



## Let's work to prevent another 'accidental war'

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This week, we honour the soldiers who, through their sacrifices at Vimy Ridge, secured Canada's place as an independent nation. And it is this legacy, of sovereignty and international influence, which compels us to consider how World War I began.

In June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated in Sarajevo. Austria-Hungary responded by declaring war on Serbia.

Before long, Russia, Germany, Belgium, France, Britain, Italy, Greece, Japan, the Ottoman Empire and the United States were drawn into the conflict, as a domino-like series of mutual defence commitments led to more and more declarations of war.

The knock-on escalation would almost have been comical, but for the horrors that followed.

More than 10 million soldiers died, most of them in the muck and filth of the trenches. Infantry were ordered into frontal assaults against barbed wire, machine guns and poisonous gas.

Tens of millions of civilians also perished. Then, there was the social dislocation caused by the loss of almost an entire generation of young men.

The point – that, if war is hell, accidental war is worse – is of no small relevance today.

Consider the invasion of Iraq. The Bush administration's rush to arms was premature, incompetent and probably mendacious. Yet by March 2003, it had acquired a momentum of its own, with troops and equipment deployed to the region and the opportunity for action – before the heat of summer arrived – fast slipping away.

Contrary to expectations, Iraq possessed absolutely no weapons of mass destruction. Yet 3,400 coalition soldiers and hundred of thousands of Iraqis have died.

Now, we face the terrifying prospect of another premature and perhaps accidental war.

President George W. Bush has been rattling sabres over Iran since his "axis of evil" speech in January 2002. He has called the Iranian government an "outlaw regime" and explicitly threatened violence.

Of course, the Iranian government is hardly composed of angels: In 2003,

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors discovered that Tehran had been trying to enrich uranium for almost two decades.

For three years, Britain, France and Germany tried to negotiate an agreement whereby Iran would cease enriching uranium in return for membership in the World Trade Organization and a light water nuclear reactor that, although less useful for producing nuclear weapons, would effectively produce electricity.

The Europeans were making real progress – until Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president of Iran in 2005. Ahmadinejad defiantly reasserted his country's right to enrich uranium, though he did not, it must be said, assert a right to produce nuclear weapons.

It is unclear why Iran, a country with some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, needs nuclear energy, but it is obvious why it might want a nuclear bomb. Two of Iran's neighbours, Pakistan and Russia, have nuclear weapons; two others, Afghanistan and Iraq, are in effect occupied by U.S. forces, while Israel, fewer than 1,500 kilometres away, recently admitted to possessing a nuclear arsenal.

Still, Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the IAEA, says Iran is at least five to 10 years away from developing a nuclear bomb, and that his agency has "not seen any diversion of nuclear materials ... nor the capacity to produce weapons-usable materials."

The absence of imminence or evidence has not stopped U.S. Vice-President Dick Cheney warning of the possibility "of a nuclear-armed Iran, astride the world's supply of oil, able to affect adversely the global economy, prepared to use terrorist organizations and/or their nuclear weapons to threaten their neighbours and others around the world."

The standoff over Iran's nuclear program has now reached the United Nations Security Council. But Moscow, remembering how Washington relied upon an ambiguous UN resolution to justify the Iraq war, is insisting that any new resolutions specifically preclude military action.

Stymied at the UN, the Bush administration has begun to assert that Iran is supporting terrorists who are attacking U.S. forces in Iraq.

Last month, in the *New Yorker*, Seymour Hersh quoted a former senior intelligence officer as saying, "The White House goal is to build a case that the Iranians have been fomenting the insurgency and they've been doing it all along – that Iran is, in fact, supporting the killing of Americans."

Hersh also quotes Flynt Leverett, a former Bush administration National Security Council official, speaking of "a campaign of provocative steps to increase the pressure on Iran. The idea is that at some point the Iranians will respond and then the administration will have an open door to strike at them."

There are several explanations for the Bush administration's behaviour. One is revenge.

The Iranian revolutionaries revealed the limitations of American power nearly 30 years ago when they were able to hold 52 hostages in the U.S. embassy in Tehran for 444 days. A second explanation is fear – that the ongoing chaos in Iraq could work to the advantage of Iran, which, like its neighbour, has a largely Shiite population.

But the most compelling explanation is the usefulness that another demonized enemy provides to a beleaguered American president.

The 2006 mid-term elections rendered Bush impotent at home. He retains control over foreign and defence policy, and it is here that he will seek to rescue an already battered legacy.

Iran provides an opportunity to blame the disaster in Iraq on foreign meddling, re-invoke the spectre of terrorism and WMD, and then rally the American people behind a new military action. As was demonstrated by the arrest of 15 British sailors last month, it would be easy to provoke some sort of incident involving Iran and one of the very many U.S. naval vessels in the region.

Bush might think that he could limit himself to destroying just a few military facilities in Iran. But recourses to force have a tendency to spiral out of control. It is easy to imagine a couple of "surgical" strikes escalating into a regional conflict encompassing Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

Such an escalation could also – in an eerie repeat of World War I – trigger a series of mutual defence commitments, including within NATO. The war in Afghanistan has already provided a precedent for collective self-defence operations outside the North Atlantic theatre.

All of which raises the question: Where does Canada stand on the developing crisis between the United States and Iran?

Thanks to the sacrifices made by our soldiers nine decades ago, this country is an independent actor on the world stage. In the past, we played that role to great effect, brokering a solution to the Suez Crisis and helping to stabilize dozens of conflicts through peacekeeping.

This week, when we remember those who fought at Vimy Ridge, let's make use of their legacy.

Let's call publicly for peace, press for a diplomatic solution, and even offer to mediate the dispute.

Let's do what we can, as a sovereign and potentially influential country, to prevent another accidental war.

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