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Regime Change: Promise and Peril, Part 2

by Stephen Kinzer

This article is a transcript of Stephen Kinzer's speech given on June 6, 2008, at The Future of Freedom Foundation's conference "[Restoring the Republic 2008: Foreign Policy and Civil Liberties](#)."

Let's look at the case of Cuba. It's another case of American intervention gone terribly wrong. When the United States decided in 1898 to send soldiers to Cuba to help Cuban revolutionaries overthrow Spanish colonial rule, the Cuban patriots were not so sure they really liked this idea. They didn't know if they wanted some thousands of American soldiers in Cuba, and they were very close to victory on their own. The Americans were shocked at the cynicism of the Cuban patriots and responded by passing a law that was called the Teller Amendment. So with the force of law we promised Cuba that our troops were going to withdraw immediately after we defeated the Spanish and we were going to allow Cuba to become independent.

Once that was promised with the force of law, the Cuban revolutionaries embraced the idea of Americans' coming. At the end of 1898, Cuba, after winning the war against Spain, was in a state of ecstatic preparation for what was going to be the biggest day in Cuban history, January 1, 1899. That's Cuban Independence Day. For the first time Cuba was going to become an independent country, but the United States changed its mind. We violated the promise that we had made with the force of law and decided no, we didn't want Cuba to become independent. In fact, we were going to turn it into a protectorate and we were going to rule it directly by American military officers, and later on we ruled it through a series of pliant dictators. Why did we do that? It's because after the Spanish were chased out of Cuba and the Cuban revolutionaries were planning their new government, for the first time we looked at their political program, and we found out that throwing the Spaniards out of Cuba was not all they wanted to do. They actually wanted to do something for their country, and what did they want to do? The first thing they wanted to do was give land to starving peasants. Where was the land? It was all owned by half a dozen American sugar companies.

And then the other thing we noticed was Cuba wanted to build up a manufacturing industry, and the way they wanted to do that was the way we had done it: erect a tariff wall so that they couldn't be flooded by goods from other countries and they could stimulate domestic manufacturing. Well, 90 percent of all the manufactured goods that were on sale in Cuba at that time came from the United States, so suddenly we saw, wait a minute, this revolutionary government was not going to be good for our corporations in the U.S., so we decided to abandon our promise to Cuba.

Now fast-forward to 1959, 60 years later. That was the year, of course, that Fidel Castro came to power. During the time I was researching my book *Overthrow*, I went back and researched that period, and I found a very interesting document. It was Castro's first speech as a leader of the victorious revolution in January 1959. He made it out in Santiago, the eastern city in Cuba where his troops first arrived from the hills, and it was a very vague speech full of kind of patriotic platitudes, but Castro made one promise. He said, "I promise you that this time it's not going to be like 1898 again, when the Americans came in and took over our country."

That speech wasn't very widely reported in the United States, but if it had been I think Americans would have had two responses. The first would have been: What happened in 1898? We forget these interventions, and we like to believe that the people in the countries where we intervene are going to forget them also, but these interventions have long-term effects. And the fact is that if we had kept our word to Cuba and not insisted on dominating Cuba for half a century, we would never have had to face the entire phenomenon of Castro communism and all the negative effects that had for America over so many decades. That is another blowback effect of our own intervention. We had created that phenomenon. It's just that it was a delayed response, so we don't automatically make the connection.

British intervention in Iran

I want to take a little more time to talk about Iran because that is such a very intense debate now in the United States. It's intruding even a little bit into the presidential campaign. Just a bit. Here is perhaps the single greatest pattern that I notice after studying so many of these interventions. It is the inevitability of unpredicted consequences. We Americans have what some people call this "can-do" mentality, this great optimism, and it's a wonderful quality. It's what helped build America into what it is now. It can be very helpful when you're trying to confront obstacles that are posed by nature or by other people or by technology; but a can-do mentality can also be dangerous because it leads us to think that we can do anything. I think that was the idea that brought us into Iraq. Don't worry. There won't be any problems afterwards because we're America. We're going to be able to deal with whatever comes up.

This is a very dangerous approach to the world, and in Iran you see very vividly this law of unintended consequences coming back to haunt us, and we see that you cannot control the

consequences of intervention. They ultimately wind up hurting not only the country where we intervene, but also us. So let me talk a little bit about what happened in Iran and how we got to the position we're in now.

For the whole first half of the 20th century, the dominant fact of life in Iran was foreign intervention, principally by Britain and Russia, to a lesser extent by France and some other European powers, and bitter resentment grew up in Iran against these intervening powers. Now during that period, the first half of the 20th century, the only Americans in Iran were missionaries and others who came to help, people who built hospitals, and the American hospital in Tehran was the only place for decades where a poor person could get good medical care for free. There were educators. The statue of Samuel Jordan, the founder of Alborz College, which trained generations of the Iranian elite, is still a place that people in Iran go on pilgrimages to. They still remember the great American schoolteacher who was killed during the constitutional revolution in 1906. He was called the American Lafayette.

So America was seen in Iran as the great country, the perfect country, the idealized country. We were not intervening and trying to suck their resources out like the British and the French and the Russians. America was idealized even beyond perhaps what we deserved at that time, so America really was in the ideal position because we were only helping, and that help was coming from private initiative. It was not a government-to-government relationship at all.

After World War II the winds of nationalism were blowing through Asia and Africa, Latin America, and in Iran nationalism meant one thing: "We've got to take back control of our oil." At the beginning of the 20th century, through a corrupt deal with the declining Kajar dynasty, the British grabbed control of the entire Iranian oil industry, and even Winston Churchill, who was then first lord of the admiralty, said very accurately that this was a prize from fairyland beyond the UK's wildest dreams. "Mastery itself is the prize of the venture," is what he said. So all during the first half of the 20th century the whole British economy was fueled by oil from Iran. Every factory in Britain was powered by oil from Iran. Every car and every jeep was powered by Iranian oil. The Royal Navy, which projected British power all over the world, was fueled by oil from Iran. Britain has no oil and has no colonies that have oil. Everything was coming from Iran. By the period leading up to World War II, 90 percent of the oil being sold in Europe was coming from Iran, and all the profits were going to this one British company.

So you had this situation where a poor country whose miserable people were living in some of the worst conditions of any people in the world had an enormously valuable resource which was going to prop up the economy of a European country. So it was natural that when Iran emerged from World War II and became a real functioning democracy, the leaders of Iran would reflect this great public clamor. "We've got to take back control of our oil so we can use the profits to develop our own country."

Well, naturally the British were in a panic when they heard this, and of course they didn't believe it. One of their first orders was to ask their ambassador in Britain to approach Prime Minister Mossadegh or one of his aides and find out how much money did he really want them to put in his Swiss bank account so he could forget all this foolishness. But it turned out it wasn't just Mossadegh; it was the entire Iranian people. It wouldn't have worked even if you could have bribed the prime minister because the entire people of Iran had grasped onto this cause. The British tried everything. They blockaded the port where the oil was exported from. They forced all their experts who could run the refinery to go back to Britain, and of course they had been very careful not to train any Iranians in how to run that refinery. They prevented agricultural and manufactured goods from getting into Iran. They took Iran to the United Nations. They took Iran to the World Court. None of this worked, so the British finally decided, "We're going to have to overthrow the government of Iran; we're going to overthrow Prime Minister Mossadegh." They began to plan this, but Mossadegh found out what they were doing and he did the only thing that he could have done to protect himself, which was, he closed the British embassy and he sent home all of the British diplomats, including, of course, all of the secret agents who were planning the coup.

Regime change in Iran

So now the British were really in a panic. They were losing their most valuable, richest, most lucrative property anywhere in the world to whom? Iranians? It was a huge shock. And then what happened was Prime Minister Churchill decided the only hope for them was to turn to the Americans and see if they could get the Americans to do this for them. So he approached President Truman and Truman said, "No. The CIA does not overthrow governments." And that was true at the time, and the CIA had never overthrown a government up to that time. It was Truman's idea that it could be used for intelligence gathering but not for that kind of operation.

In fact, while I was researching this book in the Truman Library in Missouri, I found a fantastic phrase in one of Truman's letters when he was writing about the CIA. He was very worried about giving too much power to the CIA, and here's the phrase that he used to describe what he was afraid that the CIA might become. He said, "American Gestapo." So Truman was very unwilling to use the CIA this way.

Now the British were really in trouble. They had nothing. But then at the end of 1952 the British foreign office and the secret service were electrified by the news that there had been an election in the United States and a new group was coming into power. The new president would be Dwight Eisenhower, and the new secretary of State would be John Foster Dulles, who had spent his entire life as the number-one international corporate lawyer for big American companies. The roster of the clients that John Foster Dulles served is essentially just a list of all the giant multinational corporations of that era. So the idea that a country somewhere out there in

the world was bothering a big, giant multinational corporation or a big British or American corporation was something that Dulles took very seriously. He didn't want that example to spread.

So finally the Americans decided, "We will do this." They — President Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles — reversed the Truman policy and they told the British, "Okay. We're going to do it for you. We're going to go over to Iran and we're going to overthrow Prime Minister Mossadegh." And in the beginning of August 1953 a very intrepid CIA agent crossed over into Iran with the assignment: Organize the overthrow of the government. And it's one of those wonderful quirks of history that the agent who was sent to Iran was Kermit Roosevelt, the grandson of Theodore Roosevelt, who had brought America into the regime-change era back in the time of the Spanish-American War.

It only took Kermit Roosevelt three weeks to organize the overthrow of the democratic government of Iran. It didn't just mean the end of Prime Minister Mossadegh's rule. It meant the end of democracy in Iran, and I think many people today don't even understand that Iran ever was a democracy. But in fact this is a country that's had a constitution for more than a hundred years, and in the early '50s it really was consolidating its democracy. If we had managed to keep our hands off Iran, we might have had a thriving democracy in the heart of the Muslim Middle East all these 50 years, and I can hardly wrap my mind around how different the world would look if we had only managed to keep our hands off.

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This article was originally published in the January 2009 edition of *Freedom Daily*.