

TIE A YELLOW RIBBON

IRAN, 1979-81

By L. Bruce Laingen

For me, looking back on almost 40 years in the Foreign Service is to see a kaleidoscope of experiences that a farm boy from Minnesota could not conceivably have imagined. Issuing visas, at times around the clock, at a displaced persons camp in postwar Germany; flying the U.S. flag as consul in a listening post at Meshed, close to the then-Soviet border of Iran; escorting First Lady Jackie Kennedy on her 1962 triumphal tour of Pakistan; watching President Lyndon Johnson invite Anwar, the Pakistani camel driver, to visit the United States; observing the Indo/Pakistan War of 1971 that saw the birth of Bangladesh; and sailing in the magnificent Grand Harbor of the island republic of Malta.

But one assignment is etched forever in my mind: my second tour in Iran, in 1979-81, when I became a candidate for the Guinness Book of Records — the only chief of a diplomatic mission to lose his embassy and its entire staff to political terrorists supported by their government, and to be held hostage for political purposes for more than a year. This was arguably the most egregious violation of the traditions and principles of diplomatic immunity in the history of diplomacy.

In America's experience with the Iranian Revolution that began in 1979, there are volumes of remembrances — and lessons: The need in times of political uncertainty to challenge conventional wisdom; my staff's endurance with dignity; the heroism and sacrifice of those men who put their lives on the line to restore us hostages to freedom but whose flying machines failed them; and being reminded of our good fortune in a neighbor, Canada, which was ready to set aside all its interests in Iran to bring six Americans home to safety.

But perhaps we should remember the way this crisis also triggered what became a class act of the best of community across our country. Beginning with an understandable outburst of anger and hate, much of it unfortunately directed at Iranians living in America, there evolved a most remarkable spirit of national unity — an outpouring of caring symbolized by flags, prayers, church bells, an avalanche of mail, and above all that ubiquitous yellow ribbon, that became and remains today the universal symbol of caring for fellow American in distress.

For a time, at least, there was also a new appreciation by the American public of the role played by their diplomats abroad in areas of stress and danger. Since then others in the Foreign Service have continued that role, often on the front lines in defense of American interests — in Beirut, Kuwait, Somalia — and today, in new countries born of the former Soviet Union, of whose freedom my Foreign Service generation could only dream 40 years ago. Today I tell all who are new to the Foreign Service: Welcome to the ultimate in adventure, and in public service.

L. Bruce Laingen, who retired from the Foreign Service in 1987, was Chief of Mission in Tehran, Iran, from 1979-81. In his 38-year career, he also served in Hamburg, Germany; Washington, D.C.; Karachi, Pakistan; Kabul, Afghanistan; and as Ambassador to Valletta, Malta.