

**JUNE 23**

# Voluntary amnesia in the service of war

**F**orget it! That seems to be an unstated motto for American media coverage of the Iranian presidential election. The axiom comes down to: "Don't let history get in the way of spin."

Evasion smooths the way to the next war.

For maximum propaganda effect, the agenda-setting must be decoupled as much as possible from clear truths – about the current president's mendacity in connection with Iraq, and about the record of U.S. government actions toward Iran.

While a seriously discredited President Bush strains to do damage control about his past lies and present machinations on Iraq, the U.S. media coverage typically presents his statements about Iran without so much as a whiff of suspicion. A proven liar is treated like a presumptive truth-teller.

The ambient noise of American media evokes history – distant or recent – as an option we may choose to decline, like mustard on a burger. We're encouraged to mentally disconnect from relevant historic events. Double standards prevail.

Red-white-and-blue journalists don't doubt that the past sins of Washington's present-day foes are quite relevant today. So, it's assumed to be incisive when reporters keep reminding news consumers that Saddam Hussein committed huge crimes such as mass killing of Kurds. But what about the fact that most of the worst of those crimes occurred while the United States was supportive of Hussein's regime? That question gets short shrift.

Likewise – while American viewers, listeners and readers are apt to be aware that in 1979 some radical Iranians took American diplomats hostage at the U.S. embassy in Tehran and held them for more than a year – other historical facts tend to be hazy or entirely absent. That suits the White House just fine. From a Machiavellian standpoint, the best remedy for unpleasant historical facts – distant or recent – is silence about them.

For instance: Under diplomatic cover, U.S. intelligence operatives engineered a coup that brought down the democratically elected prime minister Muhammad Mussadiq in

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1953 and installed the tyrannical Shah, who ruled with an iron and torturing hand until an Islamic revolution triumphed in early 1979. Iranians have ample reasons to be extremely wary of the U.S. government. Yet major American news media scarcely acknowledge that the CIA-organized 1953 coup was a pivotal and destructive event in Iranian history.

From afar, history is optional. But there's a direct line from the 1953 coup to the predicament that Iranians find themselves in today. Washington installed a dictatorship that gave rise to a revolution that founded the repressive Islamic Republic of Iran. Now, under that regime, advocates for theocracy and democracy are in the midst of an intense struggle.

A week ago, on June 17, during Iran's first round of voting for president, I visited a few polling stations in neighborhoods of southern Tehran. One of the people who agreed to be interviewed was a 27-year-old woman who gave her name as Leilah. She stood in line with other Iranian women (men had a separate line) waiting to get inside the school to cast their ballots. When I asked who she intended to vote for, Leilah said that she still might choose not to cast a ballot for any of the presidential candidates. "I don't believe in any of them," she said.

Her evident despair was rooted in history that cannot be understood without reference to the 1953 coup that jolted Iran off its democratic course.

While routinely omitting even a mere mention of such matters as U.S. support for the overthrow of a duly elected Iranian leader 52 years ago, American journalists – with few exceptions – have kept news coverage of Iran in a zone where history is always pliable. Now you see it, now you don't. Under such conditions of skewed reporting, the deep suspicion that infuses Iranians' views of the U.S. government is apt to seem inexplicable.

In contrast to claims from the Bush administration (and from avowedly liberal media sources like editorial writers at the New York Times), the Iranian presidential elections this month have included important elements of democratic participation. In recent weeks, Iranians have publicly and intensively debated Iran's domestic policies, with very significant differences between the presidential contenders. While American journalists often seem to be suffering from selective amnesia in their reporting, many Iranians are acutely mindful of the need to understand their country's real history and begin a more hopeful chapter.

Meanwhile, there are strong indications that the Bush administration is ramping up preparations for some kind of military attack on Iran. The assault could include a sustained series of missile strikes – but even a single day of bombing would have a wide

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range of grim effects, including severe damage to Iran's fledgling human rights movement. Activists in the United States should work to avert such a catastrophe.

*Norman Solomon's new book "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death" became available this week. The book's first chapter is posted at: [www.WarMadeEasy.com](http://www.WarMadeEasy.com)*