

## Book Review

### GUESTS OF THE AYATOLLAH: THE FIRST BATTLE IN AMERICA'S WAR WITH MILITANT ISLAM

MAJOR PATRICK D. PFLAUM\*

*Now the country is run by a bunch of kids, and this is regrettable.*<sup>1</sup>

*The Iranian nation will not accept for one moment any bullying, invasion and violation of its rights.*<sup>2</sup>

#### I. Introduction

It was an otherwise typical morning on 4 November 1979 at the American Embassy in Tehran, the capital city of Iran.<sup>3</sup> State Department officials, Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] officers, and members of the various branches of the Armed Forces were preparing for yet another day of work in the tumultuous country.<sup>4</sup> Despite the continuing specter of Iranian unrest, the rising tide of anger toward America, and President Jimmy Carter's prescient question to his staff in October concerning what he should do if the embassy was overrun and taken hostage, neither the embassy staff nor anyone else in the Iranian or American governments, knew what was about to happen.<sup>5</sup> A small band of revolutionaries driven by zealous idealism—mostly students from various universities in Iran calling themselves “Muslim Students Following the Imam's Line”—would incite a riot and storm the American Embassy.<sup>6</sup> This group would hold fifty-two Americans hostage for more than a year and take center stage in a global standoff between the United States and Iran.<sup>7</sup>

Compiled from an impressive collection of official government documents, first-person interviews, news coverage, personal letters, diary entries, and memoirs of the events, *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in America's War With Militant Islam*<sup>8</sup> chronicles the 444 days that these Americans were held hostage in Iran.<sup>9</sup> Although it is certainly not the first book about the Iran hostage crisis, *Guests of the Ayatollah* provides a comprehensive description of the events that unfolded during those 444 days.<sup>10</sup> While the book is lengthy and laden with the author's palpable disdain for the Iranians involved in the incident, *Guests of the Ayatollah* is a superb account of the crisis and provides valuable insight into the experiences of the hostages, the mindset of the extreme Islamic fundamentalists responsible for the seizing them, and the difficulties in diplomatic dealings with a country with such a militant Islamic faction. Published at a time when Iran is making headlines for its tough talk, its bid to pursue nuclear technology, and its continued religious extremism, Mark Bowden's timing is impeccable.<sup>11</sup>

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\* Judge Advocate, U.S. Army. Presently assigned as a student, 55th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

<sup>1</sup> MARK BOWDEN, GUESTS OF THE AYATOLLAH: THE FIRST BATTLE IN AMERICA'S WAR WITH MILITANT ISLAM 372 (2006) (quoting former Iranian Prime Minister Mehdi Barzagan during the hostage crisis).

<sup>2</sup> Dafna Linzer, *Iran Defies Deadline on Nuclear Program; U.S. to Press U.N. to Impose Sanctions*, WASH. POST, Sept. 1, 2006, at A1 (quoting current Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2006).

<sup>3</sup> BOWDEN, *supra* note 1, at 16–27.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 9–13.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 643–56.

<sup>10</sup> The *Source Notes* indicate the author relied on fifty books, publications, and film documentaries. *See id.* at 643–46. The crisis was also the subject of two books in 2004. *See* DAVID R. FARBER, TAKEN HOSTAGE: THE HOSTAGE CRISIS AND AMERICA'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH RADICAL ISLAM (2004); DAVID HARRIS, THE CRISIS: THE PRESIDENT, THE PROPHET, AND THE SHAH—1979 AND THE COMING OF RADICAL ISLAM (2004).

<sup>11</sup> *See, e.g., Ahmadinejad Calls for University Purge*, CNN, Sept. 5, 2006, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/09/05/iran.universities.ap/index.html>; Linzer, *supra* note 2, at A1; *Iran President Refuses to Budge*, CNN, Sept. 1, 2006, <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/meast/09/01/iran.deadline/index.html>; Molly Moore & Thomas E. Ricks, *Iranian Leader Warns U.S. of Reprisal; Khamenei Is Defiant Ahead of U.N. Report*, WASH. POST, Apr. 27, 2006, at A1.

## II. Two Governments, an Ayatollah, Sixty-Six Hostages, and Their Captors

Touted as a “master of narrative journalism,”<sup>12</sup> author Mark Bowden covers every imaginable aspect of the crisis between 4 November 1979 and 21 January 1981, describing the actions, thoughts, and emotions of the hostages, their families, the captors, the Iranian leadership, and many in the United States government. The comprehensive approach of *Guests of the Ayatollah* is the most remarkable aspect of this book. The author’s purpose is stated clearly at outset—he is seeking to explain why the crisis happened and why it unfolded as it did.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, Bowden is quite successful. Through impressive research and a journalist’s touch, he artfully explores the causes of the embassy invasion, the plight of the hostages, the personality of the captors, the nature of their cause, and the struggle to resolve the crisis and bring the hostages home safely.

The volume of sources the author consulted is significant and an indicator of the overall quality of this work. Most commendable, perhaps, are his efforts to find and interview the Iranian actors in the saga. Mark Bowden very easily could have relied on previously published materials and interviews with those hostages still living; however, he appears to have made a significant effort to gather material from those directly involved in the crisis. As a result of this effort, *Guests of the Ayatollah* includes material from interviews with at least twenty-one Iranians.<sup>14</sup> Thanks to the quality of the research, *Guests of the Ayatollah* effectively explains the root causes of the rift between Iran and the United States, the motives behind the embassy seizure, and the myriad of factors that led to the standoff between the United States and Iran. What emerges is the United States striking inability to anticipate such an event. According to the author, “In retrospect, it was all too predictable.”<sup>15</sup> Bowden describes the almost negligent failure of those in the United States government to grasp the unrest in Iran, the threat to the embassy, and the need for caution.<sup>16</sup> He correctly asks, “[H]ow could they have been so blind?”<sup>17</sup>

Predictably, the focus of *Guests of the Ayatollah* is on the hostages, and the author’s goal—“reconstruct[ing] their experiences”—is artfully achieved.<sup>18</sup> When anger and scorn failed to dissuade the overwhelming mass of invaders,<sup>19</sup> the Americans at the embassy quickly found themselves at the mercy of their captors, facing interrogations, assaults, threats, mock executions, discomfort, injury, isolation, boredom, and illness.<sup>20</sup> Bowden’s vivid description of their ordeal is captivating. Using graphic descriptions and even a bit of humor, the author conveys the appalling story of these hostages with tremendous power.<sup>21</sup>

In describing the hostages’ experiences, the author colorfully emphasizes the naiveté of their student captors. The hostages had the upper-hand in nearly all of the interrogations and were often shocked at the ineptitude of the Iranians they encountered.<sup>22</sup> Though unable to escape, the hostages were able to resist interrogations, steal weapons, hide radios,

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<sup>12</sup> Linda Robinson, *The Fugitive*, N.Y. TIMES, June 17, 2001, sec. 7, at 18 (reviewing Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World’s Greatest Outlaw (2001)* (book review)). Mark Bowden’s other books include *Our Finest Day* (2002), *Finders Keepers* (2002), *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (1999), *Bringing the Heat* (1994), and *Doctor Dealer* (1987).

<sup>13</sup> BOWDEN, *supra* note 1, at 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 644. Conspicuously absent, though, is an interview with current Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. After his election in June 2005, several former hostages identified President Ahmadinejad as one of their captors. See *5 Americans Say Iran’s New Chief Was ’79 Captor*, N.Y. TIMES, June 30, 2005, at A6. Although President Ahmadinejad denies involvement, Bowden concludes that “Ahmadinejad was one of the central players in the group that seized the embassy and held hostages.” BOWDEN, *supra* note 1, at 615.

<sup>15</sup> BOWDEN, *supra* note 1, at 4.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the CIA cell at the embassy had only three officers, none of whom spoke Farsi. *Id.* at 17. In addition, it can be argued that the embassy should have been closed prior to admitting the Shah into the United States, a move many knew would be unpopular in Iran. *Id.* at 190, 213–14.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 313 (summarizing the thoughts of hostage John W. Limbert Jr., an embassy official).

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 597 (stating, “My goal was to reconstruct their experience as they lived it.”).

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 32 (quoting hostage Barry Rosen as saying to the invaders, “You have no right to set foot in here, any of you. You are violating diplomatic immunity. It is totally illegal.”).

<sup>20</sup> See *id.* at 235, 282–83, 347–51, 383–84, 603.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 320 (describing the actions of Marine Sergeant Billy Gallegos during an interrogation).

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 312.

effectively communicate, tease the guards openly, and demand comforts.<sup>23</sup> By contrasting the naïve zealotry of the captors with their world-savvy hostages, the author makes the injustice of the hostage crisis readily apparent.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, *Guests of the Ayatollah* describes the thoughts and actions of yet another hostage of the crisis. President Carter lost the 1980 election to President Ronald Reagan in large part because of the crisis and the failed Delta Force rescue mission in April 1980, and he is an easy scapegoat.<sup>25</sup> Mark Bowden, however, effectively explains the complexity of the situation that President Carter faced, the grave consequences of his many options, and the vigor of the proponents and opponents of each option. In negotiating with a country like Iran at this point in their history, one can only commiserate with President Carter when he said, “My political future might well be determined by irrational people on the other side of the world over whom I have no control.”<sup>26</sup> While President Carter’s patience, willingness to delay military action until all other options were exhausted, and willingness to bargain with the leadership of Iran ultimately made him look weak, especially when compared with the fiery rhetoric of President Reagan, he was ultimately successful and able to secure the safe return of all of the hostages.<sup>27</sup> All in all, the author’s portrayal of President Carter is remarkably fair.

### III. Negative Aspects of *Guests of the Ayatollah*

Despite these highlights, a few issues detracted from the overall value of the *Guests of the Ayatollah*. Mark Bowden is a journalist, and this book appears to be intended to be a good read rather than a strictly historical text.<sup>28</sup> His use of quotes and his citation format severely limit the scholarly value of this book. Bowden selected an endnote format and includes in each endnote a list of the sources from which his passages originated. This style makes it extraordinarily difficult to discern the source of many of the quotations. In numerous instances throughout the book, the author reports an exchange of dialogue using quotations, and many times this dialogue is reconstructed from interviews and memoirs.<sup>29</sup> By using quotes without direct citations, the reader frequently has to wonder whether a particular quote is what was actually said, what an individual remembers being said, or what the author has concluded was said based on his research.<sup>30</sup> As such, the scholarly value of the text is limited.

Mark Bowden also sacrifices some credibility and deflates some of the power of this story in the epilogue. The last section of the book provides additional information about several important individuals after the crisis concluded. However, in three chapters titled, *The Land of the Bordbari*, *The Gerogan-Girha*, and *Yeah George Bush!*, the author almost seems to be trying to promote anti-Iranian sentiment. In *The Land of the Bordbari*, Bowden describes his trip to Iran and provides his assessment on the present state of affairs in an effort to discern whether the 1979 revolution was successful.<sup>31</sup> Addressing infrastructure, traffic, governance, population, and the hostage crisis itself, Bowden paints a dim view of the present state of Iran.<sup>32</sup> While the purpose of this chapter in the epilogue is clear, it unfortunately comes across as an irrelevant diatribe.

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<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 207, 321, 490, 507, 525, 530 (describing the playful theft of a guard’s six-shooter, the use of a secret stolen radio, the passing of notes between hostages, the colorful names that some Marines called their captors, hostage Kathryn Koob’s demand for undergarments, and the hostages’ demands to go outside).

<sup>24</sup> *See, e.g., id.* at 305, 312. Bowden’s account of a conversation between hostage Bill Daugherty and Nilufar Ebtekar, a female English-speaking revolutionary, is remarkable. *See id.* at 310; *see generally id.* at 160-61, 246 (providing background information on Ebtekar).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 464, 596.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 556.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 563. On the day after President Reagan’s inauguration, President Carter stated the following: “Our nation acted as a great nation ought to act, not only with justified outrage at a despicable and illegal act, not only with courage and conviction, but with constant purpose and constant restraint in the face of severe provocation.” Art Harris, *Jimmy Carter Ends His Presidency with a Flurry and a Flourish; Coming Home to Plains, Graciously*, WASH. POST, Jan. 21, 1981, at A28.

<sup>28</sup> *See Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in America’s War with Militant Islam* Webpage, [http://www.theguestsoftheayatollah.com/grove\\_atlantic\\_authorbio.html](http://www.theguestsoftheayatollah.com/grove_atlantic_authorbio.html) (last visited Sept. 17, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> *See, e.g., BOWDEN, supra* note 1, at 319, 652 (providing an example of dialogue that is apparently reconstructed from a discussion among Marines). *See generally id.* at 647–56 (containing the references for the various quotes used throughout the book).

<sup>30</sup> This technique is apparently a characteristic of this author’s writing and was praised by a reviewer of another one of his books. *See* Robinson, *supra* note 12 (reviewing *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World’s Greatest Outlaw*).

<sup>31</sup> BOWDEN, *supra* note 1, at 605.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

In *The Gerogan-Girha*, Mark Bowden describes his interviews with several key individuals involved in the seizure of the embassy.<sup>33</sup> The point of this chapter is to report the present feelings about the event in Iran.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, Bowden's manner appears confrontational, and he seems to be bragging about his verbal sparring matches with several of the Iranians he interviewed.<sup>35</sup> In the final chapter, the author concludes by recounting a story about his recent visit to the grounds of the former American Embassy where several Iranian soldiers tasked to guard the former embassy approach him and say through a translator, "Yeah George Bush!"<sup>36</sup> The inclusion of this encounter is obviously a reflection of Bowden's own nationalism and is also of questionable relevance. Taken together, these chapters are laden with Bowden's obvious disdain for the Iranian government and those involved in the hostage crisis. While understandable, Bowden's viewpoint unfortunately detracts from the power of his description of the hostage crisis and the weight that the incident has on its own merits. Throughout the bulk of the text, the author provides numerous examples of irony, naiveté, and hypocrisy during the course of the ordeal, enabling readers to divine the injustice and criminality of this incident without Bowden's personal commentary at the end. By so bluntly stating his negative personal opinions about the country and the cause behind the embassy takeover in an epilogue, the author compromises the overall value of his work and reveals that his chronicle may not be as objective as it may initially appear.

#### IV. Importance for the Global War on Terror

Despite these shortcomings, Bowden's re-telling of this saga provides several lessons at a time when the United States finds itself in nearly constant conflict with extreme Islamic fundamentalism. First, *Guests of the Ayatollah* provides remarkable insight into the blind zealotry and internal discord of one extreme Islamic fundamentalist movement. An understanding of the power of these forces is critical to dealings between the United States, Iran, and other Islamic countries. *Guests of the Ayatollah* demonstrates that, in some cases, the hatred against the United States is based on propaganda and misinformation, and these opinions are not easily changed.<sup>37</sup> Second, this book demonstrates the vital role of special operations forces in the modern world. During the crisis, the only real military option for President Carter was a special operations rescue mission, and the United States lacked capabilities on par with British and German special operation commands.<sup>38</sup> Despite extensive planning and rehearsal, the failure of the rescue mission tied President Carter's hands diplomatically and gave Iran a massive morale windfall.<sup>39</sup>

Third, *Guests of the Ayatollah* shows that restraint and diplomacy are still effective means of resolving issues of this magnitude. Although the United States made many painful concessions to resolve the crisis, President Carter's measured approach ultimately worked and not one hostage was killed.<sup>40</sup> Fourth, Bowden's work offers a compelling case study of human behavior in captivity. Servicemembers can benefit from an understanding of not just how one might behave when in the hands of unpredictable captors, but also how United States detainees might think and behave. Finally, Bowden's thorough coverage of the crisis allows a critical analysis of the actions of President Carter, embassy chargé d'affaires Bruce Laingen, Delta Force commander Colonel James Beckwith, and the leadership of Iran. This was indeed a crisis, with tremendously complex issues and numerous lives at stake. Leaders at all levels confronted uncertainty, risk, and failure throughout the ordeal. By enabling the reader to study the thoughts and actions of the various players in the crisis, *Guests of the Ayatollah* offers a bounty of lessons.

#### V. Conclusion

Mark Bowden's *Guests of the Ayatollah* is not the first study of this event and with the twenty-seventh anniversary of the hostage crisis approaching, one might wonder why the author chose to revisit an incident that occurred so long ago. The title itself provides that answer—it was America's first battle against militant Islam; a war that continues today. In this first

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<sup>33</sup> See *id.* at 615–31. "Gerogan-Girha" is the Farsi term for "hostage takers." *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> See *id.* at 616.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 618.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 636–37.

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 305, 312, 399, 501.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 113.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 479, 550.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 576–77, 595.

battle, America found itself surprised, unprepared, and naïve in dealing with Iran. As the United States continues to face conflict with Islamic fundamentalism, *Guests of the Ayatollah* is a vivid documentary of that first battle. Throughout the book, the author provides valuable insight into the mindset of the extreme Islamic fundamentalists responsible for the seizure of the embassy and the difficulties in dealing with militant Islam, either in true battle or in diplomacy. While the book is more journalistic than scholarly and is colored by the author's obvious feelings about the captors and their cause, *Guests of the Ayatollah* is a compelling chronicle of the hostages' 444 days and the challenges America faced in confronting the crisis. As Iran continues to appear in headlines around the globe, *Guests of the Ayatollah* is truly a worthwhile and timely read.