On Why the United States Should Not Attack Iran: A Conservative, Evangelical Christian Response[2]

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Abstract

In the midst of American intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, and in the aftermath of the presidential election in Iran, support for American involvement in Iran has increased in some circles. In this piece, our desire is to give a conservative, evangelical Christian response to why America should not support any military action against Iran. A position advocated by many of us is "Just War." In short, this position permits war if certain conditions are met. Just War theory has a long and storied heritage in the Western world, going back to writers such as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and Hugo Grotius. Two criteria in particular are relevant. The first is just cause: there must be a specific reason for going to war. The second criterion is last resort: all other nonviolent options must be pursued. In the case of Iran, we see no just cause for a military strike. The nuclear issue does not provide just cause for military intervention, nor does the aftermath of the most recent presidential election. Iran has not attacked either the United States or any other vulnerable country. As conservative evangelicals, we find ourselves on the dovish end of the Just War spectrum. As followers of Christ, our impulse is to be at peace with all men, personally. The apostle Paul instructs us, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12.8). Our reflex is nonviolence. The gospel of Christ is not advanced by means of the sword. However, it is also true that the Christian

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Scriptures teach that the state may legitimately employ force in order to protect her citizens and keep public order. Indeed, the state is given these responsibilities by God himself. Christians, consequently, are called upon to support the government in its legitimate role. It is incumbent upon Christians, therefore, to urge their leaders in Congress and their President to shape foreign policy in a manner that reflects the peaceful and non-violent dispositions described in Scripture. Unless the global community is threatened by the actions of Iran (which currently they are not),the American government must not interfere and allow Iranians to determine their own fate. Military intervention must have just cause and it must necessarily be a last resort.

United States Foreign Intervention Since the Imperial Era

Stephen Kinzer is a three-time *New York Times* Bureau Chief (Berlin, Istanbul, and Managua). In 2006, Times Books published *Overthrow*, which is Kinzer's summary of the United States' foreign involvement from the late 19th century until the present. Because it provides the context from within which to understand his later book, *All the Shah's Men*, and our later discussion, it is helpful to take a look at the broad contours of his argument.

In *Overthrow*, Kinzer focuses on US involvement in fourteen countries. He divides the work into three parts: The Imperial Era (1893-1913), Covert Action (1953-1973), and Invasions (1983-present). In the first section, The Imperial Era, Kinzer includes Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Philippines, Nicaragua and Honduras. In the second section, Covert Action, he includes Iran, Guatemala, South Vietnam, and Chile. In the third section, Invasions, he treats Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The concluding chapter in each section (chapter four, nine, and fourteen, respectively) summarizes that particular part with the last chapter (chapter fourteen) giving overarching reasons for US involvement in other governments' affairs.

In "The Imperial Era," Kinzer argues that there were three general reasons why the US intervened: American prosperity, manifest destiny, and colonialism. The events that unfolded in Hawaii typify this section. In Hawaii, the first administration the US overthrew,

US businesses and the US government worked jointly to dethrone Hawaiian Queen Liliuokalani who had proposed a change to the Hawaiian constitution that allowed only Hawaiian citizens to vote. This change, if enacted, would have given the native Hawaiians more freedom. It also would have led to loss of control for US businesses – the *defacto* leadership – and their profitability, which could have led to other consequences. Eventually, Hawaii became the 50th state in the Union.

In the second part, "Covert Operations," Kinzer notes four characteristics of American interventions. First, he notes that, with the exception of South Vietnam, there was a confluence of American corporate business interest and American legal interest. Second, he argues that United States government's role was the primary factor in regime change. Third, he observes that the majority of the administrations the US ousted during this period were at least semi-democratic (except South Vietnam). Fourth, he notes American fear of the Soviet Union and Communism. In Chile, for example, the US government overthrew the democratically elected incoming president, Salvador Allende Gossens, and replaced him with Augusto Pinochet, a dictator who was later charged with a variety of crimes that included murder, kidnapping and torture, because the former sympathized with Fidel Castro and desired to nationalize American companies.

In the third part, "Invasions," Kinzer gives one general reason for American interaction in other governments' affairs – the same motive he believes underlies all American interventions – the belief that Americans have a responsibility to change governments they consider evil. For instance, in Afghanistan, the U.S. helped Osama bin Laden and the mujahidin repel the Soviet Union. Ironically, just a few years later, bin Laden masterminded the destruction of almost 3,000 people in the worst attack on American soil since the Civil War. This led the United States to intervene again in Afghanistan and overthrow the Taliban and install another government.

United States Intervention in Iranian Affairs

Overthrow allows Kinzer to persuade the American public to appreciate the last 100 or so years of US foreign policy for what he sees it as: a century of American intervention resulting in regime changes. It also provides the background for his publication of *All the Shah's Men*. This book, first published in 2003 but revised in 2008, contains a new preface, "The Folly of Attacking Iran." It is a lively account of the 1953 revolution in Iran, focused on American involvement in toppling Iran's incipient democracy, and issuing a plea for Americans to understand why it is not a good idea to attack Iran today. Kinzer divides the text into twelve chapters, an epilogue, and two prefaces, (the original and the 2008 version). The author details the events leading to the overthrow, all the while centering his attention on Mossadegh, who laid the groundwork for Iran's democracy. Surrounding Mossadegh are three other central actors: Great Britain, the Iranian shahs, and the United States. In the early stages of the work, Kinzer focuses on the British. In 1901, in the D'Arcy agreement, Iran sold the rights to find oil in Abadan and the Persian Gulf area in return for £20,000, half ownership in the company, and 16 percent of the profit. When oil was found in that area seven years later, it strengthened the British hand, but turned popular opinion against the Brits because of what appeared to be the theft of their natural resources. All of this happened in the context of (1) a 1907 peace treaty the UK signed with Russia, which divided the countries' influence over Iran. Under the treaty, Russia controlled the north and Britain retained control over the south; (2) the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, which caused Russia's power in Iran to diminish; and (3) the 1919 Anglo-Persian agreement, which gave Britain control of Iran's army, treasury, transportation and communications systems. Britain became the dominate power in Iran. In 1932, Iran canceled the agreement, giving two reasons: the partnership had (1) led to increased disparity between the working conditions of Iranian and British personnel, and (2) appeared to give short shrift to the Iranians economically. The cancellation led to conflict between the countries and, when in 1947 a law passed that mandated a renegotiation of the deal, relations turned from bad to worse. Inevitably, Iran severed relations with Great Britain, unknowingly thwarting a coup.

While Britain was doing its best to control Iran, as Kinzer sees it, many of Iran's shahs were doing their best to give control away. One shah sold much of Iran's resources to the British. Another sold the rights to find oil in Abadan and the Persian Gulf region. Still another yielded to the Anglo-Persian Agreement, which gave the Brits control of the south (but also inspired the nationalist movement). It was not until after a coup that a shah, Reza, came to power and tried to regain some of Iran's sovereignty. He nullified the D'Arcy concession, began to gain independence from other countries (namely the UK), and was sympathetic with the Germans in World War I.

After the war, the British forced him to abdicate. His son and successor, Mohammad Reza, was not as powerful and lost much of his influence to the democracy movement in Iran. At the same time, Mossadegh was coming into his own. Conflict between these two, Kinzer argues, was a defining mark of the shah's tenure. Mohammad Reza went along with the coup of Mossadegh in 1953, which gave him control of the country for a short while, only to lose it again to Khomeini in 1979.

Mossadegh, the central character in Kinzer's account, was the leader of the democracy movement in Iran who eventually became prime minister. He was a passionate, driven, and politically savvy man who was known for resigning his office several times so as not to compromise on his position. As the author puts it, Mossadegh was a "visionary leader rather than a pragmatist, preferring defeat in an honorable cause to what he considered compromise" (Kinzer, 2008, p. 56). He built his political house on the foundation of two beliefs, convictions that were consistently apparent during his rule: he believed in the "rule of law" and he believed that Iranians must govern themselves.

Kinzer argues that in many ways Mossadegh was Mohammad Reza's antagonist. Mossadegh believed Mohammad Reza sought his own welfare at the expense of the Iranian people. Mossadegh also did not like the British. Not only did he write the law mandating a renegotiation of the oil partnership between the UK and Iran in 1947, he also refused to negotiate with Britain and recommended that Parliament nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil

Company, the business in charge of oil production in Iran. When the UK tried to negotiate with him, talks failed. The British mistakenly thought that a compromise could be reached, while Mossadegh refused to make concessions and saw this as a means to Iranian independence. When the United Nations began to mediate, Mossadegh came to the US and convinced the Security Council not to pass any resolution against Iran. While in the US, the US government also tried to mediate a compromise between Britain and Mossadegh, but to no avail. This further worsened the relations between the two countries.

It was not until Iran severed relations with the UK and the US elected Dwight Eisenhower as president that the American government organized a coup to overthrow Mossadegh. He was defeated, placed under house arrest, and did not leave his compound for over a decade. It is at this point that Kinzer makes one of his most salient points: before the coup, Americans were looked upon with admiration, but after the coup they were looked upon with suspicion. Kinzer gives some interesting anecdotes of this thinking. One of the most interesting is his portrayal of the Iranian people's admiration of Howard Baskerville, the Christian missionary from the U. S. When Baskerville died beside his Iranian friends in the Colonial Revolution in 1909, Iranians took this as evidence that the US had no ill will toward them.

On the issue of Iran, the US at first did not succumb to British demands, which led to friction between the two nations. Even under President Harry Truman, the United States did not care to intervene or overthrow the Iranian government. It was not until Eisenhower became president that American policy changed. Keeping peace with the UK was essential because of NATO, which was a strategic way to stem the threat of Communism. When Eisenhower was convinced that a change in Iran's government would help stop this threat, he tacitly agreed. In short, the proposal called for Mohammad Reza to declare Mossadegh's rule as prime minister illegitimate and replace him with General Fazlollah Zahedi. After one failed attempt, the plan succeeded. With this, Kinzer closes the book.

Critiquing Kinzer

Kinzer's books are well-written. His prose is brisk and lucid. He uses narrative to good effect, finding just the perfect stories to crystallize the points he wants to make. On the whole, this is what makes his books so convincing for readers who are unfamiliar with American foreign policy in general, and its policy toward Iran in particular. But this same brisk and unencumbered style leaves the reader wanting more documentation, more global historical context, fewer generalizations, and a less jaundiced eye toward the history of American foreign policy.

In both books, documentation is wanting. There are no footnotes or endnotes. Instead, at the end of the books, there is a section that gives a page number alongside a note. There are no corresponding numbers to the notes in the body to the note section at the end of the books. Further, in both books, global historical context is wanting. The regime changes are not placed firmly within the context of world events. Little attention, for example is given to World War I and World War II and the affects that they had not only on world politics, but also on American thought. The same lack of consideration is given to Britain's declining dynasty.

In addition, Kinzer often generalizes without documentation and asserts causal connections where he has proven only sequences. Take, for example, this sentence: "[t]he fundamental reason why countries invade other countries, or seek forcibly to depose their governments, has not changed over the course of history. It is the same reason children fight in schoolyards" (Kinzer, 2006, p. 321, Kim 2007). Or take Kinzer's assertion that the United States sometimes overthrows regimes because of her "messianic zeal" to spread Christianity. These accounts are unsubstantiated and unwarranted. It is statements like these that lessen Kinzer's credibility as a reliable commentator. The United States government is not seeking to "bring the gospel of Christ" to the nations by means of political and military intervention. To say this is not only inaccurate, but it is detrimental to American relations with Iran and the global community. For these reasons, and others, Kinzer's books are a hindrance to gaining an understanding of the

motives, context, and outcomes of previous American interventions.

Bringing Clarity to the Iran Issue:

While Kinzer is unhelpful in these regards, his work is helpful for making at least two points: (1) under current conditions, the United States should not intervene, militarily, in Iran's affairs, and (2) the consequences of intervention in Iran would likely be detrimental in the long run for both Iran and America. As Kinzer puts it, Newton's Third Law of Motion is true for foreign policy just as it is for physics: for every action, there is an opposite and equal (and sometimes unplanned) reaction. When debating whether or not to intervene in another country's affairs, the American people and her government need carefully to consider the consequences that may flow from that intervention.

Should the US intervene in the Iran situation? No. Based upon "just war" criteria, we do not see any reason, under current conditions, for military intervention (Walzer 2000). Just war theory has a long and storied heritage in the Western world, going back to writers such as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and Hugo Grotius. Several criteria of just war theory in particular are relevant. The first is *just cause*: there must be a specific reason for going to war. In the case of Iran, we see no just cause for a military strike. What reasons might be offered? The nuclear issue? The nuclear issue does not provide just cause for military intervention. Although Iran appears to have warhead design *capabilities* as well as military uranium conversion- and enrichment-related *capabilities*, and although Iran's president's rhetoric toward the United States and her allies is sometimes aggressive, Iran has not attacked either the United States or any other vulnerable country (Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence 2008). As such, there is no justifiable reason for military intervention. A just war, as we see it, might be *pre-emptive* but may not be *preventive*. In a pre-emptive strike, a country may respond to an attack "once we had seen it coming but before we had felt its impact." In a preventive strike, the aggressor "responds to a distant danger, a matter of foresight and free choice" (Walzer, 2000).

A second criterion is *last resort*: all other nonviolent options must be pursued. This implies also that during a war, all diplomatic efforts should continue in an effort to settle the grievances through negotiation rather than military conflict. A related issue here is the Iranian notion of *haq*, or equality. Hooman Majd recently emphasized the sense of rights and justice that is deeply ingrained in the Iranian psyche, and likely stems from centuries of perceived injustice at the hands of Arabs, Sunnis, and Westerners (Majd 2008). This notion of *haq* helps Westerners appreciate why obtaining nuclear power is important to the Iranian administration, if not to the Iranian people. Even as the United States retains its stance on Iran and nuclear weaponry, it must make its diplomacy an earnest and consistent interaction with *equals*.

In relation to Iran and the nuclear issue, we urge the use of an international inspection team as this seems to be a better way to deal with Iran's nuclear enrichment activities (Bertram 2007). We believe that lessening the current sanctions, if it were to initiate real and productive discussion, must be considered. If absolutely necessary, the United States and its allies could impose additional sanctions (Jentleson 2007). But for the sake of her own integrity, and her perception around the world, the United States must put to rest talk of military strikes.

Under the two criteria mentioned—just cause and last resort—a military conflict with Iran does not meet the standards for a just war. Another criterion is one of *right intention*: In order for a just war to be waged, the intention must be to secure peace and civil order for all parties involved. This principle rules out wars of economic exploitation, or of national, religious, or ethnic cleansing. This criterion is particularly important because Kinzer's accusation, and often the global perception of the United States is that its war against Iran would be one of economic exploitation (oil) and religious cleansing (Islam). We do not agree with this assertion. Although these accusations are bandied about regularly, it is irresponsible to say that the United States is against Islam, *per se*. Americans may be irked that Iran is an Islamic republic, and question why their president makes questionable statements about the holocaust and Israel, but they must realize that these are not reasons for war. The bottom line is that, as Kinzer pointed out,

the Iranian people ushered this system into power. While this may not be the ideal administration for Americans, it does not give them warrant to support military action against it.

Finally, the American people and her government ought also to consider carefully the consequences that may flow from an Iran intervention. This concern is reflected in the just war criteria of *probability of success (ad bellum)* and *proportionality of projected results (ad bellum)*. Under these criteria, a war is not waged justly unless victory is likely and the good in achieving victory must be greater than the cost to achieve it. In light of recent events in the Middle East, including the US invasion of Iraq, it is questionable that a war with Iran would produce a clear victory or that the victory would be greater than the cost to achieve it.

A related point is that a strong Iran could very well bring a balance of power in the Middle East. As Vali Nasr and others have pointed out, the Sunni-Shia split has been historically the greatest rift in the Muslim world, though it is certainly not the only reason that Iran has played the foil to Arab moves in the Middle East (Nasser 2007). That rift has been temporarily suspended, however, as Sunnis and Shias have united against their non-Arab, non-Muslim enemies in what Bernard Lewis recently described as "the odd spectacle of Sunni and Shiite extremists occasionally cooperating in the struggle against the infidels" (Lewis 2009). In addition to the Sunni-Shia issue, Iran has other reasons to play the foil to Arab moves in the Middle East. Military intervention in Iran would remove Iran's ability to balance power, while at the same time reinforcing the Muslim world's suspicion of the United States' intentions.

We grant that, at times, the United States government followed missionaries into harsh environments, but to make the epistemological jump and maintain—as Kinzer does—that the American government has a messianic zeal to spread Christianity and that this serves as a motive for American intervention is fallacious and inaccurate (Walls 1996). However, it is the perception of many around the world. The authors of this essay write as religious conservatives (evangelical Christians), and one would consider himself within the neo-conservative spectrum (Ashford), the ones Kinzer and others would likely place in the

category of "crusaders" seeking to spread Christianity through military intervention.

As evangelicals, we actually find ourselves on the dovish end of the just war spectrum. As followers of Christ, our impulse is to be at peace with all men, *personally*. The apostle Paul instructs us, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom 12.18). Our reflex is nonviolence: "To this [suffering] you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his step….When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet 2.21, 23). *We, as well as the vast majority of evangelical Christians, would never support military action for the sake of spreading Christianity*. The gospel of Christ is not advanced by means of the sword.

However, it is also true that the Christian Scriptures teach that *the state* may legitimately employ force in order to protect her citizens and keep public order. Indeed, the state is given these responsibilities by God himself and the Christian, therefore, is called upon to support the government in its legitimate role. It is incumbent upon Christians, therefore, to urge their leaders in Congress and their President to shape foreign policy in a manner that reflects the peaceful and non-violent dispositions described in Scripture. Military invention must have just cause and it must necessarily be a last resort.

Conclusion

As we write this article, President Obama has spoken to the Iranian administration by video on March 20, 2009: "We have serious differences that have grown over time," Obama said. "My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community." President Ahmadinejad responded, through media adviser Ali Akbar Javanfekr, that the United States lift sanctions and admit to past mistakes, such as their support for Saddam Hussein in Iraq's 1980-88 war with Iran (Chipman and Nasseri 2009). The response

to Obama was swift. He argued that he was skeptical of the Obama administration's rhetoric, particularly in light of the fact that Obama had reaffirmed sanctions against Iran. "They chant the slogan of change, but no change is seen in practice," he said. "We are observing, watching and judging. If you change, we will also change our behavior. If you do not change, we will be the same nation as 30 years ago [when Iranians overthrew the U.S.-backed Shah]."

We are hopeful for improved relations between U.S. and Iran. While we cannot affirm Kinzer's jaundiced view of the history of American intervention, we agree with his bottom line: the United States should not intervene militarily in Iran. Such intervention would be unjust and likely would have deleterious consequences not only for both states, but also for the global community.

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