



USLAW 2008 Leadership Council Meeting, December 5-7, Chicago Presentation by Stephen Kinzer on Afghanistan and Iran



Stephen Kinzer is an award-winning foreign correspondent who has covered more than 50 countries on five continents. Kinzer spent more than 20 years working for the New York Times, most of it as a foreign correspondent. His articles and books have led the Washington Post to place him "among the best in popular foreign policy storytelling."

*In 2006 Kinzer published *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*. It recounts the 14 times the United States has overthrown foreign governments. Kinzer seeks to explain why these interventions were carried out and what their long-term effects have been. He is also the author of *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*. It tells how the CIA overthrew Iran's nationalist government in 1953.*

Kinzer is currently a guest lecturer at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL. USLAW invited him to make a presentation at the Leadership Council meeting on Afghanistan and Iran. This is a summary of his remarks.

It wasn't that long ago – within the last year – that the prospect of a US attack on Iran seemed very real. Now we may get through the next weeks without that happening. It was people like us that changed public opinion. There was only one narrative – coming from the White House. Over a period of months, grass roots activists provided a counter-narrative – another way to look at the situation than from the White House.

Over the course of five weeks, I traveled across the US. There are groups everywhere working on this project. I met my own congressman. He said, "I don't know anything about Iran and am not interested in it. So when it comes time to make a decision, I hear what is happening from the White House." It was our ability to provide a counter-narrative that turned things around.

There's a famous Sherlock Holmes story about solving mystery with the dog that did not bark. We don't sense a victory when something doesn't happen. Iran is an example of a real victory.

My brother-in-law is labor leader. I told him people in the foreign policy business are depressed by Obama's appointments. He said the labor movement is not depressed, because it is used to being screwed.

In general, we are not going to see big changes in foreign policy compared to the last few years. Obama doesn't really have one. Maybe he gave the job to Hillary to tackle these or to have someone else to blame.

Where are we?

On Iraq: I don't believe, as the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) stipulates, that we will be down to no troops at the end of 2011. We will have 30-50 thousand still there. I don't like that. I'm an anti-interventionist but also a realist. In Iraq there is strong case for significant withdrawal.

In Afghanistan: What contacts tell me – almost no one wants all US troops to leave, out of fear of a huge explosion. The problem is not the presence of troops but *what they do*. They violate concepts dearest to Afghans.

This is a reflection of an important impulse of the US in the world. We think it is the "end of history" – that the best way to organize society is how we do it now. We see it as ideal for everyone else. This approach is underpinned by the idea that culture and tradition are not important. It is a "world is flat theory," that what's good for us is good for everyone.

The Afghans have a different system for making decisions – by consensus. The idea of choosing between parties is an anathema. Our society is based on individualism; theirs is formed on the basis of community, not individuals. Our foreign policy is based on one size fits all, and we define the size based on our own.

Theirs is a culture many times older that has a different basis for doing things. We try to find a formula for what makes us happy and prosperous. Our founders said what is true for us is true everyone in every society. That is a prescription for disaster.

Afghanistan is more of Pashtun than Muslim country. Pashtun life is based on [pashunwali](#) – honor is a central principle defined by concentric circles. You do not violate the sanctity of a woman's dressing room, the home, the village, the country. We've violated every one of those circles.

Our presence in the country is the #1 recruiting tool for our enemies. We need to pull back to a training role, supporting Afghans, building roads. There is a role for the US but it is not the role we play now. We must stop dropping drone bombs. Every time we do that the village boys empty out to join Taliban.

Over 90% of the cocaine in world comes from Afghanistan. We pay \$4b per month for our military operations there. The total value of their heroin crop is the same annually as the monthly cost of waging war there.

We follow the same policy of eradication there as in Columbia – starving the peasants for whom poppies are the only source of income. *We ought to buy the whole crop and provide funds to every peasant.*

What strikes me in DC is how narrow is the spectrum of acceptable opinions. Any deviance brands you as a whacko who doesn't deserve a seat at the table.

In Iran: We have a future secretary of state who talks about obliterating Iran.

In looking at a map of the Middle East, Iran is the largest nation – it affects everything.

After WWII we looked at a map of Europe and saw Germany as largest country. There was a [Morgenthau Plan](#) to ban all industry. Secretary of State [George Marshall](#) realized every time there is an unhappy Germany, Europe suffers. The only solution was to bring them into the success.

Iran is like Germany. Whenever it is unhappy, there has been an unstable Mideast.

Our policy has been to threaten, hector, and harass Iran.

Most believe the history of our relations with Iran began with the [Hostage Crisis](#) and ends with it. It doesn't look like that to Iran. In '53, the CIA overthrew [Mohammed Mossadeq](#) (democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran) for the sin of wanting to nationalize Iranian oil. We overthrew the government and ended Iranian democracy. It seemed like a perfect outcome with Shah replacing him. Iran is a perfect example of short run apparent success but long term consequences.

We invade, overthrow, withdraw and forget about it, *but the people don't forget about it.*

The Shah ruled for 25 years with increasing repression that produced the Islamic Revolution that brought to power a clique of anti-American mullahs that has spent the last 25 years trying to undermine the US in the world. It also led Iraq to invade Iran. We were so angry at Iran that we became military allies of Saddam Hussein. Reagan sent Rumsfeld to find out what aid to provide to Iraq. Saddam asked for intelligence on where Iranian troops were located and he wanted helicopters to drop gas. It began our death embrace with Saddam. (He later used those helicopters to gas his own people.)

It also terrified the Soviets who feared being encircled and led them to send the Red Army into Afghanistan. That, in turn, led the US to fund warlords to tackle the Soviets.

When the US decided to do the coup in '53 in Iran, Washington wired the CIA station chief to tell him. He responded, this is a bad idea; don't do it. He was fired. We ignored people we pay to give us information on the ground because it conflicts with the beliefs in DC. But even the station chief could not have predicted what actually happened.

When you violently intervene in the political development of another country, you have no idea of how it will end up.

We have in the US a "can do" mentality. We believe you can get what you work hard for. It has had good results but carries inherent danger. It works when dealing with obstacles of nature, technology, other people, but not when obstacles are set by culture and tradition.

At a talk in DC some months ago, on a panel, there was the [Bruce Laingen](#), the most senior US hostage in Iran. He had become an advocate for reconciliation with Iran.

He said, he had been sitting in solitary in a cell for a year. The door opened. One of hostage takers was in doorway. Laingen lashed out at him in a tirade.

The hostage taker listened. Then he pointed and said, "You have no right to complain. You took our whole country hostage in '53." History for Iranians started in '53. One of the hostage takers wrote that they took over the embassy, contrary to popular belief, because in '53 the CIA worked in the basement to overturn the duly elected Iranian government. They had forced the Shah to flee and they believed the CIA was still in the basement plotting to overturn new revolutionary regime.

Where do we go from here?

The US should offer direct bilateral negotiations with IRAN. Only the US can give Iran security guarantees and membership in the world

community. No country will make security concessions unless it feels safe. Iran must believe it is safe before it abandons its quest for nukes.

Pieces on the global chess board are not anchored. They can be moved around. We can help change things.

Recall Nixon's opening with China. What we were taught about Red China is that they are a group of fanatic nihilist maniacs. The lesson of how Nixon dealt with China is a model. The Shanghai Communiqué has three parts to it. There was no substantive agreement. It was too soon. The first part was written by Chinese about what they wanted to change; the second was by US; the third was to negotiate over these items and agree not to resort to military force. It created a negotiating agenda.

We told Iran we have two items: nukes and intervention in Iraq. But only two. Iran has its own legitimate interests that deserve to be discussed and negotiated. It can't be limited to our agenda.

But that's not enough.

One big problem in Middle East and other parts of world is that agreements are between our elites and their elites, and ordinary people resent us. Masses are left out of it.

Our constituency used to be the liberals who wanted democracy. But they now see world through the lens of Iraq and they don't want us there any more.

Another '70s agreement was the [Helsinki Accords](#): the West gave the USSR ironclad security agreements. The Soviets agreed to allow civil society organizations that opened the door for change.

If we start negotiating with Iran: we'd learn we are not fated to be enemies forever. We have many security concerns in common. We have a community of values with the Iranian people. They have had a constitution since 1906, a history of regular elections, whether flawed or not. People go to vote in Iran; they have the idea of competing candidates and holding them accountable.

The Iranian parliament just impeached the Interior Minister, an ally of [Ahmadinejad](#), who was himself elected in an upset.

It is an imperfect but emerging democracy with a deep popular desire for it. In Iran, most people are pro-American. We can build on that in the future *unless we bomb their houses and kill their children.*

Our strategic interests are in common with Iran:

The ability to stabilize Iraq – Iraqis lived in exile in Iran for years. The president of Iran (when he visited Iraq) announced his route in advance and was greeted with a parade in which people greeted him with enthusiasm. Bush has to sneak into Iraq, without contact with the common people, and always under heavy security.

They fear if we help stabilize Iraq, we will use it to attack them.

They also can help stabilize Afghanistan. They helped us in the run up to conflict there. We hired the [Northern Alliance](#). Iran connected us with them. Although they are mainly Tajik, Iran convinced them the country must be a Pashtun nation.

Iranians thought they were on track to reconciliation with the US. They were greeted weeks later with Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech.

Iran is eager to limit Russian influence in the Middle East. It needs to rebuild its oil industry. It has a long history of positive relations with Israel.

This will not be easy or simple. There are great suspicions. But they are not nihilistic. Isolation has meant a generation has grown up not knowing much about the world.

Prospects of making peace are tantalizing. *It is the single most effective way to increase our national security.*

We should act in ways that serve our own interests. But stop to think what is in our interests. What does defend our national security?

I hope the predicted hard line policy toward Iran won't prevent us from acting to advance our national security and not get caught up in emotion and sloganeering.

Discussion:

Q: We need to address our labor movement on the increase of the military presence in Afghanistan. What most people think they know is what they saw in "[Charlie Wilson's War](#)." The idea is that the Soviets got in before Wilson but we now know he was there first to undermine the (pro-Soviet) regime.

A: Before the Soviets entered there was a pro-Soviet regime that got there by a coup. We thought we would undermine that regime, but ended up confronting the Soviets. They feared President [Mohammad Najibullah](#) was about to change sides. They feared an anti-Soviet regime of fundamentalists on their borders.

It was under a pro-Soviet regime that Afghanistan made the first steps toward modernization – giving rights to women and educating girls. The warlords revolted.

When Soviets invaded, we welcomed the opportunity to give the Soviets their own "Vietnam" and fight a war with them directly.

Q: Is there any danger of return of the [Ackerman Bill](#) (a measure introduced in the last Congress that called for sanctions and a complete blockade of Iran, including the use of naval forces)?

A: I don't think so. That bill was written by [AIPAC](#) (The American Israel Public Affairs Committee). It called for blockade, which is an act of war. It wasn't until people like us voiced our opposition that a number of Congressional sponsors decided to take their names off bill.

I worry not about a bill from Congress but what will happen in the State Department. I fear a more generous version of what Condoleezza Rice did – an offer of negotiations that has the intention that Iran will refuse them because they are not genuine.

Q: Any insights into the "War on Drugs" and the the US as consumer?

A: The War on Drugs was one of the craziest policies we follow. Its biggest backer is Joe Biden. We are the big consumers and punish peasants who supply us without looking at our consumption. (Former Secretary of State) George Schultz and the Economist (news magazine) favor legalization.

There is no country in the world where drugs form such a destabilizing fact of life like Afghanistan. We could start there to give aid to tens or hundreds of thousands of small peasants by simply buying their entire crop.

Q: What about Iran in terms of energy/oil policy? President Ford struck deal to allow the development of a nuclear industry there to free up their oil to sell to us.

A: It was *our idea* that Iran should pursue a nuclear program. They don't have a single refinery. They need to import refined fuel. If they were planning for their long term energy future, it is logical they would do so (want nuclear power capacity). We should be able to help them develop a nuclear industry without weapons. The popular vision in Iran is that we are against any development of industry there. We bombed a ship bringing a steel mill to Iran from Germany. Now we say they can't have a nuclear industry. We must show we are not against economic development there.

We don't seem to want a stable Iran in Middle East. Our government believes an unstable Iran is good for us by keeping them from becoming a power center. We don't want to stabilize Iran.

Q: Afghanis at a recent conference said *you can't have a "good occupation."* We can't separate our presence in Iraq and goal of putting a pipeline through Afghanistan. As long as we don't respect their right to self-determination, our presence will be a recruiting tool for the opposition.

A: There is a role for Americans, including troops in Afghanistan. But not a visible one – as trainers. *We should oppose any increase in US troops.* Both McCain and Obama favored that. *We should stop all offensive operations.* Long term occupation is no good for anyone. We still have 70,000 troops in Germany. Do we fear invasion by the Russians? There are over 700 US bases around the world. The largest in Latin America is in Ecuador. President Rafael Correa campaigned on closing the U.S. base when the lease runs out. The U.S. approached him after elections. He said we could make a deal: *The US can keep its base in Ecuador and let Ecuador open a base in Florida.*

More from Stephen Kinzer: www.stephenkinzer.com

Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq
<http://informationclearinghouse.info/article12805.htm>

Afghanistan: A Way Forward
<http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/article.php?id=17860&printsafe=1>

The Reality of War in Afghanistan
<http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/article.php?id=17663>

The Folly of Attacking Iran
<http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/article.php?id=15380>

PMB 153, 1718 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036
info@uslaboragainstawar.org ☼ www.uslaboragainstawar.org

