Twitter Thread by Henry Rome



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Inauguration thread: With Joe Biden taking the oath of office tomorrow, what better time to think back 32 years to the inauguration speech of another seasoned former VP and the resounding (and often misunderstood) impacts on US policy toward Iran that linger to this day. 1/15

When George HW Bush took office in 1989, Iran was not near the top of a foreign policy agenda dominated by deterioration of USSR, potential reunification of Germany, and turmoil in China. Iran was severely weakened and its nuclear program and regional influence was limited. 2/15

But Iran-aligned groups continued to hold Americans hostage in Lebanon, an issue that weighed on Bush as it did Reagan. In his inaugural, Bush called on Iran to help bring home those Americans, pledging that "good will begets good will." 3/15

> To the world, too, we offer new engagement and a renewed vow: We will stay strong to protect the peace. The "offered hand" is a reluctant fist; but once made, strong, and can be used with great effect. There are today Americans who are held against their will in foreign lands, and Americans who are unaccounted for. Assistance can be shown here, and will be long remembered. Good will begets good will. Good faith can be a spiral that endlessly moves on.
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> Great nations like great men must keep their word. When America says something, America means it, whether a treaty or an agreement or a vow made on marble steps. We will always try to speak clearly, for candor is a compliment, but subtlety, too, is good and has its place. While keeping our alliances and friendships around the world strong, ever strong, we will continue the new closeness with the Soviet Union, consistent both with our security and with progress. One might say that our new relationship in part reflects the triumph of hope and strength over experience. But hope is good, and so are strength and vigilance.

For Bush, resolving the hostage issue was the "sine qua non" of improved relations with Iran.

He signed a classified policy directive instructing US to "be prepared for a normal relationship with Iran" and authorized the beginning of indirect negotiations. 4/15

Iran took the offer seriously, and President Rafsanjani worked to secure the release of hostages, via the tireless UN envoy Giandomenico Picco.

By the end of 1991, all Americans were freed from Lebanon. The US began to offer some promised "good will" in response. 5/15

US paid compensation for Iranian military materiel impounded after 1979; it permitted US companies to import Iranian oil; and it supported the UN's judgement at the end of 1991 that Iraq was responsible for the Iran-Iraq War, a longstanding Iranian demand. 6/15

But the US recognized that Iran expected more "good will," and it initiated a policy review in late 1991/early 1992 to decide "Should goodwill now beget goodwill?" in the words of Bruce Riedel, who served on the NSC at the time. 7/15

The decision was "no." The policy review concluded in April 1992 that not only should "goodwill not beget goodwill," but Iran was a threat that needed to be contained.

It was a contradiction of Bush's inaugural pledge that left Rafsanjani out to dry. Why?

8/15

The answer has to do with an expansion of Iranian nuclear and terrorist activity during precisely the time of the policy review.

This included the March 1992 suicide attack on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, carried out by Hezbollah. 9/15

At the same time, Iran engaged in a wide-ranging campaign to acquire sensitive pieces of nuclear technology. Tehran expanded nuclear ties with China, India, Argentina, Germany, and Russia, at a scale and scope that concerned US officials. 10/15

Much of this technology has plausible civilian applications. But this Iranian campaign came a time of shifting attitudes towards "dual use" technology and a rising sensitivity about the risks of nuclear proliferation, given the dissolution of USSR and secret Iraqi program. 11/15

This led the CIA to publicly assess for the first time that Iran was "seeking to acquire a nuclear weapon capability. Barring significant. technical input from abroad, however, the Iranians are not likely to achieve that goal before the year 2000." 12/15

Due to both terrorism and growing concerns about Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions, good will did not beget good will.

The Bush administration pivoted to a much more forward-leaning posture toward Iran, which Clinton adopted in his "Dual Containment" policy. 13/15

A final note: Israel played essentially no role in the US conclusion that Iran represented a threat. Remarkably, Israeli leaders were so nonplussed about Iran that the military intelligence directorate had closed its Iran office by 1990. 14/15

More details are in my journal article, "United States Iran Policy and the Role of Israel, 1990-1993," including more about Israel's threat perceptions and the impact of the Gulf War on US-Iran ties.

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United States Iran Policy and the Role of Israel, 1990-1993

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ABSTRACT

In 1993, the Clinton Administration announced that containing the 'hostile' and 'dangerous' government of Iran would be a key tenet of its Middle East policy. To some scholars, the Administration's decision reflected the influence of Israel and its supporters in Washington over American foreign policy. However, this conventional wisdom is misguided. Bill Clinton inherited and endorsed the Iran policy of his predecessor, George H.W. Bush, who concluded that Iran's support for terrorism and pursuit of nuclear technology warranted a strong response. Bush decided on this approach when Israel was distracted and unconcerned about Iran. In fact, Israeli leaders only began drawing attention to the risks posed by Iran after America changed its policy.