

The Manchurian Presidency: Part Two

TWENTY-SEVEN years ago, President Jimmy Carter gave his most famous address, since dubbed the "Malaise Speech." Rather than take a Republican "vote for me and you can eat all the ice cream you want, never get fat and drive your SUVs forever" approach to government, Carter warned the nation that our addiction to Mideast oil was killing us, and that we had to address it immediately.

He set forth a plan to institute a 50 percent cut in US consumption of foreign oil by 1990. He asked Congress for "the most massive peacetime commitment of funds and resources in our nation's history" to develop homegrown sources of alternative energy. Praising American technology, he set a goal for the US to get 20 percent of its energy from the sun by the year 2000 – a plan that would have made us the Persian Gulf of solar power and an exporter of solar technology. He suggested paying for his solar Marshall Plan by enacting a windfall profits tax on oil companies. And he suggested spending an additional \$10 billion on public transportation, creating alternatives to automobile dependency. Conserving fuel, according to Carter, was "an act of patriotism."

Carter's plan would have strengthened our economy and national defenses while protecting the global environment from scourges such as global warming. Energy independence would also have decimated Iraqi, Saudi and Iranian political and economic power.

A year later Carter lost his bid for re-election after being humiliated by Iran's new right-wing fundamentalist government during the Iranian hostage crisis. For 444 days reactionary students held the staff of Tehran's US embassy as prisoners with the blessing of the Iranian government. Carter's inability to rescue the hostages painted him as

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powerless, and this perception was a major factor in his popularity slide. The high price of imported oil, artificially inflated by a Saudi-dominated oil cartel, drove the nation into double-digit inflation, which also undermined Carter's presidency.

Fifteen months after the Malaise Speech, Ronald Reagan won the presidency with 51 percent of the popular vote. Former CIA director George H.W. Bush, the son of a World War II era Nazi collaborator, was elected as his vice president. As one of his first official acts in office, Reagan ordered Carter's solar panels removed from the White House roof, eventually scrapping Carter's energy conservation and independence initiatives altogether. Reagan and his successors then led America blindly through a generation-long orgy of reckless energy consumption and apocalyptic environmental policies. The Reagan/Bush/Clinton years saw the unchecked development of auto-dependent suburban sprawl and a stagnation in fuel efficiency as cars once again grew fatter and more powerful and public transit systems crumbled.

Carter's presidency was flawed on many levels. But if he had been re-elected, we would have had an imperfect but sane energy and environmental policy. Carter was also working to bring us in line with the rest of the industrialized world by developing a national healthcare plan. If enacted, the American auto industry would not be at a global disadvantage today due to astronomical health insurance costs for workers and retirees. Carter's foreign policy was often idiotic and shortsighted – for example, in its support of the Taliban – but his stated respect for human rights in this hemisphere and its support for democratic governments such as Nicaragua's Sandinistas was light years ahead of Reagan's policies.

If Carter had been re-elected, we probably wouldn't be facing the economic and environmental vulnerabilities with which our oil-addicted lifestyle curses us. And a few hundred thousand of our neighbors in Central America wouldn't have been slaughtered by Reagan-funded militaries and death squads. We might not have seen the radical shift in wealth from poor and middle-class families to the ultra-rich, driven by Reagan-era tax policies. And maybe we'd have a culture of responsibility instead of the hedonistic and immature society that gave us Hummers, lawn-care poisons and disposable, plug-in air fresheners.

But this is all speculation. Iran held our hostages for 444 days and Reagan won the election, changing our nation and our world, possibly forever.

Nine years after the historic 1980 election, sources from across the political spectrum, such as former Reagan/Bush campaign analyst Barbara Honegger, former Navy Captain Gary Sick, Newsweek reporter Robert Parry and former Yippie Abbie Hoffman, started to cry foul. Describing what has become known as the October Surprise, they argued that

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Reagan/Bush campaign officials, possibly George H.W. Bush himself, cut a deal with the Iranians asking them to hold their American captives hostage through the 1980 presidential campaign season.

The allegation is controversial to this day and remains unproven, with arguments and counterarguments surrounding the alibis of key Reagan/Bush campaign officials during supposed meetings with the Iranians. Researchers hoped some of this information would be sorted out with the first scheduled declassification of data from the Reagan/Bush White House in 2001, but George W. Bush re-classified the Reagan papers in September 2001, thus keeping documentation concerning many Reagan/Bush-era White House crimes out of the reach of historians.

For the sake of argument, let's say we'll never know if there was a treasonous October Surprise conspiracy. What remains undeniable, however, is the role the reactionary Iranian government played in changing the course of American history. More than anyone else, Iran called our political shots in 1980. The election that year was, in large part, all about Iran. And it gave us Ronald Reagan.

The Iranians released their hostages hours after Reagan was sworn in as president. For whatever reason, the Reagan administration repaid the favor, illegally selling arms to Iran in what has become known as the Iran-Contra affair. The Contra connection comes from the Reagan administration's use of the profits from its illicit Iranian arms deals, to fund, also in violation of US law, the organized bands of CIA-trained terrorists attacking Nicaragua.

Oliver North, a Reagan/Bush administration point person in the Iran-Contra affair, was one of three military officials who, during the earlier hostage crisis, planned a botched attempt to free the hostages and, in effect, save Carter's presidency. North, along with the other two planners of the failed mission, Richard Secord and Albert Hakkim, all went on to become White House aides to Vice President Bush.

From that point to the present day, there appears to be one consistent theme in US-Iranian relations: Whatever decisions the Bush family makes, in the end they always serve the best interests of Iran's reactionary mullahs. Let's fast-forward to the presidency of George W. Bush. W. came into office at a time when Iran's mullahs were facing their greatest political challenge since the Islamic revolution in the 1970s. A new generation of revolutionary students had risen up, only this time they were calling for democracy, religious freedom and greater ties with the West. When W. came into office, Iran had a pro-Western reformist president and students were leading weekly demonstrations against the old-guard clerics.

Bush wasted no time in shoring up support for the mullahs with his now classic "Axis

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of Evil” speech, in which he attempted to link three of the most disparate governments on earth: North Korea, Iraq and Iraq’s sworn enemy, Iran. With Bush all but calling for the destruction of Iran’s reformist regime, the reformists were humiliated and discredited while the mullahs rallied the nation in a united nationalist front against a perceived American attack. With three words, Bush killed Iran’s democratic revolution and doomed that country to another generation of theocracy.

The problem with theocracies, however, is that they have “faith-based” economies. There’s no need for serious economic or environmental planning when your dogma tells you God will somehow save you no matter how bad a mess you make. The mullahs screwed things up pretty bad, but God hasn’t yet shown up to fix Iran’s growing unemployment problems, and the Iranian masses once again taking to the streets.

But, right on schedule, George W. Bush shows up, this time rattling a thermonuclear saber. With the Great Satan threatening to unleash the god of hell in the form of plutonium-powered weapons, Iran’s masses once again are joined in a United We Stand goose-step. The resistance once again has been squelched and none of their concerns addressed.

The current American threat also serves to unite Iranian public opinion behind their government’s reckless nuclear ambitions. Recent history in this area is pretty clear. Iraq allowed weapons inspectors to certify that it had no major weapons systems, thus guaranteeing they had no deterrence capabilities and couldn’t respond adequately to a US invasion. It’s a whole new take on warfare. First you locate and inspect all of your enemy’s weapons – then you plan your attack accordingly. The US invasion of Iraq makes diplomacy tantamount to surrender, hence guaranteeing that nations such as Iran and North Korea will seek deterrent capabilities at any cost while not cooperating with inspection regimens.

Iran has emerged as the only winner in Bush’s war against Iraq. American forces destroyed Iran’s sworn enemy – Saddam Hussein’s secular government in Iraq – while opening that country up for an Iranian-backed religious insurgency. Bush administration policy then purposefully marginalized Iraq’s civil resistance, while supporting the rise of sectarian fundamentalist rulers. As a result of these policies, Iran is suddenly one of the most influential nations in the Persian Gulf, destined to exert influence over a new Shiite government in Iraq.

Bush’s saber-rattling over Iran has also served to push the price of oil skywards, which benefits major oil-producing nations such as Iran and Saudi-Arabia, not to mention a cadre of Texas oilmen. This benefit, of course, comes at a cost to American consumers, who now have to choose between food or fuel while watching their healthcare, education

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and social infrastructure crumble in the face of astronomical military budgets – now justified by the “Iranian threat.” And it comes at a cost to the US dollar, which is sliding faster than Bush’s poll numbers. The Iranians face similar conditions as their government turns its back on social programs while funding both its military and its police state.

This game is simple. It benefits both the Iranian mullahs and the government of George W. Bush. The threat of nuclear annihilation on both sides – though we’re the only ones who both possess atomic weapons and have announced our intention to use them – distracts from the unpopular, incompetent and criminal policies of both governments as they lead full frontal assaults on civil liberties and human rights. In both countries people are getting poorer and sicker while acquiescing to the government that is repressing them and destroying their ways of life. The Iranian and American people both lose, while our criminal governments shore up their power.

But there will be no invasion of Iran. Of course the notion is insane. Iran’s population is more than double that of Iraq, where American troops are bogged down in an endless war. And, unlike Iraq’s secular population, Iran’s population is more religious and hence more willing to die defending their ideology. Also, unlike the flat deserts of Iraq, Iran is mountainous and therefore treacherous – good for guerilla warfare while toxic for an invading army.

Of course, the Bush administration has a history of apparent insanity. No, the fact that such a war is unwinnable, and would likely unleash Armageddon, isn’t what will stop the Bush administration from waging it.

The real reason we won’t invade Iran is that such a war, with the US crazily tossing nuclear “bunker-busters” about the Iranian hillsides, is bad for Iran. And no Bush has ever done anything that was bad for Iran – or for al Qaeda or for Osama bin Laden, for that matter.

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