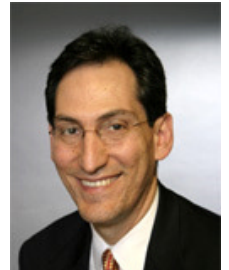


## A Letter's Many Meanings

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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's letter to President George W. Bush last week was carefully crafted to antagonize Bush but humanize Ahmedinejad. The letter didn't get him anywhere with the United States, but for Ahmedinejad's target audience – in Iran, in the wider Muslim world, and even in Europe – it was a masterstroke.

Observers initially viewed the letter at face value, as an unprecedented gesture from an Iranian leader to an American president. Given recent months of escalating diplomatic wrangling, and given the troubled history between the two countries that dates back a half-century, Ahmedinejad's approach seemed an effort to extend an olive branch.

In fact, it was an effort to position Iran as peace-seeking in the face of an aggressive United States. The letter took on a tone that was alternately condescending and pedantic, but consistently well calculated to score public relations points against an unpopular U.S. president around the world.

Consider Ahmedinejad's treatment of the events of September 11, which comes about halfway through the letter. Ahmedinejad condemns the action as "horrendous," "deplorable" and "appalling." Yet he continues with a series of rhetorical questions: "Could it be planned without coordination with intelligence and security services – or their extensive infiltration? ... Why have the various aspects of the attacks been kept secret? Why are we not told who botched their responsibilities? And, why are those responsible and the guilty parties identified and put on trial?" For the American president, and for the American people, the questions are offensive. They stop just shy of the charge that Jews did not appear for work in the twin towers on September 11, and the whole operation was a Mossad plot. It cannot fail to elicit anger.

Yet, many around the world see in this same passage a sympathetic response combined with a healthy questioning of American narratives and American motives. Ahmedinejad does not make any claims, so there is nothing the United States can refute. Instead, he merely says that there are two sides to a debate, each is potentially valid, and he finds neither one completely persuasive. It is a tried-and-true technique of Holocaust deniers, for whom he apparently has a great deal of sympathy.

Strange as it is to many Americans, Ahmedinejad's letter reflects the concerns of hundreds of millions. For his domestic audience, he portrays himself as a self-assured nationalist, operating on the world stage and seeking peace. His language is simultaneously plain and full of faith, very much fitting the populist image he has carved out for himself. He also assuages the fears of pragmatists and reformists who feared his growing confrontation with the United States was suicidal. For all of these audiences, this is a virtuoso performance.

For audiences in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, Ahmedinejad perfectly articulated many of their concerns about U.S. policy. He expressed wonderment at U.S. policy in Iraq and persistent U.S. support for Israel, two of their key issues. Although many of these governments fear Ahmedinejad, he is gaining popularity on the streets.

Among the governments of Russia and China, two permanent members of the UN Security Council extraordinarily eager to avoid a showdown with Iran, Ahmedinejad's letter was a welcome sign of flexibility and engagement after weeks of disturbing saber rattling. They did not have to believe the letter was sincere to have it relieve some of their near-term concern.

What is most impressive about Ahmedinejad's letter is that it didn't cost him anything to write it. He did not close off any avenues of further action, but instead opened up a number of them. He gained momentum on the eve of UN Security Council consideration of the Iranian file, and put the U.S. administration on its heels.

Ahmedinejad's letter was largely a rhetorical exercise, and he is surely not interested in the response. What Ahmedinejad did impressively, however, was show how skillful rhetoric reaching out to supposedly uninterested audiences can help shape diplomacy. Americans may find the letter ham-handed and insincere, but hundreds of millions of people around the world saw it as impressive statesmanship.

The White House seems bent on not giving Ahmedinejad the courtesy of a reply, and the President should not answer for Ahmedinejad's benefit. At the same time, though, the White House must not cede the moral high ground to the Iranians. The United States has gained a great deal in the last half century from a perception that it is principled in its international relations, and that perception has suffered in the years since September 11. We in the United States need to hold ourselves to account if we are to hold others to account. The time has come to do both.

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