
During the 1970s, Americans faced many political and economical challenges. People were distrustful of the government after Watergate, the economy was struggling, and oil prices were extremely high. In 1976, Jimmy Carter was elected President of the United States. Although he was popular at the beginning of his presidency, public sentiment began to change when he was unable to solve economic problems and was unsuccessful in negotiating for the release of the American hostages in Iran. In his book, Taken Hostage, David Farber provides a very well researched account of the Iranian Hostage Crisis by giving readers a detailed background of how and why the 52 hostages were taken and held for 444 days. There are many issues discussed in the book, but some common themes include the portrayal of Jimmy Carter as incapable of either helping the hostages or improving American life; the reactions of people, both in Iran and the United States, regarding the hostage crisis; and the role the media played throughout the crisis in exciting the interest of the public.

David Farber portrays Jimmy Carter as an intelligent man, yet incapable of helping America during his presidency. Carter did not sit idle while the hostages were being held; he simply was not able to find a way to free them during his presidency. Because of the President’s friendship with the Shah of Iran, relations were strained between his administration and the revolutionary government in Iran. President Carter, although he tried to prevent the Shah’s exile in America, did eventually allow him to receive medical help in the United States. This action heightened tensions between the United States and Iran, and the Iranians demanded the Shah in exchange for the hostages. Farber never directly accuses Carter of making a definite error in his decisions, although the failed mission to rescue the hostages was a disaster. Carter was influenced by Henry Kissinger and others, who did not want to betray the friendship America had established with the Shah, thus sacrificing the positive relationship America might have had with the new Iranian government. Farber identifies this as the reason the hostages were taken and why Carter was at the mercy of the Iranians, instead of being able to negotiate freedom for the hostages.

David Farber writes frequently about the reactions of both the American and Iranian publics to the Hostage Crisis. In the United States, Iranian university students held protests at their schools and outside the White House. Americans hung yellow ribbons throughout the country and began to pay more attention to news about Iran. The longer the hostages were held, the less people approved of President Carter.

In Iran, Farber describes how the students took the hostages. Although they had only planned for a three day sit-in, the students later decided to retain the hostages until the Shah was returned by the United States. The Iranians were proud that they were able to expose the weakness of America in this way. The author mentions these reactions throughout the book, showing the origins of these sentiments by giving readers a relatively long background history of how the hostage crisis eventually took place.

David Farber also writes extensively about the media’s impact on the hostage situation. He notes that before the hostage crisis, Americans knew little about American policy in Iran, although information was available concerning Iran and the Shah. The
American public was especially ignorant of the amount of power Islamic forces held in Iran and how to deal with growing threat of militant Islam. During the hostage crisis, however, the media played a large role in influencing and informing the public about Iran. The author implies that the media helped cause the increasing dissatisfaction with Carter, since people were reminded each day in the news that he was not succeeding in freeing the hostages. Farber also writes about the influence of the media in Iran, which was under Russian control. The Russians sent anti-American propaganda over the radio, broadcasted in Iran, which helped fuel the discontent Iranians felt toward Americans.

David Farber connects the themes of his book in a way that sheds an honest light on what happened during the Hostage Crisis in Iran. *Taken Hostage* is a very thorough book and is an interesting read for anyone who enjoys studying American politics in the twentieth century.

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