

# Today vs. 1935: Hyperbole or *Prescience?*



Former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Newt Gingrich can at times be brilliantly prescient but occasionally hyperbolic. Recently, he suggested the present-day global situation bears a striking resemblance to 1935, with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's pursuit of nuclear weapons capability—not to mention his anti-Jewish sentiments—strikingly similar to Adolf Hitler's quest in the 1930s for weapons superiority.

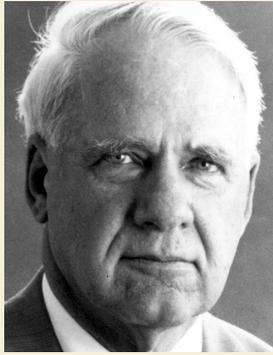
Which is it? Is the Gingrich assessment hyperbole, with President Ahmadinejad merely one of a number of verbose, sometimes nonsensical dictators in need of diplomatic containment? Plus, Ahmadinejad may not be as politically powerful as many analysts assume. Or is Gingrich correct, with the civilized world, beginning with Israel, at serious risk from the whims of a madman perhaps as early as by the end of this decade? Or is there an alternative assessment of the situation in Iran?

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*Historic parallels always pose difficulties, but Ahmadinejad is clearly a loose cannon and an embarrassment.*

**JAMES SCHLESINGER**

*Former Secretary, U.S. Defense and Energy Departments, and former Director, Central Intelligence Agency*

Historic parallels always pose difficulties—for there are as many differences as similarities. Hitler never achieved weapons superiority. Germany’s advantage lay in superior tactics and strategic surprise. Hitler actually failed to exploit Germany’s industrial capacity for fear of its impact on German living standards. Late in the war, Germany developed the V1, the V2, and jet engines—but that was already too late.

Iran, by contrast, lacks the industrial capacity and technical expertise to compete with the West. Of course, nuclear weapons can, to some extent, be “a great equalizer.” In terms of weaponry, however, Iran will always be seriously outclassed. Iran can utilize nuclear deterrence, terrorism, and, in addition, sheer boldness in dealing with the outside world. Moreover, Iran’s immediate neighbors have reason to fear her. Still, Ahmadinejad himself is a loose cannon—and something of an embarrassment to Iran’s real leaders.



*A prescient observation.*

**ARNAUD DE BORCHGRAVE**

*Senior Adviser, Center for Strategic and International Studies*



*Worried about Iran today? Consider this 2025 scenario.*

**JACQUES ATTALI**

*President and Founder of PlaNet Finance, and founder and first President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development*

News item, two decades from now: Never, since the Cuban missile crisis over sixty years ago, has the world come closer to nuclear catastrophe than at the beginning of 2025. It took courage, certainly, in the face of folly, for leaders of the Alliance to foil the most successful attempt at atomic blackmail in the history of humanity.

Everyone knew of course that nuclear arms would one day return to the scene: too many nations and groups had access. Yet no serious episode had taken place since six years ago when terrorists exploded a radiological bomb in Singapore.

The leaders of Iran, having swallowed Turkmenistan (the top gas producer in the world), and the Shiite party of the former Iraqi state (the second largest petroleum producer in the region), made clear their ambition. This ambition was first expressed twenty years ago by the current chief of the revolution, Ahmadinejad, when he was president of Iraq: Chase the West out of the Middle East.

To reach that goal Ahmadinejad first, over the course of a decade, did everything possible to destabilize the Arab regimes and destroy the state of Israel. Then, just last week, the Iranians entered the second phase of their project: taking control of the Arab peninsula, and, with that, a good third of the world’s fossil energy supply. By announcing—at the same time as their troops crossed the Strait of Hormuz—that they possessed nuclear weapons (as had been rumored for more than ten years) and long-range missiles, Iranian leaders thought none would be able to resist them. They would hold the West, like China, in the palm of their hand.

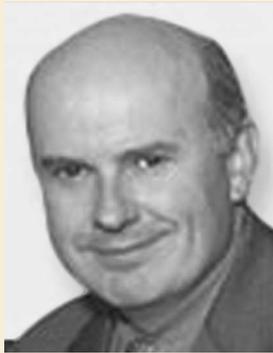
Except for one thing. The American, European, and Chinese presidents, united in their new alliance, issued a clear ultimatum threatening a nation, for the first time since the breakup of the Soviet Union, with nuclear retaliation. France, which continued to manage a nuclear arsenal in

the name of the Union, announced that it had put four of its nuclear submarines on alert.

The leaders in Teheran hesitated for three days—the longest three days in their history. Then the mullahs pulled back their troops and the president of Iran announced the dismantlement of the country's nuclear arms (see related story).

The crisis passed, but the affair was not over. It's possible that the Iranian leaders will revenge themselves with a surprise attack against a member of the Alliance, or that they will continue their strategy of harassment of their geographical neighbors.

It's also foreseeable that the people of Iran, concerned for the future, will get rid of those who have led them for the past half-century. When that happens, the 21st century will finally have begun.



*Ask Angela  
Merkel. She offered  
the same analogy.*

**GERARD BAKER**  
*U.S. Editor and columnist,  
The Times of London*

Gingrich is not alone. In February, Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, hardly a headline-grabbing, alarmist, foreign policy hawk, said precisely the same thing. She noted that the civilized world had many opportunities to stop Hitler in the 1930s, but failed to act. Coming from a German, her words demanded special attention.

A nuclear-armed Iran would tilt the balance in the Middle East in a catastrophic direction. The country's medievalist theocratic leaders, secure behind their nuclear deterrent, would deepen and intensify their support for global terrorism, further destabilize the fragile democracies of Iraq and Afghanistan, bolster their own vulnerable position among Iranians, terrify other nations into a regional nuclear arms race, and seek ways to make good on their promise to annihilate Israel.

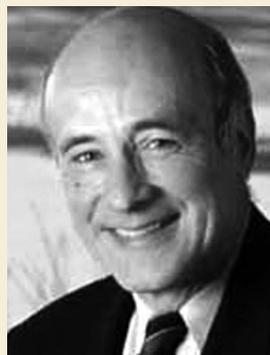
We can still prevent a repeat of history's darkest tragedies, but only if we show real resolution and unity in the face of terror.



**ANDERS ÅSLUND**  
*Senior Fellow, Institute for International Economics*

*The comparison is  
hyperbole.  
Ahmadinejad's real  
purpose is domestic.*

Former Speaker Newt Gingrich's comparison between the Iran today and Nazi Germany 1935 is of course hyperbole. The differences between the two situations are instructive. In 1935 Germany was a dormant world power, while Iran is only a third world regional power. Being non-Arabic and Shiite, Iran's appeal in the Middle East will always be limited, while Nazi Germany reached out quite effectively. Adolf Hitler tried to de-dramatize his expansionary moves, while President Ahmadinejad is intentionally provocative. The most plausible explanation is that Ahmadinejad's real purpose is domestic rather than external. He appears intent on consolidating conservative Islamic rule, and disarming Iran's various representative institutions, which endanger his long-term hold on power. To render a regime more authoritarian is bad, but external aggression is worse. The ultimate Iranian threat is its development of nuclear arms, which is clearly the national intent. Newt Gingrich's wake-up call can hopefully encourage the U.S. government to reinvigorate its endeavors to block Iran's development of nuclear arms.

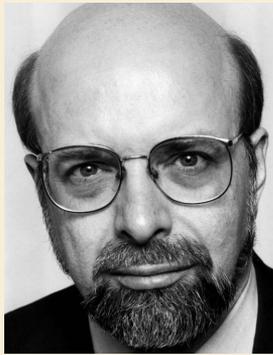


**JOSEPH S. NYE, JR.**  
*Distinguished Service Professor, Harvard University, and  
author of The Power Game, a novel about a hypothetical  
transfer of nuclear weapons from Pakistan to Iran*

*There are  
similarities with  
Hitler, but unlike  
the 1930s the United  
States is not  
isolationist.*

Iran's aspirations for nuclear weapons go back as far as the Shah's days. Whether such aspirations can be stopped or delayed until a better regime is in place remains an open question with which the Bush Administration is currently wrestling.

Like Hitler, President Ahmadinejad came to power as a populist in a quasi-democratic election and has used unacceptable anti-Semitic rhetoric. But unlike Hitler, he is not the most powerful man in his country, and unlike the 1930s, the United States is not in an isolationist phase of its foreign policy.



*To compare Iran to the Nazi Germany of 1935 is truly hyperbole.*

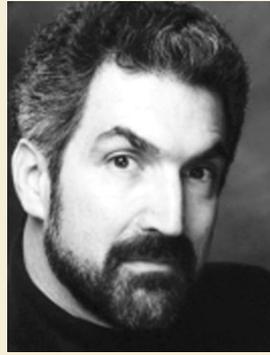
**DIMITRI K. SIMES**

*President, Nixon Center and  
Publisher, The National Interest*

While Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has a propensity for provocative statements and hard-line policies, particularly in the nuclear area, to compare today's Iran to the Nazi Germany of 1935 is truly hyperbole. Not only are Iran's capabilities not even remotely comparable to Germany's in the mid-1930s, but Iran's president is hardly the undisputed leader of his own country. There are significantly more constraints on reckless conduct in Iran today than there were in Nazi Germany. Iran also has no territorial claims on its neighbors. More often than not, Tehran's bark is worse than its bite.

Still, the overall situation today does resemble the 1930s in some ways. Responsible powers have difficulty finding common ground, the agreement to refer Iran to the UN Security Council notwithstanding. The United States continues to insist on the global promotion of democracy, China is eager to establish its leading role, and a resurgent Russia is seeking ways to become a great power once again.

All of this complicates U.S. efforts to make effective international arrangements to focus on the biggest challenge of our time—radical Islam—of which al Qaeda is only the most obvious manifestation.

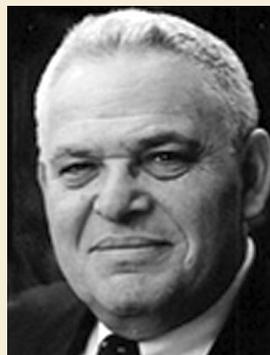


*I've used the Hitler analogy too, but today can't be compared with 1935.*

**DANIEL PIPES**

*Director, Middle East Forum*

Newt Gingrich is not alone in this comparing Ahmadinejad to Hitler. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has also done so, and so have I. I did so on the grounds of both leaders being "equipped with a totalitarian ideology and a mystical belief in their own mission"—a deadly combination. That said, two differences make me hesitate about comparing today's situation with 1935. Hitler was the absolute ruler of an immensely powerful country, while Ahmadinejad is but one leader of a second- or third-ranking state. Therefore, they represent substantially different dangers. Hitler and his allies could threaten global dominance. Ahmadinejad can only threaten to do discreet harm, such as against Israel and in the oil markets.



*The problem is that the United States has exceedingly fragile allies on Iran's doorstep.*

**EDWARD N. LUTTWAK**

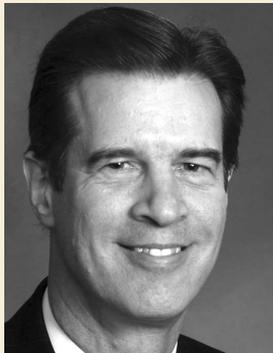
*Senior Fellow, Center for Strategic  
and International Studies*

Even with U.S. troops stationed on both sides of Iran, with the U.S. Navy strongly present in the Gulf, with U.S. Air Force bases all around, the rulers of Iran feel free to threaten the United States on a daily basis ("death to America" is their official slogan) and to support quite openly several different anti-American terrorist organiza-

tions and the anti-American Mahdi militia in Iraq, with money, equipment, and training. All this they do without the magic shield of nuclear weapons. There is absolutely no reason to believe that Iran will become more moderate once they have acquired them.

But there is every reason to believe the opposite—that Iran will exploit the nuclear shield to be even more aggressive. Israel can take care of its own security problems because they can deter an Iranian nuclear attack with ease. But the United States has exceedingly fragile allies on Iran's doorstep in Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, and Iran has territorial claims on all of them. With nuclear weapons, their survival would be precarious.

Other American regional interests from central to marginal, from Saudi Arabia to Georgia, will also be exposed to Iranian subversion and aggression. Given their current behavior, that is no evil prediction but merely a linear projection.



*There is simply  
no comparison.*

**WILLIAM H. OVERHOLT**  
*Director, Center for Asia  
Pacific Policy, RAND Corp.*

In 1935 the aggressive power, Germany, was a great power and France was a wuss. In 2005 all the big powers, including the United States, European Union, Japan, China, and Russia, as well as most of the substantial regional powers like India and Brazil, are conservative powers that oppose aggression by Iran. There is simply no comparison.

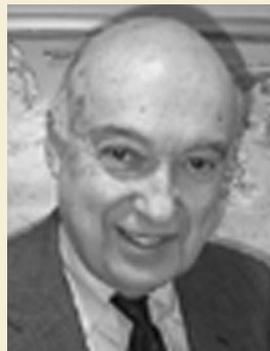
If you could somehow extract the Middle East from the rest of the world, then the confrontation of Israel and Iran might look a bit like Germany vs. France. But the Middle East is not the world—the Middle East is embedded rather than extracted, Iran is not and won't be a great power, and Israel is a nuclear anti-wuss.



*Ahmadinejad  
may be Hitler, but  
Chamberlain's  
long gone.*

**WILLIAM H. TAFT IV**  
*Lawyer, Fried Frank Harris Shriver & Jacobson*

President Ahmadinejad may be like Hitler, but the rest of the world knows about Hitler now, and it is not like Chamberlain. We can and will work together to deal with the threat of an irresponsible government in Iran obtaining nuclear weapons.



*Not all hyperbole.*

**MARSHALL I. GOLDMAN**  
*Associate Director, Davis Center for  
Russian and Eurasian Studies,  
Harvard University*

It would be nice if this were all hyperbole but there is good reason to believe it is a lot more than that. There would be less to fear if Iranians had more concern for western public opinion. Of course some do but the majority of the country evidently does not as exemplified not only by the current president but by the students who seized the U.S. Embassy in 1980. Moreover, when President Ahmadinejad rebukes the West, denies the Holocaust, and calls for the wiping out of Israel, the Iranian public applauds. In addition, unlike Germany which with only a few exceptions was opposed in its views and aspirations by its neighbors, Iran's Middle Eastern neighbors seem to

share his sentiments even if they are sometimes hesitant to express them in public.

To call for the destruction of a country this way in the nuclear age is an even more scary event than Hitler's call for more territory. The only mitigating factor is that launching a nuclear bomb on Israel will of necessity also kill large, if not equal, numbers of Palestinians and Jordanians. But since they are predominantly Sunnis, even this may not be much of a check on Iranians who are mostly Shias.



*A prescient observation.*

**DAVID M. ABSHIRE**

*President, Center for the Study of the Presidency*



*The weapons that may soon be at Ahmadinejad's disposal are more destructive than anything in Hitler's hands.*

**JOSHUA MURAVCHIK**

*Resident Scholar,  
American Enterprise Institute*

Is today like 1935? Ahmadinejad is undoubtedly sincere in proclaiming his desire to wipe Israel and the United States off the map. And he deserves to be taken more seriously in this regard than Hitler deserved to be. Hitler's ideology was made up, whereas Ahmadinejad's has deep cultural roots and myriad supporters around the world.

Also, the weapons that may soon be at Ahmadinejad's disposal are more destructive, on an absolute scale, than

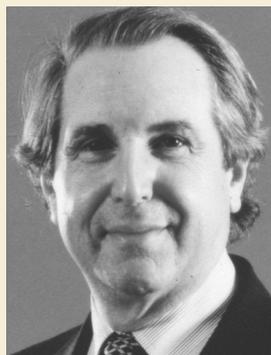
anything in Hitler's hands. What is most frighteningly similar today is the craven impulse of European governments to deal with this menace by means of appeasement.

However, there are also differences between the two moments. First, the relative military potential of Iran is far less than that of Germany in the 1930s.

Second, Hitler received invaluable political assistance from Stalin. The latter's epigones, such as Hugo Chavez, are trying to buttress Ahmadinejad, but they have little to offer.

Third, the Jewish people, whether for want of will or means or vision, offered little resistance to Hitler. But Israel lacks none of these concerns and will defend itself vigorously.

Finally, the United States in 1935 was in the throes of isolationism. But the American nation learned well from that catastrophic mistake, and is unlikely to allow things to reach the point of no return that they reached in the late 1930s. For example, where in the 1930s were voices like Gingrich's?



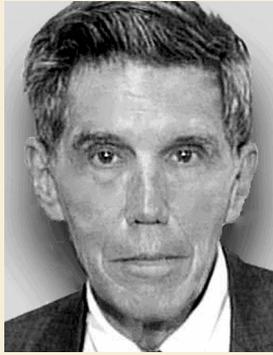
*A prescient observation, though history never repeats itself exactly.*

**MARC E. LELAND**

*President, Marc Leland and Associates,  
and former Assistant Secretary of  
the Treasury for International Affairs*

History never repeats itself exactly, but it seems clear that if (when) this Iranian Administration gets nuclear weapons, it is highly likely that it will give them to terrorists. If they believe that they are doing God's will, why would they feel restrained? What would seem mad to the rest of the world might seem less mad to Ahmadinejad than invasion of the Soviet Union probably seemed to Hitler.

The only hope is that the Iranians of this decade are more rational than the Germans of the 1930—and right now it does not seem likely.



*The world is more vigilant than in the 1930s.*

**ROBERT OAKLEY**

*Distinguished Research Fellow, National Defense University, and former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan*

Ahmadinejad seems to be using some very appealing nationalist and pan-Muslim slogans to try and gain more power at home. If he succeeds, the real danger will be much greater. The cautious containment response of the United States and others has thus far not played into his hands, and other power centers still have control. The world is vigilant this time around, which it was not in the 1930s.



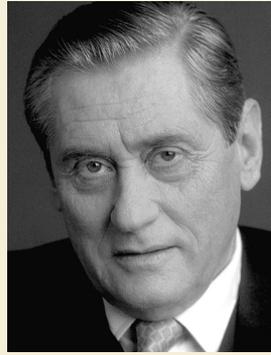
*The West needs a clear second strike capacity.*

**PHILIP MERRILL**

*Publisher of Washingtonian Magazine, Former Chairman, Export-Import Bank of the United States, and Former Assistant Secretary General of NATO*

The idea that a country sitting on the world's largest pool of oil is developing nuclear power for energy efficiency is absurd. These guys intend to build a bomb. Given the size of Iran, and the military realities, there is basically not much we can do about it except play for time.

Meanwhile, we need to insure that the Israelis as well as ourselves have a clear second strike capacity so that there is no misunderstanding that the use of a nuclear weapon by even a stateless group that is forensically traceable to any degree will mean the end of Iran. Ditto for Pakistan and North Korea.



*Mr. Gingrich's comparison is misleading.*

**HANNES ANDROSCH**

*Former Minister for Finance and Vice Chancellor of Austria*

Mr. Gingrich's comparison of the current situation in Iran with German rearmament in 1935 is misleading. Hitler was bent on conquest, and saw this as a step on the road to the catastrophic World War II.

The proliferation of nuclear weapons is undesirable, but the role of such weapons is as a military deterrent, or as a bargaining counter in diplomatic negotiation.

The conquest of Afghanistan, of Iraq, and the stationing of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf have added nothing to the political stability, the security of oil supplies, or the democratic process in the region. However unpleasant the regime in Teheran, the fact is that Iran is encircled by a hostile superpower that was heavily involved in the Iran-Iraq war of 1989 which cost over one million lives.

UN Resolution 181 of November 27, 1947, which envisages an independent Palestinian state, has yet to be implemented. A political solution to the Middle East problem also requires that neighboring states recognize the right to exist of Israel, and of Iran. This cannot be achieved by military misadventures any more than by conjuring up provocative images of "crusades" or of "axes of evil." We need an alternative, more sophisticated policy towards the Middle East.

*Gingrich is neither prescient nor hyperbolic—there is an alternative assessment.*

**J. ROBINSON WEST**

*Chairman of the Board, PFC Energy*



*This is dangerous hyperbole.*

**DANIEL GROS**  
*Director, Centre for European Policy Studies*

This is a dangerous hyperbole. It is dangerous because it basically commits those who accept it to go to war should Iran proceed with its program, which officially is still a non-military one. The political fallout from any military strike would be disastrous. Iran is not a first-class military or industrial power, but bombing the country merely on the suspicion that a nuclear energy program might become a military one would galvanize the people, including the scientific establishment, behind the current leadership and would ensure that in future any leader in Iran would have only one aim in mind: build the bomb and get revenge.

There are already now over one million university graduates in Iran, many more than in South Africa when that country went nuclear, and about the same number as in Pakistan. Combined with its energy sources, it is thus clear that a concerted national drive to get the bomb will ultimately be successful.

Comparisons between Germany 1935 and Iran today are completely misleading: Iran is not even a mid-ranking power. It could barely contain Iraq, which was later defeated by the United States in a couple of weeks with negligible losses. While Iran has clearly sponsored terrorists, it has never attacked any other country—nor has it recently experienced a traumatic loss of territory (as Germany had in World War I) that might incite it to seek revenge.

The leadership, and apparently partly the population as well, has strong feelings about the Israel-Palestine conflict, but there is no indication that the political leadership would seriously contemplate using the bomb for that purpose because they know that that would be the end of their own country. So far the population has also not given any indication that they would be willing to pay a heavy price to follow up the outrageous statements of their President regarding Israel.



*I hope it's hyperbole, but fear it's prescience.*

**STEPHEN G. CECCHETTI**  
*Professor of Economics, Brandeis University*

My reaction is that Mr. Gingrich's comment is about international relations, rather than economics. While I may hope that it is hyperbole, I worry about its prescience.

As a casual observer of international relations and defense policy, my observation is that the Bush Administration has given the Iranians a very strong hand. The world is heavily dependent on Middle Eastern oil supplies. Furthermore, my sense is that the United States cannot credibly threaten to extend the sphere of its military into Iran, and no other country has both the capacity and appetite for such an adventure.

Returning to oil for a moment, we are in a particularly precarious position. Much of the world's oil production and reserves are in unstable parts of the world—the increasingly radical Arab Middle East, Nigeria, Venezuela, and even Russia. It is very easy to imagine scenarios in which supply disruptions in only one of these regions drives oil prices over \$100 per barrel. Our interest in stability has led to appeasement in the past, and seems likely to do so in the future as well.

This brings us back to former House Speaker Gingrich's comment. Will our reliance on stable supplies of oil lead us to adopt to Chamberlainian approach to incipient Iranian territorial expansionism? I hope not.

Instead, I hope that current and future administrations are able to push for large increases in carbon taxes, providing the appropriate incentives for conservation and reducing the ability of oil producers to blackmail us. Using taxes to raise the price of domestic energy not only reduces risks that come with oil price spikes, but keeps the revenue inside of the country. It's really win-win. That's the best way to ensure that Mr. Gingrich is wrong.