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Ahmadinejad **by Sheldon Richman**

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran is no one to admire, but when was the last time President Bush stood before a critical college audience and fielded tough questions? Bush appears only before handpicked friendly crowds. Even news conferences are barely adversarial because the media has the curious rule that the president — any president — deserves to be treated like royalty.

For all his weird statements about freedom, women, and homosexuals in Iran, not to mention his views on the Nazi treatment of Jews, at least Ahmadinejad took on all comers. He even accepted his host's insults with equanimity.

That people panicked about his appearance at the forum only made him look respectable. Too bad Ahmadinejad didn't use his time better. He might have educated the American people about the history of U.S.-Iran relations, of which most Americans are unforgivably ignorant.

He could have told them that in 1953 the CIA conspired with a brutal monarch who had been driven from power to overthrow an elected secular prime minister and restore the monarch to his throne. The shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, proceeded to rule as a dictator for the next quarter century with the help of his secret police, SAVAK, and U.S. money and weapons. U.S. presidents often praised him as a great ally of the United States. The Iranian people understood who his patron was.

When they finally dethroned the hated shah in the religious revolution of 1979, and the U.S. embassy and personnel were seized, the American government pretended it was the aggrieved party. It has conducted subtle warfare against Iran ever since.

Ahmadinejad might also have taught the American people that in the 1980s, the U.S. government backed its ally — Saddam Hussein of Iraq — in his decade-long war against Iran. It provided Iraq critical economic aid and weapons, as well as intelligence and diplomatic recognition, and placed warships in the Persian Gulf to protect Iraqi oil in Kuwaiti tankers from Iranian attack.

Most interesting, the U.S. government licensed American companies to provide Saddam the means to make chemical and biological weapons. (Chemicals were used on the Iranians and Kurds. For a history of the

conflict and U.S.involvement, see my "United States in the Persian Gulf" at http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=912)

During the war the USS Vincennes, while in Iranian waters, shot down an Iranian civilian airliner over the Persian Gulf. All 290 people aboard were killed. American officials claimed — dubiously — that the plane was thought to be a military aircraft. No apology was ever issued, though compensation eventually was paid. Contrast this with an incident about year earlier, when an Iraqi warplane attacked the USS Stark, killing 28 men. The Reagan administration accepted Iraq's apology — then blamed Iran for the tragedy.

The neoconservatives, who so demonized Saddam Hussein before the 2003 invasion, were his enthusiastic backers against Iran in the 1980s. (The 1986 Iran-Contra arms deal was a glaring exception.) Ahmadinejad should have also pointed out that the U.S. government has warships in the Persian Gulf threatening Iran to this day and maintains economic sanctions, a form of warfare, against his country. To those who say that Iran is developing nuclear technology and helping to kill Americans in Iraq, he could point out that it's the U.S. government that invaded two of Iran's next-door neighbors and executed "regime change." Why shouldn't Iran be defensive and interested in acquiring a deterrent?

This would have been a useful lesson for Americans. Unfortunately, Ahmadinejad let the opportunity pass.

The American people would have no reason to fear this man if the U.S. government were not provoking him. There's an easy way to ensure that Iranians aren't killing Americans: bring the troops home and stay out of Middle East affairs.

Instead the Bush administration follows a policy that makes Ahmadinejad a hero, even among Arabs: threatening war. As Glenn Greenwald wrote at Salon.com, "Nobody has done more to inflate the importance and power of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (who, just by the way, is not even the leader of Iran, let alone the WorldWide Evil Axis of Hitlerian Dictators) than those who have focused on him obsessively."

Once again, an American president imperils the people by creating an enemy.

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