

AAD/ICJS Diplomacy & Revolution Conference

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Of course Thomas Jefferson himself witnessed popular discontent and political upheaval both at home in America and abroad in France. More than anyone, he knew the limits of our ability to understand and predict such events. In the midst of turmoil, any human being with his limited facilities – even *homo diplomaticus* – will not always get it right.

I think Jefferson also appreciated the value in diplomacy of patience, modest expectations, and forbearance: the exact qualities we have needed and still desperately need in the case of Iran. Samuel Beckett said it best: On the first page of *Westward Ho*, he wrote, “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” The Near East Bureau of the State Department, which must deal every day with simmering disasters from Morocco to Oman (and from MacDill to Capitol Hill) often says something similar if less eloquent: “Well, it wasn’t as bad as it could have been.”

For the last 30 years our relations with Iran have been a catastrophe. Since 1979 we and the Iranians have glared and hissed at each other across an abyss. We are “world arrogance”; they are charter members of the axis of evil. At the great institution where I teach, I sometimes must explain that “Iranian threat” is –

like “damn Yankees”, actually two words. 33 years of chest thumping on both sides has produced nothing but some very sore chests.

Recently the war drums have gotten louder. There is talk of air strikes, “bunker busters”, “windows of vulnerability,” and closing shipping lanes. I would like to believe that this talk is all hot air, but its sheer volume and quantity is worrying.

It seems like a long time ago, but in December 2011 reports said that the Iranians had disabled an American drone aircraft near the Iranian-Afghan border. If true, I would ask the Iranians to share their technology so that we could silence the droners in this country, particularly those who drone on endlessly about “Iranian threats”, “ticking clocks”, and “changing Iranian behavior”. They would be doing us a big favor.

As diplomats in the midst of turmoil, what is our role? Of course by nature we are cautious, skeptical, and discreet. In October 1979 President Carter, pondering whether to admit the deposed Shah of Iran to the U.S. for medical treatment, asked Secretary of State Vance, “What do our embassy people say?” Vance replied, “They have repeatedly (sigh) advised us that doing so would put them in ‘serious jeopardy’”. All of us here will recognize “serious jeopardy” as diplospeak from polite and discreet Foreign Service Officers for, in plain English, “If you do it, we are all road kill”.

If you read the record of Tehran embassy reporting from the decades before 1979, you will find that much of it is very insightful and goes directly against the official, rosy picture of Iranian conditions. Some of the best came from my colleague Bruce Laingen in July 1979. Asked “should we admit the Shah to the U.S.?” Bruce’s reply was eloquent and free of diplospeak. He said that it might be the right thing to do some time in the future, but if you did it while Iran remained in turmoil three things would happen.

1. The moderate government of PM Bazargan and his nationalists would collapse.
2. Any chance of normal U.S. relations with the new revolutionary Iran would disappear.
3. You could kiss good-bye to any U.S. mission in Iran.

Who listened? Who cared? Three months later they did it anyway, and everything Bruce predicted came true. Frankly, we were lucky to get out of it alive.

So what does this mean for practitioners today? What is their role when presidents-for-life are running for the exits? I will end with two suggestions.

First, remain skeptical. Let us not fool ourselves. Let us not fall victim to wishful thinking either about an old regime or a new. In Iran we failed to see the revolution coming, to appreciate its fury, or to see the harsh direction it was

going. One simple statistic should have warned us about change: by 1978, both urbanization and literacy in Iran had passed 50 per cent. Today simple demographics are also telling us that days of the old, authoritarians are numbered.

As for the changes happening today in the region, we should probably not be dancing in the streets. Not yet anyway. Perhaps our reaction should be, in the words of W.S. Gilbert, “modified rapture.” We don’t know where all these changes will lead, but we should expect difficult times both for us and our open-minded friends in the Middle East. Will things be better in Egypt? I hope so, but I’m not convinced. Recently an Islamist student group successively pressured authorities to block the screening of that wonderful, Oscar-winning Iranian film “Separation” at Cairo University. Why? Because, they said, it promoted “Shia ideas”. Such an incident may mean nothing. But it could also be a sign of an intolerant and difficult future for post-Mubarak Egypt and our friends there.

Second, practitioners should appreciate the power of the ghosts of history.

In the interest of full disclosure I should say that I am by training a historian. I have no grand theory of diplomacy. But like it or not in all our relationships we must deal with the ghosts in the room. In the case of Iran, these ghosts include Mosaddegh, Kim Roosevelt, Richard Helms, Morgan Shuster, the AIOC, and even the infamous 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay. I am sure these ghosts exist in

every relationship. If we ignore them, they will still haunt us as they did in November 1979. Somewhere in our profession, we need to create room for a group of “ghost busters” who, like Bill Murray and Dan Ackroyd in the film, will help us recognize the ghosts and put them in their proper place.