



Prepare to attack [Iran]

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In a declassified National Intelligence Estimate, [Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities](#), the U.S. intelligence agencies announced last December, "We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program."

This highly controversial conclusion [encouraged the Iranian leadership](#) to dismiss the possibility of an American attack, permitting Tehran to stake out an [increasingly bellicose position](#) and rendering further negotiations [predictably futile](#).

Ideally, the Iranians themselves can still be induced to close down their nuclear program, for the alternatives – either a U.S. or Israeli attack, or allowing the [apocalyptically-minded leadership](#) in Tehran to get the Bomb – are far worse.

Reviving a sense of apprehension in Iran offers the unique way to achieve this goal. Only by convincing Tehran that it will never be allowed to have nuclear weapons can Washington persuade it to terminate its program, avoiding the need for a military campaign. This can yet be attained, but it requires a basic shift in U.S. policy.

First, the Bush administration must prepare for a possible attack on Iran's nuclear infrastructure and, second, signal this publicly. (Israeli leaders should do likewise, as [some have done already](#).) Third, the administration must weather the inevitable tsunami of criticism. Fourth, it should encourage those governments most opposed to such an attack – including the European Union, [Russia](#), and China – to lean on Tehran to end its nuclear program.

Should this approach succeed, the crisis is resolved. Should it not, the U.S. presidential election in November will loom large. "There's only one thing worse than the United States exercising a military option," [John McCain](#) has said. "That is a nuclear-armed Iran." In contrast, [Barack Obama](#) has called for "tough-minded diplomacy," "stronger [economic] sanctions," and "alternative sources of energy" – basically, a call for [more of the same](#).

If George W. Bush's term ends with a McCain victory, Bush will likely punt, allowing McCain to decide on the next steps. But Obama's intention to continue with current failed policies suggests that, if he wins, and despite the tradition of outgoing presidents not undertaking major initiatives in their final weeks, Bush might initiate military action against Iran.