Blithe spirit

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Watching President George W. Bush as he responded Tuesday to the new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's nuclear weapons capabilities called to mind one of the great quotes in sports history.

It was Thanksgiving Day 1974, and an unknown rookie quarterback named Clint Longley had come off the bench to rally the Dallas Cowboys to a 24-23 victory over the Washington Redskins. Cowboys' guard Blaine Nye explained Longley's performance thusly: "It was the triumph of an uncluttered mind."

So, too, was the president's news conference Tuesday.

Bush is a "don't confuse me with the facts; I've made up my mind" kind of executive. For months, he and Vice President Dick Cheney have been warning, sometimes using apocalyptic language, that Iran's nuclear capabilities were reaching the critical point. Last March, Cheney warned that Iran faced "meaningful consequences" if it didn't stop its development of nuclear weapons and that the United States was "keeping all options on the table." At a press conference just seven weeks ago, Bush said that anyone "interested in World War III" should be concerned with Iran's intentions.

But on Monday, the 16 U.S. intelligence agencies published a new consensus report on Iran, produced at the request of Congress. The report says that Iran isn't working on a nuclear weapon after all and probably hasn't been for years.

Did the president back off his previous statements? Of course not. "I'm feeling pretty spirited, pretty good about life," he said when questioned about the obvious discrepancy between his dire warnings and the prosaic assessment of the intelligence community. "I have said Iran is dangerous, and the NIE doesn't do anything to change my opinion about the danger Iran poses to the world." The NIE, he said, is a "warning signal .... What's to say they couldn't start another covert nuclear weapons program?"

It's as if he can't tell the difference between the relative urgency of "a Category 5 hurricane is heading for New Orleans" and "there's a tropical depression out in the Atlantic."

Perhaps hurricanes are a bad example. It's as if he can't tell the difference between "we found some kind of trailer in Iraq, and it might have something to do with chemicals" and "Saddam Hussein has stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction and must be disarmed."

Maybe WMDs are bad example, too.

Americans deserve better from their president. Americans deserve to know that the nation's chief executive operates on fact, not ideology, and that the president and his advisers know the difference between perception and reality. We learned the hard way in Iraq what happens when intelligence information is massaged to meet political expectations.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh, quoting present and former intelligence agency officials, has reported in The New Yorker that the Pentagon already has drawn up target lists for potential air attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. In the wake of the new NIE, surely it's time for the views of cooler heads to prevail.

Two years ago, U.S. intelligence agencies reported that a secret Iranian nuclear program was aimed at producing enough weapons-grade uranium to manufacture weapons. The NIE report published this week reviewed the previous findings and correlated them with new intelligence. That more rigorous process changed the conclusion. Even if Iran's military weapons program were reactivated, the report judged, it would take until the middle of the next decade before Iran had enough material to produce weapons.

The alarmists should stand down. International sanctions against Iran should remain in place, and diplomatic efforts should be ramped up. Iran is a nation with a well-educated middle class and a population yearning to be part of the wider world. That world is a complex place, full of nuance, shades of gray and yes, even clutter. Simplistic rhetoric and scare tactics only reinforce the extremists. Extremists there and extremists here.

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