



Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam

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On November 4, 1979, Iranian militants stormed the United States Embassy in Tehran and took sixty-six Americans captive. Thus began the Iran Hostage Crisis, an affair that captivated the American public for 444 days and marked America's first confrontation with the forces of radical Islam. Using hundreds of recently declassified government documents, historian David Farber takes the first in-depth look at the hostage crisis, examining its lessons for America's contemporary War on Terrorism.

Unlike other histories of the subject, Farber's vivid and fast-paced narrative looks beyond the day-to-day circumstances of the crisis, using the events leading up to the ordeal as a means for understanding it. The book paints a portrait of the 1970s in the United States as an era of failed expectations in a nation plagued by uncertainty and anxiety. It reveals an American government ill prepared for the fall of the Shah of Iran and unable to reckon with the Ayatollah Khomeini and his militant Islamic followers.

Farber's account is filled with fresh insights regarding the central players in the crisis: Khomeini emerges as an astute strategist, single-mindedly dedicated to creating an Islamic state. The Americans' student-captors appear as less-than-organized youths, having prepared for only a symbolic sit-in with just a three-day supply of food. ABC news chief Roone Arledge, newly installed and eager for ratings, is cited as a critical catalyst in elevating the hostages to cause célèbre status.

Throughout the book there emerge eerie parallels to the current terrorism crisis. Then as now, Farber demonstrates, politicians failed to grasp the depth of anger that Islamic fundamentalists harbored toward the United States, and Americans dismissed threats from terrorist groups as the crusades of ineffectual madmen.

Taken Hostage is a timely and revealing history of America's first engagement with terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, one that provides a chilling reminder that the past is only prologue.

Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam Details

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David says

dry but clear recap of the late-70's Iranian hostage crisis and what led up to it. A high school senior/college freshman year flashback for me -- waiting in long gas lines, "Nightline" nee "America Held Hostage" on ABC, endless stories on the President-Carter-is-inept theme (the usual symbols/incidents are reviewed here - - "lust in my heart" interview, "malaise" speech in which he did not use the word "malaise", whacking at the crazed rabbit with a paddle, handling the White House tennis court reservations himself.....).

Some of the analysis sounded like wisdom from a good couples therapist mediating an America-Carter separation agreement -- what drives you nuts about someone (lack of efficacy in getting stuff thru Congress; lack of foreign policy experience/expertise) is the flip side of what attracts you in the beginning (he's an outsider! he's not like Nixon! he's honest and dependable!).

To be fair to Jimmy Carter, though, it's not clear from the historical material presented here that we had a lot of great options in responding to Iranian revolution. The whole thing made me appreciate the wisdom of recent Jeopardy teen tournament champ [from my daughter's high school -- go Rockets!], whose ambition is to be "ex-president of the United States -- with all the perks and prestige but none of the day to day pressure".

David Classing says

After hearing a report on CNN this week that Iran wants to send as its UN Ambassador one of the former US Embassy Hostage Takers, I realized, though the defining foreign relations news story of my childhood, I did not know much about why the Americans were held. Hearing Iran's official explanation on why the US should grant their new proposed UN Ambassador a visa merely because he was a "student" at the time I decided to read a couple of books about the subject. First, to debunk Iran's argument that he was "merely a student" at the time of the storming of the US Embassy in Tehran, it should be noted that ALL OF THE KIDNAPPERS from Iran who stormed the Embassy were students...

Farber's book is very simple to read, and instead of beginning in the 1970s to define this crisis, he starts his history during the Eisenhower years, and how the US CIA helped to topple the Iranian leader of the time, Muhammad Mossadegh, all in the name of Western control of Iranian oil (sound familiar?). Operation Ajax installed Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (the Shah) in his place and Farber draws on the history of Iran and how the Shah was exiled once Khomeini gained influence, and how Pahlavi was reinstalled as Iranian leader and Khomeini exiled later on, until 1979. The book details the history of Western influence over Iran, particularly the western controlling influence of Iran's oil, and how changes in Iranian culture led to changes in how agreements were negotiated with the West.

Farber also details the malaise spreading across the United States after Watergate and how it, along with economic factors, stagflation, high unemployment, etc, affected the Carter administration. He does a great job of showing how Carter tried to change policies, but those changes were not happening. Then in 1979, more heartache as a group of a couple hundred Iranian students stormed the US Embassy in Tehran and held the American workers hostage for 444 days. Using declassified documents, Farber details the differing

viewpoints and strategies espoused by different Carter administration officials, though Farber seems to utilize more of Zbigniew Brezinski's documents.

If you're looking for a detailed account of those 444 days, this is not the book for you. This is an easy book to read; I read it in about 1.5 days. You'll have a better understanding of what happened during those 444 days. If you, however, know a bit of what happened and the reasons for it, then you probably shouldn't read this book as one might find it too simplistic.

Amy says

A lot of dry, professor-ish set up (it's a 190-page book and doesn't even get to the actual hostage event until page 130) but interesting look at Carter's presidency and the American psyche during late 70s.

Dirk says

Thin but nicely done recounting of the Iranian hostage crisis

Roxy Moran says

This was missing a lot of analysis on the actual hostage crisis itself. 75% of the book was devoted to the hostage crisis' origins, only a single chapter to the actual crisis. Writing was fine though, title is misleading. Definitely not that much information on 'radical islam,' or whatever that the author thinks that means.

Annie says

This book is a particularly timely read with the prisoner swap today (1/16/16). It focuses on the events leading up to the Iranian hostage crisis, why Iranians felt the way they did and why Americans felt the way they did, and how the governments handled the whole thing. Insightful and interesting, however, I would've liked more about how the hostages were handled, their conditions, what it was like, etc., but that wasn't included. I would recommend it for those who want to know more about the motivations and reactions surrounding the hostage crisis.

Tara Busch says

I really enjoyed this book. Farber argues the hostage crisis was Americas first encounter with radical Islam & demonstrates how the US leadership was unprepared, not understanding the motives of their adversaries. He shows how American media and the public misunderstood US foreign policy, yet the Iranians did not! They understood the US pod better than Americans, and used this knowledge.

Farber spends a large part of the book showing this crisis as a failure of American foreign policy going back decades which failed to understand the radicals or the Iranian pod, and simply labeled everyone as "nuts",

failing to recognize the divisions in the country, the long memory and the deep resentment of the Iranian people toward the Shah & the US (his biggest supporters)
Farber also demonstrates how the crisis hit on cold War fears of communist control of middle east oil.
Great read!!

Diane says

This book is a decent history of the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis of dozens of U.S. diplomats which followed. However, the author has difficulty sticking to his subject, and spends lots of time talking about other trends in the 1970s in general, which he never relates to his subject, and giving his personal views about just about everything that happened. While there is good information in this book, the reader will have to wade through a lot of dross in order to find it.

Missy says

Let me just say that the beginning of this book, for me, was incredibly dry. However, once Farber was able to get past all the info we needed to understand the hostage crisis, I felt like I couldn't put down the book. I will admit that being born in 1991 does not give me an excuse to not know the details of American history with the Middle East. I had never heard of the hostage crisis before. But I must say, Farber does a great job because I was glued to the pages trying to figure out what could get those hostages released as the Carter administration tried plan after plan.

The only problem I had with this book is that it doesn't fully explain what the crisis has to do with relations to Iran today. It has a tiny bit of info on the Reagan administration and the Iran-Contra which is the bridge between the hostage crisis and "war on terror."

Mike Hankins says

Conflict with fundamentalist Islamic terrorism is one of the most pressing issues currently facing the United States, politically, culturally, and militarily. David Farber attempts to shed light on the issue by examining what he calls America's first encounter with Islamic radicals: the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979-1980. The book is not merely a narrative, but an examination of the event in three wider contexts: the American cultural and political landscape of the 1970s, the upheavals in Iranian politics and culture, and the relationship between the U.S. and Iran, which Farber characterizes as a misunderstanding. Ultimately, Farber argues that the inability of the Carter administration to quickly handle the crisis was the result of a failure to realize that events in Iran were motivated by long-term processes of growing anti-western sentiment directly linked to Operation Ajax in 1953. Farber then concludes that this misunderstanding has perpetuated into the present day, contributing to the terrorist acts of 9/11 and beyond.

Farber does not view the hostage crisis in isolation, but places it in the context of America in the 1970s, characterized by economic worry, growing cultural cynicism and a perceived loss of morality and leadership. Jimmy Carter's "Crisis of Confidence" speech, followed by the replacement of nearly his entire cabinet, conveyed a sense that the government was weak and adrift, if not disintegrating. Farber is quick to point out that such a dark perception of America was limited to its own citizens. The rest of the world saw the U.S. as

wealthy and globally dominant.

Farber traces the root of conflict between the U.S. and Iran to the overthrow of Muhammad Mossadegh, spurred by the United States in 1953. He then provides a narrative of growing discontent in Iran, centering around the Ayatollah Khomeini, as the nation experienced a resurgence of fundamental Islam that advocated a turning away from western modernism and secularism. Farber asserts that American leadership completely missed this religious motivation for the overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlavi, and they failed to realize that the hostage-takers were responding directly to American policies going back to the early 1950s. Carter's efforts were also frustrated by the fact that traditional negotiation techniques proved ineffective against the Iranian students, whose religious beliefs indicated that martyrdom for their cause was desirable.

The American media, its large role in increasing awareness of the crisis, and the reaction of the American people is a key theme for Farber. ABC created an entire new program, "World News Tonight," centered around the hostage situation. The book examines how the emotional and personal connections formed by news broadcasts and interviews with family members of hostages created an "us versus them" mentality with a moralistic edge. This simplistic view not only contributed to further misunderstanding about Iranian intentions and motivations, but it spawned domestic consequences in the United States. Riots and anti-Iranian violence emerged throughout the country as feelings about the crisis grew more intense. The event became a symbol of Carter's failure in the minds of many Americans, his inability compounded by the failed rescue attempt that killed eight Americans, virtually destroying his chance of reelection. Farber also indicates that most Americans, before the crisis occurred, were completely unaware of the situation in Iran, much less that it was connected to Operation Ajax. Thus, the misunderstanding between America and Iran was not limited to leadership, but was endemic to the people as a whole.

Farber goes on to argue that even after the hostages were released, Americans failed to recognize the fundamentalist religious rhetoric behind the crisis and Iran's new government as a whole. He drives home his assertion that the terrorist attacks against the west since the crisis – including the 9/11 attacks – are a direct result of this misunderstanding. As Farber states, "The Iranian public's memories of American actions and the American public's general ignorance of U.S. policy in Iran were so asymmetrical as to preclude mutual understanding."

Although the book attempts to emphasize the Iranian context for the crisis, his narrative of Iranian history is somewhat simplistic, painting a picture of two rival forces, one led by Khomeini, representing religion and tradition, the other by the Shah, representing western modernism and corruption. He does include brief mention of the factional nature of these broader movements, but his omission of any sources from the Iranian perspective is a glaring gap in his research. Otherwise, the work rests on solid documentation, mostly official state papers from the Carter Presidential Library. Farber is also an eloquent writer, his analysis is insightful and his narrative is gripping. Overall, although the work has some flaws, Farber's points are well written, thought provoking and incredibly relevant to current events.

Chloe Logan says

This definitely explored the political side of the crisis rather than the stories of the hostages in Iran. It was an interesting perspective to have, especially before seeing Argo.
