



Moments in U.S. Diplomatic History

444 Days – The End Game

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0

The 444-day-long Iran Hostage Crisis ranks as one of the most traumatic diplomatic events in U.S. history and even thirty years later still colors diplomatic relations with Iran. In these excerpts, John Limbert describes the negotiations that eventually led to the release of all the hostages Iranian Revolutionaries attacked the embassy, their (surprisingly) triumphant arrival in Wiesbaden, meeting with former President Carter, and the challenges of transitioning to regular life after such a traumatic ordeal.

Read [Part I of Limbert's excerpts](#) and the account by [Chargé d'affaires Bruce Laingen](#), who was held as a captive at the Foreign Ministry.

Approaching the End Game

Getting into the winter of 1980, November, December, I began to pick up bits and snatches that some kind of negotiation was going on and that was certainly a hopeful sign. Then we heard that the Swiss and the Algerians were involved, also a hopeful sign, serious people. Up until then, there had been a series of self-appointed mediators. And some French lawyer and an Argentinean. It wasn't quite clear what their agenda was but they weren't always serious people. The fact the Algerians were involved, the Swiss were involved, again, these were rumors, hints, things heard second and third, snatches of overhead conversation, overheard news broadcasts but at least it was reason for hope. Because until then the whole principle, the Iranian position is "We're not going to negotiate. There's nothing to negotiate about."



And at a certain point, because I suppose we had been useful for a period of time but were no longer useful, the war was more important to them, I guess they figured out it was time to get rid of us. You could sense that at the same time. Carter had lost the election, so if they had any particular grudges against Carter, which they did, that wasn't so relevant. The Shah had died. They had solidified their own political position inside Iran. So there was not much use to holding us anymore.

So we began to hear these things around Christmas of 1980. Really, we had what was probably one of the most hopeful signs, we had a visit from some Algerian delegation, who came around to see us, to talk to them. They were discreet, as you would expect. They simply said, "We are doing our best. We are pushing this. We consider this a duty as professionals."...

It wasn't until the night of the 19th of January, some of the students came in where I was and I was back with Col. Holland at that time. They said, "Come, we want to take you for a medical exam." My response was, "I don't want any medical exam. I'm fine." And they said, "No, you have to have a medical exam." I said, "I'm not playing your propaganda games, you want to televise something." And they said, "No, no, we're going to, we're going to release you." I said, "Oh, well, that's different!" "And this is for the Algerians." "Well, that's certainly different. If it's for the Algerians, that's fine."

So we went to another area, they took us to another area and first we sat, we met with some, one of the Iranians said, "All right, we're going to release some of you." That's the way they put it, "We're going to release some of you. You're going for a medical exam and then you're going to talk to the television." The implication being, whatever you said to the television would determine whether you'd be released or not. So they took me to the Algerians, there was an Algerian medical team. Wasn't sure where he was, wasn't sure he was okay. He looked good. Saw Vic Tomseth for the first time. So then I was with the Algerians and I asked them, "What's going on?" They said, "You're leaving." I said, "All of us?" He said, "All of you."

So then we went to the television interview and basically they said, "What happened? Were you well treated?" and I said, "Look, I've been a teacher. Some students are good, some students are sort of in the middle and some students need an awful lot of encouragement." And I just left it at that.

Q: Had there been any attempt, prior to that, to sort of drag you in front of TV cameras?

LIMBERT: I can only speak for myself. I don't know about others. I have since, consequently, read about some things that were staged with others but there were, I had one or two television appearances. The oddest one was, they said, "There's a television crew here" and they dragged me in front and they said, "Tell us what you were doing at the embassy." This was Iranian TV. So I said, "Well, you know, when the

Categories

- [A Moment in U.S. Diplomatic History](#) (486)
- [Africa](#) (87)
- [China](#) (36)
- [Cold War](#) (126)
- [Consular](#) (74)
- [East Asia and Pacific](#) (77)
- [Espionage](#) (29)
- [Europe](#) (140)
- [Foreign Service](#) (129)
- [Hostage](#) (39)
- [Human Rights](#) (107)
- [Humorous](#) (121)
- [Middle East](#) (104)
- [Military](#) (204)
- [Public Diplomacy](#) (59)
- [Russia/Soviet Union](#) (89)
- [South Central Asia](#) (38)
- [Spouses and children](#) (36)
- [Terrorism](#) (79)
- [The Stump](#) (13)
- [Vietnam Conflict](#) (1)
- [Western Hemisphere](#) (77)
- [Women and Minority FSOs](#) (66)

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- [evacuation Kissinger](#)
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embassy was taken, around that time, I was busy correcting the draft of my PhD thesis, because I was hoping to get it published. Let me tell you about my PhD thesis." And then I went into this long filibuster, this long explanation and I could see these guys' eyes glazing over. And they said, "Okay, that's enough."

The only other time, it was in April and it was shortly before the rescue mission, when we had a visit from representatives of the ICRC — the International Committee of the Red Cross, Swiss representatives came in. And then later in the day, with television crew, Ali Khomeini, now the Supreme Leader, at that time he was the Friday prayer leader of Tehran, came to visit us and television crews were with him.

And I had to get a dig in. So he said, "Look, do you have any complaints?" And I said, "I have only one. I know you Iranians are very hospitable and I know that you never want your guests to leave, but this is ridiculous. This is too much. As much as I tell our friends here that it's time to leave" and the phrase in Persian is "It's time to lessen my intrusion upon you", "They won't believe me and they insist that we stay longer and prolong this particular soirée." And he kind of laughed. He thought that was funny, but my intention was very serious, which was to get the dig in that what was going on was in serious violation of Iran's own traditions and own norms and what is acceptable in Iranian society. I never saw the editorials but I am told I got very seriously attacked for that in the newspapers for making a joke about their culture. But that was about the limit of it...

We got back to our place and we figured, "Okay, we're leaving any time." So through the night nothing happened. The next day, nothing happened. And we figured maybe something went wrong and we did hear snippets of radio about a deal and some financial arrangements and escrow accounts and all these things. And then about sundown, this would have been January, so sundown maybe was 6:30 or so.

On the 20th, we heard big guns going off, sounded like saluting rounds, as though they were saluting some kind of victory. And then they came in and said, "Pack up, we're leaving." And they threw us on buses. I think I ended up riding in the bathroom of some bus. I didn't mind. And they took us directly to the airport. I remember thinking it was very odd because Tehran traffic is notoriously awful but somebody much have cleared a space for us, because we were whisked right to the airport.



parkas yelling anti-American slogans and we had to walk past these guys.

And I kept thinking to myself, "This is really sad. What a group of losers." If they had any class at all they would have given us a flower, shaken hands and said, "We're sorry. This wasn't personal. This was something political" and sent us off, but they did it that way. It just left a very bad taste....

Something could have gone wrong. You knew that, so you just kind of kept your fingers crossed and hoped this all goes. Once we cleared Iranian airspace things got pretty good. There were people there I had not seen for 14 months. There were a few people there I didn't even know. It was a motley group. There was talking about experiences, what had happened, what people knew, what they thought. Obviously, it was good to see friends again....Some of the intelligence people had a harder time, once the Iranians figured out who they were....

"And the psychiatrist said, 'You look okay. Go away.'"

[In Algiers]... [Deputy Secretary of State] Warren Christopher was there. We all went into the airport lounge, had some coffee. The Algerian press was there. At that point, if I remember it, there was a formal handover. In other words, the way this worked, the Iranians had given us to the Algerians. The Algerians took us to Algiers and they then formally delivered us to the Americans. And there were two U.S. Air Force C-9 hospital planes on the ground. So we weren't in Algiers very long, maybe a couple of hours. One of my friends who watched film of this said the funniest thing was watching all the Foreign Service people in the airport lounge mingling. They said it must be in our blood...

First thing we get, these wonderful Air Force parkas, which is still one of my proudest possessions. And we leave Algiers at about three or four in the morning for Frankfurt. And we're just beginning to get a sense of how big this whole thing is, because as we're flying over France, through French airspace, the pilot announces that the French air controllers have sent us a greeting. And we land in Frankfurt, it's about six o'clock in the morning, this is, what?, January 21st, now. It's cold, it's dark, there's snow coming down and we taxi up to some part of the terminal and I look out the window and there's this big crowd of people, all waving flags and yelling and I said,



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Q: At that point you hadn't realized that this was, how long-running and important a story

LIMBERT: Didn't really, did not sink in. That was maybe the first inkling. So we got off, we got on buses. They took us to the hospital, the Air Force hospital at Wiesbaden....They had a room with banks of telephones and basically you could call anywhere in the world from these telephones. Obviously I called my family, I called my wife and kids in Saudi Arabia, I called my family here in Washington and called my wife's family in California, just to talk, a couple of friends in the Department....



They did some medical work. Actually, it was funny and at least in my case, that whole issue of the psychiatric, the psychology or the readjustment I thought was done very well. They told me, "You have an appointment to see the shrink. Go and see the psychiatrist." So I went in and there was a State Department psychiatrist and he looked at me and said, "You look okay. Go away." That was the best thing he could have done. We subsequently became friends and what he said was, "We just don't know that much about how people react to stress but we see a lot more resilience in people than we might expect. We assume people are going to react in a certain way but we really don't know." But I think that was probably the best thing he could have done.

There were some other briefings and questions and then the first night we were there, let's see, that was the 21st and that evening or afternoon was when Jimmy Carter showed up. Jimmy Carter came with [Vice President] Mondale and with Muskie, Secretary of State. I don't remember if Vance came with him or not. But I think what had happened was after the inauguration Carter had flown back to Georgia and then flew over to Wiesbaden to see us. It was a very emotional occasion....

He either shook hands or hugged all of us and then we had a session for about an hour, hour and a half and he explained what happened, his reasoning. He took questions and really the only questions were, "Why did you admit the Shah?" and about the rescue mission....He came close to saying it was a bad mistake but talked about the various pressures that had built up — the political pressures, the diplomatic pressures....

I think there were a few who were very upset and I think one of the colleagues still talks about it. He said, "I couldn't bring myself to shake his hand, it was so difficult that I didn't know what I was going to do, whether to shake his hand or not." Many of us, however, felt that essentially he had sacrificed his presidency to keep us alive and that we were alive in large part because of him....

And after that, they took us from there, they put us in the Crystal City Marriott for a day or two and basically after that we were back in civilian life. So one day you're at the White House, the next day you're out there waiting for the bus. That was a good thing. Tells you who you are....

One of the most interesting discussions we had was about three months later, we got together and had a talk from the psychiatrist who worked with the New York Police Department, specializing in victims of violence and the reaction of victims of violence. His message, which I thought was extremely sensible, was, "Look, do not judge yourself. You may have had expectations of how should have acted and maybe you were not as heroic as you thought you should have been. Do not set expectations for yourself which you cannot meet, because you will always be criticizing, and judging yourself." I thought that was very sensible.

Others, some people found that a little harder to take. But in terms of what others did, from my point of view that was their choice. Some people didn't talk to the press at all. Some people talked a lot. Some people said things that I wouldn't have said, but that was their point of view....

[Iran], the civilization, it's so old, it's so glorious, it's survived much worse than this. Compared to what the country's gone through in the past, Khomeini and his folks are minor miscreants.... For better or worse, Iran has been part of my life, connected, for more than forty years.



John Limbert and former ABC "Nightline" host Ted Koppel at the 2010 ADST Tribute to Excellence Gala

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