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American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis

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PROFESSIONAL READING

“If we have learned nothing else from this unique experience, we should have learned one lesson. Our effectiveness as a global power will increasingly depend on our effectiveness in bridging the gulf between our world and the world where most of the globe’s people will live.”

The Honorable L. Bruce Laingen

Christopher, Warren et al. *American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985. 443pp. \$25

November 1985 marked the sixth anniversary of the seizure by student militants of the American Embassy in Tehran. The events of that traumatic day, and those that followed over the next 14 months, preoccupied our government and the American people as few events in history have. They reshaped and significantly, if not decisively, determined the outcome of the Presidential elections of 1980. That result and the many other consequences of that dramatic event in Tehran are yet to be fully felt, not least by Iran itself.

This book, *American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis*, is an exhaustive examination of the management of that crisis, billed as “The inside account of how American Diplomacy met an extraordinary challenge.” The product of a study launched by the Council on Foreign Relations in 1982, it is made up of nine separate papers/chapters discussed in the course of that study by their authors, all of whom were insiders in the Carter administration’s handling of the crisis. There is occasionally some rationalization in defense of policy, but very little. It is a determined and generally objective effort on the part of

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these principals to examine the “diplomatic, economic, and legal issues at stake in the crisis, the negotiations to resolve it, and possible lessons for the future.”

Few Americans will ever forget the felt pain of that long crisis: the enormity of Iran’s challenge to previously accepted norms of international behavior; the compounding of the costs to American strategic interests in the area, already felt in the Shah’s collapse; the frustrations felt in trying to find means to deal with the crisis that took account of those interests without hurt to the hostages themselves; the way the American public embraced those hostages, thanks to the American media—the latter’s role in the crisis touched on, but is too large an issue in itself to find space in this book.

The whole affair, as the then Deputy Secretary of State, Warren Christopher points out in his eloquent introduction to the book, is “a story of almost incredible complexity.” And as former Senator Abraham Ribicoff notes in his final chapter on “Lessons and Conclusions,” it was as well a “crisis of the future,” in the way it so dramatically posed the new and difficult challenge faced by the United States in the threat of terrorism—particularly state-sponsored terrorism of the kind the Tehran crisis symbolized.

The book is an impressive source book, written by those at the working level just below the President who provided Carter his policy options. Three chapters by Harold Saunders, Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East, are as succinct accounts of the intense and sustained involvement by top policymakers in the course of the crisis as can be found. Gary Sick, his counterpart on the National Security Council staff, and whose more recent book, *All Fall Down*—in itself a monumental contribution to our understanding of both the revolution and the hostage crisis in Iran—reviews the military options in the crisis and the tragic failure of the rescue mission. Three chapters by two senior Treasury officials and a Citibank banker recount the economic and financial aspects of the settlement in probably more detail than the average reader would ever want to know. But in doing so they effectively convey both the singular and tireless efforts of those involved in getting agreement on disposition of the frozen Iranian assets and the extremely important leverage that those frozen assets represented in achieving an acceptable resolution to the crisis. There is also an excellent chapter by Oscar Schacter discussing the legal issues involved. For the long reach of history, perhaps nothing will matter more than the way the Carter administration’s handling of the crisis dramatized the importance of the rules of law and diplomacy that were at stake, not simply for this country but for the international community at large. In doing so this chapter, and indeed the book as a whole, is a reminder of the limits that present themselves to a country in dealing with terrorism inflicted upon it—especially a country such as ours, committed and responsible as a Great Power to the rule of law. We have had a dramatic and telling reminder of that in the recent TWA 847 crisis in Beirut.

The lessons are legion in this book's pages. The "deceptively attractive" nature of economic sanctions in confronting such crises. The difficulty of getting effective multilateral cooperation, on these or other sanctions, despite the rhetoric that abounds. The danger of a government's entire focus becoming hostage to a terrorist crisis, as ours did so often in the Tehran affair. The hard choices in considering a resort to force, especially when geography is against one as it was in Iran. The difficulty, as Gary Sick points out, of reconciling the contradiction between the protection of innocent human lives and the preservation of national honor, apparent again with such pain in the Beirut TWA 847 crisis. The utility of having friends among the nonaligned, in this case the Algerians. The need for a deeper and more perceptive understanding of the root causes of terrorism, and whether better ways can be found to get at those causes. As Harold Saunders observes: "If we have learned nothing else from this unique experience, we should have learned one lesson. Our effectiveness as a global power will increasingly depend on our effectiveness in bridging the gulf between our world and the world where most of the globe's people will live."

For most Americans, however, the most lasting impression from that crisis will be in the human domain—the way in which, as Secretary Christopher said in his salute to the Algerians as the hostages arrived in Algiers, 52 men and women and their families "emerged from the chasm of fear" and emerged as well in an unprecedented national celebration of freedom regained, an event of no small impact on our national psyche. Perhaps if this book is deficient in any aspect, it is in its very limited focus on the hostages themselves, their families included, and on such questions as the government's obligations to them in the post-release period—medical, psychological, and indeed financial. The hostages have yet to see any action to this date to provide some kind of "compensation" to them, despite a recommendation to this effect by a Presidential Commission in 1982. On these matters and on all the other human costs inherent in a terrorist crisis, there remains much to learn.

