In the spring of 2001, Robert McNamara and I wrote in these pages that it was time to bring Russia and China, the (then) big losers at the end of the Cold War, “in from the cold.” At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Russia was feeling betrayed by U.S. advocacy of NATO enlargement, and China was deeply upset by the U.S. refusal to oppose Taiwanese independence.

By thumbing its nose at these once and future great powers, we argued, Washington risked dangerous confrontations with either Moscow or Beijing. At a minimum, it seemed to us, the United States could expect a reciprocal stiff-arm from a resurgent Russia and China in the face of future U.S. demands.

This has already happened. Despite vigorous U.S. objections, China has refused to moderate its brutal tactics in Tibet, and Russia has simply ignored Washington’s criticism of its invasion of Georgia, during their recent dispute over Russian enclaves in areas of neighboring South Ossetia and Abkhazia. What went around has come around, in record time. Bogged down in protracted, unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with its so-called “war on terror” regarded around the world as a scandal and a failure, the United States is in no position to try to force suddenly oil-rich Russia or ultra-dynamic China to do anything.

To understand what happened, it is useful to ask what did not happen, either before or after the traumatic events of 9/11. Fundamentally, Washington failed to empathize with its adversaries. Bob McNamara, secretary of defense during some of the most harrowing periods of the Vietnam War, and I asked in the pages of World Policy Journal in early 2001:

How can we reach [Russia and China], make contact with them, develop a dialogue of mutual exploration, by the conclusion of which their integration and reconciliation might be achieved?
Our answer is to deploy “realistic empathy”...a policy whose objective is not to preach but to listen; to learn something of the history and culture of Russia and China rather than to proclaim the virtues of our history and systems; to treat them in effect as our equals, as peoples and cultures who seek peace and tranquility but also dignity and respect.

This never happened. On the contrary, following 9/11, the Bush administration’s foreign policy became the most aggressively arrogant and self-righteous in memory, not just toward Russia and China, but also toward the world at large.

Fast-forward from early 2001 to late 2008. One of the gravest current threats of a major conflagration is between the United States and Iran. Competing fantasies have arisen from deep within the empathy-free zones in which each side has endeavored to hermetically seal itself off from the reality as the other side views it.

In official Washington, Iran is portrayed as run by crazy, even suicidal Islamic fanatics, hell bent on the acquisition of nuclear weapons, annihilation of Israel, and establishment of a Tehran-controlled Shiite state in Iraq—an irrevocably anti-American regime to the core. In official Tehran, the United States once again is portrayed as “the Great Satan,” ruled by a pro-Israeli cabal, populated from coast to coast with immoral materialists, and determined to prevent Iran from resuming its historic role as the dominant cultural, economic, and military power in the Middle East. Such views are grotesque over-simplifications.

These stereotypes are dangerous because of the way they drive policy on the issue of the Iranian nuclear program. Some in Washington believe they can get the Iranians to back down in the face of military threats. Their analogous ideologicals in Tehran have implied that they would welcome such a war, apparently believing that their side will somehow prevail, if it comes to that. Either or both may be bluffing, but what happens if the bluff is called? Such are the dueling fantasies of military coercion and heroic resistance. But those who hold these views are fooling themselves.

A U.S. or Israeli-initiated air war against nuclear-related targets in Iran would likely engulf the entire Middle East and much of South Asia, from Lebanon to the Khyber Pass, involve devastating air strikes on Iran, and attacks on Israel and U.S. targets in the region using missiles, terrorists, and insurgents—a frightening conclusion reached by the participants in an informal war-gaming exercise in the spring of 2008 at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

Obviously, what is needed is empathy. But many in Washington doubt this is possible with Iran. Will the Iranians be willing to listen as well as posture and preach? Will they open up if we do? Might they admit past mistakes in their assessments of us if we reciprocate? Together with two colleagues, I journeyed to Tehran in February 2008 in an effort to begin to address these questions, however tentative or preliminary the answers might turn out to be.

We did so in the context of four screenings of the 2004 Academy Award-win-
The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara, on which we had served as principal advisers.

McNamara's first and most important lesson, is "empathize with your enemy." At one point in the film McNamara says: "In the Cuban missile crisis, I believe we did put ourselves 'in the skin' of the Soviets. But in Vietnam, we didn't know them well enough to empathize. And it carried such heavy costs."

McNamara recounts in the film how he'd learned, in our joint research projects, the degree to which his beliefs about his adversaries were wrong. He found that supreme misperception led to the nuclear confrontation over Soviet missiles in Cuba, and to the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam into a monumental tragedy. These events would not have occurred, McNamara says in the film, if leaders had found a way to see events as their adversaries saw them.

We screened the film, with Farsi subtitles, on four occasions for the Tehran media, for the general public, for university students, and for present and former government officials from all across the political spectrum. It had never before been screened in Iran. The reaction of one former (and possibly future) high-ranking Iranian official is representative here as a composite. He said, at a public forum, "These are the people who organized the conferences with the Russians, Cubans, and Vietnamese that McNamara refers to in the film. We in Iran can learn from these people. We need to understand better than we now do our own Iran-Iraq war, and we need to include other perspectives, including the U.S. perspective, and the U.S. role in that war."

The subtext was unmistakable: we Iranians, he was telling the audience, might conceivably learn that, in some respects, we were wrong, and may still be wrong, about the Americans.

Does this prove that comprehensive negotiations between the United States and Iran are just around the corner, a regime change or two away? No, of course not. On the other hand, it shows that with regard to Bob McNamara's message of embracing empathy as the agent of positive change between adversaries, hundreds of Iranians—after their very first exposure—"got it." Moreover, we should not underestimate how subtly subversive it was for the Iranians watching McNamara in Tehran this year—as subversive, with regard to foreign policy as, in a cultural context, "reading Lolita in Tehran" was and no doubt still is. It suggests that we should not let our imaginations fail us.

If Iranians can respond positively to a virtual representation of an 85-year-old former U.S. official, we should try to imagine what might be possible with a U.S. Interest Section in Tehran and, at some point, even embassies staffed with specialists in one another's capitals. Imagine what might happen if we began to really listen to each other. We need to imagine now, when the disconnect between Washington and Tehran is nearly total and very dangerous, what might be possible if each side could bring itself to empathize with the other—to try, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz once put it, "to figure out what the devil they think they are up to."

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