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In the End, Every President Talks to the Bad Guys

By Leslie H. Gelb

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"I have been charged by the president with making sure that none of the tyrannies in the world are negotiated with," Vice President Cheney reportedly declared in a White House meeting on North Korea in December 2003. "We don't negotiate with evil; we defeat it."

Cheney's call to battle resounded last week as the Bush administration slammed former president Jimmy Carter for talking to Hamas, the extremist Palestinian group that now runs the Gaza Strip, and began to have its own second thoughts about closing a new nuclear deal with North Korea. Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain also chimed in Thursday, challenging Sen. Barack Obama to "explain to the American people how talking unconditionally to dictators like Kim Jong Il . . . advances American interests" in the wake of U.S. charges that North Korea helped Syria build a secret nuclear reactor.

But the question of talking to villains is hardly simple. Even as the powerful veep was excommunicating evildoers in his 2003 pronouncement, the Bush administration was cavorting with many of the world's biggest devils: negotiating with North Korea on its nuclear-arms program, with Iran on efforts against the Taliban in Afghanistan and with Libyan strongman Moammar Gaddafi on a historic new relationship. Washington sages are now debating whether to negotiate with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran or with Hamas; some are considering trying to reconcile with supposedly repentant Islamist insurgents in Iraq and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

Contrary to Cheney's dictum, chest-thumping congressional resolutions and op-ed pieces, the United States almost always deals with devils at some point or another. There is no alternative if a president wants to test nonmilitary solutions to the nastiest of problems. Forget the inevitable posturing. The real issue is not whether to talk to the bad guys but how -- under which conditions, with which mix of pressure and conciliation, and with what degree of expectation that the bad guys will keep their word. When figuring out how to go about negotiating with devils, the questions get very basic.

Is it right to think of certain governments and groups as evil?

Absolutely, unless you're a groupie of Third World nationalist movements or a professor of semantics. As with pornography, you do know real evil when you see it in world politics -- Darfur, Bosnia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, al-Qaeda and many more.

Is it effective to publicly call another regime or group "evil"?

It can be. Sometimes, it does make sense to just shout it. The recipient won't like it, of course; it's like calling his mother a prostitute. But from time to time, enslaved peoples need to hear that they're

remembered, and Americans need to be reminded of what they stand for -- hence President Ronald Reagan's accurate and bracing labeling of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire."

But how can you deal with someone after you've labeled them "evil"?

You just can; it's done all the time. Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman knew well about the sins of the Soviet Union, but they cooperated with the monstrous Joseph Stalin against an even bigger monster, Adolf Hitler. (Winston Churchill was similarly unsentimental: "If Hitler invaded Hell," he reportedly said, "I would at least make a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons.") President Richard M. Nixon was well aware of the tens of millions killed by Mao Zedong but figured that dealing with the Chinese leader would give him leverage against Moscow. Even Reagan married his condemnation of the Soviets with an all-out effort to negotiate far-reaching arms control agreements with them.

Only President Bush messed up this simple, effective two-step approach to diplomacy. In 2002, he famously blasted Iraq, Iran and North Korea as "an axis of evil." (They were evil, though certainly not an axis.) But unlike Reagan, Bush virtually blocked his own future diplomatic path by making regime change his goal toward these evildoers, thereby slashing incentives for the devils to negotiate with him. Why should they negotiate if Bush's aim was to overthrow them? The policy made no sense, and sure enough, it didn't work. Bush did indeed go to war against Iraq, but he entered into direct negotiations with Pyongyang and eventually wound up holding ambassadorial-level talks with Iran about the present situation in Iraq. Those reversals made Bush, rather than the bad guys, look hypocritical.

Should we insist on preconditions for talks, such as demanding that the bad guys agree in advance to give up their evil words and ways?

We could try, but it wouldn't work. They wouldn't throw in their cards before they negotiated any more than we would.

The toughest cases, of course, involve working out how to handle leaders and groups who have done Americans great harm before talks can begin or get serious. Take Libya. After a lot of pushing, Gaddafi's regime took steps to curb terrorism and agreed to compensate the families of the Lockerbie bombing victims. Libyan leaders ultimately came to understand that the destruction of a civilian airliner had been so shocking that Americans absolutely needed this tacit admission of guilt, but all other issues were left for negotiations.

Presidents played cat-and-mouse games for more than a decade with Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat, urging him to recognize Israel's right to exist. He always promised to amend his organization's founding charter to accept the Jewish state, but in the end, both the United States and Israel effectively settled for his willingness to openly negotiate with Israel -- and fudged the question of the charter.

Bush started on a similar path with Iran. He insisted that Tehran renounce its nuclear program before talks could start. But it's hard to find anyone who thinks this ploy will work.

So how should we conduct negotiations with the bad guys?

There's only way: Keep the pressure on, withhold any goodies until agreed tasks are performed and seriously work to ease the bad guy's principal worry -- holding onto power. That's the sad trade-off. The devils simply aren't going to do anything to jeopardize their power.

If Washington is truly alarmed about the nuclear ambitions of, say, Iran and North Korea, we can talk to these regimes about giving their programs up -- but it's not likely to work while we're also demanding regime change. And if it's relative stability Americans yearn for in Iraq and Afghanistan, we're going to have to talk to the bad guys and give them a share of power.

Has the United States mishandled such situations in the past?

Sure. Just look at the way Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush handled Saddam Hussein in the 1980s and early '90s. They exaggerated the threat from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Iran and saw neighboring Iraq as the only counterweight to the mullahs. So they courted Hussein and coddled him with arms, intelligence and smiling visits from eminences such as Donald H. Rumsfeld. Not surprisingly, Hussein came to believe Washington would let him get away with virtually anything -- including gassing his own Kurdish citizens in 1988 and invading Kuwait in 1990.

Is everyone in an evil regime equally villainous?

No. Not all bad guys are equally bad. Moreover, the interests of different factions inside a regime differ from one another, and it's often possible to split some off from the others. The British understood the divide-and-conquer strategy, and it usually works. We should be exploring this sort of approach now with Iran and Hamas.

So what should Americans expect from deals with devils?

Alas, nothing much when it comes to improving the nature of their nasty regimes or their treatment of their own citizens. But U.S. leaders should still regularly raise the plight of the victims, publicly and privately, and play for long-run changes. On the other hand, bad guys have shown a willingness to compromise on political and security questions -- the areas upon which Washington should focus.

And even when a deal is made, don't assume they'll keep their word.

Does this all mean that we should just talk to every devil, no matter how evil?

No. There is a crucial difference between a bad man and a madman. If that line is crossed, there really isn't much sense in negotiating. Hitler's rhetoric, fanatical

anti-Semitism and palpable aggression were beyond debate, and it was self-delusion to think he could ever be remotely reasonable. The same can be said of the words and deeds of Osama bin Laden -- and probably those of Ahmadinejad and Khaled Meshal, the exiled leader of Hamas, as well. To deal with these detestable fanatics without any real prospects for a breakthrough serves only to legitimize and empower them.

But their followers are not monolithic. It's almost always worth exploring the cracks and crevices for people who are disillusioned, tired or just plain ambitious. Even devils have interests other than threatening the United States. Simply put, if you won't deal with bad guys, don't go into the foreign policy business.

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