

Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in the West's War with Militant Islam

Mark Bowden

Reviewed by Neil James

When the US Embassy in Tehran was seized by radical Muslim university students on 04 November 1979, 66 Americans were taken hostage in major and eventually prolonged breaches of international law and diplomatic propriety. 13 women and African-Americans (regarded by the hostage-takers as victims of the US ruling class) were released on 19-20 November. One further hostage suffering severe multiple sclerosis was subsequently released on 11 July 1980. Six more Americans had been courageously smuggled out by the Canadian and Swedish embassies in late January 1980. The remaining 50 male and two female hostages, including three detained in the Iranian Foreign Ministry, were held hostage for 444 days, being released the day after Ronald Reagan was first inaugurated as president on 20 January 1981. To this day, nearly 30 years on, the US and Iran have not renewed normal diplomatic relations.

About a dozen of the 52 have written personal accounts of their ordeal. The two best are probably Chargé d'affaires Bruce Laingen's *Yellow Ribbon: The Secret Journal of Bruce Laingen* (1992) and William J. Daugherty's *In the Shadow of the Ayatollah: A CIA Hostage in Iran* (2001). Numerous other books have discussed the whole crisis, including nearly a dozen concentrating on the failure of the American military rescue attempt (at the cost of eight dead) on 24/25 April 1980.

Guests of the Ayatollah is a well-researched and very well-written account of this US-Iran confrontation. Bowden brings to it the same eye for detail, inter-connection and nuance, and the same gift for flowing narrative, that he used for his 1999 bestseller *Black Hawk Down* — about the US military's flawed October 1993 operation against Somali warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid.

Bowden ably explores the broad historical and cultural background to the crisis. He misses some of the explanatory historical detail to US-Iran relations covered by Daugherty, but *Guests of the Ayatollah* is generally a highly readable one-stop account of what caused such a deep estrangement between the two countries.

Bowden's extensive use of first-hand interviews with those involved, on both sides, is a particular strength. Especially fascinating are the comparisons between what participants thought or believed at the time and what they think now with the advantage of hindsight. Many of the hostage-takers, for example, now realise that their youthful idealism and actions were ruthlessly manipulated and exploited. Those of this belief consider that they were used by clerical hardliners to destroy the liberal democrats forming the intellectual and practical backbone of the revolution that overthrew the Shah. Those Iranians who still adhere to the hard-line claims of 1979 are largely the ones who have prospered under the authoritarian regime that was built on the embassy seizure.

The picture of Khomeini that emerges is not flattering. There is much testimony by Iranians close to him at that time of his vacillation, simplistic thinking and tendency to agree with the last person who spoke to him. President Jimmy Carter, on the other hand, emerges with his reputation enhanced. He exercised composed restraint in the face of severe Iranian provocations, continued UN failures, half-hearted support from many allies and increasing domestic American frustration. Carter was also a lot more decisive, in a measured and morally-principled fashion, than widely thought at the time.

The chaos of the period is also well explained. The seizure of the embassy caused the collapse of the Iranian provisional government that followed the fall of the Shah. This meant the Americans, and intermediaries, had no-one in authority, and more importantly no-one in control, who they could even try to negotiate with effectively until the second half of 1980. This situation was a big contributor to Carter's eventual decision to order a military rescue operation after nearly six months of fruitless negotiations, outrageous Iranian demands and sheer irrational intransigence — often based on ignorance about the outside world and/or fiercely sectarian religious beliefs.

From an Australian defence perspective, *Guests of the Ayatollah* also provides much food for thought in lessons learned the hard way. US operational deficiencies included insufficient linguists, poor intelligence collection steerage, unclear command chains, inter-Service rivalry, limited means to mount long-range Special Forces operations, and no specialist rotary-wing units which regularly train and operate with the commandos they carry. The crisis also highlighted the dangerous tendencies to hubris, and to intellectual and professional introversion, in Special Forces units the longer, and the more, those in them are isolated from the professional mainstreams of their parent defence force.

The term *Islamist*, to denote Muslim extremists misusing Islam as a violent political ideology, was not in use in 1979-80. Neither was the more controversial term *Islamofascist*. Some may therefore baulk somewhat at Bowden's conclusions that:

The Iran hostage crisis was for most Americans [and indeed most Westerners] their first encounter with Islamofascism and, as such, can be seen as the first battle in that ongoing world conflict. Iran's hatred of the United States was in part a consequence of heavy-handed, arrogant and sometimes criminal twentieth-century American foreign policy, but it was also rooted in ... anger over the erosion of tradition. The murderous terrorism that has become a fact of modern life is part of the death throes of an ancient way of life. ♦

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