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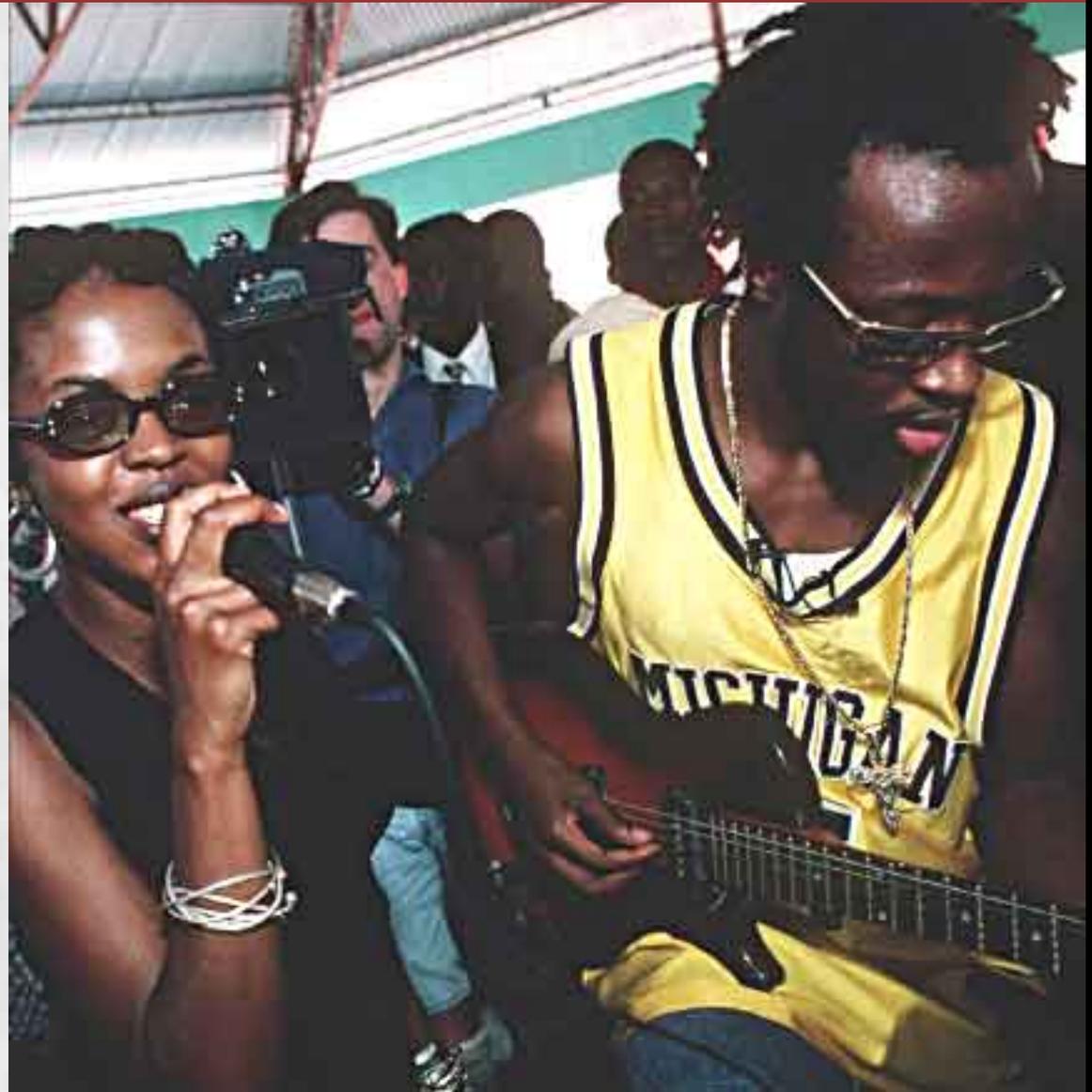
**Introducing a New Section of AQ:
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Anthropological Voices in Contemporary Public Debates

Volume 76 Number 4 Fall 2003

November 15, 2003

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The Fugees (l-r: Lauryn Hill, Wyclef Jean) perform with local school children in the La Saline section of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, April 1997. Photo by Tomas Muscionico (Contact Press Images).

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SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

Iran and the United States: Postmodern Culture Conflict in Action¹

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The Cultural Discourse of Conflict

Fifty years ago the study of culture conflict for anthropologists was limited to peoples who lived in close proximity to each other. The most frequent subjects of study were factions of the same society. Even in more recent times, studies of conflict and violence seem restricted to internal divisiveness within nations rather than between nations (cf. Gluckman 1959, Segal and Beals 1960, Levine 1961, Dahrendorf 1968). International conflict was largely left to the purview of political scientists.

After World War II, no one could have predicted that the United States would eventually be involved in conflicts in places as remote from North America as Lebanon, Korea, Somalia and Vietnam. These conflicts were relatively short lived, and were limited military operations.

One engagement seems to have a different character than all of these others—this is the American engagement with Iran. It is now the longest stand-off the United States has ever had with another nation, with the possible exception of Cuba and North Korea. Even during the Cold War era, the United States maintained diplomatic, cultural and economic relations with Russia and other communist states. The engagement with Iran is important and distinctive for another reason—

its initial stages arguably constituted the opening volleys in what promises to be an extended conflict with oppositional forces throughout the Islamic world. In this paper, I will analyze the conflict between Iran and the U.S. and suggest a model for an approach to future encounters between nations in the coming decades of our increasingly shrinking world.

Post-Modern Conflict

In the wake of the American invasion of Iraq in March, 2003, the United States has had renewed conflict with Iran. Many commentators asked “Is Iran next?” Representatives of the Bush administration developed a whole series of reasons why the government of Iran should undergo “regime change” such as had taken place in Iraq. Iran was accused of harboring terrorists, of developing nuclear weapons and of masterminding attacks on American facilities in other countries. These accusations remain unsubstantiated at this writing.

Iran continues to accuse the United States of trying to undermine its governmental structures, directly supporting dissident elements inside and outside the country. These accusations too remain largely unsubstantiated.

This state of affairs leads to the conclusion that the American conflict with Iran as it continues today is a true postmodern culture conflict. It centers not on substantive differences or real conflict, but rather on symbolic discourse. In this discourse both nations construct the “other” to fit an idealized picture of an enemy. The process is reminiscent of the Cold War in its processes of mutual demonization, but it differs from the Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union in a number of significant respects.

First, unlike the situation of the Cold War, Iran and the United States hold little or no immediate danger for each other. Both try to emphasize the danger of their opponents, but on close examination, these constructed threats have little or no substance.

Second, the mutual opposition between the two nations exists at an abstract, governmental level, but is not generally shared by the populations of the two nations. Both nations maintain that their quarrel is not with the people of the other nation, but with the “government.”

Third, the demonization of the “government” in both cases is not substantive, but rather symbolic, and shifting. It sometimes applies to individuals, such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini or President George W. Bush, and sometimes to vague unspecified forces within the two governments. This is revealed in statements such as “Iran supports terrorism,” or “America oppresses the Gulf region.”

Fourth, officials of the two nations do not talk directly to each other. Most communication is carried out through back-channels, or primarily through the media. This process of indirect discourse between nations is endemic in today's world, but it is virtually the only means of communication between the United States and Iran.

Fifth, the relationship between the United States and Iran is unique in the world. Virtually no other pair of nations shares this strange pattern of non-communication.² Iran has normal relations with every other nation on earth, as does the United States. It is only with each other that they share this unusual disjunction.

Finally, the differences are structurally irresolvable, since both sides demand that the other conform to their cultural sensibilities. The paradox is profound, since both nations operate with a functioning constitution that is assiduously followed by their respective national leaders.

Anthropological Insight

The problem is profoundly in need of anthropological insight, in that an understanding of the dynamics of both cultures is necessary in order to comprehend the nature and persistence of the conflict. One difficulty lies in the ways that both societies deal with dissention.

Laura Nader has been instrumental in pointing out discrepancies between American models of conflict resolution and native models of social justice. In a series of papers exploring this theme, she has shown that "Harmony Coerced is Freedom Denied" to quote the title of one of the more popular renditions of her thesis (Nader 2001; see also Nader 1997, 2002a: Chapter 3, 2002b). Her thesis of coercive harmony suggests that the United States has developed a culture in which disharmony is seen as something that needs to be controlled. When there are genuine social injustices, however "coercive harmony can stifle dissent for a while. But if dissent is too tightly bottled up, it will explode" (Nader 2001: B13). Nader's specific critique was developed as a critique of the practice of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), which has become a precondition for receipt of American aid abroad (Nader 2002a, 2002b), but it is generalizable to overall American foreign policy practice.

Iran is not free of its own difficulties in conflict resolution. Iranians are adverse to compromise, seeing it as weakness and loss of honor (cf. Beeman 1987). In a dispute, parties can remain estranged for years until someone mediates the dispute. During this period, the parties remain hostile. This withdrawal, hostility and need for mediation exists at the interpersonal level, and can extend to international relations (cf. Bateson, et. al 1977, Beeman 1976).

Moreover, in Islamic terms, compromise with evil is not only impossible, but blasphemous. In Islam, sincere believers must “promote the right, and resist the wrong.” If a force in the world is identified as corrupting, it must be opposed.

For Iran, Iraq, the Taliban of Afghanistan, and terrorist organizations such as Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda, the United States became the “Great Satan,” to borrow Iran’s epithet. The Middle Eastern oppositionists saw America as an external illegitimate force that continually strove to destroy the pure, internal core of the Islamic World. It was also seen as the inheritor of the mantle of colonialism carried out earlier in the 20th Century by Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union.

For the United States, the resistant forces of the Middle East took on a demonic form—that of the “crazy outlaw” nations and terrorist groups whose activities were illegal, unpredictable, and irrational. Every president from Ronald Regan to George W. Bush vilified these forces. In Nader’s terminology, they represented disharmony in an extreme form, because they threatened the international social and political order.

Each side’s mythology of itself and its role in world affairs complimented this “mythology of the other.” All of the Middle Eastern forces counted their efforts against the United States as proof of modern success in confronting a formidable enemy. For Iran this was the Revolution of 1978-79 and the subsequent 444 day hostage crisis. For Iraq, it was the Gulf war. For Osama bin Laden and other terrorist leaders, it was a series of aggressive attacks against the United States. These included bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001 on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and Pentagon in Washington. These groups thus become not just revolutionary oppositionists; they become the guardians of justice and equity for the people of the world.

For the United States, a more complex structure which I term below the “U.S. Foreign Policy Myth” held sway. As I will explain below, this myth sees the “normal world” as a body of nation-states arranged in a dichotomous structure—for or against the United States and its interests. The oppositional forces of the Middle East confound this model. The United States therefore places them in to a residual category, and tries to eliminate them—to purify the world, as it were. The United States therefore becomes not just the guardian of democracy or freedom, but of world order.

These mythologies became ideological filters for transmission (or, more accurately, non-transmission) of messages between the two cultural worlds. Such filtering might be sufficient to create the kind of abortive understanding that

took place between the two nations with such relentless regularity. However, the ideological problems were reinforced by a communicational structure that was equally conducive to reinforcing the mutual negative images both nations held of each other.

A Problem of Discourse

The communicational problems can be thought of as problems of mutual discourse which became more and more severe as time went on. The United States and all of the Middle Eastern opposition forces mentioned above have operated with different, often contradictory notions of how discourse on an international level should be managed. This often caused drastic misreadings of the content of communication between the two cultural worlds, and mutual accusations of deviousness, insincerity and bad faith.

The formal study of discourse has seen considerable growth during the past two decades. Discourse analysts posit a set of implicit contextual agreements between parties which allow face-to-face conversation to take place in an unimpeded manner. Critical theorists such as Bourdieu, Derrida and Baudrillard have extended the term discourse to include the culturally contextualized rhetorical practices of governments, scholarly institutions and commercial business. The theoretical relevance of discourse studies for this problem will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, but I wish to underscore here the need to understand the contextual factors which underlie disturbed discourse as a key to explaining.

The United States government is bureaucratically geared to speaking to foreign powers using a set of communicative routines and principles inherited from eighteenth and nineteenth century European diplomatic practice. The practices emphasize face-to-face communication between elite governmental officials at equivalent levels (head of state to head of state, secretary or minister of foreign affairs to secretary or minister of foreign affairs, etc.). Special protocol rules apply for communication between persons who are of non-equivalent hierarchical position. These principles thus imply a universal hierarchy of bureaucracy, and a universal set of understandings about management of discourse parameters within that hierarchy. The routines are widely used because they are implicitly accepted by the international community who learned them from colonial powers.

These traditional practices have been modified by modern technology; there is increasingly greater immediacy of physical and verbal contact every day through electronic communication, world-wide telephone service, courier services and high-speed travel. An additional channel of communication is provid-

ed through satellite television transmission, international radio, and electronic transmission of information for publication in newspapers and periodicals.

Much energy has been devoted to protecting the basic structure of the earlier forms of government-to-government communication in the face of this new technology. New technology is often seen as a threat to diplomatic action. Thus substantive discourse between members of the international foreign policy community must be protected from the corruption of media reporting, and from the threat of fast and easy electronic information gathering and transmission. This perceived threat has given rise to a new profession: that of the media manager who attempts to preserve a controlled construction of events as they are transmitted, reported and re-enacted through these new communication forms. Typically in most international relations dealings both parties not only decide substantive issues, but also the ideal manner in which their dealings will be transmitted to outsiders. Bad faith is attributed to either party who departs intentionally from the preconceived scenario.

The U.S.-Middle Eastern communication situation was complicated by this set of factors. After the fall of the Shah in Iran, for example, the new revolutionary government had no practice in the forms of communication used in international relations by the United States and most of the foreign community. Moreover, it had a highly original view of the ways in which new forms of communications technology could be used in statecraft and international relations, not at all in accord with standard U.S. government practice.

Iranian leaders, for their part, saw no reason to accept rules for international diplomacy set down by the United States or any other nation. Angered by what they perceived as arrogance, and deeply suspicious of American motives, they vigorously asserted that they would pursue an "Islamic response" to international relations, which was "neither East nor West."

Iranian leaders puzzled and frustrated Americans who had to deal with them. They complained bitterly that the Iranians would "not play by the rules." The situation grew especially difficult during the hostage crisis of 1979-80 when American officials *had* to communicate with Iranian leaders in order to secure the release of the American hostages held in Tehran. It was humiliating for them to face the fact that there was often no one in Tehran willing to talk to them under any circumstances. Similar problems arose throughout the course of the lengthy Iran-Iraq conflict.

Saddam Hussein of Iraq had precisely this kind of difficulty in reading American communication structures. Having been supported by the United States in his war with Iran in 1979, he was disposed to read nuanced or equiv-

ocal messages in reaction to his inquiries about invading Kuwait as positive responses from an ally. He was as surprised by the American resistance as the United States was by his aggressive action. The result was a debilitating, continued war and a permanent rupture.

Osama bin Laden and his allies, the Taliban of Afghanistan were openly supported by the United States for almost 11 years starting in 1979 in their war with the Soviet Union. They were also surprised both by American attacks against Iraq and by the establishment of a United States military presence in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War. The United States continued to give mixed messages as it provided indirect support for the Taliban while insisting that they betray their ally, Osama bin Laden.

In the discussion below, I take the position that no person or persons can be blamed for the communicational difficulties that arose during this difficult period. The problems were *systemic*, and would have been encountered by any persons in power during this period. They were also *dynamic*, in that they reinforced themselves as the two parties tried to struggle with them. They may have been unavoidable given the course of historic events. It is nevertheless my hope that in pointing out those aspects of U.S. Iranian rhetoric which proved difficult, it may be possible to avoid similar situations in the future, or at least to adopt more productive response patterns when they occur than were adopted by either the United States or Iran.

American Myths

The “U.S. Foreign Policy Myth”³ is an extremely powerful and pervasive American belief system about the nature of foreign policy, how it is conducted, and how it affects American life. This belief system is troublesome because of the hold it has in shaping political strategy and defining “normalcy” in foreign affairs, even when it falls far from the mark in reflecting reality. At best foreign policy and military strategy based on this system of belief is ineffective. At worst it is detrimental to American interests.

The United States is not alone in espousing such a system. Indeed, virtually every nation operates in the foreign policy realm from an equally inaccurate base of beliefs. (I will deal with Iranian myths below). It is natural for this to be so. Nations, like individual human beings develop habits of thinking, often based on real short-term experience or shaped by a particularly powerful leader, which are difficult to break. When these habits are institutionalized in the bureaucracy they become especially pervasive. In this case, the U.S. for-

eign policy myth is narrowly applicable. It works fairly well when dealing with Western industrialized nations, including the Soviet Bloc. It may also have been serviceable in dealing with the rest of the world in the immediate post World War II period. However, it has become woefully outdated for dealings with the global community in the past two decades, and will become even more outdated as mankind moves into the 21st Century. As a further point of contrast, those who have memories of earlier periods in United States history will be able to see how the current belief system differs from that of previous periods.

The Five Principles of Belief

The five principles are, briefly, as follows.

1. The world consists of nation states.

It is not surprising that the United States should come to believe that the world consists entirely of nation states with basically homogeneous populations whose primary identity (and homogeneity) derives from identification with their common nationhood. The United States was, after all, the first great nation founded on this principle.

Of course, there are very few nation states in the world. One can think of a few European countries, Japan perhaps, a few of the new Pacific island states, but that is about the extent of it. The majority of the people of the world do not identify primarily with their nationhood and certainly not with the central governments that rule the nations in which they happen to live. The notion that one would sacrifice one's life for one's president or prime minister is a patent absurdity in virtually every nation on earth.

2. The dichotomous power struggle is the most important organizing principle in world politics. All other political relationships must be ranked in terms of it.

Before World War II, even the United States entertained the Wilsonian possibility of a multi-polar world structure. However, the United States, itself born in revolution, and having suffered a divisive civil war also had an underlying belief in bi-polar governmental structures. This bi-polar model has now fully asserted itself. The current government tends to structure the entire world order within this framework. It is now clear that the "Islamist" ideology has replaced the "Communist" ideology in the American world view. It is a reconstitution of the old East-West struggles of the past.

Of course, for most nations on earth, the East-West struggle is very nearly irrelevant for the conduct of everyday life, except as an enormously bothersome obstacle which they must confront at every turn. The possibility of nuclear destruction is, of course, a paramount concern for thinking people everywhere, but it is the height of bitter irony that the bulk of the people who will be destroyed and suffer in a nuclear holocaust have absolutely no interest in the ideological struggle that will be the basis for that holocaust.

Few nations would accept the American belief that all nations must eventually assign themselves to one camp or another, and some, like India, have had to work very hard to stake out an independent position.

3. Economics and power are the bases of relations between nations.

Power politics as a philosophy has been with the United States only a short time. It was articulated in an extremely effective way by Hans Morgenthau, perhaps the principal teacher of the current crop of United States politicians exercising executive power in the United States foreign policy community. Former Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger was perhaps its most celebrated practitioner.

For anthropologists of all shades it is particularly galling to see that in the United States' conduct of foreign policy, almost no attention is paid to cultural differences between nations. It is assumed that wealth and military might are universal levelers, and that little else matters. Occasionally it is recognized that religious feeling, ideology, pride, greed, or altruism may be factors in the course of human events, but such matters are often dismissed as unpredictable factors.⁴

4. Nations are ruled by small groups of elite individuals.

It is difficult to understand why the United States, with a strong internal ethic supporting democracy and broad-based, grass-roots participation in public affairs finds it so difficult to take these same broad-based processes seriously in other nations.

Yet again and again, one finds that the conduct of United States foreign policy is based on identification and support of narrow elite political structures: elite elected officials, elite dictators, and elite religious officials.

Clearly, power is thought to inhere in these narrow structures. An office is the chief sign of this power, perhaps reflecting the earlier stated belief that the world consists of nation states. Thus the United States cannot easily see underlying cultural processes which contribute to social change, or, seeing such

processes, feels them to be automatically negative in nature because they threaten the established order.⁵

5. The normal conduct of foreign policy thus consists of the elite leaders of nation states meeting in seclusion discussing matters of power and economics presumably in the context of the East-West conflict.

This final point is not a separate belief, but rather the congruence of the preceding beliefs into an image—a scenario which, in fact, describes much of the conduct of foreign policy carried out by the United States in recent years.

Normalcy

As mentioned above, the U.S. foreign policy myth is a definition of normalcy—of expectations about how actors in the world behave and are motivated to act. Nations and actors that do not fit this mold are relegated to residual cognitive categories: “irrational,” “crazy,” “criminal,” “unpredictable,” and “deviant.” These categories articulate well with the strategy of coercive harmony outlined by Nader and mentioned above (Nader 1998, 2001, 2002a, 2002b).

The United States had indeed become accustomed to pursuing serious foreign policy negotiations over economic and military conflict exclusively with other Western industrialized nation-states. “Third-world” and “developing” nations were traditionally dealt with in offhand, summary fashion. The legitimate needs and desires of the peoples of these countries, especially when they were in conflict with the recognized elite leadership structures were never a part of U.S. foreign policy considerations. Indeed, such factors were regularly ignored or seen as directly opposed to U.S. strategic interests since they were viewed as “destabilizing forces.”

The “Kissinger doctrine” in U.S. foreign policy, which still pervaded the policy community, was opposed to attempts to understand the needs of other nations, feeling that it was their job to represent their own needs to the United States. Policy was often carried out with the aid of elite leaders—plumbers—who had been co-opted through a combination of economic and military force.⁶ Indeed, until the conflict in Vietnam in the 1960’s and early 1970’s it had been possible to deal with conflict in these nations almost exclusively through co-optation, military threat or economic pressure.

The Vietnam conflict should have been a warning to Americans that the basis for international relations in the World was changing. Unfortunately, Vietnam was treated as an aberration—a defeat to be ignored and forgotten as soon as possible. The basis for U.S. involvement in the conflict was unqualified U.S. support of a dictatorial regime that was out of contact and out of favor with

its own population. That support arose from U.S. need to carry out its own foreign military strategies, based on a popular domestic political posture of containment of Communism.

Iran filled a similar role in U.S. foreign policy sphere to that of pre-conflict Vietnam. It was one of the “twin pillars” of U.S. Defense in the Persian Gulf region (the other being Saudi Arabia). In the immediate post-war period oil supplies from the Gulf region were critical for the United States, and the specter of Gulf oil falling under the domination of the Soviet Union, however unrealistic that scenario might be, was enough to justify a massive foreign policy effort aimed at shoring up friendly rulers in the region—more plumbers—who could be counted upon to carry out U.S. foreign policy with little need for U.S. officials to involve themselves in great depth with the nations in question.

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was an ideal plumber in U.S. eyes. He was restored to his throne in 1953 through the efforts of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency after a coup d’etat engineered by Mohammad Mossadeq which American officials feared would allow greater Soviet influence in Iran. Thereafter the shah became one of the United States’ chief political and military clients. He purchased billions of dollars of advanced military equipment from the United States and provided a fertile economic climate for Western investment in the Iranian economy.

The shah was an extremely clever client. The money for all of his purchases and economic improvements came from the sale of oil to Western nations, the price of which was jacked up some 400 percent in 1973 by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) largely due to the shah’s influence. Thus the United States and its allies were actually paying for economic improvement and arms purchases by Iran through the increased price of oil.

Iran’s pattern of dealing with the United States during the post-war period was a continuation of a century of similar dealings with other great powers. Iran had been in conflict with other industrialized nations—Great Britain and Imperial Russia in the 19th Century and the Great European Powers in the 20th century. However, it had always been powerless to resist either militarily or economically in any significant way. The Pahlavi shahs, like the Qajar shahs before them were alienated from their own populations. Strapped for ready cash, they cleverly decided that cooperation with Western powers and Russia in economic and military matters was far more prudent—and profitable—than defiance. They sold concessions to foreigners on almost every national resource: agricultural, industrial, mineral and commercial and transportation. In the process they became wealthy themselves.

It was possible for them to do this by establishing a very special kind of foreign relationship with the United States and other Western nations—a state of cultural insulation whereby the West was largely prevented from coming into close contact with Iranian culture and civilization. The United States, being Iran's chief ally in the West was most affected by this policy in the post-World War II years. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi insisted that all U.S. military and commercial dealings with Iran be passed through Iranian government channels. The C.I.A. was active in Iran, but could not pass reports on Iranian internal affairs back to the U.S. government of which the shah did not approve. Embassy staff members with few exceptions did not speak Persian until the period immediately following the revolution, and were, in any case, kept from meeting with the bulk of the Iranian population.⁷

The Iranian Revolution marked a dramatic watershed in this state of affairs. After a brief six-month period of secular nationalism, the government was taken over by religious forces. The secular nationalists were out of power and Iran became an Islamic republic. Suddenly the rules for interaction between Iran and the United States changed. Iran's leaders adopted an independent set of international relations goals, summed up in the phrase "neither East nor West." They expressed the desire to establish a true Islamic Republic based on religious law. They became deeply suspicious of U.S. motives, fearing that, as in 1953, the United States would attempt to reinstate the monarchy in order to regain the economic benefits enjoyed during the reign of the shah.

More disturbing for American politicians was the attitude of the new Iranian leaders. They assumed an air of moral superiority, and were not interested in cooperation with Western nations on Western terms. Moreover, they seemed comfortable committing acts which outraged the United States with no apparent thought as to the possible consequences. This kind of behavior was inexplicable for most Americans.

To add to the difficulty, in the immediate post-Revolutionary period, the Iranian leaders were not in full control of their own nation. Though identified by U.S. policy makers as elites, they had very little capacity for independent action on the foreign policy scene. As will be seen below, their ability to act vis-à-vis the United States was especially limited.

In short, post-Revolutionary Iran violated every tenet of the U.S. policy myth. Iran looked like a nation-state, but its political structure was, both under the shah and today, far more tenuous than that of any Western nation. After the revolution it was not concerned with the East-West struggle, preferring to reject both sides. Its national concerns transcended matters of military and economic

power; it was often far more concerned about questions of ideology, morality and religious sensibility. Its elites were and continue to be informal power brokers and balancers of opinion rather than powerful actors able to enforce their will directly on the population. Moreover they have had to be extremely careful about contact with foreign powers, since their offices do not protect them from political attack as a result of such contact.

All of this has given U.S. leaders fits. Iran does not conform to the set model of international behavior with which the foreign policy community is prepared to operate. As a result the Iranians are “crazy outlaws.”

Iranian Myths

For American citizens one of the most difficult aspects of the Iranian Revolution was comprehending the blanket condemnation leveled against the United States by Iranian officials and revolutionary leaders. The vituperative, accusatory rhetoric seemed to be aimed at indicting all U.S. leaders since World War II for unacceptable interference in Iranian internal affairs, and destruction of the Iranian culture and economy.

For most Americans it seems incredible that such a blanket condemnation of the United States could have any substance in fact. Didn't the United States want to help Iran develop in the 1960's and 1970's? Weren't American industrial firms invited by the Iranian government to engage in joint economic ventures for the ostensible benefit of the Iranian people? Wasn't the U.S. interest in developing Iran's military strength during this period also in Iran's best interests? From an American standpoint it seems that the United States could be accused of no worse than wanting to make an honest dollar in a fertile market.

In the light of disinterested hindsight, however, it seems that there was indeed real justification for the complaints of Iran's revolutionary leaders. At the time of the revolution, Iran was left with a demoralized population, an economy sprawling and out of control, and a repressive, autocratic government that allowed its citizens no influence whatsoever in policies that affected them directly—not even the right to complain.

But, by the assessment of its own members, a far more serious development had taken place in Iranian society: the civilization had lost its spiritual core. It had become poisoned—obsessed with materialism and the acquisition of money and consumer goods. For pious Iranians, hardships can be endured with the help of one's family and social network; and through faith, *tavakkol*, and ulti-

mate reliance on the will of God. But to lose one's own sense of inner self—to be a slave to the material world is to be utterly lost.

Understanding why Iranians came to feel this way about themselves, and why the United States came to be blamed for causing this state requires a close analysis of Iranian cultural and ideological structures. Iranian ideology was expressed during the revolution and after in religious terms.

However, using “religion” or “religious fervor” as a label for Iranian opposition to the United States is far too simplistic. Anti-American feeling was widespread during and after the revolution, and was not confined to people who followed the clergy. It was also acutely felt among secularized members of the middle and upper classes, who cared not a fig for the mullahs and Ayatollahs. More significantly, it was expressed by many highly religious persons who actually *opposed* the clerical leadership of Iran, and who were convinced that the United States was supporting that leadership.

The reason for the violent expression of anti-American sentiment which wreaked havoc on relations between the two countries and eventually led to the taking of a whole embassy full of American Hostages in November, 1979 lies in the symbolic role which the United States played vis-à-vis the Iranian nation in Iranian eyes.

Taking their clue from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Iranian revolutionaries delighted in referring to the United States as the “Great Satan” in public street demonstrations. Although this epithet seems to be hyperbole on the part of the mob, such names give important clues to the symbolic conceptions being invoked. In this case it is significant that the term “Great Satan” was used, and not another.

In order to understand the full significance of this seemingly straightforward linguistic usage, a thorough look at Iranian inner symbolic life must be pursued.

Internal and External—the Moral Dimension

Religious doctrine often serves as the most tangible concretization of the core symbols of society. In so doing, religion both makes statements about the truth of the conceptual world in which society exists; and prescribes for society's members what they should do, and what they should avoid doing. Furthermore, religion serves as a formal statement of symbolic categorizations in cultural life. It helps man regulate his life by placing certain aspects of it at the core of his value and action systems, and relegating other aspects to the periphery.

Religious systems, like all systems of patterned symbolic elements, are not merely static arrangements of idealizations—they are dynamic, and occasionally make their dynamic nature explicit. Such is the case with Iran.

The central symbolic pattern in Iran, which renders human actions both great and small as meaningful for Iranians, is the struggle between the inside (the internal, the core) to conquer the outside (the external, the periphery).⁸

The contrast between the pure inner core and the corrupt external sphere in Iranian ideology is explored in depth in a recent study by M.C. Bateson, *et. al.*⁹ This paper discusses the differences between the exemplary traits of *safayi batin*, “inner purity” and the bad traits of the external world which lead one to become *bad-bin*, “suspicious, cynical, pessimistic.” The bad external traits, epitomized in adjectives such as *zerang* (“shrewd”), *forsattalab* (“opportunistic”), *motazaher* or *do-rou* (“hypocritical”), *hesabgar* (“calculating”), and *charbzaban* (“obsequious,” “insincere”) are qualities which Iranians feel they must combat in themselves as well as in the external world.

Iranians during the Pahlavi era, especially during the final ten years would often express regret at behavior which they felt was unduly at odds with the good qualities desirable for one with a pure and uncorrupted inner core. A doctor of the author’s acquaintance in a village outside of the city of Shiraz once went into a long disquisition on the difficulties of living in what he assessed as a corrupt world:

They are all corrupt, all of my superiors. They are stealing all the time, and not just from the government—they also steal from the poor people who come to them for medicine and treatment. God help me, in this system they force me to be dishonest as well. They will give me medical supplies, but only if I pay them some bribe. When I ask them how I am to get the money, they tell me to charge the patients. So you see I have no choice, I must steal too if I want to carry out this job. I hate myself every day of my life for being dishonest, and I wish I didn’t have to be, but I can’t help it.

Iranian concern with this problem is reflected extensively in expressive culture. One of the principal themes of Iranian literature, films, and popular drama shows characters caught between the drive toward internal morality and the external pull of the corrupting world. This is, in fact, one of the central concerns in the doctrine and practice of Sufism, where the killing of one’s “passions,” (*nafs*), is one of the prerequisites to achieving mystic enlightenment. Display of one’s concern for the depth of feeling that accompanies the drive toward the pure inner life is highly valued throughout Iranian society. This leads individuals to disdain that which is superficial or hypocritical. One of the highest compliments one can pay another person is to say: “his/her inside and outside are the same.” (Bateson *et. al.* 1977: 269-70)

Internal and External—the Legacy of History

The struggle between the pure forces of the inside and the corruption of the external exists not only in the idealization of individual morality; it also is a principal theme in the popular view of the history of Iranian civilization.

For ordinary Iranians the waves of external conquest which have buried their land over the centuries—Alexander and the Greeks, the Arabs, Ghengis Khan and the Mongols—are as alive as if they happened yesterday. The British/Russian partition of the country into two spheres of influence in 1907 continued the pattern of cycles of conquest. Finally, as will be argued below, the economic domination of Iran by the United States in the post-World War II period seemed to extend the age-old pattern into the modern period.

Nevertheless, every time Iran was conquered by one of these great external powers, the nation subsequently rose like a phoenix from the ashes and re-established itself. The times between these conquests were peak periods in Iranian culture. They were the periods of the flowering of the greatest literature, art, philosophy, mathematics, artisanry, and architecture.

Thus the struggle between inside and outside, when painted on the canvas of Iranian history, is seen as a struggle between the destructive forces of external invading conquerors and the reproductive growing forces of the internal core of Iranian civilization. The internal core has thus far been the victor.

The struggle between inside and outside has also been encapsulated in the central myth of Shi'a Islam—the martyrdom of Imam Hosain, third Imam of Shi'i Moslems, and significantly, grandson of the Prophet Mohammad.

Hosain's father, Ali was the only caliph to be recognized by both Shi'ites and Sunnis. Following his death, his son Hasan was convinced to resign his claim to leadership by Sunni partisans, who then usurped the caliphate, bestowing it on the ruler of Damascus, Mu'awiyeh. On his death, it passed to his son, Yazid.

Hosain was called upon to recognize the leadership of both Caliphs of Damascus, but he refused—and this act set the stage for his subsequent martyrdom. In this legendary act of refusal, Hosain came to represent for Shi'i Moslems the verification of the truth of the spiritual leadership of Ali and his bloodline (also the bloodline of Mohammad), through his willingness to be martyred when his own right to succession to leadership of the faithful was challenged.

Thus Hosain has continued to provide Iranians with a concretization of the struggle between internal and external forces. In death, he became an eternal symbol of the uncompromising struggler against external forces of tyranny, the defender of the faith, the possessor of inner purity and strength, the great martyr in the name of truth.¹⁰

Yazid and his henchmen, on the other hand, become the supreme symbols of corruption. They not only are murderers, but they also represent false doctrine—imposed from without. The sufferings of the family of Hosain, who survived the slaughter of their patriarch, are laid to Yazid's account, as are, by extension, the sufferings of all Shi'ite followers in subsequent history. To this day, a cruel, corrupt individual who brings ruin to other is labeled "Yazid."

From this exposition, it should be clear that in Iranian society the source of corruption is external to the individual, and to society itself. If civilization or individuals become corrupt, it is because they do not have the strength to resist forces from without that are impinging on them at all times. This particular directionality gives a specific bias to Iranian political psychology. As internal conditions within the country become more and more difficult, the tendency on the part of the population is to search for conspiracy from an external source. This was a distinct feature of the Pahlavi regime, which saw opposition to the central government as a Marxist-inspired plot. The same bias inspired the efforts of the oppositionist forces, who saw the central government policies as inspired by non-Iranian considerations. The confrontations which led to the revolutionary events of 1978-1979 and the ouster of the shah took place in an ironic context: both the shah and his opposition viewed themselves as defending the inner core of the civilization against the external forces of corruption and destruction. Thus, the battle of the Revolution can be seen as a battle of definitions: he who could make his vision of the inner core valid for the population as a whole could control the nation (Cf. Fischer 1980, Beeman 1996).

The duty of a righteous Muslim is to resist corruption and promote the good. Any action is justified against a corrupting force. Thus the ouster of the shah was presented as a religiously justified action, and persecution of those who supported the shah was likewise seen as justified.

For post-Revolutionary Iran, the United States fit perfectly into the cultural mold reserved for corrupt forces. It was an external, powerful, secular force. It supported a regime which Revolutionary leaders designated as corrupt. It gave the shah refuge and refused to allow verification of his claim of illness, thus raising the possibility that it was plotting against the Revolution.¹¹ When the Iran-Iraq war began, the United States seemed to "tilt" toward Iraq, a second corrupt external force, and demonstrated again and again in its actions in the Persian Gulf region that it was working against Iran's interests in the course of the war. It was thus easy for Iran's leaders to apply the epithet "Great Satan" to the United States and make it stick.

Sincerity, Political Rhetoric and Cultural Impedance

Iranian and U.S. leaders have accused each other of manipulative and insincere dealings with each other. Such accusations are extremely difficult to evaluate in a multi-cultural context.

First, it must be understood that both U.S. and Iranian leaders in their foreign relations decisions and pronouncements are appealing primarily to their domestic constituencies. Thus they attempt to say and do things that make themselves look good, whatever they may actually believe about a particular situation.

American leaders, for example, were opposed to negotiations with Iran over the release of the embassy hostages held in 1979-80 for nearly a year partly because they did not want to set Iran, an "outlaw nation," in a relationship of seeming equality with the United States. They also wanted to look for more traditional solutions through economic and military threats, and searching for "plumbers" to effect the hostage release. It is somewhat ironic that the hostages were released in the end through a mediated negotiation.¹²

Iranian leaders have had difficulties dealing directly with American officials since the revolution because of the taint such relationships carried. Through their vilification of the United States they effectively denied themselves any access to these officials, even though such access might have been important for the ongoing progress of the Revolution. The threat to their careers, indeed, their lives, was very real. In the first three years of the Revolution they could not be known to be talking to or receiving messages from Americans. Indeed, to avoid accusations of collusion with the U.S. during the hostage crisis "secret" messages from U.S. officials would be opened and read in public by nervous Iranian leaders.

The fact that Iranian and U.S. leaders do talk on occasion when necessary, shows that at some level officials in both nations understand the difference between pragmatic dealings and public symbolism. Even so, this does not eliminate the cultural impedance which prevents full understanding by one side of the actions of the other.¹³

It has taken Iranian leaders, most of whom had no experience in dealing with international politics prior to assuming power, some time to understand how to behave in a way which the Western world will find comprehensible. The United States did not crumble at being called The Great Satan, nor did it cease pursuing what it considered its own strategic interests even in the face of curses and gadfly tactics by the Iranian regime.

An important change in Tehran, already starting with the cease-fire in the Iran-Iraq war, is the search for an international voice for the Islamic Republic. This may mean projecting an image of Iran as more of a nation-state than it re-

ally is (certainly not an uncommon strategy among newer nations), or stressing issues, such as economics, which are easier for the United States and its allies to deal with, over ideology and religious sensibility. The Great Satan epithet seems to have been laid to rest at this point. If this process continues, it may constitute a kind of Pahlavization of the Revolution as Iran once more insulates its true cultural feelings behind a patina of Western-oriented international communication strategies.

An important process of evolution in Iranian political life was launched in the late 1990's resulting first in the election of Sayyid Mohammad Khatami as President, and the capture of the Majlis (parliament) by reformist elements in 2000. At this writing, in June, 2003, the public has become restive with the disparity between the promises of reform and the difficulties in implementing it. The difference between the younger population desiring reform and the older revolutionaries has played out in public demonstrations throughout the country. In this, relations with the United States have become an issue. Younger people want closer relations with the United States. The clerical establishment is still distrustful of U.S. motives and actions, and tries to spread that distrust in a process of continued demonization of the United States.¹⁴

The United States for its part should realize that this period of stress in dealing with Iran constitutes an invaluable lesson for the international relations of the future. Most nations in the world do not conform to the narrow U.S. mythology of foreign relations. As world politics becomes more multi-centered in the next decades, it will be increasingly necessary for American politicians to deal with the nations of the world on a one-to-one basis, taking their cultural sensibilities into account. Labeling nations and their leaders "criminal," "outlaw" or "crazy" because the cultural underpinnings for their actions are difficult to understand does nothing to promote real solutions to political differences creating problems in the world today. Moreover, applying the principle of "coercive harmony" in trying to control the nations of the world is likely to fail as American sensibilities regarding order and morality run headlong into the desires of other nations for justice and self-determination.

NOTES

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented in the session: "Opening Pandora's Box: New Directions in Middle Eastern Research" at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, Louisiana November 20-24, 2002

²However, some possible analogous parallels include dealings with North Korea and a variety of other nations; The United States and Cuba, and Israel and a number of Arab states.

³I have elaborated on the U.S. foreign policy myth at greater length in other publications (Beeman 1986b, 1986d). Even anthropologists do not seem to be entirely immune to it (Price 1998).

⁴Nowhere is the structure of this belief so clearly seen as in the composition of United States embassy staffs. There are always economic attachés and political attachés but in no embassy in the world is there a single officer whose primary duty is to interpret cultural differences which could cause misunderstandings between nations. This lack is reflected in mistake after mistake in the conduct of U.S. diplomatic personnel everywhere—events I hardly need to detail for readers here.

In fairness, I must note that the United States is hardly alone among nations in having some unskillful diplomats and foreign policy advisors, or being unable to analyze cultural differences. I should further note that the sensitivity that is demonstrated by talented, diligent persons at the working levels of the foreign policy community is often obscured in the United States when recommendations and observations reach the White House, where action decisions are made by persons with minimal direct experience in dealing with the cultural realities of the non-Western world. As an anthropologist I cannot resist stating that I think the world could use many more anthropologically trained individuals in foreign policy positions everywhere to compensate for those who believe that money and guns are the only basis for international understanding.

⁵Of course, as the world knows, if broad social movements prove to be important in terms of the United States' interpretation of the East-West struggle, then great significance is attached to them.

⁶Given the United States' extraordinary economic and military resources compared to the developing world, especially in the immediate post World War II decade this "superpower" mentality was perhaps understandable, but increasing sophistication of the educated world population (many of whom were educated in the United States) has made this view seem naive and anachronistic.

⁷James Bill (1988) documents this isolation extremely effectively.

⁸The account of the opposition between the internal (*baten* or *batin*) and the external (*za-her*) is somewhat simplified for the purposes of this discussion. See also Beeman 1982, 1986 for a much fuller discussion. It should be pointed out that Iran is by no means unique in maintaining a distinction between "inside" and "outside" dimensions in symbolic culture. Javanese and Japanese are two other cultural systems with this distinction, but the particular content of the two cultural arenas in those societies is very different from that of Iran. For additional discussion on this point see Beeman 1986a. Nikki Keddie points out that the *za-her* need not be identified merely as the locus of evil. It also can be seen as a zone which contains and excludes those evil forces which may attempt to intrude on the pure *baten*, which should not be open to outsiders. Cf. Nikki Keddie, "Symbol and Sincerity in Islam," *Studia Islamica* 19 (1963):27-64.

⁹Cf. Bateson, M.C., J.W. Clinton, J.B.M. Kassarian, H. Safavi, M. Soraya, 1977: 257-273.

¹⁰Cf. Michael M.J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) pp. 147-156, for an account of the meaning of the figures of Hosain and his father, Ali in present day politico-religious discourse. Fischer terms the cultural symbolic complex of Hosain and his death the "Karbala paradigm."

¹¹This was, of course the immediate cause of the capture and holding of U.S. embassy personnel for 444 days in 1979-80.

¹²Only after the hostage negotiations had been taken over by a completely different group of U.S. government officials than had directed the operations for the previous year.

¹³The Arms-for-hostages negotiations in 1986-87 are a case in point. The need to re-establish relations with Iran was correctly recognized by the Reagan administration, but the

means used to achieve this were naive. For example, American negotiators still did not recognize the danger they constituted for Iranian officials. The only way these officials could “deal” with the Americans and not risk the charge of collusion with an enemy by their political rivals was to best the U.S. in the deal.

¹⁴Ali Ansari (2000) documents this process very well.

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