



WOODS: Well, that is quite a clever title. I like *The CIA Insider's Guide to the Iran Crisis*. That's just great. And what matters to me more than the title, though, is seeing your name on the cover, because I see your name and I know I want to read it.

PORTER: Well, thank you very much. That's very kind of you.

WOODS: Well, my pleasure. Now, you have a lot of documents as appendices in this book, but even with the documents, this is very digestible. This is not going to take you forever to read, and I think an informed person really needs to read this material, because for heaven's sake, the prospect of war with Iran has been flaring up for three presidencies. I mean, for all I know, maybe even Bill Clinton had some thought about it, but I don't remember that.

PORTER: Yep.

WOODS: But I do recall very distinctly thinking that even under George W. Bush there might be war with Iran. And then, in those days, there was a big intelligence report, I think, in December 2007, that really stopped him in his tracks. So as an American, you've got to know this material. I guess, given that we're talking for about a half an hour, I want to pace ourselves appropriately, so I don't want to spend too much time on the CIA coup portion, because I have discussed that on the program in the past. But let me ask you this: a lot of critics of American foreign policy, particularly critics of the bellicosity toward Iran, will say that Americans act as if history began yesterday, and they neglect to mention that there was CIA intervention in 1953 in Iran. But the response to that might well be: okay, maybe, but they weren't overthrowing an Islamic extremist in those days, so that doesn't really explain why there would be such an Islamic resurgence and Islamic resentment against the US. So what's the answer there?

PORTER: Well, that's an interesting point, that the Islamic part of the US sort of belligerence, if you will, in the Middle East is a more recent phenomenon. No question about that. In the 1950s, the US interventionism was really not against Islamic extremism or Islamics at all, but it was against nationalism. It was against Middle Eastern nationalism. And Mohammed Mossadegh, then the democratically elected prime minister of Iran, was the perfect example of that broader problem in US belligerency in the Middle East during the 1950s.

But of course, it went well beyond that. The CIA was involved in a whole series of coups or attempted coups throughout the Middle East. They wanted to get rid of — well, they did try to carry out coups against the elected government in Syria. The British wanted them to help overthrow Nasser in Egypt, although that never happened. But this was a broader phenomenon, and obviously during the Eisenhower era when the United States government was not using military force to try to overthrow governments, but rather using the CIA. So it was a very different phenomenon, but no less troubling in terms of the implications going deep into the problem of US interventionism.

WOODS: Chapter two is on how Iran became the enemy, and that chapter two I think has a title that itself could be a standalone book: "How Iran Became the Enemy," the way it's been demonized. Now, of course, I wouldn't want to live under the Iranian regime. I'm not saying these are wonderful people. That's completely irrelevant. What I want to know is what is it that makes it impossible for the US regime to negotiate with it, to coexist with it. Of course,

we have the history of the hostage situation 40 years ago now, but is that still what the problem is? I mean, I don't know — I guess I'm asking you two questions. What's the officially stated reason for the hostility, but what do you think is the real reason?

PORTER: Well, that's exactly the right way to formulate the problem. I think the officially stated reason is a combination, has been for some years now, quite a few years, a combination of what is called malign activities by the Iranians, meaning that they have carved out positions of influence throughout the Middle East, greater Middle East, really, by having allies in Lebanon, in Syria, in Iraq, and now in Yemen. And then the other side of the equation is terrorism, that Iran is the world's greatest or biggest state sponsor of terrorism.

So I think that's sort of the double whammy that is thrown out, that Iran has been, at least since the Bush administration, I would say. And I think both of those parts of the equation are false. You'll notice that I didn't actually mention the nuclear program, because that is not part of the verbal propaganda that is upfront the most. That is in the background of this always, and I know we'll come back to that. But it's really the terrorist activities that seem to be in the forefront most of the time.

And I would argue, and I do argue with John Kiriakou in this book, that both of those are really equally false, that first of all, if you look at what we're talking about really in in what they call malign activities, it's the reality that since the late 1990s, really coinciding with a period of intense US interventionism in the Middle East, Iran has had opportunities aplenty to take advantage of its Shia allies, and allies that are not Shia but have interests that that are similar to those of Iran, to use those ties to advance its security interests.

And I think that one of the great contributions of this book, perhaps the most important one of all in my view, is the section that that explains how the Iranians have actually been using those ties to essentially create the only kind of deterrence that they have a possibility of creating, that is a deterrent to attack by Israel or the United States against Iran's territory. Because Iran has never really had an adequate ballistic missile deterrent. Its ballistic missiles have either been short in terms of the range, or inaccurate and thus unable to hit military targets, or there've been too few of them, or a combination of all three.

And so basically since 1999, I show in this essay, this part of the essay, that Iran has been using particularly its ties with Hezbollah in Lebanon, but then more recently with Syria and with Iraq and with the Houthis in Yemen, to have additional deterrent forces that can be used — that is, rockets or missiles — that can be used to retaliate if the United States or Israel were to attack Iran. And it's because of those additional retaliatory capabilities that they have set up over these years that they now have been able to have a relatively sound deterrent to particularly the Israelis. Because really for the first time since 2006, the Israelis have been deterred. They are not going to attack either Hezbollah or Iran for the foreseeable future because of this deterrent. But that is really the secret behind this whole notion of malign activities. That is 99% of the reason why Iran has been involved in all these countries in the Middle East.

WOODS: Before we proceed, can you tell me something about your coauthor? I was not familiar with him.

PORTER: Well, John Kiriakou is the former CIA official, he was actually best known for the fact that he basically gave the names of CIA officials who were involved in the torture program to people in the press. And he was then accused and actually convicted of having violated the 1917 Espionage Act, the Anti-Espionage Act, which of course has been the act of choice in getting at whistleblowers in the national security arena. And so he spent I think roughly two years in federal prison for his whistleblowing and has been out now for a few years, and he has had a hard time finding a job because of his legal status. He's asked for a pardon but hasn't gotten one.

But he also was a relatively high official in the CIA before he quit in 2004 for personal reasons, because he had kids in who were living in the Midwest, and he had to come back every weekend or every other weekend at 3:15am in the morning and sit at his desk. And he was asking for a break to be able to visit with his kids, and they wouldn't allow that, and so he quit the CIA. But he's a very smart guy. He's a very principled person, and I'm glad to have him as a coauthor and a friend.

WOODS: All right, now, of course, I want to get to *the* topic around which practically all discussion of Iran has revolved in recent years. All right, obviously people are interested in the question of Iran's nuclear program, and this is a very, very, for me, difficult issue to get straight, because it's like when people ask me about my opinion of the Kennedy assassination, to have an informed opinion on this, there are 25 books I'd have to read for starters. And I just feel like I have only one lifetime. I'm not going to devote it to 25 books on the Kennedy assassination.

Well, likewise here, you hear so many conflicting reports. I hear people saying the Iran nuclear deal was great. I hear people saying it was a disaster. I hear libertarians saying it was great. I hear left-liberals saying it was great. I hear all that. And then I hear people saying, oh, the Iranians weren't living up to it. I hear reports about the IAEA, even they are saying that Iran needs to be more cooperative. So I don't know what on God's green earth I'm supposed to think about any of this. My inclination is in the direction of: it was a good deal and it's too bad that it was set aside. But that's about it. So I need you to take some time to fill in the blanks for us, please.

PORTER: Right, well, first of all, let me just comment on the deal itself as a kind of introduction to the subject. My view of the joint plan, if you will, the JCPOA, is that yes, it was something that needed to be signed once the process started, needed to be signed and it needs to be kept, but there wasn't a flaw at the center of it. The problem is not the flaw that the Trump administration and his supporters claim. The fly in it is that the Obama administration had bought into the whole idea that the only way to get along with Iran, the only way to have a relationship with Iran that was safe for the United States was to force Iran into this deal by the pressure of sanctions and the threat of war.

Now, the threat of war was not US war, but it was Israel. The Obama administration was essentially exploiting the threat that Netanyahu had been making for years against Iran, that the Israelis were prepared to attack unless the Iranians caved in on the nuclear issue. But essentially, the Obama administration was depending on heavy coercive diplomacy – which is what they called it. That's the way they thought of it – to get the Iranians to sign on to this deal.

And in the book, the argument is laid out here, that in fact what happened was not that the Iranians were coerced by Obama as much as that they had their own interest in reaching this deal so that they could end the sanctions that had been levied against the Iranian economy all the way back to the Clinton administration in the 1990s. They wanted to use this diplomatic process to try to end the extraordinary economic pressures that had been applied to Iran for so long. And they thought that by having a nuclear deal, they would satisfy the United States once and for all and they could now rejoin the rest of the world's economy the world economy. But of course, we now know what happened. The Obama administration had its day, but then Trump took over and a totally different point of view, which was violently anti-Iranian. They had no desire to live in peace with Iran at all, essentially, became the basis for US policy.

So this analysis that I've just laid out is, in a way, the endpoint – or not the endpoint, but near the endpoint – of a much longer analysis that goes all the way back to the beginning of the Iranian nuclear program and basically explains how horribly wrong the entire US official approach to this subject has been, how one administration after another and the US

intelligence community have simply gotten the entire Iranian nuclear program issue wrong from the start.

It starts with the fact that the Reagan administration during the Iran-Iraq War was of course supporting Iraq. They were supporting Saddam Hussein's effort to get into Iran, to take down the regime. And when that failed and the Iranians went on the counter offensive, then there was panic in Washington. The Reagan administration said we've got to do everything we can to assist the Saddam Hussein regime to fight back. And part of that, then, was to announce that the United States is going to forbid Iran from having a peaceful nuclear program. And of course, this was a program that they inherited from the Shah, right? This was the program that the United States government during the Nixon administration was all in for. I mean, we thought it was great. And then suddenly, as soon as the Islamic Republic was formed, the scene shifted and the United States was no longer in favor of it.

And it was a way of punishing Iran, essentially. And in fact, in my previous book, in the *Manufactured Crisis* book, I mentioned the fact that the McFarlane, who was the national security adviser during the Reagan administration, told me personally more recently that they never considered the potential consequences of this decision in the Reagan administration to tell Iran that they could not have a nuclear program — which was that essentially the Iranians would go underground. They would go to the black market to get the ability to have their own nuclear enrichment program, which they had not planned originally. They had planned to get their enriched uranium from a French consortium. And instead of doing that, they were forced to have their own enrichment program or to give it up completely, which was not acceptable to these extremely nationalist Iranians.

And so that was the beginning of this dynamic that we see played out during the 1980s and 1990s, where as soon as the Iranians go to the black market to get the enrichment facility or the enrichment technology, then the US government accuses them of wanting nuclear weapons. And there's no evidence whatsoever that that's the case. And in fact, in this book, I tell the story that I got from an interview with the Iran-Iraq Wartime minister of Sepah, the minister of armaments during the Iran-Iraq War, about his meetings with the Supreme Leader Khomeini, in which he was asking Khomeini to approve a set of programs of weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons, biological weapons, and nuclear weapons. And Khomeini said, *Absolutely not. This is illegal. We cannot have this in a Shiite government. It's against all Islamic law.* And so they never did it. They never had any weapons of mass destruction because of Khomeini, and it was continued under his successor, Khamenei, in the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond.

So, essentially, Iran is the only state in the history of humankind that has refused to have weapons of mass destruction on religious grounds, but nobody will pay any attention to this because of the pressure of this relentless propaganda campaign that has been unfolding ever since the 1980s and 1990s. And it's continued up to the present time, layer upon layer of propaganda about how Iran is doing all these suspicious things.

Without getting into details in this interview because we don't have the time, I can tell you that everything that you have read in the news media on this subject has been simply wrong, because the news media has not been covering the facts. They have been covering what they've been told by US officials and not actually covering the actual documents that are available to them through the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and its reports. And if you do actually read those reports carefully, what you find is that the IAEA never found any evidence suggesting that Iran was indulging in a secret nuclear weapons program. Although they ultimately did buy into a set of documents, which I show in the book was fabricated. These were fabricated documents.

WOODS: So these are the documents that were announced or released somewhere around April 2018?

PORTER: Well, there are two sets of them. This is a little bit more complicated. The first set actually suddenly materialized in 2004. And for a long time, there was a mystery surrounding where they came from, how they arrived in the hands of US intelligence. And there were stories about a scientist or an engineer, an Iranian who had been part of the secret nuclear weapons program in Iran, who secreted these documents on a laptop computer, or his wife did, out of the country. And then there was a story about a businessman who would become a spy for German intelligence and he got them out. Both of those turned out to be lies.

And I interviewed the former foreign office official who had been in charge of North American affairs in 2013, on the record. Karsten Voigt, the former German official, told me that he had been brought in by German intelligence officials in 2004 who told him that they knew all about these documents. They had gotten them from a member of the Mojahedin-e Khalq, the MEK, which is this terrorist organization that had been working for Saddam Hussein against the Iranian regime during the Iran-Iraq War and then went to work for these rallies against Iran. And the German intelligence absolutely did not trust the guy because he was MEK, and they warned the CIA that these documents should not be relied upon. But they went ahead and did it anyway, apparently, because they were accepted as evidence by the Bush administration that Iran was in fact going for a secret nuclear weapons program.

So that was the first set of documents, and I show that there are many indications, several indications that these were fabricated, because they have information in them that is at odds with information that we can verify from objective sources that we know are accurate. So that was the first set.

Then the second set is the one that you just referred to, when Netanyahu told the story and had a big slideshow of how Mossad stole a half a ton of Iranian nuclear documents from a nuclear archive, from a warehouse in central Tehran. And in fact, if you look closely as I have at what is in these documents, some of them are the same ones that were in the original collection and they're equally fraudulent. And so the whole thing stinks. It just doesn't add up. That's the short version of it, and I can go into more detail if we have time.

WOODS: Well, let's try, just to fill out the whole discussion, and we touch on a little bit of each thing – of course, what people should do, and the idea behind this is, is to whet their appetites so that they go and read this. And I know people think I have a lot of books that I have to read already, but the beauty of this one, as I said, is it can be digested fairly quickly and it's a good resource to have on hand.

PORTER: Well, you're right, Tom. I mean, I like this book for one reason: it is short. It's the first time that I've done a book that is short. Six chapters, each one is much shorter than the usual chapter, and so it is digestible. It really is. I like that fact.

WOODS: I want to take you a little bit outside your comfort zone, which is history, facts, journalism, and make you a prognosticator. And maybe not a prognosticator. I'm not really asking you to predict how this will turn out. But can you describe for me, let's say, even just a remotely plausible scenario in which both sides begin to stand down and some kind of sanity gets restored to the relationship? What would that look like?

PORTER: Yes, I can. I can think of a scenario in which that would happen. I don't know how likely it is. I'm afraid it isn't very likely. But the scenario is that Donald Trump picks a new national security adviser who has his wits together, his or her wits together. But it's going to be somebody who has been looking at this problem from a different angle, and who understands that in order to have peace with Iran, the US government is going to have to back off the all-out hostility that it is now sort of hooked into with regard to its Iran policy.

That is a possibility. We have seen Donald Trump over the last year refuse repeatedly to carry out military actions that his advisors, particularly John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, have been urging on him. And in so doing, he has indicated that he does have a much different perspective on the problem from the – let's face it. I mean, these are people who are

warmongers. They would prefer to have a military confrontation with Iran for reasons which are really not in the interest of the United States. And so there is a degree of hope here that Trump can somehow find a person who would, in fact, be giving him advice on how to get out of this situation. It is possible to do it diplomatically, politically, but he doesn't have a clue at this point. He needs somebody to tell him how to do that. Now, I hope that will happen either before the election or after the election, but I am afraid that the odds at this point seem to me to be against it.

But that's the scenario that I would see as a way of at least a possibility of getting out of what is otherwise a path to real military confrontation with Iran, because Iran at this point, as I see it, does not have a viable option other than to do something to provoke a confrontation with the United States because of the all-out pressure on the Iranian economy that the Trump administration has been waging. That is to say, the policy of taking away Iran's customers for its oil, that is to say, essentially sanctioning I think it's seven countries that have been regular customers of Iran for many years now and essentially taking away 60% of their national budget. Iran cannot continue for very long to allow this to happen. And so I believe very strongly they must respond. And the IRGC, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as everyone knows by now who is listening to your show, I'm sure, has more power than they ever have had before, more influence in Iranian policy. So if Trump were to be reelected, I see that there is a very grave danger that we would have a confrontation, because the IRGC needs to push the United States into a situation where they must make a decision about changing its policy or to consider changing its policy.

WOODS: It's such a shame, because Trump was uniquely positioned to change things if he had really wanted to. Now, he signaled quite clearly in the campaign that he was going to chuck the new nuclear deal, so I didn't have real hopes for this.

PORTER: Right.

WOODS: But the idea, of course, obviously, it's the hackneyed example of Nixon going to China. You can get away with it because people know him as a tough guy and he's a Republican, so they'll get the Republican sheep to go along with it because a Republican is doing it. Whereas if Joe Biden tries to do it, you know what will happen.

PORTER: Right, because he is a right-wing Republican or at least he's perceived as that, he can get away with making a deal with Iran. I agree with you on that.

WOODS: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, and unfortunately — whereas if Bernie or Biden, because most people are not making subtle distinctions, realizing Biden is just as much part of a war party as anybody else. But they'll say, oh, it's the liberal Democrats and they're always hating America, and they blame America first and all this. And you just won't be able to get anywhere, so they won't try, is the thing. They won't even try.

PORTER: Well, I think that that there would be — actually, I do believe that whether it's Biden or Bernie and were they to be elected, either one of them, I think that they would go back to the deal.

WOODS: Yeah, you know what? Now that I say that, I actually think I did overstate that, because I get so frustrated with the bipartisan war party, that I think in that case, I was prone to exaggeration. I actually do think that there would be some change in that case. That's true. That would be one silver lining of either of these people. And of course, Biden, that's part of the Obama legacy, presumably, right? I mean, that is something that he would presumably want to maintain.

PORTER: There's no way that he would not go back to the agreement. Now, it's very possible that because of the pressure from the right, Biden would give in and make demands on Iran and start a new diplomatic process. I wouldn't rule that out. I think in the case of Bernie, he would definitely not try to renegotiate it. He would try to go back to the original agreement. But with Biden, I'm not so sure.

WOODS: So we'll see. The thing is very disappointing that, as I say, there was a possibility for a breakthrough, because if Trump had said I'm going to go negotiate with some Iranian officials, it would have shocked everybody and no one would have known what to think, and it would have been funny to see all the peaceniks suddenly trying to make excuses for why it's wrong for him to go talk to them. And then funny to see, likewise, Republicans who cheered every war in places they can't even pronounce explaining why this one's okay for him to talk to. It would have been great to see, and unfortunately, we didn't get it.

PORTER: Well, you know that he did, in fact, make it clear that he wanted to negotiate with Iran back in September, if I remember correctly, although I may be off slightly. Late summer or early fall, he did send signals to the Iranians, but at that point, the Iranian were not interested, because they didn't believe that anything really could come out of this. And they were probably right.

WOODS: Yeah.

PORTER: But he has had inclinations in that direction already, no doubt about that. But the other point that I want to make very quickly — I know we don't have any time here — is that the Pentagon is undoubtedly in favor of trying to find a way out of this. They do not want to go to war with Iran.

WOODS: That is a big, big silver lining here, or it's a big break on this, thankfully. I keep hearing that from everybody.

PORTER: For sure. I mean, the pressure for war, the desire to take chances about a war with Iran, it's all coming from political sources that are aligned with Israel. I mean, it is the single source of pushing the United States in the direction of confrontation with Iran now. I think the politics of the United States are bifurcated no, between those people who are ready to entertain at the very least taking serious chances of going to war with Iran because of alignment with Israeli interests, and those who don't want to have any part of it.

WOODS: So let's say you've got 30 seconds. You're on Fox News. You've got 30 seconds and you're talking to a Fox News audience, and they believe every caricature you can possibly imagine about Iran. What do you say in 30 seconds at least to make them think?

PORTER: I would say you have to take much more seriously the change in the objective military balance in the Middle East that has given Iran now the capability to exact far higher consequences, far higher costs on the United States if the United States were to decide to go to a military confrontation, a war effectively, with Iran. The United States could still win, no doubt about it. But Iran has far greater national interest at stake, and that means that they will take many more chances. They are ready to take a great chance of high costs for a war than the United States is, and they are willing to get involved in a serious confrontation in order to force the United States to back away from its essentially illicit pressure on the Iranian economy. So we need to take that much more seriously than we have.

WOODS: All right, that was a pretty good job. I gave you an impossible task, and I would say you rose to the occasion. All right, the book we've been talking about is *The CIA Insider's Guide to the Iran Crisis: From CIA Coup to the Brink of War*. I will link to it at TomWoods.com/1609, which is our episode number for today. And Gareth, tell me again if people want to follow your writing — I know you talk to Scott Horton quite a bit, but in terms of your writing, what would be sources they would look at and I'll link to them.

PORTER: Well, I'm elusive. I have a number of places where I've published, including *The American Conservative*, *Consortium News*, *Truthout*, *Truthdig*. Occasionally, I've been in other places, but those are the four major ones.

WOODS: Okay, very good. So TomWoods.com/1609 is where you can get an easy link over to the book we've been discussing with its coauthor, Gareth Porter. Well, thanks so much for doing this. I mean, it's tempting — if I'd given Scott Horton this job, he would have come back

with a 700-page volume, which, not to say we don't need that. We need both, right? We need one that the average person will actually get through, and thank heavens you have done that.

PORTER: Thank you so much, Tom.