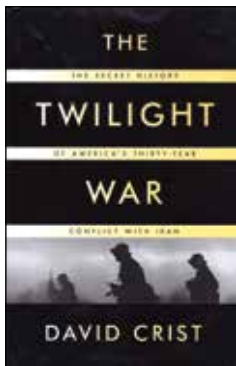


The Twilight War:
The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict With Iran

David Crist. New York, NY: The Penguin Press; 2012. 638 pages. ISBN: 1-59420-341-1. \$36.00.

Review by Warner "Rocky" D. Farr, MD, MPH

OK, Iraq is over, Afghanistan is winding down, and Syria, we are going to solve diplomatically, so what is left? Iran, of course! The new Iranian president was



at the United Nations last week when I started final editing of this review. David Crist's *The Twilight War* is both a detailed description and a comprehensive analysis of the long-standing U.S.-Iran relationship, or lack of relationship. The book stretches from the start of the 1979 Iranian revolution to the first Obama administration. This is a great addition to the ongoing literary efforts to help us understand this

troubled relationship, and the author is well qualified to write this. He is both a historian and an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve with extensive Middle East service. In addition, it never hurts that your father commanded the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM). The book shows access to many high government officials involved in formulating our Iranian policy (for those who think we have one), and the author seems to have thoroughly mined the unclassified documents. Predictably, his unclassified sources get fewer at the book continues forward. The overall result of this effort is a great book, well worth reading by all.

The promise of this book is the telling of the secret history of our undeclared 30-year war with Iran. It seems they know we are at war, but for the most part we do not realize it. For three decades, the United States and Iran have engaged in this secret war, a conflict that neither belligerent has acknowledged and a story that has never been told fully. Crist discusses the various episodes of covert and deadly operations that have intermittently brought the two nations to the brink of non-secret, open war. This "twilight war" began with the Iranian revolution and continues today inside Iraq, Syria, and the Persian Gulf. The fight is in the shadows, spy versus spy and speedboat versus supertanker. Six American

presidents have deal with this, most not doing it very well and all having had many miscalculations, bitter debates, and unacknowledged casualties. The author also covers the efforts of our various regional allies to influence U.S. policies. Saudi Arabia, in particular, was and is an important player, along with Israel; both have sought to influence America's Iran policy.

Crist has done a great job of teasing out of the unclassified literature the true stories of American espionage and covert actions within Iran as well as the activities of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and the Quds Force outside Iran. He offers an extensive analysis of numerous confrontations at sea between U.S. and Iranian naval forces as well as Iranian-sponsored terrorist attacks against U.S. targets in Lebanon.

He goes over each American administration in order and in detail. The Reagan administration contended with a transforming Iran and the Iran-Iraq War. Was reconciliation even possible? Since the Reagan administration, especially the president, firmly believed that the problems the United States faced resulted from the efforts of the Soviet Union, this colored his and all of his administration's thinking. Reagan actually hoped that the "two religious nations" could align against the Soviets. Instead, he got semi-war involving confrontations at sea, armed clashes involving proxies in Lebanon, and extensive covert actions. Reagan, however, never gave up on Iran and thought the secret weapons provided during the Iran-Contra Affair might yield results. The result was scandal and Ollie North. Following presidents would remember this as a huge warning about doing any real dealing with Tehran. Crist continues administration by administration, documenting missteps and progress.

President George H. W. Bush attempted to improve relations but mutual suspicions by both parties hampered this. Since the release of the remaining U.S. hostages in Lebanon resulted in no reciprocal goodwill gestures, although there was some signaling, nothing was achieved. President Clinton made modest hints about improving

relations, but Iranian President Khatami was too weak internally to respond to the Great Satan. Things changed abruptly with President George W. Bush and his “axis of evil.” This label surprised the Iranians as they had been working well with us concerning Afghanistan and they were not expecting the label. That accusation and the rapid defeat of Iraq’s military alarmed the Iranians and resulted in an increased desire for rapprochement with America, but the Bush White House’s new Middle East foreign policy was focused on a post-Saddam, democratic Iraq. Bush wanted to spread democracy and desired that all Middle Eastern nations, including Iran, overthrow undemocratic leaders. It is unclear how much the White House would have engaged the Iranians and the Iranians did not try hard either as the United States became bogged down in Iraq and were consequently less of a threat to Iran.

Then President Obama came along, hoping to improve U.S.-Arab and U.S.-Iran relations but this quickly morphed into nuclear issues, sanctions, and preparations

for war, a policy that the author describes as “a policy nearly identical to that of his predecessor.”

So now what? Crist’s book was pre-Syrian civil war and chemical weapons and before the new Iranian president’s charm offensive, and it does not end on a positive note. He believes that anti-Americanism remains the pillar of the Iranian policies and that this approach will not change while the revolutionary generation of 1979 remains in power. Does that mean that a decent into war is inevitable? The two big issues, economic sanctions and nuclear, are ongoing. The real question, to the author, is whether anti-Americanism is more popular among the Iranian leadership than economic misery. The new Iranian president seems to be indicating somewhat of a change.

This is a great read to bring you up to speed before it all goes south again after President Rouhani’s charm offensive falters, or the Israelis go postal, or Syria explodes, or the Quds Force comes to your neighborhood.

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