

# The Iranian Hostage Crisis

*Captivity and Restoration of a Nation*

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## Foreword

I would like to thank those who have assisted me in my work with this thesis. First, I owe my thanks to Professor Peter Filene of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for giving me the opportunity to work with my own project for his course *HIST150 U.S. History After 1945* in the spring semester of 2006. He picked up on my interest for American nationalism and suggested that I write about the Iranian hostage crisis. His help and encouragement contributed to my growing enthusiasm for the project, and after I had handed in my paper to him I decided to expand on the topic for my master's thesis at the University of Oslo.

I am also grateful to Professor Michael H. Hunt, also at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His course, *HIST152 U.S. Foreign Relations*, which I followed during the spring semester of 2006, was significant to my understanding of American foreign policy. Professor Hunt also introduced me to a book that was of utmost importance to my work on the thesis.

My special thanks go to Professor Ole O. Moen at the North American studies section at ILOS, the University of Oslo. I took his course, *NORAM4570 American National Identity*, in the fall semester of 2005, and it sparked my interest for American nationalism. In January 2006, he became my advisor, and his advice and corrections have been invaluable.

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## **0. Introduction**

### ***0.1. Subject***

On November 4, 1979, Iranian revolutionaries seized the American embassy in Tehran and took hostage 66 American diplomats and citizens. The Iranian hostage crisis became a national obsession that only ended when the hostages were released after 444 days in captivity, and in effect the American nation itself was being held captive along with the hostages. The crisis bred anger, frustration, and genuine bewilderment among both policymakers and the American public, and some questions continued to haunt Americans long after the release of the hostages. Why did the crisis happen in the first place, and why was it allowed to drag on for so long? Commentators started to ask sobering questions in the midst of the massive national celebration sparked by the release of the hostages: Why did the crisis become such an obsession with the American people? How did this public obsession affect policymakers? And was there really a cause for celebration?

Traditionally, questions like the first two seem to have been the most interesting to diplomatic historians. A classical international relations approach would be to scrutinize American policies leading up to the crisis in Iran and focus on the administration's decisions and actions during the embassy seizure. A traditional Realist view would emphasize the importance of policymakers and the rational state as driving forces in history, often without a glance to the cultural context policymakers are a part of. However, cultural history has become gradually more important and poses a challenge to this view. Many historians have recognized the effect that mass media and public opinion have on policymakers, and thus it has become more accepted to view the policymaking process in its contemporary context and study the complex interactions that produce the decisions.

The subject of this paper is the American public's reaction to the Iranian hostage crisis, analyzed as a particularly potent expression of nationalism. From this perspective, explaining the complexities of the actual policymaking process seems less important than trying to answer the last three questions stated in the opening paragraph. However, at the core of this paper lies the idea that policymakers are in a reciprocal relationship to the culture they are a part of. Policies grow out of the contemporary culture, but they also affect it. The thesis

proposed here is based on this view of diplomatic and cultural history as two intimately connected disciplines, and thus all the questions in the first paragraph might be relevant to this paper.

## **0.2. Statement of thesis**

The thesis of this paper is mainly grounded in the works of three different scholars: Gary Sick, Catherine V. Scott, and Melani McAlister. Sick served as principal White House aide for Persian Gulf affairs from 1976 to 1981, and his inside account of the Iranian hostage crisis, All Fall Down, is perhaps the most widely known work on the crisis.<sup>1</sup> Scott is a professor of political science, and her major research interest is U.S. foreign policy, and the interaction of culture, media and national identity. Her article, Bound for Glory: The Hostage Crisis as Captivity Narrative in Iran, argues for a reading of the hostage crisis as a captivity narrative.<sup>2</sup> McAlister is a professor of American Studies and International Affairs, and in her book Epic Encounters. Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000, she looks at public responses to the hostage crisis in light of a gendered national identity situated at the intersection of public and private concerns.<sup>3</sup> All these scholars highlight the personalization of the crisis, and Scott and McAlister both make a compelling argument for reading the hostage crisis as a captivity narrative.

In light of these two observations, then, it will be argued in this paper that the Iranian hostage crisis as captivity narrative was indeed highly personalized, and that this personalization was a result of both the administration's dedication and the massive media coverage (Sick 221, McAlister 200). It allowed the American public to strongly identify with their country's standing in the world, and it could be argued that the personalization of the crisis largely prompted the passionate responses, the need "to *do something*," and the national unity that ensued. These responses in turn formed a framework of sorts for policymakers to work within, a framework that worked as a double-edged sword as it was both encouraging and limiting the administration's actions. Arguably, policymakers were as much a part of the national community as the general American public and thus could not just separate

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Sick, All Fall Down (New York: Random House) 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine V. Scott, "Bound for Glory: The Hostage Crisis as Captivity Narrative in Iran," International Studies Quarterly, 44.1 (2000), 177-188.

<sup>3</sup> Melani McAlister, Epic Encounters. Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press) 2005.

themselves completely from nationalist sentiments. In a short-term, national perspective, and based on the final outcome of the crisis, this emotional investment seems to have paid off for American foreign policymakers and the American public alike. The Iranian captivity narrative, a national obsession for 444 days, ended well, thus promising restoration of the United States' standing in the world, and regeneration of the national psyche. However, seen in a long-term perspective the American handling of the crisis was less successful, and an analysis of the captivity narrative in Iran reveals several troubling aspects of U.S. foreign policy and the American national character.

### **0.3. Method**

The method employed in this paper is an American Studies qualitative method. It is mainly historical and based on text analysis. American Studies as a field is characterized by its focus on interdisciplinarity, which ties in well with this paper's focus on the interactions of foreign policy, culture, mass media, and the public.

### **0.4. Primary sources**

Written documents in the form of weekly magazines, daily newspapers and Gallup polls form the basis of this paper. A main focus will be on opinions and interpretations found in these publications, as the value of the news reports is uncertain and less interesting in light of the thesis proposed here. The material has been collected from three different time periods: November-December 1979 (the beginning of the crisis), April-May 1980 (the failed rescue attempt), and January-February 1981 (the end of the crisis). The magazines are *Time* and *Newsweek*, and the newspapers are the *Chicago Tribune*, *Louisville Courier (The Courier-Journal)*, and the *Houston Post*. *Time* and *Newsweek* have many shared attributes, but it could be argued that *Time* is a slightly more conservative magazine. The newspapers are from two Midwestern states (the *Tribune* from Illinois, the *Courier* from Kentucky) and one Southern State (the *Post* from Texas), and can be viewed as relatively conservative, at least in comparison to liberal newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The Gallup Poll is an opinion poll used to represent public opinion in the United States. At the time of the Iranian hostage crisis, the polls were conducted using door-to-door sampling methods. These polls have a reputation for being carried out independently and objectively.

As for the usefulness of magazines and newspapers as primary sources, it is obvious that there are both positive and negative sides to these documents of the past. First, it could be argued that no other sources are able to better convey the atmosphere of a time period.<sup>4</sup> Newspapers are able to record and print responses and reactions to an event already the next day, while weeklies can provide their readers with in-depth cover stories of current events. Both publications print letters from the public. It could also be argued that weeklies and dailies can pinpoint a shift in the political climate fairly accurately (Clausen 5). However, a historian must realize that what could be interpreted as a symptom of a trend in the political development does not necessarily cover the political reality (6). Newspapers, and also weeklies mix facts and interpretations (12), and it is important to remember that when a paper or a weekly magazine reflects the public opinion, it only reveals a portion of it (6). A further complication is that one can never be entirely sure whether a newspaper or a magazine merely reflects an opinion, or in fact helps create it (5). It is not unfair to say that newspapers and magazines seek to affect their readers' opinions, and sometimes it can be difficult to detect a publication's political attitude (6-7). Last, but not least, knowledge of these publications' readerships is hard to attain, and it could be argued that relatively speaking, all these sources have fairly few readers.

Although there are problems with using newspapers and magazines as primary sources, this does not mean that one should avoid them. The historical importance of these sources is incontestable, and so the challenge consists in developing an awareness of the problems stated. Instead of taking the material at face value, it is necessary to read it from a critical standpoint. This paper also employs Gallup Polls, quantitative sources that arguably are more objective and independent than newspapers and magazines. According to Sigmund Grønmo, an interpretation of quantitative data may be expressed in a very precise and structured way.<sup>5</sup> However, qualitative sources on their part are able to reveal individual differences and nuances in attitudes. Hopefully, these two types of sources complement each other in such a way that this paper's treatment of the Iranian hostage crisis can be seen as valid and relevant as possible.

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<sup>4</sup> H.P. Clausen, Aviser som historisk kilde (Århus: Institutt for Presseforskning og Samtidshistorie, 1962) 12.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Grønmo, "Forholdet mellom kvalitative og kvantitative tilnærminger i samfunnsforskningen," ed. Harriet Holter and Ragnvald Kalleberg, Kvalitative metoder i samfunnsforskning (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2002) 83.

## **0.5. Secondary sources**

These types of sources will be treated later in the historiographical section of chapter 2. Thus, it seems sufficient to state here that the works of the three authors mentioned in 0.2. form the basis of this paper's thesis, while the remaining secondary sources are included to supplement and challenge these three works, while also providing some of the historical background.

## **0.6. Definitions**

For the purpose of this paper it is necessary to define certain key terms. The public reaction to the Iranian hostage crisis will be analyzed as an expression of nationalism, and this term demands a particularly careful treatment. There are two main reasons for this. First, as the author Anatol Lieven points out, nationalism "has not been the usual prism through which American behavior has been viewed. Most Americans speak of their attachment to their country as patriotism, or, in an extreme form, superpatriotism."<sup>6</sup> "Nationalism" and "patriotism" are not synonyms, and need to be kept apart. Second, both "nation" and "nationalism" are terms that have been notoriously difficult to define, and therefore there seems to be as many definitions as there are scholars in the field of nationalism theory. To adhere to a particular definition is to choose sides in the nationalism debate, as it were.

Thus, the definitions employed in this paper will be as follows:

**Nation:** According to Benedict Anderson, a nation is an imagined community. John Fousek makes an important point when he voices his support of this definition: "If ever a nation was an imagined community, surely it is the United States of America."<sup>7</sup>

**Nationalism:** Liah Greenfeld asserts that "[t]he only foundation of nationalism as such...is an idea; nationalism is a particularly perspective or a style of thought. The idea which lies at the core of nationalism is the idea of the 'nation'."<sup>8</sup> John Fousek also contributes to Greenfeld's definition by adding that nationalism "is a style of thought about identity, loyalty, and solidarity that values the nation above all other sources or objects of identity, loyalty, and solidarity" (5). Fousek also includes "one characteristic taken from a standard dictionary

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<sup>6</sup> Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 2.

<sup>7</sup> John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) 4.

<sup>8</sup> Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992) 3-4.

definition: that nationalism as a style of thought exalts the particular nation concerned over all other nations” (5).

**Patriotism:** “Love for or devotion to one's country” (the Merriam-Webster dictionary).

Patriotism can thus be described as a matter of emotion, while nationalism is a more developed system of thought that employs this emotion to create a hierarchy of identities and nations. It could be argued that the common American patriotism has a tendency to burst into nationalism whenever the United States is threatened from without; that the emotion of patriotism is articulated through the language of nationalism.

# Chapter 1 – Historical background and historiography

## **1.1. Historical background**

James Bill's analysis of the relationship between the United States and Iran, The Eagle and the Lion, has the subtitle The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations.<sup>9</sup> Bill is an expert on Iran, and his description of how the relationship between Iran and the United States started highlights the tragedy of the hostage crisis. According to him, “[f]ew international relationships have had a more positive beginning than that which characterized Iranian-American contacts for more than a century” (4). Although Iran was never colonized, the country had to struggle to fend off the Russian and British empires, and in 1941 Great Britain and the USSR invaded Iran during the August and September months. The two colonial powers also deposed Reza Shah, and installed his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Bill describes how Iran's leaders “looked for third forces to exercise a neutralizing influence,” and how they hoped that the United States would fulfill such a role in the region (5). He argues that until 1953, “American statements and activities convinced Iran's leaders that this hope was well placed” (Bill 5). Gary Sick also emphasizes that in 1943 the USA called for a declaration of support for Iran's independence and territorial integrity after World War II was over. The purpose of this declaration was to prevent the USSR from tightening its hold on Iran, according to Sick (5).

Thus the role of a neutralizing “third force” seemingly fit the United States well, as American fear of Soviet influence in the region prompted the USA's support of Iran, eventually contributing to the withdrawal of Soviet troops from southern Iran in mid-1946 (Sick 5). However, it could be argued that this burgeoning anti-Communism also led to the fateful event in 1953 that not only “ended America's political innocence with respect to Iran,” (Sick 7) but began an era that would culminate in the hostage crisis of 1979. In 1951, newly elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, thus bringing the country into a conflict with Great Britain. When the American attempts at mediation failed, the Truman administration feared that this would push Iran closer to the Soviet Union (Sick 6). The new Eisenhower administration thus “inherited a stubborn

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<sup>9</sup> James Bill, The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1988.

stalemate,” and the fact that Mossadegh increasingly had to lean on the Communist Tudeh party for support made Washington worry about the possibility of a pro-Communist coup (Sick 6). A British plan to oust Mossadegh received support from the American government in 1953, and Operation Ajax, as it was called, was a success. Sick describes the overthrow in this way: “A small group of Westerners with no special knowledge of Iran...were able to coordinate and orchestrate the dismissal of an ambitious prime minister by the ruling monarch and make it stick by a rousing show of public enthusiasm and support” (7). The result was that “the belief that the United States had single-handedly imposed a harsh tyrant on a reluctant populace became one of the central myths of the relationship, particularly as viewed from Iran” (Sick 7).

In the eyes of both moderate nationalists and radicals on the left the overthrow of Mossadegh in 1953 established the United States as “an imperialistic, oppressive external force,” but it was first during the 1970s that the United States, in Bill’s words, “increased its influence in Iran to levels highly reminiscent of Britain and Russia during the heyday of colonialism” (5). In 1972 a Great Britain weakened from the efforts of fighting two world wars had to withdraw from the Persian Gulf, and as a part of the American policy of containing communism, the Nixon administration developed a strategy called the “Twin Pillars”. This strategy consisted in relying on the Iranian shah and the Saudi Arabian government for American economic and military security in the Persian Gulf. Gary Sick relates a meeting between the shah and Nixon that expresses how important Iran had become to the United States. After the meeting, Nixon looked at the shah and said: “Protect me” (Sick 14). Following this visit the shah bought an enormous amount of weapons from the United States, more than \$9 billion worth during the first four years (15).

By 1972 it was also obvious that the Iranian society was going through tremendous changes, and Sick writes that Iran seemed to be making “an altogether remarkable transition into the ranks of developed states” (13). However, this image masked severe problems connected to Iran’s development. William O. Beeman, linguistic anthropologist and expert on Iran, argues that the economic boom American officials claimed that they had created in Iran was in reality superficial.<sup>10</sup> Citing reasons such as bottlenecks for investment in Iran, Beeman describes how Iran after the oil price increase in 1973-74 faced an enormous inflation (62).

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<sup>10</sup> William O. Beeman, The “Great Satan” vs. the “Mad Mullahs. How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2005) 61.

The shah's attempt at taking control of the economy in 1977 resulted in chaos and a devastating number of people losing their jobs (Beeman 62).

Although agreeing that this economic situation contributed to the eventual downfall of the shah, Beeman insists that what he calls "the complete rupture between the monarchy and the people" could never have been caused by economic difficulties alone (52-53). Beeman claims that these difficulties occurred in such a way that they could be "defined as a betrayal of the basic ideals that govern Iranian social ideology and morality" (53). A central Iranian myth is that there exists a struggle between "the pure forces of the inside and the corruption of the external" (Beeman 27). A result of this belief is, in Beeman's words, that as "internal conditions within the country become more and more difficult, the tendency on the part of the population is to search for conspiracy by an external source" (28). The rapid Westernization of the Iranian society could be analyzed as such an alien source, and the concept *Gharbzadegi*, or "Westoxication," expressed how the Iranian spirit was perceived to be eroded during the modernization process (Beeman 113). In light of this myth, the shah had betrayed the Iranian society through his alliance with the corrupting external force of the United States. In addition, the shah ruled the country as a dictatorship. With the help of SAVAK, the secret police, he enforced censorship laws and imprisoned or banished political opponents.

One of these opponents was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had been in opposition to the shah already from 1963. Khomeini was arrested and banished from the country in 1964, and from his exile in Iraq he led a small group intent on toppling the shah and establishing a theocratic state in Iran. Meanwhile, tensions in Iran grew, and on January 16, 1979, the shah fled and left the country in the hands of his Prime Minister, Shapour Bakhtiar. Among other acts, Bakhtiar dissolved SAVAK and invited Khomeini into the country again, asking his political opponent to help preserve the constitution, but Khomeini wanted no such thing. He created an interim government, and joined the struggle for power in revolutionary Iran.

By late 1979 Khomeini was in a fairly strong position as the leader of the Revolution, but there were also important obstacles to his plan for the country (Sick 203). Khomeini needed to mobilize public opinion, and when President Jimmy Carter reluctantly admitted the gravely ill shah to the United States on October 22, 1979, Khomeini started referring to this admission as a "plot" (Sick 204). Sick describes how Khomeini became aware of the plans some students

had to attack the American embassy in Tehran, positioned himself so that he could take advantage of the situation, and gave his support to the successful takeover on November 5. “Within a brief forty-eight hours,” Sick writes, “Khomeini had silenced the last important voice opposing his program, had diverted domestic attention away from internal political disputes and had launched a major confrontation with the United States that could be expected to galvanize public opinion behind him” (205). “The risks for Iran were extremely high,” Sick concludes, “but Khomeini was playing for high stakes” (205).

Just how risky Khomeini’s support of the embassy seizure was, might be more evident if one considers certain traits of the American national character, and the state of the national psyche there at the time. In 1979, the USA was a powerful country, but many critics felt that it was not fulfilling its potential. Catherine V. Scott points out that months before the hostage crisis, a “foreboding about American complacency” could be found in several popular articles (181). One commentator cast the United States in the role of a “helpless giant on the world stage” (Scott 181). These observations hint at the extent to which Americans take seriously their country’s standing in the world. The helplessness of the American giant seemed to create frustration, confusion and increasing anger among its citizens. First, the war and eventual loss in Vietnam had been devastating to the Americans. Some people could not believe that a country as powerful as the United States would lose to an apparently insignificant enemy, while others had been deeply shocked by American cruelties in the war. The legacy of the USA’s role in World War II was hovering above the heads of Americans: In 1945 the United States had emerged as a superbly powerful and benevolent nation, ready to “lead the free world”. The trappings of the Cold War had made this leadership more difficult than initially perceived. The American misadventure in Vietnam did not promise well for the future, nor did the oil crisis of 1973-1974.

In addition, there were troubles at home that did not fit Americans’ perception of how their country should be. The Watergate scandal had left a stain on the American political system, and economically the country suffered from a stagflation that the Americans struggled to understand. According to Scott, the combined misfortunes of the loss in Vietnam, the oil crisis, and Watergate “had contributed to a general apprehension about American leadership in world affairs” (181). All countries can go through a rough patch now and then, but it seems that the United States’ ambitions and strong self-esteem made the uncertainty of the future particularly difficult to tolerate for Americans.

Another important aspect of the American national character seems to be attendant on this strong sense of national pride, namely an unwillingness to accommodate and accept events that do not fit the idealized picture of the United States. Beeman writes about the Vietnam War that it “should have been a warning to Americans that the basis for international relations in the world was changing” (17). “Unfortunately,” he continues, “Vietnam was treated as an aberration – a defeat to be ignored and forgotten as soon as possible” (Beeman 17-18). A related phenomenon is described by Gary Sick. He claims that on account of the United States’ government’s short memory, “the events of 1953” had in 1978 “all the relevance of a pressed flower” (Sick 7). He blames the “rapid rotation of new faces in and out of Washington,” but could it not be argued that the idea of the United States assisting in a political coup is not something any American easily incorporates into his or her image of the home country? (Sick 7) To be sure, more examples of this happening exist, but it is difficult to deny that such actions jar with the image of the USA as benevolent leader of the world. An American with that kind of image of his or her country might perhaps more easily ignore perceived anomalies. It could be argued that such ignorance is partly willed, a case of the proverbial ostrich sticking its head into the sand, but it could also be said that when pride borders on arrogance, it might become genuinely difficult to comprehend a world that does not adhere to one’s perception of it.

Arrogance and self-absorption mutually enforce each other, and given that excessive pride can be said to be a trait of the American national character, Sick’s observation of the American government’s amnesia in the case of Iran is not so difficult to understand. In addition, Sick concedes that “[d]espite a century of sustained contact, Iran remained *terra incognita* for almost all Americans” (5). Until the seizure of the embassy, it seems, there had been no particular reason for most Americans to occupy themselves with the fate of this country in the Persian Gulf. Even most Americans living in Iran, Beeman claims, “lived in almost total isolation from Iranian society and culture” (57). The biggest group of Americans were technicians who, according to Beeman, were “blatantly living and working in Iran ‘for the money’,” and the American military personnel stationed in Iran had correspondingly little interest in the country and its citizens (Beeman 55).

In conclusion, it seems obvious that although the genesis of American ignorance about Iran might be debated, its existence and impact is indisputable. When the Iranian revolutionaries

seized the embassy, Americans were totally unprepared and genuinely bewildered. The vulnerability that had already made itself felt in the country now stood out sharply, and the fact that American citizens were held hostage by nationals of an unknown and presumably insignificant country was nearly unbearable. In addition, American officials were almost as confused as the general public, and according to political scientist David Patrick Houghton, the embassy seizure was perceived as “a seemingly ‘unprecedented’ act.”<sup>11</sup> Policymakers could not find any relevant analogy, and this naturally made the situation much more challenging. In his attempt to consolidate power in Iran, Khomeini ridiculed and kicked a grumpy, wounded, and confused giant, an act that makes the expression “highly risky” seem almost an understatement.

## **1.2. Historiography**

Many people have written about the Iranian hostage crisis, among them scholars, politicians, and the hostages themselves. Some works are fairly straightforward accounts of what happened, others are attempts at explaining why it happened, some are very critical, and others are interpretations of the crisis in a new light. This paper aims at a reasonable representation of the scholarship on the Iranian hostage crisis, but its main emphasis is on relatively recent interpretations that cast a new light on the ordeal. In this section, the works included will be presented in chronological order and discussed in relation to each other with regard to key concepts such as foreign policy, nationalism, Orientalism, and the influence of the media.<sup>12</sup> A majority of the books are accounts of the relationship between United States and Iran in general, where the hostage crisis naturally plays an important role. Scott’s article, and Sick’s and Houghton’s books are about the actual hostage crisis, while Little’s and McAlister’s books deal with the United States’ relationship to the Middle East in general.

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<sup>11</sup> David Patrick Houghton, US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis Cambridge Studies in International Relations 75 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 15.

<sup>12</sup> Edward W. Said, Orientalism (London: Penguin books) 1991. This book was first published in 1978, and Said’s theory has had a profound impact on studies of how the West relates to the East. An excerpt from his definition of the term: “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’ . . . the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient . . . despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a ‘real’ Orient. (2,5)

Barry Rubin wrote his book Paved With Good Intentions in 1980, before the actual resolution of the hostage crisis, and it is an attempt at explaining why the crisis came to pass.<sup>13</sup> During the time of writing, Rubin was a fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., and he says about his own book that it was "generated by [his] research as a historian in [sic] the evolution of Middle East politics and United States policy on the one hand and from [his] work as a political analyst of contemporary development on the other" (xi). Rubin's most important message can be discerned from the title: He argues that the "road to hell of the hostage crisis was often paved for the United States with good intentions, coupled with exceedingly bad judgment" (xi). As a diplomatic historian, Rubin goes beyond a narrow Realist focus on "objective national interests," and he argues that a country's behavior is "the result of the interaction of the collective historical experience of the nation with the individual life experiences of its citizens" (x).

Rubin also emphasizes the role of the media, and in *Appendix A* he discusses whether the press misinformed the American public. James Bill is cited as a scholar who would argue in favor of such a claim, but Rubin holds that the answer is not a simple one (Rubin 338, 342). Four years before the revolution, according to Rubin, there were several articles in newspapers such as *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* on Iranian instability and economic troubles, and also editorials that warned against a too close relationship between the United States and the shah (342). However, he asserts that "the emerging myth that coverage of Iran was a media disaster is quite misleading," and he argues that the real problem lies in the fact that "foreign news coverage is simply too often the major basis of public policymakers' perceptions of what life in other countries is really like" (Rubin 342). Rubin thus highlights the relationship between the media and public policymakers' ignorance, rather than the ignorance of the American public, and on the topic of the media coverage of the actual hostage crisis he says that the "media-political relationship" had never been as central to the policymaking process as during the hostage crisis (362-363). Rubin concludes that the "heavy front-page, opening-minute coverage of the hostage crisis may have backfired on the White House and damaged American policy by seeming to demand quick results and the fostering of optimism." (363) In all, Rubin's focus on the "collective historical experience" of the nation and his analysis of the media make it relevant to this paper, but it is important to

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<sup>13</sup> Barry Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions. The American Experience and Iran (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1980.

take into account reviewer Jerrold D. Green's main criticism of the book: That it "ultimately fails in its analysis of Iranian politics," and that it should be regarded as a "serious attempt to grapple with important questions central to the practice of American foreign policy" rather than "as a study of the Iranian Revolution, which it is not"(336).<sup>14</sup>

Gary Sick's All Fall Down (1985), is in many ways different from Rubin's work. Sick was a principal White House aide for Persian Gulf affairs from 1976-1981, and in his book he delivers a first-hand account of the crisis. It is rich in detail and arguably the most comprehensive treatment of the day-to-day events during the 14-month crisis. Sick calls his book a "chronicle of a political and strategic disaster," and he admits that since he was a part of the events of 1979-1981, he is "in some respects...a product of them" (vii-viii). In a book review of All Fall Down and American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis by Warren Christopher *et. al*, published in the journal *International Affairs*, Stephen Kirby cites Sick's position as a member of the National Security Council Staff and assistant to National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski as a prerequisite for the "unusual wide range of documentary sources" he was able to draw upon when he wrote the book (162).<sup>15</sup> However, Kirby also argues that both books are "typical products of Washington 'insiders' in that they mix revealing accounts of the workings of the policy elite with atmospheric trivia about some of its personalities, and important and previously unreleased evidence with vague speculation and baseless assertion" (Kirby 161). As opposed to Christopher, who wants to find heroes, Sick takes on the role of "the godfather passing judgment on the if not criminal then criminally incompetent actions of the Washington 'family'," according to Kirby (161). Taken as a whole, then, it could be argued that the book is important particularly for its rich variety of sources and internal criticism, but that its treatment of the background of the crisis is sparse. According to reviewer Richard Cottam, the account "trivializes more than instructs", and it lacks an overall analysis (252).<sup>16</sup> This is again connected to Sick's role as insider and American policymaker: He does have a limited knowledge of Iran. Like Rubin, he asks important questions about the conduct of American foreign policy, but his one-sided focus is, if not a blatant weakness, then at least something to keep in mind.

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<sup>14</sup> Jerrold D. Green, rev. of Paved With Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran, by Barry Rubin, *Political Science Quarterly* 96.2 (1981): 335-336.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Kirby, rev. of American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis, by Warren Christopher *et. al*, and All Fall Down: America's Fateful Encounter with Iran, by Gary Sick, *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, 62.1 (1985-1986): 161-162.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Cottam, rev. of American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis, by Warren Christopher *et. al*, and All Fall Down: America's Fateful Encounter with Iran, by Gary Sick, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19.2 (1987): 251-255.

As a representative for American policymakers, Sick is affected by the criticism that James Bill levels at the administration in his book The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations (1988). Unlike Rubin and Sick, Bill is an expert on Iran. He professes to have “observed the Iran-American tragedy firsthand for over twenty-five years,” not only from the perspective of Iran, but also through his “considerable interaction with the Americans who made our Iran policy over the past two decades” (7-8). According to reviewer Sharough Akhavi, Bill draws on a wide array of sources, and he has “accumulated a wealth of experience in his many years of travel to Iran and from his numerous studies of Iran’s internal and external politics”(1417).<sup>17</sup> “The result,” Akhavi asserts, “is a work that is characterized by a high degree of authenticity and integrity” (1417).

Bill’s critique of leading policymakers’ handling of the relationship with Iran is scathing. The biggest problem, argues, is that these policymakers have felt confident in their knowledge of Iran, a feeling they more or less shared with “every U.S. president from Eisenhower through Reagan” (Bill 3). This led to Presidents Carter and Reagan trying to handle the crises following the revolution “with no serious Iran expertise on their all-important National Security Councils” (Bill 3). People whom Bill considers as having this expertise, “a tiny group of American diplomats, Peace Corps volunteers, and scholars,” did not share the confidence of the administrations, and these people were not heard (3). Bill also lists a series of flaws dominating U.S. foreign policy both before and after the revolution: “Flaws of massive ignorance, bureaucratic conflict, Sovietcentricity, economic obsession, and the prevalence of informal or privatized decision making” (2). Together with the flaws of the Iranian leadership (inexperience, paranoia) and the “shallow and orthodox reporting” of the American mass media, U.S. policy contributed to the tragedy of American-Iranian relations that Bill describes (2-3).

Bill’s analysis is comprehensive and important, and clearly shows that American policymakers’ confidence about Iran reads as arrogance seen in conjunction with their actual ignorance. In addition, his admittance of his own faults reflects well on him: “Like all Iran-watchers, I have often been wrong in my own observations and prognoses” (Bill 9). However, although he has a point when he says that “a deep concern about the challenge of

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<sup>17</sup> Shahrough Akhavi, rev. of The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations, by James Bill, The American Political Science Review 84.4 (1990): 1417-1418.

communism” prompted many American policy decisions, it seems likely that anti-communism was not the only ideology to affect policymakers’ decisions (Bill 433).

The scholars presented so far all wrote their books in the 1980s, a period during which the explaining power of Cold War ideology was natural and strong. It will not be suggested here that anti-communism did not play an important role in the United States relationship with Iran, but in the following discussion of post-Cold War scholars of the hostage crisis it will be argued that this ideology was not the only one at work during the hostage crisis of 1979. The next five works to be introduced discuss the importance of ideologies like nationalism and Orientalism in relation to the hostage crisis.

Catherine V. Scott’s article Bound for Glory: The Hostage Crisis as Captivity Narrative in Iran (2000) argues that “media representation of the crisis...contained important elements of classic American captivity narratives” (177). During the Puritans’ time, explains Scott, captivity narratives “served as a vehicle for articulating the Puritans’ special mission in the New World” (180). She claims that Puritan ministers sought to “create a permanent sense of crisis among the colonists,” and that as “a chosen people, the Puritans expected and drew strength from affliction and trials” (Scott 180). The five recurring themes Scott focuses on are: “Depictions of Iranians as ‘devilish savages,’ calls to rally around the flag, anxious depictions of the hostages’ plight and fears that they will ‘go native,’ exhortations to stand firm, and heroic leadership” (177). Scott also sees the “captivity paradigm” as part of a central myth in American cultural history: “the myth of ‘regeneration through violence’” (180).

In the abstract, Scott’s paper is said to eschew “conventional analyses of foreign policymaking during the Iranian hostage crisis,” and she does employ concepts such as nationalism, national identity, and Orientalism (Scott 177, 178, 182). As a matter of fact, Scott considers “the importance of constructing national identities” as central to her paper’s approach, and she argues that the crisis “can be placed in the larger context of efforts to secure an American identity over and against fundamental threats” (178). Scott is less occupied with what caused the hostage crisis than what it meant to the American people and government. And although she recognizes the importance of “‘prophetic dualism’ in the rhetoric of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War,” her article seems to suggest that the dualistic rhetoric of the period did not just include the United States versus the Soviet Union (Scott 178). In the case of the hostage crisis, the focus was more on the United States versus

the “savages from the Orient,” which again could give associations to the American Puritans versus the “Indian savages”.

In contrast to Scott’s article, David P. Houghton’s book US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis (2001) focuses mainly on the actual policymaking of the Carter administration during the crisis. The book is written from a political scientist’s point of view, and Houghton’s argument is that the decision making of the administration was “critically affected by a barrage of historical analogies,” that “the *availability* and *representativeness* of the historical analogies...had a crucial effect,” and that the analogies “were not mere rhetorical flourishes designed to convince others of the desirability of various options after the fact” [the author’s italicization] (17-18). However, Houghton also includes a short analysis of the interplay between the president and the American public during the crisis. He notes that the Americans became “as obsessed as Carter with the fate of their countrymen,” and that they responded to the Iranian’s “well-nigh incomprehensible” hatred with “a nationalism, and often jingoism, of their own” (Houghton 2). He then goes on to describe how the public’s support for Carter changed throughout the crisis, and what Carter’s failure in Iran had to say for his defeat in the election of 1980 (Houghton 3-4). The failed rescue attempt helped instill an atmosphere of “disillusionment, frustration and national impotence,” claims Houghton, and this atmosphere seems to have been a result of both Carter’s actions and the public’s reactions (4).

Houghton does not mention Orientalism directly, but his description of Carter’s explanation of the embassy seizure is reminiscent of Orientalist rhetoric: “Others – notably Carter himself – suggest that it was simply an act of madness, so irrational that it cannot be explained in terms reasonable people might comprehend” (5). This observation fits an Orientalist point of view, which holds that as a general rule, people from the “Occident”, i.e. the West, are rational and sensible, while people from the Orient are irrational and unpredictable. Houghton disagrees with such reasoning, and the goal of his book is to find a more ‘human’ reason for the embassy seizure (5). Ironically, Houghton struggles to find a rational explanation for Carter’s decision to go ahead with the rescue attempt, calling it a puzzle that “a president as *moralistic*, idealistic and committed to non-military means of conflict resolution as this one would launch an operation which he had been warned would almost certainly result in at least some loss of life” [the author’s italicization] (6). Houghton’s puzzle is interesting in a discussion of how the administration, the public, and the media interacted and mutually

affected each other's actions during the hostage crisis and will be followed up in the main section of this paper.

Melani McAlister's Epic Encounters (2001)<sup>18</sup> has proved particularly valuable to the thesis proposed in this paper, and of all the analyses of the hostage crisis, hers is arguably the most compelling. McAlister's main argument is that "terrorism, hostage taking, and captivity worked to construct the United States as a nation of innocents, a family under siege by outside threats and in need of a militarized rescue that operated under the sign of the domestic" (201). She also emphasizes the importance of the mass media. According to McAlister, the crisis "became one of the most widely covered stories in television history," and she cites a Kennedy School of Government study to highlight the extent of the coverage: "Instead of receding with time, eclipsed by fresh-breaking news, the story of the 'hostage crisis' mushroomed, becoming a virtual fixation for the nation and its news organizations throughout much of the fourteen-month embassy siege" (198-199).

Like Scott, McAlister sees the hostage crisis as captivity narrative, but the latter brings a new dimension to the analysis. She claims that gender was central to the Iranian captivity narrative, and that "the United States was distinguished from Iran...in large part by the ways that the hostages were positioned within their families, as part of the private sphere" (199). Likewise, gender and the dimensions of public and private, along with race, figure prominently in McAlister's challenge to Edward Said's classical theory about Orientalism. This challenge is proposed in the introduction of her book and prepares the ground for her sophisticated analysis of the hostage crisis. Her first criticism of Said is that his paradigm has depended on the "presumption that the 'us' of the West is...a homogeneous entity". She holds that in postwar United States, "the us-them dichotomies of Orientalism have been fractured by the reality of a multiracial nation, even if that reality was recognized only in its disavowal" (McAlister 11). The second problem with Said's paradigm relates to his book's "neat mapping of the 'West' as masculine and the 'East' as feminine (McAlister 11). McAlister argues that in the postwar United States, "the 'universal subject of the nation-state is *not* imagined simply as male, and citizenship is not simply a matter of *public life*" (12).

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<sup>18</sup> The edition used here is the 2005 edition, but the parts relevant to the paper have not been altered in the new version.

Her analysis of the Iranian hostage crisis is an example of her claim that “the discourse of Americanness has insisted on the centrality of properly ordered private life...to the public legitimacy of the nation” (McAlister 12). In the chapter on Iran, McAlister holds that the self-justification of U.S. nationalism in the 1980s relied on America’s respect for the public-private distinction, and that the hostage crisis presented a narrative that “constructed the United States as an imperiled private sphere and the Islamic Middle East as the pre-eminent politicized space from which terrorism effected its invasions” (233-234). Thus, the rhetoric of “prophetic dualism” that Scott mentions is even further complicated by McAlister: The classical theory of Orientalism, like Cold War ideology and anti-communism, falls short of giving a satisfying explanation of the interactions between the United States and Iran. McAlister’s challenge to Orientalism is based on the lack of explaining power the original theory has for the United States, and she seems to put the label “post-Orientalist” on the approach she favors (13).

Professor of history Douglas Little also describes the relationship between the United States and the Middle East in terms of a new understanding of Orientalism. His book American Orientalism was published in 2002 and is an attempt at explaining U.S. policy in the Middle East without sacrificing analysis for chronology, or depth for breadth.<sup>19</sup> Little professes to combine the best of the two approaches in a book where he follows up Mark Twain’s interpretation of the United States’ relationship with the Middle East “as the byproduct of two contradictory ingredients: an irresistible impulse to remake the world in America’s image and a profound ambivalence about the peoples to be remade” (3).

In the first chapter, called “Orientalism, American Style,” Little starts by stating that “[f]ew parts of the world have become as deeply embedded in the U.S. popular imagination as the Middle East,” and he goes on to explain the whys and hows of Orientalism. Little seemingly argues that the United States “inherited” Orientalism when the country replaced Great Britain in the Middle East. He claims that “something very like Said’s Orientalism seems subconsciously to have shaped U.S. popular attitudes and foreign policies toward the Middle East,” and he agrees with anthropologists Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins that orientalist images came to the Americans in the form of the magazine *National Geographic* (Little 10). Little reiterates Said’s theory later in the book, and presents the convincing argument that

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<sup>19</sup> Douglas Little, American Orientalism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 3.

“academic orientalists, U.S. policymakers, and the American media had...conjured up the genie of rampaging ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ to fill a ‘threat vacuum’ created by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War” (35,36). However, unlike McAlister, Little does not present a direct challenge to Said’s Orientalism theory, and it is not entirely clear what the term *American Orientalism* really signifies. In the introduction, Little mentions the “peculiar blend of ignorance and arrogance” that has characterized American policy in the Middle East, and in his conclusion he seems to see American Orientalism as “a tendency to underestimate the peoples of the region and to overestimate America’s ability to make a bad situation better” (314). If one argues that the first part of this last observation is based on ignorance, and the latter can be blamed on arrogance, one might come closer to a definition. However, for the purpose of this paper, McAlister’s approach to Orientalism is clearer and more useful.

The last book to be mentioned here is a very recent contribution to the field of linguistic anthropology by William O. Beeman. This field may not at first glance present itself as very relevant to a paper about the Iranian hostage crisis, but Beeman’s book treats both U.S. foreign policy, the relationship between Iran and the United States, and the hostage crisis itself in a very interesting analysis of the dysfunctional discourse that has characterized the dealings between the United States and Iran. The book is called The ‘Great Satan’ vs. the ‘Mad Mullahs’: How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other, and it was published in 2005.

At the outset of his book, Beeman argues that there exists a powerful myth about American foreign policy that 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” (13). The “U.S. Foreign Policy Myth,” as he calls it, is not unique to the United States, and it has a certain applicability in dealing with “Western industrialized nations, including the Soviet bloc” (Beeman 13-14). However, as a belief system 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 further into the twenty-first century” (Beeman 14). The myth can be summed up in this statement: “*The normal conduct of foreign policy... consists of the elite leaders of nation-states meeting in seclusion, discussing matters of power and economics presumably in the context of a dichotomous world conflict*” [the author’s italicization] (Beeman 17) Here Beeman problematizes Realist interpretations of foreign

policy. What follows from this myth is that nations and actors who “do not fit this mold” are deemed “‘irrational,’ ‘crazy,’ ‘criminal,’ ‘unpredictable,’ and ‘deviant’” (Beeman 17). This is of course an echo of Orientalism, and later in the book Beeman acknowledges the relevance of Said’s theory (42-43). Unlike McAlister and Little, however, Beeman does not problematize Said or make any attempt at defining a particular American Orientalism.

The main purpose of Beeman’s book is to “analyze and explain some of the difficulties obtaining between the United States and Iran” with the help of a “model for describing dysfunctional communication in an international setting” that he lays out in chapter four of the book, “Discourse and Rhetoric” (36). A very important point that he makes is that in the discourse between the two countries, “the most common dysfunctional communication occurred when both sides were ostensibly addressing each other, but were in fact addressing their own constituencies” (Beeman 38). The example he provides is enlightening. It was hard for Americans to understand the chants of “Death to America”, and Beeman writes that “American reporters on the scene were astonished when individuals who were engaged in these demonstrations treated them with friendliness and respect” (38). It turned out that the Iranian demonstrators acknowledged the difference between the American people and the American government (Beeman 38). Blaming the U.S. foreign policy myth for the American habit of viewing the world in terms of nation-states, Beeman claims that “this distinction was difficult for many to fathom” (38). In other words, the world view of an American will determine the way he or she interprets a message from an Iranian, but this message might not even be meant for the American. Thus, a message might be doubly distorted, and in such a situation it is not very strange if there are miscommunications.

It is obvious that Beeman has extensive knowledge about Iran, and in his book he criticizes the previously mentioned works of Rubin, Sick, and Bill. Although Beeman admits that all these works are “essential reading,” and that they are “all great in their own way,” he claims that they “frequently miss seeing Iran from the perspective of its cultural core” (50). One of his arguments is that “cultural logic, especially when it embodies powerful symbols, is far more effective in shaping public attitudes than mere facts,” and he sees this as true both in Iran and in the United States (Beeman 50). He is therefore surprised that “some of America’s finest political minds would fail to understand this basic fact with regard to Iran” (Beeman 50). In summary, Beeman’s thorough understanding of both countries is very valuable to this paper, particularly as seen in conjunction with McAlister’s analysis of the hostage crisis as a

post-Orientalist captivity narrative. In light of the current exacerbation of American-Iranian relations Beeman's analysis is particularly interesting.

## **Chapter 2 - The beginning of the crisis**

### **2.1. Introduction**

During the first weeks following the embassy seizure the stage was set for a powerful national captivity narrative in which calls for action accompanied feelings of anger, humiliation, frustration, and helplessness. Taken as a whole, the public reactions seem to have put a heavy pressure on President Carter to do something in a situation that first and foremost demanded caution, but he also received positive feedback on some of the things he did. It could be argued that a stronger national unity was a result of the initial American responses to the hostage crisis, but it is uncertain whether this unity was profound or shallow, real or perceived.

### **2.2. Establishing the Iranian hostage crisis as captivity narrative**

#### **2.2.1. Gallup polls**

In the first month after the embassy seizure, the President's popularity actually surged, and his handling of the hostage crisis seems to have played an important role in affecting this change. In a Gallup Poll from December 1979, Carter's remarkable rise in popularity is documented. It is noted that as of December 10, Carter was for the first time leading Senator Edward Kennedy as the Democratic voters' choice for the presidential nomination of 1980.<sup>20</sup> A poll shows that Carter in the latest survey was leading with 46% compared to Kennedy's 42%, while Kennedy in October had been in the lead with 60% compared to Carter's 30%. Negative public reactions to Kennedy's harsh criticism of the Shah of Iran are cited as part of the reason for the upsurge in Carter's popularity, but the results of a poll mapping the public approval of Carter's handling of the crisis indicate that this was indeed a factor contributing to the rise: A formidable 76% answered "approve" to the question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Carter is handling the Iranian situation?" In fact, it is claimed in the Gallup Poll that Carter's rise in popularity exceeds those accompanying Pearl Harbor and the signing of the Vietnamese peace treaty.

This initial public response to Carter's handling of the crisis can thus be seen as a particularly strong expression of Americans' tendency to "rally around the flag" and support their

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<sup>20</sup> Gallup Poll, December, 1979, 3.

president in times of crisis. Political scientists Lee Sigelman and Pamela Conover view this reaction as a manifestation of “the well-established principle that threats from outside a system promote cohesion within the system”.<sup>21</sup> Scott also notes this reaction and sees it as an expression of the emotions the treatment of the hostages had evoked: “[s]upport for the U.S. government, pity for the victim’s plight, and outrage toward the ‘enemy’ government” (182). While Sigelman and Conover emphasize the unity that outside threats can create, Scott takes it one step further when she claims that the “sense of tenuous security and metaphorical distancing from the foreign Other provide the context for popular understandings of the hostage’s captivity”. She argues that like the classical captivity narratives, the story of the hostage crisis relied on binaries this time grounded in Orientalism (Scott 182). Not only did the outside threat from the hostage takers bring Americans together in support of their government, but it also highlighted the American national identity by serving as its antithesis. As Americans distanced themselves from the primitive and fanatical Islamic Other, the perception of a civilized and virtuous American Self grew.

### **2.2.2. Mass media presentations of the crisis as a captivity narrative**

The American mass media played a crucial role in presenting and cementing such images of Self and Other, and McAlister analyzes the way in which the hostage crisis as captivity narrative took hold of the American press. One example is *Time Magazine*’s front page on November 19, 1979. It contains a drawing of blind-folded hostages, the title “Blackmailing the U.S.,” and a quote from Ayatullah [sic] Khomeini: “America is the Great Satan”. According to McAlister, the image of a blind-folded person contrasted with Iranian ‘fanaticism’ was a “not-so-subtle” subtext of ABC reports, and this distinction depoliticized the individual, inserting him or her “into a position of virtuous self” (209). She calls this a classic move of the captivity narrative, identifying the hostage with the private sphere and thus with innocence (McAlister 209). *Time*’s own assessment of the dominant image of the hostage crisis backs up McAlister’s claim: “It was an ugly, shocking image of innocence and impotence, of tyranny and terror, of madness and mob rule” (14). Furthermore, McAlister claims that contrasts such as these “invited those in the American audience to feel their own furious bewilderment” (209). Thus, the American public was able to identify with the hostages and the United States’ situation as a whole, something which is also reflected in

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<sup>21</sup> Lee Sigelman and Pamela Conover, “The Dynamics of Presidential Support During International Conflict Situations: The Iranian Hostage Crisis,” *Political Behavior*, 3.4 (1981), 303.

*Time*'s front page: Not only the government but the United States is being blackmailed by terrorists, and all of America is identified as the Great Satan by Khomeini.

There are more examples of the mass media "depoliticizing the individual" in both weekly magazines and newspapers. First, *Newsweek* from November 19, 1979, recounts a meeting President Carter had with the families of the hostages and the statement the White House issued in the wake of this meeting: "The President knows that no matter how deeply we may feel, it said, none of us would worsen *the danger in which our fellow Americans have been placed*" [my italicization] (62). Here, the magazine places the hostages in the private sphere, and by including the President's statement, it also shows Americans in general how the threat to the hostages is related to them. Another example comes from *Newsweek* two weeks later, on December 3, 1979. Instead of focusing on the fact that the vast majority of the hostages were American officials, the magazine seems eager to point out that "[a]t least one hostage had no connection with the U.S. government whatsoever [original italicization]. Jerry Plotkin, 45, of Sherman Oaks, Calif., lost his job selling household items"(48). The focus here is on an "everyday businessman" who was doing something as mundane as selling household items. What is more, his merchandise brings to mind images of the domestic.

The week before, on November 26, 1979, *Time* both visually and verbally makes a similar point about the hostages' domesticity and perceived political innocence. One picture shows three hostages in a kitchen, eating their meal guarded by an Iranian (26). The kitchen is of course a main symbol of domesticity, and the image of hostages being watched by one of their captors even as they engage in such an innocent and everyday activity as eating might have inspired to identification and subsequent anger among readers of the magazine. The verbal description of the plight of the hostages adds to this image of innocence and domesticity. On page 21, the hostages inside the compound are described as "haggard, some of them with their hands bound, totally vulnerable to the whims of their captors." Such a description might make it difficult to remember that the hostages actually held important official positions before the embassy seizure. Later in the article, readers are told what happens outside the gates of the hostages' "prison": "...a deeply distraught American woman, apparently the relative of a hostage, appeared at the gates with a child in hand. She suddenly began to shout obscenities at the guards" (26). This last image very powerfully combines elements of domesticity, innocence and distress in the face of the Iranian threat: the woman, traditionally the personification of the domestic sphere; the child, symbol of innocence, and the obscenities

coming from the woman's mouth; a corruption of both domesticity and innocence brought on by the duress of captivity.

In general, from reading *Newsweek's* and *Time's* descriptions of the hostages one gets very little information about these peoples' duties as official representatives of the United States. *Newsweek* of December 3, 1979, has an article called "The Hostages' Ordeal" where the hostages' work at the embassy is hardly mentioned, and this is also the case with a *Time* article from the same week: "Bound for Hours, Facing the Wall" deals with how the hostages' experience their captivity. Their official positions are only stated, not discussed. (*Newsweek* 50-55, *Time* 36). In fact, according to *Time's* article the people most interested in the hostages' work are the hostage takers: "The hostages were frequently questioned about their work and accused of plotting against the new Iranian regime" (36). The subtext here seems to be that such allegations are ridiculous, and the captors' worries about the political positions of the hostages are contrasted with their apparent unwillingness to view the hostages as part of the domestic sphere:

Despite promises from the guards to transit messages from the hostages' families to the captives, and vice versa, not a single message has so far been received by the hostages or their families. Worse, high Administration officials say that the hostages are now being fed deliberately falsified reports from the U.S. aimed at convincing them that Washington and the American people are abandoning them. (36)

This actually seems to be an attempt from the hostage takers' side to tear the hostages away from both the official U.S. position and the American "family," perhaps to keep them from automatically parroting the official American view of the Shah or what "Americans in general" meant. A comment from *Newsweek's* article supports this theory: "The Iranians have seemed to concentrate on depersonalizing relations, trying to convince hostages that the Shah is a criminal who should be returned" (55).

Such attempts at depersonalization met with resistance in the American press, though. In the aforementioned *Newsweek* article, the issue of hostages making sympathetic statements about their captors is seen as a possible example of the Stockholm syndrome (55). Pressure is cited as a reason why a hostage would do such a thing, and the idea that a hostage actually might hold political views sympathetic to the Iranian revolutionaries does not seem to be an issue of consideration at all. Thus, the hostages are practically stripped of any political significance they might have; they are cast as victims in this narrative and must stick to that. In Scott's words, "*Time, Newsweek, and People* regularly published detailed (but often unsubstantiated)

accounts of the ordeal faced by the hostages, thus inviting readers to vicariously imagine the trauma of captivity at the hands of ‘barbarians’” (184). Scott also discusses this fear that the captives would “‘go native’ and identify with their captors”. She acknowledges the fact that in American history, captives’ criticism of their own country has often been “obscure, disguised, and undermined by the reporter,” but she also emphasizes that to some extent captivity has “allowed for the representation of discordant voices to challenge official U.S. foreign policy positions” (Scott 183). Here, Scott makes an important point: The image created in the mass media is not always one-sided.

However, the focus on family and the domestic during the hostage crisis does seem substantial. What is more, it was the subject of critical commentaries already in the beginning of the crisis. In the *Houston Post*, regular columnist Donald Morris acknowledges this focus on two occasions. First, on November 12, 1979, he complains that in the mass media’s treatment of the hostage crisis, “[a]lmost anything passes as news.” Among those things are “tearful interviews with relatives of the hostages – for shame!” Morris argues that the reason for this is that “hard facts” are difficult to obtain, and he also points out that there is “exactly one American newsman” in Tehran, a man who just happened to be there at the time of the embassy seizure (*Houston Post*, 3C). Here, it seems that Morris pins the focus on family mainly on the scarcity of “real” news about the hostage taking. However, in *Houston Post* of November 20, 1979, Morris launches a more extensive criticism of both the American press and the government. In this commentary he highlights the fact that many representatives of the American mass media have consciously or unconsciously avoided: That “the bulk of this group [of hostages] consists of a single set: representatives of the United States of America.... The presence of people with diplomatic passports by itself puts Iran beyond the pale of law.” Morris then proceeds to criticize the press’ exploitation of the hostages’ families:

It is bad enough that the media have parked in the living rooms of those families that were weak enough to admit them, demanding reiterated comment about what TV terms ‘loved ones’. A particular favorite is a mother – black and easily reduced to tears – who has been subjected to this harassment several times, she is, predictably, in favor of turning the shah over to Iran if this will secure the release of her Marine son. (*Houston Post*, November 20, 1979: 3C)

Morris seems to argue here that the mass media’s pressure on the hostages’ relatives is a cynical move intended to create sympathy for a rather heartless action. This could serve as an example of the result of the mass media’s focus on the private sphere; it facilitated the American people’s identification with the hostages and thus with the emotional calls for

action. Morris is sympathetic to the black mother's reaction, but it is obvious from the article that he deplores her favored solution to the crisis. From the description of the tearful black woman Morris moves on to Khomeini's offer to release women and blacks, and this is where his criticism of the government surfaces. By accepting this offer, he argues, "Washington, desperate for a first-hand report of conditions in the embassy," has "just agreed with the Khomeini [sic] that blacks – and women – are indeed a special exploited group in America." This leads the thought to the first part of McAlister's critique of the classical Orientalism theory, where she claims that the "us-them dichotomies of Orientalism" could not stay whole and homogenous in postwar, multi-racial America. As the focus on the private sphere in the American mass media supports the second part of McAlister's Orientalism critique - that "*Orientalism's* neat mapping of the 'West' as masculine and the 'East' as feminine" poses a problem - Khomeini's offer and the American government's reaction to it pinpoint the challenges to a unified American "us" that McAlister discusses (11). In addition, Morris' critique backs Scott's point about the allowance of "discordant voices," both through indirect and direct critique of official U.S. policy (Scott 183). The black woman he cites criticizes American protection of the shah, while Morris himself criticizes the government from a different angle.

### **2.2.3. Orientalist interpretations of the hostage crisis**

Despite the fact that McAlister's critique of *Orientalism's* gendered dichotomy seems just, though, the classical Orientalist interpretation of civilized, rational, and sane Westerners versus primitive, irrational, and mad Easterners is not at all useless in an analysis of the printed media's treatment of the hostage crisis. There are several examples of American editors and journalists dictating a civilized and sane response in face of what they see as mysterious, irrational, and unpredictable acts perpetrated by the Iranians. On November 19, 1979, *Newsweek* describes how "[a]nalysts attempted to find some rationale for the ayatollah's plunge into a course from which he could hardly gain" (75). In *Time* of the same week, "A Letter from the Publisher" presents the hostage crisis as a "cover story with more imponderables and mysteries than any we've done in a long time" (2). In the same edition, *Time* prints an interview with Iran expert James Bill, where even he is made to sound slightly Orientalist in his views. As a response to Iranian fears that the Shah might try to regain his power, Bill asserts: "To us that seems ridiculous, ... *but we are dealing with Iranians and their perceptions of reality* [my italicization] (23). Bill's statement might sound harsher than it

was intended to from his side, it could even have been twisted by the magazine, but a possible interpretation might still be this: Iranian fears are based on a ridiculous conspiracy theory that in their worldview seems perfectly sane and believable; ergo their worldview is less worth than ours. In addition, the phrase “Iranians and their perceptions of reality” could imply that the Iranians are out of touch with reality, whereas Americans, more realistic and down-to-earth, are not burdened by such “perceptions.”

A counterargument to this stance could of course be that Americans are not particularly burdened by knowledge about the United States’ role in Iran either, and in *Time*’s defense they print a critical comment by an Iranian accounting major in the same edition: “Americans don’t know how we suffered under the Shah. All of us have had a father, a brother, a mother killed. I don’t know why the U.S. doesn’t learn from history” (30). This Iranian does not come forward as either irrational or primitive in his remark; he even studies a very rational subject. In addition, he appeals to family values, thus placing Iranians in the same domestic sphere as Americans. In a way he answers the media’s tendency to depoliticize the hostages by similarly depoliticizing Iranians’ reasons for being angry with the Shah and the United States. *Newsweek* from November 26, 1979, also admits American ignorance about Iran: “Despite years of close relations – *at least at the official level* [*Newsweek*’s italicization] – Americans and Iranians remain separated by a gulf of cultural, political and religious differences.” Furthermore, *Newsweek* admits that “[b]oth countries share the blame for the failure to understand each other. Successive U.S. administrations equated the Shah and his Westernized elite with the Iranian people as a whole” (40).

However, it could still be argued that in the end the image of the irrational Iranian is the one allowed to dominate the magazines, arguably even more so in *Time*. Four pages ahead of the comment from the “rational Iranian,” a White House aide expresses this judgment of the situation: “It’s a classic case of gaming versus an irrational opponent. As the irrationality approaches 100%, your ability to game nears zero.” In the same article, it is concluded that “[h]owever the embassy affair ends, it is a sharp reminder of the degree to which the traditional rules of international conduct can no longer be taken for granted. The world is changing; the unpredictable is becoming the commonplace” (*Time* November 19, 1979: 26). These two claims solidly cement the opponent of the United States as irrational and unpredictable, and the last one brings to mind Beeman’s critique of the U.S. foreign policy myth (13-17). He, of course, argued that Americans should have realized already at the time of the Vietnam War that international relations were not what they used to be (Beeman 17).

Finally, *Time* of November 26, 1979, prints an interview with Mullah Mohammed Javad Bahonar, where both the description of the man and one of the questions posed show the inherent Orientalist rhetoric of the magazine: The mullah, “whose fervent arguments illustrate the gulf between the Iranian version of the conflict and the view of it held by the outside world,” is asked a very leading question: “Isn’t the reaction in Iran to the Shah’s presence in the U.S. out of all proportion to reality?” Thus, the Iranians’ “perceptions of reality” are again assumed to be inferior to what Americans and other Westerners “know” about the world.

As for *Newsweek*, the aforementioned article from the November 26 edition does have a decided anti-Iranian bias. Whereas American officials have been to blame for the failure of understanding, the faults of the Iranians are pitted on their national character. Martyrdom, xenophobia, and lust for revenge are listed as national traits, none of which sound very rational or civilized in Western ears, and it is also claimed that to “Khomeini’s ardent followers, conciliation is a sign of appeasement and moral weakness” (40). No mention is made of the fact that appeasement has been frowned upon by many Americans as well, but within the framework of the captivity narrative the dominating image was that of innocent, civilized Americans having been torn away from their dearly beloveds by politically driven, primitive and irrational Iranians.

### **2.3. Different public reactions to the embassy seizure**

From the point of view of this established captivity narrative, then, the general feeling was that innocent Americans, and thus all Americans, had been taken hostage to cruel terrorists. Some politicians deemed this to be a result of America’s weakened position in the world and demanded action, a sentiment that was also echoed in the press. Former Secretary of Defense and Energy, James Schlesinger, is interviewed in both *Newsweek* and *Time* of November 19, 1979, and he indicates that the U.S. has become a “pitiful, helpless giant” in world affairs (*Newsweek* 62). This assessment is also the title of the article in which the interview with Schlesinger appears (*Newsweek* 61). *Time* cites Schlesinger saying: “It is plain that respect for the U.S. would be higher if we didn’t just fumble around continuously and weren’t half-apologetic about whatever we do” (15). Also in *Newsweek* on November 19 there is a comment from one of Carter’s political opponents who did not respond with the caution “most political leaders” exhibited. Republican Presidential candidate John Connally is of the opinion that the United States “can’t afford to be kicked around,” and he adds that if “appeasement were an art form, this Administration would be the Rembrandt of our time”

(62). Syndicated columnist George Will also delivers a flaming critique of American appeasement in the *Louisville Courier* of November 12, 1979. Under the evocative heading “A feckless America must face contempt, spittle on cheeks,” Will declares the United States to be a declining nation and lists a number of instances where it has responded to threats and injustices with impotence, appeasement, and “inane tolerance.” He concludes that such a nation does not deserve respect.

These sentiments about helplessness and the need for the United States to assert itself abroad are also repeated elsewhere in the magazines, and in the *Chicago Tribune* of November 11, 1979. *Newsweek* of November 19, 1979, reports that “a seething no-more-Mr.-Nice-Guy spirit infused the White House” (75). On the same page a Pentagon official is cited as saying that “[d]espite all the obstacles, a certain point comes when it’s intolerable to do nothing,” and a European strategist plainly asserts that “[t]he only way you get Khomeini to change direction is to smack him in the teeth,” and that the “Americans tried the soft approach and got nowhere.” In the following issue of the magazine, on November 26, 1979, *Newsweek* has a desperate-looking bald eagle on the front page, under the headline: “Has America Lost Its Clout?” (1) In the *Chicago Tribune* a cartoon with the title “America Under the Gun” depicts Uncle Sam holding a gun to his own head, and the caption reads: “The lesson from Iran: If you want to harm American diplomats abroad, you can do it” (Section 2:1).

Scott analyzes such reactions in light of the classical captivity narrative from the Puritans’ time. First, she asserts that “renderings of America’s decline and humiliation resemble Puritan obsession with the dangers of weakness or backsliding in the face of looming threats,” and that like classical captivity narratives “served to admonish and warn Americans to ‘keep the old ways,’ accounts of the hostage crisis in Iran castigated Carter’s innocence and ignorance about the world” (Scott 181). This claim actually points to a possible contradiction in the logic of the captivity narrative of the hostage crisis: The victims were cast as innocent, regular Americans, but the innocence of Carter is seen as something negative. Perhaps this is not so much a contradiction as a way of distinguishing between government and people; while innocence is a virtue in an American private citizen, it could be a vice in an official representative of the United States. However, since the hostages were in fact official representatives, the captivity narrative still seems valid as a way of analyzing the hostage crisis. In addition, other commentators actually supported the notion of American innocence in relation to foreign policy, and it could be argued that the American mass media’s coverage of the crisis did not give much attention to the United States’ not-so-honorable history in Iran.

Second, Scott argues that the “emphasis on ‘tough leadership’” which is reflected in accounts of the hostage crisis “taps into long-standing preoccupations with the ‘cult of the hero’” (181). Citing R. Slotkin, a scholar whose focus is on the mythology of the American frontier, Scott asserts that the frontier hero is also reflected in the captivity narrative: “In Slotkin’s (1992: 498) terms, heroic leadership and the ‘cult of toughness’ embody certain ‘natural and historical principles or forces,’ and serve as ‘an idealized representation of his [the leader’s] people’s characteristic traits, and a model of emulation.’” In Scott’s view, Carter achieved a more heroic image during the first phase of the hostage crisis (184).

However, the calls for action described up to now were not the only voices in the discourse about how to properly respond to the hostage crisis, and the idea of a hero was not the same in all responses to the events. On November 7 and 8, respectively, only a few days after the embassy seizure, newspapers the *Louisville Courier* and the *Houston Post* had articles proposing a very similar approach. In the *Courier*, the headline of the editorial reads: “Our response to Iran’s terror still must be cool restraint.” The gist of the argument is that although it is exceedingly difficult to be patient with “the madness gripping Iran,” this is the necessary course. A nation “prideful of such maxims as ... ‘Speak softly but carry a big stick’” might not take kindly to such an approach, but force is not the correct solution to this problem. The editorial concludes that “the better part of wisdom in world affairs is knowing when to keep cool” (A2). On November 13, another *Courier* editorial criticizes George Will’s bashing of American appeasement in the same newspaper the day before. If the United States acts “as macho as the bully,” it claims, this would perhaps please Will and be good for the national psyche, but “it’s hardly a prescription for an enlightened foreign policy” (A6). Writer Carl T. Rowan repeats these sentiments in the *Houston Post* the day after, with an article headlined: “Cool firmness, patience necessary to save Americans seized in Iran”. He admits that the “most natural feeling for some is to want to blast hell out of the Iranians who dare to attack our embassy,” but he hopes that Carter will not “succumb to temptations to become a one-day hero regarding this crisis brought on by what is now close to national insanity in Iran.” He thinks that a “bit of firmness with patience may yet save the lives of Americans who have served this country under extreme hardship and danger,” and the reason for his choice of approach is that he has “evidence aplenty that this lunacy generated by Khomeini cannot long endure” (2C).

Although Rowan’s predictions proved to be faulty, there are reasons to believe that a not unsubstantial number of people shared the attitude he and the *Courier* editorial exhibit here. It

could be argued that these sentiments express a classical Orientalist rhetoric that highlights the difference between the Self and the Other, even though it might not be as bluntly stated as it would be by more militaristically inclined people. An Orientalist interpretation of these two articles would go along such lines: “Cool, sensible, level-headed Americans must deal with barbaric, fanatical and mad terrorists in a way that suits a civilized country. Even if some Americans dream of nuking the terrorists, we must not resort to the Iranians’ lowly tactics”. The “cool restraint” approach was probably a response to very hawkish expressions of anger at the hostage takers and presented an image of the American hero as calmer and more intelligent than the bellicose and straight-forward type whose solution was to take an eye for an eye. However, the view of the enemy did not seem to vary that much; both approaches assumed that the hostage takers were irrational, barbaric, and mad. Thus, the mechanics of an Orientalist mind-set worked for both types of Americans: By defining the Iranians as a cultural Other, the bellicose Americans could flaunt the potential for American militaristic superiority and nationalistic righteousness, while the more restrained Americans could portray themselves as cooler, more sensible, and more civilized than both the Iranians and their hawkish fellow Americans. It might be argued, though, that the common view of the enemy still brought these different-minded Americans together on some plane, even though they disagreed on the issue of how to respond to the situation.

The President’s own conflicting attitudes concerning the proper response might be traced to these contradictory views, and this fact shows the dilemma the American administration faced as the crisis dragged on. According to Gary Sick, both Khomeini and Carter “embodied an aspect of his own national culture to a degree of perfection that lent itself naturally to exaggeration and caricature.” Sick claims that Jimmy Carter “was the personification of small-town middle-American values.” He “prized the virtues of personal humility, charity and forgiveness” and “sought peace through understanding and reconciliation, not confrontation” (219). However, the Iranian hostage crisis put these values to a straining test. As President of the United States of America, Carter could not easily ignore the calls for action and accusations of appeasement and weakness. Sick claims that as a consequence of the highly personalized nature of the crisis, there was an impulse “to *do something*, almost as if action was a necessary end in itself” [sic] (221). *Newsweek* of November 19, 1979, also reports Carter saying that his initial reaction was to do something. However, the magazine goes on to say that “restraint was the order of the week, as Carter and his aides concluded that even rhetoric might touch off a slaughter in Iran” (62). In *Time* the same week, Carter’s main

dilemma is bluntly stated: “The circumstances required a restrained response and infinite patience; yet this very stance would reinforce the public’s perception of the President as a poor leader” (15).

However, as mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the general public response to the President’s attitude and actions were very favorable during the first month of the crisis. There are many examples of this in the newspapers and magazines. In the *Louisville Courier* of November 15, 1979, Carter’s decision to enforce a ban on Iran’s oil is applauded in the editorial. “Any decision that all shades of American opinion support is a welcome rarity today,” it states. “[T]he citizens of this country seem almost totally united – as they should be – behind President Carter’s ban on direct purchases of Iranian oil” (A10). In *Time*, November 26, 1979, it is claimed that Carter’s show of strength earned him “badly needed support even from his opponents” (23). *Newsweek* from the same week asserts that “Jimmy Carter’s measured response to the siege of the U.S. Embassy in Teheran won wide approval last week ...” (46). The magazine does, however, point out “a growing feeling at home and abroad that Iran’s assault on the U.S. was merely the latest, if most dramatic, proof of erosion of American prestige and power,” and their solution is to rethink “Congressional restrictions on Presidential freedom,” and make room for “strong leadership and quick responses” (49).

However, in its December 10 issue, *Newsweek* restates the approval the President enjoys:

Iran has, nonetheless, offered Carter the political advantage of presiding over a genuine moral equivalent of war, a time for rallying around the flag and the President. For the first time in his troubled Presidency, Carter has drawn virtually unanimous public support and broad editorial endorsement for his handling of the crisis. (53)

As stated above, Scott discusses how Carter achieved a more heroic image during the first phase of the hostage crisis, an image that was “heavily tinged with heroic masculinity and invested with mythological meaning”. She describes how his earlier image of weak leadership “dissolved ... when he firmly reiterated that the U.S. would not apologize to Iran for supporting the Shah for over thirty years.” Scott claims that despite the fact that his “heroic aura faded as the crisis progressed,” his image as “frontier hero” was significant “[g]iven his sagging fortunes in the polls before the embassy takeover” (184).

As Scott hints, however, the fact that the crisis dragged on was bad news for Carter, and not everyone held favorable views of his actions. First, Sigelman and Conover claim that “crisis-bred outpourings of public support do not last.” What is worse, “should an international conflict situation become stalemated and drag on longer than had been anticipated ... the

impact on public support for the President can be devastating” (303-304). Second, criticism of the President’s conduct came from both home and abroad. Joseph Kraft in the *Houston Post* of November 15, 1979, argues that there existed a third choice of action that the President had ignored. He claims that the President would not have had to choose between the two approaches previously mentioned in this paper, cool restraint on the one side or reckless militarism on the other. Kraft states that “the normal response to the seizure of the embassy was a position, both non-provocative and free of the risk of humiliation, which the Carter administration did not take.” Citing the international relations norm that embassies are sovereign territories, Kraft argues that “the obvious response for the United States would have been to invoke the fundamental principle”. In practice, the United States should have refused to “talk to anybody about anything until the takeover of the embassy had ended and the hostages returned safely.” The reason Carter did not pursue this approach, Kraft concludes, is partly an issue of image, but also that “Carter really thinks the choice was between being reckless and keeping calm.” Kraft takes this attitude to stem from the President’s position as “a genuine outsider, insensitive to the meaning of past American commitments and blind to the significance of departure from those commitments” (2C).

In addition, Khomeini himself also purported that he could see through Carter’s actions. A CIA translation of one of the ayatollah’s speeches, referred to in *Time*, December 3, 1979, reveals what *Time* describes as “an incredible taunt”: “The President, said Khomeini, knows that he is beating an empty drum. Carter does not have the guts to engage in a military operation” (28). The President’s reaction to this is interesting and might hint at the background for his further decisions concerning the crisis. According to *Time*, “[w]hen the President heard that ... he clenched his teeth so tight that his jaw turned white.” Carter and his aides then “agreed that he [Khomeini] must be disabused of that notion.”

The anger that the President showed in response to Khomeini’s taunt was also reflected in many Americans’ reactions to the crisis, some of which can be described as outbursts of nationalist rage. *Newsweek* of November 19, 1979, calls the initial American reactions “a wave of anger against a foreign country that was almost without precedent in the postwar era” (61). The magazine reports an increasingly violent American backlash against Iranian demonstrators, describing Americans with baseball bats beating Iranians, and Texans parading with pictures of John Wayne (73). The Iranians who demonstrated provoked Americans by denouncing the USA and doing things like chaining themselves to the Statue of Liberty, but according to *Newsweek* these people were a small minority of the Iranian student

population in the United States. Nevertheless, many Americans expressed a wish to deport the Iranian demonstrators. A Republican Representative from Pennsylvania even suggested in a resolution that Carter revoke the visas of Iranian students involved in activities “prejudicial to the public interest” of the USA, and at one point the government considered deporting Iranian students who had violated the terms of their visas. (*Newsweek* November 19:73, November 3: 65). *Time* of November 26, 1979, states that “when none of the U.S. retaliations brought any progress toward the release of the hostages, American anger and frustration became almost palpable” (21). In its December 3 edition, *Newsweek* portrays xenophobic outbursts without any direct relations to Iranian demonstrations. James Le Fante, head of the Hudson County Bus Owners Association, is reported to have fired six drivers because they were Iranians, and officials in Glendale, California, apparently refused to admit to school children of Iranian refugees (65). *Time*, in its December 3 edition, describes a particularly stern view: Truck driver Frank McVey holds that “we might as well write off the hostages; they’re going to get killed no matter what we do. We should bomb the hell out of that country...” (33).

In the *Houston Post* on November 13, 1979, all but one letter from the readers express anger at both the hostage takers and Iranians in the United States demonstrating against the Shah. Keith Wayne Valigura states that “WE, as a nation, are tired of being pushed around and blackmailed by everyone and their grandmother [sic],” and Harry Eagle laments the absence of Harry Truman and Curtis LeMay. The one diplomatic voice comes from Mary A. Smith, who wants to “make an effort to understand why the Iranians hate the shah,” although she finds the hostage takers’ action “deplorable.” She calls for compassion on both sides, and although she seems to be alone in her assessment, there are reasons to believe that there were more people like her. According to the December 3 edition of *Time*, “Americans at home have largely managed to control their indignation. There have been only a few isolated attacks on Iranians.” *Time*’s assessment could of course be debated, but in light of the massive personalization of the crisis, and the general climate of anger and frustration, it might be argued that the violent reactions could have been much more widespread and damaging.

#### **2.4. The question of unity**

In all, it seems that the Americans were largely unified in their anger, although their responses and suggestions about how to handle the crisis varied. President Carter himself argued that this was a result of the hostage crisis. *Newsweek* of November 26, 1979, refer to a claim by Carter that “[n]o act has so galvanized the American public towards unity in the past decade

as has the holding of our people as hostages in Teheran” (35). This unity can also be seen in the considerable initial approval of Carter’s handling of the crisis, giving him the biggest boost he had experienced as president. In addition, *Newsweek*’s suggestion in its November 26 edition, that Congressional restrictions on the President’s freedom be rethought, shows the possible political benefits the crisis might have brought Carter. However, in *Time* the same week, the *Time Essay* by Strobe Talbott questions the notion of national unity as a result of the hostage crisis. As a response to James Schlesinger’s comment that “the Ayatullah [sic] has accomplished a ‘miracle’ by uniting the American people,” Talbott dryly states: “Not really. The U.S. is unified in its indignation but indignation is not a foreign policy or a military strategy. Nor is there any sign that the country is united in a new determination to fight blackmail by oil with the self-discipline and self-sacrifice of energy conservation” (45).

Talbott does make an important point in this article, and an extension of his argument could be to critically view the role of nationalism in the United States. This paper argues for a view of the reactions to the Iranian hostage crisis as nationalistic outbursts, patriotism taken to its extreme in the face of a foreign threat. One important question that should follow such an assessment is formulated by diplomatic historian Michael H. Hunt in response to the nationalistic responses in the wake of 9/11: “...how seriously should we take this recent explosion of nationalist sentiment?”<sup>22</sup> His tentative answer to the question is that “once beyond the shock and grief over the loss of American life, the national response had the feel not of a great crisis ... but of a sporting event at which the home team sweeps the outclassed opposition from the field or ... a quickly satisfied hunger for revenge and quiet longing for security from future attacks.” Hunt argues that this “strange disconnect between the epochal issues ostensibly at stake and the minimal sacrifices asked of Americans carries forward a pattern familiar to historians” (421). He cites consumer values and the notion of individualism as explanations for the difficulties policymakers experience in trying to “elicit significant, sustained popular sacrifice” (Hunt 421). This point about a persisting lack of sacrifice among Americans is reminiscent of Talbott’s claim that the USA during the hostage crisis was unified in its indignation rather than in a determination to make sacrifices of energy conservation (*Time* November 26, 1979: 45). As a conclusion to this chapter, though, it is tempting to argue that although the national unity seen in responses to the hostage crisis may not be substantial or deeply grounded in the American national character, it was certainly

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<sup>22</sup> Michael H. Hunt, “In the Wake of September 11: The Clash of What?” *The Journal of American History*, 89.2 (2002), 421.

perceived to be so. And sometimes perceived reality can be just as important, maybe even more important, than reality itself.

## Chapter 3 - The failed rescue attempt

### 3.1. Introduction

Operation Eagle Claw, executed on April 24, 1980, was President Carter's way of trying to *do something* militarily, but it failed miserably. Two of eight helicopters became lost in a sandstorm on their way to staging site *Desert One*, while a third helicopter had mechanical problems. This meant that there were too few helicopters left to transport people and equipment to the next rendezvous, *Desert Two* near Tehran, and so the rescue mission was aborted. While taking off, one of the helicopters lost control and crashed into a C-130, resulting in the loss of lives of eight service men. In addition, five helicopters were left behind during the hasty evacuation, as well as classified plans identifying CIA agents within Iran. The American people varied in their responses to the aborted rescue attempt, but it seems that a majority would agree with *Time* in their assertion that Carter deserved an 'A' for effort but an 'F' for execution (31)

### 3.2. Gallup polls

Gallup Polls from April and May 1980, "recorded after a recent period of confrontations and diplomatic setbacks for the U.S. in international affairs, including the failure to secure the release of U.S. hostages in Iran," exhibit a sharp decline in Americans' confidence in their country.<sup>23</sup> These polls show that "nearly half of all the persons interviewed (45 percent) say their confidence in [the United States'] international efforts has gone down lately, while 41 percent say it has remained the same, and only 10 percent say it has gone up." Although a 53 percent majority still expresses "'very great' or 'considerable' confidence in the ability of [the United States] to deal wisely with present world problems," as much as 43 percent of the people asked "say they have 'little' or 'very little' confidence or volunteer that they have no confidence at all." Carter's ratings are not much better. Under the headline "Confidence in Carter also on decline, [sic]" it is stated that "41 percent of Americans said their opinion of Carter has gone down recently, 43 percent said it has remained the same, and 12 percent said their opinion of the President has gone up." In response to the question "Do you think Mr. Carter is or is not proving a good president of the United States?" 35 percent answered "is,"

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<sup>23</sup> Gallup Polls, April-May 1980, 11.

46 percent “is not,” and 19 percent chose not to express an opinion (11). However, another poll reveals that public approval of President Carter’s handling of the Iranian crisis was at almost the same level as recorded in a previous Gallup survey from late March (12). Also of interest is the fact that prior to the failed rescue attempt, 56 percent of the Americans asked thought that the hostages would be freed, and that the majority favored economic and diplomatic sanctions over the use of military force (12).

The poll results recorded above correspond with Sigelman’s and Conover’s assertion that “crisis-bred outpourings of public support do not last,” referred to in chapter 2.3 of this paper, but these authors have also included evidence that complicates the conclusions in the Gallup Polls. Sigelman and Conover note that support for Carter started to erode as the hostage situation continued, and according to their figures, which are based on Associated Press-NBC Poll Surveys, the approval level was at 55 percent by late January, 47 percent by March and 36 percent by October (304). Although they do not refer to the approval rate for May 1980, *Figure 1* in their article shows that it was down to only 35 percent (Sigelman and Conover 305). This survey thus contradicts the Gallup Poll, which recorded only a minor difference in approval rate between March and May, and it suggests that the failed rescue attempt did have a dramatic impact on the American people’s approval of the President. In the following sections, these differing results will be discussed in relation to reactions recorded in American magazines and newspapers. In addition, the American optimism prior to the rescue attempt about the hostages being freed will be compared to the public’s reactions to the failure.

### **3.3. Different public reactions to the rescue attempt**

In their May 5 editions, both *Newsweek* and *Time* initially express a harsh verdict of Carter’s failed rescue attempt. *Newsweek*’s front cover has a picture of a military helicopter, accompanied by the title “Fiasco in Iran. Special Report,” while *Time*’s front page features a painting of a devastated Carter and the title “Debacle in the Desert.” These words and images highlight the utter failure of the mission, which can also be seen in the titles of the magazines’ respective cover stories: “A mission comes to grief in Iran” and “Debacle in the Desert. Carter’s mission to rescue the hostages goes down in flames” (*Newsweek* 24, *Time* 12). Expressing its verdict in plain words, *Newsweek* asserts that “Carter’s failed rescue effort frustrates the nation, irks the allies – and sets back the cause of the hostages” (24). *Time*’s verdict also includes a reference to the allies, but also what the failure might mean for Carter

personally: “President Carter launches an airborne mission to rescue the hostages in Iran, only to have the venture fail dismally. The result: more anger among the allies, and imperiled political future for himself” (2).

However, in their cover stories both magazines also offer a more subdued and sympathetic view of the aborted rescue mission. After having given its brusque verdict, *Newsweek* admits that “[f]or the most part, the nation’s immediate reaction to the fiasco was a rally-round-the-flag surge of unity in the face of the cruel turn of events”. To back up this claim, *Newsweek* refers to a poll “begun by the Gallup Organization just twelve hours after Carter went on air with the bad news”, which shows that “by a 4-to-1 margin Americans approved of his [Carter’s] decision to send in the commandos.” This poll expresses the opinions of 671 people interviewed by telephone on April 25, and a slim majority of these people also approve of how Carter is handling the crisis (46% to 42%) and his job (43% to 39%). Again, the answer to the question “Did the hostage crisis unite the American people?” could be a tentative “yes.” *Newsweek* further admits that Carter would have been a hero had the mission succeeded, but that he had been extraordinary unlucky (24). This view is supported by an editorial commentary in the *Houston Post* on April 29, 1980. After stating that the cause was noble but the failure tragic, the commentary acknowledges that “[w]eather, mechanical failure, bad luck – all such things are always possible” (2D).

The *Houston Post* commentary goes on to call the people who died heroes, because “in a time when the nation felt helpless, they acted.” *Newsweek* indicates that doing something to counter the feeling of helplessness was of crucial importance to Carter as well, thus bringing to mind Scott’s interpretation of Carter as the frontier hero. The magazine argues that the political situation at home” could be seen as one reason for the President’s “sense of urgency,” claiming that “the nation was growing increasingly frustrated with his [Carter’s] continued inability to extricate the hostages peacefully, and the great boost in the polls that the crisis had originally given him was fast melting away” (25-26). However, in assessing Carter’s reasons for initiating the rescue attempt one must not forget the intense personal investment of the President. A cartoon in the *Louisville Courier* of April 27 can be said to sum up both the personal and the political aspect of Carter’s involvement: From inside the White House, Carter is shouting: “No! I’m **not** leaving the White House just because of some silly election!... I’m staying here until every last hostage is returned!” The answer, presumably from his wife, is: “I know Jimmy, but the Reagans are out front with all their

furniture ...” (D2). Whatever his reasons, though, it could be argued that Carter did achieve a heroic image, but that it faded after Operation Eagle Claw. According to Scott, this image “declined precipitously after the botched rescue attempt” (184).

*Time* also expands on and to a certain degree diversifies its initial verdict of the “debacle in the desert,” and in contrast to *Newsweek* it debates the consequences of the failed rescue mission for the President’s political future rather than its causes. First, the magazine admits that the reactions around the world are mixed, “as some support Carter, others fume” (26). In addition to shock and anger, there is also sympathy to find among the allies of the United States. Second, as mentioned in the introduction, *Time* gives Carter “‘A’ for effort, ‘F’ for execution” (31). This judgment is the headline of an article, and corresponds well with *Newsweek*’s assertion that Americans in large part approved of Carter’s decision to attempt a rescue mission. *Time* also points out that “[m]ost voters did not question the President’s intentions, only his competence.” Here *Time*’s emphasis differs from *Newsweek*’s: Where the latter seems to emphasize the role bad luck played during Operation Eagle Claw, the former indicates that it was more a question of competence or lack thereof.

In the same article, *Time* elaborates on its initial prediction of Carter’s “imperiled political future,” stating that political experts agree that Carter could in the short run “make political gains from a military misfortune”. The reason for this is the same that Sigelman and Conover point out: The tendency of Americans to “rally round a President in a crisis, even a crisis that he has caused.” However, *Time* then adds that “on reflection the voters are likely to conclude that once again Carter has failed.” In all, despite the difference in emphasis, this could be seen as the view of both magazines. While *Time* focuses on the consequences for the President himself, *Newsweek* seeks the causes of Carter’s decision, emphasizes the immediate public approval, and avoids an explicit reference to Carter’s uncertain political future. In the end, though, the magazines’ verdicts are very similar, and both give the impression of an uncertain future, at least for the hostages.

When it comes to the American public’s view of the fate of the hostages after the failed rescue attempt, *Newsweek* provides a general survey while the *Houston Post* of April 26, 1980, prints specific examples of Houstonians’ view of the matter. According to *Newsweek*’s poll, a slim majority of 43 percent (against 39) thinks that the failed rescue attempt will “increase the chances of the hostages being harmed” (26). In addition, 37 percent of the asked think that the

rescue mission will delay the return of the hostages, but a majority of 43 percent believes that it makes no difference. The *Houston Post* has “conducted a random survey to monitor the feelings of those Carter is ultimately accountable to: the American public,” and the headline of the article is “Houstonians’ views of aborted rescue try vary” (15C). Admittedly, just a small minority of the people interviewed states whether they think the rescue attempt has further endangered the hostages’ lives, and interestingly enough, these are all women. Of that group a majority has answered in the positive, and it is intriguing that all but one of those still applauds Carter’s decision to go through with the mission. This corresponds with an observation in *Time*’s that “many back the President, despite fears for the hostages’ safety” (36).

Christine Luna, an office worker, is one of those people. She finds it difficult to have an opinion “because everything in the government is so secret.” Even so, she expresses deep loyalty for the government. Although she fears for the hostages, she believes that “something had to be done and it’s up to them [sic] in Washington to decide on those things.” Marilyn Walker, a clerk for the Houston police special thefts detail, is not a Carter supporter. However, she thinks “he made an effort,” and that “it took a lot of planning and sacrificing on his part.” She is behind Carter, even if she “feels the attempt at rescue [sic] the hostages will endanger their lives.” Geraldine Clay, a Houston Police Department payroll clerk, thinks that another president would have had the same problems, and although she refuses to say whether she supports Carter, she says: “I feel like we voted him in, and we should support him.” Clay does not think that the rescue try endangered the hostages further, adding that “[s]ome of them are probably dead anyway.” In contrast, Naomi Foldman, a Houston School teacher, thinks that “[i]t (the rescue attempt) seems like a stupid thing for the U.S. to have attempted.” She wonders how it will affect the safety of the hostages.

Other reactions range from sentiments along the lines of “it was good to have tried, but a shame that it failed,” to the more extreme “Carter is weak and dumb” and “we should have gone in with military force the first day, the embassy seizure was an act of war.” Whether this survey exhibits the virtually unanimous “rally-around-the-flag unity” that *Newsweek* mentions is debatable (24). Quite a few admit to feeling embarrassed about their country. Lee Duggan, Jr., a state district judge, questions the decision to publicize the failure, judging it “foolish to air our laundry to the world in that manner.” Some of the people asked think that Carter should have tried even harder and sent in more troops, but only Dorothy Albright, a clerk in

the central business district, seems to have thought about the possibility of a virtual massacre in the event of a successful mission: ““There probably would have been hundreds of people killed if it had gone through. ‘Those people (militants) are so cold-blooded, they wouldn’t have hesitated to shoot the hostages.’” In all, though, it seems that a majority of the Houstonians asked exhibit a hesitant support for the President. Carter has the sympathy of many Houstonians even though they are not among his supporters, and he even receives encouragement from people who think the hostages’ lives have become more endangered as a consequence of the failed rescue mission.

### **3.4. The failed rescue attempt as a chapter in the captivity narrative**

Meanwhile, the weekly magazines in particular were eager to inform the American public about how Operation Eagle Claw had affected the hostages and their relatives. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* of May 5, 1980, feature articles providing an inside view of the hostages’ situation and a description of the plight of the hostages’ families and their opinions of the failed rescue attempt. On the whole, the relatives of the hostages seemed to be fairly critical of the rescue mission, especially since failure had repercussions for families wanting to visit their beloved ones, but the image presented in the magazines was not entirely one-dimensional. Still, *Time*’s and *Newsweek*’s articles support Scott’s assertion that captivity allowed “the representation of discordant voices to challenge official U.S. foreign policy positions” (183).

First, both magazine articles describe the continuing and even renewed feeling of worry that plagued the hostages’ families after the rescue attempt that was meant to bring relief to a whole nation. In its headline, *Newsweek* emphasizes how the frustrating lack of a solution is making the families “still wait” and later in the article argues that the “abortive raid was a powerful deterrent to hostage families who had been hoping to visit their captive relatives in Iran” (39). *Newsweek* further laments the fact that a raid that “was to end the suffering of the hostage families ... only deepened their sense of frustration” (39). *Time*’s headline also voices a worry that the failed rescue attempt has exacerbated the situation: “For the Families, a New Concern” (32). Second, *Newsweek* in a rather poetic way describes how the failure of Operation Eagle Claw highlighted the discordance in public opinion:

As it has throughout the crisis, the nation turned to those with most at stake to strike an emotional keynote – and once again it heard a discordant echo, amplified by grief, of

the national bewilderment and frustration. Toni Sickmann, of Krakow, Mo., the mother of Marine Sgt. Rodney Sickmann, called the deaths [of the American servicemen] ‘a warning from God that there are other ways to do things’. ( 39)

The sentiment Toni Sickmann expresses here goes against the initial public support of Carter’s decision to attempt a military rescue and thus corresponds with Scott’s claim that discordant voices were heard during the crisis. McAlister supports this view, arguing that the “‘hostage families’ became a new kind of figure in American public life . . . . They also had a powerful status as moral agents in the realm of politics.” McAlister further asserts that these families did not represent the nation-state but rather the national community (208). Considering their status as legitimate representatives for the American nation, then, it is significant that some of these hostage families did not participate in the aforementioned “rally-around-the flag surge of unity.”

Sickmann’s reaction also brings up another important element of the captivity: The religious aspect. McAlister claims that the captivity narrative tried to explain the hostage takers’ actions through Islam; a category that in the news media was interpreted as a “single, unchanging cultural proclivity to mix faith with politics, and to express both through violence” (210- 211). She sees this development in light of the discourse about the terrorist threat in the Middle East that had made Islam a “dominant signifier of the region” (McAlister 200). McAlister further argues that due to a secularization of American political life, Christianity as a symbol of nationalism was not commonly evoked in the mainstream media, but that the focus on Islam as a way of understanding Iranians pushed Christianity into prominence again (McAlister 211). Scott, on her part, connects this focus on religion to the classical captivity narratives, in which “Indians represented the instrument used by God to punish the Puritans.” These narratives “suggested that God chastised the Puritans because they had become complacent” (Scott 180).

However, whereas the issue of complacency was raised by those Americans who perceived the United States as too soft militarily, Sickmann seems to argue that the deaths of the servicemen was a sign from God that military force was not a good solution to the hostage crisis. Thus the possibility of divine punishment could be invoked by both hawks and doves in the captivity narrative that was the Iranian hostage crisis, which shows that the symbols applied in the publicized story of the crisis could take on contrasting meanings. In light of the domestic focus of this narrative, another interesting aspect about *Newsweek*’s article is that it

seems to describe women as doves against men as hawks. Toni Sickmann probably had sympathy with the approach of the women who had tried to do freelance diplomacy in Europe, and who also had been shocked by the rescue mission. In contrast, “Phil Lewis Homer, Ill., father of hostage Paul Lewis, struck a note of wistfulness” by saying that “[n]othing would have tickled [Paul] more than to see those marines coming over the wall” (39).

The impression that women in particular were voicing criticism of the American administration’s use of military solutions is reinforced by *Newsweek*’s and *Time*’s focus on Barbara Timm, the mother of one of the hostages. Going against the Carter administration’s advice, Mrs. Timm left for Iran to see her son, and both *Newsweek* and *Time* record the meeting between the two. *Newsweek* describes the visit as a private and emotional encounter, but also includes an assessment of what it might mean politically. “Mrs. Timm’s visit was brief and poignant,” the magazine asserts, stating that the mother and son “talked about hometown basketball and family news, but no politics,” and that they, according to Mrs. Timm, “never quit holding hands” (39). However, *Newsweek* also predicts that the “prospect of more visits put the Administration in a tight spot, torn between fear that relatives would undercut its tough stance toward Iran, and its reluctance to seem cruel.” This quote shows one of the problems the personalization of the crisis created for Carter: Even if the American people demanded that something be done to save the hostages, such efforts could eventually backfire if they clashed with the wishes of the hostages’ families. After all, the relatives of the hostages can be said to have been a powerful symbol of the American family during the crisis. The administration’s dilemma is also evident in *Newsweek*’s comment on Carter’s response to Mrs. Timm’s visit: “‘My heart goes out to her,’ Carter said of Mrs. Timm, but he surely felt less sympathy when she deplored U.S. sanctions against Iran and apologized for the rescue mission.” Like Toni Sickmann, Barbara Timm spoke out against Carter’s policies, and the President probably held his tongue in fear that a sharp reply would turn people against him. In *Time*’s rendition of Carter’s words of Mrs. Timm, he adds the assurance: “‘I have no intention of punishing her’” (36). It could be argued that as “hostage mothers,” Sickmann and Timm more than anyone else epitomized the nation as a domestic sphere during the crisis, and that their opinions were thus steeped in moral legitimacy.

Otherwise, *Time*’s description of Mrs. Timm’s meeting with her son is in many ways similar to *Newsweek*’s article in that it emphasizes the emotional and private aspects of the visit (a lot of hugging and kissing, no political talk). However, *Time* also presents a different perspective

on Mrs. Timm's venture: What her "townspeople" and relatives thought of it. In an article with the evocative headline "A Mother's Odyssey," *Time* highlights Barbara Timm's frustration at being kept out of Iran, but also some non-sympathetic reactions to her defiance of the Administration (36). "Back in Oak Creek," *Time* states, "some townspeople consider her [Mrs. Timm] a traitor for going off to Iran against the Administration's wishes." There are other opinions, though. One attitude is particularly interesting and almost ironic seen in the perspective of the crisis as a highly personalized captivity narrative: "Others contend that she [Mrs. Timm] had at least for a moment eased the tensions between the U.S. and the militants by personalizing and depoliticizing the situation." According to McAlister, the hostage takers actually did everything they could to "emphasize the 'guilt' of the hostages and their status as U.S. government representatives," but, as mentioned in chapter 2 of this paper, this was not an easy task to undertake (209). Towards the end of *Time*'s article about Timm, her sister Judy Haessly, gets to express a "more down-to-earth view" that Americans affected by the personalization of the crisis probably found easiest to identify with: "She's not a traitor, and she's not Joan of Arc. She's just a mother who wants to see her son." With her simple words, Haessly manages to boil her sister's intentions down to the basic, all-familiar emotion of love towards one's children, thus effectively removing any trace of political considerations or motives.

### ***3.5. The rescue attempt as puzzle and tragedy***

Finally, it is interesting to take a look at Carter's actual decision to go through with the rescue mission, and to see whether bad luck and mechanical failure were the only reasons for the eventual "debacle in the desert." As has been shown here, the American public was in large part sympathetic to the attempt, at least initially, but reactions of embarrassment and anger were also prevalent. Some of those who thought the attempt was necessary also found the failure unforgivable, while others detested the use of military force. What was Carter's range of options, and why did he choose exactly this solution? Is the real problem to be found in the way the rescue attempt was executed?

First, David Houghton presents Carter's decision to go through with Operation Eagle Claw as a puzzle. As noted in chapter 1, Houghton points out that Carter was a president so dedicated to peaceful means of solving conflicts that it is difficult to believe that he would "launch an operation which he had been warned would almost certainly result in at least some loss of life" (6). Houghton admits that Carter issued orders to the rescuers to "avoid bloodshed

whenever possible,” and that he “claimed in a message to Congress that the rescue operation ‘was a humanitarian mission.’” However, Houghton does not think it likely that a President as obsessed with details as Carter was ignorant of the fact that lives would probably be lost. This chance is also pointed out by one of the Houstonians interviewed for the *Houston Post*: Dorothy Albright is of the opinion that there “probably would have been hundreds of people killed if it [the rescue mission] had gone through” (15C).

Part of Houghton’s general argument in his book is that historical analogies profoundly affected the way in which policymakers made their decisions during the Iranian hostage crisis, and there are reasons to believe that he interprets Carter’s decision within this framework. However, Houghton also points out that Carter’s “general concern with morality and rights translated into a particular concern for the lives of the hostages, and led to a determination to give the matter absolute priority” (7). The intense personal character of the crisis as presented in this paper backs up such an observation. Carter himself contributed to this personalization through his unfailing commitment to freeing his “fellow Americans” and relieving the pain of the hostages’ families. Like the mass media he did not focus much on the hostages’ official position, helping to “depoliticize the individual”. By so doing he helped create the public pressure to *do something*. Thus it could be argued that while the personalization of the crisis initially secured Carter sympathy and support from a majority of the American people, it also put him in a squeeze between all-encompassing humanitarian principles and the specific fate of his fellow American citizens. The rescue attempt could then be seen as an example of Carter reluctantly favoring his countrymen- and women. Other, more personal concerns might also have helped along Carter’s decision to attempt a military rescue, such as Khomeini’s taunts and accusations of cowardice, exemplified above. Going through with Operation Eagle Claw would be a way for the President to “disabuse” Khomeini of the notion that Carter was “beating an empty drum” (*Time*, December 3, 1979: 28). Also, Carter was probably afraid that a stalemate in Iran would destroy his chances of re-election, just as the quagmire in Vietnam contributed to Lyndon B. Johnson’s downfall as president. Lastly, Gary Sick highlights the loftier question of American national integrity: “The decision to undertake the rescue mission was a choice that touched directly on U.S. national values ... How does a nation or its leadership reconcile the contradictions between the protection of innocent human lives and the preservation of national honor?” (302).

When it comes to the issue of the execution of the rescue attempt, William Safire argues in the *Chicago Tribune* of May 2, 1980, that President Carter's moral qualms actually contributed to the failure of the mission (Section 5:4). Like many other Americans, Safire applauds Carter's decision to go through with Operation Eagle Claw. He claims that "Americans have much to be sorry for but nothing to be ashamed of," and that Carter deserves "the temporary support of his fellow countrymen – not because he is the President, but because he finally tried to act like a President." This opinion contrasts with those of the Houstonians interviewed for the *Houston Post* who seemed to loyally stand behind Carter precisely because he was their elected president. Safire further debunks the explanations that pin the mission's failure on the "folly of direct action" or "bad luck and mechanical difficulties." Operation Eagle Claw failed, claims Safire, because "the conception of the raid was not bold enough." "By reducing the risk of loss of life," Safire continues, Carter "increased the risk of failure of the mission, and the tragic irony came when lives were lost after his decision to retreat." Safire's commentary thus supports the theory that the personalization of the crisis left Carter with a serious dilemma: The American public needed their President to act tough in a fragile situation, but since they had learned to identify strongly with the hostages they were hesitant when it came to military action that might harm Americans. This knowledge may have hampered Carter in his handling of the mission and caused him to pull out of an increasingly dangerous situation, only to result in loss of lives and international embarrassment. As stated in the *Houston Post* editorial of April 29, 1980, the failure was indeed a tragedy, especially if Carter's praise-worthy moral qualms really did contribute to the debacle.

## **Chapter 4 - The release of the hostages**

### **4.1. Introduction**

In January of 1981, an agreement between the United States and Iran was finally reached. After months of diplomatic negotiations, it had been decided that the hostages were going to be released in exchange for \$ 8 billion dollars in funds, and on the morning of January 20, Carter received the message that the transfer of assets had been completed (Sick 339). This day was also Ronald Reagan's inauguration day. The hostage crisis had contributed to Jimmy Carter's loss in the presidential election of 1980, and as a final blow to Carter the hostages' departure from Tehran was delayed until 12:30 pm on January 20, 1981, 30 minutes after his term ended. Gary Sick writes that the Algerian diplomats who were involved in the negotiations explained the delay as an example of typical Iranian inefficiency, but that to the Administration and many others it looked like the Iranians attempted to humiliate their enemy one last time (341).

Overall, the reactions of the American public to the release of the hostages were largely expressions of overwhelming joy, relief, and national triumph. Outbursts of anger also surfaced as the details about the captivity leaked out. Both periodicals abound with descriptions of happy Americans welcoming the freed hostages with yellow ribbons, American flags, and hymns. Considering the American public's intense identification with the hostages throughout the 444-day ordeal, these expressions of joy and triumph seem perfectly natural and not at all difficult to understand. The hostage crisis seems to have united the American people and healed their wounded national pride. However, in both magazines and newspapers, more sober attempts at assessing these reactions complicate the celebratory whirlwind that swept the country after the release of the hostages.

### **4.2 Gallup polls**

In the Gallup Polls of February 1981 there are two groups of surveys that are particularly relevant. First, Gallup International surveys reveal that the "American people are not only far more optimistic about the new year than they were at the start of 1980 and 1979 but they also hold a brighter outlook toward 1981 than do the publics of most of 29 other countries

surveyed recently ....”<sup>24</sup> According to the Gallup Poll, more than 30,000 residents in 29 other countries participated in this study, and of those only three Latin American countries were as “sanguine about 1981” as the Americans. 49 percent of the Americans asked think that 1981 will be better than the year before, while only 26 percent believe that it will be worse (3). There are good reasons to believe that the happy outcome of the hostage crisis contributed to this optimism in the United States. Further, the Gallup Poll section on United States-Iran relations features a new poll conducted January 30-February 2, 1981. This survey reveals that “a majority (57 percent) of the ‘aware’ public – those 85 percent who had heard or read about the agreement [between the USA and Iran] – believed the U.S. should abide by the terms of the agreement with Iran.” This was a response to the question whether President Reagan was “committed to carrying out the terms of the release negotiated by the outgoing Carter administration” (40). The question “Should the U.S. try to establish good relations with Iran in the future, or not?” uncovered a more mixed response from Americans: 47% answered “should,” while 44% answered “should not” (43). It is also interesting that in a survey undertaken in November, 1980, “no broad consensus was evident on what steps the public thought the U.S. government should take to obtain the release of the 52 American hostages” (40). Taken together, these polls show that although Americans were united in their optimism after the crisis had ended, neither before the release of the hostages nor after did they agree upon a course of action against Iran.

### **4.3. Reactions to the release of the hostages**

#### **4.3.1. Immediate reactions**

Since the crisis was resolved on a Tuesday, and *Newsweek* and *Time* come out on Mondays, the most immediate reactions to the release of the hostages are recorded in the daily newspapers. In *Houston Post* of January 21, 1981, the day after the release, there is an editorial commentary called “End of an ordeal” (2B). This commentary emphasizes the gratefulness and relief of a whole nation, and it is full of praise for the government and scorn for the hostage takers. “Once again,” it proclaims, “the United States has shown the world the value we place on human life and freedom, the compassion our government gives to those it serves.” Furthermore it notes that the agreement does not mean that the USA responded to

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<sup>24</sup> Gallup Polls, February 1981, 3.

blackmail: “The Iranians are getting no reward for their illegal behavior. They are getting their own funds that they might have found useful during all the months of their banditry.” This quote refers to the fact that the money the United States transferred to Iran as part of the agreement was Iranian assets frozen by the USA at the beginning of the crisis, and according to Gary Sick, the sum the Iranians eventually received was just a third of the money they had originally lost (337). Many of those who were involved in the negotiations are also mentioned with gratitude, like the bankers, the Algerian diplomats, and the State Department and White House Staffs. Gratitude is also awarded to President Carter for “the patience, endurance, forbearance and self-control with which he pursued a course that ended the ordeal honorably for the nation, safely for the hostages.” In the last sentence, even President Reagan is thanked for adding “grace to the final scene by asking President Carter to go to West Germany to meet in person the men and women who have been his companions in thought for 444 days.”

In the *Louisville Courier* the same day, Haynes Johnson emphasizes how the resolution of the crisis not only meant the release of the hostages but also the release of a whole nation. He starts his analysis of the crisis by stating that “[t]he hostages weren’t the only ones who were freed yesterday. All Americans have been released – liberated from pent-up feelings of rage and helplessness, of weariness and despair, of hopes suddenly rising and cruelly being dashed” (A4). He notes the “collective sigh of relief across the United States” at the end of an event that had created so much national frustration that it was unique in modern times. The release from “feelings of rage” was not quite complete, though. In the *Houston Post* of January 25, a fuming editorial commentary with the headline “Despicable!” notes that “the rising hopes that the Iranians had treated the Americans within the code of civilized conduct” had been in vain: “They [the hostage takers] thought to humiliate our nation, degrade our people by frightening them, abusing them . . .” (2B). However, the commentary stresses that “the humiliation and degradation are not theirs [the hostages’]. It is their tormentors who are in dishonor.” The fact that the United States keeps its commitment to Iran, the author seems to argue, has less to do with the promise made to the “Iranian terrorists” than the importance of preserving American principles and national honor.

The feelings of relief described in the dailies are echoed in *Newsweek* and *Time* of January 26, 1981, but the magazines are arguably more muted in both their joy and their anger. First, *Newsweek* does not seem to be a 100 percent sure that the agreement will solve the crisis. Its front page features a blind-folded hostage and the title “The Hostage Deal,” a somber image

that expresses uncertainty about the outcome. It seems that the magazine is reluctant to print a picture of a hostage without the symbolic blind-fold before its journalists can actually see the freed hostages in the flesh. “Too often before,” *Newsweek* states, “the nation had counted the days – and prayed for deliverance” (20). “But last week,” it continues, “Iran offered the best chance yet for resolving the hostage crisis.” Thus the magazine does seem hopeful that an American nation affected by a “numbness” that “seemed to have undone all hope” will see the end the “fourteen-month passage through anxiety, humiliation, and rage.” The issue of *Time* published the same week seems even more optimistic, though. Its front page is covered with American flags, and its title seems to be shouting: “The Hostages. Breakthrough!” In “A Letter from The Publisher,” John A. Meyers writes that the people working for the magazine “started almost every week gearing up for a breakthrough,” and he emphasizes the importance of the outcome to the employees of *Time*: “More than any story in years, the hostages tugged hard at journalists’ hearts and patriotism” (2).

When it comes to feelings of anger, it seems that at the time the magazines’ articles were written the details on how the hostages were treated had not yet been publicized, because there are no outbursts like the one in the *Houston Post*. In an article about what awaits the hostages in the event of their release, *Newsweek* writes that the “52 American hostages appear to be in reasonably good shape,” and that “the acid test will come when they finally step off the plane from Tehran” (29). However, *Newsweek* also features a condemnation of the hostage takers that has an Orientalist ring to it. “The long ordeal of the helpless American hostages has been a nineteenth-century affront in twentieth-century dress, an outrage conjuring up images of the Barbary pirates and impulses that run to mayhem” (20). Like in earlier articles about the crisis, the hostage takers are described as barbaric and hopelessly outdated. *Time*’s approach can be described as more subtle. An article titled “The Long Ordeal of the Hostages. How vengeance and mutual incomprehension entangled two nations” sums up the crisis, and pictures of angry Iranians demonstrating are included here (20-24).

#### **4.3.2. The return of the hostages**

The homecoming of the 52 hostages sparked a remarkable national celebration, and this jubilatory atmosphere dominates the first two February editions of *Newsweek* and *Time*. At the same time the magazines recount horrific tales of brutality and humiliation and the furious reactions to these revelations. However, there is also given room for more sober

commentaries and analyses of both the crisis and the national celebration. Along with the newspapers' analyses these will be discussed in the last two sections of this chapter.

Both magazines vividly describe the national "welcoming committee" that met the hostages as they returned to freedom, and in their February 2 issues they also link the celebration to Ronald Reagan's inauguration day. *Newsweek's* front page features a picture of happy, freed hostages coming out of a plane and the title: "A Day to Remember – Special Issue," while the cover of *Time* reflects both the celebration and the anger: It has a painting of cheering hostages and the title "The Ordeal Ends. And the Outrage Grows" (*Newsweek* 1, *Time* 1). The title of one article is "America's Incredible Day. When Ronald Reagan takes command and the hostages are finally freed" (*Time* 8). *Newsweek* features a very evocative description of the hostages' descent out of the planes at an air base in Germany:

The planes dipped down and landed at Rhein-Main Air Base where thousands of servicemen, their wives and children – waving American flags – waited under the lights of batteries of TV cameras.... The sight of the immense crowd seemed to alarm a few of the hostages.... But as the planes pulled to a halt, instead of the hateful, death-to-everyone cries that had afflicted them for more than a year, the chants they heard were 'U.S.A., U.S.A.!' and 'We didn't forget you.' (26)

The description of "a crowd of hundreds of airmen and their families" singing "'God Bless America,' 'America, the Beautiful' and 'The Star-Spangled Banner'" gives an impression of a virtual explosion of patriotism (27). *Time*, for its part, focuses on the atmosphere in the United States. Under the headline "An End to the Long Ordeal. Flying yellow ribbons coast to coast, a jubilant U.S. hails the hostages" the magazine describes how "America's joy pealed from church belfries, rippled from flag staffs and wrapped itself in a million miles of yellow ribbon" (24). What follows are accounts of impromptu parades, flag-hoisting and ribbon-tying. In the February 9 editions, both magazines have special reports about the hostages' return to American soil, and the reception the hostages get from the American people is summed up on *Newsweek's* front page: A picture of a released hostage hugging his sister, accompanied by the title "A Big Welcome Hug" (1).

Alongside these descriptions of joy, however, are equally evocative accounts of the hostage takers' brutality. *Newsweek* of February 2, 1981, features an article called "Grim Tales of Brutality" which presents details about the captivity that are "uglier than most Americans had expected" (33). *Time* describes how "the public mood turned more somber and angry as the

released Americans began to tell their families and U.S. officials about the cruelty they had endured during their 14 ½ months in Iran”. A “livid” Carter in his report to the new President warns: “Never do any favors for the hoodlums who persecuted innocent American heroes.” To reporters the former President describes the way in which the Iranians had treated the hostages as “acts of animals, almost” (24). In a letter printed in *Newsweek* of February 9, 1981, reader Robert L. Spencer holds that the Iranians’ “barbaric conduct” deserves punishment. However, instead of crying for vengeance he asks rhetorically: “Is there any punishment on this earth more terrible than to be condemned to live in the chaos that is Iran today?” (4). Spencer thus suggests that the USA abandon Iran entirely, leaving the country to sort out its own mess. Rays of celebration manage to shine through the condemnations and horrific accounts, though. *Time* has a special section called “Tales of Torment and Triumph” where the hostages’ strength and perseverance are emphasized: “Throughout their captivity, the will of the hostages never broke” (30).

#### **4.4. The captivity narrative revisited**

The symbols and mechanisms of the captivity narrative were no less visible in the mass media after the resolution of the crisis, but it could be argued that the release of the hostages led to a subtle shift in the order of the prominent symbols. The idea of the blind-folded hostage as symbol of depoliticization and innocence was introduced in chapter 2 of this paper, and McAlister argues that it became a “staple image, a constantly invoked symbol,” and “perhaps the single most visible symbol of the crisis overall.” McAlister even claims that the image “came to represent the nation itself” (207). The January 26 edition of *Newsweek* features a blind-folded hostage on its front page, and the same issue contrasts “the helpless American hostages” with Iranians resembling “Barbary pirates” – the last one a very classical captivity image of innocent Americans facing uncivilized strangers (1, 20). However, as it became clear that the hostages were indeed released and on their way back the image of the helpless and blind-folded hostage seems to have diminished in prominence. This ties in with *Newsweek*’s observation in its February 9 issue that the American people now exalted the hostages “from victims to heroes,” which is supported by *Time* of February 2 as it reports Carter calling the hostages “innocent American heroes” (*Newsweek* 3, *Time* 24). As mentioned in the previous section, focus was now on the impressive strength the hostages had shown in the face of their captors’ brutality. Thus the former victims emerged as heroes, not as passively blind-folded victims but actively telling their own stories to the American people.

Since passivity traditionally has been identified with women and the private sphere this is a significant shift.

Even if the hostages were pictured as more active and in control of themselves, though, two interconnected symbols of domesticity still prevailed: the yellow ribbon and the image of the American people as one big family. Early in the crisis the former had become a powerful symbol, and according to McAlister, it achieved the status of the “predominant public symbol of concern for the hostages” (208). She further explains that the yellow ribbon had “a complicated history as a symbol of female fidelity to husbands or boyfriends in times of war; [it] symbolized the promise of love and reentry into private life for soldiers, and now for hostages.” Within the captivity narrative, the yellow ribbon “provided private citizens with a simple way to identify as part of the ‘family’ that would welcome the hostages home” (McAlister 209). So when the hostages actually did come home this symbol naturally rose to prominence, and this is reflected especially in the weekly magazines. A headline in *Time* of February 2 describes yellow ribbons flying from coast to coast, and in the following special section the pages are ornamented with this symbol (24-58). In *Newsweek* of February 9, the yellow ribbons are referred to in a commentary headline and in an article where “the nation” is said to have “wrapped [the hostages] in yellow ribbon” (19, 27).

The image of the American family dominated the mass media through a continuing focus on the hostages’ relatives together with the message that shone through in the accounts of the national celebration: The American people came forward as one big family to welcome home their lost and beloved ones. In the *Houston Post*’s editorial commentary on January 21, “End of an Ordeal,” the families of the hostages are described in the first two paragraphs as “hoping, praying for the safe return of someone they loved,” and “continuing to show courage and dignity of genuine pride” in the “final stress” of the last days and hours of the negotiations (2B). According to *Newsweek* of February 2, its “correspondents visited hostage relatives around the country as they celebrated last week” (38). The result was a “scrapbook of family vignettes” that the magazine printed. *Time* from the same week features pictures of happy families and former hostages with their children, and as stated in the previous section, *Newsweek* of February 9 has a picture of a released hostage hugging his sister on the front page (*Time* 26-28, *Newsweek* 1).

This front page also bears the title “A Big Welcome Hug,” and on page 3 of this issue of *Newsweek* it becomes clear that the welcome hug is not just from the hostages’ relatives but from the whole of America. Thus the hostages’ families come to symbolize the American

family who welcomes back their loved ones. Later in the same issue of *Newsweek* it is emphasized that the United States as a nation fulfilled this role as the anxious family:

It seemed to be the most eagerly awaited return since Odysseus was held captive by the Cyclops.... After fourteen months of silence, the hostages were engulfed in noise – a thunder of adulation rolling across the nation, a mighty sound of mingled cheers and speeches.... After fourteen months of uncertainty, there could be no doubt in [the hostages'] minds: America never forgot. (22-23)

A family does not forget about its lost members, and, according to *Newsweek*, nor did the people of the United States. To back up its claim, the magazine prints a quote from a former hostage: “‘Never,’ Laingen concluded, ‘has so small a group owed so much to so many’” (26). One observation by *Newsweek* jars with this big, national welcome hug, though, and presents a paradox that shows how the hostage crisis blurred the boundaries between public and private. In its January 26 edition the magazine asserts that while the hostages will be given “preferential treatment by the U.S. government,” the “one private citizen ... Jerry Plotkin ... will be more on his own” (29). Although all the hostages were treated as private citizens during the crisis, then, only one of them will have that status following the release. A comment from Plotkin’s lawyer’s heightens the paradox. Steven Klein is cited to have plans about book and television deals in order to “cash in on Plotkin’s story,” and he follows up by stating: “People can identify more with a private citizen who happens to be caught in the middle than with a Marine corporal.” Judging from this paper’s findings, the American people did not seem to find it difficult identifying with any of the hostages.

The personalization of the crisis brought on by both Carter and the mass media and the ensuing nationalistic reactions obviously contributed to these emotions of familial love, and the hostage crisis as captivity narrative became a symbol in itself. To reiterate what Haynes Johnson wrote in the *Louisville Courier* of January 21, “[a]ll Americans were held hostage by agonizing crisis,” and thus all Americans were released when the hostages were freed from captivity (A4). On January 25, Don Oberdorfer argues in the *Courier* for the “symbolic nature of the event as the culmination of a growing sense of American vulnerability and even impotence” (A2). This resonates with Scott’s analysis as described above: Captivity narratives in Puritan times “served to admonish and warn Americans to ‘keep the old ways’” (181). What the Iranian hostage crisis meant for the American people and policymakers is further discussed in the last section of this chapter.

#### **4.5. Contemporary analyses of the public reactions**

Commentaries in both the magazines and the newspapers reveal ambivalence about the outcome of the crisis and the following public celebration. One columnist emphasizes how the crisis changed the American people, while another focuses on what remained unchanged. Many of the commentators seem to agree that the American people sorely needed something to be happy and proud about, and that national unity resulted from the outcome of the crisis. Some acknowledge that from the point of view of pure foreign policy concerns there was not much to rejoice about, while others focus on how the conduct of foreign policy was affected by the crisis.

Already the first five days after the release of the hostages, two writers in the *Louisville Courier* review how the crisis affected Americans. On January 23, 1981, syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman argues that the hostage crisis led to a “subtle shift” in the American national character. The headline of her article is “Americans are creating a ‘tough-guy’ portrait to avoid ‘another Iran,’” and she asserts that “[s]lowly, inexorably ... we gave up on the notion that we could win through reason” (A9). This can be seen as a reaction to the initial calls for “cool restraint” mentioned in chapter 2 of this paper. Goodman claims that the Iranian crisis made the American people think they could “have love or fear, but not both.” A “peculiarity of American foreign policy,” she argues, has been that Americans “have always wanted to be seen as good guys,” but then the hostage ordeal cast Carter in the role of “nice cop” and Reagan in the role of “tough cop.” Goodman goes on to argue that the “very timing of the release ... was dramatic testimony to ‘toughness’. The Iranians, we are told, finally bargained with Carter because they feared Reagan.” Thus, even if the Gallup Polls of February, 1981, reflect no broad public consensus on how the United States should act against Iran, Goodman is of the opinion that toughness will prevail. On January 25, Don Oberdorfer, who usually covers diplomatic affairs for the *Washington Post*, highlights what the crisis did *not* change (A2). He claims that despite the massive media coverage of the crisis, a majority of Americans “know little more today about Iran and the context of the hostage taking and hostage keeping than they did in November 1979.” This observation is supported by Gary Sick. “Despite the massive television exposure and the spilling of millions of gallons of printer’s ink,” he writes, Americans “managed to emerge from the ordeal with their basic ignorance surprisingly intact” (220).

In contrast, two commentaries in *Newsweek* of February 9 focus on what Americans perceived to be true about the crisis rather than what they actually knew. These writers argue

for the significance of American foreign policy to a people in need of heroes and self-confidence, and they highlight how the crisis in American eyes so clearly marked the difference between heroes and villains, good and evil. Brian Jenkins, director of the Rand Corporation research program on terrorism and political violence, claims that the “heavy cargo of guilt” Americans had carried since the Vietnam War dissolved during the hostage crisis. This guilt, implying that the United States’ “great wealth and power” had made it “the principal, if not the sole source of evil in this world,” supposedly disappeared when the hostage takers were cast in the roles of villains. Jenkins further argues that national unity emerged as a “positive result of the incident” and that the nationwide celebration was important as therapy for the American people.” However, he also sees the hostage crisis in a larger perspective: He worries that “the prospects for *global* unity against terrorism seem more remote than ever [my italicization]” (19).

Peter Goldman, John Walcott, and Martin Kasindorf expand on the issue of the American people’s need for heroes. They claim that Americans became so “extravagantly happy” because they had discovered “not one hero but 52,” and because the country had needed heroes for so long (27). The reason they give for the American ‘bath of love’ succinctly expresses the themes of domesticity, personalization, and nationalism discussed in this paper: “An America that had been held vicariously captive with [the hostages] for 444 days embraced them as heroes ... because they were home – and because they were us” (27). The authors also acknowledge how the crisis blurred distinctions of private and public: “The media age had made [the hostages’] imprisonment at once a communal and a searingly personal experience for tens of millions of Americans” (27). Citing a social psychologist who indicates that the American people’s celebration of “what was at best an ambiguous victory” amounts to “massive overcompensation,” the article nevertheless claims that “the search for neurotic sources ... tended to miss what was most affecting ... – a kind of national communion that rehabilitated patriotism as an acceptable heart-on-one’s sleeve emotion” (27). In the end, the authors conclude, the celebration had “little to do with whether the hostages were or were not ‘heroes’ or whether the nation ‘won’ or ‘lost’ the long war of nerves with Iran”. They claim that heroes “have always been created by popular demand,” and that it was “victory enough for America to feel whole again” (28). It could be argued that Ronald Reagan was one of the heroes created in the jubilant atmosphere following the release of the hostages. He became associated with the national celebration both because the hostages were released on his inauguration day, and because he wholeheartedly encouraged Americans’ newfound

patriotism. In addition, as Goodman pointed out, he was perceived as the “tough guy” the United States needed.

Commentators in the *Houston Post*, *Time*, and the *Chicago Tribune* focus on how the American public in its turn might have influenced American foreign policymakers. In the *Houston Post* of January 26, Joseph Kraft seems to argue that the hostage crisis as both a “communal and a searingly personal experience” contributed to a new framework for American policymakers to work within (2C). His main point is that isolationism, “a constant theme in American life,” is expressed in the national celebration of the freeing of the hostages. One piece of evidence he cites for this theory is that “Americans thought first and foremost of what was close at hand and individual: The “hostages themselves,” the “steadfast wives,” and the “forlorn children and bewildered parents”. Kraft describes the release of the hostages as a “national epiphany,” and argues that although it would be “churlish” to criticize this reaction, the celebration is a scandal from the point of view of “those who think in terms of power.” In their eyes, the Iranians were rewarded for humiliating the United States. However, “those who think of national power do not hold absolute sway in America,” according to Kraft, who concludes that “the hostage experience defines in a deep way the foreign policy mandate of the Reagan administration.... The new administration can assert itself abroad only after carefully counting costs.”

This conclusion is reminiscent of Hunt’s and Talbott’s claim, referred to above, that Americans seem reluctant to make sacrifices, and Kraft’s point about isolationism also brings to mind the closely connected idea about American exceptionalism. In short, this is the idea that United States is a unique nation. Many Americans hold this view of their country, and it can be traced as far back as John Winthrop’s vision of America as a city upon a hill. In this light, isolationism can be seen as the notion that the United States in its uniqueness can serve as an example unto the world, but that in order to hold on to what makes it special it must avoid too much involvement in the corrupting affairs of other countries. Seymour Martin Lipset is a scholar who has carefully analyzed the idea of American exceptionalism, and he argues that it is a double-edged sword.<sup>25</sup> He locates the features of exceptionalism in the values and beliefs of Americans that form the American Creed. The Creed “fosters a high sense of personal responsibility, individual initiative, and voluntarism even as it encourages self-serving behavior, atomism, and a disregard for communal good” (267-268). Americans’

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<sup>25</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company): 1996.

reactions to the hostage crisis can be seen as expressions of these features: They identified with the hostages on a very personal level and volunteered their support, but although the hostage crisis transcended Americans' purely individual concerns and was in some respects a "communal experience," it could be argued that in an international perspective, Americans' reactions to the crisis were indeed self-serving. In his book "American Exceptionalism and Human Rights," Michael Ignatieff claims that the United States pays a critical cost for its exceptionalist stance, because it gives the country convincing reasons not to listen and learn.<sup>26</sup>

In *Time*'s February 2 edition, Roger Rosenblatt offers additional criticism of the reactions to the hostage crisis, but like Kraft he also acknowledges the impact American public opinion can have on decisions of policy (53-54). First, he argues for the need to learn lessons from the hostage crisis. He criticizes both American ignorance before the ordeal and the excessive American attention to the crisis throughout the period. In addition, Rosenblatt accuses the USA of making too much of the hostage incident, arguing that "foreign service officers are like soldiers out of uniform.... Carter ought to have immediately regarded and declared the hostages prisoners of war ..." (54). McAlister also makes this point when she says that "the fact that most of the hostages were American diplomatic personnel ... was all but ignored" (207). However, Rosenblatt further claims that although the obsession with the hostage crisis was an error from "the perspective of pure practicality," it is an important national obsession from the perspective of "normal human emotions" (54). Rosenblatt alludes to this contrast between practicality and emotions earlier in his comment as well, as he cites a French political strategist who echoes the sentiments expressed by truck driver Frank McVey in the December 3 issue of *Time* Magazine: that the United States should have given the hostages up for dead. This would not have happened, Rosenblatt acknowledges: "Americans would never have accepted it" (53).

Rosenblatt's assessment thus supports the notion about Americans' unwillingness to make sacrifices, and this is also a main point in Pierre Salinger's article in the *Chicago Tribune* of February 2, 1981 (Section 2:3). In this article, Salinger tries to explain why negotiations between the USA and Iran failed. Among the reasons he identifies are Americans' poor understanding of the Iranian mentality and the culture gap between the two countries. By the end of his piece, Salinger concedes that some people in the United States think that the country should have "walked away from the hostage crisis". However, he asserts that "the

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Ignatieff, introduction, *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, ed. Michael Ignatieff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 26.

Americans are not used to the idea of sacrificing human life. And this negotiating tactic would've been unacceptable to the majority of the American people". The hostages' return to the United States, Salinger concludes, "was a victory for the human spirit, but not a victory for America." Kraft, Rosenblatt and Salinger thus bring up the fact that the public might play an important role in influencing American foreign policy makers; that in situations like the hostage crisis, cynical and Realist policies must yield in the face of a strong and assertive American national identity. In conclusion, then, it could be argued that just as the American public's responses were in large part created by the highly personalized captivity narrative that was the Iranian hostage crisis, these responses also reflect important strains in the American national character that the policy makers during the hostage crisis ignored at their peril.

## **5. Conclusion**

### ***5.1. Introduction***

In this paper, the Iranian hostage crisis and the American reactions to it has been viewed as an important event in the perspective of both diplomatic and cultural history and as a particularly interesting case study of the American national character and behavior. The fourteen month embassy takeover became an influential captivity narrative that reflected many concerns that Americans had about the time they lived in: A burgeoning fear of terrorism, the United States' standing in the world, the importance of family, and the meaning of the nation. Much like the hostages were held captive by the Iranian revolutionaries far longer than anyone had expected, the mass media's continuing focus on the crisis kept the American people captivated. And similarly to how the embassy seizure had severe political and diplomatic consequences, the story about the hostage taking also affected the way in which the Americans thought about themselves. To sum up how the hostage crisis became a captivity narrative and what it meant to the American people, the three questions asked in the opening paragraph of the introduction will be addressed and discussed in relation to the thesis of this paper.

## ***5.2. Why did the crisis become such an obsession with the American people?***

In the first part of the thesis statement, the administration's dedication and the massive media coverage are cited as explanations for the intensely personalized character of the hostage crisis as captivity narrative. These explanations are interrelated, as neither the administration's dedication nor the media focus would have been as influential without the other. If Carter had not shown such intensity in his wish to release the hostages the narrative would not have been that powerful, and if the mass media had not broadcast Carter's commitment it would not have reached and affected as many people. As it happened, the two factors mutually enforced each other. It is true that television was the primary medium through which the American people followed the crisis, but this study of weekly magazines and daily newspapers also reveals that Carter, the hostages, and their families were recurring figures in a narrative focused on the private and the domestic.

The result was that the American people were able to identify strongly not only with the hostages and their families but also with President Carter and the nation he represented. Through their identification with the hostages, Americans felt fear, anger, and a mounting frustration as they were confronted with the embassy seizure, the anti-American demonstrations in Tehran, and the increasing doubts about a swift resolution to the crisis. Through their identifications with the hostages' families, Americans could more easily imagine that they had loved ones among the hostages in Tehran. And through their identification with Carter, the American people could sense what was at stake for the United States as a powerful nation in the world. Identification on a personal level was further elevated to a national level. The initial rally-around-the-flag responses reflected how the American patriotism metamorphosed into something more like nationalism: Americans now felt that the American nation and their fellow nationals needed their loyalty more than ever, and thus the nation as a source of identity and solidarity came to the fore. Even those who criticized the Carter administration's policies in Iran can be said to have done so within the framework of nationalism: What they saw as appeasement and helplessness on the part of Carter was not compatible with their idea of what characterized the United States, and thus they probably felt called upon to point out how Americans in the best possible way could honor their nation.

### **5.3. How did this public obsession affect policymakers?**

The American public's obsession with the hostage crisis is in the thesis statement described as a framework that worked as double-edged sword for policymakers. This is perhaps most clearly reflected in President Carter's changing fortunes in the Gallup Polls. As stated previously, Carter's political career initially received a considerable boost at the beginning of the crisis. He was now more popular than ever before, and at the time *Newsweek* even suggested that his powers be expanded. However, the frustrating stalemate and the failed rescue mission lowered the American people's estimation of Carter and exposed him to a more uncertain political future. Finally, there is strong evidence that part of the reason for Carter's loss in the election of 1980 was his failure in getting the hostages released. His main dilemma seems to have been that a whole nation expected him to *do something*, but that his humanitarianism together with the American people's reluctance against the use of military force limited his choices of action. Through his contribution to the personalization of the crisis, Carter had managed to secure the support of a whole nation, but the same personalization can be said to have restricted his further decision making. It is difficult to tell whether a successful Operation Eagle Claw would have saved Carter's political career, though. Considering some of the scornful reactions to the failure a success might have been exactly what Carter needed, but then again the almost inevitable loss of lives that the mission would have caused might also have condemned the President in the eyes of the American people. Considering the destiny of his presidency, the double-edged sword Carter wielded had a sharper edge toward himself.

On the basis of this and other findings discussed above, it could be argued that there exists a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between policymakers and people, state and nation. As stated in chapter 4, commentators in the magazines and the newspapers reflect on how, during the hostage crisis, the policymakers' decisions affected the American public and vice versa. This argument backs up McAlister's claim that "the constant rearticulation of danger through foreign policy is ...not a threat to the state's identity or existence; it is its condition of possibility" (6). The state needs this threat to justify its own existence, and people need a threatening Other to strengthen their sense of Self and feeling of belonging to a group. In McAlister's words: "The 'imagined community' of the nation finds continuing rearticulation in the rhetoric of danger" (6). The boundaries are not always clear, however, and just like policymakers also are of "the people," "regular" Americans can affect decisions about policy.

#### **5.4. Was there really a cause for celebration?**

To this question it is possible to answer both yes and no, depending on the perspective one employs. In the statement of thesis it is proposed that in a short-term, national perspective, there really was cause for celebration. The outcome of the crisis and the jubilant atmosphere in the United States after the release of the hostages supports the notion that the resolution of the crisis had a positive effect on the American self-esteem. Considering the rather downcast atmosphere in the country described above it seems natural that such a happy ending would work wonders for the American psyche. The Americans had been unified in their anger and fear, now they were able to celebrate that unity in the best of circumstances. They were “allowed” to rid themselves of the “heavy cargo of guilt” about Vietnam and be patriotic again. Ronald Regan probably became a unifying symbol because he encouraged of this patriotism. An Orientalist view of the enemy further contributed to a strengthening of the American national identity: A very different and incomprehensible Other makes it even easier to define one’s own Self in certain and positive terms. As in the classical captivity narratives, “captivity and deliverance define[d] the journey of ... soul and society toward redemption” (Scott 179). Not only was the American psyche temporarily delivered from its recent bout of depression, but the outcome of the crisis also suggested that the United States’ position in the world as a great power would be restored. This possibility might have been at the core of the American community’s “sense of meaning of its experience” (Scott 180). The hostage crisis was a harrowing experience, but maybe it had been needed for the country to really assert itself again as a power to be reckoned with?

However, it could also be argued that this image of the United States in the world was so colored by national triumph that it had more to do with the Americans’ perception of a global reality than anything else. In other words, seen from a purely American perspective the United States had won the respect of the world again, but was this really how the rest of the world viewed it? Although the hostage crisis appeared in an international setting, the American narrative about it arguably seems overly self-absorbed and one-dimensional. The coverage of the crisis could further be seen as a parallel to how the crisis was handled at a diplomatic level. As scholars like James Bill and William Beeman have pointed out, the American policymakers’ attitude to the Iranian crisis was riddled with ignorance and arrogance. When the crisis was resolved, the United States could pull back and refuse to have

anything to do with Iran, but from an international viewpoint this did not solve any major problems in the Persian Gulf.

Further, it is suggested in this paper's thesis that in a long-term perspective there is less cause for celebration and more problems connected to the United States' handling of the hostage crisis. First, from the point of view of American foreign policy the outcome of the crisis was not really a victory. This is pointed out by contemporary commentators already in the wake of the national celebration. However, it is particularly in retrospect that the troubling consequences of American policymaking become clear. Following the hostage crisis, the United States proceeded to sever diplomatic relations with Iran and support Iraq's invasion of the country. Reconciliation seemed difficult, if not impossible. And instead of trying to understand what had happened during the 14-months long embassy siege, policymakers seemed intent on putting the whole ordeal behind them. In the words of James Bill:

After national ceremonies of celebration at the return of the hostages, American political leaders wanted to forget the entire hostage episode as quickly as possible. ... A serious examination of what had happened and why would certainly have uncovered many unpalatable truths. It would have also done American an enormous favor by providing a badly needed explanation so that errors, oversights, and misunderstandings made in the past may not necessarily have to be repeated in the future. (303-304)

From this it might be argued that the happy outcome of the crisis actually hindered a thorough understanding of the crisis. Had it ended badly there would have been a more dire need for explanations. At the time of writing, hostility is flaring up again between the two countries, and it seems obvious that the hostage crisis created deep wounds that should have been treated a long time ago.

More important questions remain to be asked about the American experience in Iran. Do Americans today hold a grudge against Iran for what happened during the 444 days the embassy siege lasted, or can the reasons for the recurring hostilities between the two nations be found in the attitudes of the current policymakers? Do Americans distinguish between the Iranian people and their policymakers? As pointed out earlier, the Iranians vividly remembered the Americans' part in overthrowing Mossadegh, while to Americans in 1979 the event had "all the relevance of a pressed flower." Furthermore, the Iranian demonstrators stressed the fact that their anti-American slogans were directed against the American

government, not Americans in general. Many Americans, in contrast, were in favor of throwing out all Iranians who had violated their terms of visa.

It could of course be argued that it is not always a simple task to separate people and policymakers, and these boundaries were not clear-cut during the hostage crisis. However, one rather cynical answer to these questions still presents itself: To Americans, the hostage crisis was never really about Iran. It was about the American nation's journey towards redemption and restoration. The American people knew next to nothing about Iran before the embassy seizure, and for all the attention it received at the time the hostage crisis did not really alter this ignorance. One would think that the Americans' rage against the hostage takers and Iranian demonstrators would make them want to understand the background for the cries of "Death to America", namely American governments' past conduct in Iran. However, most Americans were instead personally offended by the demonstrators' chants and chose to believe that the Iranians' irrationality explained their behavior. Furthermore, after the resolution of the crisis many Americans turned their backs on Iran: 44% of the people thought that the United States should not try to establish good relations with the country in the future. Robert L. Spencer's letter in *Newsweek* of February 9, 1981, expresses that kind of sentiment, and resonates with the policymakers' wish to forget and move on. In order to do so, the United States must say "Good riddance!" to Iran and make the country deal with its own problems. As it could be argued that the USA contributed to the "chaos that is Iran today," this approach reveals an attitude of denial on the part of Americans.

Finally, the question of unity highlights the self-serving quality of the American captivity narrative about the hostage crisis. Considering the American people's attitude to Iran after the hostage crisis had been resolved, it seems doubtful that a willingness to sacrifice national strength and personal well-being for the sake of a greater international good could form the basis for American national unity. The United States had tried to shoulder a heavy responsibility when it replaced Great Britain as a stabilizing force in the Middle East, but when one of the twin pillars it had relied on came crashing down the country only reluctantly assumed responsibility for its former ally, the Shah. After the hostage ordeal was over, the United States abandoned Iran by refusing to maintain diplomatic relations. Furthermore, the American people never really took part as the United States wrestled with its important responsibility in the Middle East. It could be argued that with the exception of crises like the

one in Iran, the majority of the public is more or less ignorant about the consequences of American foreign policy.

In the end, the American nation might well have become united on an emotional level as a result of the hostage crisis. The outbursts of nationalism were genuine, and the patriotism that was revived and later cultivated by Ronald Reagan was undoubtedly important to the American people. The possibility that the unity was more perceived than real does not necessarily make it less significant to Americans. However, the question remains: What does American unity have to say for the rest of the world? The United States' considerable power and global presence seems to indicate that the country might in some way affect international relations no matter how it acts. Had the United States been unified in the isolationist stance that surfaced during the national celebration of 1981, a withdrawal from the world stage would probably have caused problems. Instead, however, exceptionalism started to manifest itself in the form of new interventions in other countries. The belief that the United States must actively spread its unique values to the world seems to have prevailed. This does not necessarily mean that the conflict between isolationism and interventionism is over, and there are signs that the Americans are not as unified as they have been when it comes to its role as active super power. However, exceptionalism still seems appealing to many Americans as an explanation of the United States' status in the world, and this is a particularly troubling aspect with the American national character. If a country is perceived as unique it might also be perceived as better, which again implies that people of other countries are worth less. Finally, like Ignatieff pointed out, an exceptionalist stance gives a country convincing reasons not to listen and learn (26). Such countries, he concludes, end up losing.

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