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Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and Americas First Encounter with Radical Islam

David Farber
Princeton University Press (Sep 7, 2004)
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The 1970s was not really the era of happy disco dancers portrayed in the media. It was a decade in which people were buffeted by unprecedented gasoline and energy shortages, a “stagflated” economy of high prices, and lost jobs. None of the decade’s three presidents—Nixon, Ford, and Carter—earned much public credibility: one failed to complete his term, and the other two were not reelected. The Iran Hostage Crisis, which lasted 444 days—from November 4, 1979 through January 20, 1981—was the final unraveling of the bleak seventies.

The author, an historian at Temple University and an authority on the 1960s, who has written or edited such respected books as *The Columbia Guide to America in the 196*0s*; *Chicago ’68* ; *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 196*0s*; and *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, presents an illuminating overview of the hostage crisis. Unlike earlier works, which were often personal accounts by the hostages or by members of the Carter administration, this book presents an historical overview of the roots of the crisis and its implications for American society. More important, Farber interprets the crisis as a struggle between Islamic fundamentalists and the West, rather than a cold war fight between American democracy and Soviet communism.

During the late 1970s, Iranian students were turning in large numbers to the Islamic fundamentalism of the Ayatollah Khomeini, and turning away from the much- hated Shah of Iran, who was installed by the United States in 1953 to ensure that communism would be stopped and cheap oil would flow to the West. Farber is especially good at showing how Iranian citizens lived in fear of the Shah’s secret police and resented his enormous wealth, which he shared only with his followers. The rise of fundamental Islam, the author concludes, was an inevitable result of the Shah’s oppression.

Although Farber devotes only about fifty pages to the actual hostage taking, his account is insightful. He concisely describes how the Khomeini government was originally too weak to control the students, but after he solidified his power, he used the students to embarrass President Carter. Khomeini finally released the hostages because he no longer needed them to punish the president for allowing the Shah to receive medical attention, shortly before his death, in the United States. The hostages were released soon after Ronald Reagan was inaugurated.

Readers who want to explore the causes of the current war on terrorism should read this cogent recounting of the hostage crisis of the 1970s. Unlike earlier accounts, which were written before September 11, 2001, Farber’s work forcefully demonstrates that the United States can no longer ignore the popularity of fundamental Islam in Muslim nations or the all-too-widespread contempt for American democracy in these countries.

KARL HELICHER (August 18, 2009)

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