



HK: Welcome to a “Conversation With History.” I’m Harry Kreisler of the Institute of International Studies. Our guest today is Robert Baer who is the author of two bestsellers, *Sleeping With the Devil*, about U.S./Saudi relations, and *See No Evil*, which recounts his twenty-year service in the Central Intelligence Agency. His newest book, just published in paperback, is *The Devil We Know: Dealing With the New Iranian Superpower*. Baer was played by George Clooney in the movie, “Syriana,” and he is a regular contributor to Time.com, and he’s written articles for the Wall Street Journal, Vanity Fair and the Washington Post. Bob, welcome to Berkeley – well, it’s good to have you on the campus.

RB: It’s like coming home.

HK: Where were you born and raised?

RB: I was born in California and I was raised in Europe and in Aspen, Colorado.

HK: And looking back, how do you think your parents, especially your mother, shaped your thinking about the world?

RB: She was a professor at UCLA of political science, she taught there many years, and she was a reader. That’s what she was – she was a reader. So, when I was dragged to Europe, I read all the time – didn’t have friends, just read all the time. And I always continued that, even through college, reading things that were never assigned. Rather than doing final exams, studying for them, I read Tolstoy, *War and Peace*. The exams showed it but I did get to the end of the book.

HK: So, it was a combination, under her auspices, of world travel and a lot of reading that really made you a cosmopolitan as a young person.

RB: A cosmopolitan but she was also a contrarian. She never accepted popular views, she questioned everything, she questioned my education, she questioned politics. She was always in some sort of opposition or another. She ran for sheriff in Colorado at the same time as Hunter Thompson, and her plan was to condemn the ski area, nationalize it on a county level. So, she was a bit of a socialist, as well.

HK: You lived in Aspen for a while and you became a skier, and I get the sense from your book about your career in the CIA, in your early years, that skiing was an important place that you learned a lot of skills.

RB: Well, [laughs] I learned how to be reckless.

HK: Well, that's a skill.

RB: There we go – that's a skill, I guess.

HK: Practiced recklessness.

RB: My ski coach was a woman named Crystal Herbert and she had set the women's ski record worldwide, and she taught us to ski fast and recklessly. I assume that carried on into my adult life, at least up until now.

HK: And there was a jump that you took on skis under her tutelage where you really had, in a split second, to make a choice how you would maneuver a Z curve.

RB: It was called the "Moment of Truth" – it was a downhill race in Aspen – where you could either slow down for the turn or just let it run, and it made a difference, it shaved off seconds. You said, "Shave off the seconds. What do you have to lose?" Well, what we had to lose – there were trees on each side and you would've bounced in the trees and that would've been it, but I got through it. I didn't win the race but I did place well.

HK: And your undergraduate education was at Georgetown.

RB: Georgetown and frankly, at eleven other universities. We tended to move around a lot.

HK: Another training for your future career. And then you went into the CIA, but really, it wasn't a career that you were planning for, or you fell into it. Right? You were looking for something to do and took the exam and did well?

RB: I was at Berkeley, studying Chinese, in the summer, running out of money. I was working for the day/night division, Bank of America, down in the Tenderloin in San Francisco, and I had a couple of friends here, we were all going into professions, Bank of America, so forth. And they said, “You know, why don’t you get a job? You’re 22 years old. Apply.” And I said, “Well, I can’t do anything. I don’t have any skills.” I was a liberal arts major. I mean, it’s what a lot of people are facing now. So, the CIA, at the time – it was the Church Committee hearings, investigating the CIA for all sorts of wrongdoing. So, we just thought this was hilarious, my going into the CIA – an Aspen hippy, smoked a lot of dope, mother’s a socialist – applying to the CIA. And the idea was, well, how fast are they going to throw you out the front door. Well, what happened was I went to these interviews in San Francisco and they progressed to the point that surprised me. I mean, I said, “When are they going to come to their senses?” And they never did. It was down the street here. I remember they knocked on my door once, the security people, and at the top of the stairs I had a picture of Mao Tse Tung, and it said in Chinese, “The east wind blows red.” And I mean, the guy didn’t notice it. It should have been my first clue about the CIA. And you know, “You’ve come to the wrong door.” Then he said, “Well, I’m asking for Bob Baer.” I said, “That’s me. “ “Oh, I’m sorry, I was meaning to knock on the neighbor’s door.” And so, I sent him on his way. And then they took me. They took me in the CIA, and before I knew it, I was in an airplane in northern Virginia, one of those old C3s, jumping out with full combat gear. And my question to myself, which is a natural one, “What have I gotten myself into?”

HK: And once you passed the interviews, there were two choices, once you entered the CIA door. One was intelligence, the Director of Intelligence, and the other was operations. And you wound up in operations.

RB: Completely accidentally, again, I was an accidental tourist in all this, the recruiter said analysts are academics, they use open source material mostly, they go to conferences, they’ll come to Berkeley and talk about whatever the issues are of the day, and you join openly the CIA, and well, there’s being an operative. And I said, “Well, I want to actually be an academic. I want to go back to school. I want the CIA to pay for it.” He said, “Well, without a Ph.D., forget it.” So, I became what’s known as an operative. Inside the CIA we call them case officers – that’s the technical term. It’s totally meaningless to most people, but it’s a person who goes overseas and meets with sources. He usually drives around the middle of the night, picks them up – they work in whatever government you’re posted to – they pass you secrets, you hope documents, and you go back in the morning and you translate them, type them up, send them back in to Washington, and they disappear forever. It’s a lot of salesmanship.

HK: Now you’re selling yourself to these people who you’re...

RB: You’re selling betrayal to them. You’re convincing them, betray whatever cause you supposedly stand for and give your secrets to the CIA. You were essentially a bank robber.

HK: It's interesting because as you explain what an operative does, a lot of what we've been talking about seems to have prepared you to do that work and do it well.

RB: Well, what prepared [me] is I never had a home, to speak of. I moved around. My mother rented places. We moved around Europe, we moved around Aspen. In Aspen we had these rentals we changed every year. So, the way the CIA looked at it is I wasn't going to get homesick, and that's sort of one of the first qualifications. People think of the CIA and they think of ninjas with guns, and these suave people, but what they really want is people who are going to go live at the ends of the earth and stay there.

HK: And strangely enough, as I read the account in your book, it's really about judging people, knowing culture and language, and so on. I mean, you really have to have a feel for human beings in their cultural and social context.

RB: You have to figure out what drives them, what their impulses are. You simply can't go around a country and randomly ask people if they want to spy for the CIA. You have to find somebody who's disaffected, disaffected with their government, come from a dysfunctional family, out of money. You have to know who your people are. You're proposing something that in most countries is a capital crime. It's not an easy decision. And you also have to be likeable. You have to spend a lot of time with people, you want them to invite you over, you want them to like you, you have to say – a fairly intelligent conversation, and so on.

HK: At what point do operatives move beyond gathering information and into dirty tricks and operations such as the Church Committee exposed? Did that stop after the Church Committee?

RB: It stopped in a large sense. Since Vietnam, the CIA, until the Bush administration, didn't use torture. It avoided anybody that used torture, and we have what's called covert action, which is overthrowing governments, but mostly it's a paper exercise. We've talked about overthrowing – to get onto the subject – the Iranian regime for years, but it was never serious. No one ever really picked up a gun, no one ever thought anything was going to happen. It was much more of a political gesture, appeasing the anti-Iranian lobby, than anything. Rarely did we get into covert action.

HK: But in an earlier period we did.

RB: We did. But see, I came in at the end of that. It was the end of Vietnam, you know, the – Mossadeq, we all sort of knew about it – but the people that did covert action were shunted aside and fairly ignored.

HK: Now in your book you talk about what it is you're after and you say the idea was to “sift out suppositions, assumptions, hearsay, poorly sourced information, wishful thinking, leaving the facts to stand on their own.” Talk a little about that, because it's something that in this last phase, recent

phase, of the CIA's institutional history, we've been lacking in that, human resources, and instead relying on technology, satellites, imaging, and so on.

RB: Well, I think it's even deeper than that. I think it's often just blistering ignorance of the way the world works. We don't know how to spy anymore. We tend to live off the internet – you know, easy assumptions, quick opinions, quick hits on a country, and then move on, and we don't really get to the depth. What I found – and I don't really write about it in my first book because I'm not allowed to – is that technical sources play a key part in our base knowledge. Let's take it this way. If I want to know about you, I'm not going to ask you, I'm not going to ask your family, I'm not going to ask your friends, I'm not going to ask your students. They're not going to give me frank opinions, totally frank. I don't get frank opinions about myself. What I want to do is get a scanner and listen to your neighbors talking on their cell phones. “Oh, look what Harry's done. He's painted his palm tree green,” or yellow, or something, and they're just furious at you. They're insights into people. And then after I have those insights, then I want to come and talk to you and get your opinion of the world. In truth, the spy world is very layered, and it's the database at the National Security Agency which really gets us inside of a society, or inside of a government. It's not the golden key but you're there. And then you also have satellite photography. If you tell me that you are digging trenches in your garden, for instance, what I'd like to do is get on Google Earth and take a look at your backyard. You have to sort of judge and test human sources at all times. It's ultimately the human sources that are going to get you deep inside and answer questions you couldn't otherwise, but without all these technical – what should I say? – backups, you don't ever get there.

HK: Now in your view of the CIA at the time you left the agency, really, it was failing in the capacity to do this for all sorts of reasons, involving beltway politics to the displacement, you argue, in the Clinton administration of concern with national security and a greater concern with money for campaigns, and so on, so that in the last phase of your career, the intelligence that was being done was minimal with regard to the caucuses and there was a lot of emphasis on completing oil deals in that region.

RB: Well, a couple of things happened. It was the end of the Cold War. The Clinton administration inherited a policy of dismantling the Soviet empire, and the way they were going to dismantle it is to run oil pipelines to give economic independence to the newly independent states. Clinton very clearly said, it's the economy, stupid, and he meant it. He meant it absolutely, completely, by the exact meaning of that term. Inside CIA, at the same time, we were at a loss. The Cold War was over. We spent all our waking days thinking about recruiting sources in Moscow that would tell when Moscow was going to fire nuclear weapons at us. That was our *raison d'être* in life. That went away in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. So, we were unmoored at that point. And then you had a lot of people just retiring, people that knew how to do operations, the operatives, the analysts. They went on to second jobs, they went into academia, they left. The war was over. It was like Francis Fukuyama, it was the end of history. It was silly, it was folly, of course. And then, at the same time, the CIA started hiring contractors, and if you look today, the CIA has

acknowledged that fifty percent of its personnel budget goes to contractors. There're people that come in whose sole motivation is to continue their contracts. And so, they don't want to take risks, they don't want to go to weird places, they don't want to lose their contracts for their company. Their motivation becomes profit, solely profit, as opposed to a patriotic mission, which believe it or not, inside the CIA you had the place driven by patriotism. A CIA officer, coming in, often started at a salary less than a Washington DC policeman. So, we're talking about patriotism, we are talking about excitement – the people came in. And that all started to go away in the nineties, and that's why I left. I left because I wanted to do a second act in something else, writing or in the oil business, I didn't care. I had no idea.

HK: What you're describing is a de-institutionalization of the CIA, both in terms of its mission and personnel, and so on. And this comes out in your book, which title I would like to – See No Evil. I can actually show the audience that book.

RB: It has sort of a biblical title, but I – you know...

HK: Yeah, there's a lot of evil and devils in your three books, actually. [laughs] And for good reason.

RB: And for an unbeliever, that's even stranger.

HK: Yeah. But of course, you were in the Middle East for most of your time. So, your newest book is on Iran, and I want to get to that in a second, but I think there is an interesting story here that tells us about who you are and about your work, because one of the puzzles that you became obsessed with was the bombing of the American Embassy in '83, in Lebanon, and also, the bombing of a barracks there that killed more than two hundred Marines. Why were those events important to you, and then what was it you wanted to know?

RB: Well, there're two things. And as a CIA officer, I don't think about the loss of lives. I mean, you just forget that, the emotion or the politics, or why – what were the motivations of the country behind this, which was Iran. I think about...

HK: Which we did not know at that time.

RB: Well, we did know. We actually had a pretty good idea that the Iranians had gone to war with us in 1981 and continued in Lebanon. I mean, they have since – the Iranian ambassador to Damascus at the time has admitted – all but admitted that they did the Marines and the U.S. Embassy. He said, "We paid for the IJO, the Islamic Jihad Organization." I mean, this is Akhtari. This is an on-record interview. That's not really in dispute, if you're looking at the public record. But what fascinated me was the sheer competence of the attackers. On the embassy bombing they used a stolen truck. They let us trace the serial numbers. It went back to Houston, Texas. There was no really good signal that they were going to do this, that we were going to be the target, our

embassy. But more than that is they managed all these years to hide the name of the bomber. There've been a lot of rumors but the family, the operatives who did the operation, never exposed the boy's name, which is extraordinary in this world, because we tried. We tried, and we looked, we went through messages, old messages, we went everywhere looking for this. The Lebanese were helping us. And again, with the Marines, it was the sheer competence of getting a truck filled with explosives, understanding that they had to get inside the middle of the barracks, they saw a straight route, drove up the steps, exploded the thing remotely. There were no hitches, no electronic hitches. And of course, they had done this to the Israelis, as well, on the 11th of November, 1982, their military barracks. And then the same group of people – and we started to know their names, the Iranians – conducted an eighteen-year war against Israel and southern Lebanon and beat the Israelis. I don't know if you've ever spent any time with the Israel military but it's truly one of the more capable militaries in the world. These are not people who don't know what they're doing – young, committed fighters. And so, the fact that these people, a very small group, beat the Israelis was another eye opener, not only the embassy. And what for me – they were a closed society. See, people didn't write memoirs, they didn't go out in the press...

HK: Who were the closed society?

RB: The Iranians driving this. And they kept their fingerprints off the operations, as well. They were very disciplined, they were very, very good. And for me, I'm fascinated by closed societies, when the facts don't come out about an event that's this big, and an event that had consequences for the United States which we still feel today. We were forced out of Lebanon, as were the Israelis. The Israelis today have lost their deterrence capability because of this small group. So, here's Bob Baer looking into this closed society, trying to get inside to see what made these people tick, where they came from. They were just very confident. And it's not just – across the Middle East you have closed societies. If you look at the Assad family which runs Syria, it's a closed society – you never see the inner circle ever coming out. Saddam was run by a closed society. Ouja, where he was born – the key players in the power ministries all came from that village. I served in Tajikistan and the leadership came from a small village, which I guarantee you, very few people have ever heard of – it's called Baljuan, another closed society. So, for twenty-one years in the CIA these – you know, there's a professor at Harvard that calls them charismatic clans [that] run these countries, and it really makes a difference to what happens to us in the world, understanding them, where they're going to go and what motivates them.

HK: And the way of thinking beyond that they are secretive is that they have tactics to maintain that secrecy. You point out with regard to the Lebanon operations and others, they even created an imaginary organization, I guess, to take credit for the operations. And it was very important for them that they hide the link from this Islamic Jihad Organization, the link to Iran.

RB: There was never – I mean, we caught them occasionally but it was accidentally. The Islamic Jihad Organization was just a name. It was like Black September, the Palestinians that attacked Israeli targets around the world in the early seventies – [it] didn't exist. It was Fatah security. But

the Iranians carried that tactic further. There was no return address for the Islamic Jihad Organization. It was guys living in apartments around the southern suburbs of Beirut, in Baalbek, that moved around, changed identities and were courageous for their cause. The victims wouldn't call them courageous, they'd call them terrorists, but from my point of view as a CIA officer, I had to look at their capabilities and not the moral values that they were operating off of.

HK: Now in your book on Iran, you come up with some conclusions about how the U.S. should relate to Iran, but before we do that, I want to get into how you came to see all of this and what you saw. You started this process of helping us understand that, but the important thing here is, over a twenty-year plus period, Iran demonstrated to you its ability to play the power game and move from a manager of terrorist organizations to a major power that knew how to use terrorism for its long-term goals. And it starts in Lebanon, it also then moves on to Palestine, to Kurdistan, to different places in the region, and now after the U.S. invasion, to Iraq. In all of these cases, they were able to make their game more sophisticated and win as a way to consolidate their power. Is that a fair summary?

RB: It's a fair summary. Look at the whole problem from the Iranian side – the Iran/Iraq war, 1980, Iran is attacked. In a sense they've provoked the attack because they've tried to kill Saddam's foreign minister. They're attacked, Koremshar is taken, Iran – it looks like the regime's going to fall. We go into a war of attrition that at times was as bad as World War I – the Iranians throwing masses of troops – we don't know whether they lost a million or two million people. No one – they don't even know themselves. It was an absolutely devastating war for the Iranians. They lost an entire generation. So, the Iranian commanders said this simply isn't working, conventional warfare, for us, we're not going to win. At the same time, you have Lebanon where you have maybe five hundred Iranian soldiers from the Pastoran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard corps, sitting in Baalbek coordinating attacks on the multinational force, which includes the United States, France, Italy and Britain, the Marines. And very quickly, over a short period of time, they're using unconventional weapons, guerilla weapons, that drive us out. And they're looking at the cost of this – I mean, the Marine bombing maybe cost a thousand, two thousand dollars, it cost no Iranian lives, it cost the life of the suicide bombers, which – by the way, they don't call them suicide bombers, they call them martyrs. We're forced out of Lebanon. 1958, we fought in Lebanon, stayed and won, and it was a fairly democratic, liberal country of our making, in a sense, but now the Iranians have driven us out. How could the Iranians not compare the two wars? And as they continue this warfare against the Israelis in a more and more sophisticated way, they're again comparing the cost. So, Lebanon very clearly becomes their template. Now the question is, can you take Hezbollah, Lebanon, and transfer it to the Palestinians, and this is what they are trying to do now. Can you take the same template and transfer it to Iraq? They clearly have tried this in Iraq. They even borrowed the name Hezbollah, or fake names. There's one, a new group, called the Asaib-al-haq, which is the gangs of righteousness, sort of – not a good – it's probably a good translation. Anyhow – but you get the idea – is they're trying the same thing in Iraq, as we speak, because it is a cheap man's way of exporting revolution, without invasion, without occupation. At the same time, the Iranians have learned – have developed their rocket forces, for instance. So, they've taken terrorism as a deterrent to protect

the revolution, or to expand the revolution, the '79 revolution, and now they've moved it to rocket forces. They've become, as we see in this arc, a much more conventional country. And the argument is, well, if we have rockets and nuclear weapons, we're not going to need terrorism. There's a logic in all of this. I think it's fairly clear.

HK: And you make the important point that one of Khomeini's real lasting legacies was to turn martyrdom, which comes out of the Shia faith, into a battlefield weapon serving the interests of the state. And in all of what we're talking about, what you're seeing is moving from the manipulation of terrorist organizations to a use of them diminishing in the context of the emergence of a state power in Iran to be a player in the game of states in the Middle East.

RB: Well, more than that – suicide bombing – I've spent a lot of time in prisons in the Middle East and talking to failed suicide bombers and the people of these networks, and the Iranian suicide networks I talked to, the families in particular, looked at this as a battlefield tactic. Terrorism does not enter their vocabulary. I was in Tehran and I talked to a basiji – it was on top of a hotel – and I'm...

HK: And this is the group...

RB: Yeah, the group that belongs – the Revolutionary Guard corps – it's a volunteer vigilante. They're the people knocking people around the streets of Tehran today. He was very rational, he was out of the Basij, and I kept on saying, "Where does the theological underpinning come for suicide operations?" And I kept on saying "suicide." In Arabic, it's "intihar." And he finally stopped me and said, "Look, what do you call an American Marine who rushes a machine gun nest in World War II, throws a grenade in it and gets shot, and he knows he's going to be shot? Do you call him a suicide? No, he is a soldier. It's a tactic." What we saw in Lebanon is that almost all of the time they were using suicide bombers against military targets and embassies, which they considered military targets. And they look around and they look at – for instance, in Iran you have Jundullah which is blowing up buses in schools. So, what I saw was inevitable – was a difference between the Iranians who were Shia and Hamas, for instance, which are Sunni, and they have a completely different view. And it's invariably different because the Sunni are in a clash of civilization with the west, so if they can kill as many of us as they can – these are the radicals I'm talking about, a very small minority...

HK: And you're talking about al-Qaeda, also.

RB: Al-Qaeda, yeah – kill the people in the World Trade Center, we'll finally figure out that we've got to get out of the Middle East, and we'll leave. The Iranians, no – it's military. Once they have driven the Israelis out of Lebanon, that was the end of suicide bombings. You don't see another one. I mean, the discipline is incredible. You don't see young kids putting on vests, like in Pakistan, and walking into a crowded area, a crowded market, or in Iraq, blowing themselves up. You don't see Shia in Iraq, for instance, putting on suicide vests and walking into a mosque. The people killing

other Sunni by suicide operations are al-Qaeda against the tribes, for instance. And this continues on, and the Iranians realize this. I've got to say something about the current demonstrations in Tehran and the power struggle, which is very serious. If this were happening in Saudi Arabia or Islamabad, it would be an out-and-out civil war. There'd be tanks in the street, there'd be tens of thousands of people. So, I see Iran as a much more conventional, disciplined, organized society and one of the most organized in the Middle East.

HK: You're making a distinction between suicide bombers which – they don't use that term – occurring under Shia versus Sunni auspices but what I want to understand here is what makes the difference. Is it state power? Is it the difference between Shia and Sunnis because of their faith? Is it the fact that Persian civilization goes back so far and therefore creates a weight to the use of this tactic? Sort this out for ...

RB: It's a good question and it goes back to my biases, and my biases are facts. I'm not referring to the Quran or the Hadith, or anything, what I'm doing is facts. In 1987 or 8, it doesn't matter, there was a hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner, and the guy in the cockpit is flying around Beirut, about ready to land at Cyprus, and he calls back to his controller in Beirut and said, "Listen, we're not getting any closer to getting our demands met. May I kill one of the hostages?" This is from transcripts from the cockpit, which we obviously intercepted, which by the way, is not a secret.

HK: And this is a terrorist who was recently...

RB: Worked for Hezbollah. He's Iranian, he works for Hezbollah – or not Iranian, I'm sorry, he's Lebanese but the Iranians sort of know about this operation, they're not really behind it. So, he calls back from the cockpit and said, "All right, we're in Cyprus now, we've landed. Is there any movement on releasing...? – these are hostages in Kuwait, this is the quid pro quo. And they say, "No, we're not getting there..." And the guys says, "May I kill one of the hostages?" They killed two of them. And he comes back from Beirut – "Yes, we have what's called quera, which is like a fatwa, and we have religious authority," from an ayatollah in this case. It's from Fadlallah. He says, "Yes, you are justified," and so, they killed the two hostages. Now you look at the Sunni, who will simply get on the internet or listen to a sheik in Doha who says you can kill people in certain instances like this, and there's no referral to a religious authority. I spent a lot of time with Hamas bombers, with the networks, and I said, "Well, how did you guys, for instance, justify blowing up a restaurant in Haifa?" "Well, we read the Quran. We read the Hadith and it says you've got to kill your enemies." And I said, "Did you go to a sheik? Is there some sort of papal bull that you can refer to?" And they said, "No, we just read it on the internet. We read the Quran. Of course we can do that. The Israelis have tanks, we don't have tanks, so we can kill..." That was the level of sophistication underpinning these Sunni operations, which you don't find with the Iranians.

HK: Or lack of control, basically. The...

RB: Oh yeah, discipline. Look, the Shia are the Catholics and the Sunni are the Protestants, if you want to put it that way. That's a gross exaggeration but...

HK: So, we're getting a sense of the basis for your book on Iran, having observed the Iranians act in this region, consolidate their power. You point out that there are lines of authority, as you've just described, everything from terrorism to other kinds of operations, but the irony here is we don't always know what those lines of authority are.

RB: We don't have a clue.

HK: All right. And so, now as we enter the present day where there seems to be an explosion of dissent in Iran, on the street, among the young who are modern and cosmopolitan and look to the west, there are divisions among the clerics who rule the country, and we're sitting back and we don't know what the lines of authority are, what the divisions are. We have a vague sense but we aren't able to completely pinpoint who's up and who's down. Why is that? Is that because we don't have operatives in Iran over many years because of our relations with the Iranians, or what?

RB: Well, you know, we don't have operatives in Iran. We have very few Farsi speakers. We do have a couple and what they end up doing is talking to exiles, and exiles – Machiavelli has certainly warned us about them – they want to go home. They want to convince us of something to help them to return. If you and I go to Tehran today and sit down with any of the leaders, Mousavi or Khamenei, or any of them, they're going to tell us a nice little story, and this is the problem with journalism. I mean, yeah, they get into the story and they give the texture, but the leadership is certainly not going to reveal what they're going to do. Did you see anything before June 12th that any of this was going to happen, the demonstrations, the election was going to be thrown, people were going to go out in the street, Mousavi was going to take on Khamenei, Rafsanjani was going to take on Khamenei? I didn't see any predictions of this. So, even [to] the Iranian exiles this all came as a surprise. But not having an American embassy there, not having CIA operatives, we're just that much more blind.

HK: And in a sense we don't know – and let's list all these things. We don't have operatives there, we have the exiles fueling a picture of what's going on that is misleading and then often fueling the imagination of our leadership, as was the case in Iraq, and we also have a lack of understanding as a result of those things of what institutions are at play here. You talk in your book about the Revolutionary Guards. They were key actors in all of the events that you witnessed now, for the last – and they are a hybrid organization that in some ways we don't understand. They own companies, they are separate from the military but part of the military, they have these militias that are going around, beating up people now, the volunteer militias. So, in the end, in this blissful ignorance – well, it's not blissful but it's ignorance – we don't really know what the balance of power is, whether Ahmadinejad controls the Revolutionary Guards or whether the ayatollah does.

RB: We don't know. I mean, look, last week the intelligence chief was happily reporting to Khamenei. The intelligence chief in Iran has always reported to the supreme leader. It's a source of power and holding on to that source of power. It's by convention. He doesn't report to the President, he reports to the Supreme Leader. But on Saturday, Ahmadinejad removes him in a clear struggle between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei. I mean, there're lines of control we don't understand, that I definitely don't understand. I don't understand why this weekend Ahmadinejad has taken on the Supreme Leader. I did not predict that and I haven't seen anybody else predict it, but if they did, you'd better get their tips on the stock market, too. It's just an odd country. Now we know that Ahmadinejad has a following – well, he's a spokesman for several of the commanders in the Revolutionary Guards. We know that Khamenei is their commander. Yet what we don't know is what are the division inside the ranks, and I deal with former and Revolutionary Guardsmen and they don't know either – maybe there're some of them that do. But for me, I've spent my life looking at the Revolutionary Guard corps. You have to understand that my bias is – it's like the Irish priest that comes along and sees a drunk looking under the light, and he says, "Have you lost something?" He says, "Yeah, I've lost my car keys." And the priest says, "Did you lose them here?" He says, "No, but the light's better here." Well, my prejudice is looking at the Revolutionary Guards, so when I see them possibly splitting, I see Iran in a real turmoil.

HK: Now the argument of your book is that we should sit down with Iran and deal, recognize what they see is their vital interest, because as a result of all that we've talking about, they have emerged as a superpower in the region. And so, the question becomes, isn't there a weakness in your argument, given that you've shown us the facts, when we confront these demonstrations and these divisions within the clerics and the relationship of the clerics to the Revolutionary Guard? Isn't there a vulnerability domestically, not necessarily that we can do anything about it, that would call into question how much they can do in the region?

RB: Well, I don't think they're not – I mean, we saw – I see that as the argument and there're a lot of people argue this is good for us because they're going to be weakened. But remember, in 1981, when they were really expanding, you had car bombs going off in Tehran. In '82 there was a power struggle, there was another power struggle in '89. None of this ever slowed down their expansion in the Islamic resistance. 1980 to 1988, you had the Iran/Iraq war. That's when Iran was moving the most aggressively to establish what you'd call a superpower or hegemony in the region. That never slowed them down, the chaos in Tehran. What you tend to see is a regime that feels vulnerable and split, you see it becoming more aggressive, exporting its problems. So, don't be surprised if the Iranians, some faction, will say, listen, the real war is in Iraq because the Sunni are killing Shia, and will you guys quit arguing and let's get to business in Iraq, and then maybe we'll get to business in Tehran, simply divert the Iranians attention. That is a possibility, but I don't look at the demonstrations in Tehran as good for us, necessarily. I think it could be bad. One of the great lies in this argument is about Mousavi and the green party, and that he's some sort of savior on a white horse. The man was head of an office in 1983 that's called the Department of Investigation, studies the Prime Minister's office, which was sending people to Lebanon, killing Americans. The reason he has withstood these accusations of being controlled by foreigners is because his revolutionary

credentials are impeccable. He is not our friend. If he comes to power, Iranian foreign policy will not change. What it will do is we will give it five years and tell the Israelis, don't worry about it, we've got the green party in and these guys are our friends, and they'll develop a nuclear bomb. And the Israelis know that. The Israelis candidate for this election was Ahmadinejad, because the man doesn't sound rational. The Israelis' argument is very simple, look, the guy's crazy, got to get rid of him, the nuclear bomb, we're all dead. That's a very telling argument, at least at a very popular level.

HK: So, what is your view of the nuclear threat from Iran? Presumably if they got a weapon, they could be deterred by the United States and Israel could deter them. So, in this vortex of information about all these things happening, what is it we should worry about? In your book, you're telling us that often we focus on the wrong set of issues because we don't see the Iranian game. How do you come down on nuclear weapons?

RB: You know, the Iranians are playing chess, we're playing checkers. Yeah, they want a nuclear bomb one day, they want to be a hegemon, and you can be a hegemon or a regional superpower – they want a nuclear bomb. But that's not really their concern now. Their real concern is you've got American armies on two of their borders, Afghanistan and Iraq. The other concern is they don't want to see chaos that they can't control in Iraq. They cannot afford for that mess in Iraq – and it is a mess. I don't care what the lies are that people are propagating. It's never – they don't want it to seep across the border. So, those are their major concerns. Now they can continue along their nuclear program – for them, right now, it's a bargaining chip. They want other things. They want sanctions off, they don't want to be embargoed, they don't want to be interfered with, and if it comes down to sitting at this table, they'll postpone their nuclear program. Ahmadinejad and Khamenei are probably going to bed at night, praying that the Israelis hit one of their nuclear facilities, because then you could see them turn on Mousavi. They're saying, if Bibi would just blow this up, drop a couple bombs, we're going to be able to go out and say look, we're under threat.

HK: For the United States is it about choosing between Iran and Israel? I don't mean abandoning Israel, but if we follow the course that you're recommending, accept or come to understand and deal with Iran sees as its vital interests, then we're going to have to not be so passive in the face of things that the Israelis do, both with regard to settlements, with regard to potentially attacking Iran to get rid of its nuclear facilities, do we have to choose in this regard? I'm not saying abandon Israel, I'm just saying not go along with every view they have of the region.

RB: Look, let me put it – the Arab's point of view. Their worst nightmare is that the Israelis, the Americans and the Iranians come to their senses and divide up the Middle East. Look at the geography. You could bookend the Arabs, the Iranians on one side, the Israelis and backed up by American air power and the fleet in the Gulf. And it's an alliance that's not that far away. I think that we could look at the Iranians, and look at the way they have acted in Iraq, which – they have killed Americans. They did it at Karbula in 2005. I have no doubt about that. I could be wrong but I still have no doubt about it. So, they behaved in Iraq, and that's what we really have to look at. They are not suicidal.

HK: The Iranians, yeah.

RB: Yeah. They're not al-Qaeda, they're not suicidal, they don't want to kill themselves. I mean, they could've done enormous damage to us, we would've retaliated, but they didn't. We have to look at their recent record. We have to look at their record in Lebanon. In spite of the 2006 war they've stepped back from confrontation. They've stepped back from confrontation in Gaza. They've had these little dust-ups but they've stepped back. So, I see them as much more accommodating to a grand bargain than I would, for instance, the Taliban, or al-Qaeda, or even huge parts of Saudi Arabia. They just don't like us. There is a clash of civilization there. There isn't with Iran. The Iranians are the only country in the Middle East that really like us – the Iranian people, I mean, not the regime.

HK: My conclusion about you and your book is that you're the operative who has been, or has become, a realist when you look at the region. And you see the game of statecraft and the role of states in bringing order to the region and reaching a settlement about the powers that be. Now the problem, it would seem to be, is just ticking off the three players here, Israel, Iran and the United States, is the domestic politics in each, which it would seem interferes with the rationality of what you're proposing. By that I mean it doesn't make your argument wrong, it just makes the possibilities of it being implemented less likely. You can look at Israel, the hawks in Israel want to go and attack Iran, there are hawks in the United States who are significant actors in the debate, even under Obama, and in Iran we've got a situation where there're players jockeying for position, we don't even understand who they are and what power they bring to the game and how it'll come out.

RB: Well, let's talk about the neocons. Who's done more damage to Israel than the neocons, who've completely diverted the attention of the United States from Iran to Iraq? Obama is a hostage to Iraq, he wants to get out, he goes to bed at night hoping that nothing happens there. If it hadn't been for Iraq, we would've been able to deal forcefully with Iran, and who brought us the war in Iraq? The neocons. It's because they have a superficial knowledge of the Middle East, entirely. They are – I mean, the Israelis – I spent a lot of time in Israel, but they were just furious about this war.

HK: In Iraq, our war.

RB: In Israel, yeah, just furious about it. I mean, what're you guys doing? You're empowering the Iranians because the country's going to become Shia with democratic elections. And the Shia, whether they like the Iranians or not, are going to spend the next twenty years deferring to Tehran. They have to, they have no choice. They'll split in the end but right now – so, you've empowered Iran, you've given it a piece of the puzzle which it didn't have before, for no conceivable reason. So, yes, the popular view of the Middle East – the memory of the mullahs – the memory of the takeover of the embassy, the Marines with the blindfold, just the popular rhetoric in the op-ed pages in the New York Times and the Washington Post, are all the same. Iran, the regime of the bad guys. They

are the bad guys but what they're missing are the nuances and the fact that they're ultimately not suicidal.

HK: Now how do we move toward a rationality in the debate? As an operative, and looking at your career – and the CIA is no longer the organization that it was – you say, well, we've got to listen, we've got to know what's going on and we've got to talk to people. So, I think in your book you've...

RB: Well, the American way is always when you have an enemy you don't talk to them. You take the French, on the other hand, who have a back channel to Tehran right now, as we speak – they always talk to their enemies, figure out what they want, see if they can give it, and then once they've decided on a policy in secret, they make it public. And that's what we need to do [with] Tehran. We really need to find out what they want, how far they're going on this nuclear bomb and what they need from Israel. Is it the settlements in the West Bank? Is it Israel's nuclear program? Is it Lebanon? I mean, all these things can be worked out, I think, with the Iranians. Look, you've got one of the most violent terrorists with one of the worst records in the Middle East, Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hezbollah, who actually sounds like a moderate, almost, at this point. He's gone completely along with the democratic elections in Lebanon, hasn't contested them, hasn't even complained that he lost them. The man is – he's become rational. He's not a terrorist anymore. And this is what we can't accept, is that Iran has entered a thermador. They are not a radical expanding power, they are a traditional state power which wants to be predominant in the Gulf, and they want to be predominant in the Gulf because they believe they've got the biggest army, the rim of the Gulf is ninety percent Shia and they've got certain demands. And the question is, we won't know what they are until we talk to whoever wins the power struggle in Tehran.

HK: An assumption – and you said part of the game here as an operative is to question the assumptions, and so on, so I want to pose this question to you about – to help us understand how we should question assumptions. The presumption here on your part is that states that manage terrorism can move and evolve over time, that terrorist movements can evolve over time. Maybe they won't, as in the case of the Sunnis, but in looking at Nasrallah, he has evolved. So, the question is, what are the indicators that we should be looking for, when we look at Iran, when we look at the region, that say, hey, things have changed, because partly what the neocons, or the conservatives in Israel, focus on is the way it was, the lesson they learned in the past. And your argument presumes that over time things change, and it's only when you see that, that you'll be able to deal.

RB: You have to deal with the facts. Look, when I first was assigned to Beirut – '83 or '84 – Hezbollah, pre-Hezbollah groups, were going into bars in west Beirut and breaking them up with bats and throwing liquor out in the street. Today - I mean, this is a silly little example but it still tells a story. Today in the Hezbollah stores, in the southern suburbs, they sell liquor to non-Muslims. I mean, talking about realism and becoming practical, and the fact that you and I can walk around the southern suburbs with a Hezbollah guide or without – and it's completely changed since the time I was there. Now I've got to say this because we're dealing in facts. There are recently

accusations that the Iranians in 2007 executed British hostages. They were taken at the ministry of finance in Baghdad. Little facts like that could undercut my thesis. We just have to watch to see, in the middle of this power struggle, if that continues. But we're talking about general currents of history. We're looking at – you have to compare Pakistan, which is a failed state – Pakistan cannot control large parts of its own country. The tribal areas, Baluchistan, even the Swat Valley, they haven't completely taken back. Iran does control its borders. There is not an armed resistance of any significance inside Iran, even in the middle of this power struggle. So, we're looking at the more stable states. The fact is, Iran is the most stable state in the Gulf, a state as we understand it – it's not a monarchy like Saudi Arabia.

HK: And what, in terms of Iran, would most disturb you at this point in time? Let's say you were still an operative. What would you be watching for that would point against your argument, and what would be something that would really sort of demonstrate that we should take your argument seriously?

RB: Well, I think one milestone that would really undercut my – or not a milestone but would be an action that would undercut my argument, would be an uprising in Bahrain, which is seventy percent Shia. If the Iranians went in there, they sent weapons in, overthrew the king, Hamad, and actually took by force a country in the Gulf. That's it, all right, we're going back to the Iran of 1979. That would be a bad sign. I think that once we get through the power struggle in Tehran, if the Iranians sort of exonerate us because we had nothing to do with this power struggle in Iran, and then we actually can sit down with them and we'll reach very small but important understandings on their nuclear program, that we can back the Israelis off an attack, that we can talk to them – it's not going to be a big opening, this is not going to be a Peking moment when Nixon flew to China. That's not going to happen. Iran is too volatile, too xenophobic, for that to happen. You will see small signs, but the real signs will be cooperation in Iraq, tacit cooperation as we withdraw.

HK: On that note, Bob – and let's hope it goes the second way, but in the meantime, people should buy your book, which is coming out in paperback soon, The Devil We Know – thanks very much for coming on our program.

RB: Thanks.

HK: Thank you. And thank you for joining us for this “Conversation With History.”

[End of Interview]