



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Regime Change: Promise and Peril, Part 3

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](#)."

I talked about unintended consequences. In the period immediately following the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh (see Freedom Daily, January 2009), Americans were very happy. Kermit Roosevelt was welcomed into the Oval Office of the White House and given a secret medal in a private ceremony, and he briefed President Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles on how it had been done. Oh, it was so successful Dulles immediately went out and started doing this again. Within a year, we went off and overthrew another government down in Guatemala, so the Iran operation seemed like a great success. We got rid of a guy we didn't like, Mossadegh, and we replaced him with a guy, the shah, who would do everything we wanted, so it was a perfect outcome.

It doesn't look quite so perfect now. Let's try to trace very briefly what happened. The shah ruled with increasing repression for 25 years. His repression produced the explosion of the late 1970s, what we call the Islamic Revolution. That revolution brought to power a clique of fanatically anti-American mullahs who have spent the last 25 years bitterly and sometimes very violently working to undermine the American influence all over the world. That revolution in Iran also weakened Iran enough so that Iran's biggest enemy next door, Saddam Hussein, decided to invade Iran. We were so angry at Iran that we became military allies of Saddam Hussein. President Reagan sent a high-level special envoy to meet twice with Saddam Hussein, and of course that envoy was none other than Donald Rumsfeld. I love that photo of Rumsfeld shaking Saddam's hand. It says it all.

We provided helicopters to Iraq to drop poison gas inside Iran. We provided Iraq with bombing coordinates so they could strike at targets inside Iran; so that not only shook that region but it also brought the United States into its death embrace with

Saddam. That was the beginning of the spiral down in Iraq that led us to this present debacle.

The turmoil of the Islamic Revolution also led the Soviets to be terrified that there would be copycat revolutions all along their southern front. That's what led them to invade Afghanistan, and their invasion of Afghanistan is what led us to go over to Pakistan and spend hundreds of millions and even billions of dollars to train huge armies of jihadis to go off and kill the infidel. We didn't realize that those jihadis we trained were going to become the Taliban, and the infidels that they wanted to kill would be us.

All of that stemmed from three weeks in history in 1953 in Iran. Now to this day I think we're still living under the emotional overhang of the hostage crisis of 1979, and we just met a member of Congress today who said that he approached someone on the floor of the House and asked him if he'd support a resolution for negotiating with Iran, and he looked at him and said, "No. They took over our embassy and seized our diplomats." We are still caught in this emotional prison.

Blowback in Iran

I want to tell you a fascinating story that happened to me during a visit to Washington last autumn. I was on a panel discussion about Iran with several other people. One of them was one of the American hostages, one of those diplomats. Actually, it was the chief diplomat, Bruce Laingen. He had been the chief of the U.S. mission in Tehran at the time the hostages were taken. I had never met him but I knew that he'd become an advocate of reconciliation with Iran, and so I was eager to talk to him. I wanted to chat with him a little, and later we exchanged some emails and he told me a fascinating story, which to my knowledge has never appeared in print. He said, "I was sitting in my cell in that embassy in Iran. I had been in a solitary cell for about one year, and one day unexpectedly the door opened and there is one of the hostage takers. One of my jailers is standing there and I looked up at him and one year of rage and anger and fury exploded out of me and I started screaming at him. I told him, 'You have no right to do this. This is totally cruel. This violates every law of God and man. You cannot take innocent people hostage and treat them like this.'" He said, "I went on for several minutes screaming at him and he just looked, waited very patiently, and when I finally ran out of breath he leaned into my cell and pointed a finger at me and in very good English said, 'You have no right to complain because you took our whole country hostage in 1953.'"

What that story tells me is that the hostage taking, deplorable as it was, did not come out of nowhere. It was not just an act of blind hatred and nihilism. People who participated in that episode have now written about it and said it was all about 1953.

What happened in 1953? The U.S. forced the shah out of the country but CIA agents working in the basement of the U.S. embassy arranged a coup and brought him back.

Now it's 25 years later, 1979. The shah fled again, same shah. So what's going to happen? "We're [Iran] afraid the same thing is going to happen again: CIA agents working in the basement of the U.S. embassy will organize a coup and bring the shah back. We had to prevent that."

If the U.S. had never done that in 1953, there never would have been a hostage takeover.

The lesson of all this is that when you violently intervene in the political development of another country, you're doing something like releasing a wheel at the top of a hill. You can let it go, but once you let it go you have no control over how it's going to bounce or where it's going to end up. American foreign policy has gotten off onto a tangent that I think our own Founding Fathers never envisioned and would be horrified to see. We've decided there is only one way everyone in the world should live, and it's the way we tell them they should live. This is the essence of the policy and the face that the United States is presenting to the outside world. We've decided that we've discovered something that other people can never discover and we're going to force them to do it. This creates a kind of resentment that deeply undermines our security.

Changing ourselves

In the current age, you cannot win wars just the way people used to win them in the past, by having the biggest army and the best-trained army and the most modern weapons. That doesn't work anymore because the enemy that we're now facing in the world doesn't respond to that. We cannot pressure them that way.

What is the weapon that we really need to revise our position in the world and improve our security status? It's information. We need to know what people are thinking, what people are saying, what people are planning, what people are doing. How do you get information? You get it from people. You get it from ordinary people, you get it from other intelligence agencies, but they don't share it with you unless they want to, unless they admire you, unless they want to help you. You cannot tell me that Osama bin Laden could be living all those years on the Afghan-Pakistan border if the villagers who live there admired the United States, wanted to help the United States. It's because of their bitterness and their anger at the way the U.S. behaves in the world that they're happy to give him sanctuary.

We complain about that, but that is the situation that we ourselves have created. Now, however, we seem incredibly resistant to learning this lesson. It's very difficult for

Americans to assimilate the idea that there are things not only that we can't do, but that we shouldn't want to do even if we could. We developed a system of government that fit our culture and our needs. Let's let other people do the same thing. Let's not assume that our experience is the same experience of all other people in the world.

Some people find the idea of individuals voting and having political parties to be a great idea. Other people don't like that. In some cultures they rely on consensus rather than conflict or on the wisdom of elders or on other ways of solving problems. Why is that hostile to us? Why should we be concerned about that, and why should the U.S. government be using its great military power and sucking up huge amounts of tax dollars to support that enterprise in order to go out and support the interests of a very small segment of the wealthy American population in ways that are devastating our own security posture? This is not about a giveaway to another country. It's only about thinking what is good for us. Let's just think about that.

I have no problem with America acting in America's interest, but let's think clearly about what is in America's interest, and that's why I turn to our other hero here, George Washington, who also had a line that I'd like to see us go back to understand, cherish, and appreciate. He said, "No country can be trusted further than it is bound by interests." Let's go back to thinking about our own interest as a nation, not serving a small group of corporations that need to suck up resources and need markets, not using the excuse of trying to help people who don't want our help. Let us look inside our country, see how much needs to be done here, and go back to the idea that John Winthrop first pronounced. Let's make ourselves a city on a hill. Let's make ourselves a truly great country that people will want to emulate. That's the way we can change the world, not by force, not by intervention, not by military power.

*Stephen Kinzer is an author and newspaper reporter. He is a veteran **New York Times** correspondent who has reported from more than 50 countries on five continents. His books include **Overthrow** and **All the Shah's Men**.*

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