

Talking to Terrorists: Pretense and Posturing

Dr. Jim Walsh, MIT

The 2008 general election campaign unofficially began this month, and the early results are not encouraging. President Bush and nominee McCain played the appeasement card and accused Democrats of wanting to negotiate with terrorists (and their state sponsors). Obama naturally responded by saying that he would never negotiate with terrorists. Left unsaid in this exchange was the fact that the US government talks with terrorists all the time and that President Bush's few foreign policy achievements have come as a direct result of talking to "terrorists and radicals."

This issue has a special resonance with me since it was wrongly reported last month that myself and two colleagues had carried on a secret backchannel negotiation with Iran over its nuclear program. The rumors and misreporting got so bad the State Department was forced to issue a formal denial.

Listening to President Bush's remarks in Israel, one would never guess that it was this White House that reversed 27 years of American foreign policy and began formal, direct government-to-government talks with Iran. American and Iranian diplomats together with their Iraqi counterparts have been meeting regularly to discuss the situation in Iraq. In fact, prior to the recent increase in violence, when the surge was widely seen as working, General Petraeus and other officials credited the Iranians with helping to reduce the flow of IEDs and foreign fighters coming across the Iranian border.

Or consider the case of Libya. Colonel Qaddafi's renegade government has long held a place on the list of state sponsor's of terror, most notably for its role in the Lockerbie bombing. Nevertheless, President Bush authorized American officials to negotiate with the Libyans, and the result was an agreement that led to a rollback of Libya's WMD programs – a result heralded by Bush administration as a great nonproliferation success.

What about North Korea? The government in Pyongyang has been a perennial on the list of state sponsors of terror, but following the North's nuclear test in October of 2006, this administration finally got serious about negotiating with the Kim regime. The result was the so-called February 15th Agreement, which led to the

closing of the Stalinist state's nuclear reactor. With the reactor shut down, North Korea can no longer produce nuclear weapons.

The Bush administration's negotiations have not been limited simply to countries that are alleged supporters of terrorism. This White House has authorized negotiations with actual terrorists. There is no more obvious example than Iraq. Indeed much of the "success" of the surge is attributed to negotiating with Sunni militias that had formerly been killing American soldiers (i.e., Iraqi terrorists) to switch sides and attack Al Qaeda instead.

A more troubling example comes from Vice President Cheney. In his famous interview with Tim Russert, Cheney invoked the need to work "on the dark side." He advocated doing business with "unsavory characters" in the battle against terrorism. Who exactly are these "unsavory characters?" They are criminals and terrorists who, for reasons of greed or common interest, are willing to collaborate with the US to undermine Al Qaeda.

In short, the President's claim that he would never negotiate with terrorists or governments that sponsor them is just flat wrong. And in some cases, doing so has been exactly the right move. Having refused to do so would have meant that Libyan and North Korean nuclear programs would have continued apace and that Al Qaeda would have more allies in its fight against American forces in Iraq.

If the 2008 presidential campaign is going to represent a different kind of politics, it's off to a shaky start. Rather than dangerous myths intended to smear a political opponent, the American people deserve "straight talk" about the realities of international relations. Politicians like to say that the military option is always on the table, but if they were truthful rather than simply trying to appear tough, they would say that the negotiation option should always be on the table. Instead of pretending and posturing, we should talk honestly about how to protect this country's national security, even when it requires talking to the enemy.

Jim Walsh is a Research Associate at the MIT Security Studies program and co-author with Thomas Pickering and William Luers of the recent article, "A Solution for the US-Iran Nuclear Standoff."