

APRIL 17

Will MoveOn.Org oppose bombing of Iran?

MoveOn.org sent out an email with the subject line "Don't Nuke Iran" to three million people on April 12. "There is one place where all of us can agree: Americans don't support a pre-emptive nuclear attack on Iran, and Congress must act to prevent the president from launching one before it's too late," the message said. And: "Please take a moment to add your name to our petition to stop a nuclear attack on Iran."

The petition's two sentences only convey opposition to a "nuclear" attack on Iran: "Congress and President Bush must rule out attacking Iran with nuclear weapons. Even the threat of a nuclear attack eliminates some of the best options we have for diplomacy, and the consequences could be catastrophic."

In MoveOn's mass email letter, the only reference to a non-nuclear attack on Iran came in a solitary sentence without any followup: "Even a conventional attack would likely be a disaster."

"Likely" be a disaster? Is there any U.S. military attack on Iran that plausibly would not be a disaster? There's no way around the conclusion that the signers of the letter ("Eli, Joan, Nita, Marika and the MoveOn.org Political Action Team") chose to avoid committing themselves – and avoid devoting MoveOn resources – to categorical opposition to bombing Iran.

+++++++

In preparation for this article, I sent emails to each of the four signers of MoveOn's "Don't Nuke Iran" letter, asking them:

- 1) Why does the letter say nothing against a prospective non-nuclear attack on Iran other than comment that "a conventional attack would likely be a disaster"?
- 2) Why was the petition confined to opposing a "nuclear" attack on Iran rather than opposing any military attack on Iran?
- 3) Has MoveOn ever sent out a message to the three-million list taking a clear posi-

tion against the U.S. attacking Iran (no matter what kind of weaponry would be used)?

4) If the answer to question #3 is "no," why not?

A response came on April 13 from Eli Pariser, executive director of MoveOn. Here is his three-paragraph reply in its entirety:

"As you know, our focus is on bringing people together around points of consensus. We build our advocacy agenda through dialogue with our members. Since we haven't done any work around Iran thus far, we saw the prospect of a nuclear attack as a good way to begin that conversation – something everyone can agree was nuts.

"As I mention in the ['Don't Nuke Iran'] email, a conventional attack poses many of the same risks as a nuclear one. But just as our Iraq campaign started with a position that attracted a broad membership – 'Ask Tough Questions,' in August 2002 – and then escalated, so we're trying here to engage folks beyond the 'peace' community in a national discussion about the consequences of war.

"We wouldn't have had the membership to be able to run ads calling for an Iraq exit today if we'd confined our Iraq campaign to the true believers from the very beginning."

++++++

I believe that the MoveOn decision-makers who signed the "Don't Nuke Iran" mass email are almost certainly aware that if they surveyed a cross-section of those commonly referred to as MoveOn members (people who are currently signed-up for MoveOn's emails), the overwhelming majority would say that they're opposed to an attack on Iran with any weapons – not just nuclear weapons.

Opposition to any bombing of Iran inherently includes opposition to bombing Iran with nuclear weapons. But vice versa is not the case. And so far it is (so to speak) precisely the ambiguity of confining the MoveOn position to "Don't Nuke Iran" that MoveOn's leadership has embraced.

As MoveOn's mass email stated on April 12, "There is one place where all of us can agree: Americans don't support a pre-emptive nuclear attack on Iran, and Congress must act to prevent the president from launching one before it's too late." As Eli Pariser wrote to me the next day, "our focus is on bringing people together around points of consensus."

This approach debases the role of consensus in progressive political organizing. It shouldn't mean tailing the opinion polls or waving an organizational finger in the wind; nor should it mean taking cues from power brokers among congressional Democrats.

Nor should a progressive organization avoid taking historically imperative positions in real time because they might interfere with feeding cash cows a diet of lines that seem optimum for maximizing the flow of "the mother's milk of politics" to pay for ads.

The voices in Congress denouncing the prospect of a military attack on Iran, period, are in short supply right now. Yet as it happens, according to a nationwide poll jointly released by Bloomberg and the Los Angeles Times on April 13, the current inclinations of people in the United States are about evenly divided: "Forty-eight percent said they would support military action against Iran if it continues to produce material that can be used to develop a nuclear bomb, down from 57 percent in January. Forty percent oppose military action, up from 33 percent in January."

As long as MoveOn's leaders (not to be confused with MoveOn's email recipients) want to confine MoveOn to mobilizing against use of nuclear weaponry in an attack on Iran, they're actually aiding a process that can dangerously reframe policy options – so that some kind of military attack on Iran becomes increasingly accepted while much of the debate shifts to arguments over whether use of nuclear weapons in the attack should be ruled out.

Of course the official scenarios for use of nuclear bombs are deranged and must be condemned. At the same time, in logical and practical terms, unequivocal opposition to bombing Iran signifies clear opposition to bombing Iran with nuclear weapons.

Will those who put out MoveOn's email alerts and green light its advertising campaigns eventually use some of the group's resources to promote opposition to any and all bombing of Iran? It's probably a matter of time – but every day of holding back from engaging in solid unambiguous opposition to any military attack on Iran is a day lost that can never be regained.

The MoveOn apparatus is the largest single online mechanism for U.S. progressives to share information, present analysis and take action. But no one should wait for the people who control MoveOn's mass email flow to come around. There are significant efforts underway to utilize the Internet as part of efforts to prevent any attack on Iran.

For example, as part of broader organizing campaigns, a coalition of groups has begun a Don't Attack Iran petition (<http://www.dontattackiran.org>). And TrueMajority is promoting an equally valuable Don't Bomb Iran petition (<http://action.truemajority.org/campaign/dontbombiran>). An April 14 letter from TrueMajority says: "Click here to send a message to top Democrats, including Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid and House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, insisting they speak out loudly, now, against any plans to bomb Iran."

That's a message that MoveOn.org hasn't been willing to send.