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David Farber: Taken Hostage

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Introduction

THE RUSTIC philosopher Calvin Coolidge observed that if you see ten troubles coming down the road, you can be sure that nine will turn off before they reach you. In the 1970s, though, the troubles all kept on coming. It was a game of chicken no one seemed to know how to escape and the head-on crash was not a pretty sight. The American people survived the wreckage (politically, the era's presidents were not so lucky) but not without scars and not without bitter memories.

The Iran hostage crisis, which lasted from November 4, 1979, until January 20, 1981, was but one of the many troubles Americans faced during a difficult time. The Iranian imbroglio, in fact, affected the American people less directly than any of the others. Unlike the energy crisis, inflation, economic stagnation, industrial dislocation, and presidential scandal and resignation, it happened faraway and caused little immediate pain to any but the hostages (sixty-six Americans were held in one form or another of captivity at the beginning of the ordeal; six other Americans escaped the immediate embassy takeover but were forced into hiding) and their families. Yet, as measured by public concern, emotional outpouring, and simple fascination, the Iran hostage crisis captivated the American people more than any other of the era's difficulties. By the millions Americans expressed their ongoing solidarity with the hostages. They wrote letters of sympathy to the hostages and their families. They wrapped yellow ribbons around trees in their front yards, pinned them on their clothes, tied them to their car radio antennas as symbols of concern for the hostages' plight.

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Though television talk shows, the evening news, drive-time radio, and almost every other forum of public conversation, Americans followed the latest twists and turns of the Americans' captivity in Iran. The nation, itself, was held hostage by the crisis.

From the beginning, a great many Americans felt the hostage crisis was about more than the plight of a few dozen of their fellow countrymen. The event was an obvious symbol, an easily understood example of the nation's inability to control its own fate, maintain its dignity, and pursue its independent course in the world. The United States could not protect its own people; it could not get them out of harm's way; it could not bring them home safely. Had America really become just a "pitiful giant," first defeated by the ragtag armies of Vietnam and then stymied by a bunch of fanatical student hostage-takers who—with complete impunity—burned the American flag, screamed, "Death to America!" and scorned the American government's every attempt to negotiate a rational solution? Was the Ayatollah Khomeini, a figure who seemed to most Americans a crazy fanatic living in a time warp, really going to be able to outwit and make a mockery of the U.S. government? Did the Carter administration's aborted attempt to rescue the hostages—a fiasco that cost eight soldiers their lives—prove that the Carter administration was inept and that the U.S. military was a hollowed-out force incapable of looking after the nation's security? As Americans watched the hostage crisis unfold, most became increasingly certain of one thing: the United States had lost its way—economically, culturally, politically, and even militarily.

This account of the Iran hostage crisis offers an analysis of the specific unfolding of that event within a broader account of an era of failed expectations. Rather than cast blame on the key actors, I explain how the political context of the late 1970s reduced the Carter administration's options in managing and resolving the Iran hostage crisis and show how Americans made sense of the hostage crisis within their understandings of America's predicament at the end of the 1970s. My account is a grim reminder of a tough time, an explanation of why so many people in the United States, back

then, felt that they, too, were being held hostage by Iranian fanatics—as well as by the OPEC cartel, stagflation, and all the other troubles that kept coming down the road.

This account also provides a framework for understanding why Ronald Reagan’s optimistic rhetoric during the 1980 presidential election campaign made sense to many Americans who were living through the so-called Age of Limits. During the 1970s and for some time after, social critics castigated Americans for being selfish, self-absorbed narcissists. In popular magazines and best-selling books, the 1970s were excoriated as the era of the “Me” generation. In part, the critics were comparing the 1970s to the 1960s, when, they argued, Americans had selflessly worked together for the common good in social change movements. (Few of these critics recognized the vitality of the 1970s era’s grassroots movements, which ranged across the political spectrum and included the New Right as well as the women’s movement and the gay liberation movement.) Americans’ outpouring of concern for the hostages, at least in part, belies the accusation of endemic selfishness among the American people.

The outpouring of empathy for the hostages and their families revealed that millions of Americans at the end of the 1970s had maintained a powerful desire for bonds of national community. The patriotic forms that bond took—while demonstrating at times an ugly chauvinism, xenophobia, and racism—also exposed how prevalent love of country remained in American society. While many Americans had, in the aftermath of the Vietnam debacle and the Watergate scandal, grown cynical about their political leaders, they had not necessarily grown similarly cynical about the United States itself. Overwhelmingly, politicians and social critics in the 1970s missed that difference.

One individual who did not was Ronald Reagan. Dismissed by most political pundits in the late 1970s as a has-been out of touch with the American political mainstream, Reagan campaigned brilliantly against the federal government but fervently for America as a shining ideal. Critics (and I include myself) argued that his vision of that ideal was often willfully blind to U.S. foreign policies that

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contradicted American principles. And while championing the ideals of the United States, Reagan seemed woefully unrealistic about—or dangerously ignorant of—the domestic inequities that plagued American society. But the rightness or wrongness of his policy predilections is not the point. Reagan preached a faith in the underlying idealism of the American way at a time when other leaders did not. His insight into the American people’s continuing patriotism, even at a time when so much was going wrong, helped put Ronald Reagan in the White House.

In addition, what makes this history of the Iran hostage crisis different from the accounts written soon after the hostages’ release is the critical importance I place on the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran and on the Carter administration’s troubled attempts to respond to its theocratic impulses within the prevailing cold war paradigm. At the time, most Americans had no way to know that the Iran hostage crisis was not a bizarre one-off encounter with an exotic form of Islam about which few had ever before thought. Now we know differently. Dozens of newly declassified documents show that Carter administration officials, especially National Security Council Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, had begun to think through the geopolitical importance of a politicized Islam in the region. But the indignities of the hostage-taking, followed by the Ayatollah Khomeini’s embrace of the hostage-takers, made it hard to consider the long-term strategic challenges that a militant, politicized Islam posed for U.S. international interests.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979 made a long-term policy response to Islam as a geopolitical reality in the region more difficult yet. American policymakers, still focused on the cold war threat of the Soviets, chose to arm the Islamic fundamentalists fighting Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Now we know that factions within these forces of Jihad would soon thereafter turn their fury on the United States. Still, even if U.S. policymakers had been all-knowing about the trajectory of militant Muslims in the region, they could not have easily defused the fierce anti-Americanism that motivated both the Islamic student militants who took over the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the older mullahs who con-

trolled the Iranian government that had emerged from the overthrow of Shah Pahlavi's regime. A quarter century of American complicity and faith in the Shah's repressive—but also modernizing and secular—regime could not have been easily overcome, even supposing that President Carter had tried (and he did not). Nor, it should be noted, would it have been effective for the Carter administration to condone—or demand—that the Shah slaughter rebelling Iranians in sufficient numbers to halt the revolt. While the Shah loyalists likely could have produced a mighty slaughter, it is unlikely that a bloodbath would have saved the Shah; it certainly would not have contributed to the good name of the United States in the region.

Most of all, in analyzing America's first major confrontation with the forces of militant Islam, I have foregrounded the difficulty American policymakers had recognizing how devoted Islamic militants in Iran were to creating an Islamic State. Over and over, American policymakers kept expecting the Iranians to realize that the real danger in the region was the Soviet Union. As I'll argue in the chapters that follow, when Americans looked at Iran and the region more generally, they saw Soviet Red and not Islamic Green. Khomeini and his followers were, in fact, worried about communist and leftist factions within Iran. They were aware of the Soviet threat to their rule. But they saw their real battle as against secular modernism and they recognized, correctly, that the United States was the major force spreading this cultural and political creed throughout the world.

Carter and many of his key advisors seemed to really believe that Khomeini was crazy and irrational. They kept hoping that wiser, saner, and more rationally self-interested men would take over Iran. Khomeini was not crazy. But what he wanted was so inimical to American government officials' understanding of how the world did and should work that he might as well have been, at least from the stance of American negotiators.

Facing up to this cultural gap does not make the Islamic fundamentalists' beliefs, during the Iran hostage crisis and in the years since, more palatable to most Americans. But it could allow for

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more effective communication to take place. And although American policymakers should not be in the business of making generous deals with unpalatable ideologues or theocrats (and should never make deals with murdering terrorists), it is useful to see such people for what they are rather than simply see them, as some contemporary American pundits and policymakers do, as insane demons given over to evil. In Iran, the student hostage-takers, while no angels, killed no one, tortured no one, and generally (with some exceptions) treated their hostages reasonably well. Treating *hostages* “reasonably well,” I want to underline, does not negate the despicable nature of the hostage-takers’ acts. And the American government at that time could not be sure that the hostage-takers would continue to treat their captives decently. Still, American negotiators could have made the relative safety of the hostages clearer to the American people and they could have better explained that the American diplomats and soldiers being wrongly held in Iran had understood the risks involved in being in a country that was undergoing a furious political and cultural revolution. Part of my task in writing this book is to explain why the Carter administration did not try to calm the American people’s response to the hostage-taking in 1979 and 1980.

In 1979 and 1980, pundits and policymakers played the game of “who lost Iran?” In retrospect, it is remarkable that the United States had been able to maintain a useful ally in the region for so long. But eventually—a quarter of a century after the U.S. backed the coup that put Reza Pahlavi on the Peacock Throne—the chickens had come home to roost. The only obvious lesson of the Iran hostage crisis is that when a failed policy blows up spectacularly the best solution is to determine why it happened and then act with extreme prudence so long as nothing catastrophic really occurs. And if you are the president, Jimmy Carter’s miscalculations should be a grim reminder: in the event of troubles that cannot be easily resolved in faraway places involving Americans in harm’s way, make sure somebody else in your administration is charged with handling the problem while you carefully explain to the voters why good results take time and that patience is always a virtue.

One other issue: much is made, in the more academic accounts of the hostage-taking, of media misrepresentations of the Iranian struggle and general mass media manipulation of Americans. I was surprised to see just how much appeared in the mass media about Iran—about the malevolence of the Shah’s security forces, the misrule of the Shah, and the multiple motives of the anti-Shah forces. I was also surprised by the number of televised interviews with the Ayatollah Khomeini and his various followers. Newspapers even gave a decent amount of space to the hostage-takers’ views and their various communiqués. Coverage of the story by the *New York Times*, admittedly the best source for daily news in that era, while not unflawed, stands up quite well as complex and nuanced reporting. ABC’s nightly specials on the crisis, hosted by Ted Koppel (the show that would become *Nightline* in March 1980), also were full of incisive background on the revolution and the motives of the militant Islamic students and various officials running revolutionary Iran.

Not all coverage of the hostage-taking was stellar. A great deal of it traded in emotionalism. Many television and radio broadcasts featured anguished interviews with members of the hostages’ families. In the final analysis it was not, I think, the quality of the coverage of the hostage crisis that needs critiquing but simply the excessive quantity of it. But the fact that the television networks, news weeklies, radio stations, and newspapers covered the hostage-taking so extravagantly cannot be blamed on some nefarious motive. Americans were fascinated by the story and emotionally pulled by it. By the late 1970s, the mass media had the capacity to feed that fascination—though its capacity was far less than it is today. For better and for worse, the mass media’s capacity to trade on Americans’ fascination with certain kinds of spectacle (and celebrity) is now a fact of American and, indeed, international cultural life. And in the late 1970s this new capacity made it possible for Americans to follow the Iranian hostage story, albeit sometimes obsessively.

Americans’ inability to fully reckon with the Iran hostage crisis and to see it as a complex international relations fiasco does not, I think, rest with bad media coverage. Back then, despite Vietnam

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(or maybe in response to it?), Americans were not well equipped for or much interested in reckoning with the political complexity of their government's power. And the democracy's leaders, most particularly Jimmy Carter, did not have the tools, talents, or desire to explain effectively what can happen when powerful interjections and interventions into other peoples' lives are not appreciated. The Iranian hostage crisis could have been an interesting lesson in international affairs. Most Americans, however, including Jimmy Carter, treated it instead as (to paraphrase) the mad act of evildoers. As a partial result, American policymakers did not respond directly to the underlying problems that produced the Iran hostage crisis. That failure led, indirectly, some two decades later, to an evil act by vicious killers morally blinded by fanaticism. Thinking past the act of terrorism to the strategy of prevention has not been an American strength. It is all the more important, therefore, to take another look at America's first major confrontation with Islamic fundamentalism.