

Claims that new president was hostage-taker

US prepares new provocations against Iran

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On June 28, the editorial in the *Washington Post*, the major daily newspaper in the US capital, turned up its nose at the newly elected Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The editors were irritated that Ahmadinejad had defeated the candidate favored by the US ruling elite, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and offended that he had done so by appealing to the economic grievances of Iran's lower social classes. The *Post* consoled itself as follows: "The new president, after all, is not worth much attention."

Within a day, however, the US media had sharply reversed course, amid reports that Ahmadinejad had been identified as one of the dozens of radical Islamic students who seized the US embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979 and held the embassy staff captive for 444 days, the episode that ended diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States.

A half dozen former members of the embassy staff were quoted in media reports declaring that they were certain, based on photographs of the 49-year-old president-elect, that he was a prominent figure among the hostage-takers 25 years ago.

The factual basis of these assertions is more than dubious. They were first plastered across the front page of the *Washington Times*, the ultra-conservative daily newspaper financed and controlled by the Unification Church of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. Other media outlets took up the claim after the White House issued a careful non-denial—admitting that US files contained no evidence that Ahmadinejad had been in the embassy, but suggesting that there "might be something to it" nonetheless.

President Bush admitted that he had "no information" on Ahmadinejad's supposed role in the embassy takeover, but added in the next breath, "obviously, his involvement raises many questions." National security adviser Stephen Hadley said that if Ahmadinejad had participated in the action, it would be a violation of international law and "one of the things we'll have to look at."

Several former hostages denied having seen Ahmadinejad, and none of those who identified him recalled either

speaking to him or hearing him named by their captors. The former students who led the 1979 takeover have unanimously declared that he did not take part. In the internal politics of Iran, having participated in the embassy seizure has long been something of a badge of honor, and Ahmadinejad is unlikely to have kept his involvement secret for the last 25 years. (According to the former students, the new president-elect had argued in 1979 against seizing the US embassy, favoring a takeover of the Soviet embassy instead, which dovetailed with his focus at the time on purging leftist students from Tehran campuses.)

The sudden outrage over Ahmadinejad's alleged role in the embassy takeover is peculiarly selective. Since 1997, when Mohammad Khatami was elected president of Iran, the US government has sought to cultivate better relations with his "reformist" faction of the ruling clerical elite. Washington never balked at the fact that one of Khatami's vice presidents, Massoumeh Ebtekar, had participated in the embassy takeover and even served as the principal public spokeswoman for the occupiers, because of her relative fluency in English. Khatami's own brother Mohammad-Reza was also a well-known participant in the embassy seizure. He was also the de facto vice-presidential candidate of Mustafa Moin, the "reformist" presidential hopeful in the recent Iranian vote.

Let us set aside, however, the likelihood that the claims of Ahmadinejad's role in the 1979 events are fabricated by the US government for the purpose of providing a pretext for further isolating Iran and preparing the way for a possible US military intervention in the future.

Even if the charges were true, Iran's new president-elect would have nothing to apologize for. The seizure of the US embassy was not a crime, let alone an act of "terrorism." It was a response to a whole series of US crimes and provocations against the Iranian people and the revolution which toppled the regime of the Shah in February 1979.

The Shah's brutal regime of torture and murder owed its existence to American backing. It was the CIA which organized the 1953 coup that overthrew the democratically

elected nationalist government of Mohammed Mossadegh and returned the Shah to his Peacock Throne, where he ruled with increasingly bloody and tyrannical methods until the mass movement which erupted at the end of 1978.

Through that quarter-century, the United States was Iran's principal supplier of arms and high technology—including assistance with the kind of nuclear energy program that Washington now claims is illegitimate for Tehran. US “advisers” helped direct both the Iranian military, which the Pentagon viewed as its most important regional ally, and the Shah's secret police, the dreaded Savak, which carried out brutality on a scale rivaling the worst Latin American military dictatorships.

Tens of thousands of Iranian leftists, workers, union leaders and dissidents were jailed, tortured and killed during those years, which culminated in a visit by US President Jimmy Carter in 1978. Carter dropped his rhetorical embrace of “human rights” and issued an ardent declaration of friendship with the butcher-Shah on the eve of the revolution.

It was the effective extermination of the left—facilitated by the role of the Stalinists of the Tudeh Party, who disarmed the working class by backing first Mossadegh, then the Shah—which made it possible for the conservative Islamic clerics headed by Ayatollah Khomeini to take the leadership of the mass movement against the monarchy.

The Carter administration sought desperately to forestall the Iranian revolution, then to isolate and overthrow it. The US embassy in Tehran was the focal point of its efforts—as it had been an organizing center of the 1953 coup. The last straw came when Carter ordered the Shah admitted to the US for medical treatment, a step that was widely seen as preparation to give him political asylum and allow him and his entourage to use the United States as a base for counterrevolutionary plotting. The student militants seized the US embassy, demanding the Shah be returned to Tehran to face a revolutionary tribunal.

The Carter administration's anti-Iran campaign culminated in an episode which has been completely ignored in the American media in recent years. In September 1980, the tenth month of the hostage crisis, the US government tacitly backed Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran. The Carter administration sought to exploit the longstanding conflict between Iran and Iraq by fomenting a war which would weaken the new Islamic regime—and in which one million people lost their lives. For his part, Hussein sought to take advantage of the conflict between Washington and Tehran by presenting himself as a reliable American ally, perhaps even a replacement for the Shah as the US gendarme in the Persian Gulf.

Even if one were to accept the claim that the 1979

embassy takeover was a violation of international law, the US government is hardly in a position to press the issue today, when it has become the world's principal violator of international law. The Bush administration even proclaims as a matter of principle that it is bound by no international obligations, whether in the form of treaties, the Geneva Conventions, or the rulings of institutions such as the International Criminal Court.

Being a serial violator of international law is a positive credential for high office in the Bush administration. Witness Elliot Abrams, convicted of lying to Congress in the illegal US campaign to arm the Nicaraguan “contra” terrorists in the 1980s, now a top aide to national security adviser Hadley. Or John Negroponte, who as US ambassador to Honduras oversaw both US-backed death squads in that country and the contra gangsters who carried out cross-border attacks into Nicaragua. Under Bush, he has been UN Ambassador, ambassador to Iraq and now Director of National Intelligence.

Then there is the case of Bush's own father, the former president, who was CIA director in 1975-76, at the height of the mass killings and repression carried out by US-backed military dictatorships in Argentina, Chile and other Latin American countries, including the continent-wide abduction and execution program known as Operation Condor.

The senior Bush was elected vice-president in 1980, on the Republican ticket headed by Ronald Reagan, at least in part because of the determination of Khomeini and the student radicals to impose the maximum humiliation on the Carter administration. There have been persistent reports, though not conclusively proven, that William Casey, Reagan's campaign manager and later CIA director, had contacts with the Iranian regime for the purpose of forestalling an “October surprise”—a negotiated release of the hostages in time to affect the outcome of the 1980 presidential election.

Bush's father may owe his first election to national office—putting him in line for the presidency—to a secret deal which kept the US embassy hostages imprisoned months longer than would otherwise have been the case. That gives the current Bush White House another reason to be cautious in playing the “hostage-taker” card against the new Iranian president.



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