



Drawing Fire: Political Cartoons of the Iran Hostage Crisis

Ateşi Çizmek: İran Rehine Krizinin Siyasi Karikatürleri

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Özet

Bu makale İran rehine krizinin özellikle Time, Newsweek, the New York Times, Washington Post, and Chicago Tribune olmak üzere ABD ulusal medyasında basılmış siyasi karikatürlerini analiz etmektedir. Bu makale, karikatürlerin basitlik gayreti içinde tarihi karmaşıklığı göz ardı ettiğini ve insanların 'diğerleri' korkusunu yağmaladığını ortaya koymaktadır. İran Devrimcilerini mantıksız ve kana susamış olarak resmetmeyi seçerek krize neden olan tarihsel güçleri ve içeriği göz ardı etmişlerdir. Karikatüristler böyle yaparak Amerikan kamuoyunun krize tepkisini kuşatmış olan bilgisizlik ile yabancı düşmanlığına ve İran'ın ABD`de süregelen negatif imajına katkı sağlamışlardır.

Anahtar kelimeler: İran rehine Krizi, ABD-İran ilişkileri, Yaygın Orta Doğu İmajı, siyasi karikatürler;Oryantalizm. Ayetullah Huneyni

Abstract

This paper analyzes the political cartoons of the Iran hostage crisis printed in the U.S. national media, specifically Time, Newsweek, the New York Times, Washington Post, and Chicago Tribune. The paper reveals that in striving for simplicity, the cartoons ignored historical complexity and preyed instead on people's fears of "the other." They gave no consideration to the context or historical forces that drove the crisis, choosing instead to depict Iran's revolutionaries as irrational and bloodthirsty. By doing so, the cartoonists contributed to both the ignorance and ethnocentrism that surrounded the American public's response to the crisis and the continued negative images of Iran in the United States.

Keywords: Iran Hostage Crisis; U.S. Iran Relations; Popular Images of the Middle East; Political Cartoons; Orientalism; Ayatollah Khomeini

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There were militants all over the place. It was ludicrous. It almost looked funny to see these guys running wild in this secure area of the American embassy, and then I started laughing. The whole thing was just ridiculous. One of the Iranians trained his weapon on me and said, "What are you laughing at motherfucker? I'll put your eyes out!" Well, I thought that was funny, coming from this little punk, so I laughed at him. A bunch of them grabbed me and started beating and kicking me. Then it wasn't funny any more.¹

Amid such scenes, nearly 500 Iranian students stormed the United States Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979. Swept up in the swelling tide of anti-American sentiment that washed over Iran in the midst of the Islamic Revolution, few of the demonstrators had any long-term goals or central direction. Indeed, as James Bill notes, most of the students were "astonished by the responses their action elicited, both within Iran and across the world."² The embassy contained sixty-two Americans, fifty-two remained hostages of their Iranian captors for the next 444 days. Condemnation from U.S. President Jimmy Carter and the international community failed to secure their release. The eviction of many Iranian students from the United States and economic sanctions against Iran proved similarly futile. Throughout the crisis, Carter and Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini traded inflammatory rhetoric. The Iranian cleric denounced the United States as the "Great Satan" and warned that any attempted invasion would be met with 35 million Iranians willing to die as martyrs.³ As James Bill notes, "American-Iranian relations had sunk to an all-time low."⁴

The seizure of the U.S. Embassy was a culminating point in decades of political disaffection in Iran. The repressive nature of the Shah's U.S.-backed regime had managed to keep most of the forces of opposition in check. But by the end of the 1970s, increasing demands for reform had resulted in violent uprisings and protests. The voices of opposition were far from unified. Some Iranians demanded greater modernization of the country while others backed the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini's call for "an immediate revolution" to turn Iran into an Islamic theocracy.⁵ With his health ailing, the Shah relinquished power and left the country at the end of 1978, prompting Khomeini's return to Tehran in February 1979. Immediately, Khomeini played on Iranians' fears that the United States would intervene to derail the political reforms as they had when the C.I.A. conspired to overthrow the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953. This anti-American sentiment helped Khomeini seize control of the revolutionary sentiment

¹ Charles Jones, Communications Officer at the U.S. Embassy, Tehran on November 4, 1979, quoted in Tim Wells, *444 Days: The Hostages Remember* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 81.

² James Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 296.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 295.

⁵ H.W. Brands, *Into the Labyrinth: The United States and the Middle East, 1945-1993* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), 160.

and provoked angry protests outside the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Less than two weeks after President Carter's decision to allow the Shah into the United States to seek treatment for cancer, the protestors stormed the embassy and began the hostage crisis. Although Khomeini had neither planned nor sanctioned their actions, he soon lauded the hostage-takers as heroes of the Islamic Revolution.⁶

According to Ali Ansari, the hostage crisis represented a turning point for Americans' image of Iran, the point at which "The sober rationality of the bureaucrat gave way to the emotional excitement of the politician."⁷ The speed with which events unfolded left many struggling to understand the hostage crisis. Few would have followed closely the growing dissatisfaction with the Shah's regime much less Khomeini's activities while in exile. Even fewer would have had any understanding of the C.I.A.'s role in the 1953 overthrow of Mosaddegh. Consequently, many Americans lacked sufficient context for understanding the historical and political forces at work in Iran. In the absence of this context, the actions of the Iranians were often portrayed in a reductionist and stereotypical way. As Ansari notes "Westerners struggled to come to terms with a new and unfamiliar lexicon, both visual and semantic ... and conveniently pigeon-holed that which they did not understand."⁸

Political cartoons contributed to casting the hostage crisis in this simplified and visceral way. Charles Press suggests that political cartoonists occupy a significant and vital role in society as interpreters of complex political events. They offer simplified explanations of confusing situations to a time-starved public.⁹ However, in the political cartoons of the hostage crisis, American cartoonists often relied on gross stereotypes of Iran and Iranians. In reducing the crisis to a digestible form for their viewers, the cartoonists reinforced much of the ignorance and ethnocentrism that surrounded the public's response to the crisis. Edward Said criticizes the U.S. media's coverage of the hostage crisis, charging that, "few columnists and journalists were interested in reevaluating the long American history of intervention in Iran" and that the hostages returned "to celebrations of American heroism and Iranian barbarism."¹⁰ These sentiments are clearly evident in the political cartoons of the hostage crisis. The following analysis of political

⁶ Ibid., 164.

⁷ Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Crisis in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 90.

⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁹ Charles Press, *The Political Cartoon* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1981). The accessible nature of their medium makes political cartoonists uniquely suited for this role. They can both reflect and condition the concerns of a "treasured" or "cherished" community for whose benefit the cartoon is produced. According to Press, the political cartoonist is motivated by concern for this community rather than his own political biases. Often, the cherished community is the "common man" whose rights or views can be neglected by those in power. Press identifies three elements that comprise a political cartoon. The first is the representation of "reality" that reveals the cartoonist's perception of a given situation. The second element is the "message," which can reflect a particular action that the cartoonist thinks should be taken to rectify the situation. The final element of the political cartoon is the "mood" that the cartoonist creates. By utilizing and manipulating such things as symbols, costume, and by using various artistic techniques, the cartoonist can subtly reinforce their message.

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World (Revised Edition)* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), lx-lxi.

cartoons printed in *Time* and *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Tribune* reveals that in striving for simplicity, the cartoons ignored historical complexity and preyed instead on people's fears of "the other." They contributed to, what Said describes as, a "more highly exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility" that has developed toward Muslims and the Middle East since the early 1980s.¹¹

The political cartoons served one further purpose. In surveying American orientalism at the turn of the nineteenth century, Holly Edwards suggests that American artists often used images of the Middle East to reflect upon and critique the nature of their own society.¹² Almost a century later, that same strain of orientalism existed in cartoon representations of the hostage crisis. While the hostages were in captivity, the cartoons reflected a deep sense of the United States' emasculation and declining global power under Carter. Conversely, the cartoons depict a new dawn for the nation and a resurrection of American exceptionalism with the release of the hostages under Reagan. In the same way that nineteenth century American artists used images of the Middle East for their own "personal, social, and cultural purposes," so too did the cartoonists use the hostage crisis to reflect on the changing status of the United States' global standing.¹³

Newspapers and magazines printed political cartoons relating to the hostage situation throughout the 444 days of the crisis. However, the frequency of these cartoons increased significantly during the four most dramatic incidents of the crisis. The first of these was the actual capture of the hostages. For weeks after, political cartoonists attempted to make sense of the situation and offered suggestions as to its deeper significance for the United States. These first weeks were crucial to framing the public's understanding of the historical and political dynamics at work in Iran.

The second dramatic incident which prompted more cartoons was the failed attempt at rescuing the hostages undertaken by the U.S. military on April 24, 1980. According to David Patrick Houghton, the operation, codenamed Eagle Claw, represented the "greatest disaster of Carter's presidency."¹⁴ Carter authorized the rescue attempt despite warnings from military advisors that it had only a 60-70% chance of success and would involve heavy casualties of hostages, rescuers, and Iranians. Taking such risks contradicted Carter's normally reserved foreign policy style and devotion to human rights. But after six months of stalemate and increasing frustration in the administration and among the American public, Carter decided the time was right for more decisive action. Despite the dangers involved, Carter deemed the risks acceptable especially given the political payoff for the upcoming presidential election if the rescue succeeded.¹⁵ On the eve of the raid, *Time* magazine lauded the President's firmer line in an article

¹¹ Ibid., xi.

¹² Holly Edwards, "A Million and One Nights: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930," in Holly Edwards ed., *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴ David Patrick Houghton, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

¹⁵ Not all of Carter's advisors agreed with the plan. Cyrus Vance warned Carter of the consequences of the mission and resigned when he heard of the decision to proceed. Vance claimed there was no need for the mission because the hostages were in no immediate danger.

titled “Finally, Fire in His Eye.”¹⁶ The rescue mission proved to be a military and political disaster. The plan called for eight RH-153 Sea Stallion helicopters to fly from the carrier *U.S.S. Nimitz* stationed in the Persian Gulf to a rendezvous point some 200 miles south of Tehran. This 600-mile flight undertaken in the dark strained the capabilities of the men and machines involved. When a sandstorm struck the formation, six of the eight Sea Stallions along with a supporting C-130 Hercules crashed in the desert. Eight Americans died in the debacle. After Carter appeared on television to reveal the disaster, initial opinion polls indicated that most Americans approved of the President’s actions.¹⁷ Rapidly, as details of the mission emerged, the public mood soured. Within a week, *Newsweek* proclaimed, “Carter’s failed rescue effort frustrates the nation, irks the allies - and sets back the cause of the hostages.”¹⁸ The failure seemed just one more in a succession of foreign policy embarrassments during the 1970s.

The final Iranian demands for release of the hostages represented the third significant event that prompted an outpouring of political cartoons. On September 12, 1980 a radio broadcast from Tehran revealed the conditions for release of the hostages. *Newsweek* reported Khomeini’s terms as follows: (1) Returning the property of the defunct Shah; (2) Cancellation of all American claims against Iran; (3) Guaranteeing U.S. political and military nonintervention in Iran; (4) Freeing all Iranian assets.¹⁹ Previous Iranian conditions for release included a U.S. apology for crimes against Iran. This new set of conditions, as one Iranian spokesman noted, signified “a kind of amnesty for the hostages.”²⁰

The announcement of Iranian demands led to the fourth significant event in the crisis—the endgame leading up to and including the release of the hostages in January 1981. Jimmy Carter lost the presidency to Ronald Reagan in November 1980. According to H.W. Brands, the hostage crisis played a major role in the outcome of the election.²¹ Opinion polls had predicted a close election, but voters went to the polls on the day after the one-year anniversary of the storming of the embassy. Commemorative newscasts of the event reminded voters of Carter’s failure to resolve the crisis. Despite the defeat, Carter worked tirelessly to secure the release of the hostages during his remaining two months in office. Rumors circulated some years later that members of Reagan’s political entourage had jeopardized Carter’s efforts. Gary Sick has claimed that William Casey promised future arms deals to Iran if Iranian officials detained the hostages long enough for their release to coincide with Reagan’s inauguration.²² By doing so, the release would appear to support Reagan’s hopes for a new dawn for the nation and not be remembered as a diplomatic success for Carter. At the time, few Americans cared about the details of the release. The

¹⁶ “Finally, Fire in His Eyes,” *Time* (April 21, 1980), 14.

¹⁷ Paul B. Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why It Failed* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985).

¹⁸ “A Mission Comes to Grief in Iran,” *Newsweek* (May 5, 1980), 24.

¹⁹ “New Hope for the Hostages,” *Newsweek* (September 29, 1980), 7.

²⁰ Anonymous, quoted in *ibid.*

²¹ Brands, *Into the Labyrinth*, 170.

²² Gary Sick, *October Surprise: America’s Hostages in Iran and Election of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Time Books, 1992).

hostages returned to a tremendous outpouring of public gratitude and were honored in a triumphant parade through streets of New York City.

During each of these four dramatic events, public interest in the hostage crisis heightened and the number of cartoons rose proportionally. The following analysis of a representative sample of cartoons reveals how the cartoonists helped frame the public's understanding of the unfolding events. Generally, the framework established by the cartoons contained one or more of the following four tropes:

1. The crisis revealed the relative decline of the nation's military pre-eminence and moral authority in world politics at the end of the 1970s.
2. Ayatollah Khomeini was the sole demonic, irrational, and malignant presence behind the whole affair.
3. There were no genuine causes for the hostage crisis and no contributing historical factors. Instead, the seizure of the U.S. Embassy and ultimate demands for money represented the moral bankruptcy of the Khomeini regime.
4. The release of the hostages represented a re-affirmation of America's national prestige. Without the hostages, the Iranians seemed far less menacing, allowing Americans to denigrate their former tormentors and assert their moral and ideological superiority over them.

The first of these prominent themes in the political cartoons was that the hostage crisis revealed the United States' military weakness and relative decline as a world power. For almost three decades following World War II, the U.S. had enjoyed a position of global pre-eminence. The long-lasting economic prosperity provided by the war fuelled a burgeoning faith in American exceptionalism. But during the 1970s, a series of events shook this feeling of superiority. Domestically, inflation finally burst the economic boom. In foreign affairs, the U.S. suffered greater indignity. The end of the Vietnam War in January 1973 signaled the nation's first ever military defeat. The fact that a small, poorly-armed third-world country inflicted the defeat exacerbated the humiliation. Similarly, the OPEC crisis forced Americans to suffer the embarrassment of being held to ransom by supposedly less-developed nations. Such setbacks represented, as cultural historian Tony Williams noted, "an affront to the chosen race's belief in historical invulnerability."²³

The seizure of over fifty Americans by Iran and the futility of Carter's response confirmed for many the emasculation of a once proud nation. The cover of *Newsweek* posed the question "Has America Lost Its Clout?" next to an image of a flustered bald eagle.²⁴ A Herblock cartoon appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* lamenting the United States' embroilment in the Middle East as a result of its oil interests. The cartoon co-opted the emotive image of a blindfolded and bound

²³ Tony Williams, "Narrative Patterns and Mythic Trajectories in Mid-1980s Vietnam Movies," in Michael Anderegg, ed., *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 117.

²⁴ *Newsweek*, November 26, 1979, cover. The author does not have copyright permission to reprint the actual cartoons referred to in the text. Where possible, internet links are provided to view the images online.

hostage. Instead of blaming the Iranian government, the cartoon blamed the “U.S. govt’ failure to end dependence on foreign oil.”²⁵ (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2009632059/>)

The hostage has an inflated chest, an unbowed head, and presents an image of strength but is constrained by misguided government energy policies. The cartoon carries a reflective message on the nature of the United States’ declining global influence. Forces outside of his/its control compromise this proud man representing the American nation. Soon after, *Newsweek* printed a cartoon by Jack Ohman that shows a dirtied United States Flag being used as a doormat to the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. An M-16 rifle lies outside impotently—a symbol of America’s declining military threat. A notice on the door invites visitors to “PLEASE USE THE DOORMAT.”²⁶ The message of this cartoon is that anyone can trample on the United States. The flag is sacred for most Americans. It symbolizes not only the United States but also anyone who has given his or her life for the country. By desecrating the flag the cartoonist evokes a mood of outrage in the viewer. For such a proud symbol of the nation to be so discredited reveals a sense of angst over how far the country had fallen. A more overt manipulation of a sacred national symbol appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* one week following the hostage taking. The cartoon shows a grim-faced Uncle Sam with a gun to his head, held by an unidentified assailant. The accompanying caption states, “The lesson from Iran: If you want to harm American diplomats abroad, you can do it.”²⁷ As with the subversion of the image of the American flag, this cartoon is designed to evoke a mood of anger and frustration in the viewer. By placing revered symbols of national pride in such a powerless position, the cartoonists contributed to the sense of national emasculation exacerbated by the taking of the hostages.

If the taking of the hostages lowered the national self-esteem, the rescue mission fiasco pushed it to its nadir. The failure seemed to reinforce fears of the ineptitude of the United States’ military forces. *Time* magazine carried a cartoon that shows the hostages in the embassy surrounded by tanks stamped with the Red Star of the Soviet Union. One of the hostages—thinking that the U.S. cavalry had arrived to rescue them—mistakenly calls out “AT LAST! ... THE MARINES! ... WE’RE SAVED!”²⁸ This cartoon not only mocks the U.S. armed forces, it also raises concerns about the strength of the Soviet military. Several months previous to the failed rescue effort, Soviet tanks had rolled into Afghanistan. This cartoon suggests that the Soviet Union was far more capable of launching an effective offensive in the Middle East than the U.S. The juxtaposition of Soviet might and U.S. weakness reveals the depth of public concern over the nation’s declining potency in the Cold War.

Newsweek reflected on the political damage to Carter’s hopes of re-election in a cartoon that represents the “CARTER CAMPAIGN ‘80” as an aircraft flying over the wreckage of three helicopters. Each helicopter is labeled with one of the crises afflicting the administration. One carries the tag “ENERGY,” another “THE ECONOMY,” the third “FOREIGN POLICY.”²⁹ As

²⁵ *Washington Post*, November 15, 1979, p. A18

²⁶ *Newsweek*, November 26, 1979, p. 8.

²⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, Section 2, p.11.

²⁸ *Time*, May 5, 1980, p. 26.

²⁹ *Newsweek*, May 12, 1980, p. 28.

this cartoon makes clear, the failed rescue mission came to symbolize the incompetence of the Carter administration in dealing with crisis situations. Finally, the *New York Times* reprinted a cartoon from the *Miami Herald* that summed up the mood of the nation after the rescue mission. The cartoon shows a small, isolated representation of Uncle Sam explaining, “LOOK, WE NEEDED THIS RAID TO RESTORE CONFIDENCE IN OURSELVES.”³⁰ This characterization of Uncle Sam clearly does not inspire confidence. Instead, he looks like a figure of fun. He is overweight and his clothing is loose fitting and shabby looking. In such garb he appears more like a circus clown than a symbol of national prestige. That he is portrayed as being so small in the frame reflects the sentiment that the nation had become weak and feeble in the wake of the crisis. All of these cartoons reflected the belief that the United States’ power and global influence had declined. The taking of the hostages and the failed rescue mission seemed to confirm that belief. By portraying Americans in emasculated positions and by manipulating treasured symbols of national prestige such as the flag and Uncle Sam, political cartoonists both reflected and contributed to this sentiment.

A second major theme of the political cartoon of the hostage crisis was the emphasis on Khomeini as the sole architect of the crisis and as an irrational, malignant force. James Bill claims that Khomeini “quietly expressed disapproval” of the demonstrators’ actions at first.³¹ Only when he realized that the situation could help unify the revolutionary forces in opposition to the United States did he fully support the action. But for most Americans, Khomeini symbolized the cruel actions of the captors and the invidious nature of Islamic fundamentalism from the start. As William A. Dorman and Mansour Farhang argue, Khomeini rapidly became a focus of western fascination and contempt in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. Instead of viewing the revolution as “probably the most popular in modern history,” the Western media “reduced a mass movement that had complex and long-standing forces behind it to the product of the iron will of one man.”³² Warren Christopher, chief negotiator at the end of the crisis, recalled, “one of the most challenging and frustrating problems of the crisis was trying to figure out who within Iran would be influential in a decision to release the hostages . . . [Iran had] no settled identity or single voice.”³³ But for the cartoonists and for most Americans there was little doubt about Khomeini’s influence over the situation. Without exception, political cartoons portrayed Khomeini as the only political agent in Iran.

Political cartoonists demonized the Ayatollah. They consistently emphasized his thickset eyebrows and stern expression to give him a more menacing look. Cartoonist Herblock had used these motifs to cite the brutality of the Khomeini regime in an April 1979 cartoon for the *Washington Post*—long before the hostage crisis had begun. The cartoon assails Khomeini’s approach to justice and civil rights by showing Iranians being shot by government forces under a menacing poster of their new leader and his words “There is no reason why a criminal should be

³⁰ *New York Times*, May 4, 1980, Section 4, p. E3.

³¹ Bill, *Eagle and the Lion*, 295.

³² 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), 156-161.

³³ Warren Christopher et al, *American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 6.

tried in the first place ... Once his identity is established, he should be killed right away.”³⁴ The cartoon also mocks Khomeini’s religious pretensions by having these events unfold under the headline “SPIRITUAL LEADER.”

(<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/swann/herblock/images/s03485u.jpg>)

Similarly, when *Time* magazine made Khomeini their “Man of the Year” in 1979, they chose for their cover a portrait that made Khomeini look full of hatred and malice.³⁵

(<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601800107,00.html>)

His darkened features and furrowed brow cast him as the epitome of evil. Nearly every political cartoon with a portrayal of Khomeini used similar visual devices to suggest an evil persona. In addition, the cartoons created an image of Khomeini as a murderous tyrant. The week following the taking of the hostages, one *Washington Post* cartoon showed Khomeini concocting a vile potion to feed to the sick people of Iran. The scene is shrouded darkness. Bats circle overhead. The Ayatollah calls out “MORE LEECHES, MORE BLEEDING, STRONGER POTIONS!”³⁶ With such images of Black Magic and Satanic ritual the cartoonist Herblock creates a mood of malevolence. That the potion is labeled “HATE AMERICA” reveals the wicked nature of Khomeini’s plans. The inference is that Khomeini’s only prescription for resuscitating Iran is to fill the populace with animosity toward the United States. Such an image not only ignores any genuine reform initiatives, it casts him as nothing more than a hater.

That same week, the *Chicago Tribune* presented an even more condemnatory image of Khomeini. The cartoon shows Khomeini standing atop a pile of grotesquely contorted and dismembered bodies—some of them appear to be the hostages—holding a bloodstained axe. He points to the viewer and declares, “YOU SATANIC AMERICANS!”³⁷ This cartoon highlights in unambiguous terms the cartoonists’ belief that Khomeini is a ruthless murderer of innocents. It suggests that both his regime and his political vision are based on repression and violation of human rights. The cartoon exemplifies the simplified and distorted view of Khomeini common to most political cartoons during the crisis. As Dorman and Farhang point out, much of Khomeini’s support derived from popular opposition to the repressive nature of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi’s regime. But this and other cartoons clearly suggest that Khomeini was the real oppressor of the Iranian people. By emphasizing the despotic nature of his power, the cartoon also creates an image of Khomeini as hypocritical in his condemnation of the U.S. as the “Great Satan.” Such a sentiment would surely arouse a sense of indignation and anger among Americans.

One final cartoon in this vein appeared in the *New York Times* one month before the release of the hostages. It shows a disembodied Khomeini gripping the hostages trapped inside an hourglass in one hand and a holding a scythe in the other.³⁸ This image portrays Khomeini as the

³⁴ Printed in the *Washington Post*, April 8, 1979, retrieved from “Herblock’s History: Political Cartoons From the Crash to the Millennium,” website accessed September 29, 2011 at <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/swann/herblock/one.html>>

³⁵ *Time*, January 7, 1980, cover.

³⁶ *Washington Post*, November 13, 1979, p. A18.

³⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, Section 2, p. 8.

³⁸ *New York Times*, December 28, 1980, Section 4, p.1.

Grim Reaper with the ability to dictate whether the hostages live or die. The ubiquitous dark menacing features and stern demeanor contribute to the image of Khomeini as evil incarnate. In addition to revealing the menacing nature of Khomeini and his regime, these cartoons also suggest that he has a blatant disregard for human rights and the welfare of the hostages. Representations of the victimized American “self” and the despotic Iranian “other” serve to enforce not only the precarious nature of the hostages’ plight but also to demonize Khomeini and his regime.

The metaphor of the crisis as a game recurred frequently in political cartoons that addressed Iranian demands for the hostages’ release. *Newsweek* commented on the influence of the hostage situation on the presidential election in a cartoon that showed Khomeini manipulating both Carter and Reagan via his hold over the hostages. The cartoon presents the situation as a game of chess in which Khomeini is in total control. The cartoonist makes him much larger than the chess pieces—including the two presidential candidates—in a visual representation of his position of power.³⁹ After Iran presented its final demands for the hostages’ release in September 1980, the *New York Times* reprinted a cartoon from the *Cincinnati Enquirer* that alluded to the ever-shifting positions of the Iranians. It shows the Ayatollah putting up signs indicating that the hostages are “JUST AROUND THE CORNER . . . NEXT CORNER . . . JUST A LITTLE LONGER.”⁴⁰ These signs lead the pursuer around the pillar on a futile quest to find the hostages. The cartoon portrays Khomeini as being in complete control of the situation, but seems interested only in tormenting the pursuer not in making any political or ideological statements. These cartoons portray the Iranians as capricious in that they have no clearly-defined objectives for taking the hostages. They create the impression that the hostages are being held on a whim and not because of any deep-seated opposition to the United States. Such a message allowed Americans to easily dismiss Khomeini’s claims of their nation’s crimes against Iran. By dismissing the genuine concerns and opposition of the Iranian leadership, the hostage crisis then becomes a manifestation of the moral bankruptcy of Khomeini’s regime. This theme is further elaborated upon in the cartoons by their emphasis on Khomeini’s greed. *Newsweek* portrayed Khomeini at a card table sitting front of a large pile of poker chips and an Uncle Sam who has lost his clothes to the Ayatollah. Khomeini informs Sam that “I’VE CHANGED MY MIND, SAM . . . I’M GONNA RAISE YOU AGAIN.”⁴¹ This cartoon incorporates the themes of U.S. emasculation and Iranian fickleness, but also suggests that Khomeini cares only for money.

More overt accusations of financial motives appeared in the wake of Iran’s demands in return for the release of the hostages. A *Washington Post* cartoon (reprinted in *Newsweek*) showed Khomeini holding aloft a sign that reads “REPENT-OR AT LEAST SEND LOTS OF MONEY.”⁴² This cartoon implies that Khomeini holds financial rewards above his religious convictions. During the final weeks of the hostage crisis, as U.S. and Iranian negotiators thrashed out the final details of the financial settlement, *Newsweek* printed a cartoon from the *Richmond News Leader* that shows Khomeini holding Uncle Sam by the throat and saying “LETS TALK SOME MORE

³⁹ *Newsweek*, November 3, 1980, p. 26.

⁴⁰ *New York Times*, September, 21, 1980, p.3.

⁴¹ *Newsweek*, March 13, 1980, p. 24.

⁴² *Newsweek*, September 29, 1980, p. 39

ABOUT WHAT SANTA WANTS.”⁴³ The accompanying caption calls his demands for financial compensation “blood money.” After the release of the hostages at the end of January 1981, the *New York Times* printed a cartoon that shows Khomeini prostrated before an enormous dollar sign. He says, “I JUST TALKED TO OUR GOD. IT’S OKAY TO RELEASE THE HOSTAGES.”⁴⁴ Again, with this image, the cartoonist suggests that Khomeini’s only motivation is financial. By claiming that money is his only true god, the cartoonist denigrates Khomeini’s religious beliefs and suggests that they are just a façade for a far baser motive.

The fourth and final major theme of the political cartoons of the hostage crisis relates to the new positive mood that swept across the nation as the hostage situation ended. The new mood changed Americans’ perceptions of their own country and of Khomeini and the Iranians. The successful conclusion of the crisis seemed to restore the public’s faith in their nation’s strength. Concurrently the Iranians seemed less threatening and increasingly became figures of fun and ridicule.

When Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency on January 24, 1981 he promised an “era of national renewal.”⁴⁵ Behind pledges of military and economic regeneration Reagan promised to reverse the psychological malaise of the Carter presidency. The release of the hostages offered fillip to the hopes of national renewal. On the very day of Reagan’s inaugural, the hostages began their flight home after their 444-day ordeal. The *Washington Post* carried a cartoon that shows Uncle Sam freed from the shackles of “THE HOSTAGE SITUATION.”⁴⁶ Although he has a disturbed expression and walks with a limp the ordeal is finally behind him. More positive images than this appeared. The *Chicago Tribune* carried a cartoon in which every star on the American flag is a smiling face.⁴⁷ These two cartoons reveal a contrast from earlier cartoons that showed the flag and Uncle Sam in situations of weakness. The *Washington Post* further reflected the positive mood of the nation when one of its cartoons portrayed a shining Sun smiling down on the White House under the caption “BRIGHT BEGINNING.” Beneath the beaming visage is the same kind of ribbon that Americans tied around their trees in support of the hostages.⁴⁸ All three of these cartoons reveal the public’s sense of relief at the conclusion of the hostage crisis.

With the release of the hostages, Iran lost its position of relative strength over the United States. Consequently, cartoons depicted Iranians far less threatening than they had appeared during the crisis. The *Chicago Tribune* printed a cartoon that showed one of Khomeini’s men informing him that the “CHECK FROM AMERICA FOR THE HOSTAGES WAS JUST MARKED ‘INSUFFICIENT FUNDS’” at the “BANK OF IRAN.”⁴⁹ On one level, this cartoon mocks the weakened state of the U.S. economy. But it also shows Khomeini no longer in control of the outcome of events. His face screws up at the news giving the impression that the Americans

⁴³ *Newsweek*, January 5, 1981, p. 11.

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, January 25, Section 4, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Taken from Reagan’s inaugural address as quoted in the *New York Times*, January 25, 1981, A1.

⁴⁶ *Washington Post*, January 21, 1981, p. A18.

⁴⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, January 21, 1981, Section 5, p. 2.

⁴⁸ *Washington Post*, January 28, p. A18.

⁴⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, January 22, 1981, Section 3, p. 4.

may have got one over on the Iranian leader. Unlike previous cartoons, this cartoon creates a mood of Iranian weakness. On the same day, the *Washington Post* printed a cartoon in which two heavily armed Iranian goons fearfully ask, “WHAT DOES REAGAN MEAN BY LOOKING OVER THE AGREEMENT – DOESN’T HE TRUST US?” They have a look of panic on their faces at the thought that Reagan might change the terms of the hostages’ release.⁵⁰ Again, this cartoon suggests a weakness in the Iranian position absent from previous cartoons. This cartoon also offers a negative assessment on the state of Iran. The two characters in the foreground are armed, scruffy, unshaven, and heavy-set. They resemble stereotypical criminals. Their surroundings give the impression of a broken and decaying country. The walls are cracked and a single light bulb evokes images of a prison cell. A picture of Khomeini presides over this scene. The cartoon creates the mood that Khomeini is in charge of a backward criminal empire ruled by heavily armed thugs. As this cartoon reveals, with the re-emergence of a positive image of the U.S. after the release of the hostages an equally negative image of Iran developed in political cartoons.

Two cartoons further exemplify the new condescending attitude toward Iran. On Saturday January 24, 1981 the *Washington Post* reprinted a cartoon from the *Miami News* that shows the hostages’ aircraft lifting off from Iran. In the foreground, an Iranian dressed all in black chastises his colleague by asking “WHAT DO YOU MEAN AT LEAST SOMEONE GOT OUT OF THIS HELLHOLE??!”⁵¹ The message of this cartoon is that Iran under Khomeini is a terrible place to be and that the Iranian people want to escape. This cartoon represents the resurrection of American exceptionalism under Reagan. A key component of American exceptionalism is the belief that the United States represents the most enlightened and virtuous nation on earth. By contrast, enemies of the United States represent the forces of evil (an accusation Reagan frequently leveled at the Soviet Union). This cartoon re-asserts the nation’s moral superiority over the Iranians. In it, Iran becomes part of the dark side of the Manichean struggle as the hostages head toward a better place. In one last thumbing of the nose to the former captors, the *New York Times* printed a cartoon on January 25, 1981 that shows a miniaturized Khomeini telling his followers “he misses the hostages.”⁵² The cartoon portrays Khomeini as powerless and feeble. He is portrayed as no more than a couple of inches tall with a barely audible voice. The clear message of this cartoon is that without the hostages he has no strength. They were his only source of authority and without them he is nothing. When juxtaposed with the iron-fisted, muscular, Grim Reaper characterization of a few weeks earlier, this cartoon reveals the extent to which the Ayatollah’s image in the U.S. had changed. Seeing their former tormentor so humbled and ineffective must surely have brought comfort to the millions of Americans viewing the image.

According to Ali Ansari, “The tragedy of the hostage crisis is that ... it crystallized a particular impression and stopped the process of reengagement, ... objective assessment gave way to emotionally charged myth.”⁵³ The political cartoons of the crisis contributed to creating this

⁵⁰ *Washington Post*, January 22, 1981, p. A18.

⁵¹ *Washington Post*, January 24, 1981, Section 4, p. 3.

⁵² *New York Times*, January 25, Section E, p. 4.

⁵³ Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Crisis in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 90.

reductionist and often skewed perception of Iran and the Iranians. Political cartoons operate in a unique place in media culture. By their nature, they are simplistic and ephemeral, designed to be consumed quickly and to provoke an immediate reaction. Throughout the crisis, they offered a damning portrayal of Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution. They established a narrative for interpreting the crisis which offered no historical understanding or context. Instead, they relied on stereotypes and orientalist tropes to provoke an emotional response from the public. With many other forms of media available, cartoons alone cannot condition public opinion. But anyone who lacked the time or inclination to delve into the greater complexities of the situation would have been given a repetitive and consistent narrative framework with which to understand the hostage crisis. The cartoons interpreted the situation as arising from the cruel, irrational, and despotic designs of Khomeini and not as a manifestation of Iran's pent up animosity against the Shah and his United States backers. They portrayed the Khomeini regime as being run by nothing more than murderers and thugs. They reflected on the weakness of the United States' global standing when the hostages were still incarcerated, and then basked in the glory of the rebirth of American exceptionalism upon their release. Charles Press argues that political cartoonists act as "servants to the cause of human decency" because of their concern for their community of viewers.⁵⁴ While cartoonists may have this potential by their ability to reflect and condition public attitudes, their devotion to human decency is far from absolute. In reducing the crisis to a more accessible form for their viewers, the cartoonists contributed to the ignorance and ethnocentrism that surrounded the public's response to the crisis and, perhaps, contributed to the negative milieu in relations between Iran and the United States in the decades that followed.

⁵⁴ Press, *Political Cartoon*, 57.

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