

Book Review

The Ayatollah in the Cathedral, by Moorhead Kennedy. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986. ix + 241 pages.

"The Ayatollah in the Cathedral," to borrow the term coined by Thomas Kuhn, is a book that opens the gateway to paradigmatic transformations in the theory of international relations and the art of effectively handling foreign affairs. Dr. Kennedy was one of the 50 hostages who went through the 444 days' ordeal in Iran. He gives a detailed account of the events witnessed and experienced by him as a hostage.

The traumatic psychological impact of being a hostage in a revolution is not easy for others fully to understand as outsiders; still the reader is able to see that there were many occasions when Dr. Kennedy, as a hostage, thought that his death was imminent.

A mediocre author would easily have made his story of captivity a "best seller" by capitalizing on hatred and by saying what the domestic opinion makers in the United States want to hear. Instead, Dr. Kennedy defies this common heritage of American scholarship on the Middle East. In this book, he emerges as a serious thinker with an outstanding ability to analyze the facts with scientific objectivity. What makes this book a remarkable multi-disciplinary masterpiece is Mr. Kennedy's professionally skillful and scientific analysis of the process and factors that shape U. S. foreign policy at the State Department; the weaknesses of U. S. foreign policy in the Middle East; the causes of the U. S. failure to understand the Third World in general and the Muslim world in particular; and an alternative to U. S. foreign policy making that would ensure mutual respect and trust not only in the Middle East but in the Third World in general, thereby restoring the effectiveness of the United States as a world leader.

This book is unique and pivotal in the area of international relations because Dr. Kennedy attempts to provide an alternative approach for U. S. foreign policy. This approach would enable policymakers to protect U. S. interests while at the same time winning mutual trust in the Muslim world; goals which, under present policy, seem to be mutually exclusive.

The basic flaw in American foreign policy making, as pointed out by Dr. Kennedy, is that "our analyses of over-seas problems are too often based on abstraction — what the problem should be rather than what really is. We indulge ourselves in the luxury of seeing what we want to see and denying what we do not want to see." (p. 196). Elaborating on the dangers of this approach to foreign policy, he says: "The problem is not professional but cultural. And

the danger of living to the extent that we do in a world of our own projection is all the more acute when we deal with the Third World, which is so very different from our own." (p. 197).

The author points out that Americans are obsessed with a "belief in America's God-given destiny," "it was easy to assume that what was right for us was right for everyone." (p. 198). This obsession has created a fundamental distortion in the world view of the American people and government because it has created a "judgemental attitude" in them that has narrowed their thinking so they implicitly believe that their standards are superior to those of others. There is now a well established norm in the U. S. system, "of criticizing others on the basis of standards that may not be appropriate to them." (p. 197).

State Department officials, including the embassy officers abroad, prepare their reports, analyses, and recommendations in the light of what will please the "bosses," given their predetermined world view of the problem. Whether these reports and analyses tell the truth or not is of little value, because the aim of the reporting officers is to make sure that they achieve success in their career and get promotions. This is possible only by preparing their analyses and reports to please those who are higher up.

Dr. Kennedy took up his assignment as the Financial Reporter in the U. S. Embassy in Tehran in September, 1980. In this capacity he was to work there under the Economic Counselor whom he calls "Arthur" in this book. Arthur was younger than Kennedy, and was an ambitious person with eyes on quick promotions. Although, as an economic counselor, Arthur's primary duty was to safeguard and promote American interests, as a consequence of his ambition for promotion, his self-interest always won priority over accuracy of information. In his reports he interpreted the events and situations in revolutionary Iran to correspond with the wishful thinking of State Department officials. In light of this, one can appreciate Kennedy very well when he writes, "with his graduate school training in economics, Arthur had earned plaudits from the Treasury Department for his mathematically oriented reporting from the previous assignments in northern Europe. In his haste to achieve ongoing success, however, he ignored certain important differences between northern Europe and revolutionary Iran, I realized that I would be working for someone who was projecting onto Iran experiences that had little to do with the country or it's revolution." (p. 64).

Arthur was so committed to the rules of the game for promotion that he even changed the contents and conclusions of a telegram that the embassy's political section had prepared for Washington policy makers. Later on, when the political section found out that Arthur had deceived them, they were furious because, as events later proved, the interests of the United States were compromised by such elements, which caused U. S. foreign policy to end in total failure.

This obsession with a self projected world view poses a dual problem when it comes to policymaking which should deal with reality. A self-projected world view, not only is unrealistic, but is distorted and negatively biased, because it can feed a misinformation campaign by the media. This creates cultural obstacles to the understanding of other peoples.

In this regard, Dr. Kennedy mentions a personal experience he had with the history class at a secondary school in New York. "I asked the eleventh graders to take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle. I then asked them to list on one side all the words or phrases called to mind by the word *Arab*. The reader can imagine what emerged volatile, fanatical, dirty, ignorant, undemocratic, inefficient, unorganized, insensitive to the poor. I then asked them to list words they associated with *American*. Once again the response was predictable: all the middle class virtues including a high standard of hygiene. Americans were steadfast, efficient, prudent, democratic, balanced, orderly, and all the rest. I then went down the *Arab* list reminding them of the filthy New York subway stations, abrupt changes in our foreign policy, of the fanaticism of those who bombed abortion clinics, the inefficiency involved in the hostage rescue attempt; and so forth. Going down the *American* list, I noted, by contrast with Americans, how deliberate and conservative the Saudis are, particularly in reaching important decisions; how Islam is inherently democratic in concept; how almsgiving and ritual ablutions before prayers are part of Islamic observance. I hope that, as well as seeing how stereotypes cut both ways, many students learned something about the Middle East and about their own attitudes." (pp. 173-74).

Whenever the lopsided and unjust U. S. policy in the Middle East backfires, those who want it to continue, try to divert the attention of the critics by blaming it on the terrorists and the fundamentalists. The fact that the terrorists and the fundamentalists are more the product than the cause of the failure is ignored. It is the fundamentalists who "want to take their country back to the thirteenth century." (p. 26). Addressing this issue of tension caused by U. S. policy toward the Middle East, Kennedy says, "Had it been possible to pursue the matter, I would have questioned whether the course of events that produces the twentieth century, the last half of which has been America's century, necessarily represents progress. We have imposed our idea of "the good" on the Middle East. But if it is so "good," why are they so fearful in rejecting it? Perhaps it is because they have tried it and found it wanting, indeed harmful, in important respects." (p. 26). Having realized this, the author suggests: "Only if we are able to do something about our shortcomings can we hope to regain the respect and moral leadership we once enjoyed in the Middle East and in the rest of the Third World." (p. 26).

On the subject of terrorism, Dr. Kennedy favors stiff measures. But he also notes that, "former President Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and former Prime

Minister Menachem Begin of Israel were once terrorists." (p. 208). The author believes that many times when people lose hope, extremists lose their credibility, and terrorism eventually is conceived to be a necessity. Therefore the problem of terrorism can not be resolved permanently unless its true cause is addressed and justice prevails. In this regard, Dr. Kennedy urges that, "the same realism should lead us to question what national interest is served by our consistent refusal to recognize the national identity and rights of the Palestinian people. Israel's future security as well as our own demands that we extend to the Palestinian people, through their representatives in the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the recognition that Israel demands for itself." (p. 209).

Thus Dr. Kennedy brings the point home that U. S. policy toward the Third World in general and toward the Middle East in particular is basically flawed because the American people and their government both live in a world of their own projection which has little to do with reality. Even those in the government who see and understand the flaws of this policy, and who have the ability to give better alternatives, refrain from doing so due to the costs they will have to pay if they make any such move.

This weakness of the American system did not discourage Dr. Kennedy and he refused to give up. After his release from captivity in the Tehran embassy, the State Department offered him an attractive assignment in South America. But he felt that in the foreign service he would be required to carry out the same flawed policies, from which he, in principle, disagreed. He would continue to be a part of the problem and not of the solution. Therefore he decided to resign from the U. S. Foreign Service.

Since then he has devoted his life to the cause of peace and justice brought about through mutual understanding among peoples of different orientations, cultures, and backgrounds. In his work in this field he had the opportunity to deal with clergy and other important people in American social life. This first hand experience revealed to him the extent to which it is generally held in the West that the ayatollahs of Iran are very orthodox, unaccommodating, hard line people, whereas Westerners and their clergy, on the other hand, are very humane, considerate, and enlightened twentieth-century people. The reality, when encountered in actual dealings with them, is quite contrary to the generally held, pleasant view. This is because in their beliefs, methodology, and approach in solving a given problem they fit very well the image of the ayatollahs of Iran presented to them through their own media., which claims to be unbiased. This is why the author entitles this book, "The Ayatollah in the Cathedral." This is an important discovery, because it helps one understand a very crucial factor at work in the American culture that prevents Americans from understanding and maintaining perspective on various issues of global

importance. The author's surprise and dismay on finding the "Ayatollah in the Cathedral" is not only eye opening but alarming as well. This is because it brings to the forefront the hidden reality, which the American people do not wish to accept i.e., that many of them are also ayatollahs in their own hearts and minds and in their dealings with others.

When Kennedy meets tough resistance from the American clergy he can not resist describing their thinking and actions in the following words: "I might have added words such as absolutism, obstructionism, know-nothingism, dogmatism, and authoritarianism, not to mention fanaticism. For I was talking about the Ayatollah, who, as I think, is far more than one Iranian cleric. He is that bundle of negative feelings within all of us that prevent us from listening to one another." (p. 168).

All in all, the book, *The Ayatollah in the Cathedral*, is the product of an insider's understanding of the way American policy makers, institutions, and leaders think and work. As an American, he has developed some important and useful insights into the working behavior and beliefs of people in the Third World, and feels that American society and policy makers do not understand the Third World and its people properly. This is why American policy in the Third World during the post-W.W.II era has been a failure. Dr. Kennedy has not chosen to be a critic of American society and policy-making institutions: he knows that the United States is a world leader and a democracy, and that in a democracy you have the right, opportunity, and duty to present your views and educate people if they are misinformed. Thus both he and his wife, Louisa have dedicated their lives to the cause of educating people and bringing them closer to each other by creating mutual understanding and trust. These two basic elements pervading American society would force American policymakers and leaders to develop and adopt policies that serve the actual interests of the United States.

This book, despite being a pioneering work in multidisciplinary areas, will not hit the stands as a best seller. It challenges the success of the weak but currently dominant paradigm in the United States and attempts to set guidelines for the development of a new and healthy paradigm in international relations and foreign-policy making. Due to domestic political pressures, U. S. policymakers find it convenient to follow the currently dominant paradigm, despite its failures. They will continue to do so in the near future as well. In the long run, however, this book may serve as the basis of new theories of international relations and new approaches to foreign policy conduct.

This academic, scientific, and strategic value of Dr. Kennedy's book takes it far beyond the memoirs of a former hostage. This value makes it a source of paradigmatic transformation in international relations, world politics, and foreign-policy.

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