THE WAR OF PERSIAN SUCCESSION

So much good news to report coming out of Iran this week. Where to begin? That would be with the unsurprising but still significant retreat of Moqtada al Sadr to his safe haven across the border, where the mullahs will feed him, at least for a while.

For those who have convinced themselves that Moqtada is primarily an Iraqi patriot, rather than an Iranian agent, this ignominious abandonment of his troops should - although it won't - peel the scales from their eyes.

And it also underlines the nervousness in Tehran. Ayatollah Khamenei probably knows he's going to die without any of the great victories he has pursued: Lebanese democracy has not yielded, there is no Islamic Republic in Iraq, and Israel is still there.

Indeed, our recent adjustment to his agents' behavior in Iraq - arrests of Iranians, exposure of their weapons supply - must send chills through his malignant body, since it shatters the great lie in which he and his followers had so passionately believed: that America has no stomach for war, and will break and run when attacked systematically.

Other wonderful news is that physical attacks against the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij-the prime instruments of repression-are taking place all over Iran. See Jack Wheeler's Pelosi's Primrose Path for details.

All this adds to the intensity of the War of Persian Succession, the fierce power struggle within the regime for the succession to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The political war between the two men who fancy themselves the logical tyrants of the Islamic Republic-Rafsanjani and Ahmadi-Nezhad-is heating up by the hour.

Yesterday (2/15) for example, a former Cabinet member named Marashi, who happens to be Rafsanjani's brother-in-law, called upon the Parliament (Majlis) to investigate Ahmadi-Nezhad's counterproductive accomplishments in foreign policy, calling the president either incompetent or treacherous.

This effectively creates a power vacuum atop the Islamic Republic of Iran. I'll bet you that our intelligence services in Iraq are getting a lot of Farsi-speaking walk-ins these days, as many of them will calculate that the tide may be turning and they'd best take our insurance with the Americans.

Finally, big Iranian news came from Europe with the announcement that the EU's experts have concluded that they have totally failed to deter the Iranians' nuclear-weapons program.

"At some stage we must expect that Iran will acquire the capacity to enrich uranium on the scale

required for a weapons program," according to an internal EU document quoted by the *Financial Times*. As the *FT* glumly reports, all EU governments have been informed of this conclusion, along with the (obvious) analysis: "the problems with Iran will not be resolved through economic sanctions alone."

Or by economic bribes, either. The EU, along with the U.S., have offered all manner of seductive goodies to the mullahs, but it didn't work, as they surely knew from the beginning. Everybody knew.

Or did they? One has to wonder whether Bush and Condi knew it would fail. They certainly gave it unrestrained rhetorical support. If you buy the theory that W's foreign policy is simply the application of winning poker to geopolitics, then you will think that, just as in the run-up to Iraq, he simply outwaited the Europeans.

Knowing diplomacy had no chance, Bush let them play out the string. Now they must fold, and he is ratcheting up the ante against the mullahs.

This would also explain the timing of our newfound toughness. With the failure of the EU initiative, there was reduced concern that the Europeans would attack us for stepping up the pressure on the Iranians. This is reflected in a series of economic measures taken by European financial institutions, which will make life in Iran even more difficult.

It would be really great if somebody found where Khamenei and the other oligarchs have stashed their private loot (I think a lot of it is in China, by the way)...and put it in escrow for a free Iran.

One can dream, can't one? One can even dream that we will act even faster. Please.