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From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad

By MATTHIAS KÜNTZEL

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BOOKS

From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad

By MATTHIAS
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MARK BOWDEN. *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in America's War With Militant Islam*. ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS. 704 PAGES. \$26.

WHEN MAHMOUD Ahmadinejad arrived in New York in September 2006 for the opening of the UN General Assembly, his appointment book was full. He had breakfast at the Intercontinental Hotel with American academics and journalists; he chatted with the members of the Council on Foreign Relations about whether or not the Holocaust occurred; and he was expected up at Columbia for the university's "World Leaders Forum"

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speakers series. Ahmadinejad gave his talk at the UN and later was greeted with standing ovations by 500 Iranian-American dignitaries at the Hilton. "We've really progressed," he exulted before his audience at the Hilton, making allusion to his diplomatic forays to Indonesia, Cuba, and Shanghai: "118 countries have specifically supported Iran's nuclear program."¹

The world seems spellbound in the face of this populist, who says what he wants and does what he says. Ahmadinejad's limitless self-confidence impressed the *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, who in interviewing the Iranian President found himself reminded of the triumphalism of the Ayatollah Khomeini: "I sensed the same certainty that was expressed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini back when this confrontation began in the late 1970s: 'America cannot do a damn thing'" (*Washington Post*, September 24, 2006).

On November 4, 1979, 400 Khomeini followers, armed with sticks and chains, broke down the door of the American embassy in Tehran, stormed the compound, and took hostage all the Americans on the grounds. It was in fact these hostage-takers who in 1979 would pose for the cameras next to a poster with a caricature of then American President Jimmy Carter and the slogan "America cannot do a damn thing." Khomeini did not release his prisoners until January 1981. Could America really "not do a damn thing"?

This is the key question raised by

¹ Hooman Majd, "Mahmoud and Me," *New York Observer* (October 22, 2006). Columbia University would cancel Ahmadinejad's lecture on short notice, citing security considerations.

Books

Mark Bowden's gripping account of the hostage crisis in his new book *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in America's War With Militant Islam*. The "guests" in question obviously were no guests. Not only were the Americans robbed of their liberty, but they were subjected to mock executions and beatings. Hardly any of them

Ahmadinejad was a member of the group that prepared the seizure of the embassy, and served as a liaison between Khomeini and the hostage-takers.

believed that they would get out of the compound alive. But in this "first battle," the battle was never really joined either. Bowden's account clearly reveals the helplessness of the Carter administration: The more assiduously President Carter sought compromise, the more contemptuously he was mocked by Khomeini.

Today, we are not only facing a second major conflict with Iran, but the West is confronted by the same theological regime, the same ideology of martyrdom — and indeed by some of the same persons. In 1979, a 23-year-old Mahmoud Ahmadinejad figured among the core group that prepared the seizure of the American embassy. According to then-Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Ahmadinejad was not only present in the occupied compound, but served as liaison

between the hostage-takers and Ali Khamenei, at the time one of the most important Friday preachers in Tehran.² Khamenei himself, today Iran's Supreme Leader, visited the hostage-takers repeatedly in the compound. Ali-Akbar Rafsanjani, today Iran's third most important political figure, was in 1980 the chairman of the Parliament and in this capacity he shared responsibility for the prolongation of the hostage crisis.

As Bowden rightly puts it, the hostage-taking was "a crime against the entire civilized world." Nowadays, when the sacking of embassies by Muslim fanatics has become a nearly daily occurrence, this assessment might not seem so obvious. But even at the height of the Cold War, it would have been unthinkable for the Kremlin, for instance, to attack the American embassy in Moscow and take its employees hostage. Such an action would have amounted to a declaration of war not only against the U.S., but indeed against the whole world. The free and secure movement of diplomats is the first form of civilization in the conduct of nations. Any nation that violates this rule places itself outside the community of nations, since it substitutes war for diplomacy and chaos for international law. Khomeini's approval of the hostage-taking made clear already in 1979 that Islamism represented for the West an opponent of an entirely different nature than the Soviet Union: an opponent that not only did not accept the system of international relations founded after 1945 but combated it as a "Christian-Jewish

² Author conversation with Abolhassan Bani-Sadr (October 10, 2006).

Books

conspiracy.”

The hostage-taking was ostensibly supposed to force America to extradite the shah, who was temporarily in the U.S. to receive medical attention. In fact, much more was at stake. The occupation of the embassy, Khomeini explained in a radio address from November 1979, amounts to a “war between Muslims and pagans”: “The Muslims must rise up in this struggle, which is more a struggle between unbelievers and Islam than one between Iran and America: between all unbelievers and the Muslims. The Muslims must rise up and triumph in this struggle.” It was precisely this aim that resulted in the Islamic Republic’s disregard for diplomatic custom.

Only after 444 days did Khomeini finally let the hostages go. Mark Bowden places his readers imaginatively in the seemingly endless situation of their captivity. His account is based on some 130 interviews: with hostages, hostage-takers, political decision makers, and the members of the Delta Force special commando unit whose rescue attempt ended disastrously in the Iranian desert. The principal scene of the book’s action, however, is the U.S. embassy compound in Tehran, where the ragged band of hostages spent 15 fearful months. “My goal,” Bowden writes, “was to reconstruct their experience as they lived it.” He achieves his goal. He depicts for us not only how the disaster transpired, but also and above all the subjective dimension: the fears of the hostages, their own analyses of the situation, their hopes and their survival strategies. How does one behave — while much of the time being bound and blindfolded — toward students who are young

enough to be your children but who have you in their power, who could torment you or kill you, who are sometimes ridiculous, sometimes malicious and often both? How does one deal with the garrulousness — or the perspiration — of one’s fellow hostages? What do the captive diplomats — among them real Iran aficionados — think of what is going on in Tehran or of the Iran policy of the USA? Bowden masterfully weaves the individual stories of his interlocutors into a novelistic narrative. The most dramatic scenes — the seizure of the embassy, the mock executions, the attempted escapes — give the book the air of a thriller.

Whereas these epic passages make the book a genuine pleasure to read, it is Bowden’s look back at Jimmy Carter’s Iran policy that gives the book its particular political relevance. Certain similarities with the dilemmas of America’s current Iran policy are impossible to overlook.

IN FEBRUARY 1979, Khomeini’s Iranian Revolution forced the shah into exile. It then kept him on the run from Morocco to Egypt, the Bahamas, Mexico, and finally Panama. At the end of October 1979, the U.S. granted the shah, who was gravely ill with cancer, a limited visa to undergo medical examinations at the Cornell Medical Center in New York. By the middle of December Reza Pahlevi had returned to Panama. In late July 1980, he would die in Cairo.

By October 1979, Jimmy Carter had long since written off the shah and, full of hope for the future, was sending conciliatory signals to the new Iranian regime. But for the Iranian students

Books

who had occupied the embassy, the shah's stay in New York confirmed their worst suspicions. They were convinced that they had in the American embassy uncovered a nest of spies of Orwellian dimensions, where a coup plot was in the process of being hatched. It was not only memories of the role played by the CIA in the 1953 overthrow of the Iranian nationalist Mossadeq that fed these suspicions. In the obsessive worldview of the hostage-takers, an all-powerful United States was responsible for all the evils of the world. "There was no such thing as an innocent explanation," one of the hostages later reported. Every piece of information coming from the embassy personnel, no matter how innocuous, took on a dark, covert significance. Even their digital watches and ballpoint pens were ascribed special powers, such as are otherwise only to be found in a James Bond film.

The contrast between the reality and the phantasm could hardly have been greater. At the time of the embassy seizure, the Iran section at the CIA consisted of exactly four people — who, moreover, were fumbling around in the dark since none of them spoke Farsi. In previous years, too, the CIA had failed actively to gather intelligence. Thus it announced in August 1978 — just six months before the revolution! — that Iran "is not in a revolutionary or even prerevolutionary situation." The intelligence reports from France and Israel, which correctly predicted the imminent overthrow of the shah, were stubbornly dismissed as "alarmist."³

The tendency toward wishful thinking continued even after the revolution in February 1979. Whereas Tehran increasingly viewed the U.S. through

the darkly hued optic of its paranoid phantasms and loudly demonized America as its Enemy No. 1, Washington plugged its ears and looked back through rose-colored glasses. The American Representative to the UN, Andrew Young, described Khomeini as "some kind of saint," while National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was favorably disposed toward him, since he seemed to Brzezinski to represent an effective barrier against Soviet influence. "We can get along with Khomeini!" was the motto in that summer of 1979. Businesspeople were encouraged to invest in Iran. Members of Congress were subtly discouraged from making critical comments. Critical journalists who refused to follow the line were denigrated. The following episode, as described by Michael Ledeen and William Lewis, is illustrative of the atmosphere:

There was considerable consternation and disgruntlement in the State Department and the CIA when three American newspapers published extensive accounts of Khomeini's writings. The articles showed that Khomeini's books revealed him as a violently anti-Western, anti-American, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic individual, who offered an unattractive alternative to the shah. Yet as late as the first week in February 1979,

³ According to Michael Ledeen and William Lewis, there was for a time in 1977 and 1978 only one CIA analyst who spoke Farsi and who worked full-time on Iran. Michael Ledeen and William Lewis, *Debacle: The American Failure in Iran* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 126, 132.

when Khomeini was returning in triumph to Tehran, Henry Precht [the head of the State Department's Iran desk] told an audience of some two hundred persons at the State Department "open forum" meeting that the newspaper accounts were severely misleading, and he went so far as to accuse *Washington Post* editorial columnist Stephen Rosenfeld of wittingly disseminating excerpts from a book that Precht considered at best a collection of notes taken by students, and at worst a forgery. Precht was hardly an isolated case, for the conviction was widespread that Khomeini's books were either false, exaggerated, or misunderstood.⁴

Thus, the State Department and the CIA defended their false picture of Khomeini against all intrusion of reality. Remarkably, somewhat later the CIA asked Rosenfeld if he could lend the agency the edition of the book he had cited, since it did not have its own copy. So much for the most omniscient and cunning intelligence agency of the most omniscient and cunning government in the world.

THE HOSTAGE-TAKING burst upon such idyllic reveries like a storm. Bowden invokes the shock that this first encounter with real Islamism represented. He describes how "the entire professional frame of reference" of embassy chargé d'affaires Bruce E. Laingen had to be overturned. Before the hostage-taking, Laingen possessed, in Bowden's expression, "a con-

stitutional bias toward hope." He strongly believed that "things were getting better [in Iran]" and put all his trust in "the power of polite dialogue between nations." Laingen was, in Bowden's words, "bewildered" by the events of November 4. "Why? To what end?" he wrote in his journal four days after the seizure of the embassy, "We have tried by every available means over the past month to demonstrate, by word and deed, that we accept the Iranian revolution, indeed, that we wish it well — that a society strongly motivated by religion is a society we, as a religious nation, can identify with."

President Carter responded to the challenge by dispatching Ramsey Clark and William Miller, two long-time opponents of America's alliance with the shah, to Tehran. They brought with them a letter signed by Carter that they were supposed to deliver to Khomeini. It contained the assurance that the shah would remain in the U.S. only for the duration of his illness, as well as an offer to procure access to the shah's doctors for Iranian representatives. Second, Carter explicitly recognized the independence and territorial integrity of Iran and expressed his willingness to resume arms exports. Third, he politely asked Khomeini to have the hostages released ("I ask that you release unharmed all Americans presently detained in Iran") and pleaded for dialogue: "I have asked both men to meet with you and to hear from you your perspective on events in Iran and the problems which have arisen between our two countries. The people of the United States desire to have relations with Iran based upon equality, mutual respect and friendship."

Thus was the first approach by the

⁴ Ledeen and Lewis, *Debauché*, 129–30.

American president to the leader of the Iranian Revolution. No one could regard the tone of this letter as provocative — above all, on the background of an act of violence that in other circumstances would have been treated as a declaration of war. What Bowden writes of Precht, the head of the Iran desk at the State Department,

It was not until the 154th day of the hostage crisis that Carter broke off diplomatic relations and began to prepare economic sanctions.

applies also to Carter: he “was less concerned with expressing American indignation than with persuasion. He wanted to convince the imam [Khomeini], not confront him.” In light of the content of the Carter letter, it is astonishing that it is precisely the U.S. that is continually blamed for the deterioration of relations between the countries.

Carter’s attempted gesture of goodwill was dashed by the stony determination of the ayatollah. Khomeini was not even prepared to permit American emissaries into the country — not even the likes of Miller and Clark. The catalogue of American punitive measures that would then be taken — the expulsion of some Iranian diplomats, as well as all Iranians in the U.S. illegally; the cessation of oil imports from Iran; the freezing of Iranian assets in U.S. banks

— likewise failed to make the slightest impression.

As his next step, Carter, via French mediators, entered into drawn-out negotiations with Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr and his minister of foreign affairs, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh: two high-profile but in comparison to Khomeini virtually powerless figures. The negotiations quickly took on a peculiar pattern that Bowden describes as follows: “Carter would latch on to a deal proffered by a top Iranian official and grant minor but humiliating concessions, only to have it scotched at the last minute by Khomeini.”

It was not until April 7, 1980 — the 154th day of the hostage crisis — that Carter finally broke off diplomatic relations and began to prepare economic sanctions. But not even this seemed to disturb Khomeini. On the contrary, in a message to the Iranian people, he declared: “If Carter has ever done anything in his life to serve the interests of the oppressed, it is this breaking off of relations between an ascendant country that has freed itself from the clutches of the international plunderers and a world-devouring plunderer.”⁵

America had hoped to influence Iran by using the habitual mix of carrots and sticks. But the Ayatollah Khomeini was indifferent not only to all material incentives — the carrots — but also to the threat of violence. Just after the hostage-taking, he dismissed the possibility of an American military response as follows: “We will destroy you all, even if we ourselves die in the process.” Later, he would go so far as explicitly to reject the primacy of national inter-

⁵ Cited from *Archiv der Gegenwart*, 1980, 23,448.

ests. “We do not worship Iran, we worship Allah,” he declared in a speech in 1980 in Qom. “For patriotism is another name for paganism. I say let this land [Iran] burn. I say let this land go up in smoke, provided Islam emerges triumphant in the rest of the world.”

Any attempt at intimidation was bound to fail in the face of this mentality of self-sacrifice. With the Iranian Revolution, the international community found itself confronted by a new form of irrationalism. Nonetheless, the attitude of the Europeans and the United Nations only made America’s dilemmas worse.

ON JANUARY 14, 1980, the U.S. submitted a draft resolution to the UN Security Council that would have required all member states “to prevent the supply of all goods, raw materials, and manufactured products — with the exception of foodstuffs and medicines — to firms active in Iran.” The Soviet Union used its veto.

At this point, the U.S. tried to convince at least its NATO allies to join it in applying sanctions independently of the UN. But even the closest allies of the U.S. declined. “England’s response was lukewarm,” Bowden writes; “Canada promised to consult with other nations first; Japan said it would ‘carefully study’ the idea; West Germany declined outright; Denmark announced it was ‘hesitant’ to break ties; Italy called such punitive steps ‘a mistake.’” In April 1980, Iranian President Bani-Sadr warned the Europeans: If they “followed the USA, they will neither get any oil from us, nor will we buy anything from them.”

In the first quarter of 1980, West German oil imports from Iran — at the height of the hostage crisis — increased by some 50 percent in comparison to the previous year. When the European Community finally agreed on embargo measures on May 17 — the 195th day of the crisis — the result was farcical. It was unanimously decided to impose an embargo on all contracts concluded after November 4, 1979 — i.e., *after* the occupation of the embassy. All contracts concluded *before* the hostage crisis remained in force. For Great Britain, even this half-measure went too far. Parliament passed a bill that merely prohibited *new* contracts — whereas British firms were authorized to “alter, supplement and expand” existing contracts.⁶ One can only agree with Bowden when he writes: “The world community deserves blame for failing to respond adequately to the insult. Apart from pronouncements, the United Nations and most of our allies were content to leave the captive American mission to its fate.”

When the hostages were finally set free on January 20, 1981, this was thanks neither to international nor even just allied solidarity, nor, for that matter, to any particular American policy moves. The idea of providing positive incentives had failed just as much as the threat of armed intervention. The hostages were liberated because Tehran had grown weary of holding them. Moreover, following Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran in September 1980, the Iranian regime had other priorities: for instance, the provision of replace-

⁶ *Archiv der Gegenwart*, 1980, 23,449, 23,579.

Books

ment parts for Iranian fighter jets. The hostages represented an obstacle in this connection. But even the liberation of the hostages was presented as a triumph by Khomeini: they were only permitted to leave Iran on the day when Jimmy Carter left the White House. America thus came away from its first major confrontation with Islamism without suffering major losses. But the outcome hardly represented a victory over Khomeini. Quite the contrary.

AFTER IRAN'S ISLAMIC Revolution of February 1979, the American government actively sought a *modus vivendi* with the new regime. The occupation of the embassy was the turning point in the relationship between Islam and the West. It set in motion the process that would issue in the Shiite suicide attacks of the 1980s. On April 18, 1983, Iranian-sponsored suicide bombers blew up the American embassy in Lebanon (50 dead, including 17 Americans). On October 23, 1983, Islamist terrorists destroyed the barracks of American and French troops in Beirut, killing 241 Americans and 58 French. On January 19, 1984, the president of the American University in Beirut was also killed by Islamists. As Khomeini celebrated the fifth anniversary of his revolution in February 1984, America, subjected to yet another humiliation, withdrew from Lebanon.

The Beirut attacks confronted the world with the efficacy of a weapon that in 1979 was still wholly unknown: the Islamically motivated suicide attack. Only a few years later, the Islamist movement would receive

additional impetus through the collapse of the Soviet Union. "Since the end of Marxism, Islam has replaced it," Ahmad Khomeini, the son of the revolutionary leader, boasted. In the context of the Cold War, Khomeinism was still just a phenomenon of peripheral importance. Since then — and especially since 9/11 — Islamism has arguably become the most important antipode to the West. Today, it represents the only movement capable of challenging global capitalism on a grand scale: with important financial resources, a global presence, and a unified ideology. Ahmadinejad is today exploiting this unique potential.

At the same time, the current Iranian strategy displays a perfect continuity with the strategy pursued by Iran in its first confrontation with America in 1979–1980. Now as then, the Iranian leadership rejects the UN Security Council and declares its resolutions null and void ("The Security Council is illegitimate. Its resolutions are illegitimate."). Now as then, the West's threatened sanctions are ridiculed ("The day on which your sanctions are applied will be a national holiday for us."). Now as then, Europe is played off against America ("If the Europeans oppose us, they will be the ones to suffer the consequences."). In 1980, when it was a matter of confronting an Iranian crime against American citizens, the European NATO countries abandoned their American ally to its own devices. Today, Iran threatens Israel with a new Holocaust, sponsors Islamist terror worldwide, and violates the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. What is the international community prepared to do now?

ON MARCH 29, 2006, the UN Security Council demanded that Iran cease uranium enrichment within 30 days. Instead, on April 11, Ahmadinejad announced a breakthrough in Iran's enrichment program: "I formally declare that Iran has joined the club of nuclear nations." In a cult-like ceremony, he presented two metal containers in which were to be found Iran's first independently enriched uranium. Choirs thundered "*Allahu Akbar*" as exotically clad dancers danced ecstatically around the containers and lifted them heroically toward the sky in the style of Maoist opera. For those who did not find the ceremony so entertaining, Ahmadinejad had a suggestion: "Be angry at us and die of this anger."

But the international community did not want to get angry. Instead, on June 1, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany offered Iran a long list of gifts and other benefits — including the prospect of direct talks with America. The package was publicly presented as a mix of carrots and sticks: If you temporarily suspend your uranium enrichment, you get the "carrots"; if not, then the "sticks," namely, economic sanctions. In reality, however, one hesitated even to show the sticks. "In a further reflection of Western efforts not to anger Iran, only the incentives part of the deal was given to Iranian officials," the Associated Press reported (June 14, 2006). Also in terms of rhetoric, the six powers did their best to mollify the regime. Using almost exactly the same words with which Jimmy Carter, shortly after the hostage-taking, offered the mullah regime a "new and mutually beneficial relationship," the envoy of

the six powers, Javier Solana, proposed to "start a new relationship on the basis of mutual respect and mutual trust." Tehran, however, paid back the fawning in its usual manner: On the day of Solana's arrival it demonstratively expanded its uranium enrichment.

To give gifts and get slaps in return: This procedure has become a habit. On June 29, 2006, the deadline that the six powers had set for Iran passed without a response. But instead of sanctions being applied, the deadline was extended until August 31. When this deadline likewise passed, European fears were directed not toward Tehran — but toward Washington. EU diplomats explained that "they were concerned that the USA wants to apply sanctions without waiting out the last-minute attempt to avoid an escalation" (*Neue Züricher Zeitung*, August 31, 2006). Yet again, Washington gave in; yet again, the "negotiations" were permitted to continue. Now, however, Ahmadinejad, taking evident pleasure, divulged some choice details from the ongoing — and, needless to say, confidential — negotiations: "At first they asked us to suspend [uranium enrichment] for six months, then they asked us to suspend for three months, then for one month. . . . Now they have proposed that we suspend for a short period, for one day. . . . They said suspend for a few days and explain that you have technical problems. But we have no technical problems! Why should we lie to the people?" (*Agence France-Presse*, September 30, 2006). Javier Solana was not available for comment.

The course of the "negotiations" showed that the international community was, as Bret Stephens put it in the *Wall Street Journal* (May 16, 2006),

“less intent on stopping Tehran from getting the bomb than it is on stopping Washington from stopping Tehran.” Time and again, Great Britain, France, and Germany threatened Iran with consequences if it failed to suspend enrichment, only then to retreat from their threats and demand further concessions from Washington. Has the

It was no accident that Ahmadinejad’s closest ally, Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez, turned his speech at the UN this year into a commercial for Noam Chomsky.

American government at least learned from the experience of the hostage crisis? “Since the horror of 9/11, we’ve learned a great deal about the enemy,” President Bush said in his speech on the fifth anniversary of 9/11. “The war against this enemy is more than a military conflict. It is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century.” That sounds good. But why did the president not even mention Iran in this speech? Was it out of consideration for the appeasement strategy of the Europeans?

On May 8, 2006, Ahmadinejad staged his most important propaganda coup to date. On that day, an 18-page letter from the Iranian president was delivered to George W. Bush — the first correspondence between an Iranian and American president in 27 years. In Iran, Ahmadinejad’s “divinely-

inspired” letter — as one of the country’s leading clerics described it — was showered with praise. In the West, on the other hand, it was often ridiculed on account of its preachy religious tone and has been almost universally underestimated. The letter permitted Ahmadinejad to present himself as a global advocate for the dispossessed and leader in the struggle against a supposedly “Zionist-dominated” world. His carefully composed text is addressed to three distinct constituencies. First, in employing theological language, he laid the groundwork for his May 2006 appearance at the summit of Islamic states in Bali. At the same time, he uses the jargon of “anti-globalization” populism in treating the problems of Africa and South America, and he thus spoke to the secular current that would gather at the meeting of nonaligned states in Cuba in September. Finally, he mobilizes the platitudes of anti-Americanism in order to woo the Western Left. It was no accident that the closest ally of the Iranian president, Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez, transformed his speech at the UN this year into a commercial for Noam Chomsky, and it speaks volumes that during his New York visit Ahmadinejad himself was eager to meet one American in particular: Michael Moore.

Even though the letter was written for tactical purposes, it cannot hide the anti-humanistic essentials of the Islamist canon. One finds, for instance, the Islamist motto “You love life, we love death,” even if expressed in the letter in a somewhat watered down variant: “A bad ending belongs only to those who have chosen the life of this world. . . . A good land and eternal

paradise belong to those servants who fear His majesty and do not follow their lascivious selves.”⁷ One finds, too, the characteristic contempt for freedom and democracy: “Those with insights can already hear the sounds of the shattering and fall of the ideology and thoughts of the liberal democratic systems.” In marked contrast to the letter that Jimmy Carter wrote to the ayatollah in 1979, the letter of Khomeini’s follower does not propose “equality, mutual respect, and friendship.” Instead, it advises the American president to convert to Islam while there is still time. Nonetheless, Secretary of State Rice sought to assess the letter only in terms of pragmatic considerations. “This letter isn’t it,” she told the Associated Press; “it isn’t addressing the issues that we’re dealing with in concrete ways.” Asked why in the given context the letter had been written, she replied: “I’m not going to try to judge the motivation.”

The Bush administration failed to consider the text in terms of its inherent logic. As a consequence, the tectonic shifts that preceded Ahmadinejad’s tour of the international conferences remained hidden for it. Instead, the administration adopted the blinkered mindset of the allies, which deliberately ignores the ideological dimension of the conflict in order to concentrate on pragmatic problem-solving. In the 1930s, some believed it would be possible to solve the particular problem of the Sudeten-Germans in negotiations

with Hitler without considering the place of the Sudeten question in the overall strategy of the Nazis. In the 1980s, some believed it was possible to solve the particular problem represented by the seizure of the embassy in negotiations with Khomeini without considering the significance of the embassy seizure in the strategic concep-

The Iranian president employs the jargon of “anti-globalization” to discuss Africa, and he uses the platitudes of anti-Americanism to woo the Western Left.

tion of Islamism more generally. Today, with the separation of the nuclear question from the ideological dimension of the conflict, this mistake is being repeated. Although the letter made headlines around the world, Washington hesitated to confront the Iranian challenge on its own terrain: that of ideology. Policymakers focused on business as usual and thus missed the opportunity to present the real alternative facing both Muslim and non-Muslim societies: Does the world want to be oriented by life or by death? Does the world prefer individual and social self-determination or to be ruled by a clique of mullahs and their cult of death?

In summer 2006, only Ahmadinejad acted strategically and used his chance. He successfully undermined the American effort to isolate

⁷ Still today, the Iranian regime celebrates as martyrs the tens of thousands of Iranian children who were sent into the mine fields in the war against Iraq and thus to certain death. See, in this connection, my essay “Ahmadinejad’s Demons,” *New Republic* (April 24, 2006).

Books

Iran via the UN Security Council. It was thus that he was brimming with confidence as he came to New York: “You see, 118 countries [the Non-Aligned Movement] have specifically supported Iran’s nuclear program. That’s eliminated the excuse that four or five countries speak for the ‘international community.’” Even when it turned out that Michael Moore could not be reached, Ahmadinejad’s good mood remained undisturbed. Others stepped in to provide a stage: Columbia University and the Council on Foreign Relations. They reinforced the triumphalism that reminded David Ignatius of Khomeini and his “America cannot do a damn thing” slogan.

But Ahmadinejad’s self-confidence is based on the premise that he can continue to act as global populist: a kind of Arafat with a Mao look. He is obsessed by the idea that the greater part of both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds should admire, or at least accept, Iran as the avant-garde of a movement of liberation. He needs no carrots but evidently does need applause. If one would call him out — in the Islamic world, in the non-aligned movement, at the UN — his veneer of sanctity would be destroyed. America “cannot do a damn thing” only so long as it avoids the ideological struggle with Khomeinism and conflict with its traditional European allies.

“The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides.” Mark Bowden uses this phrase from Philip Roth as the epigraph for his text. In 1980, nobody knew whether the hostage crisis would be quietly resolved or end in catastrophe. Today, nobody knows whether the nuclear conflict with Iran will be resolved or end in cat-

astrophe. Twenty-five years from now will we be reading a sequel to the Bowden volume: a sequel laying out the confusions and insufficiencies of American policy vis-à-vis Khomeini’s most loyal student?

