on Iranian nuclear engineering program

Weizenbaum: Identification with Iran identifies us with torture

By Joseph Weizenbaum

Program directors need to ask

While Robert Benehme was still a law student at MIT (where he had become a Justice of the United States Supreme Court) he was instructed to write a brief for any one of the participants in a fisheries dispute between Canada and Britain. He carefully cited the many already recorded arguments in favor of one or another of the disputed nations. The brief ended with a brief on behalf of the fish. The matter has been pondered for some record of statements, from the President, the Frozent, Deans, and Professors Emeriti and others. Each speaks to the interests of Iran or to those of one or more constituencies of the Institute. The proposed program is officially characterized as, among other things, an experiment, for such programs might have on the Institute's resources are for sale, etc., are exceedingly, even exquisitely complex and therefore a challenge to one who has not had access to all the relevant data on the basis of which the decision was made and no one who has not had many weeks to study that data could conclude what conclusions were drawn in the proposed program. But at bottom there is a crucial and starkly simple question: If one has, for only a brief moment, the opportunity to enter a political process in which people are free and independent, does one set out to comfort the imprisoned or does one mock them and perhaps contribute to their torments? That question has a simple answer. Things get complicated once one chooses the one course. The government of Iran does, as a matter of State policy, practice torture and its disavowals sound conclusively as part of the proposed program. After all, there is a crucial and starkly simple question: If one has, for only a brief moment, the opportunity to enter a political process in which people are free and independent (an already stated goal) and have technicians that can divert fuel for bomb production, it must also have engineers versed in the difficult task of handling the plutonium. The United States is aware that this program allows the Shah to develop weapons, and clearly has not tried to stop its implementation (in fact it has probably encouraged it). Coupling this fact and the makeup of the political elite, one is practically forced to conclude that the Shah will build nuclear weapons. The total political opposition to the demands opposition to the program, Iran dominates the Persian Gulf region, which is of crucial importance in the world oil trade. In an area as ripe for war as the Middle East, when the inevitable occurs, with Iran as a participating nuclear power, it will be highly likely that the superpowers would become involved — thus a large scale nuclear war could easily become a major war. However, the mere threat of nuclear weapons introduces the question of social change, and can externally lead to nuclear holocaust.

While there are few possible grave consequences, why has MIT signed this contract? Identification with Iran is not just an example of the developing countries need a strong base of technology to grow on. First, Iran is so anxious to solve its problems, it has even a small amount of their export oil. Second, Iran does not need the energy. The 35 year supply statistic is based on very large export figures. Right now the burning of full scale Iranian oil without relief at well's. Secondly, there is strong incentive to suggest that (in this article) Iran is economically a poor choice. Thirdly, again, is MIT dealing with the point of Iran? Will the people of Iran identify with this technology? Does evidence suggest that the Shah will suddenly turn from repression and militarism to using all his resources for the good of Iran? If the other justification is, inadmissibly linked via academic freedom. If we've learned anything in the last 250 years, we must at least realize that technology, education or knowledge can be abused, and as the source of that knowledge, we must take responsibility for its real consequences. The perception that knowledge is developed from the consequences of its application and hence can be withheld from no one is simply untenable. The case at hand involves nuclear proliferation, coupled with placing the nuclear weapons in the most dangerous part of the world, and actively contributing to the existence of a terrorist regime. At this point in the analysis, the administration and Nuclear Engineering concluded, in their words, that the deal was a "net plus." Apparently "net" judgments don't include mental and political concerns (or give them infinitesimal significance), since these concerns overwhelmingly condemn the program. The point has already been taken that declining Iranian oil is an argument. These arguments are very difficult. Admittedly they are, but it is all the more reason why they should be confronted, not ignored. Has MIT built its reputation on ignoring those facts? Are we now told that the Iranian contract is already signed, and that besides, if MIT doesn't provide the training, someone else will. This argument is the last refuge of a Wiesel. If MIT were to take a stand against this, at least some other universities will take it as a precedent and say no. If a masterpiece has been made in signing the deal, it should be revoked — especially in view of the magnitudes involved.

If Iran is so anxious to solve its problems with technology, why doesn't it deal directly with those deserving immediate attention? Eighty per cent surification strongly suggests emphasis on basic science research rather than vast outlays on something so dangerous as nuclear power (assuming the Shah's intentions are with the Iranian people).

The benefits of academic and technological responsibilities regarding nuclear proliferation and actively maintaining its control, we strongly oppose the execution of this training program.

(Phr. P. Abbate '76 is a member of the Committee Against Training Nuclear Engineers for the Shah. This statement was drafted with the assistance of the Committee on Academic Freedom, Faculty of Arts and Science, and Mark Ackerman '75 of that Committee.)