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Bill Moyers' Journal

"Voices on Iran — Part 2"

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Voices on Iran — Part 2

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[Tease — videotape segment of last week's interview with Iranian ambassador to the United Nations, Mansour Farhang]

BILL MOYERS: It seems to me that the problem is that your government is unable to deal effectively with the terrorists, militants, whomever they are, holding those hostages. It's not the United States government that's preventing it.

Ambassador MANSOUR FARHANG: No, the United States government is not preventing it. But, you see, when you talk about a conciliatory attitude by the United States, we have to understand that the United States has chosen conciliation for a period as a *tactic*, which always employs threats and it never involves an understanding of the other side. What we need is conciliation as a state of mind.

[Interior, studio]

MOYERS: For us better to understand and move towards conciliation, as the ambassador urged last week, certainly makes sense, and we'll continue our discussion and dialogue with him tonight. We'll also listen to other voices of Iran. This means the conversation I had planned with historian and social critic Max Lerner must be postponed until later this month. Fourteen hundred years ago another social critic, Mohammed, preached a vision that became Islam, the religion of Iran, the faith now of one out of five human beings on this earth. In counseling his followers to pursue understanding, the prophet Mohammed said, 'Seek knowledge, even unto China.' That is worthy text for tonight. I'm Bill Moyers.

[Bill Moyers' Journal opening]

[Interior, studio]

MOYERS: For the moment, there is a lull in the public tensions between the United States and Iran around the hostages. This is welcome and offers a chance for talk and exploration that might move us further back from the brink. It gives us time to try to understand what is happening in Iran — serious internal tensions between nationality groups within the Islam religious structure itself, and between religious and secular groups. Divisions exist there, as here, and make the task of communicating between this nation of 35 million and our 230 million people all the more difficult, especially when one of the most powerful forces in Iran, Islam, is a largely unknown religion to us. Many of us know the basics, but how do Islam and politics blend? What do Mohammed and Mecca mean to the Iranian oilworker or peasant? Examining all this is vital to future understanding between our nations. Briefly, Islam, the Moslem religion, now practiced by 800 million human beings, was founded by Mohammed 1400 years ago. As do Christians and Jews, the Moslems believe in only one God. They recognize Moses and Jesus and prophets of Judaism and Christianity, and assert that Mohammed is the last of a long line of charismatic prophets. Mohammed, they say, brought God's final words to humankind in the Koran, the Islamic bible. The Moslem world now extends from Africa to the Middle East, across Southeast Asia, and up into China. But in Iran, the Moslems belong to a minority group within the faith called the Shi'ites; the majority group are called Sunni Moslems. Here to talk with us about the role of Islam in the Iranian revolution is professor Farhad Kazemi, who teaches political science at New York University. Professor Kazemi, you were brought up in the Shi'ite faith. What should we Americans know about it in order to better understand the Iranian revolution?

Prof. FARHAD KAZEMI: Well, first I'd like to correct a popular misconception in this country, and this is the feeling that the revolution was brought about only by the Shi'ite clergy. We should be aware that a large group of intellectuals, liberals and lawyers, secularist professors and others were very much involved in the revolution.

MOYERS: It was not, then, just a result of religious fervor or passion?

KAZEMI: It was not. However, as time went on, since the clergy had the organization and the ability to mobilize people behind a cause, they managed to have the foremost position in the revolution and be able to bring about their version of the revolution to the front stage. Now, I think one of the reasons for the success of the clergy in the revolution and their position is their organization. Under the shah of Iran, attempts were made to destroy all institutions that were viewed to be in contradiction to the interests of the state. And for the shah of Iran, the interests of the state and the monarchy were the same. The shah tried, especially after 1963, to destroy the institution of the clergy. Various harassments, various forms of action were taken, but by and large he failed to do so. The reason for

the failure is several. I just mention some of the most important that appears to me offhand. First, the institution of the clergy has always had a welfare distribution system. The devout Shi'ites are supposed to give a portion of their income to the clergy, and the clergy in due time passes on some of this money to the poor. So, there is an economic relationship between the clergy and the poorer elements of the society.

MOYERS: And this kept the clergy in close contact, particularly with the poor of Iran, during the former shah's reign?

KAZEMI: Absolutely. Then the other factor, of course, is there are large numbers, several thousands, of mosques and shrines throughout the country, and then several tens of thousands of Shi'ite clergy in all corners, distant or near, in this vast area, in this vast country. Another factor, important for the clergy's position, are the popular beliefs of the Shi'ite Muslims, the festivals, the processions during the holy months, and other activities of that nature. To do that, you need an organization. And to do that, you need some planning. The clergy were always involved in the organization for the processions and other religious festivals, and they could always keep a very important line of communication open to those who felt that the Shah's regime had done some injustice to them.

MOYERS: What were the practical consequences of these phenomena then, at the time of the welling-up of the outrage over the shah?

KAZEMI: The practical consequence was that the clergy could have thousands, in some instances millions, of people ready to fight in the streets at a very short call.

MOYERS: Would you explain something to me: why is it that Imam Khomeini's authority is greater than the power of the government?

KAZEMI: Well, the reason I think is simply the fact that the institutions of government in that society have been destroyed, and the only organization that the ability to do anything is the clergy. And obviously, Khomeini is in the apex of that organization. In addition to that, what we have to realize — I said that emphatically — is that he's a man with immense appeal to the masses of the Iranians, particularly the urban poor.

MOYERS: Why is that, because of that system of welfare, because of that system of communication and organization, or is it something deeper?

KAZEMI: It's those factors that you mention, Mr. Moyers, but in addition to that, of course, are the popular beliefs among the Iranians, the Shi'ite Islam, which tend to be more widespread among the lower classes.

MOYERS: Such popular beliefs being, for example—?

KAZEMI: Well, the whole basic notion of good and evil, the idea of trying to bring about God's kingdom on this earth, the activist element of Islam, the daily practice of the people. You see, for example, the poor urban dwellers practice the prayer much more readily, much more systematically than among the university students or high school students, or those from the upper echelons of the society. There's more of a greater inculcated value system, traditional — Shi'ite traditional — among the masses than among those who are better off or better educated.

MOYERS: So this would explain why the Ayatollah Khomeini would be able to speak beyond the government to the people?

KAZEMI: Absolutely. I have been monitoring Radio Teheran for the past several months, and when you listen to Khomeini's speeches, whether one likes him or not is not the point, one cannot help being struck that he is really speaking the language of what he refers to, the oppressed classes in Iran. It's his tone of conversation, the kind of a symbolism that he uses, tends to appeal probably much more to these people. And they listen to it.

MOYERS: Would that explain why then, as the former shah attempted to bring about the modernization, and many have said, the secularization of Iran, he encountered ferocious resistance from the poor as well as the clergy?

KAZEMI: Well, that's part of the reason. Another factor, I think, goes beyond just the poorer classes. In the '60s, there were some very important reform movements within Shi'ite Islam about which not much is known in this country or in the West. One was a minor reform movement among the top of the clergy. They tried to re-interpret some of the basic doctrines of Shi'ite Islam. The circle was limited. Nevertheless, the fact of reform being attempted is important. The second, much more fundamental in reaching the university students, and professors and others, is the figure of Dr. Ali Shariati.

MOYERS: Shariati. I've heard of him, but know nothing about him.

KAZEMI: He's — I would say that he is the intellectual father of the Iranian revolution. While he had some

important veiled, sometimes not so unveiled, anti-clerical views, he came from a clerical family. But he tried to combine certain elements of Western thought with Shi'ite Islam.

MOYERS: Successfully?

KAZEMI: Well, the question, reconstruction of religious thought, is not an easy matter as we know. And I don't know too many people who have tried to do that successfully. He gave a number of speeches, talks, and many pamphlet that he put out. He made the attempt, and the attempt was meaningful to another layer of the Iranian society, those students from the middle classes who had gone to the universities. They had some elements of the West and also some very important dimensions of the Shi'ite Islam with them.

MOYERS: Combination of political fervor and religious commitment?

KAZEMI: Absolutely.

MOYERS: Are any of them now the guerrillas holding the hostages?

KAZEMI: Well, it's very difficult to say. I suppose some of them may be, but I don't have any exact fact to ascertain that situation.

MOYERS: What explains, Dr. Kazemi, the statements in Iran that it's God's will that the rescue mission failed? Or Imam Khomeini saying that some Iranians who lost their lives are martyrs? What are we to make of such statements?

KAZEMI: Well, as you very well know, in the mass media in this country the idea of the martyr complex has been perhaps overemphasized. However, this does not mean that there is no such desire on the part of the true Shi'ite believers in Iran. The basic idea here is that when it comes to a black and white choice between good and evil, as you perceive it, then you should be willing to allow your life to be taken away, to be martyred, because this is for a just cause.

MOYERS: Do they see, then— do they see the West, do they see the United States, do they see Jimmy Carter, a born again Christian, as evil, as bad, as the opposite of good?

KAZEMI: I don't think, in spite of what we tend to get, that all of the Iranians feel that way. This may be my personal feeling, but I don't think it's so wrong.

MOYERS: What about the religiously committed?

KAZEMI: The religiously committed, those masses who march in the streets and all that, they probably see President Carter as in some way the personification of evil. And they probably include him with those other peoples in the past whom they think have tried to destroy the Shi'ite cause. But I have very, very serious doubts that some of the better educated, the 'secular Iranians,' have that feeling about President Carter or the American society.

MOYERS: Thank you very much. That's fascinating and I hope again one day that we can come back to a lengthier discussion of it. Before we talk with Ambassador Farhang again, I'd like to repeat something he said to us last week, which sums up how he sees relations between Iran and the United States, and how he views American fears of Soviet imperialism.

[Videotape of segment from last week's show]

FARHANG: American imperialism was not at all unjustified in fearing any threat from outside, because it is always in competition with others but American people. And the genuine, legitimate interests of American people have nothing to fear from an independent, progressive and democratic government in Iran. That is, if we establish a government which makes decisions on the basis of what is in the interests of Iranian people, in the interest of peace and security in the region, the legitimate interests of overwhelming majority of American people coincide with such a government. If we want to see— define American national interests the way Henry Kissinger or Brzezinski define it, that is in the interests of corporate America, less than one percent of the people who own more than 86 percent of all stocks and bonds and resources, then of course an independent, progressive and democratic regime in Iran is against the interests of the United States government or those who rule it. But, in my view and in the view of Iranian revolutionaries, there is no contradiction between the legitimate interest of the American people and the legitimate interests and aspirations of an independent and democratic Iran.

[Interior, studio]

MOYERS: You have talked in the past about demystifying Islam and the Islamic movement. Is that so, and what did you mean by that? Demystifying it so that Americans don't look at it through clouded eyes, the Islamic movement.

FARHANG: Well, Islam has always been perceived by the western world as a very mysterious and mystifying religion. They know very little about. It goes way back in history, and it also has something to do with the way the Westerners perceived the Third World, or the developing world, or the colonized world. That is, Europe, which began its expansion in the modern times in early part of the 19th Century, and the expansion developed momentum in late 19th Century, always perceived the rest of the world in relationship to Europe. Even in the Middle East, the Near East, the Far East, it means nearness or farness to the center. And here it is not that this nearness or farness is not just a geographic symbolism, but also it has culture significance. In this regard, even the socialist elements in the middle of the 19th Century had the same kind of sense of superiority toward the rest of the world as the colonizers. Even someone like Karl Marx described us as barbarians, people who had to be civilized. When the Algerians resisted French colonialism in the 1830s and more than 40,000 Algerians were massacred by the French, socialists in Europe, a man like Friedrich Engels described the French action as a civilizing mission.

MOYERS: What is the meaning to you, as you look at the Western world, as you look at the United States, as you understand your own movement of independence and your own revolution, and the conflicts that exist today involving the hostages, the Shah, all of that, what is to you the meaning of the word and the idea of conciliation?

FARHANG: Conciliation means recognizing that you have done injustice to the other side. Recognizing the legitimacy of the other side's anger, the grievance of those who have suffered under your domination. That recognition means you are going to accept retribution whether it's tangible or symbolic. That is, you are going to use that understanding and not relate to the conflict between two sides as a conflict of power. That is, you do not threaten the other side. You do not use sanctions against the other side. You do not dismiss the ideas of the other side. And giving you a specific example, when we first asked for Security Council meeting right after the seizure of the embassy, the United States rejected our proposal. Therefore, when the United States asked for a meeting of the Security Council — it was accepted — the natural response on the part of Iran was, 'Why is it that when we request the meeting of Security Council, it is rejected because the United States has veto power, but when the United States wants the meeting of Security Council, it is agreed upon?' This is the exercise of power. This is an attempt to humiliate the other side. In early January — let me give you one more example what I mean by conciliation as a state of mind and not as attack — in January, when we asked for formation of an international commission of inquiry, Imam Khomeini had recommended this commission, and in the Security Council, most members of the Security Council were very sympathetic to the idea, the United States disagreed. We succeeded in delaying the decision for 48 hours, but finally they said, no international commission, and they imposed sanctions. That is threat, or the threat of punishment. So, that is not really how one goes about conciliating with the other side.

MOYERS: Mr. Ambassador, would conciliation as a state of mind, and I ask this question seeking not debate, but information, would conciliation as a state of mind include, on your side, understanding that the reason those governments voted in the United Nations with the United States, is because every government — left, right, socialist, marxist, western, third world — fears the precedent set by a government sanctioning of the seizure of an embassy. And would conciliation on your side at least entertain the realization that that might be the motive of governments voting at the United Nations, as opposed to merely the motive of power?

FARHANG: Yes. It is possible to recognize that motive and still recommend a different course of action in the interests of solving the problem. For us, the purpose is to be on guard against American intervention, overt or covert, in the internal affairs of Iran. And since admission of the shah to this country was legitimately perceived as a hostile act against the Iranian revolution, our action, or our position, was understandable in that context. We understand that it was questionable from the legal point of view, but it was possible to combine the two, to maintain that concern and yet pursue a conciliatory approach to the problem. The United States didn't do that at all. They emphasize and they re-emphasize the question of legality, and they completely dismissed the fact that we had every right and every reason to be suspicious of American intentions concerning our revolution.

MOYERS: You feared, as I understand it, that the shah's entry into this country would be a prelude to another American effort to restore the shah to power in Iran. That's how you saw it.

FARHANG: Well, yes, whether the shah himself was going to be the figure or not, I don't know. But as part of a process of destabilizing Iran and refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the Iranian revolution. In August 6, 1979, Brzezinski writes a memo to the State Department indicating to them that we have to use the internal conflicts in Iran, we have to exploit Iranian internal conflict in order to create problems and bring about destabilization of the Iranian revolutionary regime, and in the same memo he refers to the recent consultations with the shah that the United States efforts in destabilizing and discrediting Iranian revolution by using domestic conflicts must be pursued in the context of the recent consultations with the shah. That's August 6th, 1979.

MOYERS: How do these grievances, as you see them— how do these— how does passionate embrace of these grievances, rhetorically and actually, nurture conciliation? I mean, you've told us in effect what we must do. What must Iran do to at least embrace the mentality of conciliation?

FARHANG: It is in the nature of conflict between the oppressed and the oppressor, and I describe the conflict between the United States and Iran — by Iran, I mean the Iranian people, not one or two percent of the upper echelon in this who have everything in common with the American ruling elements — in the conflict between the oppressed and the oppressor, it is the responsibility of the oppressor to initiate conciliatory action, and wait for the oppressed to respond to it.

MOYERS: What if most Americans don't see themselves as the oppressors?

FARHANG: That's exactly the problem. Most oppressors do not see themselves as oppressors. Do American people see themselves as oppressors in their relationship with the blacks in this country? In the relationship with the Indians? Do Americans see themselves as oppressors in their relationship with a country like Cambodia, which was destroyed by American action? There is nothing new about oppressors not seeing themselves as oppressors. Conciliation as a state of mind means the recognition of one's own real power and the consequences of one's power on others.

MOYERS: Let's move from conciliation as a state of mind to the practice of conciliation. Which is more important at the moment, the literal return of the former shah to Iran or a gesture from the United States acknowledging that its relationships with Iran over the last 25 years are perceived in Iran as unjust?

FARHANG: Well, if the United States could return the deposed shah to Iran, that would be a wonderful act.

MOYERS: But it can't, as you know—

FARHANG: I know. But you said, you know, that is an option, if that is an option, obviously it is preferred by us. Whether that can be done or not, and another thing the United States can do, is recognition of the domination of Iran, exploitation of Iran, brutalization of Iran, by the shah assisted by the United States for 27 years. It's obviously symbolic. We understand that. Abandonment of any threat or threat of punishment, abandonment of sanctions, unfreezing of Iranian resources in this country, and adoption of— I know it's an idealistic answer, but you're asking a very hypothetical and idealistic question— abandonment of all threat or the threat of punishment, and inviting, after taking these actions, inviting us to engage in a dialogue.

MOYERS: If the sanctions continue, Mr. Ambassador, what will be the consequence?

FARHANG: The consequences could cause difficulty for us from an economic point of view, but this is not the first time that human beings, in the interest of their dignity and freedom, will accept economic hardship, and I can assure you that we as a people, are prepared to accept economic hardship in order to protect the integrity of our revolution and prevent another intervention in our internal affairs.

MOYERS: The sanctions, you are saying then, will increase the opposition in Iran to conciliation?

FARHANG: There is no question of that.

MOYERS: On February 17th, Sen. Edmund Muskie, soon to be our Secretary of State, said that to admit what the CIA had done in bringing the shah to power would not be a mea culpa, an acceptance of blame, but would merely acknowledge 'an historical truth.' Would such an acknowledgement represent to you a conciliatory frame of mind?

FARHANG: It would be a significant first step. If it is combined with abandonment of threat, unblocking of Iranian resources, and a more realistic attitude toward Iranians who live in this country. A great deal of difficulty has been either caused by immigration office for Iranians in this country. And— all of these, I cannot— I can give you a list of the damages done to us by the United States institutions. I think their abandonment would be a great step toward conciliation.

MOYERS: You have mentioned the Iranian assets held in the United States, some \$8 billion, I believe—

FARHANG: More than \$8 billion.

MOYERS: And you're saying these could be a factor in the release of the hostages?

FARHANG: Definitely.

MOYERS: Well, President Carter, if I understand the situation in Washington, is preparing legislation for Congress to disburse this \$8 billion to pay reparations, as he put it, for American hostages and their families. What will happen

if that legislation takes effect and those assets are distributed?

FARHANG: Well, the United States can do that simply because this country has a stronger military power. It's an imposition of an illegitimate action on Iranians and it will not contribute to conciliation. It's possible the United States is capable of doing that, but I genuinely hope that even this action is not going to change our attitude toward the hostages, that is, Ayatollah Khomeini has asked the Iranian parliament to resolve, to deal with the hostage issue as soon as they meet, and they are going to do that. And regardless of what happens in regard to their executive decision concerning our resources, the Iranian parliament will make the decision concerning hostages in the early sessions of their meeting.

MOYERS: So you think that irrespective of what the United States does in the next few weeks, it must remain for that process to occur, to be finished, the consideration of the hostage question by the parliament before any resolution can be brought about?

FARHANG: Yes. Yes, but the resolution can take place in that context. It is, we are not too far off from the meeting of the parliament, which is about a month from now. The runoff elections will take place tomorrow, and the parliament will meet probably within a month. Then whatever conciliations, still, we have the method, the way of resolving the conflict, and the parliament would be dealing with any conciliatory attitude advanced by the United States.

MOYERS: Is there any compassion in Iran for the hostages and the families of the hostages?

FARHANG: Absolutely. Absolutely. You go to Iran and you talk to people, there is compassion. Iranian in their culture, is a very compassionate, very caring culture. And I can assure you that our people understand the difficulty of the position we are in. As I indicated to you in this show last time when you asked me about the legality of the seizure of the embassy or its ethics or morality—

MOYERS: And you said it was not legal.

FARHANG: Yes. But, the question is, this is not the first time that human beings have been pushed to the point of acting in such a way which in principle they cannot agree with themselves. In other words, you cannot push people against their will, against their interest, and yet expect them to respond to you within the norms which are acceptable to you.

MOYERS: If there is compassion, how do you explain the throngs of people marching past the embassy where the hostages are being— were being held, with their fists upraised, shouting what seemed to us hostile, threatening, militant and uncompassionate gestures?

FARHANG: They are gestures against American power. The American embassy in Teheran represents American power, it represents Vietnam, it represents SAVAK, it represents—

MOYERS: SAVAK being?

FARHANG: SAVAK means the Iranian secret police. It represents Vietnam, it represents the conditions of Palestinians. In other words, the American embassy in Teheran is the symbol of a very oppressive power in the contemporary world, as far as our people are concerned.

MOYERS: If that is the perception in Iran, then, is it conceivable that the dispersal of the hostages from that symbol of power might actually be a positive development?

FARHANG: It could be. I think the hostage issue will be discussed and resolved by the Iranian parliament.

MOYERS: Mr. Ambassador, London succeeded this week in rescuing your countrymen from terrorists held there. What would have happened if President Carter's effort to rescue our countrymen two weeks ago had succeeded?

FARHANG: It would have been a devastating blow to forces of moderation and democratic sentiments in Iran.

MOYERS: Would you go on and explain that? There are such there?

FARHANG: No question about it. It's— it means if the present government, let's take President Bani-Sadr, who has received 75 percent of the popular votes, representing fundamentally the conciliatory and peaceful attitude toward this issue, and he was the one who was advocating the transfer of hostages from the embassy to another location, or Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh, or Mehdi Bazargan, the former prime minister, even in Ayatollah Khomeini himself, who fundamentally in terms of security of the hostages has always been very careful in advising the students and other that we should not take out our anger on the individuals that we are holding. These forces obviously would have been weakened by a successful intervention in our domestic affairs. But you're asking a

hypothetical question. I cannot imagine the action being successful. Within an hour, you could get two million people surrounding the embassy compound.

MOYERS: What would have happened?

FARHANG: And it would have been necessary for the United States to kill thousands if not tens of thousands of Iranians before they could extricate themselves, and among those killed would have definitely been the hostages and many American soldiers.

MOYERS: Last question to you is the one I asked to Mr. Kazemi, which is why does the authority of the Khomeini extend beyond, is greater than— why is it greater than the power of the government?

FARHANG: First of all, there is no distinction or contradiction between the two. Giving you a very simple answer, is that Imam Khomeini is the first, *the* first popular hero in Iranian political culture — the first *successful* popular hero in Iranian political culture. The Shi'ite tradition in Iran has been a tradition of resistance. All of its heroes have been moderate. They were killed in prison by the kings, by the oppressors. And, unlike what Mr. Kazemi said, the Shi'ites, the Moslems in Iran do not have organizations. Islam is not an institutionalized religion. The relationships among the Shi'ites are completely voluntary. There is really no organization being committed to any kind of mandate, to ordering. It is the moral power of the man and the success of the man in leading the revolution against a very oppressive regime, which has transformed him into a figure which is absolutely unprecedented, not only in our history, but in the history of the region.

MOYERS: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador. In a moment, you and I are going to be joined by an American woman who has spent a good deal of time in Iran, and who has some definite ideas on how we can build better communications in this time of great tension. Two of our guests last week perceived the need this way:

[Videotape]

EQBAL AHMAD: To debate, to understand both why Iran and Iranians have acted the way they have acted, and I think also why the United States has acted the way it acted. What brought about the crisis leading to the taking of hostages and everything that followed? I think the first challenge before us is to understand that, and understand that reality in order to change it. Changing would mean moving from confrontation to politics, to diplomacy.

Prof. EDWARD W. SAID: The right questions have never been asked. The focus has always been on what you might call the very narrow instrumental thing: get the hostages out, how do we get them out? The right questions are: What is the situation as a whole that produced this? Once you understand that, then you defuse the situation, you begin to move towards a reconciliation. The more you insist on what is just before your eyes, the more aggrieved you feel, and the more the Iranians feel aggrieved.

[Interior, studio]

MOYERS: Dr. Catherine Bateson, you are an anthropologist, linguist and educator who was in Iran for seven years, teaching and doing research until just a few weeks before the revolution. You've written about building trust between the two nations and finding symbolic gestures that will put us on the track to comprehending each other. How do you at this moment see this conflict?

Dr. CATHERINE BATESON: Well, I think the first thing to realize is that, at the moment, the styles of communication and symbols being used by the two nations are so dissonant that it's almost impossible to interact.

MOYERS: Explain that.

BATESON: You see, as the ambassador has said, the revolution in Iran was based on moral power. People felt it and participated in it, risked their lives, as a conflict between good and evil. And they continue to feel the conflicts that Iran is involved in as purely moral conflicts, conflicts between good and evil, black and white. Now, we don't tend to see things in quite that way. We sometimes do.

MOYERS: We see it more politically, as politics.

BATESON: More politically—

MOYERS: The resolution of conflicting interests. They see it more starkly.

BATESON: And we tend to think in terms of right and wrong — law, reason, logic, what are the facts, let's proceed gradually. The world of right and wrong, and the world of good and evil are different. The stakes are different, the style is different. As a result, when we think we are being reasonable, we are completely missing what Iranians feel to be the point. And I for one think that we might do better to do something that Iranians sometimes do in their

personal lives—

MOYERS: Which is?

BATESON: —when conflicts arise, which is to become *har*, [*Farsi*] to simply not speak to each other at all. At all. Now, we've now broken off relations. Since we can't talk at the moment, effectively, we should genuinely *stop* talking. And, of course, when we talk about Iran in this country, it's also talking *at* Iran. It ends up there. And, all this discussion in the press— that's our communication to Iran, that people hear about, of how we feel. Now, when individuals do this, it has two very good effects.

MOYERS: Before you tell me that— literally, if I have a disagreement with you in Iran, I mean a terrific disagreement, and it's not resolved and we just decide mutually we will not communicate any more?

BATESON: We might cease to speak to each other. But one thing that would happen is our friends, our mutual friends, would start coming between us, mediating between us—

MOYERS: A third party.

BATESON: Third parties. —And we would be saved from going on saying more and more things that make the situation worse. It's— when people break relations in this way, it very often has the function of making it possible to restore them later on.

MOYERS: Do you think that it would help for the United States to make an apology, as some Iranians and a few Americans have urged? An apology for its support over the years of the shah?

BATESON: You see, I feel that the United States did many very wrong things in Iran. There is plenty of matter for an apology. But the difficulty is this: in the moral climate in Iran today, it has been important during this period when the revolutionary process is developing and new institutions are being established, it's been important to maintain strong symbols of good and evil. And the United States is now blamed for a great many things that I don't think we're guilty of. So that, even though we could, I think, give a quite genuine apology because we've done things that are wrong, I don't think that the apology that we could give would be adequate to the picture of evil that is attached to us in Iran at the moment.

MOYERS: Then, how do you, Professor Bateson, how do you conciliate among people who see each other so starkly that way? If they see us as evil, and we see them as fanatic, is the kind of conciliation that the ambassador was discussing possible?

BATESON: Well, I would go along with many of the ambassador's proposals. I think if we see this thing at a symbolic level, that breaking communication makes sense. But we should combine that with the suspension of all threats and, most important, make it clear that if the hostages come back, there will not be reprisals afterwards, which is a threat that is still hanging in the air. We should suspend all the threats, we should stop trying to make the economic sanctions effective. We should stop the things we're doing against Iranians in this country. We should make it a very explicit point of saying, 'we suspend communication with you because we are talking past each other at the moment. We look to you to return the hostages safely after the parliament has dealt with them, and we are going to take no action that will harm individual Iranians. We are not going to try and keep food from getting to them. We're not going to try and keep medicine from getting to them. We're not going to make students interrupt their education.

MOYERS: What about the other sanctions that we have been imposing and are asking our allies to impose on Iran? What would you do about those?

BATESON: I think I would ask the allies to support us, again in the symbolic way. Let them call their ambassadors home, but let them keep on sending merchandise and providing for people's needs.

MOYERS: So you would isolate Iran politically, but not actually?

BATESON: Well, there'd be charges there, after all. Yes, yes.

MOYERS: What do you think about that, Mr. Ambassador?

FARHANG: Well, this whole framework of describing the United States as a reasonable and rational power and us as passionate, black-and-white— this is a classic orientalist, westernized view of the east. In fact, this is the mode of operation by the oppressors. It is the you use power and those who do not have power have greater reliance on ideology and morality. This has been not only in this conflict, [but] from time immemorial that morality and ideology have been used by the powerless far more extensively than by the powerful. But even—

MOYERS: But even Mr. Kazemi a minute ago said that there are many Iranians who are fervently ideological and moralistic about this, who do see us — Jimmy Carter, our nation — as evil.

FARHANG: I don't think he meant that at all. You see, when we use the word 'evil' or Satan, 'shatan' as Imam Khomeini said, it is a name. People in Iran know exactly what it means. They are not referring to a particular person, they are not referring to a people, they are referring to a source of power, a powerful institution which has a long history of producing certain kinds of situations in our own country, as well as in the rest of the region. Taking these things literally is really a mistake.

MOYERS: So we shouldn't take it personally?

FARHANG: Not at all. We are not at all describing the people of the United States as evil. Far from it. Generally speaking, I think Americans in Iran and Iranians here have always related to each other in a very cordial and enjoyable fashion. We are not changed as a people. If you are going to take these symbolic statements which fit the culture and language of us in Iran, particularly the general population, as literal descriptions of reality, then you have a problem.

MOYERS: But if you call me an S.O.B., I may not be one, but I'm going to resent it.

FARHANG: But that is very different. If I — if someone called you by that name, it's not really — it's an insult. That is, to you as a person. But, if the same expression was used for a country as a whole, then it cannot have a literal meaning. What does it mean for a country as a whole to be subjected to such a description? It has no literal meaning. It immediately develops a symbolic meaning. It's the same thing for the word 'Satan' used to describe a powerful country like the United States.

MOYERS: Dr. Bateson, is conciliation possible, given what seems to me to be the presumption on the part of Iran that we must make all of the steps?

BATESON: I think the presumption that we must make all of the steps is part of the black-and-white approach involved. I agree with the ambassador that there is a reservoir of friendliness, and that along with the use of symbols, people are also dealing with practical issues. And I think that if we cut down on this confusion in communication and allowed some time to elapse and accepted the delay until the parliament meets — I'd like to see Iran off the news in the United States completely, and whatever the symbolic meaning of the people that call America a 'Satan' it doesn't help to have it in the living rooms here and then have Americans out burning flags or harrasing Iranian students. I think that if we reduced this confusing communication that's happening as much as possible for a period of time, there would be a genuine cooling down of the situation.

MOYERS: I'm never sure in a discussion like this that I asked the right questions. There are questions that intrigue me, and I ask them, but I'm never sure that I asked the right question. Have I not asked a question that enables you to outline steps that we should take that you would like to mention?

BATESON: Those are the main steps that I think come in now. And it is important to include both sides. The suspension of threats, the active effort to do nothing that will adversely affect individual Iranians, and at the same time the reduction at the symbolic and communicative level.

MOYERS: What do you think would be the results of that, if we in fact followed a conciliatory process which Dr. Bateson has outlined?

FARHANG: We as a people would definitely respond to a genuinely conciliatory attitude in a positive manner. You say what questions you didn't ask. I'd really like to ask you a question. What would happen to the American power if the Congress of the United States or a combination of the executive and the legislative branches actually made a declaration that the United States treated the Iranian people in an unjust and brutal fashion for 30-some years, abandon all sanctions, advance an apology to the Iranian people, and accept the decision of the parliament concerning the hostages, unfreeze Iranian money, extend an apology to Iranian students in this country, and completely abandon any threat, any unfriendly gesture toward Iran. What would happen to the American people and how would the American people respond to it?

MOYERS: Well, you threw a lot of factors in the same basket. It does seem to me if Congress were to do that officially — and I'd like to hear what Dr. Bateson says about this — that it at least theoretically and possibly actually might set a precedent for any other group of terrorists or militants or guerrillas who would like to have the Congress of the United States acknowledge the same thing about relations with Chile, Vietnam, or other countries. I don't know. You see, what concerns our government, I'm sure, is not only illegality in the holding of the hostages, but the precedent that has been set by such an act which would encourage people over whom other governments might have

no more control than your government has over the young people, militants, holding that embassy. Isn't that a valid fear?

FARHANG: Well, what a fantastic precedent it would be for the United States to do it the way I was describing it. You could condemn it as illegal, and say nevertheless this illegality taking place in the context of a quarter century of brutalizing a people is understandable; therefore it is the moral obligation of the American society to respond to it in a conciliatory fashion. I think this precedent would be a tremendous turning point in the history of international relations. And the benefits derived from this turning point would be far greater than any negative consequence which might result from encouraging such acts.

MOYERS: Dr. Bateson, what's your response?

BATESON: Well, I hope the ambassador doesn't want to destabilize the American government, because I don't think—I can't quite see that happening.

MOYERS: We have our political realities as well.

BATESON: We have political realities as well. And I think—when I talk about the use of symbols, there is one thing I would like to add: that I think we should all agree in hoping that a popular and stable government develops in Iran, that the institutions fall into place, that this difficult and conflictful transition is made. And, because we hope that, we must realize that they have to use the available symbols that are needed in their political situation at the moment. Some of these speeches and the rhetoric that we find so upsetting here are very helpful in bridging this difficult situation that the country's in at the moment.

MOYERS: Thank you, Dr. Bateson. I must interrupt you because our time is gone. I want to thank you and—I meant Dr. Bateson—and you, Mr. Ambassador, for joining us. Our program last week received a phenomenal response from all over the country, and that's the reason we continued it tonight. It also brought a number of letters from people who didn't agree, including one from a viewer in New York who said, 'Mr. Moyers, I've always had respect for your judgment, representing the pros and cons of any situation. But your interview with the Iranians last night and your delicate approach to their spurious reasons for holding our citizens hostage left me stunned beyond belief. You might at least have included another guest to counter their propaganda. That's all it was, a one-sided contest, and a forum for their alibi for their monstrous act that defies all the laws of international behavior. In the game of politics we acted no worse than any other government, and perhaps a great deal better. And besides, their hatred of Carter is absurd since most of their complaints refer to actions taken by previous administrations. There were other avenues open to them. They could have had recourse to breaking off relations, to not selling us their oil, and so forth. In view of this, do we have to provide a forum for his apostles—the Ayatollah's apostles—shame on you. I could go on ad infinitum, but I believe I made my point. And I might add that most of the country agrees.' Well, actually, I'm not sure that the rest of the country agrees. What I've heard Americans saying is that they don't want to go to war, short of a real threat to our national security. I'm one who believes that our security would be more in danger by forcing Iran into the embrace of the Soviets. And the Americans I've talked to are looking for a way out short of the loss of American honor. And we have that, too, Mr. Ambassador. I haven't offered these programs as a platform for anyone's propaganda, but because I have myself wanted to understand, as many of you have, the thinking of people who are for the moment adversaries but are potentially friends. I'm an American, and I feel offended by the holding of my brothers. I want the hostages back. I'm also a citizen of the world, and fear anarchy if every government follows the lead of the ambassador's government in justifying terrorism in the name of any grievance. But, as a journalist as well as just an ordinary human being who prefers politics to war for himself and his children, I know as men always have known that any damn fool can start a war, but it takes a smart son-of-a-gun to prevent one. And, it takes a wise people to realize through understanding when the other side wants to go to war no more than we do, for they have children and dreams too, although in the fog of passions neither side often sees the realities that might have saved us. It seems time, then, to cool it, to lower our voices, to cease even the countdown of days, to realize that if we really value the lives of the hostages and the fate of relations with Iran, it is time as with any speeding railroad to do with these speeding passions: stop, look and listen. I'm Bill Moyers. Good night.

[Credits]