

# BECOMING

U.S.-IRAN RELATIONS AND THE  
IRAN-IRAQ WAR, 1979-1988

# ENEMIES

JAMES G. BLIGHT | JANET M. LANG

HUSSEIN BANAI | MALCOLM BYRNE | JOHN TIRMAN

FOREWORD BY BRUCE RIEDEL

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To Tom Blanton  
Friend, collaborator, and chair extraordinaire

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Between us and them . . .

Stands the great wound swallowing all tears, all voices.

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Transfixed or transformed by this pain? We never know because  
Who can slip through the gate without throwing a shadow  
Toward both the past and the present—fire, flood, famine  
All we've wished upon them a thousand times, still they inch  
Back and taunt us with their persistence. We track them down  
To a quick end. More come. And the old memories grow new.  
The future seems already written by a pen of iron. The book  
Unreadable, immense. The enemy has become our masterpiece.

—J. P. White, "Thinking about the enemy" (2002)

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# Foreword

The Iran-Iraq War was devastating—one of the largest and longest conventional interstate wars since the Korean conflict ended in 1953. A half million lives were lost, perhaps another million were injured, and the economic cost was over a trillion dollars. An index of the scale of the tragedy is that the battle lines at the end of the war were almost exactly where they were at the beginning of hostilities. It was also the only war in modern times in which chemical weapons were used on a massive scale. The 1980–1988 war led, in addition, to other disasters. It led to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the liberation of Kuwait a year later, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The bloody U.S. war in Iraq was the finale in this march of folly. The seeds of multigenerational tragedy were planted in the Iran-Iraq War. We will live with its consequences for decades, perhaps longer.

Both Iraqis and Iranians came to believe the United States was manipulating them during the war. Ironically (and perhaps naively), the United States tried to reach out to both belligerents during the course of the war—in great secrecy both times—to try to build a strategic partnership. The disastrous arms-for-hostages policy, which came to be known as Iran-Contra, convinced Iraqis that the United States was trying to play both sides of the conflict. The result was that when the war ended, the Iraqi regime and most Iraqis regarded the United States as a threat, despite Washington's support during the war: critical intelligence support to Baghdad, considerable diplomatic cover, and ignoring the largesse of our Arab allies who loaned tens of billions of dollars to Baghdad to sustain Iraq's war effort.

Iranians call the war the “imposed war” because they believe the United States imposed it on them and orchestrated the global “tilt” toward Iraq in the war. They note that the UN did not condemn Iraq for starting the war—in fact, it did not even discuss the war for weeks after it started, and it eventually blamed Iraq as the aggressor only years later as part of a deal to free U.S. hostages held by pro-Iranian terrorists in Lebanon.

For Iranians, though the war had tragic consequences, they nevertheless consolidated the revolution largely by successfully portraying it as a David and Goliath struggle, imposed on Iran by the United States and its allies. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was fairly short in duration and its cost minuscule in comparison to the Iran-Iraq War. For the generation of Iranians who are now leading their country, men like President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the war was the defining event of their lives, and it has shaped their worldview. Their anti-Americanism and deep suspicion of the West generally can be traced directly to their understanding of the Iran-Iraq War.

For Iraqis it was also a national nightmare, though just the beginning of a dark period that would culminate in the bloody civil war that followed the U.S. invasion and the destruction of the regime of Saddam Hussein. Many of Iraq's fault lines were exposed during the Iran-Iraq War—especially Arab versus Kurd, and Shia versus Sunni. Violent eruptions along these fault lines occurred after 2003 and continue to the present day.

In spite of its critical significance to two of the principal players in the Middle East, the bloody war in and around the Persian Gulf has attracted relatively little attention in the United States. The 1979 revolution and the Kuwait crisis in 1990–1991 have gotten far more attention from academia and think tanks than the eight-year struggle between Iran and Iraq. U.S. policy toward the war has gotten even less attention. One reason Americans have largely ignored the Iran-Iraq War is the enormous

antipathy many Americans feel toward the two belligerents. Neither Iran nor Iraq is popular in the United States, to say the least. When Americans think of Iraq, they think mainly of Saddam Hussein and the huge (and still ongoing) cost of the U.S. intervention that began in March 2003. When Americans think at all about Iran in the 1980s, they are likely to recall the Iran-Contra scandal, a peculiar and humiliating cascade of revelations that nearly led to the impeachment of President Ronald Reagan. Yet another reason Americans give short shrift to the Iran-Iraq War is that most of the critical U.S. decisions regarding the war were made in secret, and the relevant documentation has remained classified. For example, the U.S. provision of critical intelligence to Baghdad—a story told in this book with a degree of authoritative detail previously unavailable—was never discussed in the open during the war. Finally, it should be noted that the two most important American decision makers on matters connected to the war, President Ronald Reagan and his CIA director, William Casey, died without leaving their own personal accounts of why they did what they did.

Now comes this book, with its remarkable declassified documentation and oral testimony that bears directly on questions of U.S. policy making with regard to the Iran-Iraq War. Using the method of critical oral history, a collection of scholars and former officials involved with U.S. and UN policy toward the war met at the Musgrove Conference Center in St. Simons Island, Georgia, in December 2008 to take a fresh look at the U.S. role in the war. The bulk of this book is the edited and annotated transcript of that conference. The book reveals much that was previously unknown about U.S. policy before, during, and after the war. But it goes beyond mere reportage; it also contains lessons proposed by scholars and former officials regarding fundamental foreign policy challenges to the United States that transcend time and place.

U.S. involvement in the Iran-Iraq War was unusual in that the conflict was between two detestable regimes, each of which was led by an unscrupulous, cruel dictator. For the U.S. government and its citizens, there was no good guy in this drama. Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini were both repressive, narrow-minded bigots, violent and brutish in the extreme. For those who would prefer to see U.S. national security policy follow in all instances the principles laid down in the UN charter or other statements of the moral high ground in the affairs between nations, the Iran-Iraq War was a swamp. Alas, this is the rule rather than the exception in the real world. In any case, during the Iran-Iraq War, U.S. policy could not be simply to support those with whom we agreed or whom we admired, because no such party existed.

What then accounts for the sometimes grudging but often generous U.S. support for Saddam Hussein's Iraq? The answer is easy to identify, but understanding U.S. opposition to Iran and support for Iraq is a deep psychological enterprise. The two-word answer is that it was the *hostage crisis*, one of the most devastating non-war-related events in U.S. history that drove U.S. opposition to Iran and led to support for Iraq. As the war began, Iran was holding dozens of American diplomats hostage, torturing some of them, and publicly humiliating all of them. After 444 days in captivity, on the day of President Ronald Reagan's inauguration, Iran released the hostages. To most American policymakers and citizens, this illegal, cruel, and repellant act by Iran set the standard for bad behavior by Middle East governments. In effect, any leader or regime in the region that was less reprehensible than Iran's was somehow regarded as "good," or at least potentially redeemable. This principle applied especially to Iraq, which had for its own reasons decided to attack Iran and try to eliminate the Khomeini regime. So the enemy of our enemy became, if not exactly our friend, at least an ally whose interests, for the moment and on the issue of Iran, seemed to coincide with our own. In retrospect, it is of course impossible to fully understand how Saddam Hussein could have been so regarded, given as we know of his horrible behavior toward his own people and others in the region. A reconstructed and

civilized Saddam was a mirage. But in the 1980s the mirage was fueled by hope. Thus did the United States tilt toward Iraq, hoping that in so doing it could directly restrain what were regarded by many in the West, as well as the Middle East, as the “medieval fanatics” in Tehran and prevent them from gaining control of the region’s massive oil reserves.

Washington–Baghdad relations were rocky from the moment the war broke out, and they became more difficult with each passing month. “Our side,” alas, kept breaking all the rules. First, Iraq was the aggressor in September 1980. True, it had been provoked by Iran during the months leading up to the Iraqi attack. But the massive scale of the invasion was monumentally out of proportion to the provocations Iraq claimed had motivated the attack. As long as Iraq held Iranian territory, the U.S. government did not call for the restoration of the status quo ante, as would be the norm under such circumstances. Yet as the tables were turned, by the summer of 1982 when Iran went on the offensive and tried to invade Iraq, the United States did call upon the combatants to respect the international border between the two countries. Then “our guy” began using chemical weapons. First it was piecemeal and largely ineffectual. But by war’s end it was on a scale not seen since the First World War, and very decisive. The threat of Iraqi chemical warheads on long-range missiles caused many of Tehran’s inhabitants to evacuate in early 1988. Meanwhile, Saddam began using chemical attacks systematically to kill his own people. As the war ended, the Anfal campaign against Iraqi Kurds was under way, an act of pure genocide by “our guy.”

Ironically the closest U.S. partner in the region, Israel, pressed Washington hard and repeatedly tried in effect, switch sides and offer assistance to Iran. Israeli leaders, generals, and spies were obsessed by the Iraqi threat in the 1980s, just as they are preoccupied by the Iranian threat today. They longed to restore the cozy relationship they had with the Shah in the 1960s and 1970s. Israel was the only consistent source of spare parts for the Iranian air force’s U.S.-built jets throughout the war. Israeli leaders, notably Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, brought considerable pressure to bear on Washington for an American engagement with Tehran. Iran-Contra was in many ways their idea. American diplomats and spies abroad were told to turn a blind eye to Israeli arms deals with Tehran, even when it was official U.S. policy to (in the Washington euphemism of the day) “staunch” all the avenues by which the Iranians might obtain weapons or other material needed for their war effort.

This book argues persuasively (and I think decisively) that Reagan’s decision to send his national security adviser to Tehran with a cake and a Bible was much more about another hostage crisis than it was about any strategic outreach to Iran. Reagan was obsessed with freeing American (and other) hostages held by the Lebanese pro-Iranian group, Hezbollah, and he became convinced that a deal with Iran might result in their freedom. The specific means would be a trade of U.S. arms to Tehran in return for Iranian intervention with Hezbollah to free the hostages. In retrospect it is easy to see that could never work. The bizarre twists and turns, and the rogues’ gallery of characters involved on all sides, make it hard to understand why anyone, let alone the president of the United States and his senior advisers, could delude themselves into thinking that the Iran-Contra maneuver could ever work. But read on: this book shows in detail why Reagan’s advisers and his inner circle believed this was their best option, given the president’s relentless pressure to obtain the release of the hostages.

This is a story with a maze of contradictions and puzzles. In this book you will hear firsthand from participants in the drama. Among the most fascinating is the narrative of the first CIA officer to visit Baghdad during the war, in the summer of 1982. Tom Twetten traveled to Baghdad to deliver critical intelligence to the Iraqis. The ambiguity and ambivalence of the entire U.S. relationship with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq during the war is captured in his perplexity and anxiety upon arriving in Baghdad. Would the Iraqis, he wondered quite seriously, welcome him or shoot him? Also enthralling is the

account of the UN diplomat, Giandomenico Picco, who was told by Washington at the end of the war to sabotage the peace process in order to buy time for the Iraqis to inflict more damage on Iran! And you will find few revelations here or elsewhere any more poignant than the tale U.S. diplomats tell in this book about what may have been the most unwelcome assignment of their careers: defending the Iran-Contra maneuver to U.S. allies in the region—that is, our double-cross of an ally (Iraq) in an effort to assist the number-one enemy in the region of Washington and many of its Middle East allies (Iran).

Finally, the Musgrove conference and this book based on it explore the worlds of what might have been. Were significant opportunities to avoid enmity between Iran and America missed in these years? Intriguing discussions follow in this book regarding such possibilities as, What if President Jimmy Carter had listened to his own internal doubts instead of his senior advisers and had decided not to let the Shah come to the United States for medical treatment? What if the United States had drawn a very sharp red line opposing use of chemical weapons by Saddam? Or might we have helped to reform Iraq if the United States had been a loyal partner to Baghdad instead of coming across as fickle? What if there had been no Iran-Contra gambit? There are no definitive answers to these queries into the history of what did *not* happen, of course. But the discussions of the team that gathered in Georgia were highly provocative and point to lessons that should be absorbed by any U.S. government faced with the task of constructing a sensible policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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THE UNITED STATES AND IRAN: HOW “THE ENEMY  
HAS BECOME OUR MASTERPIECE”



## Kierkegaard in the Desert

### *A Reader's Guide to Becoming Enemies*

The majority of men are subjective toward themselves and objective toward all others, terribly objective sometimes—but the real task is to be objective toward oneself and subjective toward all others.

It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards.

—Søren Kierkegaard, Journals (1848,1843)

### THE UNITED STATES, IRAN, AND THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR: FROM ENMITY TO ENEMIES TO EMPATHY

Sometimes definitions help. This is especially true when a phenomenon fits the dictionary definition so precisely that one is tempted to say it is a *classic* example, a kind of empirical gold standard for what we mean when we use a term. U.S.-Iranian *enmity*, the origin and development of which is the subject of this book, is just such a perfect fit between a general definition and specific reality.

Webster's dictionary tells us that the term enmity "suggests hatred which may be open or concealed; [and] rancor suggesting bitter brooding over a wrong."<sup>1</sup> By this standard, the United States and Iran have experienced deep and bitter enmity for more than thirty years, since the very early days of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. Each holds the other accountable for what are regarded as monstrous grievances. These "original sins" of postrevolution U.S.-Iran relations occurred in the fall of 1979: the Carter administration admitted the deposed Shah of Iran into the United States for medical treatment for cancer, a decision Tehran regarded as proof that Washington would never accept the Islamic Republic and would seek instead to destroy it. The revolutionary regime held the Shah responsible for a quarter century of crimes against the Iranian people and had demanded his return to Iran to stand trial. That was the unforgivable U.S. sin. In response, the Iranian leadership endorsed and embraced a student takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the holding of more than fifty U.S. citizens hostage in a standoff that would dominate the world's headlines until it ended with the hostages' release 444 days after the students had transformed the embassy into a prison. That was the unforgivable Iranian sin.

Webster goes on to say that an *enemy* is "one that seeks the injury, overthrow, or failure of an opponent."<sup>2</sup> This describes to a tee the fundamental fact of U.S.-Iran relations during the Iran-Iraq War, one of the bloodiest of the latter half of the twentieth century. During the war the United States acting mainly via its ally, Saddam Hussein, sought to prevent Iran from winning its war with Iraq, which had attacked Iran on September 22, 1980. By the time the desert trenchlike warfare ended in August 1988, hundreds of thousands of Iranians and Iraqis had died, millions were wounded, and both societies were exhausted almost to the point of collapse. Throughout the war the Iranian leadership considered itself to be at war with the United States as well as Iraq. They called the war then, as they do now, the "imposed war"—a war underwritten by the money, equipment, and know-how of the

United States, the presumed objective of which was the total destruction of the Iranian Revolution and its replacement with a regime more amenable to U.S. desires. The Carter and Reagan administrations, for their part, regarded the prospect of an Iranian victory in the war as “a Middle Eastern Armageddon,” a term used by former U.S. assistant secretary of state for the Middle East Richard Murphy in chapter 3 of this book. Washington believed that if the Islamic radicals in Tehran defeated the Iraqis, the flow of oil through the Persian Gulf might be disrupted or even stopped, and that the continued viability of Israel, a key U.S. ally in the region, might be put at risk.

One result of becoming enemies during the Iran-Iraq War, and having remained enemies more or less ever since, is that a surfeit of self-righteousness dominates the rhetoric on both sides. Stereotypes abound. In official Tehran, the Americans are arrogant bullies and neoimperialists still seeking, after more than thirty years of futile effort, a regime change in Iran. In official Washington, the Iranians are theocratic, cruel, determined to develop a nuclear weapons capability to increase their capacity to blackmail their many enemies in the region and in the West, and to threaten the very existence of Israel. Few Iranians or Americans ever travel to each other’s country. Each makes headlines in the other’s country only when it is lambasted in the local media for some alleged slight or offense along the lines just suggested.

In this book, we attempt a historical reconstruction of the process by which the United States and Iran became enemies in the cauldron of the Iran-Iraq War: the origins, development, and milestones of the enmity that has characterized Washington-Tehran relations since 1979. *Critical oral history*, the method we use to excavate U.S.-Iranian enmity, is described in the two sections immediately following this one. But its essence was captured uncannily by the Great Dane, Søren Kierkegaard, who more than 150 years ago wrote, “The majority of men are subjective toward themselves and objective toward all others, terribly objective sometimes—but the real task is to be objective toward oneself and subjective toward all others.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, we tend to be self-centered and self-righteous, and we tend to treat others as if everything wrong with the world is their fault. The trick—and it really is a trick, performed all too infrequently in relations between nations—is to reverse the valences, to get inside the other’s point of view, to *empathize* with the other. This is difficult enough in arguments at the dinner table or in discussions between fans of opposing football teams. Between bitter enemies such as the United States and Iran, with their immense historical baggage, it is very difficult indeed.

This book is a figurative, retrospective journey with Kierkegaard into the desert of U.S.-Iranian recrimination in which the Iran-Iraq War was fought. The actual journey took place at the Arc Foundation’s Musgrove Plantation Conference Center in St. Simon’s Island, Georgia, December 8–11, 2008. At that conference, former officials, declassified documents, and scholarly analysis combined to do what we think were creative ways, yielding new insights into the process by which Iran and the United States became enemies. The participants are described in the *dramatis personae* immediately following this prologue. Chapter 1 surveys the more-than-thirty-year history of incommensurable U.S. and Iranian narratives regarding relations between the two countries. It sets the stage for the discussions in chapters 2 through 7, which contain the excerpted and edited dialogues. In the epilogue we assess what we think we learned from the exercise and the lessons our analysis suggests for moving U.S.-Iran relations out of the dangerous rut they have been in for more than thirty years. The brief chronology of events in appendix 1 provides a temporal outline of what happened, and when and where it happened. Selections from the declassified documents the participants read in preparation for the conference are in appendix 2. Each section is keyed to its corresponding chapter.

Enjoy the ride.

Critical oral history is a method pioneered twenty-five years ago in a research project on the Cuban missile crisis. The method requires the simultaneous interaction, in a conference setting, of three elements: former officials, declassified documents, and top scholars of the events and issues under scrutiny. The philosophical core of critical oral history is captured succinctly in an 1843 journal entry by Søren Kierkegaard: "It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards."<sup>4</sup>

We admit it: we believe Kierkegaard is something like the philosopher king of critical oral history. Indeed, his *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) provides insight into the deeper layers of what happens in any critical oral history exercise, as former officials begin to see that the choices they made were not the only, or the best, options available to them at the time—they might have decided differently. History might have been something very different from what it became. This realization is often accompanied by the dawning awareness of one's personal responsibility for the outcome under scrutiny. (The book's supreme relevance to an analysis of U.S.-Iran relations is hinted at in its subtitle: *A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Original Sin*.) If you seek to penetrate some of the deeper layers of what happens to former officials in a critical oral history exercise, you should begin with Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*.<sup>5</sup>

We scholars study a historical event already knowing the outcome. That is usually why we study in the first place: the outcome is important, or at least it seems important to us, and we want to explain why it happened. We work backward, from effects to causes, in search of understanding. But the former officials who helped produce the outcome of interest worked forward, in a fog of high imperfect understanding, burdened with many misperceptions, hoping for the best, and bracing themselves for the worst. The reliance on declassified documents provides something of a level playing field on which the scholars and former officials can have a useful discussion, a place to begin to develop a more comprehensive point of view that incorporates the chronological precision and analytical acuity that is possible when looking backward, yet it also includes the dynamism, creativity, uncertainty, and tension that emerges in the memories of former officials—of moving forward into the unknown, of endeavoring to *make* history without benefit of knowing the outcome.

Critical oral history is not theoretically complicated or mystical or manipulative. In fact, the name is pretty much self-explanatory. It is "history" for the obvious reason that we examine events that occurred in the past. It is "oral" because we focus a good deal on the oral testimony of the former officials who participate. And it is "critical"—this, we feel, is the key element that can make the method so fruitful—because each of the three elements (policy makers, scholars, and documents) *simultaneously* provides a check or balance on the other as the inquiry proceeds. Oral testimony is constrained by both the documentary record, contained in a large briefing notebook distributed to all participants a month or so in advance of the conference, and by the analysis of the scholars. The documents are interpreted, and thus their meaning is constrained by the knowledge of both the former policy makers and the scholars. And the scholars are constrained (as always) by the available documentation, but also (as happens too infrequently) by the memories of the former officials, who endeavor to add missing context to the declassified documentation.

Critical oral history thus provides a "free market" for historical propositions. Advocates of deeply irreconcilable points of view—including both the former officials and the scholars—present evidence for their interpretations from documents and experience and then cross-examine each other, with

reference to whatever evidence they believe bears on the issues under investigation. Each participant typically moves into, and withdraws from, a figurative “time machine” many times during the exchanges, as the discussion moves back and forth from retrospective immersion *in* the forward movement of the historical events (this *happened*) to the retrospective analytical interpretation of those events (this is the *meaning* of what happened).<sup>6</sup>

For readers of this book, chapters 2 through 6 provide a second-order time-machine experience. Chapters 2 through 6 are focused on what happened from 1979 to 1988, as Washington and Tehran made decisions regarding the Iran-Iraq War. The Carter and Reagan administrations tried, by various (mostly) indirect measures, to ensure that Iraq won its war with Iran, or at the very least that Iran did not win the war. Ayatollah Khomeini and his associates, meanwhile, spent the 1980s in direct confrontation with Iraq, a conflict in which at least a quarter million Iranians perished and millions were wounded. Yet though the Iraqis were certainly the enemy of Iran during the war, Tehran was convinced that the United States was the *deus ex machina* of Baghdad’s war effort. Chapter 7, on the other hand, is focused on the meaning of the evidence discussed in chapters 2 through 6—on opportunities that may have been missed along the way to improve U.S.-Iran relations. The participants in this imaginative, reconstructive process periodically relive some of the events of the 1979–1988 period, framed by their personal experiences or with reference to key declassified documents. Readers are thus offered a vicarious seat at the table at the Musgrove Conference Center as data and interpretations are put forward, criticized, and defended.

## A LITTLE THEORY: HOW CRITICAL ORAL HISTORY (AND HISTORY) WORK

When critical oral history works well—when participants feel they have really learned something new and important from the discussions—we believe it is because a degree of *empathy* is present in the retrospective discussion that was missing during the events under scrutiny. In real time confrontations, crises, and conflicts can often be traced to fundamental deficiencies in the ability of leaders to grasp the way an adversary thinks or feels. When this happens, events can easily spiral out of control. If they do unspool into threat and counterthreat, perhaps even into attack and counterattack, then countries (or friends, families, or neighborhoods) with disagreements will at some point become bitter enemies. Enemies tend to regard one another’s actions as premeditated and aggressive, while their own actions are experienced as reactive and defensive. In this way, the actions of each tend to reinforce the (often initially incorrect) mutual attributions of aggressive intent. Each side is typically clueless as to the story the other side is telling itself. As the downward spiral in relations evolves, each side typically loses interest in trying to determine the mind-set and motives of its enemy. Everything becomes totally, if erroneously, obvious. Everything is the fault of the other. The empathy gap becomes enormous.<sup>7</sup>

This “empathy gap” in real time often becomes dramatically obvious during a critical oral history investigation in proportion to the degree to which participants close the gap retrospectively. An example of this phenomenon occurs in chapters 5 and 6—in discussions of the course of the Iran-Iraq War during the spring and summer of 1988. Several scholars ask the former U.S. officials whether the nearly simultaneous April 17–18, 1988, U.S. attack on Iranian naval assets in the Persian Gulf and the Iraqi recapture of the strategically valuable al-Faw Peninsula from Iran was planned in Washington as a kind of “shock and awe”-like double whammy on the Iranians. The officials, led by former CIA Middle East specialist Bruce Riedel, acknowledge that, if they had been Iranian officials at the time, they too would have subscribed to the conspiracy theory favored in Tehran—which held that the

existed a U.S.-Iraqi conspiracy to defeat and demoralize the Iranians in a highly coordinated fashion.

But there was no such conspiracy, according to Bruce Riedel. In fact, he says, the United States and Iraq could not have conspired in the suggested manner even if they had wished to—which they emphatically did not, given the tense relations at the time between Baghdad and Washington. He gives two reasons: First, Iraq stubbornly refused to follow orders from Washington, as a matter of course often to the detriment of their war effort. But second, the war in the Gulf, where the air strikes occurred on the Iranian navy, had its own U.S. command and control, and these were totally unconnected to whatever process by which the Iraqis decided to attack Iranian forces in al-Faw. There was no supreme U.S. commander in the Middle East as there was in Europe during the Cold War. Somewhat like a brain-damaged patient, the left hand and the right hand of the events of April 17–19, 1988—the U.S. naval and air forces on the one hand, and on the other hand the Iraqi ground forces—had no advance knowledge of one another’s intentions. The simultaneity of the attacks was accidental. This possibility was never even considered in Tehran, according to Iran scholar and former Iranian Foreign Ministry official Farideh Farhi. The Iranians, instead, took the coincidence of the attacks on the naval and land forces as further evidence that Iraq was only a proxy of the United States, and that in effect a direct military confrontation war with the United States was just around the corner. In retrospect, Riedel and the other former U.S. officials said that if they had been Iranian officials at the time, they would have believed the same thing that leaders in Tehran believed.

This inability to bridge the empathy gap in real time had unintended but important consequences. The Iranian leadership had always assumed that the United States was calling all the shots for the Iraqis. But when U.S. airpower was brought to bear in the Gulf, the Iranian leadership concluded that they were on the brink of an all-out war with the United States. In concrete terms, it seemed to be only a matter of time before Iran could expect massive U.S. airstrikes on targets all over Iran. This raised the stakes in Tehran to the ultimate level. As readers will discover in chapter 6—and in the newly translated Iranian documents that accompany the chapter—the existential question for Iranian leaders thus became, do we capitulate to the greatest power on earth, as they no doubt expect us to do, or do we surprise them (and everyone) by “going for it”—by driving madly toward Baghdad, trying to capture it, ousting Saddam Hussein, and thus (according to a scenario embraced by some) winning the war, however long it might take, and whatever the cost to Iran in blood and treasure? Many advocates of this view were members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). To them, whether history would ultimately record that such a decision was creative and courageous or foolhardy and suicidal would thus depend on how the Americans responded. Those favoring the “go for it” decision could point to Iran’s traditions, especially their martyr-oriented, Shiite variant of Islam, a tradition that had, by early 1988, been enhanced by what the leadership called the “holy martyrdom” of nearly a quarter of a million Iranians in the war, many of whom were (by the end of the war) young boys in their early to mid-teens.

Whether empathy is present or not—and thus whether one perceives an adversary’s intentions accurately or whether one misperceives—has been described by some scholars as centrally an *ethical* issue. The question they pose is, do we have the courage, can we sufficiently transcend the bounds of our prejudices and misconceptions, to really put ourselves figuratively “in the skin” of an adversary? The British philosopher Isaiah Berlin made empathy a central feature of his writing. Berlin wrote that in addition to knowing the mind of an adversary, empathy requires one to grasp “the particular vision of the universe which lies at the heart of [an adversary’s] thought.” This capacity, he said, permits one “to some degree to re-enact the states of minds of men” who are fundamentally at odds with oneself. This is what we sometimes call the “deployment” of empathy, the grasping of a mind-set whose

assumptions are fundamentally alien from one's own.<sup>9</sup>

~~This is easier said (by philosophers) than done (by policy makers).~~ The Canadian scholar, journalist, and politician Michael Ignatieff has written that to refrain from the deployment of empathy in situations such as those described above is fundamentally unethical or immoral. To act uninformed by empathy, to refuse to enter, as fully as possible, the mind-set of an actual or potential adversary, to submit to what he calls "autism," the behavior of those who are "so locked into their own myths . . . that they can't listen, can't hear, can't learn from anybody outside themselves." In these instances, according to Ignatieff,

What is denied is the possibility of empathy: that human understanding is capable of penetrating the bell jars of separate identities. But social peace anywhere depends for its survival on just this epistemological act of faith: when it comes to political understanding, difference is always minor, comprehension is always possible.<sup>10</sup>

We agree that empathetic comprehension in any situation is possible, of course, in principle. But as the empathy gap widens into a chasm, once stereotypes harden into place, and the escalation of rhetoric begins to spiral out of control, it becomes ever more difficult for representatives of the opposing factions to see the confrontation in anything other than zero-sum terms: You are out to get us, so we must calculate how to get you first. You are on the side of evil; we are fighting for the good and the just, etc. This is what happened between the United States and Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. In fact, the war is a case study of why it is often so difficult to follow the ethical imperative of empathetic understanding embraced by Berlin and his student, Ignatieff. The Iraqis used chemical weapons on Iranian troops (as well as Kurdish civilians) with horrific results. They also targeted Iranian cities with missiles that terrorized the Iranians. The Iranians held the United States ultimately responsible for Iraqi use of weapons of mass destruction and the missile attacks. But the Iranians also fired missiles at Iraqi cities, and they sent phalanxes of teenage boys into live minefields by the thousands as, in effect, human mine detonators, a practice that the Iranian government justified by saying they were creating holy martyrs, but which produced revulsion throughout much of the rest of the world.

In actual practice, therefore, Washington and Tehran proved initially unable and thereafter unwilling to penetrate the "bell jars" of their separate identities. In Tehran, the United States, labeled "the Great Satan" by Ayatollah Khomeini, became, in the perception of many Iranians, the devil incarnate, single-mindedly devoted to the total destruction of the Iranian Revolution, chiefly by virtue of its backing of the monster, Saddam Hussein. And in the United States, revolutionary Iran and its leadership were seen as a bunch of irrational, medieval religious fanatics who must be stopped at any cost before they destabilized the entire Middle East—a catastrophic possibility, it was believed, due to the reliance in the West on Persian Gulf oil.

## THE "PLOT SUMMARY": THE EVOLVING DRAMA OF U.S.-IRANIAN ENMITY, 1979–1988

While the United States and Iran became enemies in the *context* of the Iran-Iraq War, there exists a huge asymmetry in the connection each has to the war. All Iranians have a deep personal connection to the conflict: veterans are venerated as martyrs (if killed) and heroes (if they survived); all have relatives who were killed or wounded; and even young people born too late to experience the war are bombarded by a steady stream of books, movies, events, speeches, and national holiday commemorating events in the war. An unusual vacation activity for many Iranians, for example, is visiting battlefields from the war in the hope of sighting ghosts of loved ones martyred in battle. By these and similar means, the Tehran government tries to ensure that the patriotic spirit of the war

kept alive for those younger than the war generation.

The Iranian obsession with the war, its martyrs, its spirit, and its ideals stands in stark contrast to the memory of the war in the United States. To be blunt, such a memory does not exist. The Iran-Iraq War may as well never have happened, for all the vast majority of Americans know about it. Most know little or nothing about the war, the principal exception being perhaps some vague memories of the Iran-Contra scandal of the mid-1980s, which nearly led to the impeachment of President Ronald Reagan. Even for the historically minded, the unexpected end of the Cold War and its denouement tends to swamp whatever other historical memories one may have of the 1980s. As a consequence, most Americans are likely to discount expressions of Iranian fears of U.S. aggression as either paranoid ravings or cynical attempts by Iranian politicians to manipulate their constituents by blaming everything on an external enemy—the United States. In any case, Americans are likely to regard such Iranian complaints as devoid of historical justification—the kind of fabricated grievance and empty bravado one expects of an undersized bully who, for some unknown reason, has a chip on his shoulder. As a result, most Americans have scarcely any familiarity with the war in which U.S.-Iran enmity was heated up and came to a boil.

The following “plot summary” for the epic tragedy that the Iran-Iraq War became is provided for nonspecialist readers who make up an important portion of the audience for this book. Nonspecialists, in fact, may wish to refer back to the following chronology from time to time as the various issues and events are discussed by the participants. Note: each bullet point corresponds to subjects taken up in their respective chapters.

Here is a summary of the plot of our historical drama in five acts, chapters 2 through 6:

- **Chapter 2. 1979–1980: *The Shah, the hostages, and the Iraqi invasion.*** The overthrow of the Shah and the triumph of the Iranian Revolution was one of the seminal events of the latter half of the twentieth century. From the moment of Ayatollah Khomeini’s return to Tehran on February 1, 1979, relations between the United States and Iran began to deteriorate. But the trigger point occurred during a two-week period in the fall of 1979: between October 22, when the Carter administration permitted the deposed Shah to enter the United States for medical treatment, and in response Khomeini’s endorsement of the November 4 student takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the taking of the American hostages by the students. The die was cast for the two governments to become, incrementally but inexorably, the bitterest of enemies. When Iraq attacked Iran in September 1980, the United States did not immediately back either combatant. Yet by the summer of 1982, the Reagan administration had decided it could not tolerate an Iranian victory in the Iran-Iraq War. The fiery anti-American rhetoric out of Tehran continued, and did Iranian efforts to “export the revolution” throughout the Islamic world. Concerned about Iranian threats to U.S. allies in the region, and about the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf to the West, the United States became ever more deeply involved in the conflict between Iran and Iraq.
- **Chapter 3. *July 1982: Iran Invades Iraq; Panic in Washington.*** Beginning in mid-1982, Iraq turned the tables on Baghdad and launched a counteroffensive into Iraq. The Reagan administration then began “tilting” noticeably toward Iraq in its increasingly brutal and destructive war with Iran. It facilitated the Iraqi reentry into international arms markets by removing Iraq from its list of states said to sponsor terrorism. It began to share with Baghdad some U.S. satellite intelligence regarding the location and apparent trajectory of Iranian troop formations. And in a matter whose extent is still disputed, the United States at least failed to curb Iraqi use of chemical weapons against Iranian troops and may, according to some, have given

Saddam Hussein a “green light” for their use against Iranian troops. In these and other ways, ~~became clear that the Reagan administration had decided that the revolutionary government~~ Tehran must not be allowed to conquer Iraq, as Ayatollah Khomeini had vowed to do. The government in Tehran noticed the U.S. “tilt” toward Iraq, which led to a further escalation of anti-American rhetoric and actions. A pivotal event, from the U.S. point of view, was Iran’s facilitation of the Hezbollah car bombing in Beirut that killed more than two hundred U.S. military personnel on October 23, 1983.

- **Chapter 4. 1985–1986: *The Iran-Contra fiasco.*** By 1984–1985, with Iran and Iraq bogged down in a World War I–like war of attrition, Iran found itself desperately in need of weapons and ammunition. Tehran found an unlikely arms supplier in the Reagan administration, which wanted Iran’s assistance in getting U.S. hostages, who were held by the Iranian-backed group Hezbollah, released in Lebanon. Moreover, the Israelis, concerned that an Iraqi victory over Iran might embolden Saddam Hussein’s regime to become more aggressive against Israel, had their own reasons for wanting to assist Iran in its search for spare parts, weapons, and ammunition. Finally, some officials in the Reagan White House saw a secret arms deal with Iran as a way to channel funds to the U.S.-trained and backed Nicaraguan Contras in their struggle against the Sandinista government in Managua. In engaging in these secret deals, all the principal parties acted contrary to their own stated policies and laws. On November 3, 1986, a Lebanese magazine published details of the secret talks, deliveries, and arrangements, including a May 1986 trip to Tehran by a group that included the former U.S. national security adviser Robert McFarlane, White House aide Lt. Col. Oliver North, and an Israeli official.
- **Chapter 5. 1987–1988: *The United States and Iran on the brink of war.*** In 1984, Iraq had begun attacking Iranian oil production facilities and tankers carrying Iranian oil in the Persian Gulf. Baghdad’s objective was to cripple Iran’s oil exports. Iran had responded in kind by attacking ships in the Persian Gulf with missiles, mines, and torpedoes. The resulting mayhem was known as the “tanker war.” By April 1987, the United States began to get more heavily involved militarily in an effort to protect tankers carrying oil through the Gulf, out the Strait of Hormuz, and thence to the West. Washington authorized the “reflagging” of Kuwaiti tankers in the Gulf, giving them American names, affixing American flags to them, and claiming the right of the U.S. Navy to take military action against anyone responsible for attacking these reflagged tankers. In May 1987, the USS *Stark* was hit by an Iraqi missile, killing thirty-seven crewmen. Remarkably, Washington blamed Iran, rather than Iraq, because Iran was said to have created the conditions in the Gulf conducive to such a mistaken attack as the Iraqis made on the *Stark*. Nearly two hundred ships would be attacked in the Persian Gulf by the end of 1987. In all, more than five hundred ships would be attacked in the Gulf before the war ended the following year. On July 2, 1988, the USS *Vincennes* sailed into Iranian territorial water in pursuit of Iranian gunboats and, in an extraordinary display of bungling by its commander and several subordinates, shot down an Iranian civilian airliner, Iran Air 655, killing all 290 people aboard. A week later, Iranian gunboats and American helicopters began exchanging fire on a regular basis. Iran and the United States had entered a limited war in the Persian Gulf. Many asked, how long would it stay limited? Were the United States and Iran on the brink of a major war?
- **Chapter 6. July–August 1988: *The UN brokers a cease-fire.*** On July 20, 1987, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 598, calling for an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal of Iranian and Iraqi forces to internationally recognized boundaries. Following the establishment of the cease-fire, a team of observers from the UN would monitor the cease-fire, the mutual withdrawal

forces from occupied territory, and the repatriation of POWs. But the resolution went nowhere. ~~Although Iraq immediately accepted it, Iran did not, and would not, for the next year.~~ In fact, some of the bitterest fighting of the war, involving Iranian “human wave” attacks and Iraqi use of chemical weapons on a large scale, took place all the while Resolution 598 was on the table at the UN Security Council. Then on July 16, 1988, in the aftermath of the *Vincennes* shoot-down of Iran Air 655, President Ali Khamenei notified the UN that Iran now accepted UN Resolution 598 and had agreed to end the war with Iraq. Two days later, Ayatollah Khomeini appeared in public, evidently crestfallen, and proclaimed to the Iranian people that “this decision [to end the war] was more deadly than drinking hemlock. . . . To me, it would have been more bearable to accept death and martyrdom.” Yet, unexpectedly to UN officials, the Reagan administration seemed to indicate that it would prefer to wait until the following October to push for the implementation of Resolution 598. But on August 8, the UN announced that a cease-fire would begin on August 20 with formal talks to begin in Geneva five days later. One of the most destructive wars of the 20th century was declared to be at an end.

## MISSED OPPORTUNITIES? OUT OF THE TIME MACHINE, INTO THE THEATER OF NOW<sup>11</sup>

In the final act of the Musgrove conference, chapter 7, the players exit the critical oral history “time machine” to reflect on the meaning and significance of the drama they have, in their individual ways, revisited. Their reflections are driven by the effort to identify *missed opportunities* that, if they had been grasped, might have led to a better outcome. Might things plausibly have been different?

The ensuing debate among participants in the dialogue, while readily understandable in general terms, is in fact far from simple to evaluate: *was this a missed opportunity, or was it not?* The participants are using the phrase more or less in its common-sense meaning. It is not a technical term. It is not disciplinary jargon. Nor are the participants interested in treating the discussion of missed opportunities as a game where the prize goes to the individual who identifies the weirdest or most interesting alternative history. (For example, popular among some political scientists is the following: If Napoleon had possessed a decent air force, he would have won at Waterloo. The response must be “Well, yes, of course, but really. . . .”)

The phrase “missed opportunities” as debated in chapter 7 is meant, rather, in the following sense with respect to our subject at Musgrove: *What might the decision or action or outcome of interest have been if Washington and Tehran had understood each other accurately? Would the outcome likely have been the same? Better? Worse?* Thus, if it seems on some issue or episode that (a) the United States and Iran badly misread each other, and (b) if they had read each others’ motives and capabilities more accurately, the outcome would probably have been better, then (c) we are inclined to call that a missed opportunity. Finally, (d) if the participants at Musgrove believe they see a pattern of such missed opportunities between 1980 and 1988 with regard to U.S.-Iran relations, we are inclined to believe lessons may be drawn and applied to the present and future.

Why search for missed opportunities? Because the identification of missed opportunities raises the odds of learning from history—of applying what is learned *from the past* in the critical oral history “time machine” to the present and future, *to now!* The method was in fact originally devised to raise the odds of conducting a *policy-relevant* historical inquiry into the Cuban missile crisis. The objective was to apply the lessons of the missile crisis to contemporary nuclear weapons policy. For those who are skeptical that this is possible or salutary, we suggest consulting Robert McNamara’s account in the Errol Morris film, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, especially

lesson number two, “Rationality will not save us.”<sup>12</sup> While not everyone will agree with McNamara’s analysis, one cannot doubt his sincerity when he connects the missile crisis with nuclear danger now in the following fashion: because the world as we know it almost ended then, it is imperative now to move as quickly and safely as possible to a nonnuclear world.

The logic of using critical oral history as a vehicle for policy-relevant research is straightforward, though its application can be very challenging. Here is the “deep structure” of how the process works—how bridges are built between the reality glimpsed from inside the critical oral history “time machine” and the ongoing, unpredictable theater of now—in seven steps:

1. *Your own history.* Get your own history right. Use documents to jog your memory about what actually happened. Step into a “time machine” and relive what happened.
2. *Your adversary’s history.* Get your adversary’s history right. Probe the adversary’s intentions and beliefs. Help your adversary enter the “time machine.”
3. *Psychological history.* Inquire with special intensity into what was believed, felt, thought, feared, or assumed by all the relevant parties. Psychological reality is at least as important as physical reality, and often more difficult to identify.
4. *Mistakes.* Identify mistakes on all sides, especially misperceptions and misjudgments. Require all sides to a conflict to compare what was believed at the time with what, in retrospect, seemed actually to have been true.
5. *Missed opportunities.* Identify missed opportunities for achieving better outcomes. Ask, if adversaries had understood each other accurately, what would have happened? Might things have turned out better than was actually the case?
6. *Lessons.* Draw lessons from the analysis. Specify any larger principles that might be learned from this history.
7. *Apply the lessons.* Bring the lessons to bear on current policy questions in ways that seem to raise the odds of grasping similar opportunities, rather than missing them, in comparable situations in the present and future.

We recommend consulting this template from time to time when reading chapter 7. Ask yourself, are the criteria for missed opportunities met? If not, where did the effort break down?

If you conclude that significant opportunities were missed during the Iran-Iraq War to halt or reverse the downward spiral of U.S.-Iran relations, then ask yourself, how should that insight be applied here and now to ameliorate the relationship and reduce the still substantial danger of war between Iran and the United States? This will bring you to the perilous task of drawing lessons from the past and applying them to the present and future. We take a crack at this in the epilogue, in which we list what seem to us the principal *takeaways* from the Musgrove exercise. Each takeaway is a summary statement meant to identify a nodal point during the period of the Iran-Iraq War when, so it seems to us, things might well have turned out differently—probably better, in fact, or certainly less tragic—than was actually the case.

Each takeaway is also meant to stimulate a discussion of actions that stand a chance of leading to a lowered risk of each particular array of mistakes, each “empathy gap,” being repeated in the future. We hope you will generate your own list of course corrections to the history of U.S.-Iran relations in the 1980s that might have yielded less enmity and more empathy between Washington and Tehran. For correcting the course of U.S.-Iran relations is likely to be a Sisyphean undertaking, requiring the efforts of many, over an extended period of time, to push that rock to the top of the hill.

## WELCOME TO VIRTUAL MUSGROVE!

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You should now be ready to pull your chair up to the figurative conference table at the Musgrove Plantation Conference Center. You are joining a very talented and experienced group of fellow travelers. Get to know them via their short bios in the *dramatis personae*, and in easily available, inexhaustible additional information available on the Web, simply by Googling their names. Have a close look at the declassified documents as well, and keep them at hand as you move through the dialogues. The documents are at the heart of many of the discussions. And before you are finished, ask yourself, was the devolution of U.S. relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran destined to happen? Was it just predetermined? Or might it have been different? If different, how different? And what are the lessons we should derive from the difference between what was, and what might have been?

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# Dramatis Personae

## *Who's Who at the Musgrove Conference*

Now with the wisdom of years  
I try to reason things out  
And the only people I fear  
Are those who never have doubts.  
Save us all from arrogant men,  
And all the causes they're for  
I won't be righteous again  
I'm not that sure anymore.  
Shades of Grey are all that I find  
When I look to the enemy line.

—Billy Joel, “Shades of Grey” (1992)

### FORMER DECISION MAKERS (EMPHASIZING SERVICE RELEVANT TO THE PERIOD OF THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR, 1980–1988)

1. **Charles Cogan.** A thirty-seven-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency. His postings included India, Congo, Sudan, Morocco, Jordan, and France. He was chief of the Near East–South Asia Division in the Directorate of Operations from mid-1979 to mid-1984. From 1984 to 1989, he was the CIA station chief in Paris. He is currently a research associate at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, from which he earned a PhD in public administration in 1992.

2. **Richard W. Murphy.** A veteran of thirty-four years in the U.S. Foreign Service, including postings as ambassador to Syria, 1974–1978, and as ambassador to Saudi Arabia, 1981–1983. He also served as assistant secretary of state for Near East and South Asian Affairs, 1983–1989. He was named a career ambassador by the State Department in 1985. From 1993 to 2004, he served as chairman of the Middle East Roundtable at the Council on Foreign Relations. Ambassador Murphy is currently chairman of the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C.

3. **David G. Newton.** His thirty-six years as a U.S. Foreign Service officer included postings as deputy chief of mission, Damascus, 1978–1981; political counselor, Saudi Arabia, 1981–1984; chief of the U.S. Interests Section, Baghdad, 1984–1985; U.S. ambassador to Iraq, 1985–1988; and director of the Office for Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian and Palestinian Affairs, 1988–1990. Following his retirement from the Foreign Service in 1998, Ambassador Newton was appointed as a special envoy for public diplomacy, with responsibility for explaining U.S. policy toward Iraq. He is currently an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C.

4. **Giandomenico Picco.** He served as a senior UN official from 1973 to 1992. As assistant secretary general of the UN for political affairs, he led the UN team that secured the cease-fire agreement between Iran and Iraq in 1988. He was also a member of the UN team that negotiated the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989. From 1988 to 1992, he was the central figure in the UN operation that led to the release of eleven Western hostages in Lebanon, acting as a go-between with

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