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This thesis analyzes the rhetoric used by American journalists writing on Iranian women during the late 20th century. Specifically, it examines how the press framed its language according to Western notions of superiority to present the veil as a marker of oppression, and Iranian women as victims in need of “saving.” Early missionary writings in the 19th century as well as press coverage throughout the 20th century continuously framed Iranian women’s rights according to American values. Missionaries used veiled women to highlight the oppressiveness of Islam and rally others to their cause. Their language became the foundation for some of the earliest imaginings of American writers, which recycled and reused such language to describe Iranian women in the 20th century. By the 1950s, nearly all reporting on women in Iran highlighted Islam as the source of women’s repression and the cause of Iran’s “backwardness.” Under the Pahlavi Dynasty, the press also reinforced an Orientalist vision by presenting Iran as a foreign “other” in need of reform. Much like missionary claims that Iranian women were being saved from “inside the harem,” journalists covering Iranian women in the 20th century claimed report from “behind the veil.” Though their articles maintained that they were presenting an honest view of women’s lives, reporting from “behind the veil” only resulted in perpetuating stereotypes of Iranian women. Over several decades, the Shah served a modernizing ally, a man who would Westernize his country save Iranian women from a cruel religion. Over the course of the Cold War, the U.S. strengthened its political ties to Iran, yet reporters continued to focus on the activism and looks of prominent women in the Pahlavi family. Despite the Shah’s authoritarian rule, the press remained in line with the American administration’s support of the Shah until the Iranian Revolution and designating Princess Ashraf Pahlavi and the Pahlavi Empresses as ideal Iranian women, symbols of the Shah’s reformist character. Reporters continued to oversimplify the complex political unrest during the Revolution. As the press reinforced its rhetoric of “us versus them,” women donning the chador were dismissed as simply being unable to understand what was best for them. The Revolution marked a turning point for articles included new depictions of women who supported Khomeini and immoral beliefs. Now, nearly a century later, representations of Iranian women recycles the notion that Iranian women’s rights could only exist within a Western, and preferable American, context.

Sources Included:
Beeman, William O. The “Great Satan” vs. the “Mad Mullahs”: How the United States and Iran Demonize each Other. Westport, Conn: Praeger Publishers, 2005.