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## President Khatami's Discourse With the American People

By Lincoln P. Bloomfield Jr.

IRAN'S President Mohamad Khatami has succeeded in gaining the attention of many Americans - first with his televised interview with CNN in January, and most recently with his address to the UN General Assembly in New York last month. In both instances, Mr. Khatami appeared to be reaching out to the people of America to create a constructive tone, if not yet an official dialogue, between the two countries.

Observers of Khatami's overtures to the US and Washington's reactions are focused on the tangible gestures and policy concessions the two sides have been making, from a softening of rhetoric by both Khatami and President Clinton to a lessening of American sanctions aimed at Iran's oil industry to the announcement on Sept. 24 that Iran's government will no longer support the death warrant on author Salman Rushdie. It is fair to expect that this pattern of positive reciprocal steps will continue.

Since it appears that the leadership circles in Tehran are not in agreement on the merits of engaging the US in an official dialogue, Khatami has taken to conducting a discourse with the American people, because, as he said in January, "We sense an intellectual affinity with the essence of the American civilization." Citing Alexis de Tocqueville's 19th century observations of American civilization, he particularly commends the American ability to "combine religious spirituality

with the virtues of liberty." If further disquisitions along these lines are to be Khatami's chosen vehicle for engendering renewed popular acceptance of Iran in America and thereby influencing US policy, the Iranian president might profitably rethink some of his basic conceptions about the American people.

Twice now, in his January and September speeches, Khatami has enunciated a view of American and Iranian history that finds common values and goodness in each country's populations. On both occasions, however, he assigned blame for many of the ills that have befallen Iran and the world at large to none other than the US government.

It is a small group of office holders in Washington, Khatami asserts, divorced from the values reflected in broad American public opinion, that seeks "the pursuit of domination and self-interest" by propping up oppressive regimes in the underdeveloped world and denying less powerful countries their rightful influence in the international arena, including in the UN Security Council.

This is an alluring thesis, if not altogether original. For many years, the wily president of Syria, Hafez al-Assad, hoping one day to achieve a breakthrough in bilateral relations with Washington, has professed admiration and affection for the American people even while scorning

the policies of their leaders.

Last month Khatami said he wished he could spend 20 days as an unidentified tourist so that he could experience American culture directly. It is surely unfortunate that this wish went unfulfilled, because Khatami might then have understood firsthand what de Tocqueville meant when the Frenchman wrote that America "may almost be said to govern itself ... so little do the authorities forget their popular origin and the power from which they emanate. The people reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the universe."

**The Iranian leader will have to understand that US policy reflects popular sentiment.**

And thus the US government has reflected deep and broad popular sentiment throughout this century as it made pragmatic, if at times imperfect and even harmful, decisions in the defense of freedom against fascism and then communism, and now terrorism. Americans have heard and acknowledged diverse criticisms of US foreign policy in the modern era, yet remain overall very proud of their government's leading role in developing the UN system of multilateral institutions, in mediating many of the world's conflicts, and in pursuing unilateral assistance efforts. Khatami will find little resonance among the American people if his message is a post-colonial, North-South critique of the American role in the world. Americans are quite attentive to repu-

tation and sensitive to perceptions of guilt, notably their own legacy of slavery. They are unlikely to be moved by Khatami's apparent effort to blame past US policy for undemocratic and unproductive governance abroad. With the exception of its relationship with the Philippines, the US has no history of colonialism, and draws its national character far more from its revolutionary roots.

That is why Iran's president will be very disappointed if he truly believes that the United States, once its citizens are suitably enlightened, will redirect the instruments of national power toward a new international order that more closely reflects his own conception of historical justice. He might well consult Alexander Hamilton, an American Founding Father, who said in Federalist Paper No. 7, "There is, perhaps, nothing more likely to disturb the tranquillity of nations than their being bound to mutual contributions for any common object that does not yield an equal and coincident benefit." Once Iran is ready to show the American people and their government that its own role in the world yields "an equal and coincident benefit," it will find the US ready to explore a new beginning with that country and the proud civilization it represents.

■ Lincoln P. Bloomfield Jr. was deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs in the Bush administration.