

Bruce Laingen Hopes We Have Learned From The Iranian Crisis

BY BETH CHRISTENSEN
POTSDAM — "People don't care what you say, Dad. They just want to see what a real live hostage looks like." That's what Bruce Laingen's son once told him.

Friday night, they came and nearly packed Hosmer Hall on the State University College of Arts and Science at Potsdam campus to see, listen to and ask questions of Bruce Laingen, a real live hostage.

Laingen, of course, was the charge d'affaires at the United States embassy in Teheran when, just over two years ago, Americans were taken hostage, Nov. 4, 1979.

His days as a hostage, he said, were "a better experience than most." He was one of three men held in the foreign ministry and was not physically abused.

The thrust of his presentation was to explain some of the lessons that he learned from his experiences and, more importantly, to outline some of the "lessons in a more substantive sense" that he hopes the U.S. has learned.

He made it clear in responding to questions that he was speaking as a private citizen and not laying down policy. There has been speculation that Laingen may make a bid for the Senate in Maryland, but he told an audience of reporters before the address that he has made no decision.

Time To Reflect
Iran and its revolution, the context of terrorism, the value of friends in foreign relations, the importance of foreign service, and lessons we have learned as a people are some of the things that Laingen hopes we can "learn and apply so we don't repeat them elsewhere in the future." In the two years since the Iranian incident, this country, its people and its policymakers have had "time to reflect on lessons both positive and negative identified and learned from those experiences."

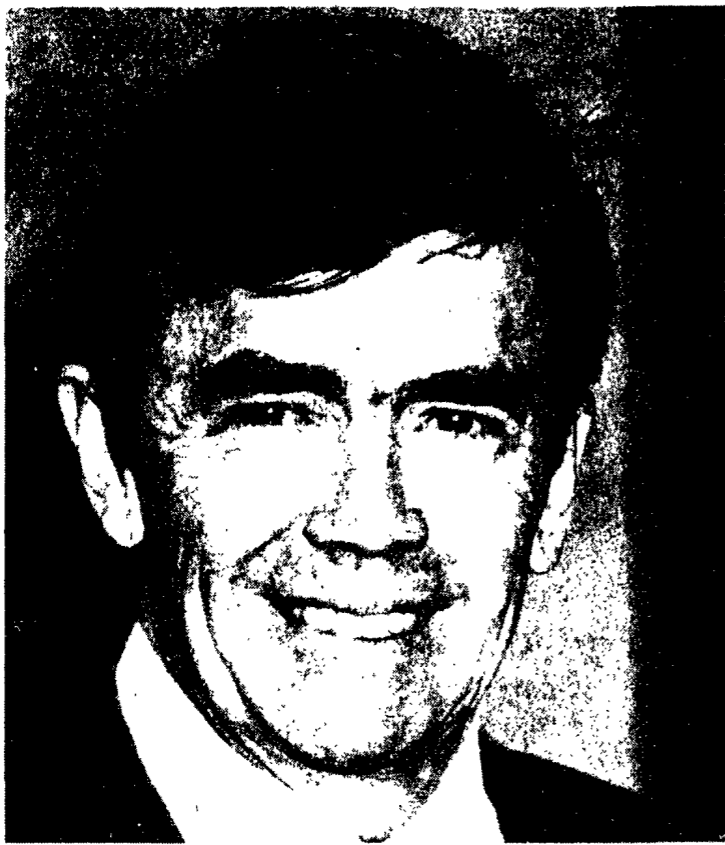
"It matters most of all that young people have learned something from this experience," he said.

On a personal level, Laingen cited sense of family, sense of country, the belief that the cause was right, a sense of humor, patience, and faith as qualities that helped him through his Iranian experience — and as qualities "fundamental in any stressful situation."

Laingen sees the Middle East as a place of potential confrontation of adversaries in the 1980s. He spoke of the "urgency of resuming the peace process." Laingen said that he sees "no national consensus undergirding Mideast policy" and that he believes any policy should reflect both support of Israel's and the United States' own broader economic and strategic perspectives.

Understand Revolutionaries
One of the lessons of the Iranian experience is "a better appreciation of revolutionary currents in other parts of the world," he said. He stressed the need to understand them and be prepared to act. He cautioned against overidentification with one particular leadership and encouraged "a greater sensitivity of foreign political and cultural presence in a society undergoing rapid change." Along these lines, another lesson is appreciating the power of an idea, especially the ideology of Islam. "Islam is ill-understood in this country," said Laingen, adding, "We need to understand Islam."

Another lesson is that, hopefully, we have gained a deeper sense of humility, or realism. "A nation's course will be determined by its own history,



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character, culture, and experience rather than be determined by us. We can only have marginal influence," he said. And we must recognize the direction a country is taking "early enough to act rather than react."

Laingen believes that, even now, we mustn't turn our backs on Iran. Despite the chaos seen in Iran now, "there is a great deal of resilience about that society." Historically it has held together and Islam and the political networks have a great deal of hold. We "must not sell the regime short, especially as long as the Ayatollah is alive and well," he said.

Someday, Iran's political structure will change, he said, but the question is "how, when, who and with what consequences to U.S. interests?" Laingen believes that the next regime in Iran will be "more rational, nonaligned, nationalistic and need not, cannot be as hostile to the outside world."

Iran has hopefully brought about an awareness of the danger of terrorism, especially in the field of diplomacy. Laingen cited the taking of the hostages as a unique case in which the terrorists were supported by the government against diplomats. Laingen hopes that from that crisis will come "some understanding in place among allies to act together economically, politically, and diplomatically."

If the host government cannot be relied on for protection, then the U.S. should withdraw the embassy, Laingen said. In response to a later question, Laingen said, without benefit of hindsight, that prior to the takeover he did not think it necessary to withdraw the embassy people from Iran.

Laingen agrees with the Reagan Ad-

ministration's policy to react swiftly and with retribution in the future. He qualified his approval by stating that how retribution is applied should be decided "in light of specific circumstances" with consideration of the humans involved. To another question, Laingen responded he thought military force in Iran would not have been effective.

Another lesson of Iran, according to Laingen, is a greater appreciation of the foreign service in the large sense of the word. He sees this appreciation reflected tangibly in gifts to the hostages such as passes to all major and minor league home games and more generally in the "welcome you've given us."

On that note, Laingen said the country has failed to extend the same recognition to Vietnam veterans.

After Iran, Laingen says, the U.S. should have a new appreciation of the value of friends such as Canada — "a new awareness of the great and trusted and true neighbor to the North." We are "indebted to them" for the help in hiding and guiding six Americans to freedom, he said. Similar friends are Algeria, Switzerland and the representative of the Vatican in Teheran, he said.

For the American people, the Ira-

nian crisis serves as a reminder of the strength that comes from a unity of purpose. Iran was, Laingen acknowledges, a tragedy, but on the positive side "the American people were united in purpose as never before," in outrage at the seizure, in the hope of seeing the hostages set free, and in celebration of their freedom.

Laingen said we should be proud of "the way in which we put emphasis in resolving the crisis on law and rules of diplomacy." The Iranian crisis showed that "we are still capable of drawing on an enormous reservoir of will" and "bonding together when dealing with problems."

"I would like to believe that out of this experience something has been left on our national psyche, something positive, however small," Laingen said. He was talking about the spirit and unity demonstrated to ourselves and friends and enemies abroad.

Laingen, the "real live hostage," received a standing ovation from the audience at the end of the lecture and question and answer period. The ovation was a welcome home, an appreciation of what he said about lessons that can be identified and hopefully learned from the Iranian tragedy.

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