



Prolonged Surrender to Reality: U.S. Media Coverage of Revolutions

William Worthy

A political memory compares press treatment of major changes.

If I were new to revolutionary governments, if I had no political memory, if I lacked any sense of *déjà vu*, if I had never been to China, Cuba, Algeria, North and South Vietnam in the 1950's and 1960's, and to Iran since the Shah's overthrow, what would U.S. media reports have led me to believe about the Islamic revolution, starting with the hostage crisis on November 4, 1979?

I would have pictured total chaos: no government in place, to speak of; "imminent release" of the hostages by the handful of "good" Iranians (President Abolhassan Bani Sadr and Foreign Minister Sadegh Gotbzadeh); the streets unsafe because of wholesale anti-government violence organized by the youthful, idealistic Marxist Mujahedeen (oddly, the first avowedly socialist guerrilla-style movement ever favorably covered by our

capitalist media); bearded, medieval incompetent clerics running a popularly despised regime and about to be overthrown any day by the oppressed people, by pro-Western elements in the military, and/or by the Mujahedeen; the top cleric, in his late 70's or early 80's, obviously insane — at best senile, at death's door, wholly unaware of what it takes to run a modern state; virtually hourly executions at Tehran's Evin prison; the people

All photographs by Randy Goodman, taken in Tehran.

starving; the country "isolated" and a pariah in the world community; the economy in shambles; the country ripe for a Soviet takeover; an obvious military pushover when Iraq invaded on September 22, 1980, et cetera.

Slowly but surely, Americans who don't like to be fooled have begun to realize that those images of a botched, terror-ridden, "fundamentalist" Islamic revolution have not met the test of time. Last autumn *The Economist* of London reported: "In contrast to Baghdad — where Iraqis do not invite foreigners into their homes, and criticize the regime only where they cannot be overheard — Tehran does not feel like the capital of a police state. Iranians welcome foreigners, criticize the regime, and drink freely."

To gain perspective on U.S. media coverage of the Islamic revolution, it is necessary to step back and review media performance in earlier revolutions. In *The Boston Sunday Globe Magazine* of April 21, 1968, I quoted Lucien Price, the *Globe's* highly respected "Uncle Dudley" editorial writer for 45 years:

"From my box seat, I know that most of the U.S. press has lied about every major revolution of the twentieth century."

Documentation of Price's observation isn't hard to come by. In 1920 Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz compiled a devastating survey of how *The New York Times* had reported the first two years of the Russian Revolution. A few quotes provide the flavor:

In the two years from November 1917 to November 1919, no less than

ninety-one times was it stated that the Soviets were nearing their rope's end, or actually had reached it. In arriving at this computation no count is made of the ordinary reports that Russia was in chaos. . . . Thirty different times the power of the Soviets was definitely described as being on the wane. Twenty times there was news of a serious counter-revolutionary menace. Five times was the explicit statement made that the regime was certain to collapse. And fourteen times that collapse was said to be in progress. Four times Lenin and Trotzky [sic] were planning flight. Three times they had already fled. . . .

Once more, with the failure of the White Armies, the Red Peril reappears. The news as a whole is dominated by the hopes of the men who composed the news organization. They began as passionate partisans in a great war in which their own country's future was at stake. . . . They wanted to win the war; they wanted to ward off bolshevism. . . . They accepted and believed most of what they were told by the State Department, the so-called Russian Embassy in Washington. . . and the agents and adherents of the old regime all over Europe. . . . They accepted reports of governmentally controlled news services abroad, and of correspondents who were unduly intimate with the various secret services and with members of the old Russian nobility [emphasis added]. . . .

From the point of view of professional journalism the reporting of the Russian Revolution is nothing short of a disaster. On the essential questions the net effect was almost always mis-

In Moscow in the early 1920's, Lenin once joked with U.S. correspondents about the number of times they had reported his death. By the late 1960's, a friend at Time Inc. had counted close to one hundred U.S. media reports of Mao's death. Aside from a possible conscious or subconscious hope of spreading destabilizing panic and demoralizing confusion, I've never been able to figure out the "thinking" that goes into such easily refuted rumor-mongering.

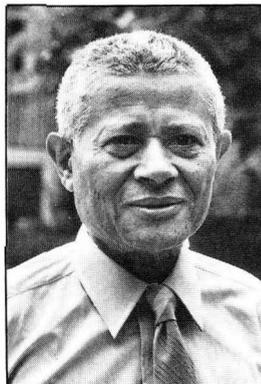
leading, and misleading news is worse than none at all. . . . They can fairly be charged with boundless credulity, and an untiring readiness to be gulled, and on many occasions with a downright lack of common sense.

For one example of intellectual dishonesty — namely, playing a story both ways — Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz came down particularly hard on *The New York Times*. While telling readers an average of twice a week about the collapsing Russian revolution, the editors and correspondents at one and the same time were portraying the Bolshevik "cadaver" as a "mortal menace" to the rest of Europe.

Almost word for word, the pattern has been repeated in U.S. media coverage of the Chinese, Cuban, and Islamic revolutions. Each has been repeatedly accused of spreading revolution and "subversion" in its geographic area and beyond, while being portrayed as a miserable failure by not meeting even the subsistence needs of its own people.

Only a gullible American public would go on, revolution after revolution, decade after decade, swallowing what Lippmann and Merz nailed as "double-think" long before George Orwell coined the word. Even if a dying or already dead revolutionary government somehow managed to spread feeble propaganda beyond its own borders, what

William Worthy, Nieman Fellow '57, is a freelance journalist in Boston. The above piece, researched in part by Deirdre Hiebert, is an expanded version of a lecture and slide show on Iran given by Worthy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government on March 6, 1985. Both Hiebert and photographer Randy Goodman were with him during his third trip to Iran in 1983.



Randy Goodman

revolution-hungry people anywhere on earth would buy into and emulate a widely heralded and demonstrable failure?

In 1961, forty-one years after the Lippmann-Merz survey, General Lazaro Cardenas, who served as president of Mexico in the 1930's, was interviewed in *The New Statesman* by K. S. Karol.

I told him [wrote Karol] that. . . in Washington. . . a Kennedy aide. . . told me that the U.S. was not opposed to revolutions or nationalization: they were against the Castro regime simply because it was Communist. . . .

He could not believe his ears. . . . He said:

"I don't like to drag up the past. . . . But if they tell you that the nationalization of U.S. firms in Mexico [in 1938] was accepted with good grace by the Americans, then I am forced to tell you the truth, as I and my country know it. I had no intention, when I came to power, to expropriate the oil companies. . . . But I had made it possible for trade unions to organize themselves and passed legislation for the benefit of the urban workers.

"The oil companies refused to apply these laws. . . . When (the Supreme Court of Mexico) found against them, the companies simply declared that they were not accustomed to taking orders from Mexican courts. Only after this flagrant violation of our sovereignty did I decide to nationalize the oil industry. . . . The U.S. sent us a kind of ultimatum. . . . In the U.S. [the oil companies] financed a ferocious press-campaign. Believe it or not, in those days the U.S. press presented us in exactly the same light as they present Castro today. Even the serious newspapers described me as a thief. Congressmen stated that Mexico was bankrupt and that my promises to pay compensation were valueless. Many Americans demanded military intervention. It was not a matter of political ideologies, simply a sordid dispute about cash."

Lippmann's acid phrases help explain why our U.S. media fall into the same nationalistic mold every time there's a new revolution — in Iran or elsewhere — that's out of favor with Washington. In the October 1961 *Nieman Reports*,



Revolutionary Guards parade to celebrate the formation of the Corps.

Robert Sollen of the Oxnard, California, *Press-Courier* also helped explain the recurring pattern, in his article "Wire Service Nationalism and Its Consequences."

"Nationalism," he wrote, quoting from Eric Fromm in *The Sane Society*, "is our form of incest, is our idolatry, is our insanity." In 1983, when photographer Randy Goodman was about to leave for Iran, a New York-based photo editor, whose daily selection of news pictures

helps to mold world public opinion, told her bluntly that he'd be interested *only* in "good and barbaric" photos from Iran. Several months earlier in Tehran, an American staffer on an English-language daily was a few blocks from his office one morning when a huge bomb went off in a nearby square. Before he reached his desk a few minutes later, U.S. wire service bureaus in Nicosia had already moved the story, in some detail,

on their wires — well before reporters for IRNA, the official Iranian news agency, had had time to collect and report the facts.

The incident reminded me of a similar occasion in 1961 in Cuba when the CIA-financed underground was planting bombs in kindergartens and department stores, as came to light during congressional investigations in the 1970's. At 9:03 one evening, over a Western Union teleprinter in his Havana bureau office, one of our eager U.S. wire service correspondents reported a bomb explosion that, awkwardly for him, was five minutes behind schedule and didn't actually go off until 9:08 P.M. Not long afterwards, during the Bay of Pigs invasion, he and most U.S. reporters were rounded up, jailed, and later deported.

With few exceptions, the American people for years after a revolution receive totally negative journalistic images, with virtually nothing to suggest a return to normalcy in the lives of most of the people. During my "unauthorized" trip to China in 1956-57, I filmed a Peking ice-skating rink for CBS Television News and also for U.S. lecture audiences. China at the time was very much in our official and journalistic doghouse, and Americans were amazed to see "communists" ice-skating — or, indeed, engaged happily in any form of recreation. At Oberlin College, a senior came up to me to make a sheepish confession after viewing that footage. The previous summer his roommate had visited Moscow and, on his return to campus, showed slides of the Kremlin in brilliant sunlight.

"Until that moment," said the student, "it had never occurred to me that the sun ever shone in the Soviet Union."

Were footage available, most Americans would be equally surprised to see Randy Goodman and me one evening in Tehran riding with kids and their parents in space ships and on ferris wheels in an amusement park. The popular image of that ancient land, thanks to media coverage, is of a joyless, boundless black hole.

That image of bottomless and impenetrable evil would be called into immediate question if the American people knew about Iran's humanely and efficiently run camps for the three million



Young supporters of the Islamic Revolution march during the Revolutionary Guard Day celebration.

refugees from the Iraqi and Afghan wars. Under Imam Khomeini's directive, guidelines, and overall supervision, all duly reported in the Iranian media, the War Refugee Foundation was set up and originally headed by Mustafa Mir Salim, an enormously impressive administrator who is now top executive assistant to President Ali Khamene'i.

Shortly after my China visit, I shared

a platform in West Newbury, Massachusetts, with Saville Davis, then the national editor of *The Christian Science Monitor*. I told of my first CBS shortwave broadcast from Peking and of the congratulatory cablegram from the New York desk several hours later. But the cable had ended with a request that, in future broadcasts, I use the old Kuomintang name for the capital — Peiping

(spelled out phonetically in the cable) — rather than the new “communist” name given to the city by Mao’s government. To the State Department in those days, the use of “Peking” bestowed respectability and legitimacy on what Secretary of State John Foster Dulles decreed was a “passing phase” in China.

David Chipp, the no-nonsense Reuters correspondent in Peking, was both amused and appalled by the childish request. He said: “At the end of your next broadcast when you come to the return cue, you should say: ‘This is Bill Worthy in Peiping. Now back to CBS News in New Amsterdam.’”

The largely conservative lecture audience in suburban West Newbury roared appreciatively. Several days later the *Monitor* quietly switched from Peiping to Peking. But though I similarly alerted *The New York Times*, its adjustment to reality took until about 1960.

With that eleven-year-long time span as a precedent — eleven years, that is, after the communists took power in China in 1949 — I told Iran’s Foreign Minister, Dr. Ali Akbar Velayati, in an informal conversation that along about 1990 he could expect the more advanced of the U.S. media to stop using “Ayatollah” Khomeini, and to start referring to



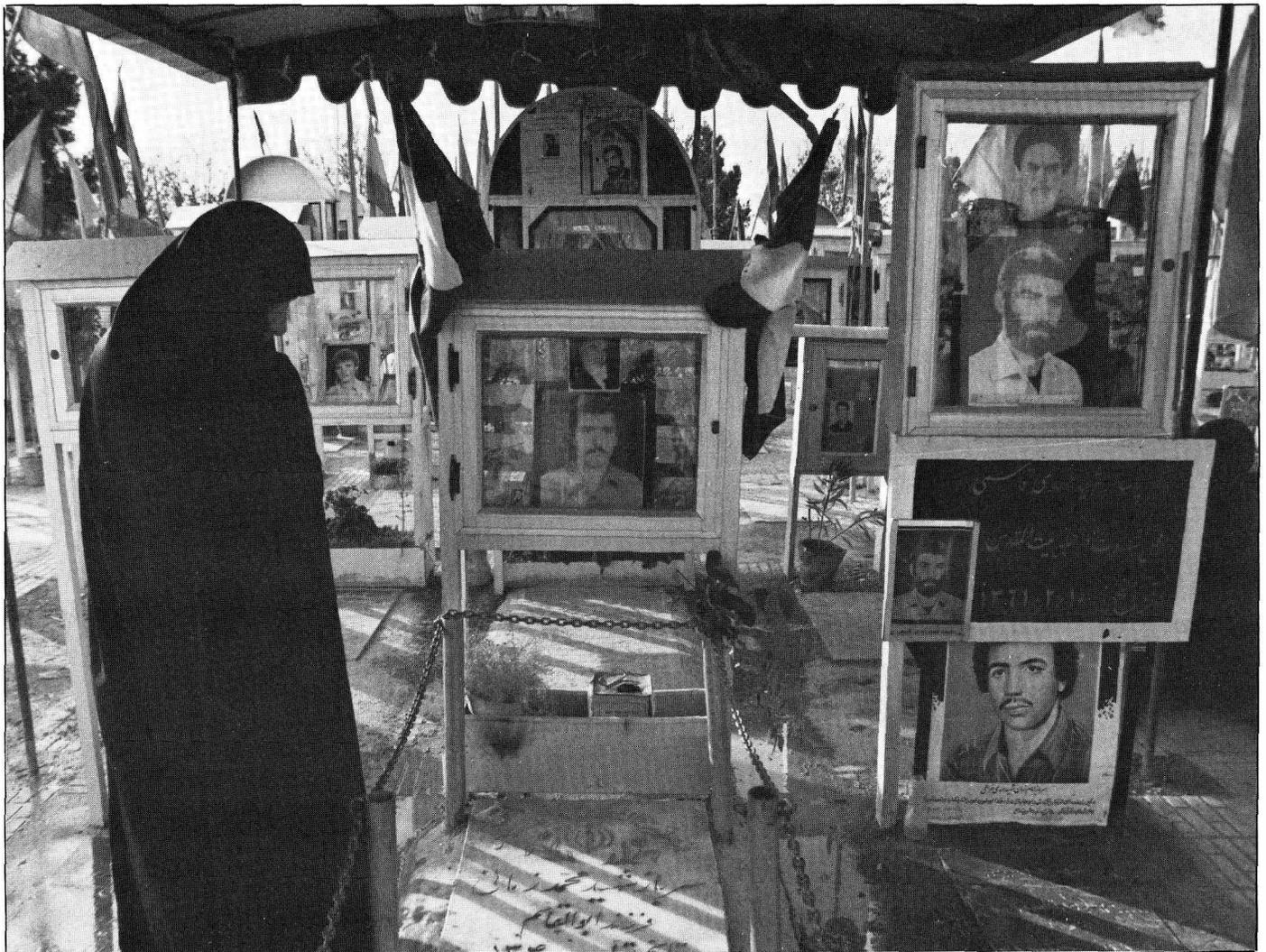
Moslem women at Friday Prayer show their support for the continuation of the Iran-Iraq war.



A Moslem woman holds a card of Khomeini during a Women’s Day celebration and protest.

him by his proper title “Imam.” Like David Chipp of Reuters, Dr. Velayati, who was trained as a pediatrician at Johns Hopkins, was quite amused. “1990,” he repeated in a soft voice. By analogy, it’s as if the Reverend Jesse Jackson, to show his displeasure over the Pope’s denunciation of liberation theology in the Third World, started downgrading him to “Cardinal.”

Hannah Arendt said that “he who understands revolution understands the future.” The longer it takes our media to come to terms with revolutionary realities, the more dangerous the world becomes. The problem stems from a combination of nationalism, cultural bias, what Catholic theology calls “invincible ignorance,” and almost wilful insensitivity to peoples asserting their



Photographs decorate the gravesites of martyrs killed in the Iran-Iraq war. A relative prays.

newly won sovereignty. At Boston Latin School and Bates College, I did not pass courses in physics, chemistry, and biology. Today, I'd not consider it censorship if a scientific association barred me from covering its convention, were any editor so irresponsible as to assign me, and were I so presumptuous as to accept such an assignment. There are reasonable limits to the prerogatives of fallible assignment editors.

Similarly, as a card-carrying, dues-paying member of the American Civil Liberties Union, I could not criticize any problems-beset revolutionary government or movement for barring a U.S. journalist who hasn't done his/her homework, and who is as much an ignoramus in the area of revolution and counterrevolution as I am in the field of

science. As Louis Armstrong once put it: "Some people, if they don't know, you can't tell 'em."

Iran is not and has not been collapsing. All along, the government has enjoyed popular legitimacy. In 1984 alone, 153,000 Iranians flew as pilgrims to Mecca. That year, four hundred thousand in all took trips abroad, including fifty thousand from the business community. If any took those occasions to defect, I've yet to hear about it. Despite many wire-service bulletins reporting his death, Imam Khomeini's wife of some sixty years still takes very good care of him, and I doubt he'll give Washington the satisfaction of dying any time soon. The ghoulish speculation about Iran after his death should cease — if not out of respect for good taste, then be-

cause there won't be any substantive change in direction. The revolution has long since been institutionalized.

With a new Islamic interest-free banking system, Iran's debt-free economy is the envy of a Third World saddled with impossible debt loads and usurious rates of interest. As a matter of policy, the Islamic Republic has paid off the entire \$15 billion foreign debt it inherited from the Shah. The government is not and never was "isolated"; as of 1983, Tehran had diplomatic — and in many cases, commercial — relations with over 110 countries, including many in the Third World.

Barnum once said: "The public likes to be fooled." In his day and setting, the price of deception was only the cost of a ticket to the three-ring Barnum and

Bailey circus. Today, the price of being lulled into contrived untruths can be nuclear suicide. Two years ago Hussein Mollanazar, deputy director of Iran's Foreign Press Office, was evaluating U.S. media coverage of his country. To Randy Goodman and me he recalled an ancient Persian fable of a stranger arriving in a town early one morning and, for whatever reason, telling everyone — falsely — that free soup was being given out on the other side of town. Everyone rushed off

to get some. That afternoon, a town resident met the stranger and eagerly passed on the tale of the free soup — at which point the newcomer himself hurried away to partake!

In that ultimate irony of deceivers deceiving themselves lies the tragedy of the incestuous pack journalism that prevailed at the U.S. Embassy gate in Tehran. In 1980, on my fourth day there, I referred in my "Tehran Diary" piece (*Boston Phoenix*, March 4, 1980) to the

"totally misleading press garbage" about the "soon-to-be-released" hostages.

Peer pressure to go along and not dissent doesn't have to be overt to be effective. Unless old-fashioned journalistic integrity replaces careerism and pandering to popular passions, then we as a nation will be as badly served by our foreign press corps in the many revolutions on the horizon as we have been in 1917 (Russia), 1949 (China), 1959 (Cuba), and 1979 (Iran). ■

AIRLIFT. . .

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ready to strike while the iron was hot. One senior official of the Jewish Agency later told *New York Times* reporter Thomas L. Friedman, "We made every single professional mistake in the book . . . Nobody knew what or how much they were supposed to say."

The New York section of the World Zionist Organization, responsible for distributing the press release that turned the leak into a flood, will not say why they publicized a supposedly secret operation. Shafer Stollman, of the Jewish agency, speculates that those responsible for alerting the media weren't professionals and didn't realize what a press release implied. Stollman speculates that, besides facilitating fundraising for the mission, the press release could serve one other purpose: to deflect criticism that, for years, Israel had ignored the repatriation of the black Ethiopian Jews because of the color of their skin.

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The story became so hot that even today it's hard to find sources who will go on record telling when the airlift finally resumed. One American source with close ties to Ethiopian Jews in Israel says the suspension lasted until March 22, when the United States flew the remain-

ing refugees from the Sudan. Now, almost a year after Operation Moses began (November 1984), most of the Ethiopian refugees are living in twenty-one resettlement camps where they are learning the language, and something about the customs of modern Judaism. Some attempts are being made either to teach the refugees modern trades or to find them work in their ancient trades, such as textile or pottery making. The Israeli government estimated it will spend \$300 million on absorption this year.

Meanwhile, controversy continues over whether the Ethiopians are Jews under the Law of Return, or whether they must undergo a symbolic conversion ritual. Greatly offended by doubts about their authenticity, some refugees held a protest march to the airport last spring, symbolically staging a return to the country in which they were *falasha* (strangers), but most certainly Jews. As it stands today, the Ethiopians live under a compromise arrangement whereby individuals must be able to demonstrate before being married by a rabbi that their mothers were Jews or that their families had not intermarried.

The exodus also provided justification for the overthrow of the President of the Sudan. On April 6, Gaafar Nimeiri was removed in a *coup*. While he is in exile in Egypt, he is being tried *in absentia*. His crimes, according to attorney general

Omar Abdelati, quoted in *The Washington Post*, include smuggling Jews out of the country to Israel "when we are officially at war with that country." ■

Corrections

In the previous issue of *NR*, under Nieman Notes, John Hughes (NF '62) was erroneously described as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs. He was, in fact, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs. The item also mentioned that he owns two newspapers on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The number should have been five.

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In the same issue, it was reported that Smith Hempstone (NF '65) had been appointed associate editor of *The Washington Times*, previously having been editor in chief. He has asked us to correct this information: He was not editor in chief nor was he appointed associate editor of the *Times*. He has no connection with the newspaper and is writing a column, which on occasion may appear in the *Times*, as in other U.S. newspapers.

We regret these errors.