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## Obama, Michael Medved and the CIA overthrow of democracy in Iran

By Eric Black

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I consider this a follow-up to a recent post about "American exceptionalism," a mindset that helps Americans blind themselves to the reasons that much of the world views U.S. foreign policy as hypocritical, bullying and imperialist.

I take my text from President Obama's big Cairo speech of last week, from radio host Michael Medved's reaction to the speech in a TV appearance I happened to catch, and from "All the Shah's Men," by the estimable Stephen Kinzer. But before I walk you through, I'll cut to the chase:

Iranians who hate America have at least some valid cause for their anger. The United States committed a historical crime against Iran much larger than anything Iran has done to us. Because of the powerful force in human psychology that I call "confirmation bias," many Americans are not interested in U.S. offenses against Iranians, but are outraged by Iranian offenses against us, like the famous hostage-taking of 1979. Through the magic of what I call "selective perception" most Americans find it easy not to know the inconvenient facts about arrogant acts of international outlawry when committed by ourselves. If you believe in American exceptionalism, which Andrew Bacevich describes as a belief that destiny has chosen America to bring freedom, democracy and prosperity to the world, then stories in which America behaves like a typical self-interested power tend to bounce off our brains. Now then, during his Cairo speech, Obama waded into dangerous territory, by suggesting that the U.S. and Iranian nations each have some legitimate grudges the other. It went like this: "For many years, Iran has defined itself in part by its opposition to my country, and there is, in fact, a tumultuous history between us. **In the middle of the Cold War, the United States played a role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government.** Since

the Islamic Revolution, Iran has played a role in acts of hostage-taking and violence against U.S. troops and civilians."

The violent Iranian attack on the U.S. embassy in 1979 and the holding of 52 American hostages -- members of the embassy staff -- for more than a year is well known to most of us. Note that the attack on the embassy was part of the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah of Iran and established the theocratic Islamic Republic that has governed Iran ever since.

I suspect that most Americans who heard Obama's next sentence, about the U.S. overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government, don't know so much about that incident. The United States did more than "play a role." The CIA organized the coup. Under orders from President Eisenhower, undercover U.S. agent Kermit (grandson of President Theodore) Roosevelt slipped into Iran, lined up Iranian military traitors, bribed Iranians to riot, bribed newspapers to print lies, prepared the young, frightened Shah to dismiss the elected government led by Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, and pulled it off. Mossadegh, who had been Time Magazine's Man of the Year in 1951, spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

The U.S. role was little known in America but much better known in Iran at the time and for decades afterward, during which it was officially denied by Washington. Kinzer documented it clearly and indisputably in his riveting book, although by the time the book was published, it was no longer deniable. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright officially acknowledged the truth in 2000. Said Albright:

"In 1953, the United States played a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran's popular prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh. The Eisenhower administration believed its actions were justified for strategic reasons, but the coup was clearly a setback for Iran's political development and it is easy to see now why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America in their internal affairs."

Mossadegh was not just "popular." His government represented the all-time high for democracy in Iranian history. The United States, believed by itself to be an unrelenting force for the spread of democracy, ousted Mossadegh-- an eccentric western-educated liberal who had believed Washington was his natural ally -- at the behest of Great Britain **because Mossadegh had nationalized the Iraqi oil company that Britain had owned** and operated for decades in about as high-handed and exploitative a manner as you can imagine.

I was impressed, in reading Obama's speech, that he brought up the incident (the first president to do so, I believe) but I didn't write about it at the time. My bad. On Friday, I happened to catch "The Ed Show" on MSNBC, starring liberal host Ed (until recently, Fargo-based) Schultz. Schultz asked Michel Medved, a conservative radio host, for reaction to Obama's speech. (Transcript here of the entire show.)

Said Medved:

"I think a lot of what the president said was important and was persuasive and was admirable. But there were a lot of problems with the speech as well. **One of the problems was a moral equivalency problem, the idea that he suggested that there were misunderstandings, for instance, in our history with Iran, without comparing America's participation in a coup in 1953 with Iran's 30 year history of supporting terrorism. That is not fair.**"

Medved is a smart guy and I think he tries to be thoughtful and intellectually honest. But that reference set off this post. The United States, as I said above, did not "participate" in the coup. It was a U.S. operation. The U.S. installed the Shah as the unelected ruler of Iran and **sustained him, for 26 years**, with aid and weapons and diplomatic support, in exchange for which the Shah ran his country as U.S. asset in the region. It is not too big a stretch to suggest that the United States bore some significant measure of responsibility for everything done under the Shah's power for those 26 years. I'm sure there are good and bad things that could be said about the decades of the Shah's rule, but he was a dictator and his regime was known for extensive use of secret police torture of the regime's opponents.

Iranians know this story. When Iranian mobs overthrew the Shah, they also took to describing the United States as "the Great Satan" and Iranian mobs and Iranian leaders have often employed similar verbiage over the years since, which makes them seem insane to us mostly because, thanks to selective perception, we couldn't imagine the depth of their grudge.

I give Obama substantial credit for acknowledging this chapter in U.S.-Iranian relations. But he minimized the degree of the offense against Iranian democracy and self-determination, as if it was limited to a role in the original 1953 coup.

Then Medved indicts him for overstating it. Medved employs the fashionable "false equivalency" argument to suggest that what the U.S. did to Iran is insignificant compared to the crimes of Iran. The false equivalency, often called "moral equivalency," is used to knock down a historical comparison that one doesn't like. Obama implies that Iranians may have a valid basis for some of their anti-American feelings, but Americans may have some basis for their feelings about Iran. Medved suggests that Obama has stacked the deck against us by taking one small mistake in 1953 and understating decades of Iranian perfidy.

I do not condone the crime of the 1979 hostage takers. I condemn Iran's subsequent and ongoing support for terrorist organizations.

But the case is precisely the opposite of the way Medved presents it. In the history of U.S.-Iranian relations, Iran is much more sinned against than sinning. **Iran has not overthrown a government of the United States. Iran has not imposed a dictator on us for 26 years.** (And, by the way, the Reagan administration provided military aid and diplomatic cover to Saddam Hussein during substantial portions of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war.)

One of the ways that American exceptionalism works is to assume good motives for all U.S. actions, avert our eyes from contrary evidence and to never judge our own aggressive actions by the standards we would apply to others who took similar actions. In a fair and just world, a

world governed by America's stated principles, which nations would be empowered to overthrow the governments of other nations, by what means and for what purposes?