

Engagement is Folly

A review by Jerry Gordon (March 2014)



[*Dancing with the Devil: The Perils of Engagement with Rogue Regimes*](#)

by Michael Rubin

Encounter Books (Feb.18, 2014)

Hardcover: 384 pp.

ISBN: 978-1594037238

In January 1954, during a White House visit, Britain's redoubtable Prime Minister Winston Churchill [remarked](#):

And do not suppose that this is the end. This is only the beginning of the reckoning. This is only the first sip, the first foretaste of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us year by year unless by a supreme [recovery](#) of moral health and martial vigor, we arise again and take our stand for [freedom](#) as in the olden time.

[Michael Rubin](#), former Pentagon expert on Iran and Iraq during the Bush era, now a  Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), echoes Churchill's observations about appeasement in his new book, [*Dancing with the Devil: The Perils of Engagement with Rogue Regimes*](#). It is a dossier of the incredulous cupidity of American governments over nearly five decades who have been played for fools by nuclear obsessed Iran, Gaddafi's Libya, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the draconian hermit kingdom of North Korea, and Islamic nuclear power and proliferator, Pakistan. Add to this rogues gallery are non-state aspirants from the Islamic terror groups; the Taliban, the Palestinians, both the PLO-Fatah and Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran's proxy, Hezbollah. The finely honed tools used by these states and terror groups include kidnapping, terror, deceitful evasion of agreements, bluster and bribery.

As Rubin reveals, Iran under the Ayatollahs, perfected their chess playing based on the successes of their North Korean allies in what George W. Bush called the "axis of evil." They followed North Korea's lead on negotiations with the EU, IAEA and the US to aggressively pursue nuclear weapons and missile programs. Not unlike the mafia, through coercion they forced their unwary adversaries even to provide the funding. Witness the billion or more that the US provided North Korea in food, oil and light water nuclear reactors in the vain hope of stopping their perfection of nuclear weapons and ICBMs, the latter possibly able by decade's end to reach the West Coast of the US. All while taking hostage an American naval intelligence crew and ship, *the USS Pueblo*, kidnapping Americans, Japanese and South Koreans, pummeling South Korean islands with artillery and sinking their vessels killing dozens of seamen. Pakistan, which Rubin considers a rogue state, uses its intelligence service, the ISI to support terrorism through the Taliban both inside Pakistan and in Afghanistan. The ISI lent logistic support to the murderous [a billion here, a billion there and pretty soon you're talking about real money.](#)"

Rubin's book is a cautionary tale that the cost in human terms of dealing with this international mafia surpasses the risks involved with such undertakings. Witness the millions of victims in regional and asymmetrical wars, especially American and coalition partners dead and injured, whether hostages or service personnel, often killed by these rogue regimes during negotiations. Talk of this stripe is not cheap, rather it is very dear. Rubin gives us well documented illustrations about what he deems the high costs of such engagements from episodes during the Presidencies of Carter, Reagan, the Bushes, father and son, Clinton and now Obama. Under the delusion that grievances can be resolved through discussions, our national security interests and those of allies, especially Israel, have been suborned by pursuit of misguided and uninformed policies aided by politicized intelligence.

Both national security advisers and State Department diplomats believed in all too many instances the Ancient Chinese maxim of Sun Tzu from his classic [The Art of War](#), "keep your friends close and enemies closer." Unfortunately, we know very little about these new post-modern enemies, their ideologies and guile. Our national leaders have evaded the ancient [Abdulrahman Alamoudi](#), a former confidant and business partner of Republican notable, [Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center](#) with \$350,000 in his possession. Alamoudi is presently serving a 23 year term in a federal prison.

Note Rubin's rubrics that should be tattooed underneath the eyelids of American and Western negotiators.

- False assumptions undermine strategic interests. Rogues do not accept

American standards of diplomacy or the sanctity of agreements.

- Incentives backfire; rather than ameliorate tension, they convince rogues that bad behavior pays.
- Seldom anymore do diplomats set the right circumstances for success.
- Complicating the mix is the bizarre attraction that Islamism for many Western progressives. Islamism is the antithesis of liberalism over issues like feminism, gay rights, tolerance and individual rights.
- Diplomats may see negotiation as a means to resolve conflict, but rogues do not share that view. When diplomats become invested in high-profile engagement they refuse to admit failure. Too often a rogues' pledge to act substitutes for results.
- The State Department avoids metrics to judge diplomacy's effect, and therefore seldom cuts its losses when its policy fails.
- Compounding the problem is a tendency at the State Department to shop around for compliant partners.
- Personal ambition also pushes engagement further than is strategically wise.
- The maxim that it "never hurts to talk" has cost lives. Diplomacy imbues rogue leaders with respectability and rewards both bluster and terror.
- When it comes to diplomacy with democracies, rogues also have the advantage of time: they know that every four or eight years, they can seek a better deal.
- False sincerity threatens US national security.
- Defiance also inspires other rogues.
- Deal making undermines moral clarity.
- Choosing to preserve rogues rather than undermine them is dangerous.
- Diplomacy is a potent tool, but no tool can solve every problem.

Will these maxims drawn from Rubin's book *Dancing with the Devil* filter through the agendas of President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry? They are both intent on achieving deals with

rogues states like Iran, Pakistan and the Palestinian Authority as described in Jonathan Schanzer's book, [*The State of Failure*](#). After reading *Dancing with the Devil*, we sincerely doubt it.

Also see Jerry Gordon's collection of interviews,