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Obama: Iran 'Wants to Open Up'

CBS response: Huh? Did someone say something?

By JAMES TARANTO

By now you probably know that President Obama on Saturday finally put out a clear statement supporting the antiregime protesters in Iran, as we and many others spent much of last week urging. What you may not know is that the president actually changed his tune on Friday--and not just in a written statement but in a TV interview. The comments did not air on Friday, however, apparently because flatfooted journalists at CBS failed to realize their significance.

Here's the pertinent portion from the transcript of Harry Smith's interview with the president:

Smith: Let's move on to news of the day. The Ayatollah Khamenei gave his--speech today and gave his sermon. He said that the election in Iran was, in fact, legitimate. He said, quote/unquote, "the street--street demonstrations are unacceptable." Do you have a message for those people in the street?

Obama: I absolutely do. Well, first of all, let's understand that this notion that somehow these hundreds of thousands of people who are pouring into the streets in Iran are somehow responding to the West or the United States, that's an old distraction that I think has been trotted out periodically. And that's just not gonna fly.

What you're seeing in Iran are hundreds of thousands of people who believe their voices were not heard and who are peacefully protesting and--and seeking justice. And the world is watching. And we stand behind those who are seeking justice in a peaceful way. And, you know, already we've seen violence out there. I think I've said this throughout the week. I want to repeat it that we stand with those who would look to peaceful resolution of conflict, and we believe that the voices of people have to be heard, that that's a universal value that the American people stand for and this administration stands for.

And I'm very concerned based on some of the tenor and tone of the statements that have been made that the government of Iran recognize that the world is watching. And how they approach and deal with people who are, through peaceful means, trying to be heard will, I think, send a pretty clear signal to the international community about what Iran is--and is not.

But the last point I want to make on this--this is not an issue of the United States or the West versus Iran. This is an issue of the Iranian people. The fact that they

CBS White House correspondent Mark Knoller has been doing some in-depth reporting on the president's trip to an ice cream parlor this afternoon. He reports that "Obama had vanilla frozen custard in a cup with hot fudge and toasted almonds." He reports that "Sasha had a Brownie sundae: vanilla frozen yogurt, hot fudge, cherry, sprinkles and whipped cream (which she asked Dad to scrape off)." He reports that "Malia had vanilla frozen custard in a waffle cone." And, "You're gonna laff: Obama & the girls actually bought Frozen Puppy pops for Bo: flavors: pumpkin, peanut butter and yogurt..."

When some twitterers complained that maybe President Obama's time could be better spent given the crisis in Iran, Knoller responded, "Surprised by the outrage at the ice cream outing. What is it you expect or want the US to do about Iran? Attack? War?"

Let us first say a word in defense of reporters like Knoller. Their fascination with Obama trivia is embarrassing but understandable. The White House beat has to be a horribly tedious job, as it consists mostly of waiting around in case news happens. If their love for Obama brings a little magic into their otherwise joyless lives, it would be churlish to begrudge them that, even if it means the rest of us are subjected to fluff like "White House Dog Photographed, Remains Cute" (*Washington Post*). And we reject as false the choice between enjoying an ice cream cone and addressing the crisis in Iran.

But Knoller's taunting of his critics--"What is it you expect or want the US to do about Iran? Attack? War?"--is revealing. The idea that those who criticized Obama's weak stance last week did so because they desired war is fairly widespread, but it is a highly partisan notion, and a kooky one at that. It seems obvious that if the regime in Tehran falls, the risk of war will be substantially reduced. Knoller is a reporter. He's not supposed to be a partisan, much less a kooky partisan.

Then again, Helen Thomas is 87, and the best medical evidence suggests that people who live that long eventually die. Maybe Knoller is angling to take her place as American journalism's crazy old aunt in the attic.

Iran and Dr. King

In an August 2007 item, we noted a kerfuffle over a monument to Martin Luther King that is planned for Washington's National Mall. Gilbert Young, an Atlanta painter, had started a Web site (now defunct) called KingsOurs.com objecting to the choice of Lei Yixin to produce a memorial sculpture, on the ground that Yixin is not black.

Gilbert objected to the idea that Dr. King's "work, his words, and his stance [were] international in scope":

King's message became universal because only the truly ignorant would not accept and acknowledge that all men are created equal and deserve to be respected and allowed the right to freedoms promised in this country's Constitution. We are still fighting for those rights. King's message may have been for everyone, but everyone wasn't for King. He was killed for speaking up for black people.

This column sided with the universal King over the blacks-only King. So, it seems, does President Obama, who cited Dr. King, both in his Friday CBS interview and in his Saturday statement, in reference to events in Iran.

That is, America's first black president invoked Martin Luther King to defend the oppressed in a situation having nothing to do with race--indeed, one in which the oppressors and the oppressed alike are white. It was a nice postracial grace note.

are on the streets under pretty severe duress, at great risk to themselves, is a sign that there's something in that society that wants to open up.

As HotAir.com's "Allahpundit" notes, however, the two paragraphs we've put in bold above were cut from the interview excerpts aired on the "CBS Evening News." Thus Katie Couric's viewers did not hear the president say publicly for the first time that "we stand behind those who are seeking justice in a peaceful way" and that "there's something in that society that wants to open up."

They heard, instead, the familiar refrains: "We respect Iran's sovereignty," and, "The last thing that I want to do is to have the United States be a foil for those forces inside Iran who would love nothing better than to make this an argument about the United States." Somehow CBS found this week-old mush more newsworthy than Obama's first clear statement of support for the Iranians.

The White House appears to have wanted to make news with Obama's new toughness. The "CBS Evening News" airs at 6:30 ET, and the interview excerpts led Friday's broadcast. At 6:48--after the segment had aired but before the broadcast was complete--the [White House blog](#) posted the full exchange under the title "The President on Iran: 'The World Is Watching.'"

This does not seem to have drawn much notice--who knew the White House had a blog?--and on Saturday the White House press secretary's office issued the [written statement](#) reiterating the points that had ended up on CBS's cutting room floor:

The Iranian government must understand that the world is watching. We mourn each and every innocent life that is lost. We call on the Iranian government to stop all violent and unjust actions against its own people. The universal rights to assembly and free speech must be respected, and the United States stands with all who seek to exercise those rights.

As I said in Cairo, suppressing ideas never succeeds in making them go away. The Iranian people will ultimately judge the actions of their own government. If the Iranian government seeks the respect of the international community, it must respect the dignity of its own people and govern through consent, not coercion.

Martin Luther King once said--"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." I believe that. The international community believes that. And right now, we are bearing witness to the Iranian peoples' [sic] belief in that truth, and we will continue to bear witness.

This was widely reported. Obama got his message out, albeit a day late. But CBS could have reported it on Friday, and it would have had a big scoop. How could the network have missed it?

What we have here is a failure to communicate, and the ultimate responsibility must be laid at the feet of the communicator--i.e., the president. Obama excels at conveying an attitude of calm detachment, which is a good skill for a leader to have in a time of crisis. But it may be that he was too good at it in this case--that he failed to provide the emotional cues that would have made it clear to the folks at CBS that he was saying something new and important.

But ideological bias at CBS might also have played a role. The Weekly Standard's [Michael Goldfarb](#), following a CBS newsman's Twitter feed, had a mildly shocking Saturday report that bolsters this suspicion (Goldfarb is quoting the Twitter tweets verbatim):

Journalism Without Reporters

On Saturday we tuned in and watched some of CNN's Iran coverage, and we were astonished to see that the network was relying almost entirely on "social media"--specifically Twitter, Facebook and YouTube--for information. Just a sample:

Don Lemon: I want to bring in our Josh Levs, whose been monitoring the moment-by-moment things that are happening on Twitter. . . .

Levs: This evening something new has happened on twitter. One of the hot topics on Twitter and the whole Twitter universe tonight is the name of a girl who Twitter say is the one featured in a video.

I'm going to show you a clip now. This is disturbing. I want you to know that. And we have blurred out her face out of respect. But this is possibly the most-seen piece of video out of Iran in the world today. And on Facebook, along with this, there was posted a story that said that she had been a bystander at a protest. And that a member of the Basij, which is the paramilitary that answers to the government, had shot her. . . .

These are the kinds of things we're seeing a lot of on Twitter. Just grabbed that one off of twitter. It's people trying to send ideas to those who are in Iran, saying if you want to avoid security forces, here's some things to do.

And we have one more here. Set your location to Iran or Tehran. Make it harder to track real Iranian twitterers. We, here, at CNN, by the way, the reason you're seeing it this way without some twitterers' name, is that we are protecting the names of people who are inside Iran. In some cases, we can't know if they're really inside Iran, but we are following English and Farsi tweets, and translating them when necessary.

So, Don, these are the kinds of things we're seeing. I want to show everyone a graphic where you can reach us, where you can reach me tonight, because we're camped out here and we're following lots of stuff on Twitter.

If there's something on Twitter you think is particularly important, there's my page right there, [twitter.com/joshlevscnn](#). One word. Basically, works the same way for all of us, Don Lemon as well.

And we're going to keep following this. And pretty much before I pop on air, we grab things that have come on literally within seconds, grab them and put them into a format that you can see them, share them with you on air. Because the Twitter universe, I will tell you, is playing an historic and kind of amazing role in what's been going on in Iran.

Later we switched to Fox News Channel, which also had a reporter, in the studio with a laptop, monitoring Twitter and other sites. Fox's coverage was less Twitter-heavy than CNN's, focusing instead on pro-Iranian protests in Los Angeles and other U.S. cities.

The networks, of course, were making a virtue of necessity. The Iranian regime, having realized that the world was watching, put foreign journalists under severe restrictions. They were hoping to ensure that all coverage would have the tone of this [CNN.com](#) dispatch by Reza Sayah, "one of the few Western journalists reporting from Tehran after the Iranian government placed restrictions on coverage":

People in the crowd sang songs of tribute as they waited.

When he arrived, they stood and welcomed him in unison: "Praise be to God and to his prophet, Mohammed."

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader for two decades, took the stage during Friday prayers at Tehran University with a few notes on small pieces of paper in his left hand. He leaned on the lectern with his right arm, crippled in an 1981 assassination attempt.

He was ready to put an end to a week of unrest.

In the world of communication, it's hard to overstate how much has changed since the Iranian regime came to power in 1979. Even CNN didn't exist back then (it debuted in 1980). Now a dictatorship cannot control the flow of information even if it can control or expel reporters. This is not to say that reporters are superfluous, but in a pinch, a news organization can make do without them.

Can You Keep a Secret?

We can. We had heard about the kidnapping of New York Times reporter David Rohde in Afghanistan, and we noticed that the Times had not reported the story. We assumed the Times had good reason to hush it up and thus did not write about it. It turns out the Times had asked news organizations and even bloggers not to report the kidnapping, and all had complied. Over the weekend, Rohde escaped, rendering the embargo moot.

Now, the Washington Post's Howard Kurtz reports, "the unusual arrangement raises questions about whether journalists were giving special treatment to one of their own":

"It certainly could appear that way, but it's more complicated than that when a human life is at stake," said Phil Bronstein, former editor of the San Francisco Chronicle. "It does involve a news organization keeping quiet and asking others to keep quiet. What shocks me is that it was so successful."

John Daniszewski, an Associated Press senior managing editor, said that "it is not the most comfortable position to be in. Your instinct is to publish what you know. But we felt there was just too high a risk something would happen to him." Daniszewski said the AP also withheld news around the same time when a staffer for a nongovernmental organization was briefly kidnapped in Afghanistan.

The incident has also provided fodder for the Times's critics on the right. Typical is this Commentary blog post from [Max Boot](#):

I only wish the Times and other news organizations displayed as much regard for the nation's secrets as they do for their own. The Times has no problem disclosing secret wiretapping of terrorists notwithstanding arguments from senior government officials that this would compromise vital programs. So the secrecy pleas which the Times took so seriously in the case of David Rohde were completely disregarded in the case of al Qaeda surveillance even though experts warned that the Times's disclosure could increase the danger not just to one person but to millions. Perhaps in the future when deciding whether or not to publish details of covert government programs, the Times and other media organizations should keep in mind that among the millions of Americans whose safety could be compromised by their disclosures are thousands of their own employees.

We sympathize with Boot's argument and have on numerous occasions criticized the Times for insensitivity to national security. Nonetheless, we feel obliged to point out that there is an important difference between the Rohde kidnapping and the Terrorist Surveillance Program: In the former case, a particular person was in imminent danger, whereas in the latter, the danger was diffuse and indeterminate.

An aphorism attributed to Stalin has it that "one death is a tragedy; a million is a statistic." A million people subjected to an increased but unknown risk of terrorism really *is* a statistic--that is, an estimate of probability, in contrast with the brute fact of a man in captivity.

This is not to defend the Times's decision to reveal the surveillance program, only to suggest that it is not quite as easy a call as the suppression of the Rohde story. And contrary to Boot's assertion that the paper "had no problem" with the revelation, the 2005 story he links reports:

After meeting with senior administration officials to hear their concerns, the newspaper delayed publication for a year to conduct additional reporting. Some information that administration officials argued could be useful to terrorists has been omitted.

Even if the Times made the wrong call, it did not do so in as cavalier a fashion as Boot suggests.

Homer Nods

In a Friday item, we observed that in formal logic, a false premise implies any conclusion. That is, the statement "if P, then Q" is true anytime P is false.

This is true, but it was irrelevant to the statements we discussed in that item, which were of the form "only if P, then Q." Such statements can be false if P is false. Examples:

- If pigs can fly, the pope is Catholic. True.
- If pigs can fly, the pope is agnostic. True, since pigs cannot fly.
- Only if pigs can fly, the pope is Catholic. False. The pope is Catholic notwithstanding pigs' flightlessness.
- Only if pigs can fly, the pope is agnostic. True.

Logically, the statement "only if P, then Q" is the equivalent to "if Q, then P." Thus, it is true any time the *conclusion* is false.

Neither Nerved Nor Fazed

- "Planned N. Korea Launch Unnerves Hawaii Residents"--headline, [FoxNews.com](#), June 21
- "Hawaii Unfazed by Missile Threat"--headline, [The Wall Street Journal](#), June 22

We Reject This False Choice

"Barrel Monster": Is It a Crime, or Is It Art?--headline, [Christian Science Monitor](#), June 19

Because They Want More Stimulus From Congress

"NIH Funds \$423,500 Study of Why Men Don't Like to Use Condoms"--headline, [FoxNews.com](#), June 19

Perjury Rap Sends Gumbly to Pokey

"Clay Man Admits to Lying to FBI"--headline, [Lexington \(Ky.\) Herald-Leader](#), June 20

Cruel and Unusual Punishment

"Live Oak Man Arrested for Fireworks Cache, Explosives to Be Destroyed"--headline, [Santa Cruz \(Calif.\)](#)

Sentinel, June 20

It's Always in the Last Place You Look

"Huge Roman-Era Cave Found by Jericho"--headline, [Jerusalem Post](#), June 21

Everything Seemingly Is Spinning Out of Control

- "Partial Walrus Estimate Alarms Conservation Group"--headline, [Associated Press](#), June 18
- "Henry Is World's Oldest Man at 113--Thanks to Whisky and Wild Women"--headline, [Scotsman](#), June 20
- "EU 'Risks Lagging US on Regulation' "--headline, [Financial Times](#), June 19
- "Calif. Regulators Find Pot Smoke Causes Cancer"--headline, [Associated Press](#), June 19
- "US Open Play Suspended Because of Darkness"--headline, [Associated Press](#), June 21
- "Man Plans on Cutting Cheese Saturday in Stoughton"--headline, [Wisconsin State Journal \(Madison\)](#), June 19

News of the Tautological

- "Suicide Bomber Kills Self at Tehran Shrine: Report"--headline, [Reuters](#), June 20
- "Officials: Hawaii Anti-Missile Move a Safeguard"--headline, [Associated Press](#), June 19

News You Can Use

- "How Science Fiction Writers Can Help, or Hurt, Homeland Security"--headline, [Wired.com](#), June 19
- "Beauty Queens Are More Than Pretty Faces"--headline, [Reno \(Nev.\) Gazette-Journal](#), June 22
- "Mate Selection: Honesty in Advertising Pays Off"--headline, [Yale press release](#), June 19

Bottom Stories of the Day

- "Woman Moved to City 54 Years Ago"--headline, [News Leader \(Staunton, Va.\)](#), June 22
- "City to Prune Tree at Wailupe Beach Park"--headline, [Honolulu Advertiser](#), June 20
- "Czech Skoda Sole Bidder to Supply Trolleys for Bulgaria Capital"--headline, [Sofia News Agency](#), June 19
- "Jeddah Malls to Have Bigger Parking Lots"--headline, [Arab News \(Saudi Arabia\)](#), June 21
- "Gillette Ads Promote Closer Shave"--headline, [Financial Times](#), June 19
- "Plane With Landing Gear Problems Lands Safely"--headline, [Lexington \(Ky.\) Herald-Leader](#), June 22
- "Haitians Mostly Ignore Senate Run-Off Elections"--headline, [Associated Press](#), June 21

Ayieeee!

The Associated Press reports from London on the latest effort to combat literacy:

It's a spelling mantra that generations of schoolchildren have learned--"i before e, except after e."

But new British government guidance tells teachers not to pass on the rule to students, because there are too many exceptions.

The "Support For Spelling" document, which is being sent to thousands of primary schools, says the rule "is not worth teaching" because it doesn't account for words like "sufficient," "veil" and "their."

But those aren't exceptions at all. They are words that fall outside the scope of the rule, which applies only when the vowel combination in question is pronounced as a long "e." They're dropping the rule even though it applies so well that they couldn't come up with a single legitimate exception. Isn't that

weird?

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