

## Ken Taylor and the embassy caper

Robert Wright, *Our Man in Tehran: Ken Taylor, the CIA and the Iran Hostage Crisis*. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2009.

Review by Desmond Morton

Our memories can be surprisingly short. A little over 30 years ago, on January 16, 1979, as Ken Taylor, Canada's ambassador to Iran had foreseen, though the US Central Intelligence Agency had refused to anticipate, a tearful Shah Reza Pahlevi abandoned his throne to take refuge in Egypt. On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini travelled from Paris to Tehran, promising the media he would restore democracy to one of the world's most brutal dictatorships.

Ten months after Khomeini's return, a carefully self-selected band of Iranian students forced their way into the US Embassy compound in Tehran and made prisoners of all the American staff they could find. Earlier, the head of mission, Bruce L. Laignen, with his two top officials, had raced to the Iranian Foreign Ministry to demand the help they had received on the previous Valentine's Day, when 79 armed leftists had fought their way into the embassy. Even Iran's shaky provisional government felt free to drive out leftists, but students professing allegiance to the Ayatollah were a different matter. Laignen, his worried colleagues and Washington assumed that the November 4 invasion would end as quickly as the Valentines Day intrusion. They were wrong. The embassy prisoners remained captives for 444 long, miserable days.

Times had changed for Americans and for the world. For two decades, the Shah of Iran had been Washington's best friend and ally in the Middle East, a faithful supplier of oil to both the US and Israel, a firm opponent of Iran's

most powerful neighbour, the Soviet Union, backed by an army that could afford even more up-to-date weapons than the Americans. Even when newly elected President Jimmy Carter added human rights to the United States' foreign policy agenda, his Nixon-era advisers insisted that he exempt the Shah and his vicious secret police, the SAVAK. Both the CIA and the Israeli MOSSAD served as mentors to the brutal guardians of the Pahlevi regime. Iranians soon blamed Carter for defending a regime with a record of mass executions and torture affecting as many as 150,000 people, in a population of 33 million, half of them from Iran's educated and artistic classes.

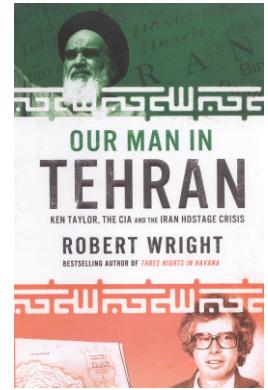
With Tehran and most of Iran in a state of anarchy in the early months of Khomeini's Islamic revolution, the American and other embassies advised their nationals to go home and trimmed their staffs as far as they could without offending Iran's new regime. After the invading students had forced their way into every part of the US embassy, they tied and gagged their captives. Some, suspected of being CIA operatives, were beaten and threatened with torture and death. Two women captives recalled that their captors loaded a single bullet in a revolver, twirled the chambers, aimed and fired at them. One of the women assumed that she would soon be dead.

For all their planning, the students did not know precisely how many Americans worked in or for the embassy. Three were at the Foreign Ministry and

54 were captives in the Chancery. Another half dozen had been elsewhere on the fateful day. What could they do? Initially, they sought safety in the British embassy. It was not a wise choice. Britain had been as influential as the US in toppling Iran's Mohammed Mossiadeq, head of Iran's only elected government, back in 1953. The British could easily be the students' next target. With help from sympathetic diplomats, and the agreement of Canada's Ken Taylor, all the American diplomats found refuge as "house guests" in the homes of his Canadian staff.

Consulted at short notice, Ottawa also sent quick approval. Whatever the public thought of Joe Clark or his external affairs minister, Flora MacDonald, Canada's government cheerfully put relations with Iran at risk to support their American neighbours. For once in its history, Ottawa escaped its reputation as one of the world's leakiest capitals. While leading American media soon discovered the "house guests" and their host, White House pressure kept them silent.

Jean Pelletier, *La Presse's* Ottawa correspondent, figured out most of the story for himself. A son of former Pierre Trudeau minister Gérard Pelletier, he sat on his scoop during a nerve-racking month while the "exfiltration" of the six Americans was planned and finally succeeded on Monday, January 28, when the six Americans masqueraded as a Hollywood film production unit. Taylor, his wife and the remaining Canadian staff left Tehran on the same day.



Pelletier and *La Presse* now felt free to break their story. The world's media revelled in a good-news story from Iran. Though Taylor and his staff had concealed their guests from their Iranian-born embassy staff, an enraged Revolutionary Council assumed treason and ordered arrests. After even torture failed to extract convincing confessions, the employees were freed.

Apart from temporary acclaim from Americans, Canada's main gain from Taylor's courage has been 120,000 highly talented Iranian immigrants, mostly since 1980.

Iranian fury that six of their potential captives had been rescued by Canadian diplomats soon subsided, to be replaced by renewed fury at the Americans who had managed some of the technical details of the operation.

Frustrated by Khomeini's refusal to negotiate, Americans now planned the bitterly debated Operation Eagle Claw, to land Special Forces troops outside Tehran, and proceed covertly to rescue the Embassy captives and bring them home. Taylor and one of his embassy guards,

Sergeant Jim Edwards, acted as CIA agents to spy out the location of the prisoners at the embassy, and to locate appropriate vehicles and a garage where the Special Forces could hide until their zero hour arrived. No part of Wright's book has drawn more media attention than Taylor's role in Eagle Claw; perhaps it fulfills Sir Henry Wootton's aphorism that "an ambassador is an honest man who lies abroad for the good of his country." Taylor and Edwards may have abused diplomatic immunity, but the Ayatollah's contempt for such niceties left few options if the American hostages were ever to regain their freedom. Like most Canadians at the time, Taylor sympathized profoundly with the captives and felt obliged to do all he could to save them. As he would later admit, he had serious reservations about the operational value of Eagle Claw: he would be proved right after eight American servicemen lost their lives on April 24, 1979, in a tragic series of mishaps that aborted the mission.

Shah Reza Pahlevi died in Egypt on July 27, 1980. By September, the Ayatollah had agreed to negotiate. The

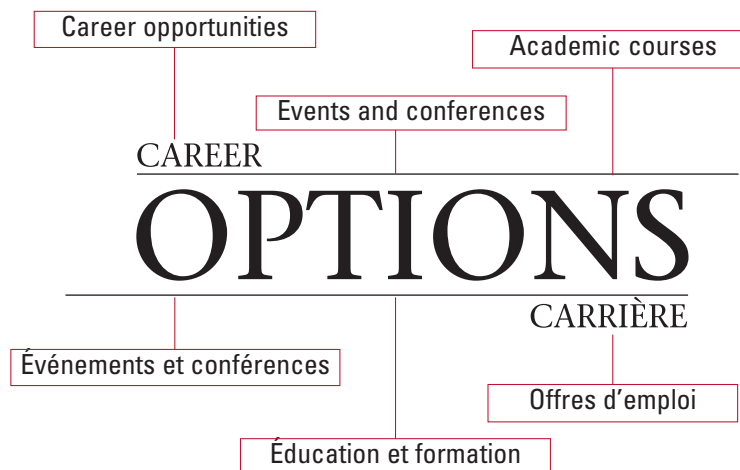
early return of the American hostages might have given Jimmy Carter a hope of victory over his conservative Republican rival, Ronald Reagan, but Khomeini imposed his vengeance. Only on Carter's last day as president was a deal finally signed. Of the 14-pages agreement, Wright tells us, 13 were devoted to the minute details of unfreezing Iranian assets seized by the US.

In *Our Man in Tehran*, Trent University professor Robert Wright has given us a thorough report on a significant event in our recent past. Like Americans in 1979, the West still has difficulty dealing with radical Islam, whether in Iran, Afghanistan, or Iraq, or even in our own homelands. Wright's book could make us all think a little smarter.

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