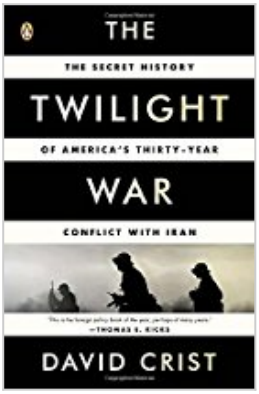

The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran

By David Crist

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The dramatic secret history of the undeclared, ongoing war between the U.S. and Iran

For the past three decades, the United States and Iran have been engaged in an unacknowledged secret war. This conflict has frustrated five American presidents, divided administrations, and repeatedly threatened to bring the two nations to the brink of open warfare. Drawing upon unparalleled access to senior officials and key documents of several U.S. administrations, David Crist, a senior historian in the federal government, breaks new ground on virtually every page of *The Twilight War*. From the Iranian Revolution to secret negotiations between Iran and the United States after 9/11 to Iran's nuclear program and sanctions against it, Crist brings vital new depth to our understanding of "the Iran problem"—and what the future of this tense relationship may bring.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A fascinating, detailed history of American-Iranian foreign relations... Crist is a natural-born writer, and the best parts of *The Twilight War* are not just engaging, but thrilling. His account of the 1988 naval mine strike on the USS Samuel B. Roberts in the Persian Gulf reads almost like the script for an action movie, in large part because he's careful to pay attention to the actual people behind the sailors' uniforms. It's that concern for humanity that also renders his narratives of the bombings of the Beirut barracks (in 1983) and the Khobar Towers (in 1996) so chilling, immediate and heartbreaking." —Michael Shaub, *NPR*

"David Crist's painstakingly researched and elegantly written account of the United States-Iran cold war is an earnest chronicle of this shadowy history. ...Deserves a spot on the short list of must-read books on United States-Iran relations." —Karim Sadjadpour, *The New York Times*

"Lucid and thoughtful... Crist has written an important and timely book that should be required reading for anyone interested in understanding how the United States and Iran went from close allies to enduring adversaries." —*The Washington Post*

About the Author
David Crist is currently a historian for the federal government. As a colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, he served in the first gulf war and made two tours with elite special operations forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. He lives in Maryland.

One

“A LITTLE KING IN YOUR HEART”

At two a.m. on January 4, 1979, the loud ringing of the secure telephone jolted U.S. Air Force General Robert “Dutch” Huyser awake and out of his warm bed in Stuttgart, Germany. The early-hour call did not come as a surprise to the fifty-four-year-old Huyser. During a crisis, you worked Washington hours. As the workday ended on the East Coast, it was common to receive a flurry of last-minute inquiries from the Pentagon, depriving you of sound sleep even if you did wear four stars.

Slightly overweight and with a round, rugose face, Dutch Huyser was a product of the air force’s bomber community. During the Second World War, he flew four-engine B-29s over Japan, and in the early days of the Cold War, he piloted the same plane, only now loaded with an atomic bomb earmarked for the Soviet Union. As American aircraft technology advanced, so too did Huyser’s career. He flew B-52 missions over North Vietnam and assumed his current job as the deputy commander of American forces in Europe in September 1975.

The week prior to his early morning phone call, Huyser had exchanged numerous calls with his boss, General Alexander Haig, and the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a longtime acquaintance, General David Jones, about traveling to Iran on a secret mission. Over the previous three years, Huyser had developed a cordial acquaintance with the shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, one of America’s most

important allies in the Middle East. Now, with a popular revolution sweeping the country and the monarchy unraveling, Washington wanted a high-level military envoy to travel to Iran to work with the Iranian military, although to do exactly *what* remained unclear.

The modern American military has produced few generals as political as Al Haig. The onetime aide to the imperious General Douglas MacArthur had learned the battlefields of Washington as well as those of East Asia. Haig deplored the Carter administration's feeble response to the Iranian Revolution and argued for a more resolute show of U.S. support for the shah. But more important, Haig did not want his career tarnished by the debacle of the collapse of Iran. He deliberately tried to distance himself from the unfolding drama in Tehran. When General Jones suggested to Haig that Huyser was ideal to convey a message to the Iranian leadership, Haig, the supreme commander of Allied Forces Europe and Huyser's superior, vociferously opposed the idea.1

At two a.m., picking up the receiver, Dutch Huyser heard the brusque voice of his boss. "Dutch, we lost. You're going to Iran."2

When he took the oath of office on a cold, bright January 20, 1977, neither Iran nor the Persian Gulf was on President Jimmy Carter's mind. He knew of the importance of Middle Eastern oil, but rather than focusing on securing American access to this oil, the president concentrated his policy initiatives on the root cause: America's growing demand for imported fuel. The emerging energy crisis became an early mantra of his administration, and the president threw the entire weight of his office behind addressing the looming crisis, delivering his first salvo in a nationally televised address just two weeks after moving into the White House. Sitting in a wooden chair next to a roaring fire in the White House library, Carter wore a cardigan sweater and lectured his audience on the need for shared sacrifice regarding energy conservation.

Carter followed that with another prime-time address three months later. On the evening of April 18, 1977, television viewers expecting to see the popular family drama about austere life on the frontier, *Little House on the Prairie*, instead saw a somber president dressed in a dark suit. "Tonight," he began in a sharp tone, notwithstanding the lilt of his Southern inflection, "I want to have an unpleasant talk with you about a problem that is unprecedented in our history. With the exception of preventing war, this is the greatest challenge that our country will face during our lifetime." By the 1980s, the president warned, demand for crude oil would outstrip the world's reserves. Carter foretold dire consequences: closed factories, lost jobs, rampant inflation, and fierce international competition for scarce energy resources. "If we fail to act soon we will face an economic, social, and political crisis that will threaten our free institutions." The looming oil crisis, said Carter in one of the more memorable lines of his presidency, "is the moral equivalent of war."3

President Carter inherited a Persian Gulf policy forged entirely on the anvil of the Cold War. One of the first crises between the United States and the Soviet Union had occurred in that region in March 1946, when the Soviets refused to leave northern Iran following the end of World War II and then moved tanks menacingly toward the Iranian capital of Tehran.4 When the United States forcefully objected, Moscow backed down, unwilling at that point to go to war.5 For the next three decades, while the United States focused its resources on confronting Moscow in Central Europe, the United Kingdom served as the major military power in the Middle East protecting it from Soviet expansion. The British had a large military presence in the area, and the Gulf sheikdoms were still colonial dependencies. But in January 1968 Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced his cash-strapped British government's decision to withdraw all its armed forces and end 140 years of colonial occupation in the Persian Gulf. As the Union Jack lowered over the newly independent sheikdoms, the United States, bogged down in Vietnam, lacked the military resources to post to the Gulf.6

So in the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon devised a new economy-of-force plan, unofficially known as the twin pillars strategy. America's Persian Gulf security would rest on the two staunchly anticommunist

powers in the region: Iran and Saudi Arabia. With Saudi oil money and its regional prestige as keeper of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, coupled with Iran's military muscle, these two nations would serve as America's proxies to contain the Soviet Union. "The vacuum left by British withdrawal," Henry Kissinger wrote in his memoirs, "would be filled by a local power friendly to us." American security in the Persian Gulf now rested largely with the growing might of the shah's military.

The shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, enthusiastically stepped into this role. Since his reinstatement on the throne, with the assistance of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), following a 1953 coup, the shah proved to be ambitious, expansionistic, and fervently anticommunist. He made it known throughout diplomatic circles that he sought Iran's ascendancy as the new regional power. Deftly playing on American fears of communism and fueled by petrodollars, which increased twenty-four-fold in the seven years from 1968 to 1975, the shah expanded the Iranian military to become the largest force in the Middle East.7 The Ford and Nixon administrations sold some $12 billion in weapons to Iran, offering the Iranian despot the most advanced weapons, short of nuclear, in the American arsenal.

The shah was not shy about using his freshly acquired military might to encroach on his neighbors. In November 1971, following the final British pullout of forces from the Gulf and the scheduled independence of its former protectorates—the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain—the shah forcibly reasserted Iran's control of the contested Tunb Islands and the island of Abu Musa in the Persian Gulf. While small (Abu Musa is only twelve square kilometers), the islands are strategically located. Abu Musa, for example, sits astride the deepwater route leading into the western approaches to the Strait of Hormuz. Any oil tanker exiting or entering the Gulf must pass close by the island. The shah also backed Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq, as a result of which in 1975 then Iraqi vice president Saddam Hussein reluctantly signed the Algiers Accords, which established as the southern border between the two nations the midpoint—and not the Iranian bank—of the Shatt al-Arab, a strategic waterway between the two nations and an important entry for Iraq into the Persian Gulf.8

President Carter continued Nixon's twin pillars policy, though with less enthusiasm. He initially hoped to demilitarize the Persian Gulf. Carter floated the idea to Moscow of reducing the quantity of weapons sold to the third world, a strategy that would include a drastic reduction of American weapons sold to both Saudi Arabia and Iran.9 The president then proposed a treaty to reduce naval forces in the Indian Ocean as the first step in what he hoped would lead to an accord on demilitarizing that body of water. Neither proposal went beyond perfunctory discussions. Moscow steadfastly refused to curtail arms shipments to buyers in the Middle East, all of whom happened to be among the Soviets' largest weapons clients.10

A fundamental split divided Carter's foreign policy team. The two principal antagonists were Carter's national security adviser and longtime Democratic foreign policy expert, a forty-nine-year-old Polish-born Cold War hawk named Zbigniew Brzezinski, and his sixty-year-old secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, who had served as secretary of the army and deputy secretary of defense in the two previous Democratic administrations. While the two advisers generally agreed with Carter's emphasis on human rights, they clashed on just about every other significant issue. The potential pitfalls associated with these two men and their rival philosophies in the same administration came as no surprise. Hamilton Jordan, Carter's youthful campaign manager, quipped during the transition: "If, after the inauguration, you find Cy Vance as secretary of state and Zbigniew Brzezinski as head of national security, then I would say we failed. And I'd quit." President Carter appointed both men, and Jordan remained as chief of staff.11

The two men also differed in their views of the Persian Gulf. Brzezinski advocated a more robust American military presence. He viewed Gulf oil as an Achilles' heel of the West in relation to the Soviet Union and stressed the need to retain unfettered access to Middle East oil. If oil resources became scarce, the next battle of the Cold War would be not for Berlin, but for Riyadh or Tehran. Secretary Vance wanted to downplay the

role of the U.S. military in the Gulf. The secretary advanced the prevailing view within the State Department that the presence of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf would be counterproductive. In an area with a long colonial legacy and deep suspicions of superpower motivations, better to keep U.S. forces beyond the horizon than to increase the military footprint in the region.12

The new secretary of defense's view lay somewhere in between. The forty-nine-year-old Harold Brown had earned his doctorate in physics at Columbia University at the remarkable age of twenty-two. A self-described impersonal and analytical man, he was a brilliant scientist and had arrived at the Pentagon as a member of Kennedy defense secretary Robert McNamara's "whiz kids." Brown had spent most of the 1960s earning the deserved reputation as a moderate and a realist, but when it came to the Middle East, Secretary Brown generally agreed with Brzezinski's more hawkish assessment of Soviet intentions. He shared Brzezinski's concern about Soviet dominance of the Persian Gulf: "Soviet control of this area would make virtual vassals of much of both the industrialized and developing worlds."13

Despite this discord, the stakes remained low for Washington, as the shah appeared to be firmly in power and in America's pocket. In January 1977, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research produced an optimistic report that echoed the intelligence community's views of the shah's prospects for political survival: "Iran is likely to remain stable under the shah's leadership over the next several years. The prospects are good that Iran will have relatively clear sailing until at least the mid-1980s."14 On a stopover in Tehran in December 1977, at the end of his first year in office, Carter reemphasized his support for the shah during a lavish New Year's Eve gala, noting that under the leadership of the shah, Iran "is an 'island of stability' in one of the more troubled areas."

But all was not as rosy as the U.S. intelligence community believed for the Pahlavi dynasty. In the early 1960s, the shah actively encouraged modernization and secularization. He forced land redistribution, especially of the vast holdings of Shia clerics, which struck at the heart of their wealth and power. The shah ordered state-owned businesses sold; the enfranchisement of women, including their ability to hold political office; and the removal of Islamic dogma from schools. The shah largely dismissed Islam as a backward force that impeded the formation of a new, modern Iran. The by-products of his brand of modernization were rapid social change and increased instability.15 While Iran's newfound oil wealth remained in the hands of a small elite, rural unemployment grew, and the population of Tehran multiplied fivefold as peasants poured into the city in search of work.16

In 1975, the shah canceled elections and abolished the two nominally independent political parties in favor of a single party dedicated to the Pahlavi regime. Any pretense of a constitutional monarchy vanished. The opposition movement grew, as did the murmur of discontent in the streets of Tehran, stoked by thousands of underemployed students freshly educated in Western universities.

From the beginning, one of the most vocal opponents of the shah's designs was a religious scholar from Qom, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Alarmed by Khomeini's unwavering vitriolic criticism of the secularization of society, the shah had ordered the sixty-year-old cleric imprisoned in 1963 and exiled the following year. Khomeini settled in the Shia holy city of Najaf, Iraq, where he continued his incessant monologues against the "corrupt" Pahlavi dynasty and its chief supporter, the United States. Khomeini remained revered by multitudes of Iranian people. He developed a mystical persona among both secularists and Islamists opposing the shah. Khomeini preferred to stay above the political fray, providing broad policy guidance and leaving the details to his key advisers. Many Western observers mistakenly viewed this leadership style as a sign that Khomeini intended to serve in the traditional role of a Shia imam: influential and powerful, but aloof from secular politics. Ayatollah Khomeini, however, had a clear view of where he wanted to take Iran, and it was not in the direction of either a Western democracy or a constitutional monarchy. He called for a purge of all corrupt influences and for the Islamization of Iranian society.

Khomeini believed history had shown that the throne was not to be trusted; the monarchy needed to go. Ayatollah Khomeini intended to remake Iran into a new Islamic republic. The mosque would supplant the imperial throne.

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