The US, Iran, Parkinson’s and clueless

On a Friday in April, I had the opportunity to attend a memorial conference for James Bill in Williamsburg, Virginia. For those of you that do not know, Bill was responsible, in part or in total, for the establishment of the Reves Center for International Studies at William and Mary. He is also responsible for a lot of things but I went there for three reasons. He authored several books but I came there because he authored what some consider to be the bible of Iran and US relations, specifically “The Eagle and the Lion, the Tragedy of Iran-American Relations”. I also went there because the discussions at the conference were to focus on Iran. Finally, I went there because James Bill, just as my precious Iranian wife, died from Parkinson’s Disease. That conference, I thought, would be the convergence of everything I had worked toward for eight months. I left with what I had hoped would be the answer. But, as I type these words, I find that spark of hope is fading because the United States of America is, when it comes to Iran, utterly and unforgivably clueless. And, we are on the verge of, for the third time, driving a stake through the hopes of the Iranian people.

Many of the featured speakers did not make it to the conference. Given the conference occurred the day after Trump decided to bomb Syria, I imagine many of the speakers had responsibilities related to the Middle East crisis de jour. Frankly, I found it extremely ironic the conference was held the day after the US bombed a Syrian airbase. In addition to Bill’s book, I highly recommend reading Paul Pillar’s “Why America Misunderstands the World”. The bombing of Syria is because, to condense Pillar’s book to one word, the United States of America is “clueless”. James Bill tried to change that but I am afraid his efforts have yet to come to fruition when it comes to Iran.

From those that stood behind the podium, I learned a lot. I knew a lot about the history of Iran and many of the speakers reiterated what I already knew about US/Iran relations. They included one of the American hostages taken when Iranian students stormed the US Embassy in 1979. Other speakers spent time in the state and defense departments. I did not know these departments invested in a kind of brain trust that Bill represented. They were the vanguard of academic diplomacy. And, apparently, they were squirreled away in the recesses of these departments with little chance to have meaningful input into foreign affairs. One gentleman spoke how he, fruitlessly, tried to make the case not to invade Iraq. Like I said, America is clueless.

At one point during the conference, I heard a most disturbing comment. I am hopeful that it was in jest but given the tenor of the discussion, I fear it had some foundation in fact. I heard that it was a coin toss as to whether the Bush Administration should invade Iraq or Iran. I do not remember hearing laughter nor a gasp coming from the crowd. I did hear quiet resignation and that comment reinforced what I already knew about our foreign affairs. Again, clueless.

There was one ray of hope I heard that day. It did not come from the grizzled veterans of the diplomatic corps nor the academicians. It came from a young man in the back of the conference room. He asked two simple questions - “What about the youth of Iran? Where did they see Iran heading?” If that young man by chance reads this article, please note that I want to hug him. The grizzled veterans noted that the population of Iran is in fact young (70 percent are under 40) but I did not get a response I wanted to hear. I heard, again, resignation. The veterans had fought the good fight. Maybe that is why they turn to academia. They gave up on the grownups and now spend their energies trying to generate a new and informed future diplomats. In response to that young man, one gentleman stated he did not hold out much hope. He rattled off half dozen countries where the youth were following in the steps of the parents and were destined to perpetuate more strife in Palestine, Israel, Indonesia and his list went on. He inferred Iranians would do the same. With all due respect to that grizzled veteran I have one comment. To that veteran I wish I had stood up that day and said – “You sir are wrong. You do not know Iranians”.

I wish I had jumped up and applauded that young man. Jack Ma, the billionaire founder of Alibaba, said, “if you want to see the future, look at the 30-year-olds”. Jack is a billionaire because he can see the future. That young man in that conference also sees the future. And that is the core of our problems in the United States. We cannot see beyond the next election cycle. There is not one “Jack Ma” sitting in Washington DC. We have trouble seeing next week let alone a year or a decade from now. Unlike the Jeffersons and Adams and Wythes that walked Williamsburg’s DOG Street a few centuries ago, today we lack the ability to learn from history and the vision to see around the corner. But, whether he knew or not, that young man in the back of the conference room did.

If you look at Iran closely you do not see the image that is spread across the TV screen. I started my effort when my precious Iranian wife, Mariam, told me one thing about Iran, “What you see on TV is not Iran”. I got Bill’s book as well as dozens upon dozens of other books on Iran. I now spend each day consuming everything I can about that country. My research started in earnest after my wife died from complications from that awful disease. That search was prompted by a doctor visit to Dr. Okun in Florida. If you know Parkinson’s Disease you know Okun. He is to Parkinsons what Bill was to US/Iran relations. The day of our visit to Okun’s office, we met an intern from Iran. She and Okun had recently returned from a trip to Tehran. The intern and my wife had a pleasant discussion even though Okun had confirmed that my wife had Parkinson’s just moments earlier. It came up in that discussion that sufferers of that disease cannot get medication in Iran. I thought how terrible that was but, at that time, my concern was my precious Mariam. I did not realize until almost two years later that reason was, again, the simple fact we are clueless. That is why I went to the conference. It was in the hope of trying to find a solution.

If you mention Parkinsons Disease to anyone you get the same reaction. If they know the disease they have the exact same response. To the person, each one will shake their heads slowly, cast their eyes to the floor and say, “what a terrible disease”. The Bill family and myself know this disease. Iranians know this disease because there seems to be a predominance of its occurrence in the middle east. It was after the passing of my precious Mariam, that I went in search of why the medication cannot get to Iranian people who suffer from Parkinsons. I found the reason. I found that the myopic vision of the people in Washington DC caused the needless suffering of about 275,000 Iranians with this disease. There was a study on a US government website that documents the problem. I found the human price of a clueless foreign policy. If you know Parkinsons then you know that price. I went to the conference to try and get confirmation of my thoughts on a solution. And that young man in the back of that conference room on that Friday, was my salvation. He and I both know the solution is in the offing and it will come from the young Iranians and their parents, that 70 percent of Iran. That is, it could happen if we would just stop screwing them.

The US relations with Iran is a sorry affair. You can read Bill’s book and the hundreds of others on Iran but I will give you an updated abbreviated view of Iran. The country is one of the oldest countries on the planet. After thousands of years Iranians had finally arrived at the threshold of a democratic government. But we, the myopic country of the United States of America, screwed them. Google “Operation Ajax” sometime. If you do that you will know our first venture into the world of covert foreign intrigue did not bode well for the Iranian people. In short, we toppled Iran’s George Washington on August 19, 1953. Note that the government of the United States of America finally, after seven decades, released documents that confirmed this sorry fact a few days ago, June 19, 2017 to be exact! But it gets worse.

Our meddling allowed the return of our buddy the shah. In eyes of most Americans the Shah did good things. We got a good chunk of the oil and he bought 30 percent of the output of our military industrial complex. That was a good thing because, after the end of the Vietnam War, the bomb and tank makers needed a market. But, you need not run over to many Iranians with American made tanks to understand 1977/1979 Iran. Iranians, in their desire for a representative government, once again went to the streets and threw out the Shah. Now it gets even worse.

Depending on your “trusted” source of information, we - the United States of America, AGAIN, interfere with the Iranians choice of government. We screwed the Iranian people again. I believe James Bill will tell you the Carter administration was composed of clowns. At a minimum, I think he would agree the clowns triumphed in the Carter Administration and dictated the Iranian policy. Carter’s staff also will tell you that, with regard to Iran, “We blew it!” (Go to the PBS documentary on Carter’s presidency and listen to those words coming from the lips of his staff). One of two things or both happened. The clowns that inhabited the Carter administration greased the skids for Khomeini to return to Iran and/or our military personnel intervened with the Shah’s military to ensure the safe return of the theocrats. According to one historian, Iran was a “land of a thousand sheriffs” after they threw out the shah. We gave one of the sheriffs a leg up. If you think the TV images of throngs of people flooding the cemetery welcoming Khomeini as he stepped out of that military helicopter are reflective of the aspirations of the majority of Iranians you are wrong. Again, you need to listen to my wife – “What you see on TV is not Iran”. To be clear we did not pilot the copter but, in a figurative sense, we mad damn sure it had enough fuel to reach that cemetery. And, it gets worse.

Here is the most troubling part. Once you realize we, the USA, brought about, catalyzed, assisted or played a role (you do the research and decide the correct verb) in the establishment of the current regime, then you realize what clueless really means. Every action we have taken since 1979 has done two things. One is we have increased the theocrats power. I could recommend a dozen different books/articles but I will give you one quote as just a small part of the story. The theocrat’s military arm, the Revolutionary Guard, has infiltrated Iran’s economy. Their economic tentacles reach into between 18 and 70 percent (depending on your info source) of Iran’s economy. Our economic sanctions against Iran has allowed them, according to one senior state department official, “to make out like bandits”. There is a word in Farsi for this component of the theocrat’s power structure. I do not remember the word but I heard it spat from between the lips of an elderly Iranian women I met at a conference in DC. Let me just say that word did not sound flattering. As I write these words now, Congress is proposing sanctions that constrain the RG. First we extend their empower and then we constrain them. The only word that fits is… clueless. The second thing we have done? We extended the suffering of those with Parkinson’s disease.

That young man at the conference that day was far smarter than the grizzled veterans. The youth of Iran will define its future. Another thing that grizzled veteran got wrong. The Iranian youth will indeed follow in the footsteps of their parents but those parents are not treading a path that veteran imagined. Those parents and the youth of Iran have been chewing away at the power of the mullahs. They are on the verge of casting aside the theocracy through an “evolution” not a revolution. It is coming through protests on college campuses, in city parks and behind closed doors. In 2009, during the Green Revolution when the Iranians thought their elections were stolen by the theocrats, Iranains bit a huge chunk out of the theocrat’s behind. Through their protestations in the streets and online they continue to chew away at their behinds. You could actually hear that chewing if you watched the funeral of Rafsanjani a few months back. The crowds started chanting slogans that harkened back to the Green revolution and the theocrats had to hurriedly turn up the music from the loud speakers to drown out that irritating chewing sound. If you want to feel the beat of the heart of this evolution, read Hamid Debashi’s “Iran, Birth of a Nation” published a few months back. It is palpable. But, sadly, the United States of American is trying to still this heart.

“Our biggest ally in the middle east right now is the Iranian people”. These are the words spoken by Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, a professor at William and Mary and former chief of staff to Secretary of State, General Colin Powell. Our ally danced in the streets when the nuclear deal was signed. Our ally danced in the streets when they, in huge numbers, told the theocrats to take a hike. Most Americans think the presidential elections mean nothing because the real power belongs to the head turban, Khamenei. To those American I say, please try and not be clueless. Unlike the inhabitants of the corridors in DC, please try, as Jack Ma does, look far down the road just as that young man did that day in Williamsburg. It was not just the number of votes that was cast against the theocrats that mattered (but I will note the theocrat’s favorite guy came in dead last in Tehran – home to a fifth of Iran’s population). It was the rhetoric that preceded the vote. It was venomous. It starkly called out the turban wearers for the ancient idiocy they call the rule of law and Iranians told them to take a hike then they danced in the streets. Today that rhetoric continues. In the Iranian news, stories abound with the president and the theocrats are taking swings at one another. It has gotten truly nasty.

In a poll taken the end of 2016, 85 percent of Iranians want better relations with the west while the theocrats and their measly 15 percent do not. Iran is on the threshold of a change. If nothing else look at the simple fact that the turban wearers are between 77 and 92 years of age and, despite what they might think, they are in fact mortal. And, contrary to the belief of many, they are not stupid. Khamenei, last summer, issued a multipage document outlining how the next elections would be open and transparent. He knows the ghosts of 2009 are still there waiting to bite him in the ass again. They know that 15 percent will not sustain them. I see the cracks. They have positioned themselves exactly where the Shah was in 1978. That young man in that conference was right in that the future of Iran can be found in the faces of the young people AND their parents that dance in the streets BUT there is one problem. He failed to realize that American foreign policy is now at DEFCON absolute cluelessness.

We are on the verge of screwing the dreams of the Iranian people again. The neocons are once again doing something the turban wearers relish. As the DC neocons pound their podiums and their war drums, the happiest people in Iran are the turban wearers. They would be dancing in the streets also but they are too old. Stephen Kinzer, author of another book on Iran (All the Shah’s Men) foresees the future of Iran if we follow our current path. Kinzer stated, “The ONLY way the majority of Iranians would ever get behind the government they have now is for someone to attack them”. If we attack Iran then the mullahs win. Think about it. Iranians do not like the mullahs but they, like every bunch of people everywhere, love their country. Trump and the neocons in Washington are trying their best to stop the dancing in the streets. Iranians will react just like Americans after 9/11 and just as Kinzer predicts. They will do what they did when, with our help, Saddam Hossein invaded Iran. At a time Iranians were railing against that theocrats (you know, that sheriff we helped) because he was imprisoning and executing opponents at a rate Hitler would admire, Iranians came together to fight Saddam. They will rally around their flag just like any other people. And once again, just like we did in 1953 and 1979, we will have robbed them of a future they rightfully deserve.

That is why I came to Williamsburg that Friday. I wanted to find something, anything, to alter things. I believed that something good could come out of my wife’s Parkinson’s disease. Not only did I want to make sure an Iranian sufferer of that disease stopped, I wanted to hear something that would indicate that wiser minds could prevail. For a moment, I thought I found it in the words of that young man. If given the chance I would like to tell him his thoughts align with the aspirations of 68 million Iranians (that 85 percent). If only we would do things to, for a change, support the Iranian people that would be great. But, once again, the United States of America is on the path the destroy the hopes and dreams of those that dance in the streets in Tehran. Once again, we are heading down a path that will lead to a tortured life for another Iranian suffering from Parkinson’s. I would like to think we are better than that. I fear we are not.

As James Bill concluded, “In a world torn by inequality, weakened by misunderstanding, and convulsed by violence, the American eagle needs to do more than strengthen its wings and sharpen it talons. It must also improve its qualities of perception, its communications skills and its moral credibility. If done, the confused and ruffled American eagle can regain its capacity to soar in respected splendor and dignity across a turbulent international landscape”. Bill was hoping that one day we be smart. His book was published in 1988. I fear that day will never come.

I have just one plea for those that reside in Washington DC. For once try and do something for our biggest ally in the middle east, the Iranian people. For the love of God, please let them continue to dance in the streets of Iran. The end result will be an Iran the world will embrace. I do not know how many miles Iranians will need to travel to get to this place but I believe it is just around the corner.