

## Foreword

The Iran-Iraq War was devastating—one of the largest and longest conventional interstate wars since the Korean conflict ended in 1953. A half million lives were lost, perhaps another million were injured, and the economic cost was over a trillion dollars. An index of the scale of the tragedy is that the battle lines at the end of the war were almost exactly where they were at the beginning of hostilities. It was also the only war in modern times in which chemical weapons were used on a massive scale. The 1980–1988 war led, in addition, to other disasters. It led to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the liberation of Kuwait a year later, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The bloody U.S. war in Iraq was the finale in this march of folly. The seeds of multigenerational tragedy were planted in the Iran-Iraq War. We will live with its consequences for decades, perhaps longer.

Both Iraqis and Iranians came to believe the United States was manipulating them during the war. Ironically (and perhaps naively), the United States tried to reach out to both belligerents during the course of the war—in great secrecy both times—to try to build a strategic partnership. The disastrous arms-for-hostages policy, which came to be known as Iran-Contra, convinced Iraqis that the United States was trying to play both sides of the conflict. The result was that when the war ended the Iraqi regime and most Iraqis regarded the United States as a threat, despite Washington’s support during the war: critical intelligence support to Baghdad, considerable diplomatic cover, and ignoring the largesse of our Arab allies who loaned tens of billions of dollars to Baghdad to sustain Iraq’s war effort.

Iranians call the war the “imposed war” because they believe the United States imposed it on them and orchestrated the global “tilt” toward Iraq in the war. They note that the UN did not condemn Iraq for starting the war—in fact, it did not even discuss the war for weeks after it started, and

it eventually blamed Iraq as the aggressor only years later as part of a deal to free U.S. hostages held by pro-Iranian terrorists in Lebanon.

For Iranians, though the war had tragic consequences, they nevertheless consolidated their revolution largely by successfully portraying it as a David and Goliath struggle, imposed on Iran by the United States and its allies. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was fairly short in duration and its cost miniscule in comparison to the Iran-Iraq War. For the generation of Iranians who are now leading their country, men like President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the war was the defining event of their lives, and it has shaped their worldview. Their anti-Americanism and deep suspicion of the West generally can be traced directly to their understanding of the Iran-Iraq War.

For Iraqis it was also a national nightmare, though just the beginning of a dark period that would culminate in the bloody civil war that followed the U.S. invasion and the destruction of the regime of Saddam Hussein. Many of Iraq's fault lines were exposed during the Iran-Iraq War—especially Arab versus Kurd, and Shia versus Sunni. Violent eruptions along these fault lines occurred after 2003 and continue to the present day.

In spite of its critical significance to two of the principal players in the Middle East, the bloody war in and around the Persian Gulf has attracted relatively little attention in the United States. The 1979 revolution and the Kuwait crisis in 1990–1991 have gotten far more attention from academia and think tanks than the eight-year struggle between Iran and Iraq. U.S. policy toward the war has gotten even less attention. One reason Americans have largely ignored the Iran-Iraq War is the enormous antipathy many Americans feel toward the two belligerents. Neither Iran nor Iraq is popular in the United States, to say the least. When Americans think of Iraq, they think mainly of Saddam Hussein and the huge (and still ongoing) cost of the U.S. intervention that began in March 2003. When Americans think at all about Iran in the 1980s, they are likely to recall the Iran-Contra scandal, a peculiar and humiliating cascade of revelations that nearly led to the impeachment of President Ronald Reagan. Yet another reason Americans give short shrift to the Iran-Iraq War is that most of the most critical U.S. decisions regarding the war were made in secret, and the relevant documentation has remained classified. For example, the U.S. provision of critical intelligence to Baghdad—a story told in this book with a degree of authoritative detail previously unavailable—was never discussed in the open during the war. Finally, it should be noted that the two most important American decision makers on matters connected to the war, President Ronald Reagan and his CIA director, William Casey, died without leaving their own personal accounts of why they did what they did.

Now comes this book, with its remarkable declassified documentation and oral testimony that bear directly on questions of U.S. policy making with regard to the Iran-Iraq War. Using the method of critical oral history, a collection of scholars and former officials involved with U.S. and UN policy toward the war met at the Musgrove Conference Center in St. Simons Island, Georgia, in December 2008 to take a fresh look at the U.S. role in the war. The bulk of this book is the edited and annotated transcript of that conference. The book reveals much that was previously unknown about U.S. policy before, during, and after the war. But it goes beyond mere reportage; it also contains lessons proposed by scholars and former officials regarding fundamental foreign policy challenges to the United States that transcend time and place.

U.S. involvement in the Iran-Iraq War was unusual in that the conflict was between two detestable regimes, each of which was led by an unscrupulous, cruel dictator. For the U.S. government and its citizens, there was no good guy in this drama. Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini were both repressive, narrow-minded bigots, violent and brutish in the extreme. For those who would prefer to see U.S. national security policy follow in all instances the principles laid down in the UN charter or other statements of the moral high ground in the affairs between nations, the Iran-Iraq War was a swamp. Alas, this is the rule rather than the exception in the real world. In any case, during the Iran-Iraq War, U.S. policy simply could not be to support those with whom we agreed or whom we admired, because no such party existed.

What then accounts for the sometimes grudging but often generous U.S. support for Saddam Hussein's Iraq? The answer is easy to identify, but understanding U.S. opposition to Iran and support for Iraq is a deep psychological enterprise. The two-word answer is that it was the *hostage crisis*, one of the most devastating non-war-related events in U.S. history that drove U.S. opposition to Iran and led to support for Iraq. As the war began, Iran was holding dozens of American diplomats hostage, torturing some of them, and publicly humiliating all of them. After 444 days in captivity, on the day of President Ronald Reagan's inauguration, Iran released the hostages. To most American policy makers and citizens, this illegal, cruel, and repellant act by Iran set the standard for bad behavior by Middle East governments. In effect, any leader or regime in the region that was less reprehensible than Iran's was somehow regarded as "good," or at least potentially redeemable. This principle applied especially to Iraq, which had for its own reasons decided to attack Iran and try to eliminate the Khomeini regime. So the enemy of our enemy became, if not exactly our friend, at least an ally whose interests, for the moment and on the issue of Iran, seemed to coincide with our own. In

retrospect, it is of course impossible to fully understand how Saddam Hussein could have been so regarded, given all we know of his horrible behavior toward his own people and others in the region. A reconstructed and civilized Saddam was a mirage. But in the 1980s the mirage was fueled by hope. Thus did the United States tilt toward Iraq, hoping that in so doing it could directly restrain what were regarded by many in the West, as well as the Middle East, as the “medieval fanatics” in Tehran and prevent them from gaining control of the region’s massive oil reserves.

Washington–Baghdad relations were rocky from the moment the war broke out, and they became more difficult with each passing month. “Our side,” alas, kept breaking all the rules. First, Iraq was the aggressor in September 1980. True, it had been provoked by Iran during the months leading up to the Iraqi attack. But the massive scale of the invasion was monumentally out of proportion to the provocations Iraq claimed had motivated the attack. As long as Iraq held Iranian territory, the U.S. government did not call for the restoration of the status quo ante, as would be the norm under such circumstances. Yet as the tables were turned, by the summer of 1982 when Iran went on the offensive and tried to invade Iraq, the United States did call upon the combatants to respect the international border between the two countries. Then “our guy” began using chemical weapons. First it was piecemeal and largely ineffectual. But by war’s end it was on a scale not seen since the First World War, and very decisive. The threat of Iraqi chemical warheads on long-range missiles caused many of Tehran’s inhabitants to evacuate in early 1988. Meanwhile Saddam began using chemical attacks systematically to kill his own people. As the war ended, the Anfal campaign against Iraqi Kurds was under way, an act of pure genocide by “our guy.”

Ironically the closest U.S. partner in the region, Israel, pressed Washington hard and repeatedly to, in effect, switch sides and offer assistance to Iran. Israeli leaders, generals, and spies were obsessed by the Iraqi threat in the 1980s, just as they are preoccupied by the Iranian threat today. They longed to restore the cozy relationship they had with the Shah in the 1960s and 1970s. Israel was the only consistent source of spare parts for the Iranian air force’s U.S.-built jets throughout the war. Israeli leaders, notably Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, brought considerable pressure to bear on Washington for an American engagement with Tehran. Iran-Contra was in many ways their idea. American diplomats and spies abroad were told to turn a blind eye to Israeli arms deals with Tehran, even when it was official U.S. policy to (in the Washington euphemism of the day) “staunch” all avenues by which the Iranians might obtain weapons or other material needed for their war effort.

This book argues persuasively (and I think decisively) that Reagan's decision to send his national security adviser to Tehran with a cake and a Bible was much more about another hostage crisis than it was about any strategic outreach to Iran. Reagan was obsessed with freeing American (and other) hostages held by the Lebanese pro-Iranian group, Hezbollah, and he became convinced that a deal with Iran might result in their freedom. The specific means would be a trade of U.S. arms to Tehran in return for Iranian intervention with Hezbollah to free the hostages. In retrospect it is easy to see that it could never work. The bizarre twists and turns, and the rogues' gallery of characters involved on all sides, make it hard to understand why anyone, let alone the president of the United States and his senior advisers, could delude themselves into thinking that the Iran-Contra maneuver could ever work. But read on: this book shows in detail why Reagan's advisers and his inner circle believed this was their best option, given the president's relentless pressure to obtain the release of the hostages.

This is a story with a maze of contradictions and puzzles. In this book you will hear firsthand from participants in the drama. Among the most fascinating is the narrative of the first CIA officer to visit Baghdad during the war, in the summer of 1982. Tom Twetten traveled to Baghdad to deliver critical intelligence to the Iraqis. The ambiguity and ambivalence of the entire U.S. relationship with Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the war is captured in his perplexity and anxiety upon arriving in Baghdad. Would the Iraqis, he wondered quite seriously, welcome him or shoot him? Also enthralling is the account of the UN diplomat, Giandomenico Picco, who was told by Washington at the end of the war to sabotage the peace process in order to buy time for the Iraqis to inflict more damage on Iran! And you will find few revelations here or elsewhere any more poignant than the tale U.S. diplomats tell in this book about what may have been the most unwelcome assignment of their careers: defending the Iran-Contra maneuver to U.S. allies in the region—that is, our double-cross of an ally (Iraq) in an effort to assist the number-one enemy in the region of Washington and many of its Middle East allies (Iran).

Finally, the Musgrove conference and this book based on it explore the worlds of what might have been. Were significant opportunities to avoid enmity between Iran and America missed in these years? Intriguing discussions follow in this book regarding such possibilities as, What if President Jimmy Carter had listened to his own internal doubts instead of his senior advisers and had decided not to let the Shah come to the United States for medical treatment? What if the United States had drawn a very sharp red line opposing use of chemical weapons by Saddam? Or might we have helped to reform

Iraq if the United States had been a loyal partner to Baghdad instead of coming across as fickle? What if there had been no Iran-Contra gambit? There are no definitive answers to these queries into the history of what did *not* happen, of course. But the discussions of the team that gathered in Georgia were highly provocative and point to lessons that should be absorbed by any U.S. government faced with the task of constructing a sensible policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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October 1, 2011