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Review by **Terry H. Anderson**, Texas A&M University

Hal Brands examines the so-called "green light" some historians and writers contend President Jimmy Carter gave to Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein before the dictator's invasion of his hated enemy, Iran, in 1980. That eight-year war led to many hundreds of thousands deaths on both sides, and got Iraq in financial crisis with a burdensome debt, which in turn induced Saddam to invade Kuwait in 1990.

Those who advance the green light interpretation include many commentators, including Dilip Hiro, Said Aburish, and Sasan Fayazmanesh.¹ They posit two rather similar types of arguments. One is that Carter wanted to punish Iran for attacking the U.S. Embassy in 1979 and holding 52 Americans as hostages. The other is a little more complex, arguing that the president and his advisers saw the Iraq-Iran war in a positive light. During the Shah's regime in the 1970s the U.S. had built and supplied the Iranian armed forces; the war would mean that Teheran would need spare parts or new military hardware, and that would force Iran to become more conciliatory and release the American hostages, an arms for hostages deal.

According to Brands, the "green light thesis is more myth than reality" (320). Yet the author admits that there are many coincidences that superficially support the theory, especially for those looking for a conspiracy. Evidence exists that demonstrates that the Carter administration was looking for ways to pressure Tehran during the hostage crisis. The U.S. began building up its military forces in the region while searching for ways to

¹ Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Said Aburish, *Saddam Hussein: The Politics of Revenge* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000); Susan Fayazmanesh, *The United States and Iran: Sanctions, Wars and the Policy of Dual Containment* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2008).

either impede or overthrow the new Islamic regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Also, there is no doubt that the administration had been seeking better relations with Saddam before he went to war in 1980, and this was particularly true after the overthrow of the Shah, the hostage crisis, and the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Khomeini regime was a revolutionary force in the Persian Gulf, where the U.S. aimed to maintain the status quo, and the aggressive Russian move south rekindled Cold War fears of Soviet expansion. These factors influenced Washington to try and improve relations with Baghdad. Finally, after Iraq attacked Iran in September 1980, administration officials such as National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher did *discuss* ways of putting pressure on Teheran, or offering inducements such as spare parts, to prod them to release the hostages.

One of the many strengths of Brand's article is how he presents the green light thesis, for on the surface, it could make sense. "The combination of the foregoing issues -- U.S. efforts to gain leverage on Tehran and maintain contact with Iranian exiles; American attempts to court Baghdad; the administration's interest in trading arms for hostages following the invasion," Brand's summarizes, "seems to establish U.S. complicity in the attack" (324).

Nevertheless, Brands concludes that the thesis is "flat wrong" (321). The strength of his argument is backed by his own interviews with former administration officials, and more importantly, two new primary sources—files released by the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, and Baath Party documents collected by U.S. forces in Baghdad after the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

These sources demonstrate that the Carter administration did not give a green light to Saddam, and in fact was startled and unprepared for Iraq's invasion of Iran. The administration was instead focused on internal Iranian politics, on the hostage crisis, and on the fear of Soviet advances into Iran. As Brands demonstrates, during the Cold War the administration had more fear of a Soviet attack on Iran than an Iraqi invasion. After all, the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, so would they now move their armies into Persia, gain control of large supplies of oil, and finally obtain that age-old dream of a warm water port? Policymakers in Washington feared that Soviet control of a Persian Gulf port could be used to interrupt or stop the flow of petroleum to the West.

Contrary to the green light advocates, Brands has found that Carter expressed consternation that Saddam attacked Iraq. That new war threatened any possibility of negotiations for the release of the hostages, and had a high probability of curtailing oil exports to the West, which already was mired in a sluggish global economy.

There is a central actor in the green light that the proponents do not seem to understand—Saddam. He always was leery of everyone, quickly killed off any threats to his

dictatorship, and never would have allowed the United States (or any country) to use him to secure another nation's foreign policy goals.

Saddam also was delusional, as Brand's article makes clear, for he even thought that the Shah's overthrow was in some way backed by the United States, and had convinced himself that a war with Iran would prepare him and his military to lead the Arabs in their eventual showdown with Israel.

Saddam's delusions included his notion that his war against Iran would be a quick, easy victory, a horrible miscalculation; for his own country, it was the wrong war at the wrong time. In 1972 the Baathists had nationalized their petroleum industry, so by the end of the decade petrodollars were flowing into the state, growing from less than \$2 billion in 1973 to almost \$24 billion in 1978. Flush with funds, the regime improved roads and utilities, increased medical facilities, and opened public schools in virtually every hamlet. The government built the infrastructure and could afford to establish free health care while subsidizing consumer goods, which made the Baathist regime relatively popular. Saddam destroyed all that progress with his attack on Iran; that miscalculation was the beginning to the slow end of his own regime.

Moreover, the green light theorists do not seem to understand the other key actor in this conspiracy—Jimmy Carter. Of all of the Cold War presidents, he was the last one who would have supported launching a preemptive attack on a nation at peace that resulted in numerous deaths. Brzezinski was a hawk, of course, but the president pulled the trigger. Yes, Carter tried to free the hostages, but that was in the heat of the presidential campaign, and he only sent in a few helicopters, not an invading army. Carter was a pacifist, and authentic born-again Christian. In fact, during the first year of his presidency he was eager to forgive and forget the nation's recent enemy, The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and was moving toward granting diplomatic relations with the new communist government, when in 1978, Hanoi decided to invade Cambodia.

Hal Brands has written a solid article, based on new documentation, and has convinced this reviewer that "The green light is one conspiracy theory that should be laid to rest" (337).

Terry H. Anderson has published *The United States, Great Britain, and the Cold War, 1944-47* (1981); co-authored *A Flying Tiger's Diary* (1984), with fighter pilot Charles R. Bond, Jr; and then authored *The Movement and The Sixties* (1994), *The Sixties* (4th edition, 2011); *The Pursuit of Fairness: A History of Affirmative Action* (2004); and most recently *Bush's Wars* (2011). He is Professor of History and Cornerstone Faculty Fellow at Texas A&M University.

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