

An American Hostage in Tehran

Barry Rosen

On November 4, 1979, five hundred Iranian students seized the American embassy in Iran in response to the U.S. government allowing the recently deposed Iranian dictator Shab Reza Pahlevi to enter the United States for medical treatment. It was the beginning of a hostage drama that would last for 444 days, involve fifty-two captive embassy personnel, and bring down a U.S. president, Jimmy Carter. This was not the first time that Americans had been taken hostage for political reasons, but what made the Iran crisis different was that it gave ordinary Americans their first real view of the power and intensity of anti-American sentiment abroad. Thought the North Vietnamese had fought ferociously against the American invaders, Vietnamese communist had generally avoided anti-American rhetoric, hoping to win support for their cause from drafted soldiers and sympathetic Americans. In Iran it was different. Nightly news coverage showed large angry mobs burning the Stars and Stripes and chanting “death to Carter, death to America” in the streets of the Tehran, while Islamic militants paraded members of the U.S. Marine embassy guard, bound and blindfolded, in front of the television cameras. For over a year Americans watched in horror as an entire country, led by a revolutionary Islamic government, vented rage against the United States the United States for its support of the shah’s brutal and repressive regime.

The Iranian students were not just holding Americans captive, as Islamic militants later did in Lebanon. They were occupying American sovereign territory in flagrant violation of international law and custom. President Carter devoted much of his last year in office to freeing the hostages, finally resorting to a disastrous military rescue operation which ended before it began with three helicopters crashing in sandstorm. After this failure Secretary of State Cyrus Vance resigned, leaving Carter’s presidency even more compromised. These failures prepared the way for the victory of the conservative Republican Ronald Regan in the 1980 election. A short time after the new president took office; he announced that the hostages had been freed.

Barry Rosen, the writer of the following selection, specialized in Persian and central Asian studies and ran Voice of America’s Uzbek service in the 1970’s. In November 1978, he became the American embassy press attaché in Tehran and was in the embassy when it was taken over. His knowledge of Iranian culture made him a leader among the hostages and he became well known to both Iranians and Americans during his 444 days captivity.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why, according to Barry Rosen, did the Iranian students hate the United States?
2. What did the students hope to accomplish by taking the embassy

3. What does Rosen reveal about his opinion of the shah and US policy in Iran in this document?

November 4 dawned a drizzly day that prompted daydreams of Florida with Barbara. It was Sunday, a normal workday in Iran. The embassy staff numbered eighty now, up from the forty of early months after the revolution. Many of the additions were on temporary duty; some were assigned to help businessmen who had returned to complete contracts. We did not consider that the beginning of the resumption of heavy involvement in the country.

Back in my office from Isfahan, I first checked the press to prepare our report for the morning staff meeting. Most newspapers provided their readers with times and routes of major demonstrations. Apparently, nothing anti-American was scheduled for the day. There were just the usual relevant items to summarize for Washington, which on that day were few: no unusually strident charges or complaints against America.

My cable drafted, I took a telephone call from a magazine called Message of Peace, based in the holy city of Qom. The journal had a strong anti-western bias, but the call informed me that I was expected in Qom to discuss the possibility of exchanging Islamic and Christian theological students between Iran and America. Then I pondered how to fulfill a directive from a more exalted ICA [intelligence] officer. He HAD to be exalted – and isolated – in order to have devised this particular project: a blueprint of Iran's current power structure. At my level this seemed like a request to photograph air. Washington naturally wanted outlines and diagrams, but the situation remained so amorphous and fluid that few Iranians themselves had a clear idea of who reported to whom and who was responsible for what. The new order's most characteristic trait still seemed to me that there was no power structure. Power was largely up for grabs among the clergy, various revolutionary organs, and street mobs unleashed for specific jobs.

Our ICA offices were now in a small building fifty yards directly inside the Embassy's main gate. Takht-e Jamshid, the street outside the gate, had been renamed Taleghani, in honor of a recently dead progressive ayatollah. At ten o'clock or so, the sidewalks and roadway began to fill up with demonstrators, slowly at first, then with a surge. When their noise grew more clamorous than usual, I got up from my typing and went into my secretary's office for a better view. Several dozen young men and women sporting plastic covered pictures of Imam on their chests were visible through the gate. The boys wore old suit jackets over turtleneck sweaters; many of the girls were in black chadors or kerchiefs. Both sexes were in their late teens and early twenties: a collection of types who took their anti-Americanism very seriously.

"God is great!"

"Long live Khomeini!"

Although they seemed no more worked up than earlier protestors, something held me at my secretary's desk, watching the swelling cluster. Suddenly there were not several dozen, but several hundred demonstrators. Then twice that or more. No better trained or disciplined than ever, our crew of embassy guards – whose who we ourselves had hired – were overwhelmed by the new arrivals.

“God is great!”

“Long Live Khomeini!”

“Death to America!”

Just as suddenly, a handful of seemingly designated men started climbing over the gates. Their scrambling appeared both preposterous and utterly natural, as if fated. Some had pistols and lead pipes. Another cut the chain with a large bolt cutter. With the gates flung open, a roar of triumph sounded and a rush of demonstrators, more than we'd seen, poured in like a flood of frenzy. The Embassy's defenses had been breached in seconds.

Thick clubs waved in the air, mingling with portraits of Khomeini held high like icons. The rush was now a tidal wave of field jackets, mustaches, sweat, and grimaces of hatred. The roar had become an unholy howl – but for some reason I couldn't yet react seriously. “There goes my great report on the so-called power structure,” I smirked to myself. “And there goes Iran. I bet we close the Embassy by tomorrow.”

Even though the gate remained wide open, some of the fist-waving men kept demonstrating their valor by climbing over the wall. A hundred bodies were now inside the compound, twitching with menace, lining up in a kind of battle order. A lieutenant of the National Police Force – in whose Academy I had taught – skipped up to embrace the scruffy invaders. The Revolutionary Guards who had taken over as our protectors from Masha'allah had been stationed outside the compound. I could picture them joining the invaders. The game was up. I felt a certain relief at that, mixed up with the excitement of observing a historic moment.

When “shock troops” had captured the Embassy nine months before and marched us out of the vault where we had taken refuge, we assumed we were about to be shot in our own blinding tears. When they grabbed my beard and ordered me to open safes whose combinations I didn't know, I believed the end was very near. As much as anything else, the invaders' inexperience made me apprehensive. They were so frightened by what they were doing and so amazed by their ease in penetrating the imperialist monsters' outpost that they made themselves doubly dangerous through nervousness. More experienced this time, they also seemed more determined – which, curiously, boded better for our safety than during the previous invasion. I was less worried about getting shot thanks to somebody's jumpiness.

The fifty yards that separated us from the main gate seemed to shrink to ten. We were right on top of the action and totally cut off, since the Chancery was several minutes' run away. The first detachment of boys and girls – I refused to think of them as men and women – rushed directly for our outer door, which I had naturally locked and barred. I instructed my secretary not to open it for anyone, then ran into my own office to search for classified materials that might not have been locked away in the Chancery with the others. The unsettling sounds of my colleagues being routed from nearby offices penetrated the walls while I was searching. Together with their Iranian employees, they were being driven to the Commercial Library in a nearby wing. The “Death to America” chanting was now so violent that its vibrations almost shook my floor. The “Death to America” chanting was now so violent that its vibrations almost shook my floor.

As I was rushing through my papers in my last desk drawer, the scrape of the door being removed from my secretary's door stiffened the hairs on my neck. “Mary, what are you doing?” I screamed. “DON'T OPEN THAT DOOR!” But Mary had children. Her husband was unemployed. Most dangerous for her, she was Armenian: a minority who, like the Jews, had been protected under the Shah and now feared for their safety. Good and loyal as she was, it was too much to ask her to jeopardize everything. By the time I had raced back into the outer room, its door was open.

The exultant victors squeezed in too fast to separate them as individuals. My first impression was of unkemptness. I noticed several girls with clubs among the first dozen. They were in chadors or kerchiefs wrapped heavily around their heads.

“GET OUT!” I shouted in Farsi.

“Either you move out of this room or we're going to drag you out,” several voices answered simultaneously.

“This is United States property. Get out of this building immediately!”

This was more than bravado. The presence of that mob in my office made me very angry. To sympathize with the revolution's original aim was one thing, but to believe that the revolutionaries had a right to violate diplomatic immunity and custom – to commit this barefaced offense against America –was quite another.

But this was probably too abstract and too patriotic to explain my stubbornness. Most of all I was acting on a childish insistence that I, which in this case meant my country, be treated with dignity. And although I was quaking, something in me was confident that I wasn't courting death. Perhaps it was naïve, but I reckoned the revolution, despite its anti-foreign passion, had killed very few foreigners.

Half a dozen intruders began ransacking the office, tearing through my press files and news-agency teletype rolls. Mary hunched in a corner, trembling. (She would be released that evening.) But most of the attention was devoted to me. My resistance seemed to infuriate and, by enhancing their image of themselves as valiant fighters, to please the intruders.

“Leave this room immediately or you will be hurt,” barked one of the leaders while his closest assistants waved clubs in the direction of my head. “This is no joke. You are flouting the will of the Iranian people.”

“YOU leave immediately. You have no right to set foot in here, any of you. It is totally illegal.”

I was also aware of the element of gamesmanship in my defense of principle. Iranians love to bargain and play brinksmanship putting one side against the other. Although the outcome was inevitable, I wanted to see how far I could go with this game. They respected a show of strength, which I was determined to carry through.

I gave up when the closest clubs swished inches from my nose. A squad led me to join the others in the Commercial Library. If I had dreamed that this was going to be the first of a dozen substitute cells, I would have been appalled and depressed instead of cocky...

“It going to be a trade: the Shah for you,” said one of the group guarding us in the Commercial Library. That was the first hint that we might be in for something longer than the brief encounter of the embassy’s seizure and its personal expulsion. Surely Washington wouldn’t, and shouldn’t, succumb to terrorism by surrendering the Shah. I felt bitter about the staff meeting of October 22, when we were told about the decision to admit him for medical treatment. But once there, he could not be given up on a plate by a humbled American government. And if he was not, would we in fact be flying home to a nice holiday with our families the next day?

I was in a group of about fifty captives in the Commercial Library. A handful was Americans. Many of our Iranian staff were panicky and pleaded to call home. Something had snapped in Mary’s back; she lay on the floor with my jacket to ease the pain. My attempt to soothe and calm lost out to the wailing of our ordinary cheerful cleaning woman: “You don’t know how brutal they can be. I have children; let me out.” ...

... Peering out the window, I saw young men and women spray-painting “nest of spies” on the chancery walls, while others denounced the Shah through bullhorns. If the Chancery’s steel doors held, I was certain they would, at least some of our staff were calling for help from the government. However, there were no signs of anyone arriving to restore order. After two heavy hours, the Americans in the army were selected to leave, but not to pack our things or for a ride to the airport, as I’d half assumed.

As the other Americans were being blindfolded, I kissed Marry good-bye and shook as many Iranian hands as I could. My own blindfold, a piece of khaki that might have been ripped from the uniform of one of our marines, was an outrage – yet I wanted it, in a way. When one guard asked another, “Is he an American too?” I almost shouted “Yes I am, and take me with the others!” The blindfold was tight, but I could tell I was being led – alone – to the back end of the compound, toward the Ambassador’s residence. The guards debated in whispers. I was pulled one way and then another. Apparently only the break in had been organized.

When the blindfold came off, I was in a bedroom of one of the Embassy’s Pakistani kitchen staff. From across the hall I heard one of the military attaches answering his captors in single syllables. My own guards, who would answer no question about who they were and whom they represented, took up the argument about the United States handing over the Shah.

“Whatever you say, your government will give in. You’re more important to them than the Shah, that blood-sucking dictator, that animal!”

“I might agree with some of the things you say about the Shah, but our policy is not to surrender to terrorism, which is what you’re engaged in.”

“Do any of you Americans, even now, have any idea of what the Shah committed?”

“I can’t answer for his mistakes or supposed mistakes. Have you made any? Are you going to answer for the one you’re committing today?”

After our little debate, my guards posted themselves outside the door, and I strained to hear a radio playing in a nearby room. A local news broadcast announced with near glee that our captors called themselves Students Following the Line of the Imam and that support for their brave and righteous action was pouring in from all over the country. The implication that the seizure might be more, or become more, than an impulse of a band of irate zealots was a glum new hint that our confinement might not end in time for dinner...

They were still unsure about who was who among embassy personal, and still totally disorganized as to which brother or sister was responsible for which duties with respect to us. But they settled on a simpler answer to their chaos. After breakfast I was moved again, this time to the large reception room of the ambassador’s residence, which was on the same floor. Blindfolded again, I could not count the Americans there, but coughing shuffling and occasional words suggested we numbered 15-20. I wondered whether the ghosts and goblins from last week’s Halloween party were enriching the Iranians’ imagination about our sinister activities. That day and the next, we were tied to chairs, our blindfolds remaining on. I got a masterpiece of modern design with a strip of leather for a seat and another supposedly to support the back.

It was fairly tortuous after the first few hours, but less than my thoughts of what this frenzied treatment might lead to.

A prohibition against talk accompanied the physical bondage. With shouts and threats we were ordered to say nothing except in answer to guards' questions. During the day I was fed a handful of dates while my blindfold remained on. Totally powerless, with ropes cutting into my hands and feet, I did not seriously consider disobeying. Still, it was demoralizing and shaming that we did obey. The only sentence in English I heard throughout the day was, "I'd like to go to the bathroom." I ate supper with the blindfold off in the already filthy kitchen. Contempt for myself was growing together with growing hatred for them.

They examined our watches for two-way radios. They checked our heels for hidden...what? Their nervousness was not totally misplaced: From their tone and from everything I knew about them, they were, despite their triumphant bluster, amazed by their success and frightened that American retribution for it was already on the way. But from what I knew about them too, they were operating on knowledge of America that came chiefly from fantasies stimulated by spy thrillers.

Returning from the bathroom on the third day, I asked a young escort if I might see something from the press. Apparently he hadn't heard or understood the leaders' directive against this, for he gave me a copy of Kayhan, which bulged with a copy about the seizure. The burning of the American flag and the "liberation" of our Iranian secretaries and drivers were featured among the saga of the Iranian people's glorious victory. Most depressing was the total absence of mention – and apparently of perception – that the take-over was a stunning violation of diplomatic immunity. As with the students themselves, the editorialists I read might never have heard of international law. It meant nothing whatever to them. It was a Western, not an Iranian concept, a concept invented to aid the rape of the Third World countries. And Iranians were finished with everything Western; the seizure itself was proof of that.

What the newspaper did declare, and what the average Iranian surely felt, was that America had for too long used its laws – and not only laws – to oppress Iran. When I understood that the embassy's seizure was regarded as no wrong, certainly not a crime, I felt a sharp stab of longing to leave the country forever.