

# The Fateful 52: How the American Media Sensationalized the Iran Hostage Crisis

Written by Monica L. Coscia

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MONICA L. COSCIA, AUG 20 2016

### The Fateful Fifty-Two: How the American Media Sensationalized the Iran Hostage Crisis

“This is an ABC News Special: The Iran Crisis,” Ted Koppel intoned ominously on December 1, 1979, “America Held Hostage: Day 26.”[1] Throughout the 444 days that fifty-two Americans were held hostage in Iran, Koppel announced on his ABC news program *Nightline* exactly how many days had passed since the seizure of the American embassy in Iran. For over a year, the American public fixated its eyes on the crisis in Tehran, and what was once a country that barely received a fleeting glance from the United States would become the eternal recipient of its chilling glare. During these months, the United States “existed on two calendars, with the number of days in captivity superimposed over the Gregorian dates.”[2] When it comes to the Middle East, contemporary Americans tend to make the generalization that it is a region of conflict and controversy due to media coverage of select, isolated incidents, and view the component countries in a negative light. American public opinion has consistently and vehemently opposed Iran since 1980, with a disapproval rating that has unflinchingly hovered between seventy-five and ninety percent for the last few decades.[3] Although disdain for Iran is the result of a conglomeration of events, the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-1980 is the event that sparked this undeniable display of American contempt. The brutality and obstinacy of the hostage crisis had an irreversibly damaging impact on Iran’s reputation in the United States and the rest of the international community, both in the short-term and to the present day; this discourse will analyze the causes, content, and consequences of the media coverage that triggered this damage.

Before delving into the media coverage of the complex event, it is imperative to briefly provide a background of the events surrounding the Iran hostage crisis. A long-term cause of the hostage crisis was heightened anti-American sentiment in Iran, due to the United States’ constant political, diplomatic, and economic intervention in Iranian affairs that Iran perceived as imperialistic and colonial in nature.[4] Two specific instances of American interference that Iranians were most livid about were the 1953 coup, in which the United States overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadeq in favor of the monarchical Reza Shah, and the acceptance of the same shah into the United States for medical treatment in 1979.[5] The latter cause was the precise impetus for the seizure of the United States embassy, although there had been anti-American demonstrations around the embassy prior to its takeover.[6] President Carter allowed the overthrown shah to receive medical treatment for his leukemia in a New York hospital on October 22, 1979, and Iran took revenge on the United States just thirteen days later.[7] On November 4, 1979, a group of Iranian students from various universities stormed the American embassy in Tehran, a location they perceived as “an enemy foothold behind the lines of the revolution,” and took its occupants hostage. Although the hostage-takers released thirteen women and African Americans two weeks later, fifty-two Americans remained hostages for over a year.[8] The United States attempted negotiations with Iran that proved futile, and the American military enacted a rescue mission that miserably failed.[9] On January 20, 1981, just minutes after President Ronald Reagan was inaugurated, the hostages were released and flown back to the United States.[10] Throughout the 444 days of captivity, journalists and reporters transmitted each development of the hostage crisis to televisions, radios, and newspapers across the United States and the rest of the world, thus transforming the embassy occupation into an international humanitarian crisis. As a result, the fifty-two individual hostages became

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what *Nightline* deemed an entire nation held hostage.[11]

The first area of analysis in the media coverage of the Iran hostage crisis is the reason why the American press was so preoccupied with the crisis and how it became the driving force of marring Iran's reputation in the United States. Broadly speaking, the American media has a keen tendency to overgeneralize news stories, especially when dealing with emotional crises and/or situations in foreign countries; this is because generalizations make sense of complex, foreign situations that Americans could only understand by entirely immersing themselves in another culture.[12] Since the Iran hostage crisis was undoubtedly both a foreign and an emotional situation, the media generalized: it portrayed the entire country of Iran as violent based on the actions of the student hostage takers. Iran, through the eyes of the United States, was no longer a nation, but a breeding ground for radicalism, extremism, Islamism, and anti-Americanism.[13] Another reason why the media shaped the public opinion against Iran was that there was little to no coverage in the press about Iran prior to the hostage crisis. The hostage crisis was, essentially, the only event that Americans at the time associated with Iran, because it was the only occurrence of the media extensively covering an Iranian event. Therefore, the media singlehandedly filled the public's void of ignorance about Iran with antagonism.[14]

Perhaps the most influential reason that the American media was primed to defame Iran is because any media source is necessarily informed by the ideology of its home country, and the time-honored values of the United States are deeply rooted in its media coverage. Its press coverage is inherently ethnocentric and views events in other countries through the lens of its own liberal, democratic, and free ideals. American journalists "saw Iran through an ideological and cultural haze that distorted the motives of the Iranian people and legitimized the motives and behavior of the shah." [15] Due to the closely held American value of the separation of church and state, the fact that Americans were taken hostage as part of a radical, religious movement was harshly unpalatable to the American public. Because secularism drives American politics and the coverage thereof, American citizens were predisposed to have a visceral aversion to the leakage of religious motivation into political or military endeavors.[16] The American press exploited the dichotomy between the United States' deeply beloved secularism and Iran's theocracy to create an "us versus them" scheme to distance Iran from the United States and deem the latter superior logically and governmentally.[17] Furthermore, Americans did and continue to place a significant amount of trust in their media, usually accepting news articles and television reports at face value.[18] Overall, the American media's tendencies of generalizing, failing to cover any foreign events if they do not pose a threat to the United States, covering international events through an ideologically biased lens, and status as a repository of its citizens' trust set the stage for an irrevocable disparagement of Iran in every outlet of communication.

Consistent with the press' tendency to generalize, the American media picked and chose the most emotionally provocative tidbits of the Iran hostage crisis to characterize the entire situation as an international humanitarian debacle. This coverage, in turn, spawned a generalized image of the entire Iranian populous that will later be discussed at length. Early on in the 444 days, the mass media turned an impersonal number, fifty-two, into fifty-two humanized individuals: the hostages became "innocents abroad, caught up in the violence of a chaotic revolution, simple victims of unscrupulous Islamic fanatics." [19] For example, in December of 1979, the *New York Daily News* and *Newsweek* published articles about each of the fifty-two hostages that featured pictures of each person and a humanizing biography about him or her.[20] Then, as soon as the reports from the Tehran embassy rolled in, media coverage took a turn for the gruesome. Newspapers and television shows reported the everyday routines of the hostage-takers and hostages to evoke sympathy, detailing how the hostages were blindfolded, beaten, handcuffed, interrogated, and isolated.[21] The first time that the news media displayed footage of a hostage was when several American television networks broadcast "film of hostage Jerry Miele...being led blindfolded to the front gate of the embassy, where the bloodthirsty crowd vented its rage from behind the tall iron gate." [22] Another example of a widely publicized hostage horror story was the mock execution of Al Golacinski, John Limbert, and Rick Kupke:

[They]were awakened in the middle of the night, forced to strip to their underwear and marched to a room in the basement where their guards made it seem they were about to be executed by firing squad. The guards fired their weapons, but they were not loaded. Then the guards laughed. Why did they do it? Limbert said it was because 'they thought it would be fun.' [23]

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Moreover, the Edmonton Journal and CBS News ran another story of terror about how the hostage-takers played Russian roulette with two female hostages in an effort to extract more information from the hostages.[24] Some hostages also reported that they were handcuffed or tied to tables for hours at a time.[25] Michael Metrinko, a young embassy officer, spent most of the 444 days in solitary confinement, was beaten for insulting Khomeini, and was kept handcuffed for over three weeks—another horror story broadcast to the news media.[26] Stories like these countered the Iranian contention that the hostages were treated humanely and justly.[27] Although newspapers and radios circulated endless coverage about the hostage crisis, television was the most effective method in communicating the brutality of the hostage-takers and rousing the American public, as it disseminated a “constant torrent of demeaning images and disturbing rhetoric from this obscure and exotic land,” to concoct a “story made for television.”[28]

Americans responded to this coverage with a “fierce, even xenophobic nationalism and emotional bond to their fellow Americans held captive in Iran.”[29] They came to perceive Iranians as merciless, evil violators of human rights who were unjustly punishing innocent citizens. The United States could not separate this situation from its commitment to individual rights, and could not reconcile the inhumane treatment of the hostages with their belief that no one should receive cruel and unusual punishment nor punishment without a fair trial and due process. The media purposefully chose to focus on “soft news” or emotional accounts that would aggravate the American public, rather than more technical reports about the negotiations between the United States and Iran, as these traumatizing, pathos-laden stories made for more interesting news than ordinary politics ever would.

In addition to broadcasting the stories of the hostages themselves, American television networks further investigated the lives of the fateful fifty-two by interviewing their family members as another tactic to generate sympathy for the hostages and empathy for their loved ones. The media reports ignored the fact these hostages were professional embassy employees and agents of the United States government, instead emphasizing their role as “a fellow citizen, a regular American with fearful parents, an anxious spouse, and scared children.”[30] The kin of hostages became regulars on the nightly news, lamenting the struggles of not knowing what kind of torture their loved ones were experiencing and when they would ever come home: “Every word they uttered, every tear they shed, was suddenly news.”[31][32] As soon as the identities of the hostages were released, the national issue became localized, as hundreds of city television stations descended upon the sixty-six neighborhoods of the original group of hostages. The American public related to the hostages who had families, hometowns, and hobbies—just like they did!—and became emotionally invested in the crisis.[33] Wives and mothers watched new footage of the hostages in front of the news cameras, and often broke down and wept for the entire nation to see.[34] The *Washington Post* ignited a national movement when Penne Laingen, the wife of hostage Bruce Laingen, announced that she “tied a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree” in her yard in accordance with the 1973 hit song; once this story hit the mass media, yellow ribbons appeared all over the country as a symbol of solidarity with the hostages.[35] The media portrayal of the hostages as ordinary family members rather than government officials resulted in a “widespread public misunderstanding of American foreign policy,” as the media led the American public to believe that the hostage crisis was an attack on American families rather than backlash against our political system that oppressed that of Iran for decades.[36]

Despite that the coverage of the hostages and their families was integral to provoking an emotional response from the American populous, the reportage of the Iranian people complemented this depiction by making the hostages look even more like helpless victims of extremism and terrorism. Countless television stations featured footage of Iranian protestors thrusting anti-American posters into the air, burning the American flag, and shouting “Death to America!”[37] Networks frequently featured footage of mobs rallying outside the embassy both before and during the hostage crisis, and their anti-Americanism was palpable.[38] Additionally, televisions, as well as newspapers and radio, used specific terminology to pigeonhole the captors as the enemy. Instead of referring to them as students, the media labeled them as militants, extremists, radicals, and Islamists—classifications that carry provocative and adverse connotations. It is also imperative to note what the United States press ignored in its preoccupation with the fanaticism and fundamentalism of the hostage crisis: the mass media made no clear effort to understand the true motivations of the student-captors, nor the broader revolution.[39] As such, Americans failed to realize that the actual reason Iranian students took over the embassy was because they were overwhelmed by their frustration at the United States for supporting a leader they despised and for overthrowing a leader they supported a few decades earlier.[40] Because the Iranian Revolution that produced the crisis advocated for the dreaded mix of religion and

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politics, and because the media harbored rampant journalistic ethnocentrism, Americans would have refused to accept the part their own government played in the hostage crisis, placing every ounce of the blame for the tragedy on Islamic radicals.[41] In summation, the American media “[persuaded] Americans to see themselves as victims of ‘terrorists’ who irrationally hate ‘us,’ rather than to recognize that Iranians had attacked the U.S. embassy in response to American policy in Iran.”[42]

Another important component of the content that the American media presented was thorough and frequent coverage of the Ayatollah Khomeini as a symbol and figurehead of the Islamic radicalism that the hostage crisis epitomized. After Khomeini announced that he supported the students and their takeover of the embassy, he became a prominent scapegoat for the hostage crisis and the recipient of American hatred and disgust.[43] A few days after the embassy takeover, Khomeini gave a speech encouraging “all grade-school, university, and theological students to increase their attacks against America,” and the United States was justifiably frightened and angered by this statement.[44] The American public perceived him as “a crazy fanatic living in a time warp” who irrationally hated the United States.”[45] His religious dress and long beard, pictures of which were featured in American newspapers and television, epitomized the stereotype of a religious, Islamic extremist. [46] Khomeini seemed to stand for everything the United States opposed—anti-Americanism, theocracy, religious fanaticism, rejection of the international system and the concept of the nation-state, support of the hostage crisis, and his call for universal Islamism—and media sources capitalized on the contrast between his religious extremism and American ideals of freedom and democracy.[47] As a result, the United States felt genuinely threatened by him, an “irrational and even insane figure,” and the power he exerted over a significant portion of his country.[48] His statement that the hostage crisis was not a struggle between two nations, but rather “a struggle between Islam and blasphemy” particularly insulted and infuriated the United States.[49] The fact that the hostage crisis, at its forefront, featured a visible and striking leader who was easy to stereotype and despise played an important role in the media’s sensationalizing of the Iran hostage crisis.

Now that this discourse has established the causes and content of American media coverage of the hostage crisis, it can assess the consequences that this journalistic assault on Iran had on its reputation in and relationship with the United States. The United States media irreparably damaged Iran’s reputation through coverage of the hostage crisis in its failure to bridge the “cultural gap” between the two nations. The mass media let the situation’s capacity to become a tragic news story get the best of it, sacrificing concrete news for emotionalism.[50] In the defense of the media and the American public, however, the coverage that characterized the hostages as innocent and the captors as evil was not executed with purely malicious motives—the hostage crisis undoubtedly possessed emotional pull, and Americans were justified in their frustration at the Iranian students who captured their fellow citizens.[51] Nevertheless, the fact that the media portrayed all Iranians through the lens of an offensive stereotype—radical Islamic jihadists clad in long beards and chadors who irrationally hate the United States and burn our flag—is less justified.

The American press coverage of the hostage crisis suffered from a serious case of Western bias, falling victim to the “conventional Western equation of Islam with extremism.”[52] The press was unable to separate militarism and violence from Islamism, and oversimplified the Muslim faith into a proclivity to “mix faith with politics, and to express both through violence.”[53] In emphasizing the innocent humanity of the American hostages, the media unfairly denied the captors their own humanity—although taking people hostage is morally incorrect, it is unfair to dismiss the students and Iranians in general as irrational and blindly motivated for their religion when they were advocating for a cause in which they firmly believed.[54] These Iranian student-captors were fighting for their freedom from imperialism—something the United States supports, in theory—and the embassy was a symbol of everything the revolution wanted to eradicate.[55] The American media, both unable and unwilling to understand why Iran would reject such sacred institutions of secular, modern democracy, classified the revolution as “an irrational backlash against a generous fatherly attempt to spread modern ways of life and to defend the Iranians from communism.”[56] The press also failed to acknowledge that not all Iranians supported the seizure of the embassy—in fact, Iranian Prime Minister Bazargan demanded the hostages’ immediate release as it violated international law and “the civilized practices of diplomacy,” but he was entirely ignored and subsequently resigned.[57] It is clear that Iran violated the human rights of the American hostages, and their brutality and violence remain unjustified, but it is wholly unfair to dismiss their entire revolution as radical fanaticism.

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There are several tangible ways in which the United States manifested its negative perception of Iran. One instance is the fact that the Iran hostage crisis was a major factor in President Jimmy Carter's downfall. Despite his tremendous diplomatic and military efforts to rescue the hostages, American discontent with Iran was so pernicious that citizens made a scapegoat of Carter and took out their frustration in domestic polls.[58] Another instance occurred on May 17, 1979, when the United States Senate passed Jacob Javitz's resolution condemning Iran for its human rights violations, a blatant manifestation of the government's dissatisfaction with Iran's refusal to release the hostages.[59] Furthermore, after the failure of the rescue mission, the United States military set up a Counterterrorism Joint Task Force, demonstrating how it viewed Iran's seizure of the embassy as synonymous with terrorism.[60] The formal responses by the United States also conveyed Iran's damaged reputation. Most obviously, the economic sanctions, freezing of Iranian assets, banning the import of Iranian oil, and the break of diplomatic relations with Iran displayed governmental condemnation that, in turn, spawned civilian condemnation.[61] Overall, the hostage crisis "triggered the American containment policy toward the revolutionary regime economically, politically, and militarily." [62] Also, the United States supported Iraq in its war against Iran but condemned Iraq for invading Kuwait just a decade later, then entered into a war in Iraq within the next—clear evidence of American desire to invoke revenge on Iran.[63] In 1982, distrust towards Iran resulted in the United States suspicion that Iran assisted in the Beirut suicide bombings.[64] The United States also put significant pressure on other nations to cease diplomacy with Iran.[65] It continues to harbor suspicious tensions towards Iran to the present day, the origins of which lie in the embassy seizure: "Memory of the hostage crisis and the failed rescue has poisoned US-Iran relations ever since." [66] For example, President George W. Bush's inclusion of Iran in the Axis of Evil less than a decade ago evidences the deep distrust the United States harbors towards Iran.[67] The hostage crisis also damaged Iran's reputation internationally. In addition to general estrangement from the international community, transnational organizations issued formal disapprobation against Iran. The United Nations Security Council condemned Iran's human rights violations in a December 1979 resolution, and the International Court of Justice issued a Provisional Order and Judgement that demanded Iran release the hostages immediately.[68] The damage to Iran's reputation was thus not limited to the United States.

The Iran hostage crisis of 1979 to 1981 irreversibly impaired Iran's reputation in the eyes of the United States, as well as the rest of the world, both immediately and in the long term. The importance of the American media in marring Iran's image cannot be overstated. Its tendency to generalize and view foreign events through the lens of liberal, secular, Western democracy primed the press to disseminate defaming coverage about the hostage crisis. The media's decision to publish individualized horror stories of the hostages and the sob stories of their families was intended to evoke emotion and sympathy throughout the United States, and this tactic was effective in igniting the public's rage. The resulting image of Iran was a stereotype of the entire nation as anti-American, radical, and extremely religious, and this still lingers in the United States' relationship with Iran; this damaged image was evident in the American responses to the crisis. Seeing as how weighty friction and hostility persists between the United States and Iran today, studying the origins of this tension is undoubtedly a worthy endeavor.

## Endnotes

[1] "Nightline' Archive: America Held Hostage," *ABC News*, accessed December 5, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/iran-crisis-america-held-hostage-9049607>.

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[5] Ibid.

[6] John Skow, "The Long Ordeal of the Hostages," *Time Magazine*, January 26, 1981, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,954605,00.html>.

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- [8] Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 172-3.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 176.
- [10] Axworthy, 205.
- [11] "'Nightline' Archive: America Held Hostage."
- [12] William A. Dorman and Mansour Farhang, *The U.S. Press and Iran: Foreign Policy and the Journalism of Deference* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 196.
- [13] *Ibid.*, 156.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 230.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 165
- [16] Elizabeth Shakman Burd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 102.
- [17] *Ibid.*, 107.
- [18] David Patrick Houghton, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 201), 2.
- [19] David Farber, *Taken Hostage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 153.
- [20] *Ibid.*
- [21] Axworthy, 171.
- [22] Bowden, 189
- [23] Susan Chun, "Six things you didn't know about the Iran hostage crisis," *CNN*, July 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/27/world/ac-six-things-you-didnt-know-about-the-iran-hostage-crisis/>.
- [24] "Russian roulette played with hostages," *Edmonton Journal*, January 21, 1981, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=hfhkAAAAIBAJ&pg=6225,19155>.
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] Axworthy, 171-2.
- [27] Chun.
- [28] Bowden, 196.
- [29] Farber, 152.
- [30] *Ibid.*, 153

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[31] Bowden, 191.

[32] Ibid., 244.

[33] Ibid., 190.

[34] Ibid., 191.

[35] Farber, 152-3.

[36] McAlister, 208.

[37] Farber, 2.

[38] Ibid., 12.

[39] Dorman and Farhang, 174.

[40] Ibid., 156

[41] Ibid.

[42] Farber, 154.

[43] Bowden, 555.

[44] Ibid., 14.

[45] Farber, 2.

[46] Ibid., 147

[47] R. K. Ramazani, *Independence Without Freedom: Iran's Foreign Policy* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 77.

[48] Houghton, 66.

[49] Ramazani, 81.

[50] Farber, 7.

[51] Ibid.

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[53] Burd, 108.

[54] Houghton, 53.

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[56] Burd, 109.

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[58] Axworthy, 178.

[59] Robert Wright, *Our Man in Tehran* (New York: Other Press, 2010), 96-97.

[60] Axworthy, 179.

[61] Axworthy, 176; Donald E. Nuchterlein, *A Cold War Odyssey* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1997), 311.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Axworthy, 178.

[67] Burd, 102.

[68] Ramazani, 77.

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