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The Collapsing Pillar

**Jimmy Carter and US foreign policy
towards Iran, 1977-1981**

Samuel Huw Rees

Submitted to Swansea University in
fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

Swansea University

2013

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SUMMARY (ABSTRACT)

The continuing diplomatic impasse between the United States and Iran dates back to the turbulent events of the late 1970s. Blame for the 'loss' of Iran, which had been one of the 'twin pillars' of US strategy in the Persian Gulf, has inevitably fallen on the White House incumbent at the time, President Jimmy Carter. This thesis offers a reassessment of Carter's decision making and his responses to the fall of the Shah, the Islamic Revolution and the US embassy hostage taking. It demonstrates that the breakdown of US-Iranian relations was not simply a one-president phenomenon and, more significantly, Carter's handling of Iran was not as dire as it is often portrayed.

The research is based on a thorough examination of the available archive material, including newly released documents, as well as recent interviews with the major protagonists. When Carter took office in 1977 he inherited a badly creaking Iranian pillar that was soon to collapse altogether. The flawed policies of his predecessors placed strict limitations on his administration and unwittingly created a ticking time bomb in the form of the Shah. Despite these restrictions, Carter battled to reconcile the strategic necessities of Cold War containment with his moral principles in areas such as human rights and arms sales.

In an administration seemingly dominated by the disagreements amongst his top two advisors, Carter remained the key decision maker at all times. He recognised the practical limits of American power and assumed sensible positions in response to an ever changing and uncontrollable crisis. Aside from its contemporary significance, Iran is therefore critical to Carter's disputed legacy and how he rates as a foreign policy president.



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My family and friends have been my rock and needless to say that I owe you all a great deal of thanks; I could not have achieved what I have done without you.

SHR, February 2013.

**Dedicated to the memory of my father
Professor Gareth Rees
(1951-2008)**

He inspired me to undertake my own research, then encouraged and guided me for the first two years until he passed away in 2008 after a long struggle against cancer.

His strength and belief in my ability has driven me on towards the finishing line and enabled me to negotiate the many difficult times during the last few years.

INTRODUCTION

The roots of the fragile US-Iranian relationship can be found in the seminal events of the late 1970s, events that continue to echo in their historical importance today. For many commentators, contemporary US foreign policy towards Iran and Iran's position in the international community is still defined by what happened over thirty years ago. Understanding the relationship between the US and Iran today is simply not possible without consideration of their past interactions and encounters, particularly those that occurred during the one-term presidency of Jimmy Carter from 1977-81.

On 7 April 1980, five months after the US embassy in Tehran was overrun by Iranian militants and American diplomats were taken hostage, the US government formally broke off diplomatic relations with Iran. For over thirty years the state of play has remained unchanged and currently shows little prospect of improvement in the near future. The two sides have long remained poles apart when it comes to explaining the breakdown of the relationship, yet there can be no disputing Jimmy Carter's position as one of the pivotal actors in the saga. The thirty-ninth president soon found Iran pushed to the very top of his foreign policy in-tray, but through necessity rather than choice, and the decisions he took helped to shape the very fabric of US-Iranian relations.

The idea for this project was first conceived in 2006 at a time when the administration of President George W. Bush, who had earlier identified Iran as part of an "axis of evil" during his 2002 State of the Union address,¹ was attempting to deal with the ultra-conservative Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, elected in June 2005. Despite the Clinton administration's effort at positive engagement in the late 1990s, US-Iranian relations once again deteriorated in the post-9/11 era with rising antagonism and stern rhetoric on both sides. The Ahmadinejad regime has remained bullish in reaffirming Iran's nuclear ambitions and rights, thus raising fears of a military confrontation with the US. Over the past few years the United Nations (UN) Security Council has voted to impose a range of sanctions on Iran over its nuclear programme and the country has also witnessed its first sustained large-scale

protests since the Islamic revolution in 1979, the so-called 'Green Movement' triggered following Ahmadinejad's controversial re-election in the summer of 2009.

President Barack Obama suggested he would pursue 'aggressive personal diplomacy' with Iran during his 2008 election campaign,² and signalled his intent once inside the White House by creating a new post in the top echelons of the State Department – a Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iran in November 2009. Ironically enough the man who initially filled this new role, John W. Limbert, brought back clear echoes of tortured past relations; he had spent fourteen months of his distinguished thirty plus years in the Foreign Service as one of the hostages at the US embassy in Tehran. The appointment of Limbert, who came out of diplomatic retirement and jokingly described himself as an 'Iranosaurus', pointed to the many years of conflict having left a dearth of American officials possessing a comprehensive knowledge of Iran.³ During its first two years in office the Obama administration made a series of overtures to the Iranian leadership but these were rejected, and the US has since returned to the seemingly default position of pressure and punitive measures. After less than a year in the job, Limbert had grown frustrated by the lack of diplomatic progress and resigned in July 2010. In his book *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History* published the previous year, he eloquently stated the importance of confronting the past if the stranglehold is ever to be broken:

*"...negotiations between Americans and Iranians will not be easy. Negotiators on both sides will have to wrestle with ghosts from their past, and, particularly in the Iranian case, that past is very long, and the ghosts numerous and powerful."*⁴

What seems clear is that the events of some thirty years previously have left an indelible mark on US-Iranian relations. As Barack Obama enters his second term the international community remains concerned about the prospect of a nuclear Iran and this issue continually overshadows any attempt to move beyond a political divide that opened up during the final decades of the twentieth century and continues into the twenty-first.

Analysts accurately identify 1979 as the vital breaking point in the relationship, but this is too often seen simply in isolation. The happenings of that momentous year –

the Iranian revolution, the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran and subsequent hostage taking – were actually many years in the making. One year alone cannot explain how close US-Iranian ties were severed in a way that has thus far proved irreparable – neither can the actions of one man. Yet President Carter, who presided over the ‘loss’ of Iran from the American perspective, is forever and irrevocably connected to the US-Iran story. Historians and political scientists alike have invested much time and effort in exploring these seismic events and Carter’s role in them, but there is still fertile ground to cover as new archive material becomes available and contemporary developments assure their enduring relevance.

Roadmap

Rather than focusing on one single event in a narrative that is already widely known, this study aims to construct a broad re-examination of the Carter administration’s handling of Iran for the duration of his term in office. The logical starting point to provide an effective context from which to judge Carter’s policies and responses is to explore the history of US-Iranian relations prior to 1977. The historiography of the opening chapter follows a predominantly chronological format and explores how and why American involvement in Iran developed. The trends established in the first part of the twentieth century are followed by the changing superpower rivalry as part of the emerging Cold War, culminating with the decisive American intervention in 1953 – the CIA engineered-coup which re-established Mohamed Reza Shah Pahlavi on the peacock throne of Iran.

The Shah, who had dealings with five different Cold War US presidents prior to Carter, is undoubtedly the crucial actor in the historical analysis of the opening two chapters. Rather than examine the post-1953 years chronologically, the thesis concentrates on key themes that underpinned the relationship between Washington and Tehran; oil supplies, the Shah’s Cold War diplomacy, the internal difficulties facing the Shah, arms sales and Iran’s role as ‘policeman of the Gulf’. Although they are all inextricably linked, each of these different strands demonstrates how deeply entrenched US strategic interests in Iran had become by the mid-1970s.

Chapter three builds on the work of the historiography by analysing the situation that confronted Carter when he assumed the presidency. It examines his rhetoric during

the 1976 election campaign and the administration's foreign policy objectives. The focal point is the early interactions with the Shah during Carter's first year in office as the administration sought to grasp the full extent of their commitments to one of the twin pillars of US Middle Eastern strategy. The two tangible foreign policy pledges advanced by Carter during the campaign would prove vital to the shaping of his administration's relationship with Iran – reducing arms sales around the world and re-casting foreign policy to promote protection and encouragement of human rights for oppressed peoples across the globe. The inherent contradiction between US strategic goals and the morality of Carter's policy is considered with specific reference to arms sales and human rights in chapter four.

The pace of change in Iran during the 1970s came as a great surprise to many people, not least the US intelligence community which remained woefully out of touch with the reality on the ground across the country. Despite the fact that the limitations and inadequacies of US intelligence have been widely acknowledged, it would be remiss to omit such a central and decisive factor. The fifth chapter seeks to understand how intelligence failings impacted upon Carter and his advisers in their dealings with the Shah and the crisis engulfing his leadership.

Predicting the Iranian revolution proved to be beyond the scope of the US government, but it nonetheless had to adapt to the changing realities. Chapters six and seven explore those very reactions and American responses to the revolution and its aftermath in 1978-79. The pace of change certainly left little time for detailed re-evaluations; within a matter of months the Shah had relinquished power and departed the country for the final time, Khomeini had returned from exile triumphantly and the internal struggle for power was in full flow. Yet internal political tussles were not confined to Iran; in Washington a significant policy chasm and institutional rivalry was surfacing between the State Department and the National Security Council (NSC) over the Iranian question. Particular attention is placed on the debate about whether Carter might have opted for decisive military intervention to save the Shah's embattled regime – the so-called 'iron fist' solution.

The final two chapters examine arguably the two most important decisions taken by President Carter in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution; firstly, allowing the

deposed Shah into the US to receive medical treatment for his terminal cancer in October 1979 and secondly, signing off on the covert military rescue mission to exfiltrate the US embassy hostages from Tehran in April 1980. In addition to considering the decision-making processes, the aim is to explore the motivations and what finally drove Carter to make these history-shaping judgements at such critical times.

Most of the research for this project was conducted at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, Georgia in 2008. Numerous collections proved to be useful and important resources – notably the White House central files, the State Department evening reports in the Plains Subject Files, and the Zbigniew Brzezinski collections. In addition, I was able to access material that had been recently declassified via the Remote Archives Capture (RAC) Program on the library's 'declassified computer'. Further existing documents were available via the *Iran: The Making of US Policy, 1977-1980* collection, held on microfiche at the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

Historical and more recent recollections of different individuals and officials were also influential sources. These included personally conducted interviews and e-mail exchanges with key figures from the period; former embassy hostage Bill Daugherty, Carter aide Phil Wise, and the lead Iran analyst in the State Department Henry Precht. Additionally, a number of the main protagonists on both the American and Iranian sides were interviewed for the Brook Lapping documentary series 'Iran and the West', which was shown on BBC television in February 2009 – thirty years on from the Iranian revolution. The transcripts of these interviews were scrutinised closely and used in conjunction with other oral histories and published memoirs.

The Collapsing Pillar

Iran had become a central part of US strategy in the Persian Gulf region by the 1970s. It was the centre piece of Henry Kissinger's 'twin pillar' strategy, along with Saudi Arabia, and was viewed as one of the 'moderate' states able to protect vital US interests; namely containing Soviet expansionism and securing access to oil supplies. Perceived in Washington as the stronger of the two pillars, Iran actually crumbled in a remarkably short space of time. What makes the Iranian case so fascinating is that

the broken pieces have not been put back together again – or at the very least salvaged and utilised to form new ties – in over thirty years since. Successive US presidents have been charged with handling the restoration process, admittedly with limited if any success in both the post-Cold War world and the current post-9/11 epoch; but only one president was in office when the pillar came tumbling down.

This is why the Carter years are so crucial. Rather than somewhat crudely dismissing the period as merely the starting point for the current troubles, it is important to consider the events in a proper historical context. Why were the foundations of the Iranian pillar evidently not as solid as the US government assumed? What could Carter have done differently given the limitations of executive power for the first president elected post-Watergate?

Some scholars, almost inevitably, liked to draw comparisons between the one-term Democrat Carter and the present incumbent Barack Obama, prior to him winning a second-term. One notable example was Walter Russell Mead's 2010 article warning that Obama risked slipping into the 'Carter Syndrome' in his conduct of foreign affairs.⁵ This provoked a furious response from both Carter and his former National Security Adviser Brzezinski, charging that Mead's analysis was gratuitous and incorrect.⁶ Recent events including the 2012 presidential election, Carter's criticism of Obama's use of unmanned drones in Pakistan,⁷ and of course developments in Iran have brought the successes and failures of Carter's diplomacy back into the spotlight.

Iran usually figures prominently in any list of Carter's failures; the hostage crisis and impotence of US power it signified are etched into the American psyche and will remain so until US-Iranian relations transform for the better. However, this project sets out to debunk the myth of disaster and weakness that surrounds Carter and Iran. It argues that the president exercised sound judgement in making very difficult choices in the face of immensely challenging circumstances. Perhaps those who remain largely critical of Carter's foreign policy ought to remember the period of history in which he was operating and the sheer weight of expectation with which he was unfairly burdened. An editorial that appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* in 1979 captured this unlikely sense of anticipation:

“...it must be said that no other leader has been asked to do so much by so many thousands of millions of people, at home and abroad, or to do the impossible for them without too much effort on their part.”⁸

Carter will always be a president who, perhaps rightly, receives far greater praise for the body of his post-presidency work, rather than his achievements in the White House. His policies and decision-making with regard to Iran demand further re-examination precisely because they are the ‘ghosts’ with which future diplomats will have to contend. But Iran is also fundamental to debates about Carter’s legacy as a president, and how he is viewed in terms of foreign policy and ultimately as a leader.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

¹ President George W. Bush: ‘Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union’, 29 January 2002. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29644> [accessed July 2011].

² Michael Gordon and Jeff Zeleny, ‘Obama Envisions New Iran Approach’, *New York Times*, 2 November 2007.

³ National Public Radio (NPR) online, ‘Diplomat: “Ghosts in the Room” Plague US, Iran’, 31 July 2010 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128897271> [accessed September 2012]. See also John W. Limbert, *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009) p. 11.

⁴ Limbert, *Negotiating With Iran*, p. 10.

⁵ Walter Russell Mead, ‘The Carter Syndrome’ *Foreign Policy*, Issue 177, (January/February 2010) pp. 58-64.

⁶ Jimmy Carter, ‘Letters: President Carter’s Rebuttal’, *Foreign Policy*, Issue 178, (March/April, 2010) p. 10.

⁷ James Meikle, ‘Jimmy Carter savages US foreign policy over drone strikes’, *The Guardian* online, 25 June 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/25/jimmy-carter-drone-strikes> [accessed June 2012].

⁸ Quote taken from a White House memo, Brzezinski to Carter, 2 March 1979, Brzezinski Material – Subject File, Weekly Reports 82-90: [12/78-3/79], Box 42, Jimmy Carter Library.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Portrayals of Carter's foreign policy

Perhaps not surprisingly, much of the academic literature and journalistic opinion at the time and in the years immediately following Carter's departure from the White House was not at all favourable towards the President. The initial assessments of Carter's presidency came against the backdrop of Reagan and the neoconservatives' increasing domination of the American political scene. What emerged as the conventional or orthodox view of Carter was that of a failed and disastrous administration that had contributed to the re-emergence of Cold War tensions and a weaker America. As John Dumbrell, a later Carter revisionist, accurately surmises, the academic and journalistic tide was against Carter in the 1980s with few prepared to defend his record; yet by the late 1980s and early 1990s "the glitter was indeed beginning to rub off Reagan and the teflon presidency".¹ The end of the Cold War obviously provided a new perspective, as did Carter's activeness in his post-presidential role advancing human rights through the internationally renowned work of the Carter Center. The revisionist school has therefore tended to base its arguments on the unfavourable conditions and trying circumstances the Carter administration encountered.

In addition to the broad orthodox and revisionist perspectives on Carter's presidency there is a further distinction that can be made within the orthodox school. The majority of orthodox scholars, while often heavily critical of Carter and the conduct of foreign affairs under his leadership, are willing to recognise certain accomplishments between 1977-81 and even cite some mitigating circumstances in their analyses. This is markedly different from those who stubbornly refuse to countenance any positives of the Carter era, seeing it as an abject and total failure. Such perspectives can be characterised as 'orthodox-Reaganite' due to the unambiguous ideological disposition of their critique.

Whether they view Carter's foreign policy as a success or failure – and most fall into the latter camp – scholars differ in their explanation of his diplomatic record. The principal focus for many orthodox, and indeed some revisionist accounts, is on the internal bureaucratic power struggle within the administration between Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and the National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski.² An alternative approach examines Carter's 'outsider' status and his apparent inability to play the Washington game, particularly in his

dealings with a hostile Congress. This has been a recurrent theme for scholars exploring Carter's foreign policy as well as those interested in his domestic record, with many critical of his political naivety and reluctant bargaining skills.³

Criticism and orthodoxy

Donald Spencer provides a prime example of an orthodox-Reaganite stance. He is scathing in his attack on what he perceives as the "amateurish" nature of Carter's diplomacy, with the Iranian debacle and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the focal points for his criticism.⁴ Spencer concentrates heavily on the failures of the human rights agenda, but ignores some of Carter's more notable successes, for example the historic Camp David agreement which was a colossal personal diplomatic fillip for the president. Such a glaring omission seriously undermines Spencer's own analysis, although his work is evidently far from concerned with providing balance to the discourse.

Other neo-conservative critics have certainly picked up on the human rights issue, including Jeane Kirkpatrick and Joshua Muravchik. Kirkpatrick charges that Carter's policies were directly responsible, or as she puts it "actively collaborated" (sic), in replacing friendly, if often undemocratic and unpleasant regimes – in Iran for example.⁵ Muravchik presents a comprehensive indictment and laments those in the State Department for their preoccupation with democracy promotion, even suggesting that a military backed-coup in Iran may have "been a more humane outcome than the triumph of Khomeini."⁶

It should be noted that not all of Carter's critics are political or ideological opponents. Perhaps one of the most damning evaluations of his presidency actually came whilst he was still in office and from an insider. James Fallows was not an academic, but a journalist and former speechwriter for Carter who had worked both on the 1976 election campaign and in the White House alongside the president. Fallows' article 'The Passionless Presidency' was published in May 1979 and quickly became the subject of widespread discussion in Washington with its denigration of Carter's style and management. Fallows attacked the President's focus on the technical details rather than the historical lessons, and his loyalty to fellow Georgians with whom he surrounded himself in Washington; such criticisms actually form the basis for many of the orthodox critiques of Carter's administration and his foreign policy.⁷

Some analysts are more willing to recognise that despite a decidedly mixed diplomatic record, Carter did face some significant obstacles that were beyond his control and would have presented a stiff challenge to any White House incumbent. Many of them were domestic; the emergence of the neo-conservatives who became an increasingly powerful influence in the late 1970s, a badly divided Democratic party, and a resistant foreign policy establishment battling against reform.⁸ David Skidmore's *Reversing Course* is the key text here. Skidmore believes that the new era promised by Carter and the flurry of 'liberal initiatives' in his first year was largely abandoned principally because of domestic criticisms. Add to that a series of difficult international situations and leaders and the context of the challenge confronting Carter when he took office becomes clearer.⁹

Gaddis Smith offers a generally more sympathetic treatment of Carter's foreign policy that rejects the Reaganite condemnation of human rights for causing the 'loss' of American strategic allies.¹⁰ Despite this, he does concentrate on the 'conversion' of Carter from an idealistic and moral approach to a more militaristic and anti-Soviet outlook – essentially his conversion to Brzezinski's world view. On Iran, Smith cites the policy confusion and lack of coordination, reckoning that Carter and his advisers inherited an impossible situation and then "made the worst of it".¹¹ Yet Smith does concede that Carter's four years in the White House were among the most significant in twentieth century US foreign policy and that the first two years in particular saw some noteworthy achievements.

Jerel A. Rosati seeks to analyse the major public statements of the administration and hones in on the magnitude of the Brzezinski-Vance rift. He believes it led to the coexistence of two conflicting images within the administration, thus ensuring one incoherent and unstable presentation of Carter's foreign policy.¹² The work of Burton I. Kaufman condemns Carter's lack of leadership and vision in foreign affairs, typified as he sees it by the blundering decision making in response to the Iranian crisis. He argues the Carter presidency was less than satisfactory, if not a failed one, and too often projected an image to the American public of a hapless administration in disarray.¹³ Although Kaufman is critical of Carter's management system and style, he does at least recognise some positives in foreign policy and a series of misfortunes suffered by the administration.

Revisionism

The revisionist literature is led by Dumbrell who strongly contests the Reaganite condemnation of Carter. Like other revisionist scholars he generally gives more favourable treatment to the human rights agenda as well as praising the significant successes;¹⁴ the politically risky Panama Canal treaties, the ground breaking Camp David Middle East peace accords, and the re-opening of diplomatic relations with China. Dumbrell emphasises the political and institutional context within which Carter was operating – the post-Vietnam and Watergate era – and focuses on the moral values of Carter’s policies, using his 1976 campaign theme of ‘competence and compassion’.¹⁵ While he recognises that academic opinion remains very divided, Dumbrell maintains that Carter did live up to the pledges of competence and compassion through his human rights policies and his unwavering work ethic.

Initial key studies that shaped the revisionist mould and preceded Dumbrell’s work are those by Charles Jones and Erwin Hargrove. In *The Trusteeship Presidency*, Jones focuses on Carter’s relations with Congress and refutes claims of an amateur approach, arguing that Carter did put forward a coherent ideology and strategy. His central argument is that Carter saw himself as a ‘trustee’ of the people, obliged to do the right thing and act in the public interest regardless of the political consequences. Like Dumbrell, he draws on the wider context and argues that Carter’s background and beliefs put him on a collision course with the Washington political establishment.¹⁶ This analysis of Carter’s good intentions is summarily rejected by orthodox historians who are more concerned with the measurables of his actual record in office, rather than what he wanted to achieve.

While Hargrove shares Jones’ view of Carter’s good intentions meeting fierce challenges within Congress, he also attempts to develop a new framework for presidential analysis that separates policy from politics.¹⁷ He portrays Carter as politically non-aligned, and notes that many of his difficulties stemmed from his resistance to the political side of policy implementation – the so-called ‘politics of persuasion’ identified by the eminent presidential scholar Richard E. Neustadt.¹⁸ Hargrove essentially presents Carter as a heroic failure, a man unwilling to bow to interest group demands despite the personal political risks.¹⁹ Despite his revisionist position and recognition of a number of success stories in foreign policy, Hargrove takes a strong line on Iran and contends that it was a “major failure”; Carter was unable to save the Shah from the revolution or to establish good relations with Khomeini’s regime

which followed. His analysis points to the breakdown of collegiality and the chaotic nature of decision making during the revolution; he also makes the stark contrast between the revolution and the ensuing hostage crisis, by which point Carter was finally in overall command of his administration's foreign policy decisions.²⁰

The early revisionist literature of the late 1980s, notably the work of Hargrove and Jones, relied almost exclusively on oral history interviews rather than on archival documents that were not available at the time (in contrast, Dumbrell's work is based on an extensive review of the documents that were available in the early 1990s). Phillip Henderson makes a robust critique of their brand of revisionism, which he sees as being based more on ideological grounds rather than on substantive academic grounds. Henderson invokes the Eisenhower revisionism of the early 1980s, which he sees as a 'natural outgrowth' in that it was predicated on the use of thousands of newly available archive materials that addressed flawed perspectives of the thirty-fourth president. By contrast, he believes the initial Carter revisionism suffers precisely because of its dependence on the recollections of Carter and his top associates rather than evidence from the documents.²¹ As far as this study is concerned, the benefits of re-assessing the Carter period today, some thirty years later, are exactly the same as those available to historians examining Eisenhower in the 1980s.

Contemporary debate

More recent literature on Carter's foreign policy published since the turn of the century has tended to revisit key foundations of the orthodox perspective, rather than develop a more original 'post-revisionist' approach. Two influential studies that have utilised new archive materials and added to the wealth of existing scholarship in the field are Scott Kaufman's *Plans Unraveled* and the late Betty Glad's *An Outsider in the White House*.

In his re-evaluation of Carter's foreign policy Kaufman acknowledges some successes, but overall judges his record to be mediocre. Kaufman focuses most of his attention on the poorly designed management system as the primary reason for Carter's failure, arguing it caused bureaucratic turf wars that hampered foreign policy initiatives, like human rights. He is also dismissive of the wider political and international context and the 'difficult circumstances' arguments put forward by revisionists. The damning nature of Kaufman's analysis arguably places his work closer to a return to orthodoxy;²² particularly as he concludes that the most

damaging result of Carter's management style was the infighting between Brzezinski and Vance, a well-trodden angle for Carter critics.

In 1980, while Carter was still president and the Iranian hostage crisis was in full flow, Betty Glad published a highly praised biography of the thirty-ninth president. *An Outsider in the White House* seeks to build on the basis of her earlier work and Glad returns, like many before her, to address the Brzezinski-Vance dynamic, recognising Brzezinski's dominance and Carter's dependence on him. The suggestion from Carter's detractors that his administration lacked conviction or a clear vision in its foreign policy is not a new one, but Glad does provide a slightly different slant on it. She maintains that because Carter had no strategic vision of where the administration was headed, he turned to Brzezinski who, in Glad's words, was "...able to provide Carter with something he needed in the foreign policy arena – an overall strategic concept."²³

Opinion on Carter's foreign policy remains very divided and partisan, as shown by two studies at opposite ends of the spectrum. Philip Pilevsky's *I Accuse: Jimmy Carter and the Rise of Militant Islam*, makes a frenzied attempt to charge that Carter's refusal to support the Shah and the decision to 'abandon' Iran inspired Islamic extremists around the world to take up arms against the US. Pilevsky alleges that Carter was paralysed by his own human rights policy and sleepwalked indecisively through the gathering disaster in Iran. His neoconservative assault on Carter is not based upon any new research, but is instead heavily rooted in the Bush era 'war on terror' rhetoric; so fervent is his criticism that some perfectly valid aspects of his argument lose credibility.

In stark contrast, Mary Stuckey reconsiders the impact of Carter's human rights rhetoric and constructs a positive assessment of his historical legacy. She recognises that while Carter was not the first to push for human rights, he deserves credit for his role in helping to institutionalise the issue within the US government. Her argument that human rights was a unifying theme of the administration is debatable given what we know about the internal bureaucratic disputes, but even ardent Carter critics would be hard pressed to challenge the assertion that his presidency altered the national agenda to include human rights. That we continue to discuss the Carter administration's human rights agenda, be it flawed or otherwise, speaks volumes for its enduring legacy and Carter's contribution.

Carter and Iran

There is wide body of existing works on US-Iranian relations, from those looking specifically at the circumstances surrounding the fall of the Shah and the revolution, to those that chart the painful unfolding of the hostage crisis. Their perspectives on Carter and his administration's handling of the numerous crises are examined in depth at various points of this study, depending on their specific focus – hence the desire here not to regurgitate debate and analysis that will take place later on. Instead, signposted below are some of the key texts that cover Carter and Iran; it is far from an exhaustive list but it does give an indication of the variety of studies, both in terms of emphasis and argument.

Some of the predominant literature on Carter and the Iranian revolution emerged in the immediate aftermath of the upheaval, when academics were writing without an awareness of how things would turn out. *Paved with Good Intentions* by Barry Rubin is remarkable for its breadth given it was produced without access to a wealth of material that is available today, and much of his analysis has stood the test of time. In *Debacle* Michael Leeden and William Lewis present a very different Reaganesque version of events that is highly critical of Carter and his administration for its weakness and confusion at a time when it should have been firmly backing the Shah's leadership.

Later studies are more favourable to Carter in some respects, but can hardly be regarded as a staunch defence of his actions and policies. These include Christos Ioannnides' *America's Iran* and James Bill's *The Eagle and The Lion*. A leading US academic on Iran in the 1980s, Bill's work charts the development of the US relationship with Iran from the 1940s through to the Iran-Contra crisis under Reagan. Particularly noteworthy is his presentation of the pro-Shah lobby in the US – what he describes as 'Pahlavism in America' – and the pressure that it brought to bear on the Carter administration.

The definitive historical analysis of US-Iranian relations is *The Persian Puzzle* by Kenneth Pollack, a man with first-hand experience having served in the NSC as Director of Gulf Affairs under President Clinton. The principal theme of Pollack's book is the importance of historical understanding, which is vital if solutions and compromises are to be found in the current stand-off. Here Pollack shares common ground with John W. Limbert, historian and former embassy hostage, who argues in *Negotiating with Iran* that understanding and confronting the past is crucial in negotiating with the Iranians – using the hostage crisis as

one of his four historical case studies. William J. (Bill) Daugherty is another former hostage turned academic and *In the Shadow of the Ayatollah* covers his period in captivity in great detail, but more importantly offers a unique insider's perspective on the debate about Carter's policies. Babak Ganji's *Politics of Confrontation* is a forceful condemnation of the Carter administration's approach towards Iran, arguing it was a major disaster for the US, the Middle East and the World. Ganji resorts to the tried and tested method of placing a strong emphasis on the Brzezinski-Vance divide, although his work does benefit from a closer inspection of the Iranian viewpoint and challenges the idea that the US was unaware about the nature of the Shah's opposition.

Literature on the hostage situation and negotiations includes *Guests of the Ayatollah* by Mark Bowden. This provides an epic blow-by-blow account of the hostage crisis, pieced together through Bowden's many conversations with the main protagonists and then turned into a rousing recollection of events. In contrast, David Houghton's *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* focuses on the response to the hostage taking, looking at the power and influence of historical analogies and the misunderstandings on both the American and Iranian sides.

All of these secondary texts, with their varying interpretations of Carter and his administration, have proved very important in providing the background for the arguments and analysis advanced in this thesis. It is clear that both Carter's presidency and US-Iranian relations in the late 1970s are contentious issues which have quite rightly attracted extensive attention over the years and will continue to do so. This study aims to add to the existing literature through a detailed examination of the archival record some thirty years later, which includes access to newly available material, and in reaching conclusions which essentially endorse a neo-revisionist perspective on Carter as a foreign policy president.

NOTES TO LITERATURE REVIEW

¹ John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-Evaluation*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) p. 15.

² See for example Richard C. Thornton, *The Carter Years: Toward a New Global Order* (New York: Paragon House, 1991); Alexander Moens, 'President Carter's Advisers and the Fall of the Shah', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol.106, No. 2 (Summer 1991) pp. 211-237; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, revised ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994); Babak Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation: The Foreign Policy of the USA and Revolutionary Iran* (London: I. B.

Tauris, 2006); Burton I. Kaufman and Scott Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, 2nd revised edition* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

³ The key revisionist perspective on Carter's relations with Congress is Charles O. Jones's *The Trusteeship Presidency: Jimmy Carter and the United States Congress* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

⁴ Donald Spencer, *The Carter Implosion: Jimmy Carter and the Amateur Style of Diplomacy* (New York: Praeger, 1988).

⁵ Jeane Kirkpatrick, 'Dictatorships and Double Standards', *Commentary* magazine, Vol. 68, No. 5 (November 1979) p. 34.

⁶ Joshua Muravchik, *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Press, 1986) p. 211.

⁷ For more see James Fallows, 'The Passionless Presidency: The Trouble with Jimmy Carter's Administration', *The Atlantic*, May 1979, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1979/05/the-passionless-presidency/308516/> [accessed July 2012]. One example stated by Fallows focuses on the setup of Carter's White House and laments the president's failure to appoint a Chief of Staff as none of the so-called 'Georgia mafia' met the criteria; instead the administration wasted a year "as we blindly groped for answers", eventually establishing a workable system that Fallows' believes a staff coordinator could have done far more quickly and effectively.

⁸ Scott Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008) p. 4. See also James Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988) and William Stivers, *America's Confrontation with Revolutionary Change in the Middle East, 1948-83* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986).

⁹ See David G. Skidmore, *Reversing Course: Carter's Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and the Failure of Reform* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ For another more favourable analysis of Carter's human rights agenda see Jerel A. Rosati, *The Carter Administration's Quest for Global Community: Beliefs and Their Impact on Behavior* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987).

¹¹ Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986) p. 188.

¹² Rosati, *The Carter Administration's Quest for Global Community*, p. 113.

¹³ Burton I. Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993) p. 3.

¹⁴ Other revisionist scholars to consult include Douglas Brinkley, 'The Rising Stock of Jimmy Carter: The "Hands on" Legacy of Our Thirty-ninth President', *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 20 (Fall 1996) pp. 505-530; and Robert A. Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency*, pp. 1-5.

¹⁶ See Jones, *The Trusteeship Presidency* and Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency*, p. 17.

¹⁷ For an assessment of this argument see Phillip G. Henderson, 'Carter Revisionism: The Flight From Politics', *Political Science Reviewer*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Fall 1995) pp. 322-53.

¹⁸ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency*, p. 17.

²⁰ Erwin C. Hargrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership & the Politics of the Public Good* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1988) pp. 122-23 and 138-41.

²¹ Henderson, 'Carter Revisionism', pp. 323-26.

²² Steve Hurst. Review of Scott Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews, January 2009, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15782> [accessed August 2012].

²³ Betty Glad, *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009) pp. 1-2.

The Historical Roots of American Involvement in Iran

It would not be possible to undertake an effective study of the American relationship with Iran between 1977 and 1981 without first examining the impact of events prior to Jimmy Carter's inauguration as the thirty-ninth President of the United States. The history of US involvement in Iran stretches right back into the mid-nineteenth century, when it was then known as Persia (it became Iran in 1935). As the US rapidly grew into one of the world's major powers and the strategic importance of oil increased, relations between the two nations became ever more significant in global international affairs. American reaction and involvement in some of the pivotal events of the twentieth century served to mould the bipartisan relationship in a specific way; both the great wars, the Cold War struggle between East and West, the Iranian oil nationalisation crisis, the overthrow of Mossadeq, and the Shah's 'White Revolution' during the 1960s.

The purpose of this first section is not to offer an in-depth analysis of US-Iranian relations since their inception over one hundred and fifty years ago, but rather to explain how US foreign policy in the years prior to 1977 was partly responsible for limiting the options available to Carter and his team. It is worth remembering that following the transition from one presidential administration to another, the new administration does not start with a clean slate but inherits, to some extent at least, the policies of its predecessors. This is particularly true in terms of foreign policy and in the case of Iran, where Carter and his advisors inherited a situation that had resulted from over three decades worth of State Department policy towards Tehran.

Interlinking strands

Although this chapter initially adopts a broadly chronological format in exploring the political and diplomatic history of the relationship and America's rise to superpower status, it later switches to a focused thematic approach which continues into the following chapter. Several underlying themes are identified as being responsible for US-Iranian relations developing in the manner they did, particularly from the beginning of the Cold War until the start of 1977. It will be necessary to examine each

of the different areas: oil supplies and the energy crisis; how the Shah of Iran was able to play 'the Cold War game' so effectively; the internal problems of the regime; arms sales during the 1960s and 1970s; and the 'twin pillar' strategy pursued by the Nixon administration. The Shah was undoubtedly the key actor during the Carter years, a leader whose regime, complete with strong American backing since its foundation, was supposed to provide stability in a volatile region. Yet as it turned out, the Shah himself actually became the problem for the Carter administration rather than a part of the solution.

When these important strands of US-Iranian relations are interlinked they serve to explain the course of the relationship's development. Oil was a vital Cold War commodity, possessed in abundance by Iran, which the US desired in order to fuel the struggle with the Soviet Union. The East-West confrontation in turn provided the Shah with the opportunity firstly to consolidate his own position with American assistance, and later to exploit his close links with Washington in order to benefit Iran's, and of course his own, international standing.

In assessing the domestic Iranian situation during the 1960s and 1970s, it is clear that the US government chose to put aside any concerns over democratic and human rights abuses to ensure that it did not antagonise an increasingly loyal ally in the Shah. The questionable attempts at modernisation and the growth of repression are certainly at odds with the American ideals of liberty and freedom. Perhaps greater pressure might have been brought to bear on the Shah if President John F. Kennedy had remained in power for longer. Instead, in the post-Kennedy era, the State Department and successive Presidents embarked upon a policy of almost universal support for the Shah's increasingly dictatorial regime. American support was nowhere more apparent and explicit than in the field of arms transfers; from the moment the Shah was restored to the peacock throne, Washington was inundated with his requests for military equipment.

Arms deals between the US and Iran grew swiftly, both in size and significance, and eventually led to the notorious 'blank cheque' from the Nixon administration. This commitment was indicative of the Nixon-Kissinger 'twin pillar' strategy that resulted from the application of the Nixon Doctrine to the Persian Gulf; which determined that

Iran would become the principal pillar of American interests in the region. The decision to assist the Shah in becoming the strongman of the region was justified in terms of the wider East-West strategic balance, but it would of course have wide-ranging future implications for the US.

Kissinger's influence on US foreign policy continued during Gerald R. Ford's short tenure as President. The Shah became overconfident in his dealings with Washington, as the arms contracts continued to flow and the domestic energy crisis within the US seemed only to increase Iran's importance to the great superpower. Perhaps the failure to adjust the policy of automatic support for the Shah when the situation demanded was down to the entrenchment and momentum of the policy within the Washington bureaucracy, and that the costs of making such an adjustment had simply become too high after the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹ A total overhaul of US-Iranian relations at this stage would have been viewed as an abandonment of the Shah and would consequently have undermined the military security system established under the Nixon Doctrine.

Tentative first steps

In his 2004 book *The Persian Puzzle*, former National Security Council (NSC) Director of Persian Gulf affairs Kenneth Pollack presents a detailed narrative of US-Iranian relations since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, as well as his blueprint for the way forward – namely pursuing a diplomatic solution rather than taking rash military action, which was at one time mooted by President George W. Bush's administration. Ever since the start of the nineteenth century Iran has been prey to powerful external actors, principally the great European powers like Britain and Russia, and Pollack points out that this should be remembered when considering “the labyrinth” of US-Iranian relations in the twentieth century.² It is against this background of Anglo-Russian rivalry in the mid-nineteenth century that the US took its initial step in establishing a relationship with Iran, albeit a commercial one rather than a political one at this early stage.

Tsarist Russia had established its influence after emerging victorious from the Russo-Persian Wars of 1804-13 and 1826-28, which saw substantial territorial gains at the expense of Iran's ruling Qajar dynasty (1785-1925). The loss of territory from the first

conflict altered the geographic contours of Iran and opened it up to foreign influence, goods and competition for the rest of the century.³ Britain was particularly anxious to guard against any Russian expansion that might threaten India, the jewel in its imperial crown. Initially seen by some Iranian ministers as a welcome counterbalance to Russian dominance,⁴ increased British interest in the region soon gave way to an intense great power rivalry. The Anglo-Persian War of 1856-57, fought to prevent Persian expansion into Afghanistan, marked the start of a period of British influence over Iranian affairs in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

In December 1856, the US and Iran agreed on a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce, an informal arrangement that, although it did not establish an official American presence in Iran, provided the basis from which relations could grow in the future. Negotiations had begun under President Millard Fillmore in 1852 and were eventually concluded by President James Buchanan who championed the treaty in his first state of the union address, saying that it would “prove beneficial to American commerce.”⁵ In his study charting the history of American-Persian relations up until 1921, Abraham Yeselson notes that around the time this treaty was being agreed, Christian and Jewish missionaries from America and other Western nations had started to appear across Iran. Yeselson claims that the government of Nasr-ed-Din-Shah (1848-96) was liberal in its attitude to such missionaries, and that American groups undertook the most ambitious work.⁶

The ratification of the 1856 treaty arguably marked the beginning of a pattern that involved the Iranians seeking a greater level of American political and economic assistance than Washington was prepared to offer, a theme which would become a recurrent feature of the first half of the twentieth century. As relations developed further between the two states, Iranian overtures to Washington were often made with the intention of using the Americans to counter-balance the ongoing Anglo-Russian power struggle. This feature of US-Iranian relations, often described as the ‘third power’ option, remained constant throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

In the mid 1850s, Iran openly sought US naval intervention to protect their merchant marine and ports from other powers and above all the British Empire; the response they received was lukewarm and had to be explained within the context of the policy

of non-intervention.⁷ America's principal concerns lay much closer to home – beset by tensions that would eventually lead to the outbreak of civil war – rather than across the other side of the globe in Iran and other distant nations. So while the US was keen to expand the marketplace for American commerce, it possessed neither the desire nor the inclination to become politically involved in another sovereign state's affairs. The overriding aim was to avoid involvement in a costly and unnecessary overseas entanglement – at this point however, Anglo-Russian competition naturally discouraged the expansion of positive American diplomacy into the country.⁸ The US was by no means one of the world's dominant powers and could not have competed with the likes of Britain and Russia at this stage, even if it had wanted to.

While its commercial interests continued to grow, the US did not move to establish an official diplomatic presence in Iran until 1883 during the presidency of Chester A. Arthur. Up until this point the interests of American citizens had been looked after by British representatives. President Grover Cleveland would later hail the impact of the Tehran legation in 1886, claiming that it was:

“...bearing fruit in the interest exhibited by the Shah's government in the industrial activity of the United States and the opportunities of beneficial interchanges.”⁹

In 1889 an Iranian delegation was set-up in Washington and during this inaugural period of official relations the Iranians continually, but usually unsuccessfully, encouraged further American involvement in their own affairs. Iranians undoubtedly despised the competing foreign influences prevalent in the running of their country but viewed the US, with its openly anti-imperialist attitude, in a considerably more positive light. Despite Iran's best efforts Washington remained steadfast in its commitment to a strict policy of non-intervention, a policy that it would continue to follow throughout the constitutional revolution in Iran at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Shuster Mission and the First World War

The 1906-07 constitutional revolution marked a watershed in modern Iranian history. The constitution drawn up by an elected assembly established a Majlis (an elected parliament), a government with a cabinet that had to be confirmed by the Majlis, and

placed strict limitations on royal power. The immediate aftermath of the revolution proved to be a turbulent period for Iran, marked by social upheaval, in-fighting and political factionalism. The latter problem quickly spread into the foreign policy arena with the second Majlis pursuing the 'third power' route in an attempt to alleviate the problems. In yet another attempt to limit the increasingly overbearing British and Russian influence over Iran's politics and economy, the Majlis hired an American economist, W. Morgan Shuster, as treasurer general and "gave him practically unlimited powers to reform Iran's finances".¹⁰

It was not long before the Shuster mission, established in May 1911 and operating independently of the US government, was faced with insurmountable challenges to its mandate. Shuster had aimed to tighten up on the collection of taxes and customs duties, creating a treasury gendarmerie with this purpose in mind. Reza Ghods, a historian of twentieth century Iranian political history, offers a positive assessment of Shuster's efforts but highlights how his objectives brought him into opposition with some of the key stakeholders in Iranian society; large landowners, tribal khans, the shah's court and of course the foreign powers, Britain and Russia.¹¹ Against this volatile background the mission was always destined to fail. In November 1911 the Russians, with tacit British consent, issued an ultimatum for Shuster's removal that, despite resistance from the Majlis, ultimately paved the way for his departure in January 1912. Shuster had, in his own words, been "forcibly deprived of the opportunity" to finish the job.¹² Yet one of the positives to come out of the mission was that Shuster's expulsion served to raise public awareness in the US of Iran's position and its subjugation by the great powers.

As US interest in the region steadily grew following the First World War, so did the Iranian demand for advisors in a variety of capacities – most vitally in the economic sphere. The State Department recommended Dr. Arthur C. Millspaugh, a leading American economist, as the man to help implement economic reform in Iran. Millspaugh's assignment lasted from 1922-27 during which time he supposedly possessed full control of the Iranian budget and financial administration – to such an extent that the Iranians would make no financial decisions with first securing Millspaugh's consent.¹³ His mandate focused mainly on improving the tax system and the collection of taxes. Yet, just like his predecessor Morgan Shuster, he was unable

to make much headway as the complexity of Iranian society and the competing interests made progress difficult to realise.

The Second World War

In spite of the great depression, the 1930s saw a continued growth in US-Iranian trade. It also marked the emergence of Germany as the new competitor to the great powers in Iran. By 1939 and the outbreak of the war the traditional status-quo of Anglo-Russian (now Soviet) competition in Iran had been upset by a rising German influence, which had been allowed to develop under the repressive monarch and Nazi sympathiser, Reza Shah. His sympathy for Hitler's Germany was partly a result of their shared loathing of Britain and the Soviet Union; the policy of 'neutrality' Iran declared was actually nothing of the sort and was heavily slanted in favour of the Germans.¹⁴

The war itself turned out to be a crucial event in terms of solidifying the American influence in Iran – a state whose geographical position on the border of the Soviet Union made it of key strategic importance during the conflict. Hitler's decision to rip up the Nazi-Soviet Pact and invade the Soviet Union in June 1941 suddenly thrust the British and Soviets together as allies, and they now moved to prevent an attack on the Soviet Union's southern border. After issuing clear warnings to Iran about the need to expel the German influence, British and Soviet troops entered the country, from the south and north respectively, on 25 August 1941. Later that same day, Reza Shah made an urgent plea to President Franklin D. Roosevelt urging him to make a humanitarian intervention and prevent the bombing of Iranian cities.¹⁵ Roosevelt responded saying he had received assurances from the British and Soviets that "they have no designs on the independence and territorial integrity of Iran."¹⁶

Within a matter of days the Iranian military collapsed and disbanded into chaos. Despite his best efforts, Reza Shah was unable to save his throne although the Pahlavi dynasty would continue; he abdicated on 16 September and was replaced by his twenty-one year-old son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who reluctantly took the oath of office the very next day. The Allied occupiers forced Iran into signing an alliance, known as the Tripartite Treaty, in January 1942. The treaty formally divided the country into occupied zones, but the newly allied powers guaranteed to safeguard the

Iranian economy from potentially damaging war-effects and to withdraw their troops within six months after the war's end.¹⁷ This latter claim was destined to cause tension between the great powers and would go on to provide the first flashpoint of the Cold War.

The US government was quick to recognise the potential dangers of a Soviet occupation stretching across the northern territory of Iran. By the end of 1941, US Secretary of State Cordell Hull was sufficiently troubled by Soviet activities – intrigues in their occupied zone, their propaganda, and the pressure they were bringing to bear on the Iranian government – that he raised American concerns with their British counterparts.¹⁸ For Iranians, the wartime occupation brought with it not only political ramifications but also, and arguably more importantly, severe economic and social hardships. The effects of the occupation forced the Iranian's to seek further American assistance and Arthur C. Millspaugh was subsequently dispatched for a second time in November 1942. Tasked with establishing some sort of economic stability, Millspaugh was again unable to achieve his goals as he could not instigate the necessary institutional reforms.¹⁹ Other American advisors did however enjoy some successes during this period, most notably in the missions that were sent to advise the Iranian army and gendarmerie (the internal security force).²⁰

In December 1943 the big three – President Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Josef Stalin – met at the Tehran conference and agreed on a joint declaration regarding Iran. Roosevelt had been keen to strengthen ties between the allies and his willingness to do so was reflected in the choice of location, which was very conveniently at Stalin's doorstep. The protocol agreed at Tehran served to guarantee Iran's sovereignty whilst also recognising the key role it was playing in the allied war effort. All three powers stated they were:

*“...at one with the Government of Iran in their desire for the maintenance of the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iran.”*²¹

Iran's geographical position meant that it was an essential supply line to the Soviet Union as part of the 'lend-lease' scheme, the American programme that provided war materials and economic aid to the allied powers. The persistent efforts of the Iranian political elite to solicit American aid in their struggle against their old colonial foes

were misguided. The US was not about to risk damaging its relationship with the British over the issue of Iran, particularly given the wider context of world events at the time. For example, President Roosevelt was fully informed and consulted over the plans to invade Iran in 1941 even if he refused to provide official and explicit American approval – much to Britain’s annoyance.²² The reason for increasing US influence in Iran by the end of the war years was very simple – the vast ‘lend-lease’ programme in the so-called ‘Persian corridor’ – US army personnel involved in this effort peaked at just below 30,000 in 1944.²³

Despite the best efforts of the US Ambassador to Iran, Louis Dreyfus, American goals in the country remained unclear during the war years. Bruce Kuniholm, in his expert analysis of the origins of the Cold War and great power conflict in the Near East, surmises that “it was not entirely clear” as to what American policy objectives were and “where ideals left off and practical interests began.”²⁴ While US policy towards Iran could certainly be described as inconsistent and confused, it was by no means overly forceful at this point. In fact, the establishment of a trusteeship by the big three actually went against the principles of the Atlantic Charter, which the idealist Roosevelt strongly supported. Furthermore, Kuniholm points out the key difference between the US and British approaches at this time, noting that the US was wary of crossing the fine line between support and imperialism²⁵ – a line that the British had regularly and unashamedly transgressed.

The first flashpoint of the Cold War

In the early part of 1946 Iran became the scene of the first confrontation between East and West, solidifying the tensions between Moscow and Washington that would ultimately come to dominate world affairs for nearly fifty years. The crisis stemmed from the occupation of Iran by the Allied powers during the war and provided a stern initial examination of the newly founded UN. Under the terms of the Tripartite Treaty of 1942, all occupying forces were scheduled to withdraw from Iranian territory by 2 March 1946 – a deadline with which British and US forces complied. Two months previously, the Iranian government had brought its case alleging Soviet interference in its internal affairs before the UN Security Council. Stalin was testing the water in order to establish what sort of response he could expect, clearly hoping that the US would not be willing to intervene and that Britain would be too weak.²⁶ However,

relations between the former Allied powers were rapidly changing and increasingly characterised by mistrust, as epitomised in Churchill's famous speech at Fulton, Missouri in March 1946, in which he claimed that an 'iron curtain' had descended across Eastern Europe.²⁷

The US responded to Moscow's actions by lodging a complaint about Soviet behaviour, in support of Iran's earlier claim, to the UN Security Council. George Kennan's so-called 'long telegram' of February 1946 had advocated meeting Soviet advances with sufficient firmness; serious concerns over the Iranian situation and a prevailing view that Stalin was moving from political subversion to full scale military invasion therefore demanded a stern riposte. US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes vowed the US would "give it to them with both barrels."²⁸ Washington lent increased support to Iran during these events of early 1946, with President Harry S. Truman refusing Soviet requests to drop the Iranian question from the UN's agenda.²⁹

It was that at this precise moment that the US chose to become more heavily involved in Iran. While many in the State Department believed more in the importance of retaining the image of a 'disinterested' power, clear strategic demands ensured that American military aid to Iran began on a reasonable scale at the end of 1946. The argument was best summed up by the assertion of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff that a division of Iran between Soviet and British spheres of influence would be a major strategic disaster.³⁰

The American position in Iran was closely associated with the Truman Doctrine announced in March 1947, which aimed to protect US strategic and security interests in the Northern Tier region comprising Greece, Turkey and also Iran. Britain's post-war economic problems meant it could no longer support the Greek government in its struggle against leftist forces and the real fear in the US was that if Greece were to fall prey to communist forces so too would Turkey. With millions of dollars of US government aid being pumped into the region, the Truman Doctrine effectively marked the displacement of the British from one of their traditional spheres of influence.

Washington was by no means acting in the best interests of Iran, but was instead focused on attempting, as the British had done previously, to strengthen the indigenous governments in the Northern Tier to serve as barriers to Soviet expansionism.³¹ If the Truman Doctrine was unmistakably aimed primarily at Greece – then Turkey – the significance of Iran as a driver in the Truman administration’s decision making should not be ignored. Stalin had already tried his luck in Iran where there were huge strategic benefits to be had from controlling the flow of Iranian oil. Domino effect thinking was prevalent in Truman’s containment policies and Dean Acheson, his Secretary of State, was key in arguing that Greece and Iran were essentially part of the same problem:

“...Soviet pressure on the Straits, on Iran, and on northern Greece had brought the Balkans to the point where a highly possible Soviet breakthrough might open three continents to Soviet penetration. Like apples in a barrel infected by one rotten one, the corruption of Greece would infect Iran and all to the east.”³²

It is worth noting however that, in spite of the events of 1946, State Department officials remained far more concerned with US foreign policy in what they perceived to be the more important areas of the world and subsequently devoted little time to Iran.³³ This outlook was to change over the next few years as internal shifts within Iranian politics soon dictated a renewed interest from the foreign policy-making corridors of Washington.

Eisenhower and the plot to overthrow Mossadeq

The election of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in November 1952 was to have major implications for US-Iranian relations. Eisenhower’s experiences in Europe during the Second World War – he had been a five-star general and Supreme Commander of Allied Forces – naturally dictated what William Stivers describes as a ‘Eurocentric’ approach to foreign policy. In his assessment of Eisenhower’s Middle Eastern policy, Stivers argues that he sought to retain the stabilising influence of European nations, particularly the British, in the Middle East, and therefore the expansion of the US role in countries like Iran had more to do with Britain’s decline than it did with a desire to further American ambition.³⁴

The Iranian oil nationalisation crisis represented Eisenhower's first test in the region. With the rise to prominence of a fervent nationalist, Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq, and the apparent waning of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's influence in the early 1950's, American foreign policy makers were confronted with a new challenge in Iran. Mossadeq no doubt viewed the advent of a new administration as an opportunity for Iran to gain leverage in its feud with the British, but it appears that he badly misjudged the nature of Eisenhower's foreign policy. Mossadeq's threat to approach Moscow for assistance if Iran failed to receive sufficient support from the US only confirmed the worst suspicions of key figures like Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.³⁵ The Eisenhower administration tended to view nationalists and Communists as one and the same thing. While they certainly did not want to 'lose' Iran, there was a realisation that Mossadeq was not the figure capable of providing the stability they deemed necessary in Tehran.

The 1953 coup, or 'Operation Ajax' (TPAJAX) as it was code-named, was carefully planned by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in conjunction with the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6). The British had been positioning themselves to make a move against Mossadeq ever since the oil nationalisation. However, Mossadeq and his supporters suspected a plot against them was imminent and reacted by closing down the British embassy in October 1952.³⁶ Without their essential planning base within Iran, obtaining American support was now even more vital to the British, yet the Truman administration remained unenthusiastic about this course of action. While Truman certainly did not endorse Mossadeq's actions, he retained some sympathy for the nationalists and, as an ardent anti-imperialist, was not about to come to the aid of the AIOC with its outdated colonial British attitude.

In his account of the operation entitled *All the Shah's Men*, Stephen Kinzer describes how American attitudes towards a possible coup d'état in Tehran changed dramatically following Eisenhower's election as President, with top-ranking CIA and State Department officials meeting their British counterparts to work out the exact details of the plot.³⁷ British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who had been re-elected in October 1951, had spent the second half of 1952 trying, unsuccessfully, to enlist Truman's support for a coup. While Truman may have been reluctant, there was a very different picture emerging within the CIA. Top ranking officials like Allen

Dulles, Frank Wisner and Kermit 'Kim' Roosevelt were all enthusiastic about the idea, yet they withheld details from the Democrats who they believed were too sympathetic to Mossadeq.³⁸

When Eisenhower was elected in November 1952, with what was favourably seen as a strident anti-Communist message, British attention switched towards the incoming team.³⁹ According to Kinzer little time was wasted – they did not even pause for Eisenhower's inauguration – and within weeks the incoming administration had informally committed itself to a covert operation aimed at ousting Mossadeq; a detailed plan would be prepared and the Dulles brothers, Secretary of State John Foster and new CIA Director Allen, would then secure presidential approval.⁴⁰

The Dulles brothers were undoubtedly two of the key drivers behind the coup. From their influential positions they were able to effectively steer US foreign policy during the Eisenhower years. Both were fierce 'Cold Warriors' who viewed the world through the narrow ideological prism of East-West relations. In their eyes, any state not decisively allied with the US was a potential enemy. Iran was therefore viewed as being especially dangerous not just because of its geographic situation, but also because of its oil wealth and active communist party – the Tudeh.⁴¹ Of the key foreign policy decision makers at the time, Eisenhower himself was perhaps the least enthusiastic about the plan but was won over by John Foster Dulles and the promotion of the possible communist threat posed should Moscow be able to exploit political instability in Iran.

In May 1953 Mossadeq wrote to Eisenhower appealing for further consideration of the Iranian case. With the plans for a coup already being pieced together, the President's response essentially refused to help the Iranians while they could help themselves:

*"...it would not be fair to the American taxpayers for the United States Government to extend any considerable amount of economic aid to Iran so long as Iran could have access to funds derived from the sale of its oil and oil products."*⁴²

Eisenhower's refusal of support came at a crucial time for Mossadeq. Despite his huge popularity amongst the ordinary people, he was beginning to lose control of the

country's political elites and was presiding over a fragmented coalition in an increasingly dictatorial manner.⁴³

Carrying out 'Operation Ajax'

The plan for the overthrow of Mossadeq was originally based on a blueprint drawn up by the British intelligence services in what they termed 'Operation Boot'. This plan was to be successfully adapted by the CIA and, in particular, veteran Middle East operative Kermit Roosevelt, grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt.⁴⁴ It essentially involved creating favourable conditions on the ground, through stirring up unrest in the form of demonstrations and riots, before carrying out the operational element. The CIA invested vast sums of money and no little time on creating such an environment; for example, two Iranian agents were given \$100,000 to recruit a mob as part of the plan to generate a situation of chaos.⁴⁵ The key element of the operation however rested with the young but unpopular monarch Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the man who would come to personify US-Iranian relations during the Cold War. Following significant personal encouragement from Roosevelt, the Shah agreed to issue a *firman* (or royal decree) dismissing Mossadeq as Prime Minister that would be backed up by dissident army and police officers, led by General Fazlollah Zahedi.

The operation began on the evening of 15 August 1953 in what would turn out to be a turbulent few weeks for Iranian politics. Despite the best efforts of the operation's planners it appeared to have ended in a calamitous failure for Roosevelt and the Americans; this was after Mossadeq had learnt of the plans allegedly via the Soviets or a leftist general and had been able to mobilise sufficient forces to thwart the coup.⁴⁶ The apparent failure of the overthrow prompted the Shah, obviously fearful of the political fallout should his involvement be uncovered, to board a flight out of the country. Fortunately for the Shah, Roosevelt was made of much sterner stuff and was not about to admit defeat. Ignoring the orders from Washington urging him to leave Iran as soon as possible – he was advised to flee by his superiors twice in the space of thirty-six hours – Roosevelt remained optimistic that there was still a chance of achieving success.⁴⁷

Roosevelt's faith in the operation was to be rewarded. Riots and street demonstrations, carried out under the CIA's guiding influence, intensified over the

next few days and eventually culminated in the removal of Mossadeq on 19 August. The monarchy was reinstated when the Shah returned to the country a few days later, claiming to Roosevelt that he owed his throne “to God, my people, my army – and to you!”⁴⁸ During the final months of Truman’s administration in October 1952, a CIA intelligence estimate entitled ‘*Prospects for Survival of Mossadeq Regime in Iran*’ had indicated that no group of officers possessed the capability to successfully initiate a military coup.⁴⁹ The findings of this assessment highlight the size of the task and the role played by Kermit Roosevelt and other CIA operatives in mobilising sufficient resources to force Mossadeq’s overthrow, particularly as the operation was executed less than a year after this estimate.

The overthrow of Mossadeq can be viewed as Eisenhower’s equivalent of the Bay of Pigs – although an eminently more successful one of course – as there is clear evidence the CIA was already preparing the ground for an operation in the final months of the Truman administration. This highlights the importance of continuity between administrations in US foreign policy, an important factor in understanding Jimmy Carter’s decision making in the late 1970s. The events of 1953 permanently scarred the Iranian psyche and would return to play a decisive role during the Carter years and beyond. The end result was the Shah; a monarch who lacked the personal strength to fight his own battles, possessed little popular support amongst the people, and who was forever tainted by his association with foreign powers – particularly the US. It took almost fifty years before the US apologised for its role in Mossadeq’s overthrow when President Bill Clinton’s Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, spoke at a meeting of the American-Iranian Council in March 2000:

*“In 1953 the United States played a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran’s popular Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadeq... it is easy to see now why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America in their internal affairs... the United States must bear its fair share of responsibility for the problems that have arisen in US-Iranian relations.”*⁵⁰

Oil and energy concerns

Oil was undoubtedly a central theme of American involvement in Iran during the twentieth century. In fact, the increase of America’s interest in Iranian oil resources ran parallel to its relative growth as a major player on the international scene as the century unfolded. Following the rise to superpower status and the advent of the

ideological Cold War struggle, the US came to view the Persian Gulf region and its plentiful supply of oil as a key strategic battleground. The gradual break-up of the British Empire led to efforts by successive Cold War presidents to ensure that the US, not the Soviet Union, established its primacy in the region. Kenneth Pollack observes that the price of oil was the policy issue on which the Shah most differed with the US, and that it was the issue that ultimately had the greatest impact on both countries.⁵¹

The discovery of oil in south-western Iran in May 1908 proved to be a seminal event in the shaping of the modern world. The find had been financed by a wealthy London socialite, William Knox D'Arcy, who in 1901 negotiated an oil concession with Shah Muzaffar al-Din. D'Arcy assumed exclusive rights to prospect for oil in a vast area of territory in exchange for £20,000, an equal amount in shares of his company, and sixteen percent of future profits.⁵² In 1909 the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, later to become the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), was established at the behest of the British government to absorb the D'Arcy concession and manage the exploration and development of Iranian oil.⁵³ In just a handful of years, British expertise created the giant refinery at Abadan and the production of oil began to flow. Prior to the outbreak of the First World War, the British government, led by the First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, sought to secure a cheap and reliable source of oil for the British Navy. In 1914 they purchased a fifty-one percent shareholding in the Company, thus obtaining a financial interest and a controlling voice in its affairs.⁵⁴

The first signs of American interest

In the immediate post-war years the British sought to consolidate their position while Iran was beset by discontent and communist uprisings – no doubt inspired by their Bolshevik neighbours. In 1919 the Anglo-Persian agreement created a virtual protectorate and gave Britain immense military, political and economic power in Iran.⁵⁵ Historian Nikki Keddie notes that the Iranian response was to look to Washington for assistance as the US was “showing a new interest in Iran and its oil.”⁵⁶ A contributing factor to this growing awareness of the Iranian question was concern at Britain’s attempts to secure further political hegemony over Iran. The terms of the 1919 treaty – which was never actually ratified by the Majlis – provided for Britain to fill the military, economic, and political vacuum created by the revolution by obtaining control over the Iranian army and finances.⁵⁷ American

unease was shared by the other major powers and was summed up by then Secretary of State Robert Lansing, who called it “a secret negotiation to obtain at least economic control of Iran.”⁵⁸

The appointment of Millspaugh’s first economic mission came following the accession of Ahmad Qavam as Prime Minister in June 1921. Qavam, who favoured the third power option, was well known for his pro-US stance and set about trying to coax Washington into abandoning its isolationist attitude with Iran’s trump card – its oil resources. The Majlis encouraged the use of American petroleum advisors and sought to grant an oil concession to American companies in the north of the country.⁵⁹ The US government’s support of Iranian oil initiatives naturally brought it into conflict with Britain and the Soviet Union – particularly the British, who still apparently believed that the AIOC had a divine right to maintain its monopoly over Iranian oil.

Despite the focus on the oil question in the early 1920s, the US role in Iran remained limited at this stage. While there was certainly a desire to expand oil interests and ensure the British did not over step the mark, the US did not wish to cause irreparable damage to British influence nor was it seeking to replace its ally as the chief player in Iran. US-Iranian relations swiftly cooled following the brutal murder of the US vice-consul to Tehran, Major Robert W. Imbrie in July 1924; he was attacked by a mob led by members of the Muslim clergy and including members of the Iranian army as he visited a religious shrine.⁶⁰ Yet even before this event the State Department was becoming increasingly wary of being played off against the British in Iran.⁶¹

As the Second World War progressed, US foreign policy in the Middle East also evolved. Washington’s foreign policy elites recognised that non-intervention would no longer serve US interests in the region, nor would it sufficiently challenge British imperialism. This change of emphasis paved the way for the ‘open door’ policy in the Middle East; which provided US companies with equal opportunities to invest in new areas. Cordell Hull provided evidence of this transformation, admitting “a more directly selfish point of view” with regard to Iran and stating that it was in the US interest that “no great power be established on the Persian Gulf opposite the important American petroleum development in Saudi Arabia.”⁶² Hull also recognised the crucial

importance of oil to the nation's security and subsequently sought to shift the burden of supplying Europe from the Western Hemisphere to the Middle East, which would of course become the centre of the world's production in the second half of the twentieth century.⁶³

In an apparent contradiction with the Roosevelt administration's desire to see free and independent states across the globe, the State Department had come to realise, as the Second World War approached its end, that some US involvement in Iranian internal affairs was necessary in order to prevent other powers from consolidating their hegemony.⁶⁴ Indeed, one of the paradoxes of the early Cold War in the Middle East was that while the US and Britain were confronting the aggressive diplomacy of Stalin's Soviet Union, they were also competing against each other for a controlling stake in Middle Eastern oil.

Iran rapidly became one of the key states in the Allied struggle for Middle Eastern influence. Not surprisingly, each power acted according to its own national interest, with the impact on Iran and its people merely a secondary concern. However, while the US certainly acted with its own benefit in mind, it did not pursue policies which exercised influence or undue pressure on the Iranians – which its wartime allies Britain and the Soviet Union were quite willing to do; Bruce Kuniholm contends that Iran was simply a unique situation where the US could not avoid involvement in great power politics.⁶⁵

The oil crisis of 1944 was a prime example of Anglo-Russian manipulation. It stemmed from Iranian approaches to US companies about the possibility of securing oil concessions. The Soviets were displeased with these offers being made to US firms and responded by exerting sufficient pressure on the Iranian government that it was forced to place all oil concessions on hold until after the war. As tensions between the two superpowers mounted, culminating in the first flashpoint of the Cold War in March 1946, oil became a major concern for the US when confronting Soviet subversion in Iran – concessions were at stake and the prime American objective was to prevent these oil reserves from falling into Moscow's hands.

The Nationalisation of Iranian Oil

Following his appointment as Iranian Prime Minister in 1951, Mohammed Mossadeq was determined to confront the British, or more specifically the AIOC, over their plundering of Iranian oil resources. In July 1949 the Iranian government had signed the Supplemental Agreement, a miserly deal not even giving it an equal share with the AIOC – whose profits continued to soar at Iran's expense. Yet far more intolerable to Iran than the financial implications was the question of national sovereignty,⁶⁶ the issue which Mossadeq and his National Front movement continually seized upon.

The Americans kept a close eye on the situation as events proceeded dangerously for the British and the AIOC. An oil commission established in the Majlis and chaired by Mossadeq voted in November 1950 to reject the Supplemental Agreement, bringing about renewed calls from nationalist supporters for the nationalisation of the oil industry. The crisis was magnified just a month later when ARAMCO (the corporation of US oil firms in Saudi Arabia) negotiated an equal split of profits with the Saudi government; yet this deal failed to generate a response from the Foreign Office or the AIOC, who ignored the pleas of the British Ambassador in Tehran to make a similar offer to the Iranians.⁶⁷ The British government was well aware that the loss of Iranian oil would cost hundreds of millions of pounds, yet their intransigence and contempt for the Iranian government scuppered any hope of a compromise. The departure of Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, who resigned due to ill health in March 1951, came at a crucial point. His replacement, Herbert Morrison, lacked Bevin's experience or moderation and Morrison's jingoistic tone only served to further inflame the crisis.⁶⁸ Yet by this late stage the situation was well beyond retrieval as Mossadeq and other extreme nationalists were now in a position to force their agenda through. Thus it was that in April 1951 the Majlis voted to nationalise the Iranian oil industry.

The British naturally responded with an extensive range of punitive measures, which included raising the issue with the UN Security Council, freezing Iranian assets in British banks and organising a worldwide boycott of Iranian oil. Over the months that followed the actions taken by Britain were to prove successful in building the internal pressure on Mossadeq. By the middle of 1952 he was facing numerous problems due to the devastating effectiveness of the oil boycott, which was causing Iranians to

become poorer and unhappier by the day.⁶⁹ Fearing the possible wider global implications if the crisis was allowed to spiral out of control, the Truman administration decided that mediation from Washington was required in order to alleviate the tensions. The principal fear of the administration was that the Anglo-Iranian dispute would lead either to a rift in the Western alliance system or the fall of Iran to the Soviet Union.⁷⁰

The US was soon under pressure to adopt a clear standpoint from both the Iranian and the British sides. The administration's policy as developed by Secretary of State Dean Acheson involved attempting to pacify the British whilst simultaneously urging Mossadeq to compromise his position.⁷¹ At this particular stage, some aspects of Mossadeq's leadership appealed to Washington. The Democrats in government viewed him as a staunch anti-Communist and a nationalist with popular support – an assessment not shared by the Dulles brothers who were at the forefront of the next Republican administration. A comparison can also be drawn with Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski's views of the Ayatollah Khomeini in the immediate aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in 1978-79. As we will see later, at one stage Brzezinski was optimistic that Khomeini's anti-Communism provided the two parties with some common ground against the backdrop of the East-West struggle.⁷²

In a last ditch attempt to resolve the nationalisation dispute, Truman sent Averell W. Harriman, the former ambassador to Moscow, to Tehran for a series of talks with the Iranian leadership. Although Harriman succeeded in convincing Mossadeq to meet again with British negotiators, his efforts ultimately came to nothing as neither side was prepared to alter their stance – the British would not agree to nationalisation, while the Iranians would not accept anything less.⁷³ Truman now had his hands tied in terms of making any progress in mediating between the two sides, particularly after Churchill's election victory in October 1951. Churchill was not prepared to tolerate Iran's behaviour and was able to play on the fact that British support was vitally important to the US in Korea.

Despite its profiteering and unfair labour practices, the AIOC was consistently defended by the British government which had to protect its substantial financial

investment. The nationalisation question was an economic issue for Britain yet both the Attlee and Churchill governments knew they had to present the threat to the US in clear ideological terms as an issue of communism.⁷⁴ The Eisenhower and Churchill governments later found themselves being pushed ever closer together in terms of the Iranian question. In comparing them to their predecessors, James Bill points out that there were two key drivers in Anglo-American thinking – oil and the Soviet threat, “... [both] were more susceptible to the arguments of the oil industry and were considerably more paranoid about the communist threat”, therefore they were “more willing... to conduct an operation of direct intervention into Iran.”⁷⁵ This aptly demonstrates the importance of oil as a contributing factor in making the final decision to overthrow Mossadeq.

Regenerating the industry and the British withdrawal

The most pressing task for the Shah’s newly restored regime following the 1953 coup was to reinvigorate the stagnant Iranian economy. This naturally meant focusing attention on the oil industry that had suffered during the bitter nationalisation crisis. Ironically, despite the successful removal of Mossadeq, the British ended up with a worse deal than the fifty-fifty split they had been offered prior to the nationalisation. Iran now regained control of its own resources and production was divided up among a consortium of foreign companies; the AIOC (which later became British Petroleum or BP) still retained a major share but was now joined at the table by a number of American firms.⁷⁶ By the end of the 1950s, the fortunes of the oil industry were slowly on the rise and the Iranian economy was benefiting from the substantial American investment in the Shah’s regime.

During the 1960s, the US viewed its oil interests in the Middle East as two-dimensional. Firstly, there was the strategic importance as American allies in Western Europe and Japan were increasingly dependent on these sources of oil, and secondly, there were the commercial benefits to be garnered by the involvement of American based companies in the industry.⁷⁷ Following the British decision to withdraw from the region in the late 1960s, the problem of securing access to Gulf oil became a major concern for the US. Stability in the region was crucial and it was hoped that if this could be achieved it would lead to an uninterrupted flow of oil to the West. In his study of America’s Gulf policy in the period after Britain’s departure, Hussein

Sirriyeh points out that the choice of Iran and Saudi Arabia as the ‘twin pillars’ of local stability was partly dictated by the fact that they were major oil suppliers with a considerable say in the regional oil policies adopted by the Gulf states.⁷⁸

This period also saw an increase in the US government’s involvement in the petroleum industry, the like of which had not been seen since Franklin Roosevelt’s unsuccessful efforts during the Second World War. (Due to the spread of the conflict across the globe and the heavy burden of supplying the Allied powers, there had been fears of an oil shortage in the US during the war years. Roosevelt’s attempts to establish greater federal control of the industry effectively ended when Congress shelved the Anglo-American Oil Agreement).⁷⁹ During the 1950s and early 1960s, Washington sought to exercise little influence over the activities of the major oil companies but by the late 1960s the situation had changed considerably. This was due to Britain’s withdrawal, which was perceived as a potential threat to the security of Western oil supplies, and, as we shall see later, the increased US dependence on Middle Eastern oil – by 1970 the US was a net importer of energy and government departments were issuing bleak assessments of the future of US oil imports.⁸⁰

OPEC, the Shah and the US energy crisis

While the US concerned itself with the continuation of access to Persian Gulf oil, the Shah was intent on exploiting oil revenues in order to fund the ambitious military programme he envisaged for Iran. He was certainly aided in achieving this goal, albeit unintentionally, by the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, commonly known as OPEC. Formed in September 1960 with Iran as one of its five charter members, OPEC’s influence grew rapidly as demand for petroleum began to overtake supply and it was not long before the producing countries possessed some real leverage with the oil companies.⁸¹ Iran was just one of a number of states seeking to regain economic sovereignty and tackle the perceived inequalities of earlier concessions.

In 1969 the Iranian government threatened unilateral legislation to increase the country’s stake at the expense of the Western consortium responsible for lifting its oil. The Nixon government was reluctant to intervene in the dispute on Tehran’s behalf, arguing that it could not control the actions of the oil consortium.⁸² With the Shah and

the consortium still at loggerheads and their differences unresolved, oil became one of the main talking points between the two leaders during their October 1969 meeting in the White House. Nixon and his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, knew they had to keep the Shah happy as the British vacated the Persian Gulf, but they could not offer him anything concrete due to their inability to dictate terms to the oil companies.⁸³

Disagreements and wrangling between Iran and the oil companies continued until OPEC signed the Tehran agreement of February 1971. The agreement allowed for annual price increases over a five-year period after and marked a healthy phase in relations between the two sides which would not last long.⁸⁴ The radical changes in the international oil industry at the beginning of the 1970s mirrored those taking place in terms of the domestic energy situation within the US. Whereas the US itself had not been heavily dependent on foreign sources to meet domestic consumption a decade earlier, petroleum consumption had now skyrocketed to the extent that Washington was forced to look abroad in order to meet consumer demand.⁸⁵ The Nixon administration and later those of Ford and Carter, faced a growing crisis in terms of securing access to the necessary oil supplies. Barry Rubin maintains that throughout this period of mounting oil price instability, the US government put a higher priority on cultivating good relations with Iran than on attempts to stop or delay this process.⁸⁶

The 1973 oil embargo, which was a response to American support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War, did little to ease the domestic energy problems in the US. Although the Shah opted against joining the embargo, he still sought to use the situation to the best of his advantage. The Iranian decision, taken in conjunction with other OPEC members, to raise oil prices in October and December 1973 was quite palpably incompatible with US interests.⁸⁷ An increase in oil prices was the last thing the US needed domestically, yet the move did not undermine US strategy in the Gulf – if anything it brought home the importance of the need to strengthen US-Iranian ties.

The Nixon administration adopted a bold new strategy labelled 'Project Independence' in an attempt to tackle the energy crisis head on. This plan, described by *Time* magazine in 1974 as "impossibly visionary,"⁸⁸ aimed to secure domestic self-sufficiency in energy, and would later be continued by the Ford team. This project

highlighted some of the major problems facing the US government; for example, even reducing dependence on foreign oil to a moderate level rather than a dangerous one, would be an extremely costly venture. In this climate of uncertainty and with the increasing “unreliability of foreign petroleum supplies,”⁸⁹ it was more prudent for both Nixon and Ford to focus on ensuring that America possessed sufficient access to foreign oil sources, such as Iran, rather than on consistently advocating the very-distant goal of securing energy independence.

The Ford administration and nuclear energy

In the 1970s the Shah looked once again in the direction of the United States, this time with a mind to developing Iran’s nuclear energy capability. Iran’s nuclear programme actually began in the late 1950s when the US gave a small reactor to Tehran University as part of Eisenhower’s American Atoms for Peace initiative.⁹⁰ The Shah’s motives and interest in nuclear energy were unclear, but there is little doubt that he viewed it as a symbol of power and status on the international scene. Jack Miklos, deputy chief of mission at the US embassy at the time, noted that no Iranian official had satisfactorily explained how the country “expects to absorb 23,000 MWE [megawatts of electricity] of additional power within the next twenty years”; he also concluded that the possibility of Iran feeling the need to acquire nuclear weapons in the future could not be completely ruled out.⁹¹ Whatever his motivations, the Shah’s mind was made up and he unilaterally made the decision – ignoring the Majlis – to plough millions into the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) one of the most expensive projects undertaken by his regime.⁹²

Tehran’s nuclear ambitions remain a source of concern and controversy in the contemporary world as the international community is uneasy about Iranian efforts to enrich uranium. Back in the 1970s, the Shah’s Iran was seeking to develop a domestic plutonium reprocessing facility, which could produce the key ingredient of a nuclear weapon. Iran quickly secured nuclear reactor deals with France and West Germany, but its dealings with the US progressed more slowly. Tehran sought to purchase eight reactors from US suppliers such as General Electric and Westinghouse, while the Ford government encouraged the Shah to invest heavily in a US based uranium enrichment plant being proposed by the Bechtel Corporation.⁹³ The Ford administration’s approach to the negotiations was a difficult balancing act as non-proliferation

concerns had to be weighed against the desire to maintain good relations with the Shah. William Burr describes the position favoured by US as not so 'strong' that it would encourage the Shah to buy nuclear technology elsewhere, but not so 'weak' that it would spark Congressional concerns and be rejected.⁹⁴

Despite a tentative beginning the Ford administration pressed ahead with the nuclear negotiations, knowing how important they were to the Shah and anxious not to risk damaging US-Iranian relations. The Defense Department was particularly worried about the impact this impasse was having on other aspects of US-Iranian relations, and Pentagon officials recommended that the US rethink its hard-line approach and accept the Shah's demands.⁹⁵ In the early part of 1975, then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger instigated an interagency review of the process outlining the issues to be resolved by the two sides, stating that an agreement; "...would allow nuclear commerce between the countries – specifically, the sale of US nuclear reactors and materials."⁹⁶ On 22 April 1975, Kissinger signed National Security Decision Memorandum 292, which stated the government shall: "Permit US material to be fabricated into fuel in Iran for use in its own reactors."⁹⁷

Interestingly enough, Kissinger has revealed that the issue of proliferation never came up during the Iranian nuclear negotiations and that it was simply a "commercial transaction" with an allied country.⁹⁸ Kissinger's recollection is at odds with the documentation of the negotiations published by the National Security Archive in its 'Nuclear Vault'.⁹⁹ The Indian nuclear test in May 1974 had heightened fears of a further spread of nuclear weapons and even though proliferation may have been a low priority for Kissinger early on, his attitude appears to have changed by the time he left office in 1977 – when he advocated moving "heaven and earth" to curb proliferation.¹⁰⁰ However, Kissinger's contention that it was a commercial deal is quite accurate – US companies stood to gain handsomely from the sale of six to eight nuclear reactors and parts, to the tune of some \$6.4 billion.¹⁰¹

Selling nuclear reactors to Iran was both attractive commercially and important as a means of solidifying the crucial strategic partnership between the two nations. By May 1976 the two sides had converged on the basic principles and a draft agreement was drawn up. Yet later that year, while some of the details were being fine tuned, the

domestic pressures of the 1976 presidential campaign shifted Ford's focus and placed the talks on hold. The Iranian nuclear question was thus left on the table for the 1976 victor, Jimmy Carter, to pick up when he entered the White House.

The contemporary relevance of the issue and the release of new documents from the era into the National Security Archive have invited a fresh look at the Ford administration's handling of Iran and nuclear energy. The journalist Dafna Linzer is scathing of the Ford administration for its endorsement of Iranian plans to begin building a massive nuclear energy industry, and their efforts in working to complete a multibillion-dollar deal that would give Tehran control of large quantities of plutonium and enriched uranium – the two pathways to a nuclear bomb.¹⁰² In light of the continued diplomatic stand-off over nuclear issues that confronts the Obama administration, it is ironic to note that influential members of George W. Bush's government (2001-09), which was particularly strident and confrontational in its condemnation of Iran's nuclear programme, all held key national security posts when Ford signed off on the nuclear deals with Iran – namely Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz. This constitutes a remarkable about-face in the space of thirty years and provides an accurate indication of how far the American perception of Iran has changed since the mid-1970s. Kissinger's claim that proliferation was not important, while clearly questionable, aptly demonstrates the faith that the US government placed in the Shah's rule throughout the 1970s. Back then Iran, or perhaps more accurately the Shah, was a willing and trusted ally enjoying the benefits of a special relationship with Washington – which is certainly not the case today.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

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- ¹⁵ Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) pp. 75-76.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Milani, *The Shah* p.78.
- ¹⁷ Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 113.
- ¹⁸ Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy 1941-1973: A Study of Foreign Policy in Modernising Nations* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975) p. 47.
- ¹⁹ For more see Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980) pp. 171-172 & p. 190.
- ²⁰ The reorganisation of the Iranian gendarmarie was spearheaded by Colonel H. Norman Schwarzkopf, father of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf Jnr. (or 'Stormin Norman' as he is better known) who commanded the coalition forces in the Gulf War at the beginning of the 1990s. See Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 116.
- ²¹ For a transcript of the Tehran declaration see the Avalon Project (Documents in Law, History and diplomacy) at Yale Law School <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/wwii/tehran.htm> [accessed October 2008].
- ²² Milani, *The Shah*, p.76-77.
- ²³ US Army Center of Military History. *The Persian Corridor and Aid to Russia* by T. H. Vail Motter (1952), Appendix B (503) <http://www.history.army.mil/books/wwii/persian/appendix-b.htm#c2> [accessed October 2008].
- ²⁴ Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, p. 168.
- ²⁵ Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, p. 174.
- ²⁶ See Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, p. 379 for more information.
- ²⁷ NATO online library – speeches: Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, March 5, 1946 'The Sinews of Peace' by Winston S. Churchill, http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1946/s460305a_e.htm [accessed September 2007].
- ²⁸ Quotation cited in Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy 1941-1973*, p. 138.
- ²⁹ James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988) pp. 35-36.
- ³⁰ Ghods, *Iran in the Twentieth Century*, p. 153.
- ³¹ Ghods, *Iran in the Twentieth Century*, p. 154.
- ³² Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department* (New York: WW Norton Inc, 1969) pp. 197-198.
- ³³ James F. Goode, *The United States and Iran, 1946-51: The Diplomacy of Neglect* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) pp. 15-16.
- ³⁴ See William Stivers, 'Eisenhower and the Middle East' in Richard A. Melanson & David Mayers (eds.) *Reevaluating Eisenhower: American Foreign Policy in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987) pp. 193-194 & p. 200.
- ³⁵ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 64.
- ³⁶ Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, p. 3.
- ³⁷ Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, pp. 145-148.
- ³⁸ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 63.
- ³⁹ Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, pp. 145-148.
- ⁴⁰ See Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, pp. 150-152.
- ⁴¹ See Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, pp. 3-4.
- ⁴² Dwight D. Eisenhower, Cable 3295. Secret to Mohammed Mossadeq, 30 June 1953. In *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, L. Galambos & D. van Ee (eds.) Document No. 281

<http://www.eisenhowermemorial.org/presidential-papers/first-term/documents/281.cfm> [accessed July 2007].

⁴³ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 65.

⁴⁴ Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, pp. 138-139.

⁴⁵ See Stivers, 'Eisenhower and the Middle East' pp. 205-206. For a more detailed analysis of the exact cost of the operation see Kinzer pp. 162-163.

⁴⁶ Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 139.

⁴⁷ Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, p. 172.

⁴⁸ Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, p. 191.

⁴⁹ Special Estimate 33 *Prospects for Survival of Mossadeq Regime in Iran* p. 2 (published 14 October 1952). Central Intelligence Agency FOIA electronic reading room <http://www.foia.cia.gov> [accessed July 2007].

⁵⁰ Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright's remarks before the American-Iranian Council, 17 March 2000. Federation of American Scientists website <http://www.fas.org/news/iran/2000/000317.htm> [accessed September 2007].

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⁵³ Kinzer *All the Shah's Men*, p. 49.

⁵⁴ Marian Jack, 'The Purchase of the British Government's Shares in the British Petroleum Company 1912-1914' *Past & Present*, No. 39 (April 1968), p. 139.

⁵⁵ Melvin E. Page (ed.), *Colonialism: An International Social, Cultural, and Political Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003) p. 279.

⁵⁶ Keddie, *Roots of Revolution* p. 85.

⁵⁷ Ghods, *Iran in the Twentieth Century*, p. 55.

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⁵⁹ Ghods, *Iran in the Twentieth Century*, p. 72.

⁶⁰ For more information see the following articles: Michael P. Zirinsky, 'Blood, Power, and Hypocrisy: The Murder of Robert Imbrie and American Relations with Pahlavi Iran, 1924' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 18 Issue 3 (August 1986), pp. 275-292; and 'Persia: A Closed Incident?' *Time* magazine, 13 October 1924, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,719273,00.html> [accessed September 2007].

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⁶² Quotation cited in Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, p. 160.

⁶³ Michael B. Stoff, 'The Anglo-American Oil Agreement and the Wartime Search for Foreign Oil Policy', *The Business History Review*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Spring 1981) pp. 67-68.

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⁶⁵ Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, p. 205.

⁶⁶ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 63.

⁶⁷ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 56.

⁶⁸ Mostafa Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle: Iran's Oil Nationalization and Its Aftermath* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992) p. 83.

⁶⁹ Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, pp. 135-136.

⁷⁰ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 57.

⁷¹ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 75.

⁷² See Chapter Eight p. 235 for further details.

⁷³ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 58.

⁷⁴ Torey L. McMurdo, 'The Economics of Overthrow: The United States, Britain, and the Hidden Justification of Operation TPAJAX' *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (June 2012) pp. 21-22.

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⁷⁶ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 75.

⁷⁷ Michael A. Ledeen & William H. Lewis, *Debate: The American Failure in Iran* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981) p. 50.

⁷⁸ Hussein Sirriyeh, *US Policy in the Gulf, 1968-1977: Aftermath of British Withdrawal* (London: Ithaca Press, 1984) p. 132.

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The Cold War and American Support for the Shah

Despite its heavy dependence on US assistance, Iran was by no means an American satellite state in the same way that the communist regimes in Eastern Europe were to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The US government possessed neither the will nor the desire to exert control over the running of Iranian affairs, but it did undoubtedly possess a strong influence on the man at the top, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. This chapter examines the role played by successive US administrations in shaping the changes to Iranian society prior to the Carter period, and looks at just how the Shah unwittingly constructed a ticking time bomb that was destined to explode at the end of the 1970s.

The Shah's internal problems

The changing nature of global Cold War politics following President John F. Kennedy's election as US President ensured that Iran was viewed slightly differently than it had been in the mid-1950s. During the height of the Suez Crisis, Iran had been considered a vital US partner in a volatile region, yet as the 1960s began there had been tentative moves towards détente by the two superpowers and the likelihood of the Cold War going 'hot' had seemingly reduced, particularly in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Even before this, it was apparent that the Kennedy administration possessed a different set of policy objectives with regard to Iran; in particular they sought an Iranian government with a broader internal base, greater efficiency and popularity, and less corruption.¹

The internal difficulties facing the Shah's regime were apparent to many American observers. In the early months of 1961, a number of influential voices both within and outside the new Kennedy administration warned of the trouble brewing in Iran, including State Department analyst John W. Bowling and key members of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.² US intelligence assessments noted the flimsy foundations of the Shah's regime: the weakness of the armed forces, the rigging of elections, the fact that power was concentrated exclusively with one individual, and of course the growing social and political unrest.³ American officials had been spurred

on by the Iraqi Revolution and therefore urged the Shah to press ahead with a modernisation programme in order to guard against the spectre of communism.⁴

The 'Cold Warriors' of the Eisenhower administration had by no means given the Shah a guarantee of unconditional support – to the contrary, Pollack points out that many Eisenhower era officials were keen to distance the US from Iran and viewed the Shah as a weak and callow leader.⁵ But they had endeavoured to create a degree of stability within Iran, as much as anything to protect it from the perceived communist threat. Kennedy and his foreign policy advisers shared the desire to prevent Iran from falling under the influence of Moscow but opted for a definite shift of emphasis in attempting to achieve this objective.

The Shah himself was concerned enough by the change from a Republican to a Democrat controlled White House that he dispatched one of his leading officials, General Teimur Bakhtiar, the head of the Iranian intelligence service SAVAK, to meet with the new administration's officials. Bakhtiar stated the Iranian case for increased aid, citing the problems involved in simultaneously financing economic development and maintaining adequate security forces. In response, Kennedy expressed US sympathy but explained that an assessment of the situation was ongoing.⁶

Following the Bakhtiar trip, State Department officials were anxious that the Shah's flagging morale be boosted with reassurance of US support. Averell W. Harriman was sent to Tehran for a second time (he had earlier attempted to mediate between the British and Iranians following the nationalisation crisis) to meet with the Shah and calm his fears. Harriman was impressed by the progress made in Tehran since his previous visit, yet he still noted the need for political, social and economic reforms. While he realised that the US could not compel the Shah down the route of modernisation, he believed that if Washington could exert a heavy enough influence then progress could be made.⁷

The US Ambassador to Iran, Edward T. Wailes, shared Harriman's views and, in a telegram to Washington, advocated that the internal political objective of the US in Iran for the next five years should be to attempt to influence leaders and ministers into

achieving feasible reforms.⁸ The US was eager to see developments in Iranian society that might prevent it from suffering the same fate as its near neighbour Iraq, where the pro-Western monarchy had been overthrown in July 1958. Wailes' telegram captured the tone of the uneasy relationship that developed between the two sides during this period. The Shah had quietly supported Nixon's campaign during the 1960 presidential election and harboured a personal dislike of Kennedy, highlighted by the fact that he was not displeased on hearing news of Kennedy's assassination in November 1963.⁹

Whatever comparisons one makes between the approaches of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, it is evident that the latter enjoyed a far more effective working relationship with the Shah. (Even though Lyndon B. Johnson was by no means personally fond of the Shah,¹⁰ his two visits to Iran as Kennedy's Vice President in the early 1960s formed the basis from which the two leaders could work). The mid-to-late 1960s saw a broad continuation of American support for the Shah and limited encouragement of the need for continued reform, but it also witnessed the growth of the Shah's independence on the international scene – Barry Rubin claims that by the end of Johnson's term the Shah “was to be accepted on his own terms.”¹¹ Strong Iranian support for US Cold War policies, including the Vietnam War, and its position as a dependable ally in a region of vital importance, meant that Washington was prepared to tolerate, to some degree, the Shah's overtures to Moscow.

How did the Shah become the problem?

Under increasing pressure for change both at home and from outside influences – such as the US government – the Shah finally embarked upon a series of internal reforms in the early 1960s, in what would collectively become known as the ‘White Revolution’. The key element of this programme was land reform, which was crucial to the restructuring of both Iranian society and the country's economy. Dr. Ali Amini, who the Shah had reluctantly appointed Prime Minister in May 1961, inaugurated the process of social and economic reform. Kenneth Pollack describes Amini as “the American candidate”; he had previously served as Ambassador to the US, during which time he established a friendship with the then Senator Kennedy.¹² Amini was distrusted and resented by the Shah, who claimed that the Kennedy administration had forced him into making the appointment. This assessment of Kennedy's influence

appears somewhat exaggerated, particularly as other commentators have noted that American leverage over the Shah was limited at this time.¹³

Whether he was the American candidate or not, the Kennedy administration clearly viewed Amini's appointment as an opportunity to make some progress. Robert W. Komer of the NSC staff, advised Kennedy that, "we must vigorously support the new Amini government as the best, and perhaps last good chance of forestalling Iran's slippery slide into chaos" and that Amini's reforms should be backed "positively but discreetly."¹⁴ Prior to Amini's appointment, the State Department had been reluctant to apply too much pressure on the Shah for fear of pushing him closer towards Moscow.

Amini and his radical agricultural minister, Hassan Arsanjani, set about tackling the power of large landowners by instigating meaningful land reform. Unfortunately, the pace of radical change exemplified by the Land Reform Act of 1962 only served to stir up opposition to the Prime Minister and his supporters. Indeed, Kennedy himself expressed concern over the situation in Iran as early as August 1961, noting that the regime appeared "to have lost much of the initial momentum."¹⁵ Amini received little support from the Shah, with whom he repeatedly clashed over cutting the military budget. This lack of support from all quarters, particularly the middle classes, resulted in his eventual resignation.¹⁶ James A. Bill contends that the Shah used Amini as a shield to deflect criticism from himself before choosing to "cut the ground out from under" him to clear the way for a more loyal Prime Minister – whose appointment would enable the Shah to assume royal control of the reform agenda.¹⁷

The aftermath of the revolution and Washington's response

Aside from land reform that removed the landlord as the intermediary between the peasants and the state, the White Revolution also involved the establishment of literacy and health corps (modelled on the US Peace Corps) and allowed women to vote for the first time.¹⁸ These changes essentially brought too much modernisation too fast for Iranian society to handle. The peasantry suffered as a result and reforms only served to strengthen the hand of the clergy who, over the next decade or so, would emerge as the only form of viable opposition to the Shah's increasingly tyrannical regime. In the post-1963 period the Shah became ever-more reliant on the

operations of SAVAK as the principal tool for consolidating his regime. Under Kennedy, the CIA had attempted to distance itself from SAVAK by removing its training mission, yet this did little to slow the organisation's spread into Iranian society as CIA personnel were simply replaced by members of the Israeli Security Service, Mossad;¹⁹ this was a by-product of the cosy relations the Shah cultivated with Israel throughout his reign.

Conservative members of the clergy, led by the radical mullah Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, spearheaded the resistance to the Shah's reform programme. In 1963, Khomeini made the leap from relative obscurity to the forefront of the Iranian political scene by making a series of speeches denouncing the White Revolution, focusing on the perceived threat it posed to Islam and on the Shah's close links with America and Israel.²⁰ The regime's decision to arrest Khomeini in June caused tens of thousands of Iranians to take to the streets of Tehran, Qom, and other cities in protest. The Shah responded by calling in the military, which brutally suppressed the demonstrations, killing a large number of people in the process. Not only did the revolution now have blood on its hands, but it had also inadvertently enabled Khomeini to move up the pecking order of Iran's Shia religious hierarchy.

American interpretations of the unfolding events in Iran varied somewhat but usually fell into one of two categories, optimism or scepticism. The news media was very enthusiastic about what it viewed as a revolutionary reform programme, as were aid workers involved in the work of the American Peace Corps. However, this enthusiasm was not shared by the foreign policy-makers, who better understood the realities on the ground and recognised the strong possibility of the Shah not being able to build on his positive start.²¹ In March 1963, Kennedy issued a National Security Action memo in which he requested a review to ensure that approval for further military assistance remained "intimately linked to an overall strategy for moving Iran toward more effective solutions to its crucial internal problems."²² In his response to the President, Secretary of State Dean Rusk painted an optimistic picture of the "energetic solutions" being pursued by the Shah but also noted the hostility lingering within various groups,²³ hostility which would of course erupt later in the year.

The accession of Lyndon B. Johnson as President is widely viewed as marking the end of American attempts to pressure the Shah into carrying out further modernisation of Iranian society. Kennedy's assassination in November 1963 essentially removed the principal foreign impetus to Iranian reforms and, in doing so, allowed the Shah to begin another period of entrenched and repressive political rule.²⁴ However, the conventional view of the Kennedy administration's reform-orientated policy towards Iran has recently been challenged by the historian Victor Nemchenok; he argues the focus on political reform has obscured the underlying motivation of Kennedy's policy, which was the continued search for stability and fear of Soviet exploitation.²⁵ In fact, guarding against communist subversion is a theme of remarkable continuity in US policy towards Iran from Eisenhower right through to Carter.

Growing unease

In October 1964 the Iranian Majlis approved a law, known in the US as the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which granted American military personnel and their dependents based in Iran full diplomatic immunity.²⁶ Whilst this agreement was similar to others negotiated by the American military for personnel based in countries like Germany and Japan, Iran's historical experiences meant it was viewed as a throwback to the days of overbearing foreign influence – even though the nationalist icon Mossadeq had approved an identical SOFA treaty when he had been Prime Minister.²⁷

When the Majlis subsequently accepted a \$200 million loan from a consortium of American commercial banks to purchase military equipment, opponents of the regime had ample ammunition with which to accuse the Shah's regime of selling out to the US. The most vociferous criticism came from Ayatollah Khomeini in a famous speech during which he claimed: "They have reduced the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog."²⁸ Khomeini's broadside resulted in his arrest and eventual exile, first to Turkey and later to the holy Shia city of Najaf in Iraq, and he would not forget the perceived role played by the US during this period. The whole episode itself reflected badly on the public image of the US amongst ordinary Iranians, and was only prevented from spiralling out of hand by the Shah's increasingly tight system of control.

Internal unrest continued to grow within Iranian society during the late 1960s and early 1970s, yet the US government did not seem aware of the true extent of the discontent. A CIA intelligence estimate in September 1970 concluded that “no organized opposition of any consequence” existed, and that although the conservative clergy resented the Shah’s rule “they appear to be able to do little more than grumble.”²⁹ While there is no suggestion that those opposed to the Shah were in a position at this stage to deliver a fatal blow to the regime, the reliability of American intelligence on the ground in Iran can certainly be called into question. This assessment in particular appears to have grossly underestimated the strength of anti-Shah feeling amongst ordinary Iranians. Yet it was not only the Nixon administration and the State Department who were getting carried away with the apparent stability of the Shah’s government. In a 1973 article, Time magazine concluded:

*“...Iran is stable, and the Shah seems to have the overwhelming support of his people. He has carried out something like a social revolution from the top.”*³⁰

By the end of 1972, as President Nixon was seeking re-election, there were some clear warning signs of the potential dangers to come from within Iran. Andrew Killgore, a political officer on the US embassy staff in Tehran, sent a letter to Jack C. Miklos, Country Director for Iran at the State Department, in October outlining his concerns about the political situation, noting that the Shah might be contemplating adopting a one-party system for Iran.³¹ In a handwritten postscript, Killgore thanked Miklos for his preceding letter because of the strong criticism of the Iranian regime it implied and stated his belief that:

*“The Shah’s interests and ours will be better served in the long run by our looking dispassionately at the failures as well as the success of the regime.”*³²

A starker warning, which more accurately portrayed Iranian displeasure with the Shah’s dictatorship, had been issued to the US government earlier that same month but, due to American doubts about the integrity of the source, it had been brushed aside. It came in the form of a letter to President Nixon from Nasser Afshar, editor of the Iran Free Press publication. Afshar tried to impress upon Nixon the dire consequences that would result from following its pro-Shah policies; chillingly predicting with accuracy:

*“Revolution will come to Iran. The people grow daily more weary of billions spent by the Shah’s government on armaments while seven out of eight Iranians starve.”*³³

Although the correspondence made such points, it was far from aggressive or overtly anti-American in its message but was rather a desperate plea for help in the Iranian search for freedom.

The Nixon administration and the State Department chose to ignore the warnings brought before them. Rather than seeking to engage with Afshar's people and attempting to gain an understanding of the challenges facing ordinary Iranians, the Nixon administration followed the previously established practice of disregarding those opposed to the regime for fear of antagonising America's friend, the Shah. Harold H. Saunders of the NSC staff recommended that no reply be sent to the Afshar letter as both the State Department and, of course, the Shah considered the organisation "offensive" in nature. The inability to see the bigger picture, which Killgore appeared to have grasped from his experiences on the front line in Tehran, points to a failure of US policy and a reluctance to challenge the status quo of US-Iranian relations during the 1970s.

The consequences of American support for the Shah

It could be argued that the constant stream of US military aid into Iran following Mossadeq's removal allowed the Shah to establish a reactionary police state and, as a result, prevent the development of any genuine opposition.³⁴ Ordinary Iranians did not always look favourably upon the aid being provided by the US and its increasing cultural influence in everyday life. Western innovations appearing in Tehran were seen by many as cultural contaminants and Muslim activists were already protesting against a perceived 'Americanisation'.³⁵ This explains why many Iranian citizens associated the Shah's dictatorship with the US – a linkage that later generations would use as justification for viewing the US as the 'Great Satan'.

As previously noted, the Shah's overtures to Moscow in the mid-to-late 1960s did not alter Iran's alignment behind the US in the ongoing Cold War struggle. Richard Cottam highlights how important the Shah's Iran was to the US as a region stabiliser, to such an extent that the Johnson administration broke off all contact with opposition groups, a policy later continued by Nixon and Kissinger, in an effort not to antagonise "a faithful friend."³⁶ Consistent US support over the years undoubtedly helped the Shah to consolidate his regime and provide a degree of stability. Iran was placed on

the road to apparent economic recovery, despite the underlying issues with social deprivation and the strict control on its society exercised by SAVAK.

Many scholars have been critical of the level of assistance the US provided to facilitate this growth of royal power. While the US government initially harboured some uncertainty and concern at the Shah's rise to power, they quickly, and inadvertently, transformed their policy in order to best fit with changing circumstances. James F. Goode summarises the American approach effectively:

*“As the Cold War progressed, concern over communism then overrode other considerations... the increasing power of the Shah fitted into the emerging global pattern of containment.”*³⁷

With ordinary Iranians identifying the American government as the real power behind the Shah's repressive security apparatus, the legacy of this support would later return to haunt the US.³⁸

American intelligence sources correctly surmised that US interests in the Middle East would be safeguarded with the Shah at the helm in Iran. More ominously, what they also clearly outlined was the existence of a power vacuum – even as early as 1957 – should the Shah be removed. A CIA intelligence estimate predicted that the death or incapacity of the Shah would lead to “a period of factional disturbances and a struggle for power.”³⁹ In fact, these very words could quite easily be describing the Iranian political situation in the immediate aftermath of the Islamic Revolution over twenty years later. Despite apparent US awareness of the brittleness of the Shah's regime, there were precious few alternatives and successive administrations were reluctant to engage with Iranian opposition groups, thus effectively establishing the continuity of Cold War policy in Iran.

The Shah and the Cold War

Playing the game

The constant Iranian demands for military supplies during the 1960s were justified by the need to keep pace with Iran's neighbours, Iraq and Egypt, who had established close ties with the Soviet Union. Ali Ansari describes how during this period the Shah

was able to play the 'Cold War game' to good effect, emphasising Iran's need for a strong military as a part of the West's defence against an encroaching Soviet Union.⁴⁰ Conversely, it is quite possible that the Shah was simply reacting to events as they unfolded around him; his ultimate concern was securing his own position and using the ongoing superpower struggle to enhance Iran's international standing was simply a bonus.

A vital part of American regional strategy in the Middle East was securing access to the oil supplies of the Persian Gulf and avoiding a military confrontation with the Soviets. The Shah was able to play on US insecurities with regard to these aims by continually stressing the threat posed by Soviet-backed Arab nationalists such as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. He understood what Washington's objectives vis-à-vis the Soviet Union entailed in the Middle East, and was also aware of the Kremlin's desire to oust US military and strategic influence from within Iran.⁴¹ Once, owing to considerable US help, the Shah had been able to establish some internal stability, his regime was later able to play the two superpowers off against one another in order to obtain the millions of dollars worth of armaments that he so desired.

The Shah was by no means the only leader to enjoy success playing the 'Cold War game'. It could in fact be argued that he learnt from the approaches employed by other states towards the superpowers and merely adapted them to suit what he deemed to be Iran's needs. Non-alignment was one of the major strategies used by a number of states in their superpower relations. Put quite simply, non-alignment involved committing to neither superpower camp, but leaving open the possibility of doing so at a later date. This strategy was pioneered by the Yugoslav Dictator, Josip Tito, who recognised that the US was quick to offer him economic aid following his split from Stalin's Soviet Union in 1948, and was later expertly practiced by Nasser's Egypt.⁴²

The eminent Cold War historian, John Lewis Gaddis, outlines how non-alignment was not the only weapon available to states seeking to expand their autonomy from the superpowers; this could also be achieved by encouraging fears that their regimes might fall without the requisite superpower support.⁴³ This strategy played particularly well in Washington, where there was an overriding fear of the 'domino effect' occurring in key strategic regions like the Persian Gulf. While the Shah's Iran

could hardly be described as non-aligned due to its close relations with the US, it is clear that the Iranian leader used elements of both strategies in his dealings with Washington during the Cold War period.

Eisenhower and the Shah

In the years immediately following his restoration to power in 1953, the Shah was more concerned with consolidating his regime, which relied heavily on American support, than on playing the two superpowers off against one another. Aside from the numerous internal problems he faced, the Shah saw the foremost outside threat as possible encroachment by the Soviet Union on Iranian territory. Far from alienating Washington, the Shah's Iran therefore sought to increase the level of economic and military aid it received from the US. To this extent, Iran was able to play the vulnerability card to good effect with the Eisenhower administration.

In spite of his regular demands for increased aid, which were not always warmly received in Washington, the Shah enjoyed a fruitful relationship with America during the Eisenhower years. Iran demonstrated an undoubtedly pro-Western stance in its foreign policy because the Shah was acutely aware that his own power was very much dependent on continued political and military assistance from Washington. He realised that the only way to acquire the level of support required was to make Iran an essential ally of the US in the Cold War – hence the decision to join the Baghdad Pact in 1955, an alliance with Britain, Pakistan, Iraq and Turkey based along similar lines to NATO.⁴⁴

The Suez Crisis of 1956 provided the Shah with another opportunity to rally support for his cause in Washington, which he did by writing to Eisenhower and claiming that continued Iranian military weakness would have stark consequences, not just for Iran but for the region as a whole.⁴⁵ The US was obviously anxious to retain allies in the Middle East in order to combat potential Soviet advances and Iran, with its heavy reliance on Washington and the vast sums of aid it was receiving, was therefore key to US policy. In December 1956 Eisenhower praised Iran for its efforts in maintaining peace and security in the region and in effect offered a security guarantee in an attempt to deter Moscow. He stated that any threats to Iran's territorial integrity would be viewed as a "matter of the utmost gravity" and, citing the example of Iran in 1946,

claimed “nations... exposed to danger are not alone.”⁴⁶ These statements came just a month before Eisenhower’s famous speech to Congress in which he enunciated the ‘Eisenhower Doctrine’.

The Eisenhower Doctrine was essentially a response to fears that the Soviet Union would use the Suez crisis as the basis for entering a wider global conflict. This doctrine shares numerous characteristics with the ‘Carter Doctrine’ announced in President Carter’s State of the Union address in January 1980. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was the key driver behind the Carter Doctrine, the principal element of which involved a commitment to use military force to protect America’s vital interests in the Persian Gulf. Just like the Eisenhower Doctrine, the Carter Doctrine was a response aimed at Moscow in the wake of Soviet threats, on this occasion the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

Courting the Soviets

While Iran’s close relationship with the US naturally prevented it from following a strict path of non-alignment, the Shah nevertheless attempted to utilise similar methods to those of non-aligned states. In the wake of the brutal overthrow of neighbouring Iraq’s monarchy in 1958, the Shah sought to further strengthen his control over the Iranian armed forces to consolidate his own position. However, he was increasingly convinced that the US was not doing enough to support Iran’s aggressively pro-Western position. To this extent, he began to court support from Moscow as a means of forcing Washington to recognise the legitimacy of his needs. By exploring the possibility of a Soviet-Iranian non-aggression pact, the Shah hoped to attain further US concessions in the form of increased aid and security commitments.⁴⁷ In spite of these attempts to cajole the US into parting with yet more funds, the Shah did not seriously want to endanger relations with Washington. However, as Iran’s standing on the world stage steadily grew, the Shah’s regime continually used the Soviet Union as its principal bargaining chip with the US in an attempt to secure bigger and better deals – particularly, as we shall see later, when it came to arms transfers.

As the situation on the ground began to change so the Shah was able to enter the next phase of his Cold War strategy. With tensions between Tehran and Moscow having

relaxed somewhat, the Shah felt able to play the two superpowers off against one another in order to benefit the Iranian international position. He made official visits to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in 1965 and 1966, in which he signed a number of commercial agreements that proved to be the precursor to a February 1967 deal in which Iran agreed to exchange natural gas for Soviet military equipment.⁴⁸ Iran's apparently budding relations with the Soviet Union and its satellite states in the mid-1960s naturally caused some unease in the State Department, yet the Shah was able to brush off American concerns by continually trumpeting Eastern European defiance of Soviet economic hegemony in the sphere.⁴⁹

Iran's position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union appeared to be somewhat erratic during this period. One minute the Shah would be seeking to clinch a military or economic agreement of some description, while the next he would be bleating to Washington about the threat the Soviets posed to his nation. It is difficult to determine whether these actions were actually part of a grand Cold War strategy or if it simply represented the Shah's genuine paranoia of the perceived communist threat. Whatever it was, the late 1960s and early 1970s provided a perfect showcase of this aspect of the Shah's behaviour. Having spent previous years attempting to establish improved relations with the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc nations, the Iranian government then proceeded to spend the first couple of years of the Nixon presidency issuing stark warnings about Moscow's intentions towards Iran – often focusing on the close links being forged between the Soviets and the Iraqis.⁵⁰

The Policeman of the Gulf

Part of the reason for Iran's anxiety lay in its fear that the US, with its resource-hungry commitments elsewhere across the globe – notably in Vietnam at this stage, was unconcerned by events in the Persian Gulf and that such an attitude might provide an opening for the Soviets to exploit.⁵¹ In the early 1970s Iran's sights were strongly fixed on a Persian Gulf region that was facing a period of uncertainty following the British decision to withdraw, the Shah himself was particularly fearful that instability would lead to the dangerous growth of Arab nationalism. However, the notion that Washington would allow the Soviets to seize the momentum in the Middle East was perhaps another figment of the Shah and his advisors' vivid imaginations. It is clear, as we shall examine in greater detail later, that Nixon and Kissinger recognised both

the challenges facing the region and its overall strategic importance to the wider goals of US foreign policy – hence Iran’s role in the ‘twin pillar’ strategy and the Shah being labelled the ‘Policeman of the Gulf’.

Despite its status as the vital US strategic ally, the Iranian government continued its tactic of enticing the Soviets into further involvement in the region’s affairs. In October 1972 for example, just five months after US assurances of continued support and access to American military technology for Iran, the Shah made a state visit to Moscow that culminated in Iran and the Soviet Union issuing a joint communiqué, which was squarely directed at the Nixon administration. Both parties announced their desire that issues within the Persian Gulf be dealt with by countries of the region and without outside interference. Having previously complained at a lack of US interest in the area, the Shah was now angered by the stationing of a small US naval force in the Gulf at Jufair, the former British naval station, following an agreement with Bahrain in December 1971.⁵² This move was nothing other than a calculated attempt to bait the US by the Shah, and provides an indication of his growing confidence in dealing with Iran’s principal Western ally and major weapons supplier – despite his continued reliance on American support.

As we have seen, the Shah’s Iran was able to adapt successfully in its approach to superpower relations as the international geopolitical situation changed during the Cold War era. The Shah sought, whenever possible, to exploit the ideological struggle between East and West for the benefit of his own regime, seeking to build up both his power and control internally whilst also improving his personal standing on the international scene. By the mid 1970s, his attitude had transformed considerably from the subservient pose adopted towards the US in the post-1953 Eisenhower years. Now, with an over-inflated opinion of both his own self-importance and that of his country, the Shah felt empowered to tell the world how he saw things. The fact that he was able to act in this manner owed much to the West’s handling of Iran. The Middle Eastern historian J. B. Kelly notes that, in general, Western opinion throughout the 1970s was content to accept the Shah at his own valuation, even to the point of accepting his claim that the best way to preserve Western interests in the region lay in establishing a powerful Iran.⁵³

The Shah's transformation in attitude was however just that, and did not represent a change of policy. Tehran's overtures towards Moscow throughout the Cold War were merely a façade, as it seems apparent that Iran never really considered deviating from the pro-Western stance it had established during the 1950s. Despite some rocky patches, Iranian support for the US remained, much like Washington's support of the Shah, as a constant feature of the Cold War.

Arms Sales

Arms transfers formed the basis of US-Iranian relations throughout the early part of the 1970s and continued to do so right up until the Shah was deposed at the end of the decade. By the time Jimmy Carter assumed office at the beginning of 1977, the arms market and the Shah's grandiose desires were rapidly spiralling out of control; a 1976 report of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee demonstrated the sheer scale of the problem, indicating that the US was selling more arms to Iran than to any other country.⁵⁴ Deals for the transfer of advanced military technology became a vital part of the relationship between Washington and Tehran during the Shah's reign, the legacy of which would be keenly felt by the Carter administration.

The Military and the Shah's Consolidation

The US-Iranian arms relationship has its roots in the post-1953 period, when the Eisenhower administration seemed intent on offering American support as a means of stabilising the Shah's tenuous position. A post-coup CIA assessment of the Iranian situation clearly demonstrates how the Shah sought to undermine the power of General Zahedi, one of the key contributors to the plot, in order to consolidate his own position. In particular, he endeavoured to assert his authority over the armed forces and, even at this early stage, pressured Washington for financial assistance directed towards the Iranian military.⁵⁵ While the Shah's demands were never fully satisfied, there was an unmistakable increase in the levels of assistance received following the removal of Mossadeq. From 1949-1952 the US extended a mere \$33 million in economic and military aid; but between 1953-1957 this rose to a staggering \$500 million, of which \$125 million was directed to the armed forces.⁵⁶

The Kennedy administration sought, unsuccessfully as it turned out, to shift the Shah's preoccupation from military security to economic progress. In order to achieve this, Washington attempted to put limits on American military aid and to reduce the size of the Shah's unwieldy army. In plans outlined in March 1962, US officials stated that reform of the Iranian army was to be focused on "military realities rather than to the political glamour value of advanced weaponry."⁵⁷ This provides an indication of the level of concern in Washington with regard to the Shah's continued quest for costly, state of the art military equipment as a source of both international and domestic prestige.

The change of administration in the White House following Kennedy's assassination failed to diminish the Iranian government's desire for further military co-operation, for which the Shah continually pressed. Throughout his rule, the Shah always resented Washington's attempts to limit – or at the very least apply conditions to – American military assistance. It seemed, to the Shah at least, that Iran was not reaping the benefits that a staunchly pro-Western ally should be entitled to. Negotiations on this issue continued in the early part of 1964 when the Shah and his advisors met with US officials in order to put across the Iranian case. This involved the Shah consistently stressing the potential threats facing Iran – once again, his fear of Soviet-supported Arab nations – and expressing his dissatisfaction with both the shortages of equipment and the state of Iran's defences.⁵⁸ US policy makers were understandably anxious to ensure that Iran's economic development was not being derailed by the Shah's apparent obsession with hi-tech military equipment. Yet these concerns about the internal situation in Iran had to be considered against the backdrop of the global East-West conflict, which remained the primary focus of US strategy.

By 1966, the Shah had begun to operate with increasing confidence on the international scene. A CIA estimate noted that while he remained dependent on US support, he was also becoming "increasingly dissatisfied with US unwillingness to provide the amount and kind of arms he wants."⁵⁹ He displayed a newfound determination to secure a favourable deal on the equipment he had earmarked for his forces, even if this entailed looking towards other suppliers aside from the US. The US Ambassador Armin H. Meyer had previously warned his superiors in Washington

that he believed Iran was considering purchasing arms from non-US sources, including the Soviet Union. When Meyer met with the Shah and expressed his hope that Iran would avoid arms procurement deals with the Soviets, the Shah remained defiant, insisting that Iran possessed “liberty of action” and could make decisions independently, while also highlighting the fact that the US appeared to have no problem in providing arms to other states who procured weapons from Moscow (citing India, Iraq and Yugoslavia as examples).⁶⁰

President Lyndon B. Johnson was, just like his immediate predecessors, determined not to allow the Soviets to gain any sort of foothold in Iran. In attempting to dissuade the Shah from committing to arms agreements with Moscow, Johnson told him in July 1966:

“...while the immediate threat of Soviet military aggression has receded, indirect pressures continue and the Soviet aim of communizing Iran remains the same.”⁶¹

However, Johnson’s assessment of the threat level posed by the Soviet Union was not shared by the Shah, who, as we have seen previously, never seriously entertained the idea of aligning Tehran with Moscow.

American aid to Iran was virtually terminated at the end of 1967, with the *New York Times* noting that Washington now viewed Iran as “one of their more notable success stories”.⁶² However, Michael Leeden and William Lewis argue the decision to graduate Iran from the ranks of grant aid recipient had major consequences that would fatefully shape the response of the Iranian military to the revolution some ten years later.⁶³ When Tehran had been receiving aid, the US had been able to dictate the terms of military agreements but now the choices ultimately rested with the Shah’s regime alone; a factor that would become increasingly important as arms sales to Iran increased during the Nixon-Kissinger era. A May 1968 CIA memo recognised that the Shah wanted to appear less publicly aligned with the West for his own benefit and that his increasing level of independence would in the future cause occasional friction in US-Iranian relations.⁶⁴ However, the Johnson administration had set the basis for a continued healthy arms relationship between the two nations which Nixon officials were eager to carry on.⁶⁵

Nixon and the 'blank cheque'

The defining moment of US-Iranian arms relations during this period was undoubtedly the Tehran meeting in May 1972 in which Nixon and Kissinger issued their infamous 'blank cheque' to the Shah. This carte blanche pledge of support for Iranian purchases of American military technology served not only to further intertwine Washington with the Shah's increasingly repressive regime, but also armed the Shah with the freedom from regulation that he so desperately desired.

Prior to this, the State Department had maintained that selling arms to the Shah while he was receiving counsel from American advisors, who could influence his decisions and priorities, was the safest way to control the arms market. However, a State Department Research Study published in January 1972 raised a number of concerns about just how one-sided the US-Iranian arms relationship had become. In a section entitled 'Implications for the United States' the report stated:

*"The Shah views ARMISH/MAAG (US Army Mission in Iran/Military Assistance Advisory Group) primarily as a servicing agency to monitor and facilitate US military sales to Iran... [there] is little evidence that he pays much heed to any efforts on the part of ARMISH/MAAG to influence the scope of his armament efforts or his concept of what Iran needs."*⁶⁶

Seemingly ignoring the issues raised in the study, the Nixon administration chose instead to place even greater freedom in the hands of the Shah just a couple of months later.

The increased arms transfers that resulted from the Tehran meeting caused continual tensions between the State Department and the Pentagon, with military officials voicing their concerns that Iran was acquiring arms beyond its needs and capacity. While the State Department supported Nixon and Kissinger's goal of building up the strength of the Shah's Iran, they actually shared the Pentagon's displeasure that such an explicit promise on the level of arms transfers had been granted. Even Kissinger's own people, such as NSC staffer Harold H Saunders, expressed unease about the practical limitations of such a policy.⁶⁷

Kissinger himself has since denied that the President issued a 'blank cheque' of support to the Shah. However, in a memo to the Secretaries of State and Defense in July 1972, Kissinger stated:

*“The President has also reiterated that, in general, decisions on the acquisition of military equipment should be left primarily to the government of Iran. If the Government of Iran has decided to buy certain equipment, the purchase of US equipment should be encouraged tactfully where appropriate, and technical advice on the capabilities of the equipment in question should be provided.”*⁶⁸

The message could not be any clearer – the Shah was henceforth empowered to shape the future path of US-Iranian arms deals.

The consequences of the ‘blank cheque’

Critics of the Nixon administration’s Iranian strategy, particularly with regard to the increase in arms deals, are plentiful, with many arguing that the decision taken at Tehran in 1972 placed too much power in the fragile hands of the Shah. In his study of the role played by the Nixon Doctrine during the détente period, Robert Litwak outlines his belief that the Tehran agreement helped to complete the process set in motion in 1953, meaning that the future of US interests in Iran became inextricably linked with the Shah’s fate.⁶⁹ Christos Ioannides, in his book *America’s Iran*, contends that the decision to allow the Shah greater control over his military purchases only served as a further boost to his growing confidence on the international stage, and what Ioannides describes as “his arrogance of domestic critics and ordinary Iranian citizens.”⁷⁰

The blank cheque agreement certainly made it very difficult for Nixon’s immediate successors, Ford and Carter, to control US-Iranian arms transfers. This was in spite of the International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act, passed by Congress during Ford’s tenure in 1976, which outlined how the US should play a leading role in reducing the scale of the international arms market. However, the impact of this restrictive legislation was negated by section 102 of the act which granted the President the authority to agree arms transfers to a state if “an unforeseen emergency” exists – a loophole which could be easily exploited even though the Shah had a habit, well known to Washington, of over-inflating threats to Iran’s sovereignty.⁷¹

In November 1976, as Jimmy Carter was preparing to become the next President of the US, the Shah agreed a \$414 million arms deal which he justified by arguing that

the US remained the major, but not the exclusive, supplier of Iranian weapons.⁷² The Carter administration was thus left with a very difficult balancing act. How could it redefine US policy on arms to Iran without appearing to abandon a key strategic ally? On the other hand, could a continuation of large-scale arms deals realistically work alongside Carter's human rights platform and his claim during the 1976 presidential election campaign that the US should be the world's granary, rather than its armourer?

Leslie M. Pryor, a pseudonym for a Western observer in Iran, described the levels of American arms transfers to the Persian Gulf states during the 1970s as "irresponsible and against long-term US interests."⁷³ While the debate over Nixon-Kissinger-Ford foreign policy obviously stretches much further than just this one aspect, there can be little doubt about the legacy of the policy of arming US-friendly states in the volatile Middle East region. Fast forward thirty years or more and, despite operating in a very different post-9/11 world, the administration of George W. Bush continued to negotiate massive arms deals with Persian Gulf nations. However, the major difference between arms sales to the Persian Gulf in the 1970s and in the early twenty first century is that Iran is no longer a recipient, but rather the intended target; as Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made clear in the summer of 2007:

*"There isn't a doubt that Iran constitutes the single most important single-country strategic challenge to the United States and to the kind of Middle East that we want to see."*⁷⁴

Nixon and Kissinger

President Richard M. Nixon and his National Security Adviser, Dr. Henry Kissinger, came to power with a mandate for change in terms of foreign policy, at a time when US actions were being closely scrutinised both at home and abroad. Some historians have claimed that the first Nixon administration marked a crucial turning point in US policy towards Iran, which would rapidly emerge as the key pillar for US interests in the Middle East. This change in approach by the US government represented a personal triumph for the Shah's own long-held view of a proper role for himself over twenty years of State Department reservations.⁷⁵

The conventional reason advanced for the shift of policy towards Iran is Britain's announcement of its intention to withdraw from the Gulf region, commonly referred to as 'East of Suez', in 1968 (the actual physical withdrawal of British forces came later in 1971). This explanation has recently been challenged for being too simplistic by the academic Roham Alvandi. He maintains that the British withdrawal and US involvement in the Vietnam War were conditions present when both Johnson and Nixon were in office and that the reason for the shift in policy was Nixon's willingness to embrace the Shah of Iran as the guardian of Gulf security; he stresses their long-standing friendship and close ties forged when Nixon was Eisenhower's Vice President.⁷⁶ Whatever the motivation for the change, there was a clear shift in Gulf policy from Johnson to Nixon that proved to be vitally significant to later developments in US-Iranian relations.

Nixon and Kissinger, his principal foreign policy confidant who was himself an expert in international relations, had some differences in their strategic outlooks; Nixon favoured strengthening the bipolar geopolitical structure against the Soviet Union, while Kissinger, in contrast, did not believe that the US could continue to maintain bipolarity in the longer term. Kissinger sought a gradual move towards a multipolar order; hence he focused on détente with the Soviet Union and also required assistance from US allies in shouldering the growing international security burden.⁷⁷ However, what Nixon and Kissinger did share was a very one-dimensional view of the world, with a strong focus on great power politics. They saw third world states simply as pawns in the West's great ideological battle against the Soviets; in this context, the Shah's Iran was viewed as a 'good' pawn.⁷⁸

Applying the Nixon Doctrine in the Persian Gulf

US relations with Iran during this period have traditionally been linked with the application of the 'Nixon Doctrine', which had originated, somewhat unintentionally, from a speech delivered by Nixon in 1969. It essentially grew out of the Nixon era policy of 'Vietnamization', which involved the US providing assistance to South Vietnamese forces so that they could eventually continue the fight against the communist regime in the North by themselves. The doctrine itself was very limited and ambiguous, leaving scope for Nixon and Kissinger to manoeuvre it as they saw fit. The strategy transferred effectively to the Persian Gulf region because it

emphasised the development of indigenous regional security systems, rather than direct involvement for US troops – which was no longer a viable option due to the costly and increasingly unpopular Vietnam quagmire in which US forces were stuck.

The British withdrawal from East of Suez in 1971 would significantly change the geopolitical landscape of the region, leading as it did to all of the Gulf emirates previously under British protection, including South Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, becoming independent states. This development was the cause of much concern both in Washington and Tehran, as none of these states were considered stable and all were feared to be vulnerable to Nasser's influence and nationalist sentiment.⁷⁹ The Nixon administration did not wish to rush into a premature decision on how best to fill the power vacuum, recognising that the Soviet Union did not pose an imminent threat to the Arabian peninsula. The idea of inserting American troops into a part of the world already rife with Arab nationalist tensions could not be seriously entertained due to the precarious political balance in the region and the limitations on US military options brought about by Vietnam.

Nixon and Kissinger, with American resources already stretched close to breaking point across the globe, did not seek to supersede Britain's historical role, but opted instead to ensure that vital US interests in the region could be protected using a different strategy. The severity of the energy crisis meant that the US had to protect its sources of oil in the area, a goal that Washington believed could be achieved by arming so-called 'regional policeman'.⁸⁰

In July 1969 a National Security Study Memo (NSSM-66) concluded that Iran, militarily and economically supported by the US, could potentially fill the vacuum left by the British. In terms of the Nixon Doctrine, Iran was the ideal case of a state whose leadership was prepared and capable of assuming a preponderant role within an evolving regional security system.⁸¹ The Shah persistently claimed that his ideals of nationalism and self-reliance went hand-in-hand with the principles of the Nixon Doctrine, which obviously dictated that America's allies should defend themselves rather than rely exclusively on direct support from Washington. The US Ambassador to Iran, Douglas MacArthur II (the nephew of General Douglas MacArthur), backed up the Shah's assertions by noting that Iran was the only country in a position to fill

the void left by the British in the Gulf region.⁸² The Shah subsequently became Washington's regional sheriff in accordance with the Nixon Doctrine, a role he gleefully accepted. American officials were also content with the arrangement, as rather than having to share the defence costs, Iran was in a position to play its role at no cost to the US.⁸³

The Twin Pillars

For the best part of 1970, an NSC Review Group carried out an assessment of the Persian Gulf situation, culminating in National Security Decision Memorandum 92. NSC staff presented Nixon and Kissinger with two feasible options for US policy; firstly, backing either Iran or Saudi Arabia as the key to stability, or secondly, pressing for improved Saudi-Iranian cooperation.⁸⁴ Kissinger's recommendation was that the US should try to marry these two options together, whilst also attempting to establish a working relationship with the new entities in the region. The Nixon administration's 'twin pillar' strategy was thus established – albeit, as US policy makers at the time noted, with the Shah's Iran as the stronger of the two pillars.

Iran, due to the reasons previously outlined, was an obvious and logical choice as one of the pillars, while Saudi Arabia was chosen partly with a view to appeasing Arab nationalists in the Middle East. Nixon administration officials were aware of the potential complications involved in implementing the strategy – not least the traditional Arab-Persian divide, and of course the Arab-Israeli dispute which made it difficult for Iran to align itself closely with the Arab states.⁸⁵ Cold War historian Richard C. Thornton claims that the change of US policy was driven by a need to replace the collapsing India-Pakistan balance in Southwest Asia.⁸⁶

Arms sales and oil supplies were naturally vital elements of the 'twin pillar' strategy. The development of a special US-Iranian arms relationship following the Tehran meeting in May 1972 was an important political signal in line with Nixon and Kissinger's evolving approach to the Persian Gulf.⁸⁷ American journalist Tad Szulc, in his critique of Nixon-Kissinger era foreign policy, believes that the US went too far in providing extensive loans and advanced military equipment as part of its plan to create a surrogate military power in Iran.⁸⁸ That arms relations between Washington and Tehran were able to develop as rapidly as they did throughout the 1970s was

largely down to the spiralling price of Cold War oil; as the Shah became able to garner higher prices for Iranian oil, so his capacity for purchasing expensive American weaponry increased markedly.

In the aftermath of the oil price rises, Nixon and his advisors did not seek to abandon or re-think US strategy. Instead, they continued to regard the 'twin pillars' as the key to securing the Gulf's oil supplies for the Western states. Nevertheless, the policy was somewhat undermined by the world energy squeeze and there was a definite need to strengthen its stability. The US government responded to the military aid needs of both Iran and Saudi Arabia and, through these agreements, was able to further strengthen economic and commercial ties in the region.⁸⁹

Did Nixon and Kissinger misread the Shah's intentions?

The Shah's ultimate objective was Iranian independence or, at the very least, a reduction in Iran's level of dependence on the US for its own security. He was pleased with his role as the 'policeman' of the Gulf, but argued that for Iran to fulfil this task it would require a vast amount of weaponry. He continued to play on American fears of a possible communist threat to Iran, often gesturing towards Moscow for possible weapons deals, and was therefore afforded greater leverage in his dealings with Washington's power brokers. This approach perhaps hastened the open-ended arms commitment that the Nixon administration finally provided him with in May 1972.

Moscow's burgeoning relationship with Iran's neighbour under the new Ba'athist regime was a pressing concern for both the US and the Shah. The Iraq question only served to highlight the strategic significance of Iran, particularly after Iraq and the Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in April 1972. At around the same time and at the Shah's urging, the Nixon White House, acting against the better judgement of the CIA and the State Department, began providing covert assistance to support the Iraqi Kurds in their struggle against the Baghdad government.⁹⁰ Yet Nixon's trust was badly misplaced as Iran abandoned the Kurds just three years later when the Shah signed the Algiers Accords with Saddam Hussein. Once again the Shah's actions were consistent with the pattern of his Cold War behaviour as he sought to exploit American anxieties over regional stability to further his own ends.

Nixon and Kissinger were not naïve enough to believe that the Shah's primary concern during this period was assisting the US in implementing its regional strategy. They knew that, particularly as he reached the zenith of his power and international prestige in the mid-1970s, the Shah was more concerned with his own self-preservation and gratification. However, it best suited US interests at the time to continue to build up the Shah's regime as a beacon of strength in a critical area of the global ideological battle.

A poisoned chalice

In terms of US-Iranian relations, President Jimmy Carter inherited over twenty-five years worth of pro-Shah policy that had been allowed to gather an almost unstoppable – or at least a very challenging – momentum throughout the early and mid-1970s. At the beginning of 1977, the Shah still presided over a nation that was becoming increasingly hostile towards both its own monarch and his principal ally, the US. Yet despite what we know now, there was very little at the time in the intelligence reports coming out of Iran that suggested the Shah was about to fall, and there were precious few, if any, US experts predicting that a revolution was just around the corner.

This was the climate in which Jimmy Carter assumed office in 1977. Complete with a mandate to improve America's position in the world after the traumatic events of the mid-1970s – the Watergate scandal and the symbolic fall of Saigon instantly spring to mind – the new President had also made a steadfast commitment to supporting the principle of human rights across the globe. Thus, while the Carter team intended to concentrate its attention on other foreign policy objectives, such as the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) and the Arab-Israeli conflict, they would soon be forced to confront a problem very much of America's own making – that of how to deal with the Shah of Iran. In seeking to understand how and why the Carter administration responded in the way it did to the challenges posed by Iran during the late 1970s, the events of some thirty years before must not be neglected.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

¹ Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 155.

² Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, pp. 133-136.

³ National Intelligence Estimate 34-61, *Prospects for Iran*, 28 February 1961, pp. 1-2, Central Intelligence Agency FOIA electronic reading room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov> [accessed September 2007].

⁴ Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2006) p. 46.

⁵ See Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 76-78 for more information.

⁶ Memo of conversation, President John F. Kennedy & General Bakhtiar, 1 March 1961, FRUS 1961-1963, Volume XVII, No. 17. It should be noted that on an earlier visit to the US, Bakhtiar had informed US officials of his desire to replace the Shah. He was offered no assistance and his disloyalty was communicated to the Shah, who bided his time before eventually dismissing him in 1961. For more information see Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, pp. 108-109.

⁷ Memo of conversation, Meeting on Iran with Ambassador Harriman, 27 March 1961, FRUS 1961-1963, Volume XVII, No. 26.

⁸ Telegram, US Embassy Tehran to Department of State, 10 May 1961, FRUS 1961-1963, Volume XVII, No. 46.

⁹ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 137.

¹⁰ Interview with William J. (Bill) Daugherty, 27 March 2008 at Armstrong Atlantic State University, Savannah, Georgia.

¹¹ Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 115.

¹² Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 82.

¹³ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 81-83.

¹⁴ Memo, Robert W. Komer (National Security Council Staff) to President Kennedy, 18 May 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Volume XVII, No. 50.

¹⁵ National Security Action Memorandum No. 67, 7 August 1961. The Papers of John F. Kennedy, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series, National Security Action Memoranda, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum online, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/NSAMs.htm> [accessed August 2007].

¹⁶ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 84.

¹⁷ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 147.

¹⁸ Ghods, *Iran in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 193-194.

¹⁹ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 84.

²⁰ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 88.

²¹ Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 112.

²² National Security Action Memorandum No. 228, 14 March 1963. The Papers of John F. Kennedy, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series, National Security Action Memoranda, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum online, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/NSAMs.htm> [accessed August 2007].

²³ Memo, Secretary of State Dean Rusk to President Kennedy, 20 April 1963, FRUS 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, No. 218.

²⁴ See Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 153; Ghods, *Iran in the Twentieth Century*, p. 194; Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 90; and Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 115 for more.

²⁵ For more see Victor V. Nemchenok, 'In Search of Stability Amid Chaos: US Policy Toward Iran, 1961-63', *Cold War History*, Vol. 10, Issue 3 (2010), pp. 341-369.

²⁶ The US Department of Defense had been pushing for a SOFA for some time prior to 1964, but it was a controversial issue for Iranians anxious to protect national sovereignty from foreign interests. Even when the law was eventually passed, it only just scraped through the Shah's handpicked parliament. See Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, pp. 156-159 for more.

²⁷ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 93.

²⁸ Quoted in Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 159 and Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 94.

²⁹ Special National Intelligence Estimate 34-70, 3 September 1970, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 86.

³⁰ 'Middle East: Policeman of the Persian Gulf', *Time* magazine, 6 August 1973, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,903988-1,00.html> [accessed August 2007].

- ³¹ Letter, US Embassy Tehran to the Country Director for Iran (Miklos), 30 October 1972, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 230.
- ³² Notes on document No. 230, FRUS 1969-1976, Vol. E-4, Iran 1972, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/e4/c17626.htm> [accessed September 2007].
- ³³ Memo, Harold Saunders (National Security Council Staff) for the files, 20 October 1972 (including a copy of the letter sent by Nasser Afshar to President Nixon on 1 September 1972), FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 225.
- ³⁴ Ghods, *Iran in the Twentieth Century*, p. 191.
- ³⁵ Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 100.
- ³⁶ Richard Cottam, 'Goodbye to America's Shah' *Foreign Policy*, No. 34. (Spring 1979), p. 9.
- ³⁷ Goode, *The United States and Iran, 1946-51*, pp. 18-19.
- ³⁸ Cottam, 'Goodbye to America's Shah', p. 8.
- ³⁹ National Intelligence Estimate 34-57, *The Outlook for Iran*, 10 January 1957, p. 1, Central Intelligence Agency FOIA electronic reading room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov> [accessed September 2007].
- ⁴⁰ Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, p. 42.
- ⁴¹ See section 5 of Telegram, US Embassy Tehran to Department of State, 25 July 1966, FRUS 1964-1968, Volume XXII, No. 161.
- ⁴² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London: Allen Lane, 2005) pp. 124-126.
- ⁴³ Gaddis, *The Cold War*, p. 129.
- ⁴⁴ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 76. The Baghdad Pact was renamed the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) following Iraq's withdrawal after the revolution in 1958.
- ⁴⁵ Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, pp. 97-98.
- ⁴⁶ Letter, Dwight D. Eisenhower to Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, 10 December 1956. In *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, L. Galambos & D. van Ee (eds.) Document No. 2133 <http://www.eisenhowermemorial.org/presidential-papers/first-term/documents/2133.cfm> [accessed October 2007].
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- ⁴⁸ Leslie M. Pryor, 'Arms and the Shah' *Foreign Policy*, No. 31 (Summer 1978) p. 58.
- ⁴⁹ See section 8 of Telegram, US Embassy Tehran to Department of State, 15 February 1967, FRUS 1964-1968, Volume XXII, No. 187.
- ⁵⁰ See, for example, Telegram 928, US Embassy Tehran to Department of State, 12 March 1970, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 53; and Telegram 2333, US Embassy Tehran to Department of State, 1 June 1970, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 69.
- ⁵¹ Telegram 2333, US Embassy Tehran to Department of State, 1 June 1970, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 69.
- ⁵² J. B. Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf and the West* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980) pp. 317-318.
- ⁵³ Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf and the West*, p. 318.
- ⁵⁴ Pryor, 'Arms and the Shah', p. 57.
- ⁵⁵ National Intelligence Estimate 102, *Probable Developments in Iran through 1954*, 16 November 1953, p. 2, Central Intelligence Agency FOIA electronic reading room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov> [accessed September 2007].
- ⁵⁶ Leeden & Lewis, *Debacle*, p. 38.
- ⁵⁷ Quotation cited in Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 107.
- ⁵⁸ For further details see Memo, Commander Shanahan to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 11 April 1964, FRUS 1964-1968, Volume XXII, No. 14; and Telegram, US Embassy Tehran to Department of State, 15 April 1964, FRUS 1964-1968, Volume XXII, No. 15.
- ⁵⁹ National Intelligence Estimate 34-66, *Iran*, 24 March 1966, p. 5, Central Intelligence Agency FOIA electronic reading room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov> [accessed September 2007].
- ⁶⁰ Telegram, US Embassy Tehran to Department of State, 29 June 1966, FRUS 1964-1968, Volume XXII, No. 148.
- ⁶¹ Letter, President Lyndon B. Johnson to the Shah of Iran, 20 July 1966, FRUS 1964-1968, Volume XXII, No. 158.
- ⁶² Quotation cited in Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 119.
- ⁶³ Leeden & Lewis, *Debacle*, pp. 41-42.

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- ⁶⁴ Special Memorandum No. 9-68, *The Shah's Increasing Assurance*, 7 May 1968, p. 1, Central Intelligence Agency FOIA electronic reading room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov> [accessed September 2007].
- ⁶⁵ Dr. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Adviser, first met with Iranian Prime Minister Hoveyda in December 1968 at the White House following an invitation from President Johnson. For further details see Memo of Conversation, 5 December 1968, FRUS 1964-1968, Volume XXII, No. 321.
- ⁶⁶ Research Study, Bureau of Intelligence & Research, 28 January 1972, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 164.
- ⁶⁷ Memo, Harold Saunders to National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, 12 June 1972, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 204.
- ⁶⁸ Memo, Kissinger to Secretary of State Rogers and Secretary of Defense Laird, 25 July 1972, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 214.
- ⁶⁹ Robert S. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 143.
- ⁷⁰ Ioannides, *America's Iran*, p. 7.
- ⁷¹ For more on the International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act 1976 see Pryor, 'Arms and the Shah', pp. 68-69.
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- ⁷³ Pryor, 'Arms and the Shah', p. 68.
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- ⁷⁸ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 101-102.
- ⁷⁹ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 103.
- ⁸⁰ 'Policeman of the Persian Gulf', *Time* magazine.
- ⁸¹ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*, p. 140.
- ⁸² See Telegram 4183, US Embassy Tehran to Department of State, 13 October 1969, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 23; and Memo of Conversation, 8 April 1971, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 123.
- ⁸³ Ioannides, *America's Iran*, pp. 4-5.
- ⁸⁴ Memo, Harold Saunders and Richard Kennedy (NSC) to Kissinger, 3 June 1970, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 70. See also Memo, Kissinger to President Nixon, 22 October 1970, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 91.
- ⁸⁵ Memo, Kissinger to President Nixon, 25 June 1970, FRUS 1969-76, Vol. E-4, No. 75.
- ⁸⁶ Thornton, *The Nixon-Kissinger Years*, pp. 88-89.
- ⁸⁷ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*, p. 142.
- ⁸⁸ Tad Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace: Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978) pp. 444-445.
- ⁸⁹ Sirriyeh, *US Policy in the Gulf, 1968-1977*, pp. 188-189.
- ⁹⁰ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 105-106.

Carter's Iranian Inheritance

The first year of Jimmy Carter's presidency was a vital period in the development of US relations with the Shah. As we will discover, the Shah was nervous about the possible implications of working with a new administration, while Carter himself would quickly come to realise both the strategic significance of Iran and the complexities of American support for the Shah's regime.

This analysis of the first year of US-Iranian relations under Carter is principally based upon a thorough survey of documents from the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, Georgia. When pieced together, the documents and recollections of those involved at the time illustrate that the Carter administration acted with a degree of hesitancy towards Iran but certainly did nothing to undermine the relationship. There was no overarching review or overhaul of policy in Iran, but this was largely because conventional wisdom within the US government garnered from successive administrations suggested it was wholly unnecessary. The tentativeness with which Carter and his advisers approached Iran was borne out of the contradiction they found in offering full support to the Shah whilst at the same time seeking to condemn the excesses of his regime.

To understand the reasons for this uncertainty it is necessary to delve back into the circumstances surrounding Carter's run for the presidency, his first few months in the office, and the administration's efforts to establish relations with the Shah. There are a range of relevant factors to examine; a degree of naivety on Carter's part, fundamental differences amongst his principal foreign policy advisers, the Shah's own unhelpful attitude and actions, and a substantial error of judgement on the president's part during his visit to Tehran at the end of 1977. In a toast praising the Shah's Iran as "an island of stability" during an official function that was broadcast across the country, Carter, unwittingly by all accounts, dealt a huge psychological blow to those Iranians who had grown tired of the Shah's tyranny and longed for the virtues of freedom and liberty which they presumed Carter's presidency represented. Subsequent chapters will then examine arms sales and human rights – and the contradictory nature of these

two aspects of US foreign policy – as well as the role of US intelligence in pre-revolutionary Iran.

Running for the presidency

Jimmy Carter's long road to the presidency began in the mid-1970s at a time when Vietnam and Watergate remained uppermost in the thoughts of Americans across the nation, with many feeling a deep disillusionment with their government. The political establishment in Washington at this time was characterised by mistrust between the legislature and the executive; a newly empowered Congress in the post-Watergate era sought to hold the office of the president in check and make it more accountable. In foreign policy terms, the dominant Cold War consensus had fragmented as a result of the Vietnam War and the American foreign policy elite was divided.¹ In addition, there were genuine fears regarding the clandestine actions and monitoring activities of government agencies, principally the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). It was against such a complicated backdrop that Carter attempted to present himself as an outsider, free of the baggage associated with Washington politics, and as the man who aimed to restore public confidence in the executive office. As Hamilton Jordan, one of his closest aides and later his Chief of Staff, recalls saying in trying to persuade Carter to run for the presidency towards the end of 1972:

“With the Vietnam war coming to a close, domestic problems and issues were apt to be a more important consideration, the problem-solving ability of the American government was very much in question, and someone outside of Washington and outside the Senate, a Governor who had proved that problems could be dealt with effectively by the state, could win. I thought one of the things... was the real need for moral leadership in the country, for somebody to stand up and tell the American people to do the things that were unpopular, a feeling that if politicians dealt more openly with the electorate that they would respond well.”²

These ideas would be encompassed in the now famous 50-page memo Jordan wrote in November 1972 detailing how Carter could win the presidency. Fast forward to four years later that same month and Carter, the Democratic candidate, had defeated the incumbent Republican President, Gerald Ford, in the 1976 presidential election to complete a remarkable rise from relative obscurity and become the first governor of a former confederate state to enter the White House.

Carter's foreign policy platform during the campaign

As has been suggested above, pressing domestic problems were the overriding concern of the American electorate when they voted in 1976. However, as Professor Phil Wise, who worked on Carter's 1976 campaign and later as his Appointments Secretary in the White House, points out, the 1976 presidential election was quite unlike any other. While foreign policy may have been lower down on the list of priority issues, the principles of trust, honesty and decency transcended any particular issue³ – principles that certainly applied to US conduct abroad in the post-Vietnam era.

With the unique political climate and with his background – a one-term Southern governor who possessed little if any experience of foreign policy issues – it is hardly surprising that Carter and his inner circle decided against placing too much emphasis on the international agenda. Yet there were opportunities to demonstrate what Carter stood for and to criticise President Ford for his policies abroad; most notably the second of the three televised presidential debates, held in San Francisco on 6 October 1976, which focused on foreign and defence issues. Carter concentrated his attack on the style of the Ford administration's foreign policy and therefore inevitably on the role of Henry Kissinger, the individual who had come to dominate US foreign policy making in the Nixon-Ford era. Carter charged that, "as far as foreign policy goes, Mr. Kissinger has been the President of this country" and also criticised the "secrecy and exclusion" of foreign policy making during the Ford presidency.⁴

Throughout the general election campaign the Carter team repeatedly attacked Kissinger's 'lone-ranger' style of diplomacy. As Nixon's National Security Adviser, Kissinger had shut the State Department and Congress out of the decision making process (for example, the secret bombing of Cambodia), and while he had moved to head up the State Department under Ford this proved to be largely cosmetic.⁵ Kissinger was also, as we have already seen, partly responsible for the Shah's continued arms shopping spree in the mid-1970s.

The issue of exclusion and the concept of participation by the people in helping to shape US foreign policy formed part of a conscious effort by the Carter team to

highlight the apparent disconnect between the average American and those in Washington.⁶ The promotion of human rights across the globe, for which Carter's presidency would later become known, remained on the periphery at this stage, although Carter had stated his intention to inject a greater level of American idealism into foreign affairs. In fact, during the San Francisco debate Carter was asked whether he would be willing to risk an oil embargo in order to promote human rights in Iran – a question that he did not directly answer, focusing instead on Saudi Arabia and stating that an oil embargo against the US would be considered “an economic declaration of war.”⁷

That was not the only time that Iran came up during the San Francisco debate. Another of Carter's criticisms of Ford centred on the rapidly increasing arms sales market – what Carter described as the US becoming “the arms merchant of the whole world” contrary to its long standing beliefs and principles. Carter cited Iran as a prime example of the “ridiculous” nature of US arms policy under the Ford administration, highlighting how orders for sophisticated military equipment, such as F-14s and Spruance-Class Destroyers, were being delivered to the Iranian military prior to reaching US forces.⁸ Achieving a global reduction in arms sales by means of a multinational agreement was actually one of the few specific foreign affairs proposals put forward by the Carter campaign.⁹

Carter's claims were rebuffed by Ford, who sought to portray his opponent as naive for not understanding the necessity of arms sales to Iran. Ford continued by attempting to justify the close relations established by the US with the Shah's Iran dating back to the Truman years. He argued that Iran's close proximity to the Soviet Union and Moscow-influenced Iraq meant that it was essential to sell arms to “a strong ally” of the US. In addition, Ford stressed the importance of Iran as part of the ‘twin pillar’ strategy and also the need for the US to support its allies in the Middle East through continued arms transfers – “it's in our interest and in the interest of Israel and Iran, and Saudi Arabia, for the United States to sell arms to those countries.”¹⁰

In the event, differences of opinion over Middle Eastern strategy were forgotten as memories of the San Francisco debate were dominated by the infamous gaffe Ford

dropped when he claimed that there was no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. This slip-up enabled Carter to drive home the advantage and, on most commentators' scorecards, win a decisive debate victory – *The Times* described him as the surprising winner.¹¹ Just a month later, Carter and his advisers were preparing for their transition into the White House and would soon be confronted with the stark realities and difficulties of managing US relations across the globe.

Brzezinski and the Four-Year Goals

As we have seen, the Carter election campaign in 1976 lacked any real degree of detail in terms of foreign policy objectives, instead focusing attention on the style and conduct of foreign policy making under the previous Republican presidencies. Following the election victory, the Carter team needed to present a clear definition of the direction of US foreign policy for the next four years. For this, Carter turned to his newly appointed National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski – a Soviet specialist and former Harvard and Columbia academic who had been Carter's main foreign policy adviser since 1975. The two had first met through the Trilateral Commission, a private non-governmental organisation founded in 1973 (and still existing today), which sought to foster closer links between America, Europe and Japan; Brzezinski had been one of the key figures in the founding of the commission and had invited Carter to join whilst he was the Governor of Georgia.

Early in 1977 Brzezinski produced a paper – entitled 'Four-Year Foreign Policy Objectives' – that spelt out the overall concept and specific goals of the Carter administration's foreign policy. It criticised Ford for his "very pessimistic foreign policy" and stated that Carter's policy would be optimistic, "...we hope to build a better world – not simply survive in a hostile one. It is a policy of constructive global engagement." Brzezinski outlined five broad purposes, the last one of which involved expanding fundamental human rights, and ten central objectives to achieve during the four-year term. These objectives included a commitment to obtaining a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East and the promotion of "new emerging regional influentials" (sic) across the globe, including Iran and Saudi Arabia – which clearly suggested a continuation of Kissinger's twin pillar strategy in the region. The aim to restrict global arms sales through international agreements, the one clear proposal from the election campaign, was also included, as was the desire to enhance

global awareness of human rights and influence other governments to accord these issues a higher priority.¹²

In terms of Iran, Brzezinski underlined four main priorities for the US. First, to arrange an exchange of high-level visits with the Shah (1977-78); second, continue consultations on Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean security (1977); third, play a mediating role in future Iranian-Arab tensions (1977-); and finally, encourage Iran to adopt a stabilising role with regard to the security of neighbouring Pakistan and Afghanistan (1978-79).¹³ This did not represent a significant departure from the policy of previous administrations, demonstrating that at this early stage Carter and his team had no pressing need to overhaul the US approach to Iran. At this stage Iran was of marginal interest to Carter as he did not yet fully appreciate the Shah's significance to Iranian stability – remember that Ford had lectured him on this very point at the San Francisco debate.

This is further supported by a document, circulated to key White House staff, which detailed the goals for the first six months of Carter's presidency – Iran was not even mentioned in the section on diplomacy and national defence. Perhaps more surprising was the omission of any mention of either human rights or the reduction of US arms sales across the globe. Instead, the key priorities at this stage were reviewing the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) process; the Panama Canal, moving towards transferring control of the waterway to the Panamanian government against significant domestic opposition; attempting to mediate in the dispute between NATO allies Greece and Turkey over sovereignty and rights in the Aegean Sea; and dealing with international economic problems.¹⁴

Getting the Carter message across

With the establishment of clearly defined foreign policy objectives, the Carter White House could now work on conveying its message not just to the American people but also throughout the world. In April 1977, Brzezinski briefed the President concerning public understanding of his foreign policy. While the public perception was perceived to be generally good, there were apparent concerns surrounding a lack of understanding of Carter's broader purposes. In order to remedy this, Brzezinski proposed getting the administration's message out more clearly in the public domain,

through a conceptual speech to an elite foreign policy audience and a town hall meeting on foreign affairs aimed at the common man.¹⁵ A month later, Carter was to make the seminal foreign policy speech of his presidency at the University of Notre Dame (below are three extracts):

“Because we know that democracy works, we can reject the arguments of those rulers who deny human rights to their people.”

“...we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear.”

“We’ve fought fire with fire, never thinking that fire is better quenched with water.”¹⁶

The Notre Dame speech solidified Carter’s commitment to human rights and a democratic foreign policy based on decency and values in the post-Vietnam era. It represented a clear attempt to break away from the old order; in Vietnam the US had fought ‘fire with fire’ but to no avail. The Carter administration recognised this moral failure and signalled a new direction in US foreign policy – a return to the historical values of the nation through the tools of leadership and diplomacy on the world stage, with the US playing a positive role in shaping the future.

The administration’s desire to distance itself from the approach of its predecessors was evident from some of its other actions. Carter fired George Bush as head of the CIA and set about reorganising the agency; and his Secretary of State, the experienced Cyrus Vance who had served in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, made assurances to Congress that he would always “come completely clean” with them.¹⁷ The Iranian situation was later to test Vance’s pledge to the full, while the role of the CIA was to be heavily scrutinised in the wake of the Shah’s abrupt exit from power. The continuity of US policy in Iran highlights how Carter’s new direction was more a case of style rather than substance. The administration was not about to abandon the Shah as one of the ‘twin pillars’, but they were seeking to shift the tone of future interactions and relations away from the Nixon era of blank cheques.

US-Iranian relations at the start of 1977

As we have seen during the previous chapters, the early 1970s proved to be a prosperous time for US-Iranian relations. Under successive Republican presidents, American interests in Iran – commercial, bureaucratic and foreign policy related – had

expanded substantially and in January 1977, when Carter was sworn in as President, this honeymoon period showed no sign of ending. The Nixon-Kissinger-Ford policy toward Iran had received powerful support from the major American arms, electronic, and telecommunication industries; the Iran market was a bonanza where competition for contracts was sordid and ridden with corruption.¹⁸ Major US firms had established themselves in Iran and helped contribute to a sharp increase in the number of American citizens living in Iran.

The relationship was by no means all one way; the size of the Iranian student population being educated in the US had also grown substantially since the beginning of the 1970s and further demonstrated how intertwined the two nations had become. American universities offering a high quality of education proved to be very popular in Iran. In the 1977-78 academic year there were around 100,000 Iranian students studying abroad, over 36,000 of whom were enrolled in US institutions; in 1978-79 there were 45,340 and in 1979-80 the number reached its peak of 51,310. At this time Iran had the highest student enrolment in the US compared to any other country.¹⁹

However, the potential difficulties associated with the close relations being established between the two nations had not gone unnoticed by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. In a 1976 study looking at US arms transfers to Iran, the committee provided a foretaste of the dangerous issues the Carter administration would later encounter. It raised concerns about the socio-economic impact of the growing numbers of Americans in Iran, one passage noting that “Anti-Americanism could become a serious problem in Iran... if there were to be a change of government”, and, in a chilling prediction of what might happen in the event of a crisis, “United States personnel in Iran could become, in a sense, hostages.”²⁰

As Michael Leeden and William Lewis point out in their book *Debacle* (1981), the study’s findings offered no way out of the complex maze of dependent relationships that had been established in the military and security spheres.²¹ This warning that abandoning Tehran would have grave consequences for US policy seemed only to reaffirm the idea that preparing an exit strategy from Iran was not necessary. Nobody in the US government appeared to be asking the ‘what if’ question such was the entrenched nature of Iranian policy – what if the Shah was to fall from power? In

February 1976, President Ford did at least initiate an assessment of US policy in the region in National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 238. This focused on the prospects and policy options in areas such as arms supplies, bases and installations, technology transfers, and the influence of outside powers.²² This should have awakened members of the Ford administration to the potentially damaging long-term effects of their policies in the Persian Gulf, with Iran as the clear focal point. Instead the status quo was quietly, and it appeared successfully, maintained for the Carter administration to continue.

US strategy in Iran

At first glance the goals for the US to achieve in Iran set out in Brzezinski's four year objectives do not seem to differ markedly from those of previous Republican presidents. Brzezinski's findings were based on recommendations put forward by the NSC's Middle East specialists William Quandt and Gary Sick. On closer inspection it is apparent that while the policies might not have been vastly different, in the short-term at least, the approach of the Carter administration certainly was. Quandt and Sick advocated a mature relationship with Iran, in which consultation would be more prominent than arms transfers. Furthermore, in a clear attempt to distance Carter from the Nixon Doctrine, they proposed that the US government should not "lend support to the idea that Iran is the chosen instrument of American policy in the region."²³

Vance himself admits that the administration's basic approach to Iran was similar to that adopted by other post-1945 presidents. The key foreign affairs players; Carter, Brzezinski, Vance, and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, all recognised Iran's strategic importance to the US in terms of Persian Gulf security. Yet Carter and his advisors also wanted to stick to their emerging position on human rights and the election commitment to restrain American arms sales. At some stage these desires were destined to clash with continued American support for the Shah. As Vance admitted, "it would be hard to maintain public support for our strategic relationship with Iran if the Shah failed to pay more attention to human rights."²⁴

Brzezinski too appears to have been committed to improving human rights, yet he approached things from the other end of the spectrum, preferring to focus on strengthening American power in order to achieve these goals. When, as in the case of

Iran, a choice between projecting US power or enhancing human rights had to be made, he believed that power had to take precedence; “Without credible American power, we would simply not be able either to protect our interests or to advance more humane goals.”²⁵ How to respond and deal with the Iranians was a dilemma that would demonstrate the strategic differences between the more hard-nosed Brzezinski, a more willing advocate of the ‘iron-fist’ approach, and the somewhat power-shy Vance, who was evidently more reluctant to use force.

Carter’s election – the view from Iran

Carter, perhaps more than any other Cold War American President since Kennedy, faced an uphill battle in his relations with the Shah. At the beginning of the 1960s during the ‘White Revolution’ years, Kennedy’s desire for modernisation and the spread of American ideals had been the source of some discomfort in relations between Washington and Tehran. Now in the mid-1970s, Carter’s talk of promoting American values globally had a similar effect.

Throughout the 1976 election campaign Carter made no secret of his desire for a reduction in US arms sales and, following his victory, attention focused more heavily on the human rights elements of his policies. Both of these areas were obviously major concerns for the Shah. Despite SAVAK’s best efforts to cover up his regime’s excesses, Iran was widely recognised as having a poor record on human rights abuses. The Shah and his inner circle had worked hard over a number of years to foster close links with the US military and by the mid-1970s, thanks largely due to a willingness to spend huge amounts of capital on American equipment, Iran was able to dictate the terms of some deals to Washington’s powerbrokers. The statements emanating from the new administration in Washington thus appeared to threaten the Shah’s comfort zone and his status as a key US ally.

Had the Shah been able to see a copy of Brzezinski’s four-year goals he would soon have realised that there was little reason to be apprehensive. Within the sections on arms control and human rights, in which some countries were clearly identified, Iran was not mentioned by name where perhaps it could have been. For example, section B1 of the human rights objective stated the US would “...consider human rights

criteria in making decisions on economic aid and arms transfers”,²⁶ criteria which could certainly have been applied to Iran under the Shah’s leadership.

When contrasted with the attitudes of the previous administration, which had agreed numerous arms deals and moved towards a nuclear energy relationship, it is not difficult to see how the Shah might have feared a negative effect from Carter’s election. He was concerned that Carter saw him as a tyrant, and was uneasy at the criticisms of him being made by sections of the American media and some members of Congress.²⁷ Despite his knowledge of the American political system – which should have told him that Carter could not be the sole cause of the growing anti-Shah feeling – the Shah must have initially seen Carter’s victory as a turning point for US-Iranian relations.

The Shah’s pessimistic outlook appeared to be in marked contrast to the views of many ordinary Iranians who welcomed a change of leadership in America. Carter’s popularity with the Iranian people and press can be seen in the album of clippings the Iranian Ambassador Ardeshir Zahedi sent to Carter’s Press Secretary Jody Powell in March 1977.²⁸ It is also apparent from the flood of correspondence Carter received from Iranians living in all different parts of the world. They saw Carter as the man who would hold the Shah to the same heady standards of liberty that applied in the US.

Establishing a relationship with the Shah

One of the problems which helped to fuel the Shah’s own insecurities was the absence of a US ambassador in Tehran. The ex-CIA chief Richard Helms, who had served as ambassador from 1973-77, left Tehran at the end of the Ford presidency and had not been replaced. This meant that there was no point of contact for the Shah and the new administration and doubtless led to some statements and policies being misinterpreted at both ends. In the short-term, Carter sought to alleviate this problem by dispatching Secretary of State Vance to Tehran for talks with the Shah in May 1977. As Vance saw it his objective was to explain the President’s views to the Shah and put the administration’s human rights and arms sales policies into proper perspective.²⁹

Carter was eager to meet the Shah himself for the first time so Vance opened the meeting by delivering a presidential invitation to visit Washington later in the year. Despite this gesture, Vance sensed an underlying anxiety that belied the Shah's seemingly decisive demeanour. The Shah outlined his regional concerns, which centred on Soviet ambitions in Africa and the Middle East and the threat posed to the region's oil resources, and promised to support attempts to find an Arab-Israeli settlement. Vance meanwhile had the tricky task of broaching the arms and human rights issues. He emphasised the US desire to continue the military supply relationship with Iran but noted that it would have to be put "on a more orderly basis." The Shah, failing to "focus adequately" on Vance's warning, seemed unperturbed and continued to discuss the terms of specific deals and make further requests of the US.³⁰

On the sensitive issue of human rights, Vance attempted to convey Carter's policy in unthreatening but honest terms. While emphasising that it was a key element of the new administration's foreign policy, he also outlined how it was part of the American tradition and value system. In telling the Shah that the issue applied to all nations, Vance softened the blow by simultaneously praising some of the improvements that Iran was already making. All too predictably, the Shah resorted to his Cold War playbook in claiming that the Soviet Union would be the only beneficiary from civil unrest in Iran. He did not object to the human rights policy "as long as it was a question of general principle and not directed at him or did not threaten his country's security."³¹

Carter was keen to reassure the Shah about American intentions. He sent two letters to the Shah in the early part of 1977 in addition to arranging the Vance trip as a special measure. The historian Babak Ganji has claimed that Carter ignored the Shah's message of congratulation following his election victory, a gesture that was not well received in Tehran.³² Yet the correspondence between the two leaders in the early months of 1977 suggests that Carter acted respectfully and decently towards the Shah. A Brzezinski memo of February 1977 comments:

*"Our Embassy reports that the Shah was 'clearly delighted' with President Carter's letter. It was given headline treatment in Tehran papers and prominent coverage on radio and TV."*³³

Ganji also contends that Carter sided with officials who wanted to weaken the Shah, alleging that he attempted to distance the US from the Pahlavi regime and pointing to the failure to appoint a successor to Helms as US Ambassador as a prime example of this policy in action.³⁴ However, this assertion does not square with the available evidence. As we have seen, Carter did make reasonable efforts to encourage the Shah during the initial six months of his administration. The Vance mission and its aftermath, particularly the negotiation on the deal for advanced warning surveillance aircraft (otherwise known as AWACS) certainly helped to ease some of the Shah's insecurities. Carter did not state his unequivocal support for the Shah; neither did he deliberately set out to distance the US from him. Instead, he preferred to allow events to run their course and let the Shah be the master of his own destiny.

The delay in appointing a new Ambassador to Iran does seem strange, but it is by no means as sinister as Ganji suggests, particularly as there were a large number of State Department personnel already in Iran at the time. Midway through 1977, William H. Sullivan, a career diplomat who had previously served as US Ambassador to Laos and the Philippines, was appointed as the new Ambassador in Tehran. An NSC memo from May 1977 highlighted the importance of the role:

*"To a considerable degree, the state of US relations with Iran are dependent on the personal relationship which the Ambassador is able to establish with the Shah."*³⁵

These words were fitting, as Sullivan would play a crucial role in the dramatic events that were to unfold in Iran during the Carter years.

The US may have lacked an effective voice in Tehran for some months during 1977 but the same cannot be said for the Shah, whose voice was being heard loud and clear in Washington through his gregarious Ambassador Ardeshir Zahedi. One of the most influential Iranians in the US during the 1970s, Zahedi had been appointed for a second time as Ambassador in 1973 (having previously served in the role from 1959-1962). He was the son of General Fazlollah Zahedi, who played a key role in the 1953 overthrow of Mossadeq and later served as Prime Minister, and had been educated in the US at Utah State University. In his second stint as Ambassador to the US, Zahedi was able to establish close personal ties with officials in the Nixon and Ford administrations at a time when US-Iranian relations were flourishing. He was able to

form especially close links to the most powerful US foreign policy-maker at the time, Henry Kissinger. The cosy nature of their dealings can be seen in claims from Zahedi's personal secretary at the time, Delphine Blachowicz, that he made a regular habit of sending personal gifts to Kissinger.³⁶

Zahedi could certainly be described as the Shah's 'mouthpiece' in Washington, with his constant efforts to promote his leader and strengthen the bond between Iran and his hosts. James Bill's description of him as "an extremely effective public relations official for the Shah in America,"³⁷ provides an indication of the impact he made in Washington. By the time Carter took office, Zahedi had become firmly embedded in the Washington political establishment; an extravagant man, he was a regular on the social scene who courted the capital's movers and shakers. He was also not afraid of overstating his own self-importance to his American audience. Carter himself recalls a time in November 1978 when Zahedi claimed the Shah wanted him to fill prominent positions at home when the reality was very different "...we have some intelligence information that Zahedi has offered to fill these posts and the Shah has not been enthusiastic about it."³⁸

Personality aside, Zahedi worked tirelessly to create new and lasting relationships with the incoming administration, hoping no doubt that those he enjoyed with the previous incumbents could be replicated as far as was possible. During the period 1977-78 he naturally sent a large volume of correspondence to a variety of US officials in his role as Ambassador, with the recipient of the vast majority of his letters being the National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski. Their correspondence often included handwritten notes that indicated the development of close relations between the two – Zahedi would regularly heap praise on his 'friend' for his excellent work. In his memoirs, Brzezinski makes no reference to his relations with Zahedi other than to admit that he liked and admired the flamboyant individual.³⁹ Yet Brzezinski's links with Zahedi would later be the source of considerable consternation for those in the State Department, in particular Secretary Vance, when the situation in Iran began to deteriorate in the latter half of 1978.

Visiting Washington

While preparations were being made for the Shah to make a state visit to Washington later in the year, his wife Empress Farah visited as part of a private trip to the US at the end of June 1977. The briefing material for her visit, as provided to the First Lady, shows how President Carter was keen to advance his personal commitment to human rights. Mrs. Carter was advised that Empress Farah was “deeply committed” to social improvements in Iran and that it would be appropriate for the First Lady to talk about her own interest in human rights in addition to those of the President.⁴⁰ Yet what the Empress’s visit really served to do was to demonstrate the close links that had developed between the two nations and the personal ties the Pahlavis enjoyed with the previous administration. The principal purpose of the visit was for the Empress to attend a board meeting at the Aspen Institute of Humanistic Studies, of which she was an honorary member, while she also received an honorary degree from Columbia University in New York. Perhaps more revealing though are the lunch appointments arranged with former President and Mrs. Ford and with former Vice-President and Mrs. Rockefeller.

As the date for the Shah’s visit in mid-November approached the controversy surrounding his arrival intensified. Iranian students and exiled dissidents were making their feelings well known and had planned demonstrations to coincide with the Shah’s arrival. In an operations memo from the Mayor of Washington DC’s Special Events Task Group outlining arrangements for the Shah’s visit on 15-16 November 1977, there is a detailed list of these demonstrations – groups identified as the Muslim Youth Organisation, Iranian Student Association, and other variants of these. Yet in addition to the various student and youth groups, there were also demonstrations by the Clergy and Laity Concerned/Community for Creative Non-Violence and the Iranian Engineers in the US.⁴¹

These actions far outweighed the turnout of the pro-Shah welcome groups, which should have prompted those in the Carter administration to question the stability of the Shah’s regime. The students themselves maintained that the Iranian government was coercing or bribing Iranians working in the US to come to Washington and demonstrate in favour of the Shah; a claim which appears to have some validity given that over 400 Iranian military staff training in Texas as part of an aid agreement were

granted special leave to fly to Washington for the occasion.⁴² That these Iranian personnel were given special dispensation to go to Washington for the Shah's visit, which presumably had to be signed off by officials at the Pentagon, suggests that the Carter administration was already aware of the perceived problems and was reacting by trying to ensure that his visit was not viewed negatively both in Iran itself and around the world. At this early stage, the administration did not want to do anything that might unsettle the Shah's leadership even further.

Displeasure amongst Iranians at the Shah's visit to Washington was not confined to their own increasingly unpopular leader. There was also criticism of Carter for failing to stick to the promises he made during the election campaign – a charge that would grow in importance as the months pressed on. In its analysis of the Shah's US visit the *Zendan* newsletter (translated as 'Prison'), published by the Committee to Defend Political Prisoners in Iran, accused the US government of hypocrisy and attacked Carter for following Ford's policy. It also condemned the continued arms sales to Iran which Carter had pledged to curtail, while describing the US involvement in Iran as "dangerous and expanding."⁴³ Although the article's damning assessment of Carter's first year in office was exaggerated, it nevertheless provided a hint of what was to come for Carter in the wake of his infamous toast in Tehran; namely the stark disillusionment and disappointment ordinary Iranians felt over his 'failed' leadership.

Members of the Carter administration did not exactly roll out the red carpet to welcome the Shah. A revealing indication of how US government officials viewed the Shah's spending habits and seemingly endless desire for military equipment can be seen from the reaction of an NSC staffer to a State Department request for helicopter support to transport the Shah and his party during the November visit. Rick Inderfurth, a special assistant to Brzezinski, commented flippantly that, "...he'll probably want to buy the helicopter – out of his pocket change."⁴⁴ Despite their personal views, government officials certainly wanted to exploit the Shah's visit for all it was worth politically. In working on a guest list for the Shah's state dinner, David Aaron, Brzezinski's deputy in the NSC, sought to utilise the evening to build contacts and support in Congress rather than just for "fun and games". Particular focus was on getting votes for Carter's Energy Bill, the sale of F-15 and F-16 jets to Saudi Arabia and the SALT process.⁴⁵

A look at the provisional schedule for the Shah's visit shows he was due to meet with all the key figures in the administration; Vice President Walter Mondale, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, Energy Secretary James Schlesinger, and of course Secretary Vance, Brzezinski and the President. While this was obviously the norm, the appearance on the timetable of the Director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Stansfield Turner, who was scheduled to meet the Shah at 8am on Wednesday 16 November 1977,⁴⁶ most certainly was not. It is not clear whether this meeting actually took place or not – note that it does not appear in the State Department's official programme for the Shah's visit as issued to the press – yet its very presence on the schedule appears puzzling to say the least. The chief of the CIA did not usually meet with foreign leaders and what could he have possibly been discussing with the Iranian leader other than SAVAK or important intelligence considerations? Such questions only add further fuel to the fire of allegations concerning CIA involvement in Iranian affairs, giving more ammunition to many Iranian conspiracy theorists. The CIA's role and its perceived close links to SAVAK were of course sensitive issues during the Iranian revolution and Khomeini's subsequent rise to power.

Tears on the White House lawn

The Shah's arrival on the south lawn of the White House on the morning of 15 November 1977 is a moment that shall be remembered forever by those who witnessed it. In an almost surreal situation, President Carter welcomed the Shah to the country with tears streaming down his face in front of the world media's television cameras. In the background the voices of anti-Shah protesters angrily reacting against mounted police, who had released tear gas in an effort to disperse them, could be heard. Unfortunately for the President and his guest the wind had blown the fumes over the south lawn making their introduction a particularly uncomfortable one.

In what can only be described as an ugly contradiction, Carter praised the Shah's leadership and his country's progress whilst in tears caused by attempts to quell the actions of the Shah's detractors. The demonstrators threw posters and stones at police, burnt effigies of the Shah and released balloons depicting him as an American puppet.⁴⁷ The carefully stage-managed attempt to show that the Shah was in complete control of his nation had failed badly. In reflecting on the incident, Carter later

described it as “an augury” for what was to happen two years later, when “there would be real grief in our country because of Iran.”⁴⁸

The November visit can also be seen as the precursor to the infamous toast that Carter would make in Tehran over the New Year period. The words used by both the President and his deputy Mondale in their respective toasts at the official functions were glowing in their praise of the Shah. Carter reeled off a list of his achievements which were down to “energetic and wise leadership.”⁴⁹ There was no mention of the challenges facing the relationship and many of the positive sentiments of the toast were to be repeated in Tehran within a matter of weeks, only this time they would have damaging consequences for Carter’s own leadership.

Talking to the Shah

Carter and his team did not know quite what to expect from the Shah during their talks; Vance was the only member of the administration who had already met him, while the president had hardly made an auspicious start in developing relations with his Iranian counterpart. For all the talk of a commitment to human rights, which naturally unsettled the Shah, there was also the issue of the protracted negotiations on the sale of AWAC planes to Iran. Congressional opposition had delayed the deal and the Shah, displaying his usual confidence that the deal would be agreed as had been the norm, sent an impatient message to Carter expressing his displeasure. In addition, a week prior to his arrival in Washington, the Shah had been highly critical of US foreign policy in an interview with the journalist Arnaud de Borchgrave. Gary Sick, the NSC’s Iran specialist, described his remarks as “scornful and combative” and noted that he did not have a nice word for anybody.⁵⁰ Needless to say that on his arrival at the White House the Shah was not quite so bold and there was a much warmer atmosphere than in his earlier communications with Carter.⁵¹

The administration had three concrete objectives for the meeting; first, to convince the Shah that Carter was committed to the US-Iranian ‘special relationship’, second, to secure an agreement on Iranian defense needs and how the US could meet them, and third, to obtain the Shah’s commitment to a moderate stance on oil prices at the forthcoming OPEC meeting in December.⁵² Carter also wanted to offer, privately and discreetly of course, his opinions on the human rights problem in Iran. In contrast, the

Shah arrived armed with a lengthy shopping list of his desired new weapons and aircraft, hoping that his willingness to show restraint with regard to oil prices would win the day.

After their first day of meetings, NBC news reported that Carter and the Shah had discussed everything but human rights. The State Department was keen to ensure that when the issue was discussed on the second day that it be communicated to the press by White House staff.⁵³ Needless to say, the press release the next day mentioned human rights – “the President reviewed his approach to human rights throughout the world” – although it is not clear as to how deeply it was discussed or within what context. Jody Powell was questioned by journalists over the issue of human rights and the exact wording of the statement, and asked whether they specifically discussed human rights in Iran.⁵⁴ The administration was treading carefully and trying not to push Iran too far, particularly in the public domain, preferring instead to focus on the steps that the Iranian government had already taken in relation to Carter’s ideal.

Carter’s own notes of the meeting do not mention human rights specifically. The issues that appeared to take precedence were arms sales (specifically the AWACs deal); energy concerns and oil prices; nuclear energy and non-proliferation; and other mutual areas of concern across the globe.⁵⁵ The talks actually progressed in much the same way as they had done when Vance had visited Tehran six months previously. The Shah initiated proceedings by launching into an extensive, if not entirely accurate (once more he overstated Moscow’s grand designs in Africa and the Middle East) assessment of the Persian Gulf situation. He went on to focus on the changes in his own country, quoting a range of improving economic and social statistics.

In spite of his performance, the Shah could not fool Carter who knew from American intelligence reports that the reality was very different. When alone with the Shah, Carter tactfully attempted to address the issue:

“Iran’s reputation in the world is being damaged...Is there anything that can be done to alleviate this problem by closer consultation with the dissident groups and by easing off on some of the strict police policies?”⁵⁶

The Shah responded by saying there was nothing he could do and that the complainants represented only a tiny minority who enjoyed no support amongst the

majority of the Iranian people. With Carter, aware of the sensitivity of his involvement, reluctant to force the issue the Shah returned to Tehran in buoyant mood, no doubt comforted by the reassurances of continued American commitment to Iran.

Returning the hospitality – Carter’s stopover in Tehran

A little over six weeks later Carter arrived in Tehran to spend New Year’s Eve in the Shah’s company as part of a nine day trip to various parts of the globe. The President had originally been scheduled to stop in Tehran for only a few hours whilst en-route from Delhi to Paris as part of an ambitious four continent tour at the end of November. When this trip was cancelled so that Carter could ensure that the legislation for his energy programme was passed, a second trip was subsequently planned during which he would participate in an official dinner on New Year’s Eve in Tehran.

The scale of the original trip came in for much criticism with many commentators seeing it as an overly ambitious and unnecessary diplomatic folly. Questions were naturally raised about the need for the President to stop in Tehran, particularly considering the fact he was meeting the Shah just a couple of weeks prior to this. During a press briefing to outline plans for the President’s original trip, a reporter quizzed Brzezinski as to whether the serious human rights problems in Iran contributed to the decision to pay a visit. Brzezinski’s response reaffirmed that human rights issues were “a fundamental tenet of our relationship with the world” but also made it very clear that they were not a precondition for dealing seriously and productively with other issues, bilateral or multilateral.⁵⁷

In the weeks between the Washington meeting and the return session in Tehran the difficulties in Iran became ever more visible to American eyes. In the aftermath of the Shah’s visit, his security forces stepped up their crackdown on dissident actions and protests as riots and disturbances became commonplace in Tehran and the other major cities. The CIA was monitoring the situation and believed that the Shah had reverted back to his old ways and was no longer prepared to tolerate political dissent. Brzezinski linked the crackdown to the student demonstrations in Washington “which embarrassed the Shah and... went beyond what he perceives as the limits of tolerable

dissent.”⁵⁸ The Shah appeared to have tamed the situation but the long term prospects were still volatile. Brzezinski’s analysis cited the Shah’s desire to reassert control rather than forging alliances with influential groups, and the heavy-handed nature of the police response to the disorders as exploitable issues which could be used by his radical opponents.⁵⁹ The fact that students were now talking openly about deposing the monarchy showed the scale of the problems facing the Shah.

The ‘infamous toast’

The main event of Carter’s brief stopover in Tehran was a state dinner. It was at this event that Carter made a speech that would come back to haunt him, along with the rest of America, in the very near future. Carrying on the effusive tone of the November meeting, as was typical of heads of state at these occasions, Carter once again, and in spite of what he knew was happening on the streets, lavished praise upon the Shah:

*“Iran, because of the great leadership of the Shah, is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world. This is a great tribute to you, Your Majesty, and to your leadership and to the respect and the admiration and love which your people give to you.”*⁶⁰

Carter’s words were not simply the result of an overenthusiastic slip of the tongue; indeed, it is clear from his notes that he intended to use the line ‘island of stability’ and to mention the Shah’s leadership skills.⁶¹ Vance has tried to excuse Carter’s comments as not being markedly inconsistent with the available intelligence estimates and academic advice at his disposal.⁶² This is an unconvincing defence, as it is apparent both from Carter’s own recollections and the available evidence that he knew of the tensions under the surface which the Shah regularly attempted to gloss over.

The impact of Carter’s backing of the Pahlavi regime was not immediately apparent. Iranian media coverage of the President’s visit was extensive – his arrival, the dinner and toasts, and his departure were all broadcast live on Iranian television and radio. The initial reactions were quite favourable and upbeat, with various reports stating that the talks had been ‘important’ and ‘excellent’, and that Iran and the US were now equal partners in their ‘vital’ alliance.⁶³ As it happened, Carter’s arrival in Iran coincided with one of the quieter periods the country had seen for some months.

However, just a few days later on 8 January 1978 a series of demonstrations and violent clashes engulfed the holy city of Qom, some eighty miles south of Tehran. The unrest had been sparked by a newspaper article, almost certainly written with explicit or implicit support from the Shah himself, attacking the influential exiled religious cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.⁶⁴ The Shah once again instructed his security forces to react in the only way he knew how – forcefully.

The significance of Carter's ill-advised remarks cannot be ignored. They inadvertently sparked the opposition leaders into action and perhaps provided the Shah's regime with false confidence that it was free to take whatever punitive action it deemed necessary against political dissidents. Kenneth Pollack, who served in the CIA and NSC as an expert on the Persian Gulf, believes Carter's remarks set into motion the chain of events that became the Iranian Revolution.⁶⁵ They deflated the hopes of many ordinary Iranians who had hoped Carter would be a positive and liberalising influence on the Shah. It now appeared to them that Carter would not support his own rhetoric on human rights in Iran, and that they had been betrayed by America. Thus the anti-Americanism at the root of Iranian society slowly began to emerge, growing ever more virulent as the Shah clung to power throughout 1978.

Bill Daugherty, an ex-CIA operative turned academic who was one of the American hostages seized by the Iranians in November 1979, firmly believes that the New Year's Eve toast was a turning point for how Iranians viewed Carter.⁶⁶ He describes it as inexcusable and recollects how the hostages were constantly reminded about it during their captivity. The average Iranian believed that Carter had stabbed them in the back and the sense of betrayal they felt was much deeper than anyone in the US recognised. As Daugherty says, "you had to be there to listen to these people to understand it"; they did not expect Carter to get rid of the Shah, but thought he would influence him to improve civil liberties and put a halt to the activities of SAVAK.⁶⁷ Many others across the globe, not just Iranians, were looking to Carter's America to lead the way on these issues; as *The Times* put it when evaluating his foreign excursion:

*"The United States is climbing out of a period of shame and demoralisation and is once again being looked to as a source of power, ideas and help."*⁶⁸

Contradictions and confusion

The Carter administration has been roundly criticised for the apparent inconsistencies in its policy towards Iran during the period 1977-78. It is imperative however to give due consideration to the situation Carter inherited before offering a snap judgement. There is a sense that Carter did not understand how boxed in he was by the commitments Nixon had made. When he raised concerns about human rights problems he did not fully comprehend the level of US entrenchment in Iranian affairs.⁶⁹ Making US support for Iran dependent on either conforming to American standards of liberty or on reducing its military shopping list were not viable options; doing so could quite conceivably have pushed the Shah closer to Moscow and plunged the region into crisis. Nor did Carter want to give his unquestioned backing to the Pahlavi regime, which governed in a manner that was contrary to the beliefs which he had passionately expressed. Carter's approach thus had to encompass the contradiction between maintaining the 'twin pillar' focus and changing the tone of US support for the Shah so that it was not unconditional.

An already difficult scenario was further complicated for US foreign policy makers by the human rights and arms considerations to which Carter was committed. These factors shall be examined in greater detail in the following chapter but, as we shall see, they helped contribute to a confused presentation of the Carter administration's aims in Iran. This affected not only the Iranian leadership but also the average Iranian citizen. The Shah's uneasiness at Carter's election victory stemmed from the human rights and arms reduction issues, yet after their meetings in November and December 1977 he assumed, erroneously of course, that he possessed Washington's full support. Similarly, the Iranian people came to expect so much from Carter as a result of his statements that they took the apparent endorsement of the Pahlavi regime as a devastating blow to their own future hopes. Not surprisingly, the Shah's opposition was quick to capitalise on the contradictions between Carter's word and his government's actions. In the aftermath of the Tehran trip, Khomeini labelled Carter a hypocrite who was only interested in promoting human rights when it was convenient for the US to do so.⁷⁰

Carter could not undo the web of US entanglements he had inherited from his predecessors, nor did he wish to force the Shah out of power as Eisenhower had done

with Mossadeq back in 1953. His lack of foreign policy experience left him very vulnerable to the problem of the Shah, yet this was a situation which had been years in the making and would have tested any president no matter how extensive a background he or she possessed in foreign affairs. In the end, his administration suffered, particularly during its first eighteen months or so, from a failure to project its policy accurately, both publicly and in private. It did not wish to be accused by conservative Republicans of undermining a key US ally, nor did it wish to be seemingly abandoning the principles on which the American public had voted for Carter. The administration was thus unable to find a solution to the dilemma it faced between maintaining public support for a strategic relationship with Iran if the Shah failed to address human rights concerns, whilst at the same time not alienating his regime.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

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Strategic Realities versus Moral Values: Arms Sales and Human Rights

Jimmy Carter's rise to the presidency undoubtedly caused some trepidation on the Shah's part. The two strikes against Carter as far as the Shah was concerned were firstly, his insistence that human rights considerations should weigh heavily in arms sales decisions, and secondly that the US should begin exercising greater restraint regarding such sales.¹ Although these have been briefly touched upon previously, both arms sales and human rights require a more detailed examination – the first part of this chapter will thus focus on arms sales and the second half on human rights.

Carter had made reducing US arms sales across the globe the principal component of his foreign policy platform during the election campaign. But once he assumed the presidency the difficulty of striking the very delicate balance between his desire for arms reduction and the necessity of continued support for a key pillar of US policy in the Persian Gulf became all too clear. Carter was thus severely limited by the history of US-Iranian arms sales and strategic considerations, not to mention domestic political factors. Iran alone accounted for about half of the \$8 billion in annual American military sales when Carter took office.² The new administration had to factor in commitments made by the Nixon and Ford administrations, which meant analysing a number of existing or pending deals with Iran. In addition, there were substantial Congressional considerations that needed to be taken into account, particularly as Carter had promised to conduct his foreign policy openly and in conjunction with members of Congress. While Carter did make some progress it was only in the context of a very limited framework as he possessed little room for manoeuvre on arms reduction.

Similarly, the administration's focus on human rights also appeared to be diametrically opposed to the cosy relationship that America had carefully cultivated with the Shah. Carter believed that the concept of human rights should be incorporated into US relations with the rest of the world, yet in some regions this would prove extremely problematic. This was certainly the case in Iran which had

become a key US ally and a vital part of its 'twin pillar' strategy in the Middle East under the Shah's leadership. However, the Shah's methods of controlling Iranian society and suppressing opposition to his regime had resulted in a disturbing human rights record.

This chapter seeks to challenge the view that Carter's human rights agenda helped contribute to the Shah's downfall. The perception of extensive pressure being applied by Washington onto Tehran is altogether inaccurate. Despite a genuine commitment to the ideals expressed in his famous Notre Dame speech, Carter recognised that Iran was a unique situation where it would prove very difficult to apply these moral standards so rigidly. Strategic concerns therefore took priority in Iran, yet the Shah was by no means given a blanket exemption by the administration when it came to human rights issues. Carter approached the matter with tact and diplomacy, recognising the limitations of what could be achieved. Far from forcing the Shah into modernising his regime, he was guilty only of attempting to have a positive influence.

Arms Sales

The growth of the US-Iranian arms relationship has already been charted earlier on in this study, with the turning point being the 'blank cheque' of support Nixon and Kissinger provided to the Shah in 1972. The incoming Carter administration could certainly not ignore Iran's importance to the US, but tackling the thorny issue of possible reductions in arms sales would not be easy.

Carter signified his intentions from the very outset by selecting Paul C. Warnke as Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), the independent body established in 1961 by John F. Kennedy at the height of the Cold War nuclear arms race. Warnke, who had been an outspoken critic of the conflict in Vietnam and a strong proponent of arms restraint when he served in the Defense Department during the Johnson administration, endured a difficult confirmation process from a sceptical US Senate. He would push for US military restraint in support of arms control measures, but would later come under fire from conservatives in Congress and the foreign policy establishment for being soft on the Soviet threat.³ Carter also sought to tackle some of the domestic institutional difficulties facing the US with regard to arms control. After some 50,000 total hours of effort and often-acrimonious negotiation, all

the major agencies agreed a new procedure for developing Arms Control Impact Statements (ACIS) through an interagency process.⁴ Yet in spite of the newly-agreed ACIS, interagency wrangling and disagreements with the ACDA continued in much the same way as they had before.

In terms of the global arms market, Carter did attempt to introduce measures that would improve regulation and reduce the spread of weapons. Most famously, his administration initiated the Conventional Arms Transfer (CAT) talks with the Soviet Union. During a series of discussions in 1977-78, US representatives stressed the need for multilateral cooperation in order to sustain the initial Carter policy of unilateral restraint, and the Soviets appeared to be willing to entertain the idea of such cooperation. However, the talks stalled due to a significant difference of opinion within the US government; the State Department saw the talks principally in political terms, while the ACDA viewed them as a technical negotiation.⁵ Carter ultimately sided with the State Department but the CAT talks were nevertheless doomed to failure. In the fourth round of talks at the end of 1978 the Soviets wanted to discuss the Persian Gulf, among other regions; however, the NSC and the Pentagon were reluctant to do so for fear of undermining US security interests⁶ – at this stage the Shah was clinging precariously to power in Iran and the US was already wary of the instability in the region. The reluctance of both sides to discuss sensitive areas of interest, coupled with worsening relations between Washington and Moscow eventually put paid to the CAT process.

PD-13 and Carter Policy

It was not until the spring of 1977 that the Carter administration sought to clarify its policy on arms transfers, with Iran one of many states anxious to discover where it stood with the new President. Even America's principal ally got caught up in the process as Israel was angered to learn that a draft policy document proposed placing it in the second tier of states in terms of arms exports – rather than in the preferred state category.⁷ Yet when Carter unveiled Presidential Directive-13 (PD-13), his formal policy on conventional arms transfers, in May 1977 it was Iran rather than Israel that was left out in the cold. The document branded arms transfers “an exceptional foreign policy implement” and identified America's NATO partners, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand as countries exempted from the restraints it set out, in addition to stating

that the US would honour its historic responsibilities to Israel.⁸ With Iran not being mentioned, many questioned where the Shah stood in the pecking order of US priorities.

Carter knew that he had to offer the Shah some early reassurance that his friendship and role as protector of US interests in the Persian Gulf was valued by Washington. While PD-13 appeared to put a limit on Carter's room for manoeuvre with a non-exempted state like Iran, there was in fact a get out clause. The directive provided the President with the ability to personally approve deals in "extraordinary circumstances" where American friends required weaponry "in order to maintain a regional balance"⁹ – a description that applied perfectly to the Shah's Iran. The announcement of PD-13 had rekindled fears in Tehran about American intentions but Vance acted swiftly to calm them. He assured the Iranians that the US was committed, within limits of course, to meeting their special defence needs.¹⁰

Although it possessed some flexibility in dealing with Iran's requests the Carter administration, in keeping with its desire to reduce global arms sales, continued to stress otherwise to the Shah, focusing instead on the limitations of its new guidelines. It is easy to see how this caused confusion in Tehran; at the same time as they were being told that the US would do its best to meet their needs they were also being constantly reminded of the restrictions that had been put in place. Vance was the provider of the mixed message during his May 1977 visit to Tehran, reiterating the limitations but also delivering some more positive news; the US would go ahead with the pending sale of 160 F16 aircraft to Iran and the President would seek congressional approval over the Shah's request for advanced surveillance aircraft.¹¹ A comprehensive US position was difficult to discern as there were a variety of interests and forces at play, including major defense corporations and numerous US senators and congressmen who pressed for certain deals when it affected their business or constituents.¹²

The AWACS Deal – A Battle with Congress

At the end of April 1977 Carter formally approved a Pentagon offer to sell five highly sophisticated radar surveillance aircraft, known as AWACS – airborne warning and control system, to Iran. Critics of the deal argued that the planes were so complicated

that the US Air Force would have to provide technical personnel and assistance in order to enable the Iranians to operate the elaborate system.¹³ The deal had been some time in the making and was a product of the work of Richard R. Hallock in the mid-1970s. Hallock was a Pentagon adviser recommended to the Shah by virtue of his association with James R. Schlesinger, Nixon and Ford's Defense Secretary who was later brought in by Carter to be the first ever Energy Secretary – the two were former colleagues at the RAND corporation. Supposed to be acting as a watchdog of the Iranian arms program, Hallock quickly assumed an unofficial role as the Shah's adviser on military purchases, with a multi-million dollar contract for his own consulting company and ties to some of the industry's big hitters such as Northrop.¹⁴ The Pentagon later severed ties with Hallock once the extent of his associations became clear, but the Iranians felt he had saved them millions with his advocacy of AWACS as airborne radar systems meant they could economise on ground systems.¹⁵

The number of aircraft and their cost were issues which the Shah himself wanted resolved. He sent Carter a letter requesting that the President increase the number of proposed AWACS being sold to Iran from five to nine. As usual, he tried to stress his country's importance to the US and the regional threats Iran was facing:

*"I think you would concur with me, Mr. President, that taking into consideration the present developments in Africa and the eventualities in the Indian sub-continent, it is imperative for my country to be fully alive and alert to events in those quarters especially those related to the Indian Ocean."*¹⁶

Carter responded by proposing the sale of seven rather than five whilst again repeating his new set of policy guidelines on the sale of military equipment.¹⁷

The proposed AWACS sale was controversial for the Carter administration, particularly as its criticisms of Ford's arms deals were still fresh in the public consciousness. *The New York Times* claimed that Carter had approved the deal over objections from some officials in the State Department – the Pentagon had supported the sale, and that the decision was linked to getting his energy legislation before Congress accepted.¹⁸ Industry sources claimed that the link was Senator Henry M. Jackson (D-Washington), who was chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.¹⁹ As the main contractor of the AWACS was the Seattle based Boeing Company, had Iran not been sold them then Senator Jackson might not have looked so favourably upon Carter's energy program. This provides an indication of

some of the domestic complexities that Carter faced with the AWACS deal, which would become a lengthy and arduous negotiation.

Technological security concerns surrounding the AWACS were foremost in the minds of many US Senators. A recently released document containing the intelligence community's assessment of the positive and negative aspects of the sale to Iran, as conveyed by the Director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Stansfield M. Turner, to a Senate committee painted a fairly grim picture. On one hand, Turner pointed to Iran's sizeable intelligence and security forces under the Shah's control; but on the negative side he noted that a) Iranian communications security was below US standards, b) there were obvious jurisdictional rivalries and little cooperation among the intelligence and security services, and c) the US lacked detailed information "on which to predicate confidence in the actual effectiveness of Iranian security practices."²⁰

This evaluation did little to dispel the fears of many in Congress. With the Soviet Union's close proximity to Iran and the Shah's constant bleating about the threat from Moscow, there was a real concern that important US equipment could eventually fall into the lap of the Soviets. Bear in mind that at this stage only two AWACS aircraft were operational in the entire US Air Force. This opinion was voiced by Senator John Culver (D-Iowa) who claimed that aircraft flying in Iran could easily fall into Soviet hands, either by accident or intentionally, and that one of America's most important defence secrets would be exposed.²¹

Not surprisingly the AWACS plans were widely debated in Congress, with opponents in both the Senate and the House of Representatives tabling motions seeking to prevent the sale. Carter should have been in a favourable position – after all the Democrats controlled both Houses of Congress – yet this particular deal proved especially problematic. The confrontation between Carter and prominent figures within his own party, such as Culver and Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd (D-West Virginia), who felt that the sale was both dangerous and went against Carter's policy of restraint, nearly resulted in a major political crisis for the administration.

The Senate Foreign Assistance Subcommittee, under the leadership of Senator Hubert Humphrey (D-Minnesota) who personally favoured the deal, recommended that the AWACS sale be disapproved and provided a list of six security assurances that it sought on the deal. Carter though appeared determined to force the deal through, arguing that Congressional rejection would carry with it serious consequences for America's international interests.²² Yet with the House International Relations Committee having already voted against approval and a Senate vote likely to go the same way, the Carter administration was forced to resign itself to the fact that it could not win an institutional confrontation of this nature. Hamilton Jordan, Carter's closest political aide, and Frank Moore, his head of congressional liaison, saw a decisive defeat in the offing and advised the President to get a prominent AWACS supporter, such as Humphrey, to suggest that the proposed sale be temporarily withdrawn and resubmitted at a later date.²³

The delay was unsurprisingly not well received in Tehran. The Shah's impatient response and threat to withdraw his request appeared to anger Carter, who confided in his diary, "I don't care whether he buys them from us or not."²⁴ Carter did of course offer the Shah his reassurance that the deal would be completed when it was returned to the Congress in September, but the exchange was hardly cordial. As far as Carter was concerned he was doing everything possible to secure the deal, which went against his stated intention to reduce the sale of offensive weapons. Carter's backing for the deal seemingly against his better judgement was no doubt influenced by the Pentagon's strong desire for the deal to go through. US military chiefs recognised the possible security issues but these were far outweighed by the positives of the deal; less American technicians on the ground, lower unit prices to encourage European allies to buy them, plus the financial gain – each unit cost a staggering \$125 million.²⁵

Eventually it was the veteran Democrat Humphrey who proved to be the key figure in brokering a compromise. The six minor amendments that he proposed were made and the administration wheeled out its big guns, Carter, Vance and Harold Brown, to help push it through Congress. A memo sent to Brzezinski on 6 September 1977 highlights the administration's efforts to prepare a coordinated strategy for the resubmission of the proposal. The press strategy involved the Pentagon releasing the six assurances just after the resubmission and, perhaps more tellingly, the CIA declassifying part of a

letter from DCI Admiral Turner in which he states, "...these additional measures in combination with Iran's proven security record should materially reduce the likelihood" of physical compromise.²⁶ The idea was to place a heavy emphasis on these comments, which appeared to discount Turner's earlier assessment of the pro and cons. Opposition in the Senate remained firm so Carter concentrated on winning over members of the House. Finally, at the beginning of October, the sale was approved when the congressional committees lacked the votes to kill the proposal.²⁷

The Shah's Shopping List

Despite the Shah's sporadic displays of bravado, such as his threat to pull out of the AWACS deal, the congressional delays which dogged US-Iranian relations during the summer of 1977 did not seem to dampen his enthusiasm for further American equipment, even if it did slightly shake his confidence in the US alliance with Iran. On the contrary, requests from the Iranian government continued to arrive at the Pentagon as per the norm. Following on from the decision to complete the sale of 160 F16s, which had been brokered but not finalised at the tail-end of the Ford administration, the Shah sent Carter a further request for 140 more of these aircraft.²⁸

Aside from the operational difficulties – the US was simply not able to produce the required numbers in the Shah's desired timeframe – Carter's response sought once again to convey the change in US policy which dictated a need to contain arms sales to an acceptable and safe level. As he pointed out, this was certainly not the case in Iran:

*"Since becoming President, I have approved the sale of military equipment... which, in total dollar volume, is greater by half than that approved for any other nation in the world."*²⁹

Unfortunately for Carter, the only relevance of this statistic to the Shah was as a means of confirming Iranian importance to the US.

At around the same time that the Shah was hankering for more F16s, his regime suffered a significant setback in its quest for another type of advanced fighter aircraft when the US government reneged on a deal to sell 250 F18L fighter planes to Iran. This was another deal which had its origins in the Ford presidency with former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld having received the initial request. The 'no

sale' decision was justified by the strict criteria that had been set out in PD-13 and followed on from a similar case when Pakistan was denied the chance to purchase over 100 A7 attack bombers – the two deals together would have amounted to around \$4.5 billion.³⁰ While the official explanation maintained that the deal had fallen foul of the new policy guidelines, there was a sense that the Carter administration acted with a broader political context in mind; namely that the US had to give Iran a sign that it could not just get anything it wanted, whenever it wanted.³¹ The Shah and his cohorts had garnered this impression in the years since 1972 and Iranian demands were rapidly spiralling out of control.

The F18L case aptly illustrated the power of major contractors and the external pressures facing the administration. Much of the controversy surrounding the deal focused on the fact that it had been instigated by the Northrop Corporation, a major defense contractor, without the express approval of the Defense Department. In addition, *The New York Times* charged that because Iran was set to finance the development of the land based version of the F18, the agreement would set a dangerous precedent for a foreign country to influence US weapons development and military sales.³² This factor contributed greatly to the collapse of the deal because, unlike AWACS which had been available to the US Air Force for some time (albeit in limited numbers); there were no plans for the land based version of the F18 to be operationally deployed by US forces. The administration highlighted this issue when addressing the concerns of Los Angeles City Mayor Tom Bradley, who had written to Carter criticising the decision to cancel the F18 sale and lambasting its effect on employment in the region.³³ Northrop was based in the city of Hawthorne in the Los Angeles County of California, which explains Bradley's interest in the matter.

Others Factors: Iranian-Israeli Relations and Nuclear Energy

The Iranian government was not only in contact with US defence contractors, but was also actively seeking alternative means of securing the weaponry its military required; the primary American fear of failing to meet the Shah's needs was that Iran could easily get its equipment from elsewhere. Since the restoration of the Pahlavi dynasty in the 1950s, Iran and Israel had enjoyed extensive, often secretive, relations. Their mutual interests were served by Iran providing oil to Israel in return for Israeli intelligence, weapons and guidance to Iran in its dealings with the US.³⁴ The

friendship was based on the desire to counter Arab influence in the region, with the Shah placing a premium on this rather than on any loyalty to his Muslim subjects.

By the mid-1970s the Iranian-Israeli arms relationship had become so close that Israel had developed a surface-to-surface missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, specifically for export to Iran.³⁵ This collaboration between the two largest recipients of American arms naturally caused some anxiety in Washington. While the US supported the principle of Iranian-Israeli cooperation and the positive effect it could have on regional stability, it did not want to be excluded completely from discussions and needed to retain an element of control over proceedings. Vance conveyed this feeling to both Tehran and Tel Aviv in a cautionary note, stating that sensitive items would need to be reviewed by the US on a case-by-case basis and that he could foresee problems with the planned missile productions.³⁶ Carter's strategy of restraint would certainly not have been aided at this time by a commercial alliance between America's two largest weapons consumers.

Carter's predecessor Gerald Ford had started negotiations with the Iranian government over possible nuclear energy cooperation in the mid-1970s. The Shah's people, led by Dr Ahmad Etehad the Iranian atomic energy chief, worked hard to try and convince the US government to allow them to purchase a number of nuclear reactors. Although they initially made some progress with the Ford administration, talks stalled and despite Kissinger's questionable claim that the issue of proliferation did not figure in the discussions,³⁷ the sticking points remained the size and extent of the Shah's nuclear desires, and his insistence on the Iranian right to reprocessing.

The Carter approach to US-Iranian nuclear cooperation would be marked by a clear focus on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Given the unequivocal position of the incoming president, the Iranian regime must have recognised that it was unlikely to break the stalemate unless it shifted its stance. In February 1977 they did just that and Etemad declared that Iran had given up the option of a national reprocessing facility and was looking closely at other multinational options.³⁸ Despite this statement, US observers remained sceptical – as highlighted by a document in which a Pentagon staffer drew a picture of a bull next to a statement from the Shah renouncing his interest in reprocessing plutonium.³⁹ A series of significant policy statements by

Carter and the passing of the Non-proliferation Act by Congress in 1978 signified a tougher US approach toward reprocessing.⁴⁰

Midway through 1977 US-Iranian nuclear negotiations re-started and the subject was also discussed during the Shah's visit to Washington in November 1977, leading to an agreement in principle by the beginning of January 1978. The basis for US-Iranian nuclear cooperation was clearly identified by the Shah in a letter to Carter after his return visit to Tehran. He hailed the agreement for confirming "our mutual dedication" to the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and the development of nuclear energy for "peaceful purposes."⁴¹ By mid-1978 the two sides had initialled an agreement, which had not at the time been approved by Carter, stating that Iran would not reprocess spent fuel or enrich uranium supplied by the US unless the two parties agreed (the US retained a veto over this).⁴² However, the turbulent developments in Iran during the second half of 1978 scuppered any chance of closer US-Iranian nuclear cooperation and the agreement was not signed by Carter, or the Shah, who found his regime let alone his atomic programme in tatters by the end of the year. The nuclear issue does of course retain a great deal of contemporary relevance given the current impasse in the diplomatic discourse between the two nations.

Saying no to the Shah

Security matters dominated the agenda for the Shah's state visit to Washington in November 1977. As their correspondence throughout the first year of Carter's presidency had been almost exclusively related to arms transfers or other related areas, this news came as no great shock to anyone in the US government. A glance at the subjects the Shah wished to discuss gives an indication of his unrelenting pursuit of US weaponry; electronic counter measure equipment, additional F16s, follow on aircraft for the F5 and F4, and co-production of a missile system with the US.⁴³ Carter, no doubt aware of his responsibilities on both sides of the fence, blocked the F18 sale but could not cut off all assistance to Iran. He did not want a repeat of the bruising AWACS battle and tried hard to make the Shah aware that the administration must take into account domestic political realities – the task was to achieve a realistic understanding without reviving the Shah's perennial doubts.⁴⁴ As it seemed too quite regularly with the Shah, something got lost in translation and his shopping list

continued to grow, sparking questions from those who were disappointed with Carter's handling of the Iranian dilemma.

Carter's meetings with the Shah caused many to doubt his pledge on reducing American arms transfers. Wary of the danger this was causing to his presidency, the administration set out to re-establish Carter's arms reduction credentials at the beginning of 1978. In the wake of the AWACS confrontation and the fact that it was a congressional election year, there were destined to be further struggles with Congress over arms export control. Anticipating this problem, Carter announced plans to reduce arms transfer agreements by \$740 million in the fiscal year 1978, stating that a larger cut would violate commitments already in place while a smaller cut would neglect "our responsibility to set an example of restraint."⁴⁵ The pressure was now on to meet such a target.

In seeking to stick to the fiscal constraints it had imposed upon itself, the Carter administration had to accept that at times Iran would turn to other suppliers. This fact was acknowledged in a July 1978 meeting of the Policy Review Committee (PRC) which examined arms transfer policy towards Iran. The PRC proposed the sale of more equipment, including F4E aircraft, anti-radiation missiles, self-propelled howitzers and cargo carriers. It also recommended sending a team to carry out a comprehensive review of the political-military relationship between the two nations later in the year, and raised concerns over the long term stability of the Shah's government.⁴⁶ Although these deals were agreed one should not be fooled into thinking that Carter could not say 'no'.

Against a backdrop of domestic pressure from members of Congress who had the interests of their own districts and states in mind, the Carter administration refused further arms requests from the Iranian government in 1978. Congressional lobbying and pressure to complete arms or other trade deals was nothing new, but cases involving Iran were plentiful due to the vast number of requests under consideration. In August the sale of F4G 'Wild Weasel' aircraft was blocked, while the administration also refrained from selling ammunition components that might be used to make napalm bombs to the Iranian government, a decision which would have contravened US export policy, despite the efforts of two South Carolina politicians.

Veteran Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC) and Congressman John Jenrette (D-SC) both took up the case of the American Gear and Pinion Corporation in seeking to get the decision overturned. Thurmond claimed that the policy was “obviously not consistent with other military sales to Iran” citing his belief that more lethal weapons had already been supplied to Iran.⁴⁷ However, the administration stuck to its guns and upheld the decision.

In a similar case, the government came under fire from a group of cross-party senators and representatives over its decision not to provide Iran with eight Perry-class frigates, on the basis that the \$2.5 billion value of the transaction could not be accommodated under the administration’s ceiling on arms sales to Iran. The group, led by Senator Warren Magnuson (D-Washington), were critical that a sale which would have provided jobs to the depressed US shipbuilding trade had been barred not because of Iranian security needs, but instead because it did not fit within “an arbitrarily fixed dollar ceiling that conforms neither to political nor military realities.”⁴⁸ The Carter administration’s response noted that it could not control Iranian decision making on where they purchased equipment (in this case from Western European suppliers) and that the original planning and budgeting request for the frigate programme had been initiated in 1976, before Carter entered the White House and therefore prior to the ceiling.⁴⁹ It certainly appears that in the latter half of 1978 Carter’s arms export policies were applied more consistently than they had been previously; perhaps the change was linked to the continued deterioration of the Iranian political situation.

Moderating Iran’s military build up

By the autumn of 1978 it was clear that the State Department had been largely unsuccessful in its attempts to moderate Iran’s military build up; the total package of Iran’s five year plan for military purchases received by the US in September would have amounted to at least \$12 billion.⁵⁰ Yet the examples highlighted above indicate that efforts were being made to halt the Shah’s excessive build up of weaponry. At this time, the Carter administration was assessing the impact of further reductions and their possible effect on the Shah’s power. Carter was not however, as many of his critics have argued, seeking to undermine the Shah in any way. The CIA’s analysis predicted that the Shah would continue to seek large quantities of imported arms, the

majority of them from the US because of their superior quality and his belief in the symbolism of political ties between the two countries.⁵¹ The benefits for the US of this relationship were limited – little leverage could be gained from these arms transfers as replacement suppliers could easily be found elsewhere.

An extract from a memo released in 2005 provides evidence that Brzezinski believed a gradual reduction in US sales would not significantly jeopardise Iranian security or regional stability, mainly because the Shah would simply replace the US with another supplier. He did however acknowledge that even a gradual reduction would result in some political costs; most obviously there was the friction with Tehran over Carter's rationale for a restrained arms policy, and in the longer term there was also the weakening of the close US ties with the Iranian military – which as Brzezinski noted was “the most important element in a succession struggle.”⁵² While Brzezinski might have been thinking about the Iranian military's role in a possible regime change, the administration's policy was concerned with not exerting any undue influence on the Iranian political scene and letting events take their own course. Carter certainly cannot be accused of recklessly withdrawing US military support for Iran at a time when the Shah was facing domestic pressure – the Brzezinski memo shows that careful evaluations took place before decisions were made.

What the Carter administration could certainly have done better was to have communicated its policies to Tehran with rather more clarity than it did. The ambiguity of US officials at this time was not deliberate, but was instead a reflection of the administration's own confused approach to the issue. They felt the need to tell the Shah that strict new guidelines were in operation, but at the same time they were still signing off on other deals. It seems as though Carter and his advisers were stuck between a rock and a hard place; they felt compelled to complete deals with Iran that they thought would contribute to the stability of the region, while at the same time they also wanted to define some limitations on the Shah's military spending. In this respect the administration had been put in an extremely difficult position, principally due to the actions of its predecessors.

The one question that does not seem to fit into place is why Carter pushed so strongly to complete the AWACS deal. Babak Ganji alleges that the administration tried tacitly

to link the AWACS sale to the introduction of political reforms in Iran, and that the debate about the sale turned into one about the legitimacy of the Shah's rule.⁵³ There appears to be little evidence in support of such an accusation aside from Gary Sick's claim that in his May 1977 visit to Tehran, Vance promised AWACS to the Shah but failed to notify his colleagues in the State Department of this. However, Ganji himself admits that it was unlikely that Vance's colleagues did not know of the AWACS plans since the Secretary had told a House Committee on International Relations about them back in January.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Vance's account of the May meeting paints a different picture; he told the Shah that they would seek congressional approval for his AWACS request but made no promises on the matter.⁵⁵

It appears as though Carter firmly believed the recommendations of the Pentagon's experts and his advisors who argued that the advanced radar system was crucial to regional stability, even if such a justification went against his earlier criticisms of the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger triumvirate. During the election campaign Carter was the outsider looking in, with little knowledge of the nature of US involvement in Iran. Now, as President, Carter was able to comprehend the delicate situation and later admitted himself that it was not possible for the US to make excessively abrupt changes to current practices, partly because of contracts already in existence.⁵⁶ Bill Daugherty offers the view that some of the things Carter said in the 1976 presidential election were naively optimistic and that, certainly in terms of Iran, there were things that he would not be able to achieve.⁵⁷ Perhaps the only thing that Carter could have done to rectify this was to admit that he had made an error of judgement. However, such an admission, had he made it, would have doubtless resulted in a damaging political fallout for his administration.

Despite Carter's best efforts to keep a lid on the Shah's spending habits, it was the US government that would come to be vilified for Iran's excessive military expenditure. Many Iranians were deeply upset that the Pahlavi regime was squandering the country's money on military equipment and foreign policy adventures that they assumed were being dictated by Washington.⁵⁸ The idea that the Shah was making these decisions himself, often against the US government's wishes, was usually dismissed out of hand. The Shah's opposition would later hone in on Washington's supposed influence, using it to fuel anti-American feeling amongst ordinary Iranians.

Human Rights

*"We ought to be a beacon for nations who search for peace and who search for freedom, who search for individual liberty, who search for basic human rights."*⁵⁹

Jimmy Carter, 2nd Presidential Campaign Debate, 6 October 1976

The focus on human rights had been more implied rather than an overt part of Carter's 1976 presidential election campaign. Phil Wise believes human rights were not a critical part of the campaign, but does acknowledge its link with Carter's central themes of honesty and trust.⁶⁰ Yet during the campaign Carter had clearly signified his desire to repair the image and reputation of the US on the international stage. As the quote above suggests, Carter believed that the US should take the lead in establishing moral and democratic standards for other nations to follow; his administration thus sought to incorporate the promotion of basic human rights as a central part of post-Vietnam US foreign policy.

It should of course be remembered that the use of human rights as part of foreign policy was not simply a Carter phenomenon. By the mid-1970s an articulate and effective human rights lobby already existed in Congress, and was becoming increasingly influential.⁶¹ In the House of Representatives there was the pioneering work of Congressmen Donald Fraser (D-Minnesota) and Tom Harkin (D-Iowa). As chair of the House Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements, Fraser conducted a series of public hearings on US foreign policy and human rights throughout 1973; these were later followed by a report that advocated human rights becoming a key aspect of foreign policy decision-making.⁶² Carter's desire to link economic aid and weapons deals to human rights was certainly not a new idea. In the early 1970s linkage had been used to good effect, most famously when Congress adopted the Jackson-Vanik amendment as part of the 1974 Trade Act, making trade concessions to the Soviet Union contingent on a relaxation of its immigration policies for Jews and other minority religious groups.

Congressional concern was all very well, but it was not until Carter became the first chief executive to concentrate attention on the issue that human rights became more prevalent in US foreign policy. Carter's inaugural address had set the tone:

*“Because we are free, we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. Our moral sense dictates a clear-cut preference for those societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights.”*⁶³

In fact, there was actually a pressing need during the administration’s first few months to define what the Carter human rights commitment meant in terms of practical policy; it seems that there was much confusion and debate in foreign policy making circles as to what this should actually entail.

Brzezinski believes that Carter came to power determined to make a break from America’s recent past, punctuated by revelations of the abuse of power both at home and abroad, and to fill the moral vacuum that was present in international affairs. He too claims to have been convinced that “the idea of basic human rights had a powerful appeal in the emerging world” and that the previous administration’s failure to tackle the issue had resulted in the dwindling of support for America across the globe.⁶⁴ Brzezinski’s commitment to the policy has been called into question, yet he certainly appeared to be a vocal advocate; witness his response to a CIA human rights performance report of 1978, enthusing to Carter that “human rights is the genuine wave of the future.”⁶⁵ Vance also saw the importance of the concept, advocating the basic values of the Founding Fathers as one of the guiding principles of US foreign policy.⁶⁶ Under Carter’s stewardship, all branches of his administration sought to incorporate the concept into US relations with the rest of the world.

Carter started out by signing the US up to, and pushing to ratify, a number of international agreements and protocols on human rights which the US government had previously failed to endorse. These included the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Genocide Convention, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination. Dr. Jessica Tuchman Mathews, who Brzezinski had appointed to the NSC’s newly created Global Issues group, advocated using the United Nations (UN) as a forum to speak out on human rights.⁶⁷ However, as she rightly pointed out, the US government had so far been unable to do this as it was open to charges of hypocrisy – particularly in terms of civil rights and race relations. Yet the President’s intention to sign up to these conventions actually opened the door for further American actions on human rights.⁶⁸

The administration's lofty rhetoric on human rights continued. In March 1977 Carter made a speech at a town hall meeting in Massachusetts in which he expanded on the ideas set out in his inaugural address.⁶⁹ The administration also criticised repression taking place in countries such as South Africa and Czechoslovakia, while Carter also had a much publicised exchange with the high profile Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, a move which angered Brezhnev and the Moscow hierarchy. Nevertheless, there was a lot of debate about the value of words on the human rights issue, with many calling on the President to stop talking about it and start acting.⁷⁰ The difficulty of course lay in striking the right balance. Too many words or actions, especially when focused on a particular nation or regime, could provoke a potentially damaging response.

While Carter's dedication to human rights received favourable coverage and attention both domestically and internationally, the need for a coherent concept of what it all meant was also apparent. A delegation of US Congressman attended the March session of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and reported back with mixed sentiments about the Carter administration. The positive aspect was undoubtedly the news that the President's outspokenness on human rights had received widespread support, but on the downside, concerns were expressed about the misunderstandings of American intentions which resulted from the absence of a clear definition of human rights.⁷¹

Formulating a coherent policy

By the end of the administration's first quarter in office a strategy on human rights had been drawn up which outlined the general principles, factors to be considered in each case, available responses and potential risks involved. Not surprisingly, the strategy highlighted the difficulties inherent in the US applying human rights pressures to countries where it possessed significant interests; in Iran's case these were the potential damaging impact on oil supplies and the stability of the Persian Gulf region. The identifiable risks of the policy were strained relations with regime leaders and possible counterproductive results, leading to further repression or the growth of nationalistic support against foreign interference.⁷² As this analysis demonstrates, many of the issues discussed during the formulation of Carter's human rights concept were directly pertinent to the Shah's Iran.

The grey area of 'special circumstances' – what questions the US government should consider before devising its policy to any particular country – most certainly applied to Iran. The process of weighing up the degree and nature of other US interests in a country formed part of a guidance checklist established by the administration.⁷³ Human rights may have been fundamental to Carter's vision of US foreign policy but at times it would have to take a back seat as strategic realities took precedence. This is why Iranian arms transfers continued to take place; technically they should not have done because Iran did not meet the requirements of the International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act of 1976, which specified that the US should not provide security assistance to any country consistently violating internationally recognised human rights.

It should be remembered that the prime targets of Carter's human rights platform were undoubtedly the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc satellite states. It was an effective way of putting pressure on the Soviets indirectly – in the sense that it was unlikely to result in a nuclear stand-off. It was never intended as a tool for undermining regional minders such as the Shah; on the contrary, Iran promised to be one of the major stumbling blocks for such a policy. Here was a state that fitted most of the criteria that demanded a US response, but at the same time it remained one of the twin pillars of US policy in the Middle East.

Like other aspects of Carter's foreign policy, human rights was not exempt from some of the institutional turf wars that hampered the administration. Much in the same way as they would later clash over US policy towards Iran, the State Department and the NSC were often on different wavelengths in their approach to human rights policies. Within the State Department itself internal frictions were also prevalent. There was dissatisfaction in some quarters with Carter's appointment of Patricia Derian as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights. Derian was a civil rights leader from Mississippi without foreign affairs experience and had a staff that included 'outsiders'; this led to resentment and resistance from career officers at State, who were concerned about what impact the new human rights focus might have on US relations in their region.⁷⁴ Derian's leadership of the Human Rights Bureau and the

lack of clarity about just how far the president's commitment on the issue extended, created bureaucratic problems right from the start.

By the summer of 1978 those Brzezinski had tasked with tackling human rights in the NSC had grown increasingly frustrated by the dominance of the State Department in this field. In April 1977, having determined the detail of its human rights agenda, the administration established an interagency group, headed by Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, to examine the relevant issues. Jessica Tuchman Mathews, the NSC lead on human rights, charged that while the Christopher Committee had been created as an interagency group, Christopher himself was increasingly using it purely in an "advisory capacity, making all the decisions himself."⁷⁵ Such disagreements could be seen as a precursor to the differences between Vance and Brzezinski that would develop as events in Iran unfolded in 1978 and 1979.

The NSC's protestations about State Department dominance in this field were not aimed at the Human Rights Bureau, which continued to fight its own battles internally with the regional bureau bosses. One critical issue was military assistance, an area which Derian did not have control over despite her best efforts. Instead it was the job of the Christopher Group to adjudicate, on a case-by-case basis, private arms sales to countries where the State Department recognised violations of human rights had taken place.⁷⁶ Such an approach allowed the administration a degree of flexibility, which they certainly needed in dealing with states like Iran. Had Derian been able to assert her authority over this issue then the US-Iranian arms relationship would have looked very different; yes the policy was inconsistent, but the inconsistency was judged to be a strategic necessity given the wider Cold War context.

Despite the bureaucratic difficulties, Carter and his advisers recognised the broad base of both domestic and international support that existed for the US in terms of its commitment to human rights. In December 1977 both Brzezinski and Carter's key advisor Hamilton Jordan emphasised the need for the administration to be more visible and active on human rights issues. Brzezinski outlined several initiatives the US government could take, such as creating a Human Rights foundation, while Jordan stressed the political benefits that it could bring for the administration:

*"Of our numerous foreign policy initiatives, it is the only one that has a broad base of support among the American people and is not considered 'liberal'. With Panama and SALT II ahead of us, we need the broad based, non-ideological support for our foreign policy that human rights provides."*⁷⁷

Human rights were clearly a central tenet of Carter policy and not merely a publicity-seeking gimmick. Public support on this issue was crucial if Carter was to achieve some of his more controversial foreign policy objectives, most notably the Panama Canal treaties which faced significant domestic opposition in the US.

Carter's immediate impact on Iran

The Shah had taken the first tentative steps towards loosening the shackles on Iranian society well before Carter had even triumphed in the 1976 election. In mid 1976 the regime began releasing political prisoners, allowing greater freedom of speech, and easing other aspects of the reactionary police state it had created.⁷⁸ The US government was aware that the Shah had allowed prisoners who had allegedly been killed or tortured to be interviewed by journalists; that trials were being held in public rather than behind closed doors; and that the International Committee of the Red Cross had completed an inspection of Iranian prisons.⁷⁹ Many believe that this change of heart and relaxation of state authority was down to the Shah's ill health – unbeknown to the world he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a few years earlier – and a growing concern with the future of his dynasty. With his close links to the US the Shah was undoubtedly an interested observer of the presidential election, but it is very unlikely that he was pre-empting in anyway Carter's eventual victory; on the contrary, he would have been hoping for his close friend Gerald Ford to be re-elected. The Shah was particularly concerned with having another Democrat in the White House and while he waited to discover what Carter was really like following the election, his regime focused its attention on publicising the policies it had introduced in the previous year.⁸⁰

Iranian perceptions of Carter were such that the Shah might well have been tempted to accelerate the process of change following the 1976 presidential election result. While Carter can hardly be blamed for how he was perceived, unfortunately for his administration what mattered in Iran was not what was actually happening, but what the Iranians believed was happening.⁸¹ Many Iranians thus linked the relaxing of the Shah's attitude to Carter's election and Vance's visit in May; the assumption being

that Carter had exerted his influence for the benefit of the Iranian people. Developments during the first few months of 1977 appeared to back up such views as the Shah pardoned prisoners who had been tried by military courts and released a total of over 200 political prisoners; Brzezinski was heartened by the list of global human rights improvements and asserted that Carter was having an impact.⁸²

Yet any 'successes' in terms of the Shah relaxing his tight grip on Iranian society were achieved without a clearly defined strategy on the US part, but rather through the administration's continued pronouncements on the subject. The pressure that was perhaps expected by the Shah never came about, for a number of different reasons. Firstly, as we have seen, the Carter administration did not possess a clear idea of what exactly its human rights policy might entail (at least for the first few months of 1977). Then there was the reluctance to jeopardise regional stability by endangering the Shah's position – hence the continuation of the 'twin pillar' strategy. In addition, the US was facing a significant crisis in terms of oil supplies and prices. As an influential figure in OPEC, the Shah's support was vital if Carter was to be successful in securing a reduction in oil prices.

Understanding and awareness in Washington

The question of just how aware the Carter administration was about some of the realities on the ground in Iran is an interesting one. What they knew at the time doubtless shaped how they responded or acted towards Iran, particularly when it came to their meetings with the Shah. The evidence suggests, as do Carter's own recollections, that the US government was reasonably well informed as to the regime's domestic excesses. This makes Carter's infamous 'Island of Stability' toast during his New Year's Eve 1977 stopover in Tehran even more difficult to fathom; publicly aligning himself so closely with the Shah when he was all too aware that social unrest was growing proved to be Carter's most damaging mistake.

A CIA report from April 1977 highlighted concerns over the treatment of political prisoners, the use of torture and the number of executions taking place. It also pointed to the extension of SAVAK's activities from outside Iranian borders to countries in which Iranian citizens were residing.⁸³ Other organisations such as Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists had also published reports

which highlighted various issues concerning political prisoners, freedom of the press and the justice system. In comparing freedoms in Iran to other nations it was clear that the Shah's regime ranked at the lower end of the table. Freedom House, an organisation that carried out an annual comparative survey of countries across the globe, ranked Iran as a 6 for both political and civil rights on a scale of 1-7 with 7 being the lowest (compared to the US which was a 1 for both).⁸⁴

In addition to the reports of US intelligence agencies and the various different international organisations, the Carter administration also received a flood of correspondence both from Iranian citizens and other interested parties concerned with the situation in Iran. Many dissidents both within Iran and outside expressed their concerns to the US government during 1977 and 1978. These were very often pleas for assistance or appeals to the US government asking them to reconsider their stance towards the Shah. The response from Washington typically comprised of acknowledgement of the letters, but there was an obvious reluctance to intervene in specific cases.

One man who was seemingly aware of the unique challenge Iran presented to the administration's human rights agenda was Donald Fraser. In his questioning of Charles Naas before the House subcommittee on International Organizations in October 1977, Fraser wanted to find out about the State Department's way of addressing human rights issues to ensure it was not merely a 'tag-on' interest. He accurately noted that "in Iran we have them all [interests and problems] in one place"; it was a friendly and important country from a security and arms standpoint, yet it had a history of human rights violations. Iran thus symbolised the major challenges for this strand of US policy.⁸⁵

By November 1977 and his first meeting with the Shah, Carter would have been aware that his Iranian counterpart faced some challenges in terms of dealing with social and political unrest. Prior to the Shah's November visit, Carter had also received a letter from Martin Ennals, the Secretary General of Amnesty International, requesting that he raise the issue of human rights during the discussions. The Amnesty letter provided a detailed assessment of the success, or lack thereof, of recent legal reforms and on some of the continuing problems in Iranian society, namely

allegations of torture and claims that political activists were being shot in the street.⁸⁶ The response from the US Embassy in Tehran, which Carter's advisers concurred with, rather aptly sums up the approach of the administration – instead of condemning the Shah for failing to act on human rights issues, they sought to offer tacit encouragement for any positive actions he did take:

*“There has been steady progress towards liberalization in Iran, and US public, especially governmental, comments ought to be made in a way best designed to insure (that the) GOI keeps heading down the right path.”*⁸⁷

Increasing unrest and the Shah's response

Following the demonstrations in Washington to coincide with the Shah's November visit, Iran was beset with further anti-government protests which continued into 1978. Anticipating questions about US human rights policy in Iran prior to the president's return meeting with the Shah, US officials prepared an assessment of the situation on the ground. Gary Sick, the NSC's authority on Iran, briefed Brzezinski based on reporting from the embassy. He outlined a number of alarming episodes, the majority of which involved the Shah's forces cracking down on student demonstrations – riot police intimidating protesting students; rally and meetings of opposition groups being broken up by mobs arriving in buses; and the Iranian press providing misleading descriptions of such events.⁸⁸ All this pointed to the fact that the Shah, embarrassed by the disturbances that had greeted him in Washington, had sought to re-establish order in a way that ran contrary to his modernisation efforts of the previous months.

Once again the response of the US government followed the course that it had established in replying to correspondence from various parties expressing their fears over conditions in Iran. Sick believed that there was no reason for the administration to “duck the issue” and advocated praising the efforts to liberalise the political process over the past year, suggesting a statement along the lines of... “We hope that these latest disturbing events will not interrupt the significant process which has been made on the human rights front.”⁸⁹ Carter and his team no doubt understood that they were likely to be quizzed on how their human rights policy was being applied in scenarios like that in Iran. The administration recognised that the repressive tactics adopted by the Shah's authorities were not conducive to the development of a responsible opposition,⁹⁰ yet there was little the US could do, or was willing to do, about this.

Ultimately, Carter left the Iranians to themselves in order to determine solutions to their own internal problems.

A February 1979 CIA report, which was in part based on a report from the previous year, noted how 1978 was marked by serious and often violent demonstrations of popular discontent that had seriously eroded the authority of the Iranian government.⁹¹ It demonstrates the mixed signals being sent out to ordinary Iranian citizens in 1978 – on the one hand the Shah, perhaps in a desperate attempt to cling onto power, announced a series of measures aimed at liberalisation, yet at the same time the regime's authorities continued to use excessive methods to curb demonstrations. For example, reforms to offer increased judicial protection, lift censorship and permit more political expression, and the announcement that free parliamentary elections would be held in 1979, were cancelled out by the use of extreme violence on unarmed protesters, arbitrary arrests, and the imposition of martial law in September 1978.⁹² Public debate and political expression was apparently legal yet it was still being suppressed by the authorities. By the time the findings of this particular report were released the US government was only all too aware of the deep divisions within Iranian politics and society.

How much pressure was actually put on Iran?

The question of how much pressure the Carter administration placed on the Shah's regime to modernise is one that is continually debated. The theory that Carter imposed American liberal principles on the Shah, who only began reforming the Iranian political system as a response to Carter's human rights policy, ultimately resulting in his downfall, gained much support in the US in the years immediately following the crisis. Republicans and neoconservatives held that Carter's human rights agenda represented a major departure from previous US policy towards Iran. Jeane Kirkpatrick, a Democrat who later switched parties to take a role in the Reagan administration, was one of Carter's fiercest critics. She published a famous article entitled 'Dictatorships and Double Standards' (1979) in which she charged that Carter's human rights policies had resulted in the loss of Iran and Nicaragua.⁹³ Joshua Muravchik (1986) offers further vociferous criticism of Carter's human rights policy in which he points to the 1977 reforms as evidence that the Shah was feeling the pressure of Carter's non-stop human rights rhetoric. Donald Spencer (1988) sums up

his disparaging assessment of Carter's diplomacy with the assertion that "never previously in US history had an administration acted so decisively or so successfully to subvert a major strategic and political ally."⁹⁴

The above arguments are met with far more convincing claims to the contrary. The available evidence suggests that the true nature and extent of US pressure on the Shah appears to have been largely overplayed. James Bill and Barry Rubin both subscribe to this view, with Rubin believing that there are no facts to support accusations that Washington forced the Shah to soften his regime.⁹⁵ Christos Ioannides backs this up, arguing that any significant policy changes towards Iran under Carter should have been reflected in the diplomatic exchanges between Washington and Tehran; this was not apparent from the captured Embassy documents,⁹⁶ nor from any of the more recently released documents that I have examined.

The accounts of Vance and Carter's talks with the Shah show that the human rights issue was raised but only in a sensitive and discreet manner. The administration's policy towards Iran was fairly evident to anyone watching its actions; as Kenneth Pollack saw it, Vance barely mentioned human rights in the May meeting, but more tellingly one of his party told reporters that the US was very pleased with reforms Iran was already making.⁹⁷ Furthermore, Henry Precht, the State Department's Iran Desk Officer, asserts that it was Carter's wish not to press the Shah on human rights and that essentially it was to be "business as usual" as far as US policy towards Iran was concerned.⁹⁸

The suggestion that there was a coordinated attempt from within the US government to use human rights policies to undermine the Shah can also be discounted. Donald Spencer charges that human rights enthusiasts within the Carter team – such as Patricia Derian at State, David Aaron and Jessica Tuchman Matthews at the NSC – pushed a radical pace of change in Iran and sought "complete and immediate capitulation by the Shah to their own perception of what Iran should become."⁹⁹ Michael Ledeen and William Lewis make similar arguments concerning the State Department's human rights agenda, yet their claims have been dismissed as a "fairytale" by Stephen Cohen, the State Department official responsible for human rights

policy towards Iran, who recalls that State lost all the battles to apply such human rights pressures on the Shah.¹⁰⁰

On the 6 December 1978, as the US government was belatedly awakening to the possibility that the Shah's regime might not survive, Brzezinski faced a White House briefing session on human rights policy. The inevitable focus of the media's questions was likely to be the role of Carter's human rights policy; had it pushed Iran into a process of modernisation which had subsequently unleashed the forces that threatened the Shah and American interests in the region? Not surprisingly Brzezinski was prepared to offer answers that deflected attention from the role of the US and placed the emphasis back on the domestic tensions in Iran. As the reaction to the Amnesty International letter demonstrates, the Carter administration was not seeking to exert undue pressure or influence on the Shah's regime. The key was to explain how the US had been supportive of the Shah without ever seeking to use any kind of pressure to influence the internal decision-making of the Iranian government; one suggested response was as follows:

*"It is clear that the current tensions in Iran are of a domestic nature that could not derive from the public posture of the United States or any other foreign government on human rights questions."*¹⁰¹

The sentiment expressed in this statement is essentially accurate – the problems in Iran were of the Shah's own making and had little to do with American policy in a practical sense. As Ioannides rightly observes, the revolution would have taken place sooner or later regardless of Carter's human rights policy.¹⁰²

What is open to question though is Carter's influence in terms of his perception amongst the Iranian people. During his election campaign and in the initial months of his presidency, Carter's positive pronouncements on human rights, while never directly targeted against the Shah, were enough to convince many that he would come to their aid. It appeared, to the Iranian public at least, that the Shah was bowing to pressure from Washington as he introduced limited reforms and raised expectations amongst the Iranian middle classes.¹⁰³ This explains why Carter's subsequent choice of words and public flattery of the Shah in his Tehran toast would go on to cause such serious consternation and anger amongst many Iranians.

How did Carter's actions fit with his stated policy?

All this begs the question of whether the Carter administration made the Shah's Iran exempt from its human rights focus. Iran was certainly given special treatment, though not a blanket exemption, even though it could be argued that this was one born out of necessity due to the circumstances – a staunch US ally for decades, one of the major buyers of US weapons, and America's strategic outpost in the volatile Middle East region. As noted previously, the main target of the policy was the Soviet Union and the Eastern European states but it was also applied to other areas of the globe. For example, the regime in South Korea, which was an American ally, was criticised for its repression of political dissent; while more tangible actions – including the suspension of military or economic aid – were taken as protests against human rights practices in Central and South American countries, including Chile, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.¹⁰⁴

The Shah's fall has often been compared to the collapse of Anastasio Somoza's regime in Nicaragua in 1979. There were similarities between the two situations, namely that both were violently suppressing opposition to their rule. Somoza was being challenged by the Sandinista Front, socialists with backing from Cuba and the Soviet Union, yet despite this seemingly unfavourable alternative Carter withdrew US support because of gross human rights violations. The Shah's case was, from the American point of view, a fundamentally different one. US interests in Iran were unmistakably tied to the fate of the Shah and there was a genuine fear in Washington about the ramifications if he were to be toppled. The nature of the opposition was different too; there were a number of groups battling for influence in Iran and there was no telling who or what would emerge to fill the power vacuum vacated by the Shah.

Other nations that were the subject of Carter's human rights drive included South Africa, Rhodesia and Uganda. Trade embargoes were imposed on Ian Smith's Rhodesia and Idi Amin's Uganda (although the Uganda embargo was driven by the US Congress), while arms exports and the delivery of police equipment was banned to a South African nation in the grip of its apartheid struggle.¹⁰⁵ In a sense, these states provided softer targets for Carter's human rights policies because, unlike Iran, they were not critical to US regional security.

In his memoirs, Brzezinski summarises what he believes to be the major successes of the administration's human rights actions whilst also admitting that they were not able to overcome some of the contradictions between these policies and their principal strategic aims.¹⁰⁶ In February 1977, Brzezinski approved an NSC initiative to restrict arms transfers to those glaring human rights violators, a move which was received well by Congress; a similar rationale was behind the later reductions in military training allocations which affected Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.¹⁰⁷ A state where the US found its human rights policy caused it some difficulty, in much the same way as in the case of Iran, was South Korea. The regime in Seoul was important to US security and there was a desire to support its independence and freedom from the neighbouring communist regime in the North. However, South Korea's disregard for civil liberties and political expression made it difficult for the US government to justify its support publicly. As Brzezinski noted, American influence on these issues was greater with weak and isolated nations than with those with whom they shared vital security interests;¹⁰⁸ interestingly enough Brzezinski does not mention Iran at all in this section of his memoirs, which is perhaps further confirmation of its exemption from this strand of US policy.

Gaddis Smith argues that Carter and his team could not come to terms with what he describes as the 'Wilsonian contradiction'; pledging to respect the rights of individual nations yet at the same time insisting that they conform to a way of life that imitates American ideals.¹⁰⁹ The inconsistency of the administration's application of its human rights strategy could conceivably be seen as a negative and a failing on Carter's part.¹¹⁰ Yet the case-by-case pragmatism employed by Carter and his foreign policy makers, while not in keeping with the President's personal sense of morality, was a necessary approach in the context of the global Cold War. Even the harshest Carter critic can surely admit that it would have been foolhardy and dangerous to apply these standards and exert undue influence without first calculating the potential strategic impact.

Hard as the Iranian regime tried it could not keep its social problems hidden from the eyes of the watching international community. Yet there was little that those on the outside looking in could do to improve the situation. Despite Carter's best intentions,

his administration was realistic enough to recognise that there were limitations on what they could achieve; the hope was more so that the US could provide some sort of positive influence on the Shah and his cronies. It appeared to be having the desired effect in the first year; the State Department reported on the eve of the Shah's arrival in Washington that he had acted more rapidly on human rights than any other leader in a similar position. Brzezinski, always keen to emphasise the positives of the administration's policy, attributed this to the intensification of US statements on human rights.¹¹¹

Ultimately the close relations between successive US administrations and the Shah, coupled with key strategic considerations, left Carter in a difficult position with limited choices. There appears to have been a tacit recognition that Iran be treated as a 'special case' where the administration would have to tread more carefully in terms of applying its human rights agenda than it did with many other despots. This did not mean that Carter turned a blind eye; he still sought to have a positive influence on the Shah but not at the risk of endangering his increasing fragile political position. Carter's approach was certainly not a coordinated attempt to undermine the Shah as alleged by some of his detractors, particularly as general strategy towards Iran remained similar to that of the previous Ford administration. Granted Carter did make a serious error of judgement when he offered effusive praise for the Shah's leadership in the New Year's Eve 1977 toast, yet these words alone were not to blame for the 'loss' of Iran. Carter promoted human rights and democracy in Iran sensitively and responsibly, ultimately allowing the Iranian people to determine their own future, even if that meant an endgame that was less favourable for the US. His belief in moral principle over the use of power was crucial in preventing a US military intervention – the so called 'iron fist' solution favoured by Brzezinski and others in the US government.

The Carter administration's approach was understandable when placed in the context of what was at stake in Iran given the extent of the historical American commitment to the Shah. Carter unquestionably possessed a genuine desire to use morality and human rights as constructive tools of US foreign policy. However, such tools were not designed to be used in Iran, where Carter quickly came to realise that human rights had to give way to overriding geopolitical, economic and energy concerns.¹¹² The

chapter of Brzezinski's memoirs in which human rights is discussed is called "Good Intentions at High Cost"; this provides both a good indication of his personal feelings on the matter, and a succinct summary of Carter's human rights policy towards Iran.

The shift in US foreign policy in the post-Vietnam era served to expose the inherent contradiction between a policy based on moral values and the concept of Cold War containment. As Carter found out, it was not always possible to criticise leaders whose regimes, no matter how distasteful, were a vital part of US regional security. Policies or actions deemed to be 'soft' on the Soviet threat were invariably attacked by hard line advocates of containment, who were gaining in political clout as the 1970s progressed. The consequences of this contradiction were strongly felt in Iran which had been, to use Carter's much maligned phrase, an "island of stability" as far as US interests were concerned for many years beforehand. But the Shah's regime was not as stable as it appeared on the surface and American policy-makers were seemingly oblivious to the social and political challenges facing him. This knowledge gap was to severely hamper the Carter administration as the events of the Iranian revolution unfolded in 1978.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

¹ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 120-121.

² Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 317.

³ April Carter, *Success and Failure in Arms Control Negotiations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) p. 285. Warnke later resigned the post in October 1978, although he had made it clear to Carter when he took on the role that he would not be able to serve the full four-year term.

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Limited Intelligence: The Onset of the Iranian Revolution

“We have got to have a good intelligence system in order to protect the security of our country... And if we should ever be in danger in a time of crisis, it’s too late to build up an adequate intelligence community.”¹

President Jimmy Carter, 24 February 1977

“[It] is essential that I and those who aid me in the formulation of our nation’s foreign policy make our decisions on the basis of accurate information about the capabilities and intentions of other countries and of forces that shape world events.”²

President Jimmy Carter, 14 October 1980

The foreign policy choices and subsequent responses of any modern-day government are without question shaped by the information available at the time to its decision makers. Jimmy Carter’s handling of Iran in the late 1970s was certainly no different and it has since raised, and continues to raise, numerous questions regarding the role of intelligence in the decision-making process. There has been almost unanimous agreement amongst all those involved in the Iran crisis, both at the time and in the years since, that the intelligence reaching Carter and the foreign policy establishment was very poor; an assessment which was echoed by the Senate’s Select Committee on Intelligence in 1980.³ What were the reasons behind the intelligence failure then? Was it a result of the Carter administration’s own failings and ill-fated reforms of the intelligence services or were other considerations, such as the focus on signals intelligence sites the US possessed in north-eastern Iran, more important?

This chapter seeks to examine why the US government had difficulty in monitoring the build up to what very quickly became a turbulent and unpredictable situation in Iran. The intelligence community inevitably comes under the spotlight, with particular focus on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), yet intelligence gathering was not the sole source of information available to Washington and there are other indicators which require consideration – including the growing American economic and commercial involvement in Iran. There is also the debate about the Carter administration’s own attitude towards intelligence, particularly in the post-Watergate era. The two quotes used above indicate that Carter recognised the consequences of poor intelligence on US security interests; note that the first quote, which came at the

beginning of his presidency, stressed that intelligence could not be built up after the event but that it had to be operational in preparation for a crisis. This is a very pertinent observation, certainly when it is applied to Iran during this period.

In scrutinising the US intelligence community's activities in Iran it is also important to remember the limitations of intelligence and not to overstate what it can achieve. The simple point to make here is that all the intelligence in the world, had it been gathered and analysed effectively, would not have prevented the Iranian revolution taking place – by their very definition revolutions are always unpredictable. However, a more successful intelligence effort would certainly have better prepared the Carter administration for the upheaval and would likely have informed some of their responses and strategies in the post-revolutionary months.

The shortcomings of US intelligence in Iran have been widely chronicled, but what does an intelligence failure actually mean? In straightforward terms it is when there is a disparity between the estimates of what is likely to happen and what later information reveals as the reality. Robert Jervis, an academic who was brought in by the CIA in the immediate aftermath of the revolution to write a report assessing its performance in Iran, notes that it is imperative to separate collection from analysis; what can be reasonably expected from analysis depends on the accuracy of the information available at the time. Therefore intelligence failure should be judged on “whether the analysts made good use of the information at hand.”⁴ As we shall see, information suggesting the political, social, and economic instability of the Shah's regime did exist but the analysis of it was flawed for a variety of reasons and it took the US intelligence agencies a long time to wake up to the realities of the Shah's impending fate in 1978. Yet responsibility for this cannot be heaped on the Carter administration alone. Too much emphasis has been placed on the significance of institutional reforms and personnel reductions, changes which were actually established patterns rather than radical Carter-era departures.

During the 1976 presidential campaign, Carter and his close advisors demonstrated a degree of naivety in some of the statements they made regarding the intelligence community – as they had done when discussing the need to curb US arms sales. Naturally the Carter campaign wanted to tap into the public distrust of the CIA that

was prevalent at the time. However, in pledging to impose a new standard of post-Vietnam, post-Watergate morality and transparency in terms of the agency's covert operations, Carter was making a promise he simply could not keep unless he wanted to seriously constrain covert intelligence activities.⁵ Whilst on the campaign trail in 1976, Carter once branded the CIA as a "disgrace" and pledged that when the agency made a mistake he would call a press conference and tell the American people about it.⁶ This was one promise that Carter would not be able to keep during his tenure as President.

Carter and the CIA

The Carter administration got off to a rocky start in its relationship with the CIA. The strategy for reform was based around the idea of making the agency more accountable and the newly appointed Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) needed to reflect this goal. Carter's initial nominee for the position was Ted Sorensen, former special counsel and advisor to President John F. Kennedy. Sorensen's nomination proved very controversial and caused a vocal rebellion in the ranks of the clandestine service.⁷ Sorensen was perceived as being too liberal for the role and was dogged by allegations that he was a conscientious objector. The confirmation process pitched the administration into its first battle against a Democratic controlled Senate, which should not have presented too many difficulties for a Democrat in the White House. But Sorensen's eventual withdrawal, before a Senate vote had even taken place, proved to be an early indication of the congressional difficulties to come for the Carter administration.

Carter's choice of Sorensen was also significant for another reason; the debate over the politicisation of the CIA. This was something which Gerald Ford had been accused of at the beginning of 1976 when he replaced DCI William Colby, a career intelligence man, with future US president George H W Bush, who had already been active in Republican politics having served in the House of Representatives among other roles. Carter would have been aware that not since Eisenhower's appointment of Allen Dulles in 1953 had an incoming President appointed a new DCI – although Kennedy did remove Dulles after the Bay of Pigs fiasco during his first year in office. Prior to his election, Carter had met with DCI Bush and other CIA officials on a number of occasions when he received intelligence briefings during the campaign; in

fact, Carter distinguished himself in the eyes of CIA officials by becoming the first presidential hopeful to request such briefings, in June 1976, before even receiving his party's nomination.⁸ Bush, in effect, made Carter's decision for him by tendering his resignation during a phone conversation in the days following Carter's election victory, a decision that was made public at the end of November, and caused much press speculation about the nature of their meetings and a possible political dimension to the discussions. It was not surprising then that Carter's unexpected choice of Sorenson, a prominent Democrat without any apparent military or intelligence background, left him open to criticism that he was trying to politicise the CIA.

Carter's second choice for DCI was his former Naval Academy classmate, Admiral Stansfield Turner. It was a selection that could not be questioned on political grounds as Turner had no previous political allegiances, but he was certainly an advocate of greater transparency and public accountability in intelligence activities. Carter was effusive in his praise of Turner and he hoped that bringing in an intelligence outsider would help to restore the tattered reputation of the CIA. It initially looked as if Turner would become a key figure in the administration's policy-making but he soon ran into a number of difficulties, including the resentment of those within the CIA who felt he did not deserve the post.⁹

What Turner did possess, early on at least, was strong backing from the president for a series of reforms of the agency. These included developing new oversight procedures, embarking on a substantial management restructure, and switching from reliance on human intelligence to a greater emphasis on signals and technical intelligence. It was Carter who instructed the new DCI to bring the entire intelligence community – not just the CIA, but the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the National Security Agency (NSA), Army, Navy and Air Force intelligence – much closer together, making it more responsive to the needs of the White House. However, Carter stopped short of granting the DCI full control over all intelligence agencies – as requested by Turner.¹⁰ Carter recognised the need for multiple sources of information and the potential danger of concentrating too much power at the centre of the intelligence community, therefore damaging the accuracy and the efficiency of US intelligence reporting.

Not surprisingly, some of these initiatives made Turner unpopular amongst the intelligence professionals. A recently released memo from the Carter Library indicates that Brzezinski and David Aaron, the two top men at the NSC, were aware of the potential problems Turner's proposals for reorganisation of the CIA could pose. Aaron described the changes as "a major departure", citing concerns about the weakening of the agency with powers being centralised in the office of the DCI, and the continued demoralisation of the professional intelligence corps as key issues; "A reorganisation like this could in effect reduce the CIA to operatives and support types."¹¹ Brzezinski and Aaron sought to raise the issue with Vice President Walter Mondale before speaking to Carter. Mondale had been tasked with the job of reforming the agency and was seemingly well suited to the role having been an ardent critic of US intelligence on the Church Committee – the Senate's Select Committee which examined the legality of US intelligence activities. Aaron had previously worked as an aide to Mondale and therefore enjoyed a close working relationship with the Vice President.

The 'Halloween Massacre'

Just over a month later at the end of October 1977, Turner fired around 800 experienced employees from the CIA's Directorate of Operations, the branch responsible for providing human intelligence reporting to Washington, in what became known in intelligence circles as the 'Halloween Massacre'. The changes were principally attributed to budget cuts but also reflected a change of emphasis from paramilitary action, of the type carried out by the Agency in Laos during the 1960s and 1970s, to intelligence collection and analysis.¹² Brzezinski has since admitted that this reduction in staffing "probably affected" the CIA's ability to acquire intelligence,¹³ a viewpoint that would seem to fit with the concerned nature of the Aaron memo from the time.

In terms of its relations with the CIA, the Carter administration is widely remembered for the 'Halloween Massacre', but the significance of the personnel purge and other CIA reforms under Turner's stewardship to the intelligence operations taking place in Iran is not necessarily clear. Some of the changes that were affecting CIA operations had already been initiated by previous Republican administrations. For example, President Ford's Executive Order 11905, unveiled in February 1976, limited the

functions of intelligence and famously banned assassinations.¹⁴ When Carter issued Executive Order 12036 in January 1978, it reaffirmed much of the groundwork laid in Ford's earlier EO, such as the prohibition of assassinations and moves towards greater oversight and accountability. Turner has also been criticised for weakening the Army Special Forces, the CIA's partner in undertaking paramilitary action, yet this process actually began back in the early 1970s under Nixon during the Vietnam era.¹⁵

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Executive Order 12036 was the centralisation of power in the office of the DCI, effectively giving the post holder far greater influence over the management of the intelligence community. A month prior to the release of the EO, a report appeared in *The New York Times* claiming that officials within the administration were concerned that many issues would be left unresolved by the changes. In particular, it focused on the priorities and use of the most sophisticated intelligence-gathering equipment, such as reconnaissance satellites and electronic listening devices – some of which were situated in Iran. The report also pointed to an early CIA failing under Carter; its failure to predict a possible nuclear test by South Africa in August 1977 – embarrassingly for the US government they were informed about the developments, which had been detected by Soviet satellites, by the Kremlin.¹⁶ The South African incident doubtless dented Carter's already fragile confidence in the effectiveness of the CIA and the wider intelligence community.

A recently released NSC memo shows that another member of the administration also had concerns about the CIA reorganisation and recognised the need for effective intelligence stemming from several different sources. Henry Owen was part of Brzezinski's NSC staff and had special responsibility for economic summits, yet in the summer of 1977 he felt compelled to weigh in on press speculation about Carter's reorganisation of the intelligence community. Owen reminded Brzezinski about some of the great American intelligence mistakes of the past and recommended that they should "look to several sources of intelligence advice"; he also warned that "If you are dependent on only one source of estimating... you might wake up one morning and find yourself the victim of error that you had been unable to detect."¹⁷ Owen's warning essentially sums up the beginnings of the Iranian revolution; US decision makers were caught off-guard by events due to a lack of effective intelligence. However, the ineffectiveness of the reporting was not solely caused by reforms of the

CIA. Other factors, such as budgets cuts at the State Department, the Soviet-centric focus of the CIA and its relations with Iran's secret police, SAVAK, and the established belief throughout the US foreign policy establishment that the Shah remained the only option they could support, all contributed.

Initial estimates

The picture of the Shah's Iran painted by American intelligence agencies at the beginning of 1977 was essentially a positive one. While there was an acknowledgement of some of the regime's excesses being committed by SAVAK there were also confident predictions about the political stability of the Shah's leadership. For example, in 1977 the CIA produced a report entitled "Iran in the 1980s" which concluded that "the Shah will be an active participant in Iranian life well into the 1980s" and "there will be no radical change in Iranian political behaviour in the near future."¹⁸ Assessments of this nature would doubtless have led the key decision makers in the Carter administration to presume that there was little danger of significant political upheaval in Iran at this time. It is therefore not surprising that intelligence on Iran failed to find much of an audience in Washington.¹⁹ While there were certainly aspects of the military-political relationship which needed addressing, such as the excessive arms sales facilitated by the previous Republican administrations, there were no apparent alarm bells ringing for the incoming administration – a key strategic ally in the Middle East appeared stable and was far from a foreign policy priority during the early months of Carter's presidency.

Aside from the intelligence and political reports coming out of Iran, there were other indicators that the US government could have potentially used to determine the stability of the Shah's regime. The steady build-up of American business interests and the growing presence of American citizens in Iran by the mid-late 1970s, particularly in the nation's capital Tehran, certainly suggested a stable pro-Western nation that was seen by the American people as a strong US ally and a good investment opportunity. The US-Iranian commercial relationship had grown out of the political and military cooperation fostered by Nixon-Kissinger-Ford. As the gold rush began and the contracts increased, so the American presence expanded rapidly – between 1970 and 1978 the number of Americans living in Iran increased from fewer than 8,000 to nearly 50,000.²⁰ Internationally established American brands like the Ford

Motor Company were looking to invest in Iran; in January 1978 Henry Ford II wrote to President Carter expressing hope that the company “will be able to make a positive contribution to Iran’s development process and, by so doing, contribute to our own country’s national interests.”²¹ In addition to the thriving business relationships, there were signs of improvement in other aspects of Iranian society. News of such developments, like for example a proposed new medical centre in Tehran based on US and European models,²² reached Carter in Washington and at least suggested the Shah possessed a degree of commitment to modernisation, whether genuine or otherwise.

That is not to say that all the signs coming out of Iran were one-hundred percent positive. The White House also received correspondence from Iranian dissidents, many of who were living in exile, who sought to alert Washington to the regime’s excesses. The State Department and the NSC chose to see these as isolated cases and not as signs which indicated the existence of underlying problems in Iran – which of course they were. The problem was that the party line in Iran was well established and in some senses unchallengeable as the intelligence reports and all the signs from the embassy in Tehran continued to remain optimistic about the future prospects of the Shah’s regime.

Intelligence failings on the ground in Iran

It must be remembered that the CIA was not the only agency responsible for providing information to Washington regarding the activities taking place in Iran; the State Department had an equally, if not more, important role to play on the frontline. In the early 1970s the US had its embassy, a twenty-seven acre complex in the centre of Iran’s capital city Tehran, as well as consulates in four other cities; Isfahan, Mashad, Shiraz, and Tabriz. However, the State Department, much like the CIA and other government agencies, was not immune from the effects of budget cuts. In the 1970s a number of cost-cutting programmes at State required embassies around the world to reduce their staffs. This led to the number of officers in the political section in the Tehran embassy being reduced, and the consulates in Isfahan and Mashad being closed.²³ In retrospect, it is perhaps understandable that the cuts were made in Iran, for the simple reason that internal political matters were not deemed to be of any great concern to the US because the situation appeared stable.

It certainly appears as though the US government did not feel like it needed to actively monitor goings on in Iran, hence the decision to reduce manpower and resources in the diplomatic corps. Bill Daugherty, ex-CIA officer and Iran hostage, argues that the intelligence failures in Iran can be traced back even further, to a trend which began in the 1960s and carried on into the late 1970s when there was a shortage of intelligence collected on the internal political scene in Iran; there was minimal data collection by the CIA and a lack of political officers in the US embassy in Tehran.²⁴ Such arguments are backed up by the figures – from 1963-1978 there was a drastic reduction in US diplomatic staff in Iran; in 1963 there were twenty-one political officers at the US embassy in Tehran, yet by the time of the revolution in 1978 there were just six political officers.²⁵ Intelligence may well have been floating around in the community but the US had nobody to go out and collect it; because of this a lot of signals were missed.²⁶ A great deal of weight has been placed on Turner's preference for technological methods over human intelligence gathering, but these figures indicate that the trends were in fact longer term and that the lack of information on the ground was not purely down to the CIA changing its methodology.

Rational policy making would suggest that had Iran been seen as a potential problem area, then the State Department would have focused greater attention and provided the necessary manpower and resources needed to closely monitor developments. However this was not the case, giving a clear indication of the way the whole US government perceived the situation in Iran, as the same could be said of the intelligence agencies. Jervis indicates that one of the major surprises he found in his report on the CIA's National Foreign Assessment Center (NFAC) was the "paucity of resources dedicated to Iran"; only two political and two economic analysts in the CIA, while the DIA did not have a single expert on Iranian affairs.²⁷ Instead it was the Soviets, Chinese, and Eastern Europeans who were the higher priority targets. The lack of trained personnel in Iran was a matter of managing limited resources, demonstrating how budgeting and bureaucratic problems can eventually grow into great strategic difficulties.²⁸ Ironically enough, the lack of effective human intelligence coming out of Iran contributed towards the growing sense of complacency at State.

The perception, or rather the lack of it amongst US officials operating in Iran, of what was happening was a major problem for the Carter administration since it did not always match the reality. Those at the helm would have been unaware that America was simply failing to connect to the ordinary man on the street and determine what the concerns of Iranian citizens were. Had US embassy staff been more effective in this area then perhaps some of the anxieties and underlying ill-feeling towards the Shah and his regime would have been more apparent much earlier on in the process. As it turned out, US officials only maintained contact with a very small elite of educated English-speaking Iranians; they had little contact with the lower and lower-middle classes that made up the vast majority of Iranian society, and were not in touch with religious leaders, workers, or Farsi speaking professionals and students.²⁹ This association with 'Westernised' Iranians distracted US officials from the realities on the ground and distorted the picture they painted of the Shah's Iran. Former DCI Stansfield Turner summed up this problem very succinctly when he later admitted, "The people we sent out to the field were too wont to get their information at cocktail parties."³⁰ This indicates that there was a severe shortage of grassroots contact and therefore a lack of accurate information flowing in to US policy makers, who were, in effect, being told what they wanted to hear.

One of the criticisms of the US embassy staff in Tehran at the time the Iranian revolution was unfolding was that they lacked sufficient experience or understanding of the country and its people. Indeed, the lack of skilled linguists is perhaps one of the explanations for the failure to make contacts within the grassroots of Iranian society. Some would argue that the Carter administration did not help itself with its personnel changes, most of which resulted from the desire to reduce costs. For example, an experienced Iran analyst, Ernest Oney, was dismissed as part of Turner's 'Halloween Massacre', and veteran chiefs of station were replaced by officials with limited cultural knowledge and language skills.³¹ James Bill's in depth study of the US-Iranian relationship highlights the extent of the problem of limited language and area training amongst US personnel in Iran. In 1970 fewer than 10% of American diplomatic personnel spoke and read fluent Farsi, compared to figures of 45% and 70% in the British and Soviet embassies respectively.³² In the aftermath of the revolution the US did send more skilled Farsi speakers to Iran but by this time it was

all too late – the cruel irony being that a number of the hostages taken when the US embassy was seized spoke fluent Farsi.

Bill Daugherty himself is an example of inexperienced US personnel being sent into the heat of the fracas in Iran – he was posted to Tehran in September 1979 as a rookie first-tour CIA operative. At this point the US was still struggling to deal with the post-revolutionary conditions in Iran following the Shah's departure and the situation on the ground remained very tense; just weeks before a rifle grenade attack had slightly damaged the US consulate in Tabriz.³³ The CIA's decision to send a first-tour officer into Iran at such a time – after all this was just two months prior to the seizure of the US embassy – was ill-conceived to say the least. It is interesting to note that Daugherty's appointment was initially rejected by the acting head of station in Tehran, and that he readily admits he possessed no operational experience (having just finished his training), spoke no Farsi, and had no knowledge of Iran's history, culture and customs.³⁴

A not unfamiliar problem for Carter and his policy makers was the in-fighting and inter-agency feuding which dogged US officials operating in Iran. The odd personal rivalry amongst members of the diplomatic corps was perhaps inevitable, yet it was the institutional differences rather than any individual rifts which caused the real difficulty. Foreign service officers serving in Tehran felt strongly about the lack of effective communication between CIA officials and the State Department, with both sides complaining about each other and the lack of information-sharing.³⁵ It is of course difficult to speculate how differently, if at all, the US government would have handled the crisis in Iran had the CIA and State been on the same wavelength – would improved communication between the two have been any use when the information they were gathering appears to have been fatally flawed? The squabbling and turf wars fought by CIA and State officials in Iran were certainly not unique; this sort of thing was commonplace in the world of espionage and intelligence gathering and usually involved the men from Langley. As we shall see, those at the top of the State Department would later be locked in a bigger institutional battle with the NSC over the direction of US policy in Iran.

US relations with SAVAK

Aside from the bureaucratic problems it faced, there were a number of other factors which influenced, and indeed hampered, the CIA's intelligence operation in Iran. Firstly, there is the nature of the relationship between the CIA and the Iranian domestic security and intelligence service, SAVAK. Much has been written about the exact extent of collaboration between the two organisations, with questions being raised about the CIA's reliance on SAVAK for reports on the internal political situation in Iran.³⁶

SAVAK was officially formed in 1957, yet its development occurred in the years following the CIA-inspired coup that removed Mossadeq and restored the Shah to his throne in 1953. During this post-coup period, the Shah had set about establishing his own power base and eliminating those that might potentially threaten his position. Part of this process involved constructing an effective internal security apparatus; for help with this the Shah turned to the US government, who sent over Army Colonel Stephen J. Meade, on loan to the CIA, to assist with the development of the new organisation.³⁷ The CIA was anxious to keep the new Iranian security apparatus focused on the threat from Moscow, yet the Shah saw its real value in terms of highlighting potential internal security threats. In the late 1950s the organisation was expanded in size and over the following decade SAVAK moved to assert its authority across all aspects of Iranian society, giving the Shah greater confidence about the security of his own position. He remained naturally suspicious of the CIA – perhaps mindful of how he had been restored to power at Mossadeq's expense – and asked SAVAK to monitor the agency's activities in Iran. For its part, the CIA gave its officers strict instructions to maintain their focus on the Soviets and the Communist threat, and to gratefully accept whatever titbits of information SAVAK agreed to provide about Iran's internal affairs.³⁸

The trend of CIA reliance on SAVAK was thus established during the 1960s and continued into the 1970s under Nixon and Ford. During this period SAVAK also stepped up its pursuit of groups and individuals opposed to the Shah's regime, outside Iran as well as within. Rumours and stories of SAVAK's activities were circulating both in the US media and within the US government. For example, in March 1977 Nasser G. Afshar, publisher of the Iran Free Press, wrote to Vice President Mondale

outlining concerns that his own life and those of other Iranian dissidents living in the US were in danger due to SAVAK, citing the CBS programme *60 Minutes* on 6 March 1977 as evidence of this. The programme had included an interview with Richard Cottam, an ex-CIA officer who had served in Iran during the 1950s and would later become an advisor to the State Department during the hostage crisis, stating that he was positive SAVAK was operating in the US *with* the knowledge of the CIA. Afshar requested a full-scale investigation into the activities of SAVAK in the US.³⁹

The State Department took a couple of months before reacting to the claims and advising that no response to Afshar's letter be made, stating that there was "no evidence to support his allegations" and that "The Department of Justice has looked into charges of illegal activities by SAVAK in the United States."⁴⁰ It later turned out that the White House was fully aware that the FBI was investigating SAVAK's activities in the US, and recognised that this posed a sensitive problem which might have possible repercussions on the US intelligence sites based in Iran.⁴¹

The apparent failure by US authorities to question what SAVAK was doing and also the quality of the information it was providing certainly provided a major contribution to the failure of US intelligence in Iran. Senior US intelligence officials seemed to be aware of their over-reliance on SAVAK, but Jervis argues that the US was not fed misleading information but rather it simply knew very little.⁴² Many, including John Stempel who was serving in the US embassy during the revolution, have concluded that SAVAK's miscalculation of the strength of religious opposition to the regime resulted in the US failure to understand the mass appeal of Khomeini and the religious leaders.⁴³

The problem was not that the US government was unaware that religious opposition existed – the evidence indicated that it did – but rather in assessing how much of a threat it posed to the Shah and the level of public support Khomeini possessed. In his book *Politics of Confrontation* (2006), which is highly critical of the Carter administration, Babak Ganji insists that SAVAK did in fact gather enough information on the activities of Islamic groups but that it was hampered by internal strategic disagreements on what approach to take.⁴⁴ SAVAK collected information on

the protests and unrest spreading across the country but they did not share it with the US.⁴⁵ However, even if SAVAK did possess a great deal of relevant material, they were unable to evaluate it – all the pieces were there but they could not put them together.

The focus on Moscow and the Tacksman sites

Criticism of the US reliance on SAVAK is often linked to the reduction in Embassy and CIA personnel in Iran. Interestingly enough, both of these factors are closely related to another crucial influence on US intelligence in Iran during this period – Washington's preoccupation with the Soviet Union. Despite Nixon and Kissinger's detente policies of the 1970s, which had helped reduce Cold War tensions from the dangerous levels seen in previous decades, there naturally remained a healthy degree of suspicion between the Kremlin and the White House. The two sides were competing for influence in areas of the Third World, such as in Ethiopia and Angola, and there was a continuing nuclear arms race which commanded the world's attention. It is hardly surprising then that US policy in Iran, a country that bordered the southern Soviet Socialist Republics of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, was decidedly Soviet-centric in its nature.

Perhaps the reason why the CIA was so content to lean on SAVAK for information on the Iranian political scene was because it was more concerned with monitoring Moscow's activities rather than those of the Shah's opponents. By virtue of its geography alone, Iran was vital to US Cold War policy – a fact which the Shah had always maximised to the best of his ability. In the late 1950s, US intelligence services began setting up several listening posts in Iran along the Soviet border. The two most important sites were Tacksman I, located at Kabkan 650 miles south of the Soviet Union's Tyuratam space centre and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test facility, and Tacksman II, constructed in the mid-1960s at Behshahr on the south-eastern corner of the Caspian Sea. When the Soviet Union tested its ICBMs in the 1960s the US was able to monitor all of the launches using the Tacksman sites; they could also eavesdrop on Soviet ground and air communications. The sites proved to be vital in monitoring the development of Soviet strategic missile forces and helped to verify the terms of the SALT I agreement.⁴⁶ The significance of the Tacksman sites to the US cannot be underestimated, hence the need to maintain a stable political

situation in Iran and keep intelligence on Soviet activities flowing back to Washington.

The very existence of the signals intelligence sites in north-eastern Iran made dealing with the Shah a very delicate issue for US policy makers. The timing in Carter's case was particularly awkward. Another essential consideration for the administration at this time was the ratification process of the SALT II agreement, which Carter and Brezhnev were in the process of negotiating. The key to securing approval for the treaty from the conservatives in the US Senate rested with the US ability to verify Soviet compliance – which depended at the time almost solely on the Tacksman sites.⁴⁷ When one considers the importance of the electronic tracking stations, it seems clear that Carter would not have risked compromising their continued security and availability unless there were extraordinary circumstances – and US intelligence indicated little to be of concern until deep into 1978 as we shall see.

The effect of the Tacksman sites on staffing levels is also interesting, in that their existence provided a misleading slant on the number of CIA personnel stationed in Iran at the time of the revolution. At first glance, the CIA station may have looked substantial with several hundred employees, but the vast majority of these were stationed in the mountains at the listening posts – at Tacksman II in Behshahr, for example, there were one hundred technicians operating the equipment by the beginning of 1979.⁴⁸ Daugherty claims that whilst Richard Helms was still DCI he had agreed a deal with the US Embassy in order to prevent any overlap or duplication of work. The idea was that the small number of CIA case officers would go after the 'hard' targets, the Soviets and Chinese, leaving the State Department staff in the economic and political sections to focus on the Iranian domestic scene.⁴⁹ However, as has previously been discussed, the embassy itself was understaffed and lacking in experience and language skills, so this solution did nothing to solve the problem.

Following the Shah's departure from Iran and the uncertainty that surrounded the post-revolutionary period, US authorities were forced to close down the Tacksman posts. The site at Kabkan was overrun by Iranian militiamen and the US technicians were briefly taken hostage before later being returned, while the site at Behshahr was abandoned in January 1979.⁵⁰ The political situation ultimately gave them no choice,

but the US was losing a great deal in deserting these sites. Tacksman I and II had unique capabilities and were able to detect Soviet missile launches much earlier than the US bases situated in Turkey; their closure inevitably had a negative effect on the SALT II verification process with Vance admitting that the US ability to check Soviet compliance became severely weakened.⁵¹ The loss of the signals intelligence stations was arguably as important as the loss of the long-time US ally the Shah; Daugherty is certainly of the opinion that the Tacksman sites were the most important thing in Iran, not what was happening to the Iranian government.⁵²

Opposition groups

The lack of contact with opposition forces and therefore the subsequent failure to understand their motives and relative strength was another failing of US intelligence. Yet there are a number of reasons why the US government failed to make sufficient contact with Iranian opposition leaders and dissidents. Firstly, there was the potential danger involved for those individuals attempting to make contact with the Americans or other Western diplomats. Over the years SAVAK had garnered a fearsome reputation within Iranian society, with many having either witnessed first-hand or heard tales of the organisation's brutality. However, SAVAK's leadership cleverly and quite deliberately spread fear of its methods and exaggeration of its power as a mechanism for maintaining control.⁵³ It did not merely focus its attention on one group of dissidents or a minority of Iranians, its intimidation was directed at the whole population. Barry Rubin sums it up by saying that while the Shah did face a real terrorist problem in the 1970s, SAVAK responded by terrorising the entire population.⁵⁴ It is therefore hardly surprising that the Shah's opponents were uncomfortable and not always prepared to come forward – even if US officials had been readily contactable and available.

The conventional explanation for the American unwillingness to meet with opposition groups has been that the US government was wary of antagonising the Shah, particularly when it was unsure exactly what could be gained from such meetings. The desire not to undermine the Shah contributed to the CIA's dependence on SAVAK for information during the 1960s and 1970s. Richard Helms, former DCI and US Ambassador to Iran (1973-77), maintains that the US did collect intelligence data on the Iranian political scene and dismisses speculation that a tacit agreement not to

existed with the Iranian government.⁵⁵ Jervis also challenges the conventional view and asserts that in writing his assessment of NFAC's performance he saw reports about internal Iranian politics and the activities of the Shah's opposition – almost none of which came from SAVAK. Despite this evidence, it is clear that the US undoubtedly retained a degree of sensitivity towards the Shah's concerns.

In the aftermath of the revolution, following the establishment of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, questions were asked as to why the religious establishment had not been identified as a serious threat to the Shah's regime. It appears that there was a huge knowledge gap that existed amongst US intelligence officials and policy-makers when it came to Iran's religious affairs. That is not to say that research on the religious establishment was not carried out, but it was largely descriptive rather than analytical. There was also a tendency amongst Iran analysts to underestimate the importance of religion, although they were not alone in this.⁵⁶ This knowledge gap extended right up to the top echelons of the administration and is best exemplified by Turner's response when Mondale asked what an Ayatollah was; Turner was not sure, but promised he would find out.⁵⁷

The US tended to look at the Iranian domestic political scene in very broad and simplistic terms, seeing the nationalists and the leftist groups as the probable troublemakers. The role of nationalism, and later anti-Americanism, was also misunderstood as the CIA tended to associate these forces with the terrorist threat. Jervis believes that they failed to recognise that Iranian nationalism had turned not against the US directly but against the Shah because he was seen as an American puppet.⁵⁸ This dynamic was undoubtedly missed due to the lack of human intelligence collection taking place; talking to ordinary people may have clarified such trends.

The Iranian nationalists were obvious targets of US attention (after all it had been Mossadeq's National Front which had successfully deposed the Shah back in 1953) as were those on the left who were the inevitable focus of the Soviet-obsession emanating from Washington. The Soviet-centric nature of US policy makers at the highest levels extended down to those working on the frontline. For example, it was commonplace for those intelligence officers following local political developments to emphasise the leftist groups that challenged the Shah's rule; a high percentage of their

time was taken up monitoring the militant groups the Mujahedin-i Khalq and the Fiyadan-i Khalq.⁵⁹ There were only limited contacts with the nationalist forces and no such mention of the religious leaders.

The weakness of US intelligence on the Shah's opposition is highlighted in a recently declassified CIA assessment from the beginning of November 1978. Brzezinski had posed questions surrounding the extent of US knowledge about Iranian opposition groups and sought answers from the CIA. Turner readily admitted that the information the CIA had provided was "not as specific and detailed as you want" but that it was the "best we have"; the report's opening line states that the "Shah's opposition is fragmented into many groups", a fact which by now was very apparent to all concerned in the US government.⁶⁰ The rest of the document offers very little in terms of detailed analysis or assessment of the intentions and capabilities of these groups. There is speculation offered about their possible connections to the Iranian military, as well as an admission that little is known about the more extreme terrorist organisations, such as the Mujahedin-i Khalq – a somewhat revealing disclosure given its previous involvement in the assassination of US nationals. The report does at least, albeit belatedly, discuss the 'Opposition Muslim Clergy' and acknowledge its influence on the demonstrations and riots.⁶¹ This was the best information available to Carter and his advisors at the end of 1978, demonstrating the size of the task facing his administration as it sought to calculate its response to the Shah's troubles and the growing volatility in Iran.

The 'supershad' myth

There can be no doubting the influential nature of the long-standing US attitudes towards the Shah and the impact this had on intelligence collection. The foreign policy establishment had, over the course of a couple of decades, come to see Iran for what they perceived it to be – namely politically stable and with the Shah firmly in control. This was all very well of course, until there came a point when this was not the case and the US would need to adapt its policies accordingly. That point in time arguably came, or was certainly fast approaching, when Jimmy Carter assumed the presidency at the beginning of 1977. Yet there appear to have been doctrinal and institutional barriers against challenging what James Bill has described as the 'supershad' myth. Bill contends that many American-Iran watchers, including CIA

officers, suffered from such a myth; they were often old hands to whom the Shah seemed to have been around forever, they came to view him as indestructible and could not envisage an Iran without his leadership.⁶²

Jervis highlights this issue as one of the main problems with the analysis of Iranian intelligence. CIA analysts, and almost everyone else in the US government, believed in the strength of the Shah's conviction and his decisiveness. Yet they failed to go back and examine his historical actions and behaviour, for example during the 1953 coup. Assessments written in the 1950s and 60s pointed to a very different Shah, as CIA officials later acknowledged in their response to Jervis's report.⁶³ Remember that the Shah had grown in confidence both internally and internationally as the years had progressed, thus the perception of him amongst US officials in the 1970s had altered markedly from what it had been in the formative years of his regime.

In its investigation into the failure to foresee the revolution, the House Select Committee on Intelligence returned a damning verdict in 1979 stating that "long-standing US attitudes towards the Shah inhibited intelligence collection" and "dampened policymakers' appetite for analysis of the Shah's position."⁶⁴ The criticism of those in charge of US foreign policy is that they did not encourage Iranian analysts to challenge the status quo and that any dissenting viewpoints were either removed from briefings or certainly toned down in order not to conflict with the perceived wisdom. As Barry Rubin points out, this practice was certainly not a new one. He cites the example of Jesse Leaf, a key CIA Iran analyst prior to his resignation in 1973, who once wrote a report that was highly critical of the Shah's policies for "sowing the seed for popular dissidence." This conclusion was removed at the behest of his superior, who told him that it did not accurately reflect US policy to Iran.⁶⁵ The key point here is that all reports originating from Iran during this period, whether they were CIA, State Department, or DIA, should have been focused on providing accurate accounts of what was actually taking place, rather than ensuring they fitted in with an established framework of US policy.

When you look back now at some of the intelligence assessments from 1977 and 1978, with the considerable benefit of hindsight, it is quite conceivable that the authors were pandering to the demands of their superiors and giving them exactly

what they wanted to hear. The more likely explanation is that they were blinded by the 'supershah' myth and unable to see past the deeply entrenched views of the establishment, hence the overly-positive estimations about the longevity of the Shah's regime. Stansfield Turner succinctly summarises the dominant ideology which overshadowed US policy to Iran during the period:

*"There was a sense that if you criticised the Shah very vigorously, there was a very real chance that this would come back to haunt you and that you would end up working in some other part of the government rather than working on Iran policy."*⁶⁶

Turner's comments point to a short-sighted approach from the US government, in which briefings were made to fit 'policy' rather than the other way around. Had there not been such a stubborn refusal to question the Shah's position then perhaps some of the reports which were less than admiring of the regime – those which stated that problems did exist – might have been acted upon or given greater consideration.

In the end, this problem stretched right up to the very top echelons of the White House itself, with the National Security Adviser Brzezinski guilty of refusing to accept any analysis which went against conventional US policy. Brzezinski was of the opinion that the State Department as a whole, and in particular Henry Precht on the Iran desk, had a "doctrinal dislike" of the Shah.⁶⁷ This belief led Brzezinski to disregard some State reports that he felt were attempting to undermine US policy; such as one in 1978 conducted by three foreign service officers with experience of Iran, which noted that the Shah's regime was facing a serious challenge.⁶⁸ This example points to a rather different problem – the ongoing institutional struggle between State and the NSC which dogged the Carter administration's foreign policy.

Precht was certainly one of the few US officials to question the common perception among CIA analysts that the Shah was a firm and decisive leader; he remembered the cowardly way in which he fled in 1953 when things had not initially gone to plan.⁶⁹ Yet Precht only really began to question the direction of US policy from the beginning of September 1978 onwards, and by this time the US government had already been caught off-guard and had limited options. Precht also recognised that if he cared about his future prospects he would have to be careful about how he handled views which were directly contrary to US policy:

*"I reckoned that if I announced my conclusions in the Monday morning staff meeting I might well find myself at Foreign Service Institute studying a language that wouldn't be Persian."*⁷⁰

Other concerns – taking the eye off the ball in Iran

The top foreign policy officials in the Carter White House were largely unconcerned with Iran during the administration's first eighteen months. As has been suggested in previous chapters, there were more pressing foreign issues to be tackled – most notably the effort to reinvigorate the Middle East peace process which resulted in the Camp David negotiations of September 1978. As far as Iran was concerned, Carter and his team put their faith in what the experts at the State Department, the CIA, other agencies and foreign governments were telling them; which was in essence that even though he might have to make some political compromises and cede some power, the Shah was not in any serious danger.⁷¹

The precedence of other foreign policy problems no doubt added to the US government's desire to ensure that political stability, that is to say support for the Shah, was maintained in Iran. After all, the Shah was personally very supportive of President Carter's efforts to bring about a lasting peace settlement in the Middle East; he enjoyed particularly close links with the Egyptian President Anwar El Sadat and his backing of the US in the peace process was therefore helpful. The Carter administration was also troubled by developments in Afghanistan in the early part of 1978 – concerns which were shared by Iran – with the threat of Soviet intervention in an area of vital strategic importance. (The government of Afghanistan, led by President Daoud, had been overthrown in a communist inspired revolt in April 1978. This marked the start of the Soviet Union's long-term effort aimed at ensuring their control over the country and ultimately led to the Soviet invasion in December 1979). The Shah was quick to express his concerns in a letter to Carter in May 1978. In his response, Carter stressed the central role he saw the Shah playing in monitoring the Afghan situation, "Your own special vantage point and depth of experience in that region will be particularly valuable in assisting me to evaluate the course of events."⁷²

It was not until after the Shah had declared martial law in September 1978, as Carter and his top advisors were otherwise engaged at Camp David, that the US government

began to take a much keener interest in the Iranian situation. It is therefore not implausible to suggest that the administration's other foreign policy priorities – the Middle East peace process, the SALT negotiations, and of course the Panama Canal Treaty which was still awaiting Senate ratification in the early part of 1978 – significantly reduced the administration's focus on Iran's domestic problems. It was only from September onwards that the reports being sent back to Washington by the embassy began to recognise the scale of the difficulties facing the Shah. But what the US Ambassador William Sullivan also maintained, with backing from the White House – at least from Brzezinski, was that the Shah remained the only viable option for the US. It appears as though virtually all of the Iranian experts both in Washington and in the Middle East believed that the Shah would be able to ride out this turbulent period.⁷³

The failure to predict the Shah's downfall

The US government was without doubt slow to grasp the significance of the troubles that developed in Iran throughout 1978, starting with the religiously motivated demonstrations at Qom in January. Brzezinski admits that while the Iranian crisis was gradually brewing throughout the year, recognition of this within the US government was very slow in materialising. As late as the fall of 1978 US intelligence was predicting political continuity in Iran, as was the US Ambassador William Sullivan.⁷⁴ Vance's recollections of the intelligence assessments at the time closely mirror those of Brzezinski. During the summer of 1978 analysis of the Iranian situation by the State Department, the CIA, and the Department of Defense intensified, yet the conclusion remained steadfast; the opposition groups did not pose a significant threat to the Shah.⁷⁵

In September 1978, a matter of months before the Shah's downfall, the DIA predicted that the Shah "is expected to remain actively in power over the next ten years."⁷⁶ The CIA appeared ahead of its counterparts in that its August 1978 assessment was at least entitled 'Iran after the Shah'. However, the report's conclusions were not dissimilar to others that had gone before. The Iranian military was loyal to the monarchy and the opposition threat was not significant; the CIA's evaluation was that "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even a pre-revolutionary situation."⁷⁷ The Shah's failure to respond to the mounting turmoil by initiating a crackdown actually helped to shape the CIA's

assessment of the situation; they felt that had it been an immediate danger then the Shah would have acted accordingly.⁷⁸ The State Department meanwhile lacked a full-time Iranian expert in its Bureau of Intelligence and Research and therefore produced no intelligence report on Iran during 1978.⁷⁹

Brzezinski credits Gary Sick, the NSC officer responsible for Iran, with holding a different view – he claims that Sick reported growing social and religious tensions which threatened to derail the Shah's leadership on several occasions during 1978.⁸⁰ Similarly, Vance too maintains that by this stage some of his colleagues in the State Department were becoming increasingly concerned with the growing unrest and were beginning to question the intelligence assessments.⁸¹ The reality is that neither the NSC nor the State Department were the first to recognise the threat the growing violence and unrest presented to Iran's dated monarchical regime. In fact it was James Bill, then an academic at the University of Texas at Austin, who delivered a paper entitled "Monarchy in crisis" at a March 1978 seminar organised by the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Bill warned the US government that as the violence escalated more and more groups would coalesce in opposition to the regime and that the Shah would lose the will and capacity to employ his traditional tactics of political control.⁸² Bill's bleak conclusions, supported by more accurate human intelligence which was sadly lacking, might have awakened the US government to the impending crisis sooner.

While Bill and others in the academic community did not predict the date or means of the Shah's fall from power, they appeared to be at least as well informed about the regime's fragility as were the CIA and State Department analysts. The CIA in particular had very limited contact with academics and outside experts and there was a great deal of mistrust between them.⁸³ One point that should again be made here is that nobody, whether inside or outside of the US government, was able to foresee who would replace the Shah. Political analysts in the late 1970s did not perceive the religious establishment as even a possible focus of opposition to the Shah's regime.⁸⁴ It is therefore difficult to criticise the US intelligence agencies for failing to connect to the Islamic community when none of the so-called experts believed them to be as influential as turned out to be the case.

It was not just the Americans who were unprepared for the events which took place in Iran at the end of 1978 and beginning of 1979. Britain, the US's Cold War ally and former colonial master, appeared equally clueless to the realities of what was happening to the Shah. Documents recently released by the UK National Archives show that throughout 1978 the British ambassador, Sir Anthony Parsons, painted a far more optimistic picture of the Shah's future prospects than was actually the case. The final year of the Shah's rule began with riots in the religious city of Qom, yet Parsons sent Foreign Secretary David Owen a largely positive review of the situation at the end of January. He observed that "The Shah remains in complete control of the country and of the government" and he did not "foresee any serious trouble in the near future."⁸⁵

The British, like the US government, remained loyal to the beleaguered Iranian monarch throughout the troubled months of 1978, even as the Shah himself appeared increasingly confused and unsure of how to handle the situation. As clashes between government security forces and anti-Shah protestors heightened in May, Parsons sent a telegram to London still maintaining that there was no "serious risk" of the Shah being removed from power.⁸⁶ Parsons remained upbeat in his assessments right up until October when violence and demonstrations erupted on a larger scale. Britain's monitoring of the Iranian situation appears to closely mirror that of the US authorities in that there was almost a stubborn refusal to admit what was happening until the crisis really began unfolding; hardly surprising given the close working relationship established by Parsons and his counterpart in the US embassy William Sullivan. British and American observers were seemingly shocked both by the level of discontent in Iranian society and the passivity of the Shah's response.

Carter's criticisms of the intelligence

Towards the end of November, as the situation in Iran worsened on a daily basis, the Carter administration was rocked by media reports indicating that the President had been critical of the intelligence services' failures in Iran. The stories stemmed from a leaked memo which Carter had sent earlier that month to Brzezinski, Vance and DCI Stansfield Turner. Although the memo did not single out the CIA, it was widely seen as a direct censure of the agency's performance under Turner, with Carter stating that he was "dissatisfied with the quality of political intelligence."⁸⁷ The leaked memo –

something which became a regular and unpleasant feature of the Carter White House – further damaged the administration’s already tepid relations with the CIA and raised public concerns about the intelligence community’s effectiveness in reporting on volatile foreign political situations.

Carter’s displeasure which stemmed from the Iranian experience led the administration into creating a task force with the brief of providing a rapid and comprehensive overhaul of existing methods of intelligence collection and evaluation. *The New York Times* alleged, courtesy of unnamed officials and aides, that the high-level interagency task force was created as a direct result of Carter’s November memo, and that State and the CIA had already been ordered to determine if other key strategic nations might be vulnerable to events similar to those that took place in Iran.⁸⁸ Perhaps the only positive to come out of the loss of Iran and the collapse of the twin pillar strategy was that the Carter administration had been so badly shaken by the damaging events that it was determined to prevent a similar occurrence happening elsewhere.

Carter had of course been well within his rights to lament the intelligence and task his leading officials with putting things right, in what one assumes was a confidential note. After all, the President was the one ultimately responsible for decisions taken on the basis of the information available at the time. Not surprisingly in the wake of the leaked memo, the intelligence services were roundly condemned for their failings. A scathing indictment of the US intelligence effort in Iran can be seen in a November 1978 letter Brzezinski received from John H. Shepherd, a lawyer from Michigan, who was writing in response to the media stories. Much attention in the US press had been focused on the relationship between the CIA and SAVAK, and on the CIA’s intelligence estimate from August 1978, which had concluded that Iran was not even close to a revolutionary condition. Shepherd directed Brzezinski’s attention to an article in *Le Monde*, the well-regarded French daily newspaper, which detailed the religious, economic and political origins of the crisis and provided a “factual basis for a pessimistic prognosis” of the Shah’s regime.⁸⁹ The article was published in July, a month prior to the infamous CIA estimate and raised the question of whether those drafting the August report had access to the same facts that *Le Monde* did. Shepherd went on to question the CIA’s links to SAVAK, noting that “it is a basic rule in

investigative work that one should not rely too heavily on those with whom one has a client relationship.”⁹⁰ Brzezinski passed Shepherd’s observations onto Turner, doubtless aware that many of them were justifiable criticisms.

There was certainly little sympathy for the intelligence agencies either within government circles or amongst the public. Yet from within their profession one group launched a robust defence of the CIA and attempted to pin the blame for the failings in part on the Carter administration’s reforms. The Security and Intelligence Fund (SIF) had been created in 1977 by James Angleton, the controversial former CIA Chief of Counterintelligence and so-called ‘spy-catcher’, and other like-minded associates in order to defend US security and intelligence organisations.⁹¹ In an open letter which has recently been released into the Carter library archives, Angleton and his SIF colleagues attacked the Carter administration on a number of issues. Firstly, they pointed to the impact of Carter’s Executive order 12036 which “drastically restricted the scope and initiative” of the intelligence services; secondly, they accused the White House of a failure of leadership in not making “bold and imaginative” use of what intelligence resources remained; and finally, they drew the comparison with the CIA’s actions in Iran twenty-six years previously under Eisenhower, a President “not cowed by crisis.”⁹²

The SIF was rallying against the Congressional committees led by Senator Frank Church (D-ID) and Representative Otis Pike (D-NY) which exposed the details of numerous CIA operations in the late 1970s. To them, Carter was an extension of what they saw as a liberal-leftist assault on the intelligence services. Their argument regarding EO 12036 certainly has some merit, but their criticism of Carter’s leadership and the comparison with Eisenhower in 1953 is entirely unjustified. For a start, the argument ignores the preceding 25 years of US-Iranian relations prior to 1978-79 and, as has been demonstrated, the availability and quality of political intelligence which was very poor indeed – a fact which almost every figure involved with Iran at the time now readily admits. It is hardly surprising that the SIF, which was essentially a product of the Cold War, should wither away following Angleton’s death and the onset of Gorbachev’s *glasnost* policies in the mid-1980s.⁹³

Carter and US intelligence in Iran

There can be no denying the serious shortcomings of US intelligence in Iran prior to the revolution. The religious elements in particular were disregarded as being unimportant; analysts with a better understanding of Iranian culture and society should have read far more into the significance of this factor. In effect, the decision makers at the top of the US government knew little about the exact nature of popular discontent and those groups who were likely to replace the Shah in the event of a coup or revolt. Interestingly enough a CIA intelligence assessment entitled 'The Resurgence of Islam' produced in March 1979, two months after the Shah's enforced exile, belatedly outlined some of the trends that had been developing during the previous couple of years. This document, recently released into the Carter library archives, shows how the Shah's repressive strategies pushed people towards the religious establishment in order to air their grievances. Below are two extracts from the report:

*"In Iran the Shia clergy has been a long-time opponent of the secular government and especially of the Pahlavi dynasty. The monarchy never secured widespread popular support, and it alienated the devout by emphasising Iran's dynastic tradition rather than its Islamic heritage."*⁹⁴

*"[The] Shah let himself be considered an enemy of Shia Islam. By bringing politics, unions, and the media under tight control, he left Islam as the only forum for dissent of even the mildest sort. The effect was to give religious leaders a political leadership role they probably could never have won on their own."*⁹⁵

If the CIA was able to identify these trends in March 1979 then why had it not been able to do so earlier? These were not changes that occurred overnight, but rather patterns of established societal behaviour. The truth is it took the events of the winter of 1978 to awaken the US authorities to what was really happening in Iran. This document, perhaps more than any other, illustrates the major weaknesses of the US intelligence effort in Iran in the run up to the Islamic revolution.

Those who attack the Carter administration for its handling of the intelligence community concentrate on the perceived purge of the clandestine services. Admittedly the 'Halloween Massacre' saw a reduction of operation personnel that impacted upon the CIA's human intelligence collection capabilities. However, these

changes were not solely Carter-led initiatives, much of the budget cutting and other areas of intelligence reform had begun under the previous Republican administrations and, in a wider sense, reflected the volatile political climate in Washington epitomised by the Church and Pike Committees in the post-Watergate era.

Another way of approaching the argument is to question whether the removal of experienced personnel from Iran during the period was really as damaging as some Carter critics contend. After all these staff were most likely dyed in the wool Shah sympathisers who would have been unlikely to challenge the status-quo of which they were a part. It is doubtful whether these 'experienced' Iran watchers would have been able to provide any meaningful contribution, for example an analysis which challenged conventional thinking, prior to the revolution. As a case in point, the CIA's lead Iran analyst had actually produced a long paper on the religious opposition in the summer of 1978, but it was mostly descriptive and limited analytically.⁹⁶

Carter was also badly served by his old Annapolis classmate Stansfield Turner, who was never able to fully establish his authority over the intelligence professionals and has since admitted that he should have demanded a thorough review of the Shah's position.⁹⁷ Kaufman argues that Turner's difficulties can be explained in part by his failure to connect with the president on a personal level; Carter reportedly found his briefings boring and so they became more and more infrequent as time went on.⁹⁸ The structure of the administration's foreign policy bureaucracy is also significant as Turner was undoubtedly hampered by his lack of access to the Oval Office. Initially he met Carter weekly, though this later became twice a month and never without Brzezinski present. Throughout Carter's time in office the CIA remained under strict management by the NSC and all agency reporting reached the president via Brzezinski.⁹⁹

One aspect of US policy during this period which does seem confusing and somewhat contradictory is the conscious decision to pay so little attention, in intelligence terms, to a country that was a key strategic ally in a geographically vital region. This was a continuation of Nixon-Kissinger 'twin pillar' thinking which Carter's foreign policy team arguably might have addressed sooner – there should have been a recognition that political stability in Iran could not just be taken for granted. However, it should

be remembered that Carter was engulfed by numerous other foreign policy concerns, not to mention a variety of pressing domestic initiatives – including welfare and tax reform, national health insurance, and high levels of inflation and unemployment.¹⁰⁰ Under the circumstances it was difficult to do anything other than take the pragmatic approach to Iran, particularly as the consensus that all was well remained steadfast within US circles until late in 1978.

Some historians have claimed that the US failures in Iran were caused not by intelligence failures, but by the Carter administration's mistaken policy decisions and its sheer incompetence.¹⁰¹ Admittedly, Carter's desire to reform the CIA put him at a disadvantage from the very beginning; but institutional reform was not the sole cause of the significant human intelligence failings on the part of the CIA, which, coupled with the systemic problems in the State Department, meant that the Iranian crisis was essentially an accident waiting to happen. (Further analysis of the roles played by the State Department and Ambassador William Sullivan come in the following chapter). US authorities were not alone in their inability to uncover a vital piece of information that would have altered their estimates – news of the Shah's health problems. However, aside from this, the lack of adequate intelligence collection and analysis seriously affected the US response and ultimately, as Brzezinski himself has recognised:

“The intelligence system gave the President little preparation for the shock that the sudden disintegration of Iran was for him.”¹⁰²

NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

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Reacting to Iran: US responses 1978

“...our current posture... is obviously the only safe course to follow at this juncture. However, if it should fail and if the Shah should abdicate, we need to think the unthinkable at this time in order to give our thoughts some precision should the unthinkable contingency arise.”¹

US Ambassador to Iran William Sullivan, 9 November 1978

The US government was unprepared for the situation that developed in Iran in the latter half of 1978. Washington’s reaction and responses to the crisis have been analysed ever since, with the vast majority of scholars delivering an often critical assessment of the Carter administration’s performance. There is a school of thought that Carter could have responded more decisively to the situation and somehow saved the Shah’s ailing regime – the so-called ‘iron fist’ solution. The intention of the following two chapters is to explore the debate about the response of the US government in the latter part of 1978 and early 1979 utilising a range of recent interviews and primary source material.

The critical events that precipitated the unravelling of the Shah’s regime occurred in September and October 1978 just as the Carter administration was understandably preoccupied with its flagship foreign policy issue, the Middle East peace process, in the shape of the talks at Camp David. Perhaps there was a fixation with the Middle East; Gary Sick recalls that Carter’s focus was on the peace negotiations and that he was not as actively engaged in day-to-day policy-making during the Iran crisis as he was on other issues.² Criticism here should be aimed not at Carter personally, but instead at his team of advisors, particularly his national security advisor, whose job was to pressure the president on such difficult issues – something Brzezinski did not do until he was belatedly forced to act at the beginning of November 1978.³ Yet in the final analysis, developments elsewhere were not responsible for plunging the US into policy crisis over Iran. The Carter administration had not been able to pre-empt the Iranian revolution due to factors beyond its control, but what Carter could control was the nature of the US response to a very volatile and fluid set of events.

Attention is invariably focused on the inner workings of the administration's foreign policy apparatus. The rapidly expanding policy chasm between Carter's top advisers has been widely discussed over the last thirty years, but it demands further re-examination. The in-fighting between the two opposing blocs – the so-called Carter 'hawks' and 'doves'⁴ – was largely responsible for the Shah's confusion and the lack of clear understanding of US policy in Tehran. In this sense, it is possible to criticise Carter's leadership style and argue that he should have been more forceful and decisive in clarifying the US position. As his Vice President Walter Mondale recalls, Carter established his system of foreign policy decision-making to ensure that Vance and Brzezinski debated issues, as he believed this would then provide him with more options. However, as Mondale rightly surmises "...when push came to shove Carter was very reluctant to use military power."⁵

However, his reluctance to use military force should not mark Carter out as a weak leader. In fact, throughout the crisis period he stayed faithful to his moral values and actually took the most rational approach of anybody in the administration. Carter recognised the US was in no position to sustain an unpopular regime in Iran, nor was it able to simply cast aside twenty-five years of friendly relations with the Shah. This troublesome case had to be handled with tact, care and diplomacy – none of which seemed high on Brzezinski's agenda – and Carter endeavoured to follow such a course as far as was practical. What his administration's approach suffered from was the absence of another vital ingredient – clarity.

Summer of uncertainty and the Camp David talks

In August 1978 the Shah, recognising the growing depth of the bad feeling towards his regime, sought to offer some concessions to his opponents. He announced that the next scheduled elections, in June, would be one-hundred percent free and that there would be further reforms and increased freedom of speech and press. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher was doubtful that the Shah's promises would be able to win over his long-standing opponents among religious leaders and students, but the US government nonetheless chose to offer its support and encouragement, both privately and publicly, for the Shah's liberalisation efforts. Christopher also made it clear that it would not be easy for the Shah to maintain his course and that

serious trouble could develop during the holy month of Ramadan and around the anniversary of the overthrow of Mossadeq on 18 August.⁶

In light of the developments at the beginning of August, the NSC's Iran point man Gary Sick was keen for Brzezinski to meet with the US Ambassador William Sullivan, who was back in the US on leave, before he returned to Tehran. This was perhaps the first indication that the White House was concerned with the embassy's monitoring of an increasingly volatile situation. Sick described the continuing violent protests in Iran as "disturbing" and stressed his desire to impress on Sullivan the need for "as clear a picture as we can" of the future outlook for Iran's political situation.⁷ Ironically enough, it was during this period of worsening political unrest in August that the US sent crowd control equipment, including tear gas, to the Iranian government.⁸

Less than a month later, as Carter, Brzezinski and Vance were consumed with the negotiations between the Israelis and the Egyptians at Camp David – talks which took place between 5 and 17 September 1978 – the Shah was forced to impose martial law in Tehran and other major cities across the country. On 8 September at a rally in Tehran's Jaleh Square, Iranian troops opened fire on demonstrators killing more than a hundred of them – this day came to be known as 'Black Friday'. Christopher, monitoring the situation in the absence of Vance, noted that the Shah "seemed depressed and undecided on how to proceed" and recommended that the US reaffirm its continued support.⁹ Carter briefly telephoned the Shah, a six-minute call according to Brzezinski,¹⁰ to express his regret at the events and reiterate continued US support. Unfortunately for Carter, the routine White House press release issued following the incident was announced over Radio Tehran, leading many ordinary Iranians to believe that the US supported or even ordered the shootings.¹¹ As the events that would follow demonstrated, the blame inevitably fell on Carter and the CIA even though the shootings at Jaleh Square had nothing to do with the president; once again it was the perception rather than the reality that was important in Iran.

Trouble brewing in Paris: Khomeini in exile

October proved to be the pivotal month in the lead up to the Shah's downfall. Trying desperately to stem the rising tide of public disapproval, the Shah chose to grant

amnesties to political prisoners and dissidents. Yet this was not enough to silence those opposed to the regime; by now they were being urged to continue protesting on the streets by Ayatollah Khomeini. A vehement critic of the Shah's leadership and his close relationship with the US for many years, Khomeini had been living in neighbouring Iraq since his expulsion from Iran in 1963 and had been waging a holy war against the Shah, who hoped that removing him from Iraq would reduce his influence and thus quell some of the religiously motivated demonstrations and protests. According to the Iranian Ambassador to the US, Ardeshir Zahedi, the Shah had actually been presented with an alternative means of handling the Khomeini problem; the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein approached the Iranian government in the autumn of 1978 and offered to either expel Khomeini or eliminate him.¹² The Shah was cautious, fearful that getting rid of Khomeini would only turn him into a martyr and thus increase the power of the religious opposition.¹³ He declined Saddam's offer to eliminate Khomeini; who was instead exiled from Iraq, refused refuge in Kuwait, before eventually settling in Neauphle-le-Chateau on the outskirts of Paris in October.

Having initially been sceptical of moving to 'the West', Khomeini soon realised there were advantages that would aid him in his struggle against the Shah. Assisted by a large group of sympathetic followers, including many Western (and indeed American) educated Iranians, Khomeini sought to encourage public disaffection with the Shah's regime by spreading his message through literature and tape recordings that were smuggled back into the major cities in Iran. Khomeini was also able to raise international awareness of the Iranian struggle, largely thanks to the media access and availability on offer to him in Paris. Despite their actions, Khomeini and his supporters would later disingenuously claim that that the true origin of the revolution was from Iran and not from France, even though their efforts were crucial in rousing public unrest and anti-Shah sentiment. Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, who was with Khomeini during his Paris exile and later became President of Iran, maintains the revolution was initiated by the Iranian people and Khomeini "didn't know a movement was in the process of being formed."¹⁴

If he was unaware of what exactly was going on, then Khomeini certainly did a remarkable job of stirring up trouble from outside Iran. A translated copy of a Khomeini pamphlet being circulated around Tehran at the end of November 1978

called for his followers to stage violent demonstrations during the holy month of Moharram – what he described as ‘the blood month’ – to bring about the Shah’s downfall. Khomeini was actively encouraging his supporters to prompt confrontations with military and security forces, whilst at the same time venting his anger at the US whom he criticised for assisting the Shah.¹⁵ Khomeini was able to exert his commanding influence over the Iranian people during the period of Parisian exile from October to February, and his growing importance to the striking workers and anti-Shah dissidents ultimately paved the way for a triumphant return to Tehran a few months later.

Back in Iran, industrial unrest was increasingly having a damaging impact on the country both economically and politically. On 24 October, President Carter received word that the Shah had asked the Americans and the British for advice on how to deal with the crisis in the wake of fresh strikes and disturbances. The Shah was unsure whether to install a military government or attempt some kind of coalition deal with opposition leaders. Yet Sullivan and the British Ambassador Anthony Parsons argued that the outlook was not as dark as it seemed and suggested that dismissing the present government would be perceived by the Shah’s opponents as a sign of weakness. The Shah’s own vacillation and weakness in not taking the initiative himself are clear for all to see – Carter’s own handwritten comments on the memo read “*Give him whatever advice we can*”¹⁶ and seem to sum up the futility of the situation. Carter was not in a position to direct the Iranian leader as to how he should respond, particularly as he had previously outlined a reluctance to involve the US in the internal affairs of other states around the world. The Shah was however following a trend that had been established during the course of his long reign and that can even be traced back to his return to the throne in 1953; one in which he looked to Washington for guidance in times of need.

Policy confusion in Washington

Many of those who accept that the Carter administration was ill served by the intelligence community and therefore underprepared for the events that followed still charge that the administration lacked a clear strategy of how to approach the crisis engulfing the Shah’s leadership. Yet there are two principal factors which made following a clear and coherent strategy extremely difficult for Carter: firstly, there

was the inconsistency and lack of clarity in the political reporting, which culminated in the breakdown of relations between Ambassador Sullivan and the White House; and secondly, there was the development of the institutional and doctrinal debate that saw internal clashes between the makers of US foreign policy, specifically the National Security Council (NSC) and the State Department. Throughout the entirety of the Iranian revolution Carter remained firm both in his reluctance to use military force unnecessarily, and in his belief that the US should not dictate its own terms to the Shah – he maintained that the will of the Iranian people had to be respected. The problem for the president was not everyone within the administration appeared to be working towards achieving the same outcomes he sought.

William Stivers attributes the inconsistencies in Carter's foreign policy to the factional divisions within the administration; the Carter 'hawks' and the Carter 'doves'. The 'hawks' consisted of figures such as Brzezinski, Defense Secretary Harold Brown, Brzezinski's deputy David Aaron and his aide Samuel Huntington. The 'doves' were Vance and the top echelons at State, UN Ambassador Andrew Young, and Arms Control and Disarmament Director Paul Warnke.¹⁷ This group were concerned that US-Soviet issues should not completely dominate every aspect of US policy, whereas the 'hawks' were more Soviet-centric and viewed developments across the globe through the narrow prism of the East-West global conflict. Brzezinski and Vance had competing images of the international system; Vance saw a complex global situation and sought to advance the idea of a global community, while Brzezinski became more pessimistic and focused on political-military issues as concern over Soviet activities in Africa and elsewhere increased.¹⁸ Jerel Rosati believes that the two conflicting images that coexisted within the administration were responsible for the highly incoherent and unstable nature of Carter's foreign policy.¹⁹

When it came to Iran, the division was an institutional one between the State Department and the NSC, with whom the Defense Department generally sided. The dividing line was drawn over how strongly, and by what means, the US should support the Shah. Brzezinski believed that the State Department was reluctant to use military force when the situation required it, and described Vance as "the last Vietnam casualty" so worried about the damaging American experience in Southeast Asia that "he lacks the will to use force again."²⁰

Towards the end of October and the beginning of November 1978, the need for clarity in the US response to the growing crisis was becoming ever more apparent; some elements of the media and the political establishment were now asking questions of the Carter administration and clamouring for a more decisive approach. Nelson Rockefeller, who had served as Vice President under Gerald Ford, contacted Brzezinski advocating a clear-cut US stance in support of the Shah,²¹ while *The Wall Street Journal* was critical of Carter's stand on human rights for placing additional pressure on the Shah and argued that Washington now needed to provide the Shah with "a greater show of resolve" to let everyone concerned know that "the Shah is our man."²² While some were advocating firm action to demonstrate US loyalty to the Shah, cracks were becoming apparent in the approaches of the policymakers inside the Carter administration.

Washington was increasingly divided over how best to respond to the unfolding crisis. Sullivan, along with the British Ambassador Anthony Parsons, had told the Shah that a military solution was a non-starter, and the State Department, while stressing support for the Shah, also expressed the view that the US should remain opposed to a military regime. This angered Brzezinski, who felt that the message conveyed by Sullivan had not been approved by the White House.²³ Even if this was the case and the message had not been approved, Carter had already made clear his reluctance to use force and resort to the military option; he sought an American foreign policy that recognised limitations rather than pursuing an interventionist agenda.²⁴

In a cable sent to Washington on 28 October, Sullivan once more reiterated his belief that the Shah was the "unique element" who could lead a "controlled transition", and strongly opposed any overture to Khomeini,²⁵ again suggesting that the US was reluctant to see any type of military crackdown. It was at this point that the rift between the State Department and the NSC over how to deal with the situation became apparent – Brzezinski believed that the State Department had given up on the Shah and that it was 'soft' on a military solution.²⁶ Vice President Mondale, an active participant in the administration's foreign policy decision making, points to a fundamental difference between the two approaches; Vance and State favoured

diplomacy and restraint, while Brzezinski favoured strengthening the Iranian military.²⁷

The fracture that split the most influential foreign policy advisers serving Carter was to prove very damaging to both the president and US policy in Iran. Brzezinski's belief that adequate force had to be used in order to retain the current regime was strongly challenged by the State Department, particularly by Patricia Derian. In her role as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, she saw Iran as a key test of the administration and consistently argued the case for pressing the Shah into further reforms.²⁸ This approach not surprisingly clashed with that of Brzezinski and the NSC, who did not want to risk further destabilising the Shah's already crumbling power base.

Mixed messages in Tehran

The serious intelligence failures and ineffective political reporting in Iran, which highlighted limited American understanding of the country's history, culture, and of the significance of the events taking place there, naturally impacted on the way the US government responded to the crisis. US embassy officials were effectively members of the established political order in Iran, and maintained little if any contact with Iranians outside of their own social bubble. More alarming than this however, was President Carter's loss of trust and faith in Ambassador William Sullivan, his top official in Iran. Meanwhile in Washington, the flamboyant Iranian Ambassador to the US, Ardeshir Zahedi, was firmly ingrained within DC's political and social elite, but appeared to be losing touch with the reality of the situation back at home.

Zahedi, who for many years revelled in his role as cheerleader for the Shah's regime in Washington, often provided contradictory accounts of what was going on and combined this with a stubborn refusal to admit to the strength of the opposition forces. Having been called back to Iran as martial law and curfews were imposed at the beginning of September, on his return Zahedi claimed that the demonstrations were a new phenomenon – stimulated by the communists and different from the protests led by religious leaders in previous months.²⁹ He too, like Sullivan later on, eventually lost the confidence of the leader he was serving, which became apparent in November when the Shah told the US government that the Iranian Ambassador was badly out of

touch with the political situation.³⁰ Zahedi provided evidence of his lack of understanding when meeting Vance prior to his return to Tehran; he made a gross misjudgement of the size and nature of the religious opposition, describing them as disorganised and stating his belief that they would meet fierce resistance from the majority of rural Iranians.³¹

Brzezinski may have found Zahedi a useful ally during the strategic squabbles over a possible military solution, yet both the Carter administration and the Shah would have been better served if the Iranian Ambassador had adopted a more pragmatic stance to the troubles. Zahedi admits that he enjoyed a “close and friendly relationship” with Brzezinski and that they shared the same analysis that the ‘iron fist’ was the only way for the Shah to restore order; while Brzezinski’s communications seemed to be with Carter’s approval, Zahedi could tell that they were not in line with the State Department’s thinking.³² When Zahedi returned to Tehran, Brzezinski was able to establish his own direct means of communicating with the Shah – one that bypassed the State Department.

Sullivan described Zahedi and the covert communications as being Brzezinski’s own one-man ‘embassy’ in Iran.³³ Vance was livid when he found out in December 1978, and he believes it played a major part in heightening the Shah’s confusion during this troubled period.³⁴ As Gary Sick notes, Brzezinski’s back-channel diplomacy also demonstrates how the NSC and State Department split and people within the administration began pursuing different courses.³⁵ Finally, it serves to highlight a serious error of judgement on Brzezinski’s part, aligning himself so closely with a man whose views and analysis were gradually being discredited in his own country.

Worse still for the Carter White House was the breakdown in relations with Ambassador Sullivan. After his appointment mid-way through 1977, Sullivan worked hard to reassure the Shah that while the Carter administration favoured modernisation and reform, it was not going to force the Shah’s hand and retained the view that Iran was a key strategic pillar of US policy. In his reports back to Washington throughout 1977 and the bulk of 1978 Sullivan remained positive about the Shah’s chances of weathering a visibly deteriorating political situation. Whilst in Washington in June 1978 for an arms policy review, Sullivan informed Carter that the Shah faced a rough

period ahead but that he should come through it.³⁶ This was a line that Sullivan consistently clung to right up until the end of October 1978 when the change in tone of his telegrams back to Washington prompted the crisis meetings of the Special Coordination Committee (SCC).

Sharp criticism of Sullivan's role in protecting the Shah's status-quo came from James D. Cockcroft, an academic from Rutgers University who had been involved in producing a report for the International Commission of Inquiry investigating human rights violations in Iran. In a letter to Henry Precht at the State Department, Cockcroft outlined how he was left "incredulous" by Sullivan, "whose rosy picture of things even pro-government newspapers contradicted," and for the "cocky determination" he demonstrated in consistently reaffirming that the US stood firmly behind the Shah, believing he was headed in the right direction.³⁷

During a difficult November and December, relations between the White House and Sullivan were often strained, to the point where Vice President Mondale even questioned whether he was the right man to be in Tehran.³⁸ Things did not improve in the New Year. The primary reason for Carter sending General Huyser to Iran was that he and Defense Secretary Brown felt Sullivan was unable to provide the US with adequate reports from the Iranian military.³⁹ The president had lost any remaining faith in Sullivan long before the ambassador sent a cable in January 1979 which contained highly contemptuous criticism of Carter's leadership. Carter would have fired Sullivan sooner but for Vance's insistence that it was the wrong time to put a new man into such a turbulent situation.⁴⁰ Brzezinski focuses his criticism of Sullivan on what he describes as a watering down of actual US policy, part of his wider condemnation of the State Department as a whole, and for not explicitly urging the Shah to be tough.⁴¹

While the President's patience with Sullivan extended into the New Year, Brzezinski's had clearly run out much earlier. He was unimpressed with the Ambassador's efforts to stiffen the Shah's resolve and his portrayal of the US government's position. Brzezinski has stated in his memoirs that "by and large" US policy during the Iranian crisis was more reflective of his theoretical approach and concerns, even though the State Department remained publicly more ambiguous;⁴²

hence his concern that Sullivan and US diplomats were not giving strong enough advice to the Shah along the lines he intended.⁴³ Henry Precht, the State Department's Iran desk officer lambasted by Brzezinski for being anti-Shah,⁴⁴ offers a similar assessment of the mixed message the Shah was receiving from Washington – soft from the Embassy and State Department, yet hard from the NSC.⁴⁵

While Sullivan is, as shall be made clear, far from the only one to blame for failings in the US handling of the crisis, the collapse of the link between the White House and the US Embassy in Tehran proved extremely detrimental to the Carter administration. Precht admits that the distrust and personal antagonism between the White House and Embassy contributed in a major way to the inability of the US to formulate an accurate analysis of the situation.⁴⁶ Opinions on Sullivan's role during the Iranian revolution vary greatly depending on the authors; for example, Brzezinski's memoirs include few if any favourable words for Sullivan, while Vance's are naturally far more positive. In fairness to Sullivan, once he belatedly abandoned the idea that supporting the Shah was the only viable option for the US he and others at State advocated reaching out to the various opposition groups, including Ayatollah Khomeini, in order to aid the transition to a new government. The other important aspect to consider is that he was pitched into direct confrontation with the administration's ascendant and domineering foreign policy personality in Brzezinski, a battle he was always destined to lose.

The Special Coordination Committee (SCC) and Iran

The group within the US government which took responsibility for considering situations such as that developing in Iran was the NSC's Special Coordination Committee (SCC). This body, established under a different title by President Eisenhower in the mid-1950s and reformed by subsequent presidents, was responsible for dealing with special activities and sensitive foreign intelligence operations. It became the SCC following Carter's Executive Order 11985 issued in March 1977 and its role was further refined in Executive Order 12036 in January 1978; the group, chaired by Brzezinski but including the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the DCI among others, was required to "submit to the President a policy recommendation, including all dissents, on each special activity."⁴⁷

On 2 November 1978, perhaps somewhat belatedly, Brzezinski called the first SCC meeting on Iran. The purpose of the meeting was to determine the US government's response to Sullivan's feedback from his meetings with the Shah, which now highlighted grave concerns and were indicating that the Shah was considering abdicating or installing a military led regime. The administration faced lots of other foreign policy issues at the time and even though this was the first SCC meeting dedicated specifically to the Iranian problem, Gary Sick points out that the people who attended saw each other nearly every day, certainly two or three times a week in meetings, so it was not as if there was a lack of communication.⁴⁸

The NSC's preparation for the meeting, or rather its 'checklist', demonstrates how Brzezinski wanted the US to adopt his favoured policy of showing strong support for the Shah and encouraging him to exert his authority once again. The notes examine the coalition versus military government debate, concluding that such a decision is "the Shah's call"; they list ideas and advice for a possible political counteroffensive – such as disassociating himself from past excesses, giving examples of positive economic and social developments, and confronting Khomeini by exposing his "lack of program". The 'checklist' also suggests that consideration be given as to how the US could improve its intelligence collection in Iran and also the possible oil implications, in particular the negative effect on Israel – which was heavily reliant on Iranian oil.⁴⁹ Brzezinski had established, through conversations with Sullivan, Zahedi and his French counterpart that the Shah required an immediate boost in morale and will; he also sought Vance's approval of the line he favoured the SCC to adopt prior to the meeting.⁵⁰

Those present in the Situation Room for the hour long SCC meeting were Brzezinski, Aaron and Sick from the NSC; Christopher representing the State Department in Vance's absence; Defense Secretary Harold Brown; General David Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and CIA Director Stansfield Turner. Brzezinski quite clearly dominated the meeting, asserting his view that the US government "supports the Shah without reservation" but that it would leave specific decisions, such as what type of government to form, up to him. Of those present at the meeting, only Christopher and Turner were prepared to challenge some of Brzezinski's proposals and debate the question of which option the US would prefer given the choice; a

military or a coalition government. This issue made the wording of the message to be delivered to the Shah by Sullivan particularly important; Christopher was concerned that the phrase “need for action” implied that the US favoured a military government over a coalition. Brzezinski and Aaron claimed this was not the intention, and that they were trying to get across the need for greater authority and leadership on the Shah’s part.⁵¹ The phrase was ultimately left in the final message which was sent from the White House to Sullivan. The text of the message also included a note for the Ambassador indicating that “a military government under the Shah is overwhelmingly preferable to a military government without the Shah.”⁵²

In Vance’s absence, it was Warren Christopher who sought to challenge the NSC’s attempts to convey a message to the Shah that suggested Carter and the US government were favouring the military solution over all others. The battle lines between the State Department and the NSC were already being drawn in this first SCC meeting concerning Iran. Brzezinski was the driving force behind the military option; he felt strongly that the Shah had to survive in order to maintain regional stability and that the only way he could do so was by cracking down.

Looking back at the Iranian crisis having left office and even still today, Brzezinski is remarkably candid about his position – as can be seen in a recent interview conducted for a BBC television series:

“Iran at the time was in a sense a lynchpin to political stability backed by us in this part of the world. And we were concerned that if the Shah falls the whole thing could become extremely unstable, not just in Iran but in the region.”

By November 1978 it was clear to Brzezinski that the Shah could not handle the situation, at which point he told Carter they ought to explore the attitude of the Iranian military. He believed Iran was facing a crisis and needed to respond; “first you re-establish order, thereby asserting your authority and then shortly thereafter initiate reforms having proven you are in charge.” The institutional struggle at the top of US foreign policy making was also apparent in Brzezinski’s thinking; he was concerned that Sullivan and the State Department would “stampede the Shah into pell-mell reforms” which he felt would destabilise the country.⁵³ Brzezinski formed his concrete position early on in the crisis and proceeded to spend the following months

reinforcing his views to Carter, other senior figures in the US government, and – through his close contact Zahedi – the Shah himself.

Criticism for the ponderous way in which the Carter administration handled the emerging Iranian problem could point to the fact that it took until the beginning of November 1978 before the SCC, a group established to deal with special circumstances and manage the US response to crisis situations, finally met to discuss Iran. Even Gaddis Smith, who generally portrays Carter's foreign policy sympathetically, believes the administration was slow to realise the seriousness of the Iranian situation and was hampered by conflicting voices in Washington and a lack of policy coordination.⁵⁴

The straightforward explanation for the failure to call a high-level policy meeting on Iran until this point was that there had been no apparent need to. It should be remembered that the SCC meeting was called at this time in response to the sudden change in tone of Sullivan's cables from Tehran.⁵⁵ The first anxious telegram on 2 November 1978 was long overdue, coming as it did two months after the Jaleh Square incident and after weeks and weeks of growing street demonstrations and marches. Sick describes Sullivan as "a sort of cheerleader for the Shah" and maintains that his 2 November cable produced what he had been trying to prevent up until that point – a high-level policy meeting in Washington; inferring that Sullivan did not want White House involvement in Iran.⁵⁶

Less than a week later Sullivan's notorious 'Thinking the Unthinkable' telegram arrived in Washington.⁵⁷ It was prompted by his attendance at a cocktail party with Deputy Ambassador Charles Naas (they were the only two Americans present that evening), during which members of the Iranian military command seemed unwilling to acknowledge political problems or disorder, despite the circumstances surrounding them with martial law having been imposed and the country in turmoil. Sullivan hoped that sending the telegram would stimulate an extensive review of Iranian policy, but Naas readily admits that the message could have "been much more direct".⁵⁸ President Carter and his advisors were of course being briefed about the events taking place in Iran throughout the summer and autumn months of 1978 but during this period there was still, as highlighted previously, an altogether too rosy

picture being painted by Sullivan among others. Until the Ambassador's about-turn there had been no pressing need to bring together the relevant agencies for emergency discussions about the future of American interests in Iran.

The sociologist Said Amir Arjomand goes further in claiming that the first high-level meeting on Iran actually marked the point at which American confusion became apparent.⁵⁹ He argues that up until this point, no contradictory messages had reached Tehran and the Shah was clear from his discussions with Sullivan that the US government did not favour a military solution – which Carter did not – and that it favoured a modernisation programme. It was after the first SCC meeting that Brzezinski contacted the Shah to assure him of US backing in the event of a military crackdown;⁶⁰ the US was now telling Tehran different things from two different voices.

This argument is backed up by Zahedi's recollections of the Shah's state of mind during this period. He recalls that the Shah did not know who to believe and was confused as to what exactly American policy was; he was receiving advice from Sullivan to continue with the liberalisation programme, yet some American officials in Washington felt he should act more decisively. As a result, the Shah did not know whether to believe his own Ambassador in Washington or the US Ambassador in Tehran.⁶¹

The Shah's address to the nation on 6 November, in which he repeated his oath to protect Iran's territorial integrity and conceded that previous mistakes and corruption would not be repeated,⁶² was most likely a response to the US advice that emerged from the initial SCC meetings. In the face of damaging strikes and labour unrest that was becoming more politicised and anti-foreign in nature, Washington now understood that its own public posture was a particularly delicate issue. Questions from the media had so far met with strong public statements of support for the Shah from the White House. In a memo to Brzezinski, Gary Sick noted how their statements in support of the Shah had been counterproductive, making him appear like a puppet taking orders from Washington and that the US should maintain a low profile and restrict itself to private diplomacy.⁶³ Sick's concerns are representative of Carter's steadfast commitment not to exert any undue influence over Iranian internal

affairs and his desire that the US should avoid actions which could create additional problems for the Shah and his attempts to form a new government.

As labour unrest continued and the internal policy debate in Washington reached an impasse at the end of November, Treasury Secretary Michael Blumenthal recommended that George Ball, a former Under Secretary of State who had opposed the Vietnam War, be brought in to carry out a review of existing US policy.⁶⁴ Ball presented his findings to President Carter a couple of weeks later. He offered criticism of previous US policy (the Nixon Doctrine); noted that the Shah could not survive in a position of absolute power; advocated the transfer of power to a civilian coalition government through a 'council of notables'; and stressed the danger of delay and indecision.⁶⁵ The report relied heavily on the State Department as its main source of information and thus it was no real surprise that Ball identified Brzezinski as part of the problem with US policy making.⁶⁶ However, Ball's analysis garnered little support in Washington – where only Christopher gave it strong backing – and he was proposing such a disparate group of 'notables' that Sullivan and the US Embassy felt the plan was unworkable.⁶⁷ Carter's rationale for rejecting the plan was consistent with his earlier actions – he would not force the Shah's hand by telling him what to do; in effect, Carter was accepting part of Ball's analysis, namely that the Shah's regime could not survive in its existing form. The report had also emphasised the need for urgency and this was all too quickly becoming apparent to the policymakers in Washington.

Contingency planning

The intelligence shortcomings in the lead up to the Iranian revolution did, as previously detailed, put the Carter administration on the back foot. Once the enormity of the problem became apparent, the US government had to draw up a series of actions and responses it would need to take if the now much anticipated political and social upheaval in Iran came to fruition. Aside from the obvious strategic impact and loss of a long-time ally in the Shah, Carter had to consider the potential military security implications if a new and less pro-Washington government took control. There were also significant civilian concerns to factor in. Billions of dollars of US money had been invested in Iran, much of it in the oil industry, and there were around 500 US firms with plants or offices in the country. The substantial American business

presence in Iran naturally meant there were also large numbers of US citizens working and living in Iran – estimated to be as many as 41,000 (including dependants) by the late 1970s – and their safety was of paramount importance.⁶⁸

The willingness of successive US administrations to sell some of the Pentagon's most advanced weaponry, combined with the Shah's gratuitous spending habits meant that Iran was home to masses of sensitive military equipment by the end of 1978. The Shah's lavish military purchases had placed serious strains on the Iranian economy, as can be seen in the huge rise in Iranian food import needs in the late 1970s; the CIA predicted that at some stage he would have to curb military goods imports in order to prevent a payments crunch.⁶⁹ However, the instability of the Iranian economy was not the US government's primary concern; it had to consider how developments in Iran were being viewed in Moscow – the fear being that the Soviets would seek to exploit the economic, political and social difficulties in Iran, and in doing so gain access to valuable US military secrets. Such security issues were readily discussed during the SCC meetings from November 1978 onwards and fears were also raised over the long-term safety of the CIA's Tacksman signals intelligence sites in northern Iran.

A memo sent by Gary Sick to Brzezinski in December 1978 discussed the types of sensitive military equipment that would need to be considered for removal and/or destruction in the event of a serious crisis in Iran. Interestingly enough, the recommendation was that Erich von Marbod, the Pentagon official who managed a similar operation in South Vietnam, should take on the task. The comparison with South Vietnam, all but abandoned by the US government in the mid-1970s, is obviously one that Brzezinski was keen to avoid. Sick's memo also sheds light on the NSC's aggressive effort to influence the decision making process; he indicates that Deputy Defense Secretary Charles Duncan was against the appointment of von Marbod for "bureaucratic reasons" and suggests that both Brzezinski and Aaron should encourage Duncan to change his mind; whilst he also criticises Defense Secretary Brown for not handling the issue himself.⁷⁰

The State Department was quick to recognise the potential dangers of such a large American presence in a country undergoing significant social, economic and political upheaval. Right from the beginning of November, as the Carter administration was

seeking to grasp the gravity of the situation, State Department officials raised the issue during policy meetings. Not surprisingly this irked Brzezinski, who was more anxious to discuss the wider strategic implications. He claims to have attended a Policy Review Committee (PRC) meeting in early November – note that Vance chaired PRC meetings, instead of the SCC meetings which were chaired by Brzezinski – during which his State Department colleagues were preoccupied with the evacuation of Americans from Iran. Brzezinski was concerned, at this early stage, that this would send the wrong signal to both the Shah and his opponents; namely that the US was beginning to pull out.⁷¹ This was a valid point to make at a time when the administration itself seemed both confused and divided over its own policy, yet as things began to deteriorate even further these were safety matters that the US government could not fail to act on.

By the beginning of December the first signs of anti-Americanism were starting to emerge from the demonstrations and violence taking place not just in Tehran, but in other cities across the country. There were numerous instances of American citizens having their homes bombed, American-owned vehicles being burnt, and oppositionists were even being urged by some mullahs to destroy American property.⁷² Vance's reports to the President led the State Department to consider the safety of Americans living in Iran urgently; a matter of days later the US government recommended that dependants of official US personnel be permitted to leave the country.

The situation had only degenerated further by the turn of the year, and Vance now warned disturbingly that anti-Americanism had reached its highest level yet.⁷³ So began the process of removing American civilians en masse; by the end of January 1979 the evacuation had become less of a precaution and more of a necessity. On the 29 January, Vance ordered all military and civilian 'non-essential' employees and dependents to leave the country and advised members of the American private community to do likewise.⁷⁴ This was by no means an easy task for the US government to undertake thanks to the sheer size of the American presence in Iran and the ongoing political uncertainty. The scale of the evacuation can be seen in that over three and a half thousand American citizens left Iran in the space of just a few days in

February, leaving behind hundreds more who did not wish to depart (including dual-nationals and those married to Iranians).⁷⁵

There was considerable congressional interest in the protection of American citizens in Iran, particularly considering the numbers involved. Towards the end of February, Under Secretary David Newsom faced a House of Representatives subcommittee to answer questions on evacuation plans and crisis management. He put special emphasis on the fact that almost 45,000 Americans had already been withdrawn from Iran in very difficult conditions.⁷⁶ The difficult conditions Newsom was referring to stemmed from the public perception of the American role in controlling Iranian affairs under the Shah, a myth that was being perpetuated by those groups opposed to the Shah, increasingly so since Khomeini's return from exile. This was confirmed by the former Iranian Prime Minister General Gholam Reza Azhari, who explained that the extreme anti-Americanism grew from the opposition's constant public reiteration of the CIA role in Mossadeq's overthrow and the subsequent CIA role in training and support of SAVAK.⁷⁷ The simmering nature of Iranian public discontent with the 'American imperialists' was gradually building towards its crescendo in November 1979.

The 'iron fist': Debates over military intervention

Debates concerning alternative means by which the Carter administration might have handled the Iranian crisis invariably centre on what Brzezinski famously labelled the 'iron fist' solution. The basic premise of this option was that the US would encourage and back a military intervention by Iranian forces to keep the Shah in power and suppress the revolution. This type of covert action was hardly alien to United States military and security forces during the Cold War; over the years there had been involvement in the Philippines, Guatemala, and Indonesia among others, not to mention the CIA's role in the overthrow of Mossadeq back in 1953. Proponents of the 'iron fist' within the administration, led by chief advocate Brzezinski, argued that the only way for the Shah's regime to survive was to crackdown on the public unrest to restore some kind of political and economic order before the country descended into further chaos and uncertainty.

Whilst he supported the Shah in principle, President Carter was personally uneasy with the idea of supporting, tacitly of course not publicly, the use of violence and potentially lethal force to sustain the regime. Carter has reaffirmed this in a recent interview in which he states that the administration's presumption was that the Shah staying in power would be the best strategic outcome for the US, but that "*our intention was never that the Shah would use abusive tactics against his own people in order to maintain calm.*"⁷⁸ This neatly sums up the foremost difficulty facing the Carter administration; how to maintain its support for an ailing regime when, according to its stated human rights principles, it should have been condemning the Shah's methods.

In the face of considerable domestic pressure and with his previous attempts to establish control having been ineffective, the Shah finally opted for a military government led by General Gholam Reza Azhari on 6 November 1978 – news which greatly relieved an increasingly anxious Brzezinski, who hoped that the Shah was finally facing up to the crisis and asserting his leadership.⁷⁹ Despite trying to impose martial law, the US embassy reported that the new government had little initial impact on the debilitating strike action that was damaging the country.⁸⁰ The inability of the military was not a positive sign, particularly for those within the US government who were pushing for a show of military strength as the favoured option. Brzezinski claims that the Shah himself was hampering the military regime, firstly by not empowering it to crack down firmly and secondly by releasing political prisoners and then assessing their willingness to participate in a coalition government.⁸¹

The assumption being made by Brzezinski and others in Washington – not including President Carter of course – was that the Iranian military could successfully suppress the opposition forces. The feasibility of this supposition has to be called into question. For a start, there were serious doubts surrounding the ability and mindset of the Iranian military – both in terms of its morale and its loyalty to the monarchy. Much to Brzezinski's annoyance, this was the concern of those closely monitoring events in the US embassy and the State Department. Charles Naas, the deputy US Ambassador, laughed at the idea that a military government could end the disorder and the killing when it would have to slaughter hundreds of people in order to retain control. He believes the US government was hinting to the Shah that he *should* crackdown but

that he could not expect them to do it for him.⁸² While they regularly clashed over Iranian policy at the time, both Henry Precht and Gary Sick agree that a military coup would ultimately have failed.⁸³

Apart from the uneasiness about the true extent of military support, the Carter administration also had to factor in the flagging personal leadership of the Shah if it was to seriously consider backing a move to use military force. Ultimately it was the Shah's decision to make, not Carter's, and there is plenty of available evidence to suggest that he lacked the will to initiate the 'iron fist'. The chief of the Iranian Navy, Admiral Kamal Habibolahi, presented the Shah with proposals from the military commanders to end the chaos but he took no action.⁸⁴ His wife Empress Farah Pahlavi maintains that her husband did not want to keep his throne "at the cost of shedding the blood of his people."⁸⁵

By late November, Naas and the US embassy staff were convinced that the Shah meant what he had been saying and that he was not prepared to cause a bloodbath by cracking down – he would rather give up his throne if it came down to it.⁸⁶ The Shah was now frequently expressing this position to Ambassador Sullivan and his British counterpart, Anthony Parsons. In a meeting with Parsons at the beginning of December, the Shah once again dismissed such a possibility.⁸⁷ Even though the Shah had evidently made up his mind, the ambiguity of the US position, exacerbated by the conflicting advice of the Brzezinski-Zahedi channel and the US embassy, caused him to repeatedly question his own judgement.

There was a potential civil war brewing and the one unifying element of those Iranian citizens protesting on the streets was that they were all anti-Shah. As a third party looking in from afar with their own strategic interests of foremost concern, Carter and the US faced an extremely awkward dilemma. There were really only two available options; work to broker a political settlement or sanction a military crackdown against the Iranian people. As Bill Daugherty has observed, if anyone thinks the aftermath of 1979 was disastrous for the US, they should try imagining how the Iranians would have felt if Brzezinski had talked Carter into giving the Shah the green light to massacre his own people – a move that may well not even have stopped the revolution in the long run.⁸⁸ The Shah later changed his position, admitting in his memoirs that

Brzezinski's approach had been the right one,⁸⁹ but he only took such a stance when he was no longer faced with the fear of the consequences of such action. Ultimately, the Shah lacked the conviction or the desire to go down this route and when he looked to the US for guidance he saw a president who, despite Brzezinski's protestations, remained lukewarm about backing the use of force to quell popular discontent.

Towards the end of 1978 an increasingly bleak picture of the situation was emerging in Washington, yet the Carter administration was not united in seeing it that way. The findings of the two leading US academic experts on Iran, James Bill and Marvin Zonis who had visited the country to assess the crisis, should have sent a stark warning that the Shah's days were numbered. They found an "intense rage" amongst the public for the Shah personally, and both agreed they saw only a "slim chance" that he could retain a minimal role as a constitutional monarch; they characterised the opposition movement as strong and very well organised; and interestingly, they also found amongst a wide range of Iranian contacts an eagerness for the US to play a decisive role in promoting a political solution to Iran's crisis.⁹⁰ The views of Bill and Zonis certainly contrasted to some of the US embassy's own reporting at the same time. Reports that magnified the news of pro-Shah rallies across Tehran, such as one on the 13 December,⁹¹ gave those in Washington arguing that the US cling to the Shah an exaggerated sense of his public support.

The Shah's desperate attempts to form a new government and retain the monarchy continued to flounder and it was becoming clear that Khomeini and other opposition leaders were not willing to agree to a solution which allowed the Shah to remain in Iran. He had asked Gholam Hosein Sadiqi, an ageing former minister who had served in the Mossadeq era, to try to form a civilian government.⁹² However, Sadiqi was not able to put together a cabinet, thus forcing the Shah to reconsider his increasingly limited options. When Ambassador Sullivan met with the Shah on Boxing Day 1978 the Shah was still procrastinating about what course of action to take, mulling over whether or not to give Sadiqi the additional six weeks he needed in order to finalise a new cabinet – it was left to Sullivan to explain that "Iran could not afford another six weeks of drift."⁹³ The Shah claimed his last remaining option was to install a hard line military regime that would almost certainly initiate a brutal repression of the uprising.

Once again he enquired as to Washington's feelings on such a move; once more Sullivan asserted that Carter and the US could not make such a decision for Iran.⁹⁴

Debate and discussion within the administration about how the US should respond continued with Brzezinski and Vance in disagreement over the nature of the message. Arjomand sees the 28 December telegram sent to the Shah as a perfect example of the lack of policy coherence on the part of the Carter administration; the Shah was advised to begin the transition to a coalition government, but to also think about resorting to military action if this could not be achieved.⁹⁵ It is interesting to note that Brzezinski and Vance both claim a compromise victory in this debate in their respective memoirs; they were essentially competing to win the President's ear and in doing so shape US policy in two very different directions.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

¹ Cable, Sullivan to State Department, 9 November 1978, Doc 01711, Fiche 279, *Iran: The Making of US Policy, 1977-1980* (National Security Archive) microfiche collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

² Sick, *All Fall Down*, p. 173.

³ Alexander Moens, 'President Carter's Advisers and the Fall of the Shah', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (Summer 1991) pp. 221-22.

⁴ For more see William Stivers, *America's Confrontation with Revolutionary Change in the Middle East, 1948-83* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986) pp. 77-78.

⁵ Interview with Vice President Walter Mondale p. 7, (6/16), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

⁶ Memo, Christopher to Carter, 7 August 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 8/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷ Memo, Sick to Brzezinski, 12 August 1978, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Country, Iran 8/77-8/78, Box 28, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸ See Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 325.

⁹ Memo, Christopher to Carter, 8 September 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 9/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹⁰ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 361.

¹¹ Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, pp. 214-215. Rubin notes that the events at Jaleh Square changed the views of some of the better informed American officials, including Henry Precht at the State Department. However, he also acknowledges that this turnabout was a gradual process and that no one pressed such doubts on their superiors nor did they voice the opinion that the Shah might fall.

¹² BBC1 Programme Script, p. 2, (1/1), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

¹³ BBC1 Programme Script, p. 2, (1/1), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

¹⁴ Interview with Abolhassan Bani-Sadr p. 6, (4/6), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

¹⁵ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 30 November 1978, NLC-1-8-6-43-9, Jimmy Carter Library.

- ¹⁶ Memo, Christopher to Carter, 24 October 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 10/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ¹⁷ Stivers, *America's Confrontation with Revolutionary Change*, pp. 77-78.
- ¹⁸ For more see Jerel A. Rosati, *The Carter Administration's Quest for Global Community: Beliefs and Their Impact on Behavior* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987) pp. 58-65.
- ¹⁹ Rosati, *The Carter Administration's Quest for Global Community*, p. 113.
- ²⁰ Rosati, *The Carter Administration's Quest for Global Community*, p. 115. Brzezinski's famous quote about Vance is taken from Michael P. Sullivan, *The Vietnam War: A Study in the Making of American Policy* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1985) p. 166.
- ²¹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 363.
- ²² 'Crisis in Iran', *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 November 1978, Zbigniew Brzezinski Material – Country File, Iran 11/78, Box 29, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ²³ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 362.
- ²⁴ Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency*, p. 17. Carter made clear his belief that the US "...cannot control events within other nations."
- ²⁵ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 447.
- ²⁶ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 328.
- ²⁷ Interview with Vice President Walter Mondale pp. 1-2, (6/16), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ²⁸ Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, p. 189.
- ²⁹ Memo, Christopher to Carter, 13 September 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 9/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ³⁰ Memo, Vance to Carter, 24 November 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 11/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ³¹ Memo, Vance to Carter, 27 November 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 11/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ³² Interview with Ardeshir Zahedi, p. 35, (4/17), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ³³ William H. Sullivan, 'Dateline Iran: The Road Not Taken', *Foreign Policy*, No. 40 (Autumn, 1980), p. 178.
- ³⁴ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 328.
- ³⁵ Interview with Gary Sick p. 17, (6/26), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ³⁶ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 325.
- ³⁷ Letter, James D. Cockcroft to Henry Precht, 15 November 1978, Doc 01737, Fiche 283, *Iran: The Making of US Policy, 1977-1980* (National Security Archive) microfiche collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ³⁸ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 368.
- ³⁹ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 451.
- ⁴⁰ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 454.
- ⁴¹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 356.
- ⁴² Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 356.
- ⁴³ Interview with Vice President Walter Mondale p. 3, (6/16), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁴⁴ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 355.
- ⁴⁵ Henry Precht, E-mail response to author's questions, September 2010.
- ⁴⁶ Precht, E-mail, September 2010.
- ⁴⁷ Jimmy Carter: 'Executive Order 12036 - United States Foreign Intelligence Activities', 24 January 1978. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=31100> [accessed February 2010].
- ⁴⁸ Interview with Gary Sick p. 6, (6/26), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁴⁹ Documents, 'Checklist for SCC Meeting' and 'Checklist... Other Issues', 2 November 1978, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC 112: 11/2/78], Box 29, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁵⁰ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 363.
- ⁵¹ Minutes, SCC Meeting, 2 November 1978, Vertical Files, Iran, Box 67, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁵² Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 364.

- ⁵³ Interview with Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, p. 1, (6/5), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁵⁴ Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, p. 187.
- ⁵⁵ See Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 362 for more details.
- ⁵⁶ Interview with Gary Sick pp. 4-5, (6/26), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁵⁷ See the quote from Sullivan's 'Thinking the Unthinkable' cable at the beginning of this chapter.
- ⁵⁸ Interview with Charles Naas pp. 12-14, (6/17), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁵⁹ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, pp. 128-129.
- ⁶⁰ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 129.
- ⁶¹ Interview questions – points to film with Ardeshir Zahedi, pp. 3-4, (8/3/8), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁶² News Letter from the Imperial Embassy of Iran, Translation of the Shah's address to the Iranian nation, 6 November 1978, Brzezinski Material – Country File, Iran 11/78, Box 29, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁶³ Memo, Sick to Brzezinski, 6 November 1978, Vertical Files, Iran, Box 67, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁶⁴ Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 235.
- ⁶⁵ Ball report summary, undated, Plains Subject File, Iran Undated, Box 23, Jimmy Carter Library; also see Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, pp. 252-53.
- ⁶⁶ Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, pp. 189-90.
- ⁶⁷ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 253; Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 236.
- ⁶⁸ 'Iran: Carter's Biggest Crisis' *US News & World Report*, p. 26, 15 January 1979, Vertical File, Iran, Box 67, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁶⁹ Memo, Brzezinski to Carter, 23 September 1978, NLC-1-7-9-25-7, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁷⁰ Memo, Sick to Brzezinski (with attached memo from Sick to Aaron, 19 December 1978), 22 December 1978, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC 123: 12/13/78], Box 29, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁷¹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 366.
- ⁷² Memo, Vance to Carter, 2 December 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 12/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁷³ Memo, Vance to Carter, 26 December 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 12/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁷⁴ Memo, Vance to Carter, 29 January 1979, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 1/79, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁷⁵ Memo, Christopher to Carter, 22 February 1979, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 2/79, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁷⁶ Memo, Vance to Carter, 26 February 1979, NLC-7-21-3-6-2, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁷⁷ Memo, Rear Admiral Thor Hansen to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 8 February 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Geographic File, Iran – Meetings [on: 11/2/78-1/31/79], Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁷⁸ Interview with President Jimmy Carter, pp. 2-3, (6/7), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁷⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 366.
- ⁸⁰ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 7 November 1978, NLC-1-8-4-36-9, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁸¹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 371.
- ⁸² Interview with Charles Naas, pp. 16-17, (6/17), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁸³ See Precht, E-mail, September 2010; and Interview with Gary Sick, pp. 17-20, (6/26), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁸⁴ BBC1 Programme Script, p. 5, (1/1), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁸⁵ Interview with Shahbanou Farah p. 15, (4/7), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁸⁶ Interview with Charles Naas, p. 23, (6/17), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁸⁷ Memo, Vance to Carter, 5 December 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 12/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁸⁸ Daugherty, Interview and e-mail, March/April 2008.

⁸⁹ Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, p. 189.

⁹⁰ Memo, Christopher to Carter, 14 December 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 12/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁹¹ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 13 December 1978, NLC-1-8-8-34-7, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁹² Memo, Vance to Carter, 18 December 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 12/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁹³ Memo, Vance to Carter, 26 December 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 12/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁹⁴ Memo, Vance to Carter, 26 December 1978, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 12/78, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁹⁵ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 130

Reacting to Iran: US responses 1979

In January 1979 President Carter made a pair of crucial decisions as the US sought a decisive response to the emerging political crisis in Iran. Firstly, he chose to send General Robert E. 'Dutch' Huyser of the US military to Tehran in an effort to stabilise an already turbulent situation; and secondly, he determined that the US would offer public support for the new government of Shapour Bakhtiar, established by the Shah in a last ditch attempt to stave off revolution prior to his exile, as Ayatollah Khomeini prepared to return.

This chapter seeks to challenge the standard interpretation that sees Carter's handling of Iran in this period as a foreign policy shambles. Instead, having been faced with a desperately difficult situation, Carter actually chose the right course in rejecting a potentially disastrous military intervention and trying to offer US backing for a post-Shah order in Iran – even if this ultimately proved unattainable.

The Carter White House was not helped by the breakdown in relations with its own diplomats in Iran, but there were errors of judgement on the part of the administration, as questions over the purpose and timing of the Huyser mission indicate. However, Carter's policies and actions were not responsible for the fall of the Shah or Ayatollah Khomeini's triumphant return from exile and later establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran; there was nothing Carter could have done differently to control events in Iran contrary to the belief of some. The reality was that Carter possessed very limited options, none of which had particularly favourable outcomes; add to this the consistent disagreements amongst his principal foreign policy advisors over Iranian strategy and it really was a no-win situation for the president.

The Guadeloupe calls

With the situation unresolved and the Shah's fate still in the balance at the start of 1979, President Carter headed to the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe to attend an important quadripartite summit. Here Carter met his European counterparts, British Prime Minister James Callaghan, French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and

German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt; to discuss international political and security developments. Yet Iran remained the foremost concern for the US government and, even though he was away from Washington, the President was certainly not out of the loop, receiving regular updates from Secretary Vance and Vice President Mondale on Sullivan's increasingly fraught meetings in Tehran.

As Carter was arriving in Guadeloupe, the Shah was busy appointing yet another Prime Minister in a last ditch effort to establish a constitutional monarchy with national support; this time the choice was long-time political opponent and critic Dr. Shapour Bakhtiar. Bakhtiar was a former junior minister during the Mossadeq era and an influential figure in the National Front movement, who had even been imprisoned for his opposition to the monarchy. Even though he was a western educated liberal, as a former leader of the resistance movement his appointment was meant to appease Khomeini and the opposition leaders. Bakhtiar made it very clear that he would not form a government unless the Shah agreed to leave Iran.¹ While the Shah ultimately agreed, he remained highly sceptical of Bakhtiar's chances of securing support and clung on to control of the Defence Ministry and the military budget.²

Carter's handwritten notes of the telephone calls he received from Vance and Mondale while in Guadeloupe help to highlight two important factors; firstly, the consistent indecision and frailty of the Shah's leadership, which has been discussed previously; and secondly, Carter's own apprehension about the likely impact and bloodshed that would result from a military takeover. Vance and Mondale called the president twice on the evening of 4 January, the first day of the summit, to inform him of the latest developments. Iran's top military leaders had told Sullivan they would not permit the Shah to leave and they planned to initiate a coup to 'clean up' Iran and end the violence, but they would allow Bakhtiar to form a government. Vance warned against this move, while Mondale believed that the Shah was now leaning in favour of a military takeover. Carter instructed Vance to find out definitively what the Shah's attitude towards a coup was and not to consult with the Iranian military until after Carter was able to assess the Shah's opinion and intentions.³ Brzezinski recalls Vance calling in a "state of considerable agitation" over the Iranian military's apparent readiness to move and that he himself was dismayed that Vance and Mondale "would actually wish to prevent what was clearly in the collective interest of the West."⁴

After conveying the president's message to the Shah via Sullivan, Vance reported back the next day to Carter in Guadeloupe. The Shah was fully aware of the coup group and their plans – it had in fact been set up at his own suggestion – but he was also willing to support Bakhtiar and would leave Iran in the next few days. He was essentially seeking US cooperation and blessing for the coup; Sullivan argued the US should support the military provided they support Bakhtiar and felt strongly that the new Prime Minister had no chance of surviving unless the Shah departed the scene.⁵ In the event nothing happened as the Shah and the military pondered and dawdled without taking authoritative action – much to the frustration of Brzezinski. Such was the weakness of the Shah's position, he was forced into finally accepting that he would have to seal his own fate and agree to Bakhtiar's demand that he abdicate and leave the country.

There was little Carter could have done to force the Shah's hand one way or another even if he had wanted to. Granted he was concerned that there could be no guarantee of minimising the bloodshed if a coup went ahead,⁶ but he was also aware – and reminded in no uncertain terms by Brzezinski – that he “would shoulder massive historical responsibility” if his administration prevented the Shah from taking the course he deemed necessary.⁷ The opportunity was there for the Shah to grasp if he wished to; instead just over a week later on 16 January he would leave Iran for the final time.

The Huyser mission

A key aspect of the deliberations in Washington in December 1978 and January 1979 concerned the intentions and reliability of the Iranian military. Although President Carter may have hoped that the Shah could stay on in some capacity there was a growing realisation in Washington that such an outcome was becoming ever more unlikely. The focus turned to the Iranian military leadership who had always remained staunchly loyal to their monarch – how would they react if the Shah were to leave?⁸ In the SCC meeting prior to the Guadeloupe Summit, Carter's foreign policy team debated the options available to the US government. There was some discussion over how forcefully the US should press the Shah to step aside, again resulting in a clash between Brzezinski and Vance; the former believed asking the Shah to leave would

be damaging for future US interests.⁹ Such arguments were largely academic anyway since he was on the brink of departure and the decision was made to publicly support Bakhtiar's attempts to establish a civilian government and give it the best chance possible of succeeding.

The often divided Carter administration was united over one issue; Bakhtiar's transitional government needed the backing of the Iranian military in order to function effectively. During the 3 January SCC meeting, Deputy Defense Secretary Charles Duncan suggested that General Robert E. Huyser be sent to Tehran to reassure the Iranian military of continuing US-Iranian military arrangements. General Huyser arrived in Tehran the next day on a specially sanctioned assignment, which has since come to be known as the 'Huyser mission'. Huyser was the Deputy Commander of US forces in Europe at the time, but he possessed considerable experience of Iran having travelled to Tehran on numerous occasions to deal with Iranian military leaders and meet the Shah.¹⁰ In 1978, as the domestic situation in Iran was becoming ever more volatile, Huyser was sent by the Pentagon, at the Shah's request, to assist with the reorganisation of the Iranian military.¹¹ Carter was therefore dispatching a US military figure of authority, a four-star general, who was not only well known to the Shah and respected by the Iranian military, but who should have been well aware of the threats and challenges facing the country from his previous involvement.

The mission almost failed before Huyser had even set foot in Iran. Huyser himself was far from enthusiastic about taking on the role, yet the real problem came courtesy of the violent exception to the whole idea voiced by his superior, General Alexander M. Haig,¹² Richard Nixon's controversial former Chief of Staff who would later become Ronald Reagan's first Secretary of State. Haig's objection to the mission was based on a doctrinal dislike of the Carter administration as much as anything else. Both he and Huyser felt that the US government should have offered firmer backing for the Shah and not allowed the situation to deteriorate in the way it had done by the start of 1979.¹³ Haig clashed with Washington over the mission, criticising its ambiguous objective and its evident political rather than military motivation.¹⁴ Ultimately, both Haig and Huyser were forced to accept the decision and put aside their personal doubts, although this was hardly a promising omen for President Carter.

The rationale behind the Huyser mission has been the source of much debate among those looking back on the Shah's fall from power and there are a number of competing interpretations,¹⁵ with Gaddis Smith claiming that "the precise purpose of his mission was unclear to everyone."¹⁶ The conventional view holds that Huyser was dispatched to ensure the Iranian military would remain supportive of the Bakhtiar government following the Shah's expected departure.¹⁷ This was undoubtedly the way in which Vance, Christopher and the rest of the State Department viewed the mission. Some contend that Huyser's task was to prepare the Iranian military to seize power in a coup; Kenneth Pollack is particularly strident here, casting Huyser as "the new Kim Roosevelt" in reference to the 1953 coup and arguing the decision represented a victory for the NSC position.¹⁸ Charles Naas, Sullivan's deputy at the US embassy, saw the mission as a cross between the two seemingly contradictory responsibilities outlined above.¹⁹ Others claim the real purpose was to make up for the inadequacy of US reporting on the Iranian military's needs and intentions.²⁰ Indeed, Carter acknowledges in his memoirs that both he and Defense Secretary Harold Brown recognised the need for a reliable military source on the ground in Tehran.²¹

There were clearly divided understandings of the Huyser mission from those involved on both sides, American and Iranian.²² Babak Ganji believes it marked the clearest indication yet that the Carter administration had abandoned the Shah; while he is also fiercely critical of the contradictions contained within Huyser's own recollections.²³ However, far from being a sign that the US government had given up on the Shah – remember he had effectively sealed his own fate by accepting Bakhtiar's condition that he leave – the Huyser mission was, in its simplest terms, an attempt by Carter to get a clearer grasp of the political and military situation in Iran. It should hardly be a surprise that those involved in the administration have tended to view the mission very much in terms of their own position; that Vance, Christopher, and Mondale saw it differently to Brzezinski, Brown, Duncan, and Energy Secretary James Schlesinger is merely indicative of the wider policy chasm that had developed within the administration.

Brzezinski in particular hoped that the Huyser mission would be interpreted by the Iranian military as a green light to take firm action.²⁴ This was certainly not Carter's intention as he had consistently viewed a military crackdown as the last and least

favourable resort. Carter has since insisted that the aim was to ensure that the Shah's support was firm and also that Iranian society did not entirely collapse. There was nothing overtly sinister about a US general visiting Tehran; indeed in his explanation Carter stresses the intimate relationship which had long existed between the US and Iranian militaries.²⁵ Yet despite Carter's obvious reluctance toward backing a military solution, there was a degree of uneasiness amongst some of his advisors about the mission's objectives and its public perception. The original intention was that it would be a quiet, non-public attempt to determine what could be done to provide some stability as the government was changed; however the next morning *The Washington Post* broke the story – Mondale believes that this loss of secrecy contributed to a loss of effectiveness for the mission.²⁶

At the very moment Huyser was arriving in Iran the nature of his role was still the source of much concern back in Washington. When Sullivan reported the Iranian military's apparent change of attitude towards a coup, Vance was concerned that Huyser's imminent arrival would indicate a strong American preference for this option, which was not the mission's purpose as he saw it. Vance responded by making a last ditch attempt to water down Huyser's instructions, or at the very least stall his meetings with Iran's military leaders. At Huyser's first meeting with Ambassador Sullivan on 5 January he was handed a cable from the Secretary of State directing him to ignore all previous instructions.²⁷ (In his memoirs, Vance simply recalls a message that emphasised to Sullivan and Huyser the need to encourage the military to give its backing to a pro-Western civilian government.²⁸) Much to Brzezinski's satisfaction, Carter took a firm line when Vance raised his and Mondale's concerns during their Guadeloupe telephone conversation, explaining that he did not wish to change Huyser's orders.²⁹ Not surprisingly, the next message Huyser received from Vance a day later advised him to proceed 'as previously instructed'.³⁰

All the available evidence and recollections of those involved at the time indicate the Huyser mission was in fact a hybrid of all the differing interpretations discussed above. In a practical sense the decision to send Huyser to Tehran can be explained by the fact that the Carter administration, or anyone else for that matter, simply had no way of predicting what the outcome of all the uncertainty in Iran would be. Carter was thus guarding against, and preparing for, a whole variety of possibilities all at the

same time. Sullivan's inability to provide notice of the Iranian military viewpoint was an acknowledged deficiency and the US needed to assess the will and readiness of the military with regard to a possible coup; but at the same time they sought to ensure the forces remained in Iran and loyal to Prime Minister Bakhtiar.

The ambiguity of the mission may not have appealed to Haig, Huyser, and others in the US military, but the practicalities demanded that the US government remain flexible and prepared to adapt its approach as events unfolded. This strategy of deliberate vagueness is highlighted by Washington's reluctance to issue formal written instructions detailing the exact nature of the mission. Huyser found this unacceptable and insisted on receiving written orders before departing for Tehran; when he did finally receive a 'draft' directive the orders were "basic and indefinite", indicating a worrying lack of confidence from the man charged with carrying them out.³¹

Despite the inescapable ambiguity of the mission, the decision to send Huyser to Tehran certainly impacted on US policy towards Iran in a number of ways. Most importantly, it further damaged the already deteriorating relations between Ambassador Sullivan and the White House. Sullivan was resolutely opposed to the mission from the very outset and did not exactly roll out the red carpet to welcome Huyser, who remembers being "put into cold storage on arrival."³² A veteran diplomat with many years experience, Sullivan had already reached his conclusions about the Shah's future and the state of the Iranian military and clearly resented Carter's decision to send a US Army General to run roughshod over his patch. For his part, Huyser quickly realised that any differences of opinion with Sullivan, who was plainly in open disagreement with Washington, were going to complicate his task:

*"It seemed strange to me that I should arrive in Iran with orders from the President to make every effort to help Mr. Bakhtiar, only to hear the President's permanent representative talking of defeat even before the game had started."*³³

Carter has made no secret of the fact that during the Huyser mission he came to rely more on General Huyser's reports than he did on those of the US Ambassador in Tehran. Carter had lost confidence in Sullivan and doubted whether he was actually conveying US policy to the Iranians as instructed. Carter's misgivings were fully

justified; by this stage Sullivan was following his own 'lone-ranger' course, reaching out to the Khomeini camp without seeking Washington's approval.³⁴ As previously mentioned, for the administration the mission's real value was seen in terms of having a reliable source, with insider knowledge of the Iranian military, able to report back to Washington. Huyser's presence was a reassuring one for the President, as he indicated when thanking him for his efforts: "*For my own part, your presence in Iran gave me a sense of relief and confidence... I was never disappointed by you.*"³⁵ Carter would most certainly not have said the same of Sullivan's service during the same period.

In Sullivan's defence, it is easy to see why he took offence to the Carter administration sending in Huyser – the decision provided a clear indication that the White House was querying both the motives and reliability of his reporting and the job being done by the embassy staff in Tehran. Sullivan naturally demanded that Huyser be instructed to coordinate with him; Vance recalls Sullivan being "justifiably perturbed" at the general's appearance on the scene.³⁶ There was a palpable difference in approach between those on the ground and those back in Washington; as Charles Naas puts it, the two were operating on very different wavelengths.³⁷ Sending Huyser over to Tehran seriously undermined Sullivan's position vis-a-vis the Iranian military. Another criticism of Huyser's presence in Iran argues that he was "badly in over his head" and never really understood the country – he travelled around Tehran in a bulletproof vest and spent all of his time with a handful of the Shah's leading generals.³⁸ Similar charges could be directed against numerous US political, military and intelligence personnel serving in Iran during this period – too much of their information and insight was received second-hand and came from establishment figures in the old regime.

While Huyser's presence in Iran may have been welcomed by the White House, it was not so warmly received in the royal residences of Tehran. The Shah was angered when he heard that Huyser had arrived and was meeting with the military and different officials without him knowing³⁹ – there was evidently a lack of communication from Washington. Even though it was still officially committed to backing the Shah, the Carter administration had to, at some stage, begin looking beyond the monarchy – or 'thinking the unthinkable' in Sullivan's words. The formation of the Bakhtiar government had, in effect, signalled the end of the Shah's

regime, yet the monarchy still remained for the time being. Thus the lack of courtesy shown did little to ease the Shah's already fragile state of mind and he was naturally anxious about the conception and purpose of Huyser's visit. Zahedi, still clinging to the idea that the ailing regime could restore order, advised the Shah to expel Huyser and send him back to the US straight away; he claims that some Iranian generals were of the opinion that Huyser had been sent to tell them to obey Bakhtiar from now on, rather than the Shah.⁴⁰

What Huyser was actually seeking to do was convince the military leadership of their responsibilities to the country and the need to remain in Iran if and when the Shah took his much anticipated 'vacation'. After meeting with the four most senior Iranian military figures, General Rabii, General Gharabaghi, General Toufanian, and Admiral Habibolahi on 9 January, Huyser was confident that he had extracted a commitment of sorts that they would support Prime Minister Bakhtiar.⁴¹ As far as Huyser was concerned his job was done; his understanding was that Carter had only wanted him there for a couple of days and he was concerned that if he stayed too long then the generals might become too dependent on him as a conduit to US government thinking.⁴² Yet the decision was taken back in Washington that Huyser would remain in Tehran to monitor the Iranian military and provide the necessary encouragement from the US government to support Bakhtiar.⁴³

Some of the exchanges between Huyser and his bosses at the Pentagon during his now extended period in Tehran hinted at confusion over the nature of his instructions and objectives. One Huyser cable describes a conversation with Brown on 11 January in which the Secretary of Defense raised doubts concerning his understanding of US policy and his instructions.⁴⁴ If Huyser was unclear as to his exact objectives, then they were spelt out very explicitly by Brzezinski in a 19 January memo, which was 'substantially revised' by Carter before it was circulated. This document clearly set out the following: 1) the US commitment to supporting the Bakhtiar government; 2) recognition of the importance of military support for the regime, which should be encouraged; 3) the need for the Bakhtiar government to broaden its support base through dialogue with additional political forces, including the religious elements; and 4) the basic goal remained a stable Iran which would genuinely cooperate with the West.⁴⁵ This was by no means a black and white approach; on the contrary, many

grey areas remained as the administration continued its attempt to cover the spectrum of eventualities.

Prior to dispatching Huyser to Tehran, the idea of sending out a special US representative had first been mooted by Energy Secretary James Schlesinger who, like Brzezinski, was a firm proponent of the view that the US should do all it could to keep the Shah in power. Schlesinger had wanted to send Brzezinski to indicate strong US backing if the Shah were to use the 'iron fist'. It was only following Vance's intervention and insistence that the Shah's days were numbered, that the decision was made to send someone who could keep the Iranian military together rather than a political representative.⁴⁶ Herein lay the crux of the problem, unfortunately the Huyser mission was a political job that needed a military man to carry it out. Huyser himself alludes to this in bemoaning both his lack of access to Bakhtiar and his total ignorance of the rift that developed between Sullivan and the White House during his time in Tehran.⁴⁷ Carter's primary reason for sending Huyser was his lack of confidence in Sullivan's reports on the Iranian military, yet Huyser claims he was unaware this was the case.

The Bakhtiar government: Khomeini waiting in the wings

With the Shah's admission that he had no alternative but to appoint Shapour Bakhtiar as Prime Minister and reluctantly accept his fate, the Carter administration had to follow suit – it was not the US government that was giving up on the Shah, but rather the Shah who was accepting his inevitable defeat by the Iranian people. The new dilemma for the US was how to delicately handle the deposed Shah whilst simultaneously backing the new government. Carter, believing that Bakhtiar could establish a government under the existing constitutional arrangements – that is with the Shah still around, threw the United States' considerable weight behind the new Prime Minister and publicly pledged support.⁴⁸ The State Department, led by Sullivan and Vance, felt strongly that the Shah had to go immediately to give Bakhtiar any realistic chance of succeeding. The challenge for Bakhtiar lay in seeking to convince the opposition groups that the Shah had fully relinquished political power and that he was not just the latest royal puppet;⁴⁹ while the reaction of Ayatollah Khomeini to the appointment would also be crucial.

During the Guadeloupe summit the Carter administration began seriously discussing how to deal with Khomeini, a figure who possessed the influence and public support to undermine the new government. The key question was whether or not the US government should initiate direct contact with the dissident cleric to discuss the transitional arrangements and persuade him to give the new Bakhtiar regime the opportunity to establish order after the Shah's departure. Here, once again, there was a clear disagreement between Brzezinski and Vance. In keeping with his change of heart on the Shah's fate, Sullivan was now urging that Khomeini be brought into the process – remember that just months earlier in October 1978 Sullivan had been very much opposed to such a move⁵⁰ – and Vance supported this recommendation during his calls with Carter in Guadeloupe. Vance's plan was to send an experienced former American diplomat, Theodore Eliot, to meet Khomeini in Paris with a message that unless Bakhtiar was given time then the Communists and other radical left-wing groups would exploit the chaos.⁵¹

The conscious attempt to play on Khomeini's anti-Communist tendencies failed to appease the concerns of Brzezinski, who feared the negative impact the decision could have on the top military leaders on whom he was still pinning his hopes. Carter harboured his own reservations of how it could gravely hinder Bakhtiar's efforts and undermine public confidence in the regime. Brzezinski stalled for time and recommended that the final decision on the matter be delayed until the president's return to Washington.⁵² Back in the capital on 10 January there followed lengthy and tense discussions between Carter, Brzezinski, Vance, Mondale, Brown, Aaron and Jody Powell, during which the president was presented with vastly different proposals by his advisers. On the one hand there was the Vance plan for direct contact with Khomeini, while on the other there was Brzezinski's suggestion of giving Bakhtiar a ten day deadline to obtain the necessary support from across the political divide otherwise the US would step in and initiate a military takeover.⁵³

Both Vance's diplomatic solution and Brzezinski last ditch attempt to sway Carter in favour of a military coup were rejected, with the president opting instead for a more discreetly conveyed message via a French intermediary, urging Khomeini to allow Bakhtiar the opportunity to restore order. This was the most practical and realistic course to follow as the Brzezinski and Vance options were both flawed. The will and

ability of the Iranian military to initiate the 'iron fist' was by no means certain and encouraging the suppression of discontent ran contrary to Carter's promotion of human rights. On the other hand, Khomeini had little to gain from direct negotiations with the US government and he wanted no outside involvement in decisions concerning the governance of Iran. Khomeini's fierce criticism of American influence and his anti-imperial rhetoric was also a key basis of his popularity and public support.

As the Shah waited to leave the country in what he hoped would be a dignified manner, the news filtering in from Paris was not positive. Khomeini instantly disregarded the new Prime Minister and stated that no one who was loyal to the Shah would be acceptable to him as the leader of Iran.⁵⁴ Ebrahim Yazdi, Khomeini's chief spokesman and later Foreign Minister in the post-revolutionary government, recalls that Carter's message was not well received. Once again it was all about perception – Carter's intention was to quietly appeal for calm on the streets of Tehran but it was interpreted as an ultimatum. The Khomeini camp believed the US government was threatening a military coup if they refused to support Bakhtiar; the message also encouraged the clergy to sit at the negotiating table with the military – reflecting the US fear of a Communist rise to prominence – yet this idea was rejected by Khomeini, who claimed the Iranian military was an instrument of American control. Bakhtiar was simply unacceptable in the eyes of the Ayatollah; Yazdi sums up Khomeini's stance:

*"Bakhtiar had no authority and was the Shah's puppet... the revolution of the masses which saw many Iranians killed would be useless if someone like Bakhtiar remained at the helm."*⁵⁵

Not only did Carter's approach meet with disapproval in Paris, but it also provoked an extraordinary response from Sullivan. His 10 January cable to Washington, described by Brzezinski as 'hysterical', bordered on insubordination and was scathingly critical of Carter.⁵⁶ Given the situation on the ground in Iran, Carter was mindful of treading carefully and taking a less publicly-visible approach that might only invite further misinterpretation and hostility. Yet Sullivan claimed they were making a "gross and perhaps irretrievable mistake" by failing to bring the military leaders and the Khomeini camp together in an open forum.⁵⁷ Sullivan's obstinacy failed to take into

account Khomeini's reluctance to deal with the Shah's former generals and won him little favour in Washington.

Carter had already openly displayed his lack of faith in Sullivan and the White House remained convinced the ambassador was playing his own game in Tehran.⁵⁸ If Huyser's arrival in Tehran had infuriated Sullivan, then Carter's decision to ignore his advice on Khomeini was the final straw; his working relationship with the White House limped on for a few months longer out of necessity, but it had effectively ended in the wake of the January cable. The irony of the situation is that Huyser, the president's 'own man' in Iran, actually agreed with Sullivan's prognosis that unless there was cooperation between Khomeini and the military leaders then Bakhtiar could make little progress.⁵⁹

This period when crucial decisions were being taken in the White House was a particularly fraught one for Carter and his advisors; Brzezinski for one readily admits that tempers occasionally frayed and that his relationship with Vance became increasingly difficult.⁶⁰ Internal policy disagreements and deteriorating personal relationships did not just impact on Iranian policy. There were numerous other foreign policy objectives being pursued concurrently by the administration – improving relations with China, continued negotiations over the Sinai treaty in the wake of the Camp David Accords, and the gruelling yet vital SALT II negotiation process. The pressure and strain on Carter at the beginning of 1979 was intense and his frustration is plainly visible in response to a brief from Brzezinski describing the friction within the administration over Iran. Brzezinski was condemning the 'conventional wisdom' and consensus of US analysts, criticising their 'self-delusion' in identifying the Shah as the entire problem; his comments clearly irritated the president who commented "*Zbig, after we make joint decisions, deploring them for the record doesn't help me.*"⁶¹

Carter's retort indicates a degree of exasperation with the way his own foreign policy was being made, in effect the decision-making apparatus he had established. Seeking to thoroughly examine all the available options and their alternatives was all very well, but when his two principal advisors were at entirely opposite ends of the spectrum, as they were on Iranian policy, then it presented Carter with real problems.

The Shah's exit and Khomeini's triumphant return

When he did eventually leave Iran on 16 January 1979 it was clear that the Shah still harboured hope of a swift return should the military succeed in restoring order. Rather than heading off to his pre-arranged exile in the US – through Zahedi the US government had arranged for the Shah and his family to use the Walter Annenberg Estate in California – he chose instead to go to nearby Egypt. Vance contends that this move only served to further jeopardise the future of Bakhtiar's government by damaging his attempts to persuade the moderates that he was acting independently and was free of the Shah's influence.⁶² Whilst this is no doubt true, the US government understood that the real threat to Bakhtiar would come when Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to challenge the new government's authority. The two weeks spent 'waiting for Khomeini' proved to be a time of great uncertainty as speculation grew over how and when he would return, and what the public reaction would be.⁶³ There was still widespread labour unrest, coupled with tension on the streets and rising public vitriol towards the US – protesters were carrying posters and chanting 'Carter is Bakhtiar's real boss', 'Death to Carter', 'Death to Huyser'.⁶⁴

In the aftermath of the Shah's departure, Huyser's reports on the Iranian military's readiness and capacity to step in and administer the country were far from encouraging and, as Khomeini's return loomed ever nearer, the General's doubts about the military and its leadership only increased.⁶⁵ In late January, Frank Church, the Idaho Senator and influential chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, requested a meeting with Secretary Vance following rumours, circulating in various parts of the globe, that the US was planning to engineer the Shah's return to Iran. Vance moved to reassure Church that the US government's policy remained one of respecting and supporting the constitutional processes and that they were advising the Shah not to return.⁶⁶ The time for backing the Shah had long since passed but perhaps there remained an expectation amongst many that the US government would intervene on behalf of its friend as it had done in the past. There were certainly those who sought to exert American influence over proceedings, for example Brzezinski and Harold Brown wanted to encourage Bakhtiar to arrest Khomeini on his return,⁶⁷ but the administration as a whole remained divided and Carter, its leader, unconvinced that such action was even feasible or in their best interests.

Vance and Sullivan continued to push the idea of facilitating discussions between Khomeini and the military leaders. Carter was persuaded and the arrangements were put in place; ironically as the Shah was leaving Iran on 16 January, Warren Zimmerman, a senior US diplomat in Paris, held talks with Ebrahim Yazdi to ascertain Khomeini's position.⁶⁸ Although they would meet again a week later, the situation was already beyond retrieval and the opportunity of bringing the parties together in order to negotiate some form of agreement had been lost.

Vance is highly critical of Brzezinski's obstinacy and opposition to the US government making direct contact with Khomeini; he argues that they delayed too long and were tying themselves to Bakhtiar when the long term prospects for his regime were ominous to say the least.⁶⁹ Vance's observation may be accurate, yet he was part of an administration that found itself in an extremely difficult position as it could hardly have abandoned Bakhtiar as political uncertainty raged in Iran. Khomeini's Islamic ideals and practices were certainly alien to western liberal democratic traditions and he scarcely offered a more democratic alternative to the Shah, even though he did possess a great deal more public support, plus his hatred of the US was widely known.

On 1 February 1979 the Ayatollah finally left Paris for Tehran where he was met by a rapturous reception as hundreds of thousands of his followers took to the streets of the capital. The speech Khomeini made on his return was far more inflammatory than the ones previously made in Paris; he called on the government established by the Shah to step down and was deliberately intransigent because Carter's message had suggested he support Bakhtiar.⁷⁰ On 4 February, Khomeini established the Provisional Revolutionary Government, appointing Mehdi Bazargan, a well respected liberal intellectual who had at times clashed with the Ayatollah during the revolution, as Prime Minister – meaning that Iran now had two governments locked in a struggle for power.

Ambassador Sullivan began desperately urging his State Department colleagues in Washington to press for an early conclusion to the Huyser mission, claiming that Huyser's presence was impeding the military from making essential and long overdue

arrangements with the Khomeini camp. Sullivan was essentially seeking a change of strategy, or what he deemed a more 'realistic' and 'longer term' set of instructions from Washington; he famously stated that "Khomeini has won a revolution but we have not yet accepted that fact."⁷¹ However, the US did not have to cling to Bakhtiar's government for long as his attempts to stand up to Khomeini were eventually unsuccessful. Just a week later the royal Prime Minister announced a curfew in an eleventh-hour attempt to restore order, Khomeini instructed his supporters to resist and the military subsequently crumbled even quicker than the US government had feared it might. By 11 February the Bakhtiar regime had collapsed and the revolution that had deposed the Shah was complete.

Astonishment at the pace of change was certainly not confined to Washington; even members of the new government were shocked by just how quickly events moved. Prime Minister Bazargan told Charles Naas that he was "very surprised – and hence unprepared – by the quickness of the collapse."⁷² Those in the White House who had maintained faith, almost to the bitter end, that the Shah would one day return were now forced to confront a very different reality. There was considerable disarray as the Carter administration searched for yet another strategy in the face of changing circumstances.

Less than a week earlier, Carter had come out offering a strong public endorsement of Bakhtiar based on his debrief with General Huyser, who had belatedly left Tehran on 3 February. Carter's public pronouncement had been a move calculated to stiffen the resolve of both Bakhtiar and the military, yet it was severely undermined the very same evening when media reports stated that the State Department felt very differently and only expected the regime to last a matter of days.⁷³ Carter and Press Secretary Jody Powell were fuming with the State Department and the president later held a meeting with State officials in which he scolded them for their disloyalty; for their part the State Department believed Brzezinski had engineered the meeting.⁷⁴ Once again a divided administration was shooting itself in the foot; another example of the back and forth institutional bickering and finger pointing that characterised and dogged its Iranian policy.

The warring factions at the State Department and the NSC were brought together in a drawn-out SCC meeting on 11 February. Crucial decisions were reached on the safety of Americans in Iran, protection of sensitive equipment, and future US strategy. Four available options for the US response were discussed: 1) urge the military to pursue an accommodation with Bazargan on the assumption that Bakhtiar is no longer in power; 2) recommend that the military play a limited role, maintaining unity amongst its ranks and accepting the transfer of power; 3) encourage the military to undertake direct action and restore order to the political situation; 4) an alternative to option three – the ‘southern strategy’ – which involved the military taking control of the oil fields and concentrating their strength in the south of the country.⁷⁵ After consideration the third option – the ‘iron fist’ – was dismissed, as was the even more fanciful fourth option. Huyser, Sullivan and the Pentagon were in agreement that the ‘iron fist’ was only viable with a massive US commitment of support both publicly and logistically.⁷⁶ The Iranian military was already working towards options one and two, therefore the US had little choice but to accept that it had to follow suit. Thus the bumpy transition to yet another regime in Iran – and this time a considerably more hostile one – began for President Carter’s White House.

Undecided and divided?

The US government was hampered throughout this period by the startling regularity with which information was leaked to the press. When the struggle amongst policymakers and institutions for internal ascendancy manifested itself in this way, it severely undermined the Carter administration’s public posture both at home and abroad. According to Sullivan, the incessant squabbling in Washington eventually impacted quite significantly on his communications. He claims that any sensitive message he sent that digressed from the views of the NSC would appear, almost verbatim, in *The New York Times*.⁷⁷ Yet the State Department itself was not averse to acting in a similar fashion, as seen when *The Washington Post* reported that the administration had reached the conclusion that the Bakhtiar government was destined to collapse, something which was emphatically denied by White House Press Secretary Jody Powell.⁷⁸

Henry Precht believes that the leaked communications with the embassy in Tehran gave rise to the suspicion that the State Department and other supposed opponents of

the Shah were fighting a covert battle. This served to heighten animosity within the US government and made it even more difficult to achieve a policy consensus; it also ensured that the circle of people informed about Iranian policy was further contracted.⁷⁹ The counterproductive leaks gave the impression, though not an altogether inaccurate one, of an administration that was badly divided and in disarray over its Iranian policy at various moments when Carter desperately needed to portray unity and clarity.

The Carter administration created further difficulties for itself through its inability to accurately portray to the Shah and others in Iran exactly what US policy was. The lack of clarity coming out of Washington only served to exacerbate the Shah's indecisiveness; while it was not of course Carter's place to dictate terms to the Shah, it could be argued that the embattled Iranian leader may have been better served had he been one-hundred percent clear about the US position. Responsibility for such failings cannot be placed solely on one individual, certainly not on the President himself, as there were a number of contributing actors – Sullivan, Nass and the US embassy staff; their Iranian counterparts led by Zahedi; Vance, Christopher, Newsom and Precht at State; Brzezinski, Aaron and Sick at the NSC; and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Brown, Duncan and Huyser at the Pentagon.

In appraising this period of US policymaking towards Iran it would seem all too easy to fall into one of the two camps that were competing to win over President Carter some thirty years ago. One can castigate Brzezinski and the NSC for refusing to see past the Shah and consider possible alternatives; or focus criticism instead on Vance, Christopher, Sullivan and the rest of the State Department for not supporting a more decisive intervention and the use of force. The obvious target is Brzezinski, the administration's standout foreign policy personality. More important than his ongoing promotion of the 'iron fist' was the manner in which the National Security Advisor conducted himself, seemingly determined to use almost any means necessary to ensure that his strategic approach won favour with Carter. James Bill, writing in the late 1980s, believes that the State Department allowed Brzezinski and his NSC staff to arrogantly "shape a policy that placed America on the losing side in a revolution", criticising Brzezinski for compromising US national interests and even holding him partially responsible for the extreme anti-Americanism which later followed.⁸⁰ Henry

Precht recalls that after being labelled as an ideological opponent of the Shah by Brzezinski, his views on the impending crisis were simply discounted.⁸¹

Brzezinski's proximity to Carter in the White House was obviously advantageous in warding off the challenges which came, albeit at times too meekly, from Vance and the State Department over Iranian policy. When it came down to a personal battle between the two, Brzezinski was very bright and a more aggressive personality than Vance, who had previously worked in federal government and was more inclined to try and build consensus; Vance also had to manage and contend with a huge bureaucracy in the State Department while the NSC was a far smaller, streamlined organisation of just 40-50 staff.⁸² Vance may have been closer in ideological terms to the president, but Brzezinski was more forthright and domineering.

In terms of the wider strategic context of the Cold War, Brzezinski retained a stubborn certainty in his analysis that Iran was a vital buffer to Soviet expansion in the Middle East: "*we were especially mindful of the certainty that a civil war in Iran would be a windfall for the Soviet Union.*"⁸³ Brzezinski's thinking was expressed in his identification of an 'arc of crisis' in Africa and the Middle East late in 1978, the part of the globe where US interests were at their most vulnerable.⁸⁴ Brzezinski saw the dangers of the creaking twin pillars, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and noted how they could bring about a fundamental shift in the global structure of power. His strategic vision essentially marked an extension of the Kissinger world view that had largely shaped US foreign policy in the 1970s, and the National Security Adviser's steadfast belief proved to be the root cause of his inflexibility and refusal to countenance any analysis which pointed in a different direction – for example that of the State Department.

Brzezinski's concerns were shared, to some degree at least, by the entire Carter administration which recognised the Cold War problem created by the Iranian revolution; namely a vast security vacuum in the Persian Gulf. The Soviet Union had been actively peddling its influence in the region and signing friendship agreements throughout the 1970s, and the US government was not about to abandon Iran leaving Moscow free to fill the void. Christian Emery argues that with abandonment definitely not an option, the Carter administration's response in 1979 was a choice

between three strategies – engagement, containment or confrontation. Carter’s belief system ensured that engagement was the logical choice and the State Department, which had always supported this approach, began to re-assert its authority over policy during this period having ‘won’ their battle with Brzezinski.⁸⁵ The problem for Carter was that many Iranians saw engagement and interference as one and the same – they were of the view that the US had never fully accepted the revolution and was seeking to undermine it. In his analysis of why engagement failed, Emery puts forward two explanations: firstly, the US failed to resolve the issue of military payments and the delivery of American military hardware that had been paid for by the previous Iranian government; and secondly, they tried to link the relationship to shared anti-Communist beliefs when the Iranians were not overly concerned about a perceived Soviet threat.⁸⁶

One question that remains unanswered is if the Shah’s Iran was such a vital cog in US global security, then what explains the administration’s oversight in not adequately reviewing and, if necessary, overhauling its Iranian policy? This cannot be solely down to Brzezinski’s obstinacy, but perhaps there was a degree of complacency that the Shah would survive – as he always had – and a reluctance to thrust Iran onto what for Carter was an already overcrowded and ambitious agenda. Another aspect to consider here is that it is very difficult for any bureaucracy such as the Washington foreign policy establishment, which is mostly reactive, to work towards shifting what has been – or appears to have been – a successful policy just because there is a possibility that circumstances may be about to change.⁸⁷ This was undoubtedly the case in Iran where, from 1977 onwards, nothing was ever a certainty.

Various writers have criticised Carter for lacking a coherent Iranian strategy from the very outset and for the decision to carry on following the basic tenets of the Nixon Doctrine – ironically an approach that Carter had panned during his presidential campaign. Henry Precht asserts that the administration gave relatively little strategic consideration to Iran before late 1978 and that it reacted to events without a policy design.⁸⁸ Bill Daugherty offers a similar view of the US government reacting to events as they occurred, stressing that from mid-January 1979 Washington was never in control of anything happening in Iran, or even in the US Embassy while Sullivan was there.⁸⁹ Alternatively, it could be argued that the US did actually follow a

consistent line towards Iran right down to the final days of 1978, despite the best efforts of Brzezinski, but as it headed into the New Year, US policy became ever more confused and muddled.⁹⁰

The Carter government's approach towards Iran was different to that of the Ford administration in that they were prepared to raise the issue of human rights with Tehran and they also sought to move away from the idea that the Shah's Iran should be the sole instrument of US policy in the region. Continuity remained in the sense that Carter continued to support the Shah and maintain the close strategic relationship that had been fostered under previous administrations. This approach should not be criticised just because there were no major new initiatives on Iran and Carter was understandably reluctant to rip up twenty years worth of established foreign policy thinking. Indeed there were other key reasons behind Carter's continued support for the Shah which are often overlooked; the Iranian monarch's assistance in the Middle East peace accords and, with domestic energy concerns prevalent, his prominent position within OPEC.⁹¹ There can be no denying that the Carter administration was caught off-guard by developments in Iran during 1978 – which was otherwise a year of foreign policy triumphs for Carter – and from then on was playing catch up to events that would eventually have overwhelmed even the best laid plans. Questions concerning the lack of a consistent Iranian policy are in a way beside the point; the crucial aspect was the lack of effective coordination between the different policymaking groups.

One of Carter's biggest problems, as we have seen, was the all too often vast distance separating the stances of his principal advisors. Brzezinski himself accepts that as the situation in Iran deteriorated, disagreements within the US government only served to widen.⁹² Pollack argues that the approaches of both the State Department and the NSC were fatally flawed and that the president took the obvious middle position between the two.⁹³ While Carter did undoubtedly seek the middle ground between the two camps during the administration's often rancorous debates on Iranian policy, his was on the whole the most sensible and practical position for the US to take. Early on in the crisis, Carter had been keen to offer the Shah his personal backing but, as the true extent of popular discontent became apparent, he eventually accepted that the regime could not survive and that it was going to be difficult for the US government to plot

the course of Iran's future. This was not the 1950s and, unlike Eisenhower before him who had bowed to pressure brought to bear by his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in sanctioning the plot to overthrow Mossadeq, Carter exercised astute restraint in rejecting Brzezinski's persistent drive for a military coup.

Carter's leadership during these intense few months has been characterised as indecisive and criticised for a perceived inability to assert the necessary authority during policy discussions. One school of thought contends that had Carter stepped in to settle the debates in a definitive way, then this might have enabled the administration to rally around one position rather than continually pursuing differing outcomes.⁹⁴ General Huyser chooses not to aim personal criticism at Carter, but focuses instead on the administration's foreign policy making process; too many voices and different approaches resulted in Washington conceiving and then implementing conflicting policies simultaneously.⁹⁵ Granted there was a collective failing on the part of the administration to project its position, yet there are certainly grounds to argue that, with an air of inevitability about the Shah's fate, the actions of Carter and the US government were, in effect, immaterial.

After examining the available alternatives the case can even be made, as Said Amir Arjomand does convincingly, that Carter and the US "did not do badly" in their handling of the Shah's fall.⁹⁶ One crucial factor that needs to be kept in mind here is that policy disagreements in Washington were not the cause of the collapse of the Shah's regime, hence it is too simplistic and inaccurate to lay the blame solely at Carter's door. The president might have stepped in and been more forceful, but that was not Carter's style – he preferred a more collegial approach, in which ideas were discussed and consensus decisions reached. Carter more often than not looked to follow the middle course not just because his advisors were rarely on the same page and the consensus he craved proved elusive, but because it usually turned out to be the most rational approach available in trying circumstances.

Carter was arguably a product of the time at which he assumed office; he sought to exercise his executive power with far greater responsibility than his immediate predecessors, most infamously Richard M. Nixon, and was wary of taking the interventionist route overseas. Remember that trust and honesty formed the basis on

which Carter had consistently sold himself to the American people throughout 1976 – he was going to be the chief executive who consulted with Congress and involved the public in the decision making process. Unfortunately for Jimmy Carter, the rise of a highly unpredictable regime led by Ayatollah Khomeini ensured that the decisions he took between November 1978 and February 1979 would not be his last concerning Iran.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 7

¹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 375-376.

² Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 334.

³ President Carter's handwritten notes, 4 January 1979, Plains Subject File, Iran 6/75-12/79, Box 23, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁴ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 379-380.

⁵ President Carter's handwritten notes, 5 January 1979, Plains Subject File, Iran 6/75-12/79, Box 23, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶ President Carter's handwritten notes, 5 January 1979, Plains Subject File, Iran 6/75-12/79, Box 23, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 380.

⁸ General Robert E. Huyser, *Mission to Tehran* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1986) p. 13.

⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 376.

¹⁰ Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 7.

¹¹ Huyser offers a more detailed account of his role in Iran at this time in his own book. See Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, pp. 7-11.

¹² Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, pp. 14-15.

¹³ Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 14.

¹⁴ Haig is particularly trenchant in his critique of Carter's decision to send Huyser to Iran. See Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, pp. vii-ix and pp. 14-15.

¹⁵ See for example Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, pp. 254-257; Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation*, pp. 98-99; Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, pp. 246-247; Daugherty, *In the Shadow of the Ayatollah*, pp. 90-91; Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 146-147; and Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled*, pp. 159-160.

¹⁶ Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, p. 193.

¹⁷ See for example Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 254 and Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 246.

¹⁸ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 147.

¹⁹ Interview with Charles Naas, pp. 19-20, (6/17), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

²⁰ See for example Daugherty, *In the Shadow of the Ayatollah*, p. 90 and Sick, *All Fall Down*, p. 131.

²¹ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 451.

²² This debate is covered well by Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation*, pp. 98-99.

²³ Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation*, p. 99.

²⁴ See Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 378; Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 18; and Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 148.

²⁵ Interview with President Jimmy Carter, p. 3, (6/7), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

²⁶ Interview with Vice President Walter Mondale pp. 2-3, (6/16), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

²⁷ Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 23.

²⁸ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 336.

²⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 380.

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- ³⁰ Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 25.
- ³¹ Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 17.
- ³² Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 24.
- ³³ Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 24.
- ³⁴ Daugherty, *In the Shadow of the Ayatollah*, pp. 91-92.
- ³⁵ Letter, President Carter to General Robert Huyser, 7 February 1979, NSA Brzezinski Material – General Odom File, Iran 11/78-11/79, Box 27, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ³⁶ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 336.
- ³⁷ Interview with Charles Naas, p. 23, (6/17), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ³⁸ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, pp. 254-255.
- ³⁹ Interview with Shahbanou Farah p. 35, (4/7), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁴⁰ Interview questions – points to film with Ardeshir Zahedi, p. 5, (8/3/8), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁴¹ See Huyser's account of his meeting with the joint assembly of senior Iranian military figures on 9 January. Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, pp. 59-63.
- ⁴² Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 65.
- ⁴³ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 337.
- ⁴⁴ Memo, General Huyser to SecDef Brown and CJCS General Jones, 13 January 1979, Brzezinski Material – Country File, Iran 12/78-1/79, Box 29, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁴⁵ Memo, Brzezinski to Vance & Brown, 19 January 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, Alpha Channel (Misc) [4/78-4/79], Box 20, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁴⁶ Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, pp. 236-237.
- ⁴⁷ Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, pp. 290-291.
- ⁴⁸ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 451.
- ⁴⁹ Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 334-335.
- ⁵⁰ As seen in the previous chapter – 'Policy confusion in Washington' section, pp. 179-182.
- ⁵¹ Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 336-337.
- ⁵² Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 380.
- ⁵³ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 380-381 and Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 336-337.
- ⁵⁴ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 451.
- ⁵⁵ Interview with Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi, filmed interview pp. 4-5, (4/16), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁵⁶ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 381.
- ⁵⁷ Cable, Ambassador Sullivan to Secretary Vance, 10 January 1979, Plains Subject File, Iran 6/75-12/79, Box 23, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁵⁸ Interview with Gary Sick, p. 21, (6/26), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁵⁹ Memo, General Huyser to SecDef Brown and CJCS General Jones, 13 January 1979, Brzezinski Material – Country File, Iran 12/78-1/79, Box 29, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁶⁰ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 381.
- ⁶¹ Memo, Brzezinski to Carter, 12 January 1979, Brzezinski Material – Subject File, Weekly Reports 82-90: [12/78-3/79], Box 42, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁶² Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 338.
- ⁶³ The second chapter of Huyser's account of his mission is entitled 'Waiting for Khomeini', 17 January – 31 January 1979. See Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, pp. 138-247.
- ⁶⁴ Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 244.
- ⁶⁵ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 384-85.
- ⁶⁶ Memo, Vance to Carter, 26 January 1979, Plains Subject File, State Department Evening Reports 1/79, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁶⁷ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 388-389.
- ⁶⁸ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 338.
- ⁶⁹ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 340-341.
- ⁷⁰ Interview with Abolhassan Bani-Sadr p. 16, (4/6), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁷¹ Memo, David Newsom to Vance, 2 February 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Geographic File, Iran – Meetings [on: 11/2/78-1/31/79], Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.

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- ⁷² Quoted in Daugherty, *In the Shadow of the Ayatollah*, p. 93.
- ⁷³ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 389.
- ⁷⁴ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 389-390.
- ⁷⁵ Minutes, SCC Meeting, 11 February 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC 129: 2/11/79], Box 29, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁷⁶ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 392.
- ⁷⁷ Sullivan, ‘Dateline Iran: The Road Not Taken’, p. 181.
- ⁷⁸ ‘US Seeks Khomeini Links’, *The Washington Post*, 8 February 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Material – Country File, Iran 2-3/79, Box 29, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁷⁹ Precht, E-mail, September 2010.
- ⁸⁰ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 252.
- ⁸¹ Precht, E-mail, September 2010.
- ⁸² Wise, Interview, 2 April 2008.
- ⁸³ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 379.
- ⁸⁴ The term ‘arc of crisis’ was first used by Brzezinski in December 1978 and is included in a number of internal NSC memos. It was then famously coined in the US media and featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in January 1979; see ‘The Crescent of Crisis: Iran and a Region of Rising Instability’, *Time* magazine, 15 January 1979, p. 18.
- ⁸⁵ Christian Emery, *US Policy in Iran: The Dynamics of Engagement and Strategic Alliance 1978-81* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming in 2013). See also Christian Emery, ‘Engaging Post-Revolutionary Iran 1979-80: Understanding US Decision-Making’, Paper presented at ‘One-term President, Long-term Legacy: Jimmy Carter and Iran’ Conference (Durham University, 19 October 2012).
- ⁸⁶ Emery, ‘Engaging Post-Revolutionary Iran 1979-80’.
- ⁸⁷ Daugherty, Interview and e-mail, March/April 2008.
- ⁸⁸ Precht, E-mail, September 2010.
- ⁸⁹ Daugherty, Interview and e-mail, March/April 2008.
- ⁹⁰ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 133.
- ⁹¹ Moens, ‘President Carter’s Advisers and the Fall of the Shah’, p. 216.
- ⁹² Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 371.
- ⁹³ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 147-148.
- ⁹⁴ Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 236.
- ⁹⁵ Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 293.
- ⁹⁶ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 133.

The Decision to Admit the Shah into the United States

The emergence of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as the spiritual leader of the Islamic revolution at the beginning of 1979 forced the US government to abandon a policy of remarkable continuity, one that had been followed by a succession of administrations over the previous twenty-five years. Whether Washington liked it or not, the wishes of the Iranian people had been granted with the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty and the future of US-Iranian relations now looked markedly different without the Shah at the helm. However, few would have envisaged just how far relations between the two countries would plummet by the end of the year, following a series of events which still reverberate to this day.

The primary focus of this chapter is on the seminal decision that precipitated the seizure of the US embassy by Iranian students on 4 November 1979; the US government allowing the Shah to come to the United States to receive medical treatment for his terminal illness. In the months prior to this, whatever its reservations about Khomeini, the Carter administration moved to accept the new political realities in Iran and adapt accordingly by seeking to build some kind of working relationship with the new regime. While there was the need to build diplomatic ties, Carter also had to tread carefully and remain mindful of the all too recent past. Iranian public perceptions of interference in their country's affairs had been exacerbated during the revolution and key figures within the new regime, including those considered to be more moderate, were vocal in their condemnation of the US government. Thus any sign of reluctance to accept Iran's new political regime from the Carter administration may well have been interpreted as a desire to cling to the past.

Jimmy Carter took the now fateful decision to allow the Shah into the US at what was an admittedly delicate time in US-Iranian relations in October 1979. Yet contrary to much of the literature which portrays this as a naive error of judgement, Carter was well aware of the dilemma he faced with the Shah and actually saw things more clearly than his advisors. The decision was not one of incompetence but rather one of resignation, made almost against his better judgement. He relented only after his

advisors joined forces in a rare show of agreement between the NSC and State Department, all of them telling him it was the course of action he had to follow. A re-examination of the internal and external pressures the administration faced and all the considerations it had to make – including of course the security of American personnel – evidently shows it was a simple humanitarian verdict once Carter became fully aware of the Shah's medical problems. Yet the President has not been given the credit for being far more perceptive than those around him, because he found it difficult to disagree once the weight of opinion – both inside and outside of his administration – was saying otherwise.

Recent interviews carried out for the Brook Lapping documentary series *'Iran and the West'*, which aired on the BBC in February 2009 to mark the thirtieth-anniversary of the Iranian revolution, bear this out. Extensive use of this archive has been made in this chapter (and others); it is a recent and significant source that allows the principal actors, including President Carter, Brzezinski and Mondale amongst others, to justify their actions at the time. The material reviewed here, much of which was not included in the programme that was broadcast, represents a fresh look back on the momentous events of thirty years ago when all the previously available memoirs were written, in many cases, only a couple of years after the events had taken place. The decision to admit the Shah in October 1979 was more significant than any other made during the revolutionary period; it would have far-reaching consequences for the US on the international stage and also for Carter personally as he entered an election year in 1980.

Handling the new regime

To a certain degree the US government remained in a state of crisis management during the early days of the provisional revolutionary government – as far as Washington was concerned, there were a number of unresolved issues that needed to be addressed in the wake of the collapse of the Bakhtiar regime. The Special Coordination Committee (SCC) meeting on 13 February 1979 raised two principal questions; firstly, the safety of sensitive US military equipment in Iran and the political consequences of a compromise; and secondly, the question of formal recognition of the new government – whether the US should send a presidential message to new Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, as was common practice and had

been done for Bakhtiar and previous prime ministers.¹ The Joint Chiefs of Staff were concerned about the compromise of any or all of this equipment and the negative impact it would have in terms of the US 'technological lead' over the Soviet Union. Despite this, it was agreed at the meeting that the US had to 'proceed cautiously' in any approach to the new government or military leadership – they did not want to face accusations of collusion with the military against the civilian government. Close ties had existed between the US and Iranian militaries during the Shah's era, and some senior military men had been reluctant for their monarch to step aside during the revolutionary upheaval. It was also agreed that Vance would send a congratulatory message to the new Foreign Minister, Karim Sanjabi, but that a presidential message to the new Prime Minister should be delayed for a few more days until things became clearer.² Ironically enough, this meeting also recognised that the US would, at some stage, have a problem with people formerly associated with the Shah's regime seeking asylum in the US (something Sanjabi himself would do after fleeing Iran in 1982). Little did the administration realise that within a matter of months it would be dealing with its most difficult asylum seeker – the Shah himself.

Although undeniably tentative, the initial dealings with the provisional government were fairly encouraging from a US perspective. Sullivan and the US military advisers were actively seeking to ensure the safety of critical military equipment and their efforts were generally met with a cooperative attitude; Vance put this down to the political moderates within Bazargan's mainly Western-educated cabinet.³ Carter too was pleased with the early signs of cooperation and no doubt felt reassured by Bazargan's public announcements that expressed his desire for friendly relations with the US.⁴ Carter maintains that while the US was surprised by the speed of the Shah's overthrow, his administration tried to accommodate the change as quickly as possible and established diplomatic relations with the new regime once it was in place.⁵

However, their optimism was not matched by Brzezinski, who was decidedly more sceptical of the new government and preferred to focus on the chaos and confusion that still abounded. Brzezinski clearly resented the State Department's apparent eagerness to embrace the change, or their 'preference' as he called it, and lamented his own failure to win the argument by getting Carter and the rest of the government to approve and, if necessary, initiate a military coup.⁶ In one sense, this more cautious

approach was fully justified given that the US government was still coming to grips with the situation and seeking to establish where power now resided in Iran. The big question concerned Khomeini – was he a benign influence or was he pulling the strings behind the appearance of Bazargan and the moderates in government? It would not be long before Washington categorically knew the answer.

The State Department and the US embassy had greeted Bazargan's appointment with a mixture of relief and applause, as he appeared to be just what the US wanted. The selection appeared to have borne out State's prediction that Khomeini would realise that a theocracy was impractical and turn instead to 'friendly' liberals.⁷ The Carter administration sought to rally around Bazargan and to portray the message that stable US-Iranian relations were in the best interests of both parties. At the end of February, Secretary Vance met with a representative of the provisional government and both sides stated their desire for good relations between the two nations, while Vance sought to reaffirm that the US government was committed to supporting the new regime, emphatically stating that it was not working against the new government.⁸

Strategic considerations were never far from Brzezinski's thoughts and the central objective for the US still remained – to help Iran preserve its own national integrity and independence, the only difference being that now the Carter administration was also seeking to fashion a new security framework for the region to replace their historical reliance on Iran.⁹ US policymakers were evidently anxious as to the potential wider regional implications of the Iranian situation. There was particular concern voiced over the often volatile relationship between Iran and neighbouring Iraq, where the Shah had been able to settle the long border dispute over the Shatt-al-Arab waterway and over the possible revival of Shia unrest due to Khomeini's rise to ascendancy in Iran.¹⁰ US concerns were of course very valid – eighteen months later the two countries would begin a protracted and costly struggle for regional ascendancy following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran.

Despite his obvious distaste for the new regime, Brzezinski was initially hopeful that Khomeini's anti-communism could lead to a de-facto alliance with the US. He felt that the US government "ought to tap the anti-communist sentiment of the now dominant fundamentalist clergy" and emphasise the common bond the nations shared

in seeking to contain communism.¹¹ Vance too felt that the revolutionary regime would be preoccupied with the threat across its northern border and for that reason it would seek to retain the close security ties with the US cultivated by the Shah.¹² For its part, Moscow wasted no time in seeking to aid the spread of anti-American feeling in an effort to push the US out of Iran and ruin its regional influence, using covert propaganda such as the broadcasts of the 'National Voice of Iran', the clandestine Soviet-influenced radio station operated from Baku.¹³ There is evidence that Moscow was certainly uneasy about Khomeini's anti-communism; in March the Soviets were seeking to rally regional communist support for the Tudeh party, in anticipation of hostility and persecution from Khomeini's regime.¹⁴

The much maligned US intelligence services maintained that even after the Shah's exit there still remained a strong threat in Iran from leftist groups and guerrilla organisations seeking to use the revolution for their own benefit. Losing the Shah had been traumatic enough for the US government and the last thing they wanted to see was the breakdown of the Bazargan-Khomeini axis, particularly if a decidedly pro-Soviet regime took its place. The difficulty for the US was that Bazargan lacked any real power and as the months passed it became clear he was actually not in charge of very much; various Islamic organisations such as the Revolutionary Council and the Pasdaran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, either followed their own interpretations of Khomeini's statements or chose to chart their own course.¹⁵

Khomeini, evidently the key player in Iran, was in no way inclined to seek an accommodation with the US government in the way the Shah had for many years. Did the Carter administration therefore make a mistake in seeking to reach out towards the moderates in the new regime too quickly? In the post-Shah era Iranians wanted foreign influences, such as the US, to stay away, therefore the friendlier Washington was, the more suspicious the hardliners within the new regime became.¹⁶ An example of this can be seen in the attempts to resurrect the beleaguered Iranian oil industry, coincidentally a major concern for the US at the beginning of 1979 – the need for energy conservation in the wake of the Iranian situation was being stressed throughout Washington. Bazargan realised Iran needed long term contracts, expatriate experience and general Western assistance in order to realise its production potential, yet his position led to accusations from Khomeini that he was pro-Western just like the Shah

had been.¹⁷ Building relations was never going to be an easy task for the administration and it seems somewhat paradoxical to argue that the best means of improving links with the new government was for the US to maintain a low profile, particularly as Carter would doubtless have been criticised for inaction and failing to support the new regime had he chosen such a course.

February 1979 embassy seizure

Although the November 1979 seizure of the US embassy is synonymous with the Islamic revolution and the collapse of US-Iranian diplomatic relations, it was not actually the first time that the embassy had been occupied. Nine months previously the Carter administration was given a brief taste of the volatile public backlash against the United States when, on 14 February, the embassy was briefly overrun.

The attack started in the morning when gunmen came over the walls and gates of the vast compound and sprayed the buildings with machine gun fire before eventually forcing their way into the embassy. Sullivan contacted representatives of the Khomeini government requesting urgent assistance before embassy staff were temporarily held and the gunmen damaged communications equipment, smashing the main switchboard.¹⁸ In the immediate aftermath it became clear that a US marine had been taken hostage, but he was released eight days later following negotiations between Sullivan and Iranian Prime Minister Bazargan.

The US inquest into the attack identified left-wing extremists as the perpetrators; more specifically the Charik organisation, or 'Peoples Sacrifice Guerrillas', described by US intelligence as probably Iran's largest and most dangerous Marxist terrorist group.¹⁹ The embassy takeover was in fact symptomatic of the early difficulties Khomeini's government had in dealing with numerous left-wing elements. Continued violence in the major cities and crippling industrial action, affecting the vital oil industry, provided a direct challenge to the revolution that pro-Khomeini forces were desperately trying to stave off during the first weeks of the fledgling regime.

Back in Washington, the Valentine's Day assault on the embassy awakened the US to the need to scale down its presence in Iran, including its military presence which was even larger, and also had some officials reconsidering the wisdom of allowing the

Shah to take refuge in the US, a potentially inflammatory gesture that could endanger American officials and citizens still living in Iran.²⁰ After the incident, Sullivan and his deputy Charles Naas decided to reduce the embassy staff right down to the bare minimum required.²¹ Later in the year, following the departure of Sullivan and Naas, Bruce Laingen arrived in Tehran as the new US Chargé d’Affaires; Laingen had previously served there in his first diplomatic tour some 26 years earlier in 1953. One of his key mandates was to do something about the US security presence in Tehran, and an additional 70 staff left following his arrival in June 1979.²²

Yet the first embassy takeover was not necessarily the grave warning sign of what was to come that it now appears with hindsight. In fact, over the coming months the remaining staff at the embassy became accustomed to working amongst the unrest and uncertainty on the streets of Tehran. In his book *Guests of the Ayatollah*, Mark Bowden describes how Michael Metrisko, a political officer in the embassy and one of the fifty-two hostages held for the full 444 days, recalls walking to work on the day of the second and more serious hostage taking on 4 November 1979:

“It was just the usual rabble... burning American flags and giant dolls of President Carter and other western leaders – the standard background noise.”²³

The February events also set a precedent for resolving hostage situations in Iran; the involvement of the Iranian government gave the Carter administration the misguided belief that when the second embassy takeover occurred in November 1979 the situation would be resolved in a similarly swift fashion.

The Shah’s Travels

The Shah had departed Iran for the final time on 16 January 1979 and proceeded to spend the next ten months being shunted from one country to another as international leaders, particularly those from Western countries, seemed anxious to distance themselves from a man who had led Iran for over a quarter of the twentieth century. William Shawcross’ book charting the Shah final months, aptly entitled *The Shah’s Last Ride*, describes his tale as a “forlorn journey into exile and death”.²⁴ However, as the Pahlavi dynasty limped through its final days and weeks, the Shah’s future appeared almost a foregone conclusion; he would seek asylum in the United States, Iran’s closest ally during his reign and home to many of his influential friends and

supporters. At this early juncture Khomeini had not raised any objection to the Shah's imminent exile in the US,²⁵ yet the issue would turn into a complicated one as the months of 1979 wore on, leading to a decision which ultimately held far-reaching consequences for US-Iranian relations.

In any discussion concerning the decision to admit the Shah, it should be remembered that the Carter administration had originally offered him the opportunity of refuge in the United States back in January 1979. Perhaps somewhat remarkably given its propensity for disagreement, there had been a consensus within the administration when French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing suggested in early January it might be wiser if the Shah stayed in the Middle East and well away from the US. Brzezinski, Brown and Vance were united in their opposition to Giscard's proposal as they felt it would do damage to the US reputation and undermine the new Iranian government;²⁶ they offered asylum partly in the hope that the Shah would leave the Middle East. Yet the Shah was in no apparent hurry to touch down on US soil and was not about to keep the Carter administration informed in advance about his movements. He firstly accepted an invitation from President Anwar Sadat, a close friend and ally during his reign, to go to Egypt and then less than a week later he flew on to Morocco as a guest of King Hassan. As it turned out, President Carter was somewhat relieved that the Shah had not yet decided to come to the US, confiding in his diary on 20th January 1979 that "the taint of the Shah being in our country is not good for either us or him."²⁷

The Shah's decision to loiter in the region has been widely interpreted as a desperate last ditch resort, a somewhat hopeless belief that he would somehow be restored to power in the same way he had been back in 1953. The reality of course was very different and now the Shah's incessant dithering caused great problems for Carter and the US government. His presence in Morocco soon gave the monarch there, King Hassan, cause for growing concern as the country's Islamic contingent grew ever more restless. Even though Hassan had formally recognised the new Bazargan government, which itself heaped further humiliation on the Shah, he was still denounced by his own people on the streets with slogans such as "The King is the Shah's dog."²⁸ After a month in Morocco, it had become clear to the Shah that Hassan was giving him the cold shoulder and wanted rid of him. The Shah now sent a

message to the US Ambassador in Morocco, Richard Parker, on 22 February saying that he was ready to proceed to the United States as had originally been planned.²⁹

The Carter administration was once again faced with a very delicate situation. Henry Precht warned against allowing the Shah into the US from the very outset; when he was told by Newsom that a decision was imminent, he replied “This is not January” and protested that such a move would be very damaging to future relations with Iran; Sullivan had a similar response “... if they let him in they will bring us out in boxes.”³⁰ At a meeting of the SCC – the highest level policy and crisis management group in the Carter White House – on 23 February, the administration’s key decision-makers met to discuss their options. Brzezinski argued it was essential the US demonstrate its support for an old ally, fearful of the knock-on effect and loss of confidence a failure to do so could cause amongst other US allies around the world. The State Department took a very different view, based on the unanimous recommendations of Sullivan and Precht, and with the Valentine’s Day US embassy takeover still fresh in their minds. The security issue had come sharply into focus; Sullivan was at the time negotiating over the release of US intelligence personnel who had been taken captive at one of the CIA’s Tacksman sites just days previously.³¹

The timing of the Shah’s request was crucial. Not only did it come on the back of recent attacks on US personnel in Iran, but it also coincided with the Carter administration’s active efforts to forge new diplomatic ties with the Bazargan government. Just a couple of days prior to the SCC meeting, Vance had instructed Sullivan to meet with the new Prime Minister for the first time and assure him, and through him Khomeini, that the US government accepted the revolution and had no intention of intervening in Iran’s internal affairs.³² The Carter administration was seeking to convince the moderates Khomeini had charged with leading the new regime that they could continue doing business with America and that their suspicions surrounding US intentions were unfounded. In late February 1979 nobody in Washington was naive enough to fail to recognise the dangers of granting political refuge to the reviled former monarch and his family. In the end, the decision was taken to inform the Shah that while the invitation remained officially open, there were now pressing threats to US interests and American lives that the Carter administration had to consider.³³

It was by no means a comfortable determination for Carter and his advisers to make; Brzezinski made no secret of his personal revulsion with the decision and Vance described it as “the most distasteful recommendation” he ever had to make.³⁴ However, such a dilemma need not have existed in the first place if the Shah had acted logically and taken the original offer from the US government – it was yet another example of his inability to act decisively. Both Brzezinski and Vance agree that the Shah’s own procrastination created this scenario; had he been admitted in January then perhaps adverse reaction in Iran would have been limited provided he maintained a low profile and his fate may have been forgotten amongst the euphoria of Khomeini’s return – in Brzezinski’s words the Shah’s actions generated an issue where none should have existed.³⁵ Back at the beginning of 1979 it had been widely expected that the Shah would eventually make his way to the United States and, at that time, none of the revolutionary leaders had uttered a word about it.³⁶

By mid-March, with King Hassan pressing the US government to admit the Shah – backed by the French as Giscard now felt the Shah’s presence was endangering their ally Hassan³⁷ – the Carter administration now had to find a country that would be willing to take the displaced Iranian monarch. Once the decision had been taken that he could not come to the US as originally planned, Carter had asked Vance to explore possible options for the Shah to land.³⁸ Not surprisingly, there was hardly a rush of willing countries queuing up and the State Department was well aware that almost no country was willing to accept him; when Parker was dispatched by Vance to ensure the Shah was clear about the US position there were just two countries – South Africa and Paraguay – that were willing to take him in.³⁹ There were no possibilities in Europe and neither of these options appealed to the Shah, but he was being ushered out of the region and was not in any position to choose his destination. At the end of March he left Morocco and headed to the Bahamas, ostensibly thanks to the last minute intervention of his influential American friends Henry Kissinger and David Rockefeller, who would both become actively involved in debates over the Shah’s fate as the year went on.

Friends with influence

During his twenty-five years in power, the Shah worked hard to establish warm relations between Iran and the US across a range of different spheres – political, military, business and industrial. He and his family had especially strong links to the US and during this period he was able to cultivate close personal ties to numerous members of the Washington political elite; over the years he had met with many Presidents, Vice Presidents, Secretaries of State, Ambassadors and other officials of administrations from Eisenhower to Carter. The focal point of the relationship became the most powerful financial-political hub in the US; involving the Rockefeller family and influential figures like Henry Kissinger – a collective identified by James Bill as the ‘Rockefeller-Pahlavites’.⁴⁰

The dilemma of what to do with the Shah and his family was therefore not necessarily confined to the decision makers within the White House and the State Department; clearly there was a group of powerful American citizens pursuing their own agenda who felt it was their place to lobby the Carter administration over its handling of the displaced Shah. Initially it had been Nelson Rockefeller, the former New York Governor and US Vice President under Gerald Ford, who prior to his sudden death at the end of January 1979 had urged the Carter administration – through the Brzezinski channel – to support the Shah unconditionally.⁴¹ It later fell to his brother David, then Chairman of both Chase Manhattan bank and the influential think-tank the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR); and Henry Kissinger, one of the most dominant personalities in twentieth century US foreign policy, to apply the pressure to Carter and his team throughout 1979. To assist them they also had John J. McCloy, one of the so called ‘Wise Men’ of US foreign policy,⁴² a powerful and well connected lawyer with deep-seated links to both the Rockefellers and the Shah; and a host of other Republicans, including former Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford.

The Shah’s personal ties and network of links to the American political and financial elite extended far beyond his official dealings with the US government. The interest of the Rockefellers stemmed from the increasing involvement of the family bank, Chase Manhattan, in Iran during the 1970s; the Shah and his private family trust, the Pahlavi foundation, were prized international customers and the regime held a vast amount of its national assets with the bank. In his definitive discussion of ‘Pahlavism

in America', James Bill describes how the Rockefellers made frequent visits to Iran right up until the revolution – both Nelson and David made separate trips in 1976 and 1977, and Nelson returned again in the spring of 1978. The Rockefeller-Pahlavites arranged their meetings with the Shah directly, seldom involving official US representatives.⁴³ As the Shah's situation became more tenuous, so this group became ever more vocal in their attempt to influence Carter, firstly into taking decisive action to save the regime, and then later on, into respecting and granting the wishes of a once-valued ally.

In the early part of 1979 as the Shah's future remained decidedly unclear, the influential lobbyists stepped up their campaign. The former Iranian Ambassador to the US, Ardeshir Zahedi, was active on the Shah's behalf again contacting both Nixon and Kissinger, senior US senators and his old friend in the White House, Brzezinski. According to Zahedi, all of them shared his concerns and were prepared to lobby hard for the Shah's admission into the US.⁴⁴ In March 1979 Under Secretary of State David Newsom called David Rockefeller informing him that the US government had intelligence that indicated an attack on the US embassy was likely if the Shah were to be admitted. Newsom also tried to stress the same reasoning to Henry Kissinger but to no avail; both men refused to pass on the message that it was not a convenient time to admit the dispirited monarch.⁴⁵

The pressing of the Shah's case on the Carter administration was relentless; the president himself recalls that the question was brought to him at least weekly from various different sources, but that he remained adamant in his resistance to such pressure.⁴⁶ In April 1979 John J. McCloy, who had served as Assistant Secretary of War during the Second World War, wrote a series of letters to officials in the Carter government. In a letter to Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, McCloy offered his opinion that the US should accede to the Shah's request for residency due to his "outstanding record of past cooperation". In response, Christopher clearly stated the State Department's concerns for the safety of US personnel and other American citizens in Iran. Having failed to secure Christopher's support for his proposal, McCloy subsequently contacted his close friend Brzezinski seeking reassurance that the government was at least considering the issue. Brzezinski's reply to McCloy was hardly a ringing endorsement of Carter's stance:

*"You know how concerned I am about the subject... Let us keep in touch and never hesitate to share with me your views."*⁴⁷

This was yet another issue where division amongst Carter's advisors created problems, although in this instance it was actually Brzezinski who appeared to be swimming against the tide of opinion.

The Carter administration was aware of whom it was up against and the tactics they were employing. At the beginning of April there was another attempt to pressurise Carter with a pincer movement. He was initially called by Kissinger and asked to reconsider his decision, then the very next day he met with Rockefeller who asked exactly the same question. As Carter observed, *"Rockefeller, Kissinger, and Brzezinski seem to be adopting this as a joint project."*⁴⁸ Yet it was not just the so-called Rockefeller-Pahlavites who pressed for action. Carter also recalls fielding personal calls from former Republican Presidents about the Shah's situation.⁴⁹ Vice President Walter Mondale was also contacted by both Kissinger and Rockefeller urging that the Shah be allowed into the US; he remembers that Kissinger described the situation as a humiliation for the US and dismissed the concerns about putting the embassy staff at risk as just part of their job.⁵⁰ The Shah's supporters sought every means possible and any available contact to try and influence the Carter administration into changing course. Their motives for doing so differed somewhat – most of them were doing so with only the Shah's or their own interests in mind; others, like Brzezinski, felt that it came down to the basic principle of American loyalty to an ally, regardless of the possible consequences for US interests.

David Rockefeller was a good case in point. Even though he was a key part of the triumvirate that was applying consistent pressure on the White House, in actual fact he was a somewhat reluctant participant and only actively took on his brother's bidding when his own interests appeared to be threatened. Contrary to popular belief, in the aftermath of the revolution the Provisional Government of Iran did not want to completely sever the country's economic ties with the US. However, its leaders were fearful that given the Rockefeller family's and Chase Manhattan Bank's long-standing association with the Shah, Iranian assets would be frozen in an attempt to destabilise the economy and precipitate the Shah's return. This is what led the new regime to choose other US banks to handle the National Iranian Oil Company's accounts. It was

only after the new regime's decision to withdraw its assets from Chase Manhattan that David Rockefeller became interested in helping the Shah – he had previously turned down Kissinger's approaches for fear of damaging Chase's relations with the new regime.⁵¹

From April until October, when Carter finally relented and allowed the Shah into the country to receive medical treatment, there was a concerted effort by pro-Shah forces both inside and outside the US to reverse the original 'no' decision. Although Carter had remained steadfast in his opposition throughout this period, in the end the circumstances changed considerably once the Shah's health problems became public knowledge.

An unhelpful Congress: The Javits resolution

The Carter administration's ethical human rights policy in the run up to the Iranian revolution has already been considered. Not surprisingly, in the aftermath of the Shah's departure and with the establishment of a new government the situation remained very delicate for Carter and there was simply no way the US could voice major criticisms of the new regime's methods without incurring a severe public backlash in Iran. The whole issue was a very difficult one for the US government to broach because if they condemned or raised objections to the trials and executions taking place, then they were accused of being complicit in the crimes of the defendants.⁵²

The State Department tried hard to put the human rights criticism in a friendly and non-confrontational context by praising the noble objectives of the revolution – freedom, justice and democratic institutions.⁵³ But however it was phrased there was no avoiding the fact that the new regime was indulging in acts of excessive authoritarian justice seen many times during the Shah's long reign. For Carter the predicament remained the same as it had in 1977 and 1978; even though the US government was morally opposed to some of the things that were taking place in Iran, speaking out brought little benefit and only endangered American interests.

In the mid-late 1970s, human rights was a topic that was garnering lots of attention not just in the White House, but also in the corridors of power in the US Capitol. A

growing number of congressional representatives were now willing to confront abuses in different parts of the world in direct and aggressive manner, often going further than the president was able to, unrestrained by the complexity of diplomatic concerns and the national interest. In this particular case, the US Congress was taking more than a passing interest in Iran for another reason – Khomeini's hostility towards Jews and Israel. The treatment of Jews, Baha'is and Christians led to a Senate resolution on 17 May 1979 which condemned the revolutionary government for its persecution and execution of these groups and other political opponents. The resolution had essentially been triggered by the execution of a wealthy Iranian-Jewish businessman accused of spying for Israel. The reality was that rather than a revolutionary vendetta against Jews, as it had been presented on the Senate floor, it was actually part of a wider targeting of those with close associations to the Shah.⁵⁴

The resolution was sponsored by Senator Jacob K. Javits (R-NY), one of Israel's most prominent supporters in Congress and a man with a large Jewish constituency.⁵⁵ It was backed by other prominent Senators such as Majority Leader Robert Byrd (D-WV), who described it as "very timely", and Abraham Ribicoff (D-CT) who went further by praising the Shah as a true friend of the US and calling for the entire world to condemn the excesses in Iran.⁵⁶ The Javits resolution, as it became known, actually caused the US government some major difficulties in its dealings with Iran.

Firstly, the resolution was far from "very timely" as Byrd had suggested; in fact, its timing was quite the opposite and proved to be particularly problematic. It essentially derailed much of the behind the scenes diplomatic work and rapprochement efforts in which members of the US government had been engaged. Officials in the Iranian government were none too pleased either, coming as it did just days after Vance had assured them that the US wanted to expand its ties with Iran.⁵⁷ They failed to appreciate that this apparent contradiction was most certainly not the intention of the Carter administration. The Iranians' lack of understanding of the American political system contributed to this; had they been aware that the president, particularly this one, possessed very limited control over the actions of the US Congress then they might have recognised that Carter was powerless to prevent the Senate's condemnation.

Towards the end of April and the early part of May, the State Department had been actively weighing up the possibility of US representatives meeting with Khomeini. Henry Precht and Charles Naas discussed the idea and found support from within the provisional government in the form of both Mehdi Bazargan and Ebrahim Yazdi. However, the whole process was completely wrecked by the Javits resolution. Naas thus describes its damaging impact:

*“...for Javits it was a simple political gesture to his constituents in New York. For us in Tehran it was calamitous.”*⁵⁸

Another consequence of the Javits resolution, though an unintended one of course, was that it undermined Carter's effort to appoint Walter Cutler as the new US Ambassador to Iran, belatedly replacing Bill Sullivan, by now a discredited figure in the eyes of the White House. Cutler had already been approved by the US Senate and was ready to go to work. However, in what was ostensibly a belligerent response to the passing of the Javits resolution, the Iranians moved to block Cutler's appointment. The justification given by Yazdi was that Cutler had been involved in some dark issues in central Africa and accordingly a man with such history was not welcome in Iran.⁵⁹ Again, this decision was not very well received by US diplomats who had been patiently forging new relationships and contacts while they awaited the arrival of their new Ambassador – it was another case of events back in Washington undermining their efforts on the ground.

The Javits resolution also resulted in a renewed outpouring of anti-American vitriol and only added fuel to the already widely held public belief that the US was trying to engineer the Shah's return. Tens of thousands protested outside the US embassy. The disparate and often contentious strands of the Iranian revolution were continually united in one thing, their hatred and blaming of America, which acted as the powerful glue that held them together.⁶⁰ This marked a turning point for the worse in US-Iranian relations, heightening suspicions and resulting in the almost inevitable cries of double standards – why were there no Senate resolutions during the Shah's rule? This incident gave Khomeini a perfect example with which to highlight US hypocrisy and hostility towards the revolution.⁶¹ Ironically enough, there were question marks over Senator Jacob Javits, the man who sparked the whole furore, and his own links with the Pahlavi regime. Javits had been a long-time supporter of the Shah, principally

because of the regime's close relations with Israel, and in 1976 his wife Marian received a lucrative contract from the Iranian government to do the public relations for Iran Air. However in June 1979 – just weeks after he had sponsored the Senate resolution – the Iranian government released confidential files and alleged the contract was merely cover for a secret Iran lobby operating in the US.⁶² Whatever the exact truth of the matter, the incident was certainly embarrassing for Javits when knowledge of the contract became public in 1976 and then again in 1979.

But Javits was by no means the only member of Congress who seemed intent on speaking out about the Shah or the situation in Iran even if it risked undermining the Carter administration's stance. For example, Senators Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) and Charles Percy (R-IL) were both committed Pahlavites who openly stated their support for the Shah. The problem for the White House was that any ill advised comments from members of Congress in a public forum would always find their way to Tehran, thus exacerbating Iranian misperceptions about American intentions. Senator Henry 'Scoop' Jackson (D-WA), who was closely associated with the defence industries in his home state of Washington, gave an interview on US television in October in which he rather tactlessly predicted that the Iranian revolution was doomed to failure; his comments were not well received in Tehran by either the Iranian foreign ministry or US diplomats at the embassy.⁶³

No matter how hard it tried, the Carter White House could not control the message being received by the Iranians. The Senate's passing of the Javits resolution undoubtedly harmed US-Iranian relations and started the cycle of mistrust that would characterise the relationship over the following months. It is not at all surprising that Charles Naas asked to be replaced at the embassy in the wake of the Javits resolution. He says the Bazargan government, which sought diplomatic relations with the US, lacked authority and that it was clear that the real power lay with Khomeini, who did not want a working relationship with US diplomats. Naas also resented the fact that the efforts of American diplomats were being undermined by the insensitivity of Senators playing the political game back in Washington.⁶⁴

The pro-Shah lobby Vs. Diplomatic resistance

Throughout 1979, as the Shah's powerful group of friends pressed for his admission into the US they met with significant opposition from those involved at the forefront of US-Iranian relations in the State Department. There was a seemingly widespread recognition across the US government that admitting the Shah would be a serious mistake that would almost certainly be interpreted as a hostile act by the Khomeini and his supporters. Those opposed to admission held a relatively straightforward view; as far as they were concerned it would never be the correct time to bring the Shah to the US while question marks remained over the effect such a move could have on US-Iranian relations and the safety of American personnel.

While other policy makers changed their positions at various times during the spring and summer of 1979, those at State remained steadfast in their opposition. Henry Precht, head of the Iran desk, maintains that his position never wavered – it was the same in October when the Shah was admitted as it had been back in February. He felt that although the US had a human debt to the Shah, such obligations had to be put to one side in order to build a new relationship with Iran; the decision could then be reviewed at a later date once the situation had settled down.⁶⁵ Precht's views reflected the conventional State Department thinking that relations with Iran had to be more important than looking out for the Shah. This position jelled among Vance, Christopher, and Newsom at an early stage in the policy debate as the Shah grew restless in Morocco in March.⁶⁶ The message was also drummed home by Naas while he was back in the US for a brief period at this time; he was keen to raise awareness in Washington of the political uproar the decision would cause and the need for US national interests to come before the personal interests of the Shah.⁶⁷

Throughout 1979, as the Shah moved around the world to Egypt, Morocco, the Caribbean, and then Mexico, Washington kept reminding Bruce Laingen, the man who had become Charge d'Affaires at the embassy, and the rest of the diplomatic staff that what happened to the Shah after the revolution mattered a great deal. The question was asked several times during the summer as to whether it was safe for the Shah and his family to come to the US.⁶⁸ For example, Vance asked Laingen for an evaluation of the risks in allowing the Shah into the US at the end of July 1979. Laingen's response was unambiguous in its assessment of the reasons not to allow the

Shah in at this stage, highlighting the sensitive nature of US-Iranian relations and the tumultuous political situation in which the US remained a “convenient scapegoat”.⁶⁹ Vance supported Laingen’s estimation and recommended to President Carter that the decision should not be considered at this time but reviewed at a later date.⁷⁰ During this period both Henry Precht and Warren Christopher also wrote numerous memos arguing strongly against admission.⁷¹

Carter recognised the unequivocal message coming back from the embassy and the vastly different circumstances from when he had originally made the offer of a safe haven. He was not prepared to take the risk when it was evidently not essential for the Shah to come to the US – the president made it plain that he did not want the Shah playing tennis in California while Americans in Tehran were being kidnapped or even killed.⁷² The decision was made at the beginning of August to defer consideration of the Shah’s possible exile in the US until the last two weeks of September; the pro-Shah attitude and pressure applied by Brzezinski is apparent as Carter snapped in one memo, “Zbig – attenuate your crusade.”⁷³

Laingen returned to Washington for a brief visit at the end of the summer yet both the top men at the NSC, Brzezinski and Aaron, were out of town during the week of his visit. In late September, Laingen again offered strong advice against an early admission, arguing that the new regime should be given time to complete its process of installing the new governmental structure and that it remained a sensitive matter that could result in considerable agitation and violence.⁷⁴ The anti-admission stance had crystallised within the administration, save of course for Brzezinski, and it was evidently going to take something drastic in order to change established attitudes.

The Shah’s health

There are all kinds of conflicting accounts concerning the Shah’s health, including some inconsistencies regarding his exact condition, when it was diagnosed, and how much the US government and others knew about his medical problems.⁷⁵ What is known is that back in the mid-1970s the Shah had been diagnosed by French doctors with a mild form of lymphoma but had managed to keep this information suppressed and it became a closely guarded secret. The turbulent months of the revolution highlighted not only the Shah’s indecision, but also his ailing health and mental state.

Despite this, no medical intelligence on the Shah's condition came to light – not that the US government was not watching. In a meeting at the White House in late November 1978, at the height of the revolutionary unrest, Ambassador Zahedi informed Carter that the Shah was unwell and depressed; yet CIA Director Stansfield Turner, who was present at the meeting, intervened saying that he did not believe the Shah was ill because the CIA had studied recent pictures of him.⁷⁶ The reality was that neither the US nor anyone else, other than the Shah's personal physicians, knew the true extent of his medical problems.

It was following his exile from Iran that the truth about the Shah's medical problems slowly began to emerge, first in the Bahamas and then in Mexico. According to his wife, he was seen by a Mexican doctor and informed that the hospital did not have the necessary resources or equipment required for the therapy. The Pahlavi family, especially his sister Princess Ashraf who was another regular lobbyist on his behalf, wanted desperately for him to go to the US for treatment but Empress Farah Pahlavi had her doubts:

“...deep inside my heart I didn't want to go to America because I knew... there would be a negative reaction of maybe the Press or the people or demonstrations.”⁷⁷

The situation came to a head at the end of September 1979 when David Newsom at the State Department was advised by two of David Rockefeller's associates, Robert Armao and Joseph Reed, that the Shah was gravely ill, possibly with malaria, and might require temporary admission into the US for treatment.⁷⁸ Dr. Benjamin Kean, of the Cornell Medical School in New York, subsequently travelled to Mexico to examine the Shah in an effort to determine the full extent of his medical condition. Farah Pahlavi has complained that the US sent a doctor who was a specialist in tropical disease and not an expert in her husband's disease,⁷⁹ but there are two points to make about this claim. While Dr. Kean was an expert in tropical medicine, he had not been officially sent by the US government and, perhaps more importantly, nobody seemed sure as to what the Shah's condition was – the Mexican doctors believed he may have malaria – so there was no way an expert could be sent.

It was only after Kean's initial assessment ruled out malaria and recommended diagnostic tests to check for cancer that the Shah's full medical history and long battle with cancer was disclosed by Armao and Reed. On his return to Mexico in mid-October, Kean met with one of the French doctors who had been treating the Shah's lymphoma and also had a series of discussions with the State Department's Medical Director, Dr. Eban Dustin.⁸⁰ Exactly what happened next and the nature of the conversation between Kean and Dustin has been contested and there is no official record to clarify what was discussed. However, the information that filtered back to the State Department and to President Carter is indisputable.

Making the final decision

At Carter's 19 October Friday foreign policy breakfast Secretary Vance, the last holdout among his advisers, informed the president that in light of the medical information he now believed that the Shah should be admitted into the US on humanitarian grounds.⁸¹ Brzezinski and Defense Secretary Brown had long advocated the Shah's admission while Vice President Mondale, who initially saw it as an additional risk the US did not need to take – particularly as the advice from the US embassy was fairly unequivocal,⁸² had changed his position over the course of the summer months. Mondale admits that his opinion was swayed but stresses that it was nothing to do with the pro-Shah lobbyists, but rather because he became far less optimistic that things were going to work out diplomatically between the US and the radical elements in the Iranian government. He also felt the humiliation to the Shah and the US had reached an unacceptable stage by this time.⁸³ Carter was the lone voice arguing against the Shah's admission, questioning the medical judgement and reiterating the arguments about US interests that Vance and the State Department had previously put forward.

Carter's was evidently more concerned about the possible security implications than with any political calculations. During the meeting Hamilton Jordan provided the president with the wider political outlook on the decision:

*"...if the Shah dies in Mexico can you imagine the field day Kissinger will have with that? He'll say that first you caused the Shah's downfall and now you've killed him."*⁸⁴

Carter did not take kindly to this line of thinking and grew ever more frustrated as Brzezinski and Vance, for once on the same page, reaffirmed the humanitarian principle of their argument. He instructed Vance to ensure that the medical information advice was concrete and also had the last word when he asked the now famous rhetorical question:

“What are you guys going to advise me to do if they overrun our embassy and take our people hostage?”⁸⁵

The next day Carter received memos from both Christopher and Brzezinski clarifying the situation and making recommendations as to how the administration should respond. Christopher outlined how the Shah’s lymphoma was no longer responding effectively to chemotherapy and he now required essential diagnostic tests which Kean advised “cannot be carried out” in Mexico; a view that was supported by the State Department’s Medical Director.⁸⁶ The findings presented to President Carter appeared to be explicit – the Shah now needed urgent medical treatment in the US.

Christopher and Vance’s about face in the light of the new circumstances thus brought them onside with Brzezinski and the NSC. While they obviously agreed with the recommendation to admit the Shah, there was disagreement over whether or not the US should consult the Barzargan government to see what its position was prior to making the final decision. Christopher and Vance had presented this option to Carter but it had been firmly rejected by Brzezinski, who argued that the Iranian government’s reaction was bound to be negative and that they should not have the right to veto US actions in a case that was clearly humanitarian in nature.⁸⁷

Carter was again faced with a very difficult choice; Laingen’s assessment from the embassy’s perspective was very clear on the dangers of admission – even if it was on humanitarian grounds, while the medical reports indicated that there was a valid and pressing case for the Shah’s admission. Carter had previously indicated – way back in February – that he would be willing to admit the Shah if there was a medical necessity,⁸⁸ and this was precisely what he did late on the evening of 20 October in approving Brzezinski’s recommendation. Carter certainly did not immediately reverse his decision on hearing that the Shah had terminal cancer and was seeking treatment in the US. In fact it was very much the opposite; as Mondale notes, it was only the

unanimity of his advisers, who were all telling him that they had held on long enough, which eventually persuaded him to change his mind.⁸⁹ Brzezinski's position never wavered, but others changed their position as the months wore on; first Mondale, then later Vance – who was strenuously opposed to it until the full extent of the Shah's health became clear. Carter was, in a sense, the last man standing.

Security assurances and the Algiers meeting

What remains somewhat puzzling is the debate about security guarantees from the Iranian government prior to the Shah's admission. The recollections of senior White House officials all make reference to the Bazargan government promising or assuring protection for the embassy.⁹⁰ In a recent interview, Carter states that he refrained from admitting the Shah until the necessary security assurances had been received. He believed these had been made following negotiations between Brzezinski and the Iranian government – thus the Shah could be admitted for treatment provided he made no political statement whilst in New York.⁹¹ Yet this account certainly does not tally to those of Bruce Laingen and the Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi, who met to discuss the issue following Carter's decision. It seems that the Carter administration was using the short-lived embassy takeover in February, which the Iranian government had stepped in to resolve, as the basis of its security assurance.

The cable US embassy staff in Tehran had been dreading duly arrived on Sunday 21 October. Bruce Laingen and Henry Precht were instructed to inform the Iranian government that the Shah was terminally ill and had requested treatment in the US, which the US government had accepted on humanitarian grounds. They met almost immediately with Prime Minister Bazargan and Foreign Minister Yazdi, seeking to state the US case for admitting the Shah – focusing on the humanitarian aspect and stressing that it was in no way politically motivated – and asking for security assurances. Laingen recalls the response all too clearly; *"We will do our best"*⁹² – hardly the security commitment that the Carter administration was hoping for. Yazdi told them:

*"You are opening Pandora's Box... and America is responsible for the repercussions and ramifications."*⁹³

He also stressed that the people of Iran would find it hard to accept the argument that it was a humanitarian issue and not part of some wider conspiracy.

One means by which the Carter administration could have reassured the Iranians that the Shah was in fact a very ill man with no designs on reclaiming power was by handling the medical situation far better in the aftermath of the decision. The American academic Betty Glad claims the refusal to allow Iranian doctors to examine the Shah or to review and verify the diagnosis proved to be a damaging mistake. This left the Iranians to rely on the press conference of Morton Coleman, the cancer specialist treating the Shah, whose suggestion that he would need at least six months intensive chemotherapy, possibly eighteen months, did little to allay their fears.⁹⁴

Brzezinski confronted the medical situation directly with Bazargan and Yazdi when they briefly met on 1 November 1979 in Algiers, celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Algerian independence. Laingen had pressed Bazargan and Yazdi to head the Iranian delegation at Algiers as he knew Brzezinski was heading the US delegation and that if talks could be arranged between the two parties then perhaps they could make progress:

*"It would elevate the dialogue up to a point where it mattered... (and) could mean a lot in building, as we were trying to do, a new relationship with this new Islamic government in Tehran."*⁹⁵

Yet the meeting, or rather its aftermath and poor reception back in Iran, proved to be more problematic than Laingen or anyone else envisaged.

Brzezinski assured Bazargan and Yazdi that the US had no intention of undermining their government, overthrowing it or turning back the clock; he sought to stress mutual interests rather than accentuate their political differences.⁹⁶ He also made it clear that the US had no designs to use the Shah against the new regime in Iran, pointing out that he was ill and it was purely a humanitarian gesture with no political motivations. Crucially, Brzezinski refused to budge on the issue of a medical examination by Iranian doctors; he was satisfied with the medical diagnosis and rejected the Iranian request as he believed this would be a negative reflection on the veracity of the US government.⁹⁷ As noted above, this intransigence from the US government was unnecessary and only exacerbated Iranian mistrust.

The Algiers meeting was not well received back in Iran; the news media was fiercely critical of Bazargan and Yazdi, and the pictures of them shaking hands with Brzezinski caused public outrage. The criticism and discontent undoubtedly stemmed from a lack of understanding of the decision-making structure within the US government. Yazdi believes that when the media and public heard Iran's top government officials had met with the President Carter's National Security Advisor, the assumption was that they had met an 'intelligence rank' – equivalent to meeting the director of SAVAK in Iran – they did not recognise that the NSC in the US was not the equivalent of SAVAK.⁹⁸ The meeting thus appeared more suspicious to the media and the general public in Iran than it was in reality and it also piled further pressure on Bazargan and Yazdi who were accused of being pro-Western sympathisers. Rubin claims this is exactly what Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, Khomeini's aide and long-time rival of Yazdi, was trying to achieve when he ordered Iranian television to broadcast pictures of the encounter.⁹⁹

Explaining and understanding the decision

When President Carter made the final decision to admit the Shah in October 1979 he did so based on erroneous information, of that there can be no doubt. The confusion surrounding the medical information was not the President's doing; as Daugherty notes, at some stage in the communication process the Shah's condition somehow transformed from not being a fatal illness with treatment in Mexico sufficing, to a life-threatening condition that could only be treated in the US.¹⁰⁰ If anyone is culpable from the medical intelligence perspective, then it is the diplomats and doctors who provided the White House with an inaccurate assessment.

Much of the debate and discussion has focused on what actually caused Carter to change his mind and reverse his earlier judgement. Typically, critics of his presidency point to the role of the Shah's American allies in bringing significant political pressure to bear and eventually forcing his hand.¹⁰¹ Such views were common, not just in the literature that followed the Carter years, but also in the early weeks of the hostage crisis. In December 1979 the Washington Post columnist Jack Anderson wrote a scathing critique of the administration's handling of the Shah's admission and cited the Kissinger-Rockefeller pressure as the key factor.¹⁰² James Bill, who coined the term 'Pahlavism in America', has described the decision as a case study of "the

power of informal actors in American foreign policy-making.”¹⁰³ From his view inside the State Department, Henry Precht points to Carter's dwindling political fortunes in October 1979, the growing number and influence of those voices supporting the Shah, and the fact that the president would have faced strong criticism had he refused medical care to a sick friend.¹⁰⁴ One thing is for certain, the Kissinger-Rockefeller camp was more than pleased with the final outcome, however it came about; Rockefeller aide Joseph Reed sent a memo to McCloy and other pro-Shah lobbyists after the decision was made in which he declared their “mission impossible” was complete.¹⁰⁵

For his part, Carter has consistently reiterated that the efforts of Kissinger, Rockefeller et al were counterproductive in that they actually strengthened his opposition; Jordan also claims this was the case and that the president deeply resented such pressure.¹⁰⁶ Although the Shah's eventual admission suggests that their efforts were far from counterproductive, the final decision did not come about as a direct result of the lobbying efforts that continually brought the issue to the president's attention; as discussed previously, Carter regularly showed his displeasure with Brzezinski for attempting to do just that. In the end, the judgement purely came down to the Shah's ill health and was made on a humanitarian basis.

There was growing political pressure on Carter in the later part of 1979 for a variety of reasons. The nation's economy was badly affected by the ongoing energy crisis – characterised by Carter's ‘Crisis of Confidence’ speech that summer; the SALT II ratification process had stalled in Congress and was proving to be a very difficult political battleground; and there were also the strains of preparing for an election year and the anticipated challenge from Senator Ted Kennedy for the Democratic Party's nomination. Rose McDermott examines the decision using ‘prospect theory’ – where different alternatives that involve risk are evaluated and decisions are made based on the potential value of losses and gains. She argues that once pressure began to mount against him, Carter proved more willing to take risks to regain his position in the polls and quieten the criticism from conservatives for ‘losing Iran’ – it was all about recouping political losses.¹⁰⁷ This analysis is flawed because the Shah's fate was in no way an issue on which the president stood to gain anything in terms of his own domestic political support. The irony is of course that the unintended consequence of

the decision, the Iran hostage crisis, would overshadow the whole of 1980 and Carter's re-election campaign.

What does the decision to admit the Shah say about Carter's leadership? It is perhaps easy to look back with hindsight and maintain that he demonstrated weakness by failing to assert his own authority. Daugherty makes that very point, arguing that Carter failed to recognise that his was the only vote that counted among his advisors; he also makes the somewhat unfair comparison with Abraham Lincoln's personal decisiveness in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation against the wishes of his own cabinet.¹⁰⁸ Others have preferred to focus on his lack of foreign policy experience which made him overly dependent on his advisors, particularly Brzezinski.¹⁰⁹ However, while in others aspects of US foreign policy Carter may well have leaned on Brzezinski, in this particular case he spent most of 1979 rejecting the National Security Advisor's constant appeals to reconsider the Shah decision.

Carter's critics often overlook one of the clearest facts to emerge from all the archive documents, memoirs and personal recollections of those involved in making the Shah decision; that the president was the last man standing. When he met with his foreign policy team on 19 October all of them were in favour of allowing the Shah into the US and it was Carter who reminded them of the reasons why they had so far, in the face of various pressures, refused him entry. That Carter was reluctantly persuaded by his advisors does not make him a weak leader. Yes his instinct about the safety of US personnel in Iran did turn out to be correct, but all of his advisors, people whom he had chosen and whose judgement he trusted, were telling him that it was a humanitarian call that simply had to be made.

The humanitarian element of the Shah's plight ultimately swung Carter's decision. While his administration's adherence to its own human rights doctrine may not have been one hundred percent consistent in Iran, or in other countries for that matter, Carter's own personal and moral values led to a decision that was based solely on compassionate grounds. Prior to the revelations about the Shah's health, Carter had been quite prepared to see the Pahlavi family live elsewhere rather than on US soil. The important failing of the US government, which has nothing to do with Carter's leadership, lay in not knowing the true extent of the Shah's health problems, but they

were hardly alone in that – other than a handful of French doctors and some members of his inner circle, nobody knew of the Shah’s battle with cancer. Had the Carter administration been aware of this then perhaps they would have been able to enter into an open dialogue with the Iranian government about the possibility of admitting the Shah, but only in the event of a medical emergency.

Once the decision had been taken the Carter administration did not help itself by making several costly mistakes, namely in the way it communicated the decision and the stubborn refusal to allow Iranian doctors to verify the Shah’s condition. As we have seen, the propensity for misinterpretation was a feature of US-Iranian relations in this period and clear communication of American motives and justifications might have alleviated some of the suspicions and conspiracies being imagined by the Iranian people. The Shah’s arrival in the US did not, by itself, instantly spark the angry public reaction that had been widely anticipated. Laingen recalls that the indications coming out of Qom, the clerical centre of the revolution, were not too alarming and that Khomeini was not overly concerned about the Shah’s change of residence.¹¹⁰ Yet the tension was certainly simmering beneath the surface and the event which brought it to boiling point was arguably Brzezinski’s handshake with Bazargan at Algiers – or rather Iranian misunderstanding of it. Just days after the Algiers meeting, what President Carter had feared and many in the State Department had predicted duly occurred; on 4 November 1979 a mob of students overran the US embassy, seizing documents and taking its staff hostage. The Iran hostage crisis had begun.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 8

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² Minutes, SCC Meeting, 13 February 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC 133: 2/13/79], Box 29, Jimmy Carter Library.

³ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 342.

⁴ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 459.

⁵ Interview with President Jimmy Carter, p. 2, (6/7), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

⁶ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 393.

⁷ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 149.

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- ⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 470-471.
- ¹⁰ Memo, Sick et al to Brzezinski, 22 February 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – PRC 94: 2/23/79], Box 25, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ¹¹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 470.
- ¹² Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation*, p. 131.
- ¹³ Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) report on broadcasts, November 1978 to November 1979. These reports indicate Soviet efforts to highlight discontent with the Shah's regime and the role of the US government (found in numerous collections at the Jimmy Carter Library).
- ¹⁴ Memo, Situation Room to David Aaron, 12 March 1979, NLC-1-10-1-2-6, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ¹⁵ See Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 149-153 for a more definitive explanation.
- ¹⁶ Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, pp. 286-287.
- ¹⁷ Memo, Situation Room to David Aaron, 12 March 1979, NLC-1-10-1-2-6, Jimmy Carter Library.
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- ²¹ 'The Iranian Revolution: An Oral History with Henry Precht, Then State Department Desk Officer', *Middle East Journal*, Volume 58, No. 1 (Winter 2004) p. 27.
- ²² Interview with Bruce Laingen, p. 3, (6/13), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ²³ Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in the West's War with Militant Islam* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006) pp. 26-27. Bowden, a renowned journalist and author in the US, provides a gripping account and the definitive narrative of the hostage crisis, examining events from the point of view of those involved on both sides.
- ²⁴ William Shawcross, *The Shah's Last Ride: The Story of the Exile, Misadventures and Death of the Emperor* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989) pp. 13-14.
- ²⁵ Sick, *All Fall Down*, p. 177.
- ²⁶ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 471-472.
- ²⁷ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 456.
- ²⁸ Shawcross, *The Shah's Last Ride*, p. 121.
- ²⁹ Shawcross, *The Shah's Last Ride*, p. 126.
- ³⁰ 'The Iranian Revolution: An Oral History with Henry Precht', p. 29.
- ³¹ Daugherty, *In the Shadow of the Ayatollah*, p. 95.
- ³² Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 343.
- ³³ William J. (Bill) Daugherty, 'Jimmy Carter and the 1979 Decision to Admit the Shah into the United States', *American Diplomacy*, April 2003, p. 3, http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/archives_roll/2003_01-03/dauherty_shah/dauherty_shah.html [accessed June 2010].
- ³⁴ Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 343-344.
- ³⁵ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 472 and Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 344.
- ³⁶ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 153.
- ³⁷ Shawcross, *The Shah's Last Ride*, pp. 133-134.
- ³⁸ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 460.
- ³⁹ Shawcross, *The Shah's Last Ride*, pp. 135-136.
- ⁴⁰ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, pp. 319-320
- ⁴¹ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 322.
- ⁴² The 'Wise Men' was a term coined by Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas in their book *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986). The term refers to the group of government officials and members of the foreign policy establishment who helped shape the US containment policy and the wider world in the post-Second World War era; they were later brought back in to advise President Lyndon B. Johnson during the Vietnam years. The principal figures in the group were Dean Acheson, Charles E. Bohlen, W. Averell Harriman, George F. Kennan, Robert A. Lovett, and John J. McCloy.
- ⁴³ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, pp. 319-320. Bill's chapter 'Pahlavism in America: The Informal Politics of Foreign Policy-Making' (pp. 319-378) provides the definitive account of the external pressures this group placed on the Carter administration.
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- ⁴⁷ Various letters from McCloy, Christopher & Brzezinski, all April 1979, White House Central File, CO71 1/20/77-1/20/81, Box CO-31, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁴⁸ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 461.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with President Jimmy Carter, p. 4, (6/7), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
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- ⁵¹ Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation*, p. 134.
- ⁵² Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 289.
- ⁵³ Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 289.
- ⁵⁴ See Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, pp. 283-284 for further discussion of the events leading to the Javits resolution.
- ⁵⁵ Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation*, p. 135.
- ⁵⁶ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 284.
- ⁵⁷ Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation*, pp. 135-136.
- ⁵⁸ Interview Questions – Points to Film with Charles Naas, p. 9, (8/5/14), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁵⁹ Filmed interview with Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi, p. 5, (4/16) Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁶⁰ David Farber, *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) p. 126.
- ⁶¹ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 284.
- ⁶² 'Iran: Private Access. Cover for a Secret Lobby', *Time* magazine, 11 June 1979, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,946311,00.html> [accessed March 2010].
- ⁶³ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 285.
- ⁶⁴ Interview Questions – Points to Film with Charles Naas, p. 9, (8/5/14), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁶⁵ Precht, E-mail, September 2010.
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- ⁶⁷ Interview Questions – Points to Film with Charles Naas, p. 8, (8/5/14), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
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- ⁶⁹ Memo (with attachment of Laingen's cable), Secretary Vance to President Carter, 28 July 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, Alpha Channel (Miscellaneous) [5/79-8/79], Box 20, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁷⁰ Memo (with attachment of Laingen's cable), Secretary Vance to President Carter, 28 July 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, Alpha Channel (Miscellaneous) [5/79-8/79], Box 20, Jimmy Carter Library.
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- ⁷² Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled*, p. 194.
- ⁷³ Memo, Brzezinski to President Carter, 3 August 1979, Brzezinski Material – Subject File, Weekly Reports 102-120: [7/79-12/79], Box 42, Jimmy Carter Library.
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- ⁷⁵ Daugherty deals with some of these issues in his 2003 article; see Daugherty, 'Jimmy Carter and the 1979 Decision to Admit the Shah', pp. 6-9.
- ⁷⁶ Interview Questions – Points to Film with Ardeshir Zahedi, p. 4, (8/3/8), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁷⁷ Interview with Shahbanou Farah pp. 40-42, (4/7), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
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- ⁷⁹ Interview with Shahbanou Farah p. 42, (4/7), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
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- ⁸³ Interview with Vice President Walter Mondale, p. 16, (6/16), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
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- ⁸⁵ Jordan, *Crisis*, p. 32.
- ⁸⁶ Memo, Deputy Secretary Christopher to President Carter, 20 October 1979, Plains Subject File, Iran 6/75-12/79, Box 23, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁸⁷ Memo, Brzezinski to President Carter, 20 October 1979, Plains Subject File, Iran 6/75-12/79, Box 23, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁸⁸ Daugherty, 'Jimmy Carter and the 1979 Decision to Admit the Shah', p. 8.
- ⁸⁹ Interview with Vice President Walter Mondale, p. 16, (6/16), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
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- ⁹¹ Interview with President Jimmy Carter, p. 4, (6/7), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
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- ⁹³ Filmed interview with Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi, p. 14, (4/16) Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁹⁴ Glad, *An Outsider in the White House*, p. 177.
- ⁹⁵ Interview with Bruce Laingen, p. 16, (6/13), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
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- ¹⁰⁰ Daugherty, Interview and e-mail, March/April 2008.
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Held Hostage by Khomeini: Launching Operation Eagle Claw

The intention of this chapter is not to re-live the compelling story of the US diplomatic and military personnel held hostage for four hundred and forty-four days – this has already been expertly done elsewhere, including by some of those involved – but rather to examine the responses and actions of the Carter administration in the months that followed the seizure of the US embassy in November 1979.¹ Particular focus is on Jimmy Carter’s decision to launch the hostage rescue mission – codename Operation Eagle Claw – in April 1980, examining why the President changed his approach given his commitment not to endanger the lives of the hostages in any way and his clear reluctance to use military force.

Much of the existing literature on the Iranian hostage crisis and the rescue decision was written during the 1980s and 1990s.² Since that time further documents from the period have become available at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library – such as, for example, the minutes of the SCC meetings on Iran. This account has also made extensive use of interview transcripts from the Brook Lapping Associates documentary series *Iran and the West*, first broadcast in February 2009, accessed through the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at Kings College London. These transcripts encompass a wide range of key participants from both the American and the Iranian side; interviews conducted with former hostage turned academic Bill Daugherty and Carter White House insider Phil Wise in 2008 are also referenced in this chapter. When pieced together this evidence enables a fresh interpretation of the Carter administration’s handling of the hostage crisis.

It is evident that despite the strategic divisions which still existed within the administration, the response to the hostage crisis was far more effective and coordinated than it had been to the earlier fall of the Shah and revolution that followed. The entire administration worked tirelessly to seek a resolution to the crisis and investigated every possible means of securing the release of the hostages. But the brutal reality was that nobody in Washington had any control over the hostages’ fate –

they immediately became pawns in the internal political situation in Iran as Khomeini sought to solidify the future of his Islamic revolution.

The rescue attempt was a bold decision from Carter and its failure should not necessarily be regarded as a negative reflection on his leadership. After all, by April 1980 reliable negotiation had become impossible, sanctions and other punitive measures had proved ineffective, and the Iranians were complacent about the US government's inability to act. The operational failings of the mission were not Carter's fault – senior military figures were responsible for the preparation, they had confidence in the plan and convinced him that it could work.

Carter's growing sense of frustration and desperation about his inability to alter the status-quo was not borne out of selfish concern for his own political future, but instead by an admirable sense of personal responsibility that he felt for getting the hostages back onto American soil. From the very outset of the crisis the US government had two overriding objectives; to protect its vital national interests and to protect the well-being of the hostages.³ Debate about the first objective is inevitable but the successful achievement of the second is unequivocally in Carter's favour. As Bill Daugherty has remarked:

"...we all got out alive, so there's something to be said for Carter's handling [of the situation]. If there had been a serious military attack, I don't think that we'd have left the country alive."⁴

Hoping for a quick fix

The vast US embassy compound at Taleghani in the heart of Tehran was attacked and eventually overrun by a group of revolutionary students – the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line – on Sunday 4 November 1979. Sixty-three Americans working at the embassy in various different capacities were seized; while a further three, including the Charge d'Affairs Bruce Laingen, were held at the Iranian Foreign Ministry. The initial reaction of the White House to the events that were unfolding in Tehran was not one of mass panic and hysteria for the simple reason that they had seen this before. Granted there was major concern at the apparent scale of the unrest and the number of service personnel involved, plus of course it had not been long since the Shah had landed on US soil to receive medical treatment – a factor which

had not been part of the reckoning in the earlier instances of attacks on US personnel in Iran.

Yet close examination of the internal White House papers and the memoirs of those involved, indicates that nobody saw this turning into a protracted crisis. Carter's thoughts in his diary entry for that day summed up the feeling and situation aptly; the President was "quite disturbed" and recognised "it's almost impossible to do anything if one's people are taken" due to a lack of protection from the host government.⁵ There was of course no way of knowing either way, but logic pointed to a swift resolution which is what Carter initially expected; the unprecedented nature of the attack meant it was inconceivable to think that the diplomats would be held for any length of time.⁶

White House memos talked of the 'post-crisis period' and of Iran 'post-hostage and post-Khomeini'.⁷ The prevailing view was that it would soon be over and there would then be a need to respond decisively to Iran's actions in order to demonstrate to other nations that this behaviour would not be tolerated by the US. Hamilton Jordan was confident it would be another short-lived takeover that would be resolved in much the same way as the February incident. That morning in a conversation with Phil Wise, Carter's appointments secretary, Jordan even considered the possible campaign benefits a well-handled crisis could have for Carter who was being challenged for the Democratic nomination by Senator Edward Kennedy.⁸ (This was meant to be a big day for the Carter campaign as Kennedy's now-infamous interview with CBS's Roger Mudd, in which he failed to express his reasons for seeking the presidency with any degree of coherence, was due to air).

The State Department, NSC and Pentagon were all agreed that there was no need for a rash military response and that urging the Iranian government to resolve the situation through friendly intermediaries was the right course to follow. As Brzezinski readily admits, when the SCC meeting convened the very next morning to discuss the developments "none of us had the slightest expectation" that this hostage-taking would mark the start of a damaging fourteen-month crisis.⁹ Indeed, it would not take long for the initial optimism of Carter and his aides to drain away as the realisation of exactly what they were facing became all too clear.

The loss of moderate voices

Once Ayatollah Khomeini gave the action of the militant students his blessing the whole basis of the negotiation for their release changed. Washington's misguided confidence in the ability of the Iranians to resolve such an issue was based on their dealings with the moderate element of the post-Shah order in the interim Iranian government; most prominently, Prime Minister Bazargan and Foreign Minister Yazdi. The US government had come to realise that there were, in effect, two governments in Iran; the secular side consisting of Bazargan and Yazdi, and the clerical side led by Khomeini – and they had concentrated on dealing with the secular side.¹⁰ When the more rational secular actors were removed from the picture early on, the Carter administration was faced with the uncertainty and unpredictability of entering into dialogue with the obdurate Khomeini.

Khomeini's initial reaction to the embassy seizure was somewhat different to his later championing of the hostage takers and their motivations. Yazdi flew to Qom to inform him of the news and the Ayatollah instantly decreed that the students be thrown out, fearful that the incident would do irreparable damage to Iran's reputation.¹¹ However, the students had their own line to Qom through their adviser, a cleric named Ayatollah Mousavi Khoiniha, who reached out to the Imam on their behalf; once Khomeini saw they were followers of the revolution he realised their actions could be utilised to further his vision for an Islamic theocracy in Iran.¹² He praised them, encouraged them to hold onto their 'gains' and later made public statements of support for them and condemnation of the US. This change in Khomeini's attitude transformed the whole context of the hostage taking – the student leaders had only expected to hold the hostages for a few days in an attempt to get the US to send the Shah back, but now they were part of a far bigger international incident with grave consequences for US-Iranian relations.

Recognising the severity of what was taking place and the dangerous international implications, the interim government now held an emergency cabinet meeting to discuss the way forward. Yazdi knew that the Iranians had international commitments to keep, regardless of their relationship with Washington; he had told Laingen, who had just left the Iranian Foreign Ministry prior to the attack on the embassy, that his

government would do what it could to resolve the issue and assumed it would be sorted within a couple of days:

*“No matter how much we disagreed with US foreign policy, either way this was the (Iranian) government’s responsibility.”*¹³

However, the country’s political leaders were not calling the shots in the new Iran – Khomeini was and they knew it; they felt excluded from the decision making process and believed foreign policy was being conducted outside the hands of the government. As Yazdi recalls, the whole cabinet was adamant the hostage taking was against Iranian national interests and, with Bazargan leading the way, the group decision was made to resign from office.¹⁴

The collapse of the Bazargan government just two days after the embassy capture was extremely significant and marked a decisive power shift towards the religious leaders and clerics in Iran. The government was not replaced; instead Khomeini concentrated all political authority in the hands of the Revolutionary Council, a body of clerics and militants who were ‘the guardians of the revolution’, while assuming the role of Supreme Leader.¹⁵ His views hardened on the embassy takeover and even those close to him, such as Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, who had been with him in Paris and would later become the first President of Iran, were unable to influence him. Bani-Sadr visited Khomeini after the hostage taking and offered to take care of things and stop the students but Khomeini rejected such a course, saying that as soon as the US expelled the Shah the hostages would be released.¹⁶

Carter and the US government were now confronted with an attack on their diplomats that looked very different from any previous cases – the people they had been negotiating with had gone and the Iranian public, whipped into an ever more vitriolic anti-American hysteria by the state-controlled media, now wanted the Shah’s blood. As Vance has noted, devising an effective strategy to resolve the situation was complicated by their limited knowledge of the political dynamics in Tehran; yet the one thing the US already knew was that Khomeini alone had the power to release the hostages.¹⁷

Assessing the options in Washington

The developing crisis required a quick assessment of the available options for the president, yet neither Carter nor his advisors could foresee exactly how Khomeini's strategy would evolve in the coming months.¹⁸ Despite this, Carter administration policy with regard to the hostage crisis was more coordinated than its response to the Shah's predicament had been.¹⁹ The fundamental conflict of values between Vance and the State Department and Brzezinski and the NSC – one favouring patience and diplomacy, the other advocating a more hard-nosed approach – remained a critical dividing line; but while differences remained, the lessons of the sometimes confused response to the Iranian revolution had been learnt as the administration set about clarifying its position and exploring the implications of the different paths it might take.

The Special Coordination Committee (SCC) brought together on an almost daily basis State, Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), CIA and NSC, plus others, including Vice President Mondale, Energy Secretary Charles Duncan, Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti, Treasury Secretary Bill Miller, White House legal counsel Lloyd Cutler and Press Secretary Jody Powell. The SCC became the central coordinating mechanism directing the US response in all areas, diplomatic, military, and economic, while also dealing with aspects of public relations and domestic politics.²⁰ Eventually, specialised SCC task forces were created to work on areas related to the hostage situation: energy, under Duncan; legal domestic issues, under Cutler; economic, under Miller; and longer-range political, under Aaron. As one would expect, Brzezinski and Vance were to work closely with the President on any sensitive negotiating issues, while a highly secret group consisting of Brzezinski, Brown, General Jones, and DCI Turner met to consider military contingency plans.²¹

Brzezinski paints a very positive picture of the 'harmony' that was maintained throughout, despite the earlier splits on Iranian policy, and the coordination with which it was carried out and communicated.²² Yet the drawback of the system was that by involving as wide a representation as possible from across government, these meetings ended up severely draining the resources of Carter's administration in other areas of policy. Betty Glad highlights such criticisms, pointing out that senior departmental heads spent at least two hours a day on the subject, thus diverting them

from other departmental responsibilities, plus there were persistent congressional demands on policy makers – Vance and Christopher spent up to two hours a day discussing Iran alone with members of Congress.²³ Any criticism of this nature needs to remember the all-consuming nature of the hostage problem – this was not an issue Carter could sideline and pick up again a few months down the road. It naturally came to dominate the final year of his presidency; Phil Wise remembers how in the first few days there was still a thought that a diplomatic solution could be reached, but as the days and weeks went by there came a realisation that the US was dealing with a whole new equation in Iran.²⁴

In the early days of the hostage taking, all available avenues were explored by the Carter administration, usually in the SCC meetings that took place. They included establishing new lines of communication; dealing with Iranian students in the US; considering economic counter-measures; and planning military contingencies. Putting all of the options onto the table was one thing, agreeing on what action to take was quite another. While Brzezinski acknowledges the cooperative nature and eagerness of his colleagues, he was less than impressed with their excuses for inaction; State on measures against Iranian diplomats; Justice on matters relating to Iranian residents in the US; and Treasury for making complex arguments as to why economic sanctions would be counterproductive.²⁵ As per his campaign promises, Carter also resolved to keep members of Congress, where not surprisingly feelings were running high, informed of the latest developments. A briefing of House members on 8 November revealed extraordinary hostility towards Iranian students in the US and, while there was moderate cross-party support for Carter's refusal to hand over the Shah, there were critical voices on both left and right that were likely to become more vocal than the administration's supporters.²⁶

The resignation of the entire Bazargan government provided the final evidence, if any were needed, that Khomeini alone possessed the power to release the hostages. The Carter administration moved to send an emissary to negotiate directly with the Ayatollah and, at Warren Christopher's suggestion, they dispatched former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who possessed good contacts among the religious leaders, and congressional staffer William Miller, a former Foreign Service officer who had served in Tehran. Bruce Laingen, being held at the Iranian Foreign Ministry, had secured

agreement for the delegation to be received but as they were changing planes in Turkey, Ramsey and Miller were told that Khomeini had refused them entry and decreed that no Iranian official could meet with representatives of the US government.²⁷

Khomeini's sudden about-turn may have been influenced by media coverage of the Clark-Miller mission, which is certainly how those in the White House perceived it. NBC News rejected Press Secretary Jody Powell's request not to reveal details of the mission – NBC ran the story so that instead of being unofficial and out of the spotlight, Clark and Miller were portrayed as direct emissaries of the president, something Vance cites as a grave mistake.²⁸ Once again Carter appeared to be a victim of his own time. As the historian David Farber suggests, journalists in the post-Watergate era were extremely wary of blindly following the behest of government officials;²⁹ instead they now felt it was their right to decide whether information was or was not in the public interest.

All sorts of people who felt they could help the White House resolve the situation came forward and offered their services. The vast majority of these efforts and approaches were kept out of the public domain in order to ensure that negotiations could proceed without either side coming under undue domestic political pressure.³⁰ One of those who offered assistance was the heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali, arguably America's most prominent Islamic figure ever since he had become a member of the Nation of Islam in the early 1960s. He and Wallace D. Muhammad, leader of the Islamic movement among African-Americans, were well known and widely respected across the Islamic world and felt they could make a contribution.³¹ Though the offer was never taken up, it provides an indication of the various different alternatives – some more plausible than others – that the administration considered. Carter was working flat-out, in his own words “almost full-time” to explore every possible way to establish communications and secure the release of the hostages.³²

The initial days and weeks of the hostage crisis were beset by confusion and unpredictability, but this had less to do with any disarray within the Carter administration and was almost inevitable given the fluidity of the situation. Gary Sick captured the circumstances in a memo sent to his NSC superior Brzezinski less than

ten days after the outbreak of the trouble. Sick was very conscious that in making decisions on Iran, all concerned in the US government were aware of “what the world must look like in Tehran” and that nobody “assume we are working with an opponent who is capable of exercising real judgement.”³³ The rational secular actors had been replaced by a man, and later a regime, of whom and of which the US had very limited understanding. Formulating policy responses against this background was problematic and fraught with danger in that there was no telling how Khomeini might respond to any given action – as seen in his refusal to admit the Clark-Miller mission just a few days earlier.

It did not take long for far gloomier forecasts to replace the early optimism. David Newsom and Harold Saunders at the State Department predicted, after just one week, that the prospect of a stalemate was looming ever larger. They advocated finding new ways of breaking the impasse at this early stage including taking direct unilateral action, such as a break in diplomatic relations and the holding of Iranian diplomats to give the US some bargaining leverage;³⁴ incidentally these were moves favoured by Brzezinski from the very outset.³⁵ Reflecting in his memoirs, Vance opines that the Clark-Miller mission was the last chance to get the hostages out before they became pawns in the Iranian power struggle – its failure pointed to a long and painful process ahead.³⁶ Even the usually bullish Brzezinski saw that any hope of the hostage issue being a fleeting one evaporated once Khomeini had publicly endorsed the hostage taking and refused to meet the American emissaries.³⁷

What to do with the Shah?

The breaking hostage crisis focused attention on a key and unresolved issue for the US government – the Shah’s whereabouts and, more specifically, his presence in the US. The question aroused differences of opinion and tensions within the Carter administration as they grappled with a number of possibilities. The hostage takers, and Khomeini, were demanding the Shah be expelled from the US and returned to Iran. Publicly, the US government was unequivocal in its rejection of such a gesture but behind the scenes there was some dissent. Vance and Mondale felt that the US would be better off if the Shah could be ‘encouraged’ to leave as this would undermine the whole basis of the Iranian students’ argument.

Brzezinski dismissed such a move arguing that if the US buckled to Iranian coercion it would be “an act of acquiescence to blackmail unprecedented in American history.”³⁸ Carter firmly agreed with Brzezinski and Sick’s assertion that the US should not support a show trial of the Shah and that handing him over was not an acceptable approach to seeking the release of the hostages – a memo from Gary Sick again hints at the divisions between himself and Henry Precht at the State Department, noting that “he [Precht] finds the idea attractive”.³⁹

To counter what they perceived as a soft State Department position, the NSC made a strong case that there would be a number of dangerous consequences should the former Iranian monarch leave the US and break the ‘tenuous equilibrium’. Numerous scenarios were suggested including: the Shah’s departure would increase the captors frustration at being unable to bring the Shah back to Iran; it may split the captors and lead to a rash over-reaction which could endanger the hostages; they will see it as the US having given in to their demands; it would likely precipitate trial of the hostages; and it would be interpreted by some, if not all, as the first step in a new US attempt to overthrow the Iranian revolution.⁴⁰ This was a battle Brzezinski was determined not to lose; he saw it as an issue of national honour in which the US could ill afford to back down given the message this would send out to the Soviets and the rest of the globe.⁴¹ In fact, Brzezinski’s obstinacy was such that it angered Carter who chastised him for failing to make alternative arrangements and for being too close to the Rockefeller community that had always wanted the Shah to stay in the US regardless of the consequences.⁴²

The Shah’s fate remained at the forefront of discussions throughout the first few weeks of the crisis. Mexico appeared the most likely destination after his recovery from medical treatment, but that fell through at the last minute as the Mexican President Jose Lopez Portillo got cold feet and refused him a visa – a move which angered both the Shah and Washington. The Shah was eager to take up President Anwar Sadat’s invitation to go to Egypt; here Brzezinski and Vance finally found some common ground and united in opposition to a move they felt would be destabilising for Egypt and the region, with its obvious proximity to Iran.⁴³ The US had lined up Panama as a potential destination by virtue of the administration’s good relations with General Omar Torrijos, with whom Carter had agreed the Panama

Canal Treaties in September 1977, but they had to convince the Shah to make the move. Eventually, following extensive negotiations led by White House legal counsel Lloyd Cutler at the Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, where the Shah was temporarily staying, an agreement was thrashed out which permitted the Shah's children to stay in the US and on 15 December 1979 the Shah left never to return again.⁴⁴

Some of the darkest predictions for the aftermath of the Shah's departure from the US never did materialise, but the inescapable fact was the hostages remained in captivity for well over a year afterwards. Just six weeks into the crisis the Iranian motivation had moved beyond personal retribution and anger directed at the Shah and Carter's room for manoeuvre was shrinking on a daily basis. Domestically he retained the backing of the public but international support was timid at best, the Shah was no longer a factor and the internal power struggle in Iran remained confusing. Frustration was the overriding feeling for the president; he wanted to be forceful and bring about a swift end to the stand-off, but at the same time he had to exercise restraint as one false move could put the hostages in grave danger. It was a delicate and sometimes impossible balancing act that would continue throughout the following year.

Military contingency planning

In the early days and weeks of the hostage crisis unmistakable divisions existed within the SCC concerning the use of military force as a means of resolving or responding to the situation. Once again the dividing line separated Brzezinski and Vance on opposite sides, although this time it was not as simple as an institutionalised NSC versus State Department battle.

Vance, Christopher and the State Department had a very real personal interest in getting all of their diplomatic colleagues out of Tehran safely. This aim seemed threatened by the prospect of military action, hence their reluctance to embrace such an approach. In contrast, Brzezinski felt that all options should remain on the table and that it would be prudent for the US to be prepared to act, and for the Iranians to think that they were willing to use force if necessary. Right from the outset, at only the second SCC meeting, Brzezinski suggested they consider three military contingencies – a rescue operation; a retaliatory strike if any of the hostages were

killed; and action to secure the oil fields in southern Iran if the political situation were to deteriorate.⁴⁵

The expectations of those held hostage after the embassy seizure were quite clear; Bill Daugherty expected the US government to respond with a serious and credible threat of immediate force in order to secure their release within the first few weeks.⁴⁶ While Carter had been wary of using American military might ever since assuming the presidency, the hostage taking represented extraordinary circumstances and a unique challenge to Washington's international authority. Carter's natural instinct pushed him towards restraint and diplomacy, but he also wanted to act tough and convey American outrage at the flagrant violation of international law. Yet there was little the US could do to alter the situation; Carter was clear in his own mind from the very beginning that the US did not possess many options – “they've got us by the balls” is how he reportedly described it.⁴⁷ Punitive options were considered from the start; a potential attack on the oil refinery at Abadan and/or a strike against Iranian F-14 bases. However, the Pentagon believed it would be a mistake to target the Iranian military since they might be helpful later on⁴⁸ – presumably in a ‘post-Khomeini’ order which was still hoped for by many in Washington.

The administration also had to withstand the external pressure for military action coming from an outraged Congress, media and US public, who saw the hostage taking as a brazen attack on US interests. Numerous congressmen and senators on Capitol Hill favoured using a military solution and they demanded an aggressive response from the President. In his meetings with members of Congress, Vice President Mondale was told that the President had to act tough and use the big stick of military force as this was the only language the Iranians would understand.⁴⁹ Such arguments ignored the inherent danger in many of the military courses – that they might provoke retaliatory action amongst the captors and thus further endanger the hostages' safety, something Carter simply was not prepared to do.

The nature of American thinking on the military option quickly changed once it became clear that the release of the hostages was not forthcoming; their primary concern revolved around preventing harm to the hostages or, in the event that it did occur, how to punish Iran for its actions.⁵⁰ If the status quo endured and American

personnel remained in captivity with no diplomatic solution in sight, then the most likely military alternative was a rescue operation to free the hostages. This option was discussed in detail immediately as the crisis emerged. Vance recalls receiving a pessimistic assessment from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) on the feasibility of a rescue operation on 6 November, just days after the embassy seizure, and that the idea was dropped but contingency planning was permitted to continue behind the scenes.⁵¹

At the SCC meeting on 8 November, the viability of an early rescue mission was again discussed having been examined by the military chiefs. The JCS did not believe it was viable; their assessment concluded that even with excellent intelligence on the ground there would be a “very high risk of failure”.⁵² Hamilton Jordan remembers the President’s weekly foreign policy breakfast on 9 November during which emergency rescue plans came up yet again. Harold Brown cautioned that Tehran was not Entebbe, the Ugandan airport and scene of the successful Israeli raid to rescue hostages from a hijacking in July 1976. He had spoken to senior Israeli generals involved in planning the Entebbe raid and they had quickly concluded that this was a totally different situation as the US hostages were locked up in the middle of a large city (of over four million people) and the nearest airport was nine miles away from the embassy compound.⁵³ The JCS felt a rescue would be extremely difficult, but not impossible and, while Carter was not inclined to follow the military options, he felt they needed to be ready for use as a last resort.⁵⁴

Not knowing how the situation would unfold in the coming days and fearful that the hostages would be put on trial, the US government drew up a number of contingencies at various levels of escalation. A contingency paper (dated 20 November 1979) described the posture as ‘hint [at] military response’ and outlined a range of different actions available; including reinforcing military forces in the Indian Ocean, overflights, and moving a carrier into the Persian Gulf. This document was indicative of the Carter approach in that ‘selective military options’ were most definitely a last resort after all other alternatives had been exhausted and only in the event of ‘severe escalation’ (an attack on a hostage or American ship/aircraft).⁵⁵

In the latter part of November and into early December, a series of important foreign policy meetings in the White House demonstrated that, despite his apparent

reluctance, Carter was prepared to utilise the threat of military retaliation in an attempt to force the issue. On a number of occasions he dismissed Vance's concerns about potential responses to any show trials, such as the mining of Iranian ports and restricting the shipment of goods from US allies, and he also rejected his Secretary of State's opposition to the deployment of AWACs in Egypt.⁵⁶ The Defense Department put forward other options which would enable the US to demonstrate its strong military presence and destabilise the Iranian economy. These so-called 'lesser options' as Brown referred to them, included dropping carbon fibre or aluminium chaff to disrupt the Iranian electrical network, and a propaganda campaign of leaflet drops to try and win over Iranian public opinion.⁵⁷ Brown was another figure in the administration who was increasingly perturbed by the failings of the diplomatic route and wanted to press for firmer action sooner rather than later – Brzezinski ensured that the President was aware of any such views that concurred with his own.⁵⁸

As the weeks dragged on towards the end of 1979, Carter's resolve seemingly stiffened but yet there is no evidence to suggest he was any closer to approving military measures in response to the hostage taking. If he had been, the Soviet Union's Christmas invasion of Afghanistan completely altered the strategic context as far as the US was concerned. The overall approach of seeking to exert maximum political and economic pressure on Iran did not change, but they now had to tread more carefully and ensure Iran was not driven into the arms of the Soviet Union.⁵⁹ Avoiding a military conflict and freeing the hostages became the default course for the coming weeks and months.

Public opinion and meeting the families

Jimmy Carter's decision making in this period was very much driven by his genuine humanitarian concern for the hostages and his desire to bring them all home unharmed. He took the decision to meet with the families of the hostages when the crisis was only a matter of days old, unaware of course as to how long and draining the whole experience would become. His Press Secretary Jody Powell had urged him to meet the families, arguing it could play a critical role in shaping US public opinion in their favour; Carter had agreed, seeing himself as being personally responsible for their safety.⁶⁰ On the 9 November, just five days into the four hundred and forty-four day ordeal, the President and Vance met family members for the first time at the State

Department. Carter seemed reassured by their support of his stance and call for calm amongst the public.⁶¹

The commitment Carter had constantly restated to his advisors – not to take any military action that would put the lives of the hostages at risk – was now reaffirmed to the families of the hostages and actually became his Achilles heel. In a further meeting with the families at the State Department on 7 December the President made this pledge:

“I am not going to take any military action that would cause bloodshed or arouse the unstable captors of our hostages to attack them or to punish them.”

He also told them that if there were trials of the hostages, the US would begin strong economic sanctions against Iran.⁶²

The content of the meeting was reported in the *New York Times*, forcing the administration to clarify its position on the use of military force. The Iranians would undoubtedly have noted this and seen it as another sign of Carter’s weakness. Sick certainly believes this was one of Carter’s biggest mistakes as his comments instantly appeared in the media and sent the wrong message to Tehran – it removed the aura of uncertainty that the US had possessed at the early stages of the negotiations.⁶³

The public statements Carter made that indicated he would not use force were demoralising for the hostages and the point was consistently driven home by the Iranians holding them.⁶⁴ Media coverage of the situation was so widespread that statements and reports were likely to be misinterpreted, particularly given the propensity for US-Iranian misunderstanding. One of the lessons the Carter administration should have taken from the derailing of the Clark-Miller mission was to keep its handling of the hostage situation out of the public domain; later in the crisis, this was done fairly successfully with the military contingency planning which was kept a closely guarded secret. But that was easier said than done in the climate of post-Watergate America, where secrecy garnered mistrust and there was a demand for transparency and accountability in the highest levels of public office, especially the presidency.

Carter's personal approach, while undoubtedly admirable in its intentions, was a far cry from that of his National Security Advisor. Unlike the President and Vance, Brzezinski deliberately avoided such meetings as he did not want to risk being swayed by such emotions.⁶⁵ Carter's compassion is hardly something he can be criticised for, the failing was actually on the part of the administration as a whole and its handling of the media and the meetings. His political advisers like Powell and Jordan were keen to exploit any possible campaign capital out of a very unfortunate situation and in retrospect they might have thought about the wider implications of not handling the meetings with more discretion.

Public opinion was actually remarkably kind to Carter in the early months of the crisis as the American public united in its indignation at the hostage takers and the Iranian leadership. In the initial days there was a concern within the administration that too much emphasis was being placed on the issue of the US harbouring the Shah and they needed to shift the attention onto the hostage situation itself. One suggested means of doing this was to concentrate on the moral debate, by stating publicly that the US humanitarian commitment would also extend to Khomeini if he were to become ill and was by no means specific to the Shah.⁶⁶ Yet this was not the easiest message to sell to a sceptical Iranian public, and the last thing the US government needed was to invite further scrutiny of its role and influence in Iran. Coincidentally, Kermit Roosevelt's book *Countercoup*, detailing his role in the fall of Mossadeq in 1953, was due to re-emerge at this time (it had first been published in August 1979 but was later withdrawn); the State Department knew very well that further publicity of the US role in Mossadeq's overthrow would not be helpful at such a delicate time.⁶⁷

In spite of such fears, a month after the embassy seizure the pulse of the American public was taken and found to be decisively supportive of the President. A Roper public opinion poll carried out in the first week of December 1979 found that in terms of the cause, the decision to allow the Shah into the US for medical treatment was approved by the majority (61%-33%); and while one third of respondents opposed the admission of the Shah, only just over one fifth (22%) were in favour of sending him back to Iran. Opinions on how the US should respond to the hostage taking were fairly staunch, with the majority favouring some form of retaliation but opposed to more violent actions. Two thirds favoured deporting Iranians in the US who backed

Khomeini (66%) and even more agreed with stopping all US food shipments to Iran (72%); yet less than one in ten would bomb Iran (9%). The question of a military raid into Tehran to free the hostages was rejected by a two to one margin and three quarters of those Americans polled felt such an attempt would likely fail.⁶⁸ Further national polls conducted by Gallup and Harris around the same time confirmed public support for Carter's tempered approach by a 'mandate-sized majority'.⁶⁹ In effect, Carter's stance was a mirror image of American public opinion; he wanted to respond firmly but with restraint, and prevent a major conflict or any military action that might imperil US citizens. He also possessed the backing of Congress and on 20 December the Senate passed Resolution 318, which offered full support of the President in his efforts to obtain the safe release of the hostages.

Intelligence compromises

The US response to the hostage crisis was dominated by concerns for the safety of those being held as well as the wider strategic impact and damage to US prestige. Yet behind the scenes in Washington there was another aspect that required urgent attention – the extent of the damage caused to US intelligence. The strategic importance of the Tacksman signals intelligence sites in north-eastern Iran has already been discussed, but in addition there was the groundwork carried out on a day-to-day basis by CIA and State Department officers based in and around Tehran – correspondence, reports, and telegrams relating to such work were kept on the US embassy compound. Much of this material was of course seized, or in many cases painstakingly reassembled, by the Iranians and later published in a series of volumes known as the 'Documents from the US Espionage Den'. Back in Washington, questions inevitably arose about the extent of the intelligence compromises and the processes for handling and disposing of sensitive documents.

On the 14 November, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence sent a letter to the State Department enquiring about sources of US knowledge surrounding the events and requesting a full account of the intelligence compromises. They sought information regarding the sensitive data known to have been destroyed; those sensitive items not definitely known to have been destroyed; and the net damage assessment in terms of materials and US officials that had fallen into the Iranian's hands.⁷⁰ It was difficult at this early stage for the US government to assess the full

extent of the damage, but they were of course aware of the personnel stationed at the embassy.

State Department employees made up the bulk of the sixty-six original captives (later it was fifty-two who endured the full period of captivity) and their procedures for getting rid of the documents were very sloppy to say the least.⁷¹ The State Department had hoarded documents, some dating back as far as the mid-1950s and made little effort to destroy their files in the panic that ensued. The Defense Attaché files had actually been removed from the embassy and taken to Germany following the 14 February attack, yet somewhere in the chain of command the decision was made that it was safe to return the files in full – Bill Daugherty is scathing of this choice, not knowing who took it or why they did so.⁷²

By the end of November, following the release of thirteen female and black hostages, a more complete picture of the documents that had fallen into Iranian hands began to emerge. In conversations with the returned hostages the State Department discovered that virtually none of the political and economic section files had been destroyed, compromising many Iranians the US was working with, neither had the sensitive files in Bruce Laingen's office, or those of the Defense Attaché and military assistance groups.⁷³ The result was that the invading students stumbled upon a wealth of classified documents which charted almost every aspect of US-Iranian relations right across the previous decades.

When it came to destroying their files, the CIA had a thirty-minute burn limit which, as far as Bill Daugherty remembers, they adhered to; had they possessed a more reliable disintegrator or a better shredder then he believes there would have been no CIA documents at all.⁷⁴ The documents that were gathered from the 'espionage den' were used to fuel Iranian paranoia about the meddling of the CIA in its own internal affairs. The reality was somewhat different – the CIA station at the US embassy was tiny and consisted of just three officers. Station chief Tom Ahern had been in the country for about four months; Bill Daugherty, on his first mission as a CIA officer, had only arrived in Tehran in September 1979; and Malcolm Kalp, a CIA officer with more experience, had only arrived four days before the embassy was taken. None of them spoke Farsi and they were all still trying to find their feet in the country.⁷⁵

Iranians feared another counter-coup and the return of the Shah, but the CIA was powerless to effect such change. Indicative of this was a top-secret cable to CIA director Stansfield Turner taken from Ahern's desk on the day of the embassy takeover (he had neglected to shred it), in which he commented about US prospects for influencing the course of events: "*Only marginally, I would say, until the military recovers, and that is a process we can do almost nothing to affect.*"⁷⁶ From the CIA's perspective there was not actually a great deal of intelligence to compromise; as we have already seen the US paid severely for its over-reliance on the Shah's SAVAK as its primary source of information in the lead up to the revolution.

Damaging stalemate

The longer the crisis dragged on the more difficult it became to solve. Aside from the draining political impact this had on the Carter administration, particularly as it was simultaneously trying to re-elect the President, great damage was being inflicted on US prestige and the global perception of her as a superpower. Having seen the apparent impotence of American power in Carter's inability to solve the hostage crisis straight away, others now felt empowered to challenge the once mighty US, fuelled by what Laingen termed (in one of the cables he sent from his captivity) the "mass psychology of hate" that Khomeini and his supporters had developed in Iran.⁷⁷ Described in one intelligence document as a 'wave of Iranian-encouraged anti-Americanism', it triggered a variety of hostile actions against US personnel and installations worldwide; from vicious demonstrations to bomb threats and violent mob assaults.⁷⁸ In Pakistan, angry mobs stormed the US embassy in Islamabad on 21 November, in response to reports linking the US to the occupation of the grand mosque in Mecca – the embassy building was burnt down and a US Marine security guard killed during the incident. Carter was in no doubt that the blame for instigating the attack lay with Khomeini who had made public statements alleging US involvement.⁷⁹

Brzezinski still believed that the US could influence the internal political power struggle in Iran and provide backing and support to an alternative leader or rival group. He urged Carter to investigate such a possibility with America's European allies, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, French President Valéry Giscard

d'Estaing, and West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt.⁸⁰ Carter agreed, but finding an alternative to the Khomeini government proved unrealistic as the US government was having enough difficulty in trying to fathom how domestic developments in Iran might affect the hostage situation. A CIA assessment from early January 1980 was unsure of Khomeini's aims and motivations, and somewhat contradictory in its evaluation of the likely impact of economic pressures.⁸¹ The knowledge gap that existed in US-Iranian relations, which had grown wider in the post-revolution confusion, evidently provided very little for the Carter team to work with.

The wider strategic context of the crisis had been further complicated by the re-emergence of Soviet aggression, culminating in the invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979. The initial Soviet position on the hostage taking was dismissed by Carter as artificial, even though they had condemned the action and reiterated their firm commitment to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. Carter did not believe that Moscow was seriously working in the direction of resolving the conflict, particularly as the public broadcasts seemed to contradict the Kremlin's official position. The President's assessment is illustrated by his handwritten comment at the top of Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin's message – "*This is b.s.*"⁸² Soviet exploitation of the Iranian problem can clearly be seen in a *Pravda* article highlighting the US attempts to 'blackmail' Iran and their preparations for the use of force, citing comments from prominent US politicians, such as Carter's campaign rival Ted Kennedy and former UN Ambassador Andrew Young, in support of Iranian demands to extradite the Shah.⁸³ Both Kennedy and Young were outspoken critics of the Shah and had been forthright in their condemnation of the decision, with Young saying it was 'logical' for the Iranian people to demand his extradition.⁸⁴ The barbs from Kennedy were hardly surprising, but the disparaging assessment of Young was particularly damaging for the administration because just a few months previously he had been an integral part of the Carter team.⁸⁵

In January 1980, Hamilton Jordan penned a detailed memo to the President in which he outlined some of the foreign policy challenges facing the administration. Jordan believed, particularly in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, that they had to consider taking some risks in obtaining the hostages release; this would enable them to then build a relationship – however tenuous – with the Iranian government

that would undermine and discourage Soviet influence. Jordan highlighted the huge gap between the two sides and advocated actions that could be used by Khomeini as evidence that he has won the battle with 'the US imperialists'.⁸⁶ In a sense, what Jordan was saying to Carter was we have to risk failure, as there was simply no way of knowing how Khomeini might view a US concession – it was quite conceivable he would see it as a weakness and take an even harder line.

Everyone in the Carter administration knew the stakes were high and that they had only risen thanks to Moscow's actions. In his January 1980 State of the Union address the President set out what would become known as the Carter Doctrine, essentially a US military guarantee to the Middle East:

*"An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."*⁸⁷

This marked the re-emergence of Cold War tensions and a substantial shift in Carter's foreign policy. Internally, it also marked a belated victory for Brzezinski's global view over that of Vance; Brzezinski later revealed how he found the adoption of such a policy particularly gratifying as for some time he had been building up bureaucratic momentum behind his vision for Middle East security measures.⁸⁸ Carter's new approach was firmly modelled on the policies of his early Cold War predecessors. Brzezinski implored Carter to emulate the Truman Doctrine of 1947, which had been a response to Soviet threats aimed at Greece and Turkey, as the twin pillar strategy in the Middle East was crumbling with the collapse of Iran and the growing vulnerability of Saudi Arabia.⁸⁹ An even more pertinent model was the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957, which also provided a security guarantee to the Middle East in the face of Soviet posturing.

Yet the administration's renewed focus on regional security in the Middle East did not breathe any fresh impetus into the efforts to free the hostages. Carter was not helped by what he regarded as the toothless and ineffective United Nations (UN); the administration was critical of UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim's meeting with the Iranian Revolutionary Council and his attempts to identify with their position at the expense of representing the world community and the view that Iran was clearly in

violation of international law. Jordan believed that Waldheim had lost any future negotiating credibility thanks to the Iranian perception that he was sympathetic towards their arguments.⁹⁰ A UN Commission of Inquiry was established to assist in resolving the crisis, but the Commission was not allowed to visit the hostages in Tehran. In addition, the US government's demand that the hostages be transferred from the militants to the control of the Iranian Government (Revolutionary Council) was still not forthcoming.

Nor was the US aided by its allies around the world. The administration tried repeatedly to co-ordinate multilateral sanctions passed against Iran but failed simply because few countries had any real interest in cutting their trade with Iran.⁹¹ Despite their public condemnation of the hostage-taking, some of America's leading allies, including West Germany and Italy, even Canada and Great Britain, showed a reluctance to follow suit with economic sanctions of their own.⁹² The likely effectiveness of sanctions was questionable anyway – the sacrifices the Iranian people were willing to make in the name of the revolution would be highlighted during the conflict with Iraq in the 1980s in which they suffered some devastating atrocities.

By March 1980 the Shah was resurfacing from his Panamanian exile to complicate matters further, just as impatience with the Iranian situation was growing in the White House. The Shah was not in the best of health, his condition had deteriorated rapidly and doctors agreed that surgery was now necessary. The ensuing debate about his medical treatment in Panama saw John McCloy and the Chase Manhattan Bank lobbyists applying pressure once again, pressing Vance on what they saw as the US government's responsibility for the Shah's health and security.⁹³ Carter officials were naturally very concerned about the possibility of the Shah having to return to the US for the operation, fearful of the negative impact and repercussions it would have on the hostages. However, there was greater concern about a possible move to Egypt fostered by the Shah's close relationship with Sadat. This was seen as highly detrimental to Sadat's domestic and regional position, and to US policy in the area. The whole issue of the Shah's medical treatment in Panama increased tensions between the hostages' families and the White House, which only added to Carter's woes. Eventually the Shah chose Egypt as his final destination against US wishes – so concerned was Carter that he even briefly considered allowing him back into the US.

The Shah would spend the final months of his life in Egypt before his death on 27 July 1980.⁹⁴

Operation Eagle Claw – Taking the plunge

“The JCS does not believe it is viable. There would be a very high risk of failure, even with very good intelligence on the location of the hostages and other operational detail.”

Minutes of SCC Meeting, 8 November 1979⁹⁵

The JCS’s assessment of the likely outcome of a rescue attempt at the outset of the crisis in the end proved to be accurate. Media conjecture about a US military response had been rife at the time – even *The Economist* predicted a direct rescue action would be “uncommonly difficult” as the circumstances did not compare favourably to Entebbe; the long journey of helicopters would forewarn the captors they were coming and put the hostages at imminent risk.⁹⁶ Therefore the pressing question is what changed in the six-months from November to April – what persuaded the military chiefs to change their advice and why did Carter eventually sanction the mission having earlier made clear his reluctance to do so?

As the situation dragged on into the Spring of 1980, the Carter administration was taking stock of the damage being caused by its inability to resolve the hostage crisis which was evidently undermining respect for the US in the region and worldwide. Optimism that Bani-Sadr, who became the first President of Iran in February, might be able to bring some stability had long since dissolved and the elections to the Majlis in March only confirmed this. At this point there were four potential options for the US, the first of which was to continue on the present negotiating track. Alternatively, they could focus the bargaining process and re-establish credibility (for example, by setting a deadline for the release of the hostages); the third option was to take some form of military action (maritime quarantines or mining of ports) to underscore the gravity of the situation; or finally, initiate a rescue effort knowing that the stakes would be very high, with severe repercussions if it ended in failure.⁹⁷ The current negotiating tactic had proved its ineffectiveness and the alternatives indicated that the

Carter administration had run out of peaceful steps and was now seriously weighing up tougher and more significant actions.

Enter Brzezinski, who saw Carter's dissatisfaction with the hostage situation as an opportunity to reshape and "infuse a renewed sense of direction and discipline" into the administration's foreign policy.⁹⁸ Iran remained the clearest example of Carter's foreign policy impotence and Brzezinski was pressing for a re-evaluation of the negotiating strategy in favour of a riskier approach that would turn up the pressure on Iran.⁹⁹ He believed that the US had to issue an ultimatum even if it heightened the possibility of a broader escalation of the conflict. The prevailing attitude in the White House was beginning to change as Khomeini's intransigence was shown again in his refusal to allow the UN commission to see the condition of the hostages. Definitive plans were now being made for a response and on 22 March 1980 there was a five-hour NSC meeting at Camp David in which the details of a rescue operation were discussed. Brzezinski and General Jones were confident the plan would work, but Vance was far from enthusiastic.¹⁰⁰ The Secretary of State was worried about the new direction they were taking, the talk of restoring national pride, and the impatience with the diplomatic approach they had employed thus far.¹⁰¹

In fact, the planning of the rescue operation was not a sudden change of heart but had been months in the making. Immediately following the embassy seizure a special operations unit known as 'Delta Force', led by Colonel Charles A. Beckwith from Georgia, had started training operations based around storming the embassy. Initial proposals had been refined to try and make the best of a logistical nightmare – the nearest US ally to Iran was Turkey and the need to maintain absolute secrecy meant it was nigh on impossible to station extra troops there without arousing suspicion, particularly in Moscow. The final plan was thus a complex two-stage process. Firstly, it required landing six C-130 Hercules transport planes and eight RH-53 helicopters in a remote location in the Iranian desert to be known as 'Desert One'; there the C-130s would unload the men and re-fuel the helicopters for the second phase of the mission. The RH-53s would then fly the ground troops on to the 'Desert Two' hide site about 50 miles outside of Tehran where they would be concealed; the next night the rescue force, aided by CIA agents already in Iran, would be transported in trucks to Tehran to make their assault on the embassy and free the hostages. The helicopters would fly

in and gather everyone, before heading to an airstrip on the outskirts of the city where two waiting C-141 transports would get them out of Iran and into Saudi Arabia.¹⁰² US intelligence had learned of the location of every hostage and the habits of their captors from a discharged Greek cook and the military figures were confident that the Delta Force unit could succeed.¹⁰³

Both the Carter administration and the Pentagon had maintained a tight circle of people with knowledge of the rescue plans, with Brzezinski and Brown at the forefront – some achievement given the Carter White House’s propensity for leaks. This was illustrated at the beginning of April when *The Christian Science Monitor* published an article under the headline ‘The 82nd – ready ‘in hours’ if needed in Iran’, alleging General Thomas H. Tackaberry had made statements about a possible hostage rescue. Brzezinski asked General Jones to investigate and the JCS Chairman urged Brown of the need to keep visibility down and “get everyone to shut up about specific military options, including [a] rescue.”¹⁰⁴ Tackaberry had not been briefed on the rescue but ill-judged comments which brought such headlines might have imperilled the mission before it had even begun.

The President approved a number of important decisions at the Camp David NSC meeting and this marked a distinct change in the American posture. He sanctioned a reconnaissance mission of the Iranian foreign ministry (where three hostages were being held); gave the go ahead to the ‘Otter’ mission, where a small aircraft would identify a suitable Desert One landing site; agreed to initiate formal economic sanctions; and moved to expel all Iranian diplomats from the US.¹⁰⁵ The administration’s preparations had rightly indicated that the timing of a rescue effort would be a critical factor.¹⁰⁶ By the beginning of April things were rapidly falling into place for action; the Otter mission had successfully identified a location for Desert One¹⁰⁷ and, following the Iranian government’s refusal to take custody of the hostages from the militants, the formal announcement of the tough new US position – including the breaking of diplomatic relations – came on 7 April. Political developments in Iran meant any decision on the fate of the hostages had effectively been put on hold until the new Iranian parliament was formed in mid-May. There were also operational considerations to take into account – such as the shorter summer nights which would give the task force less time to complete their mission.

Carter has recently claimed that all his advisers, including Vance, settled on the rescue mission plan and believed it to be viable.¹⁰⁸ However, Vance's recollection of the events is somewhat different. At Camp David he had approved the intelligence probe to attain further information for a rescue operation should it become necessary, whilst at the same time reaffirming his belief that they needed to continue to exercise restraint; following the meeting Vance felt there was no indication that a decision on the use of military force was imminent.¹⁰⁹

From the early days of the crisis, part of Vance's argument involved invoking historical analogies and making reference to previous situations in which US hostages were returned safely in the absence of military action. He raised awareness amongst his fellow advisors of two such examples – the Angus Ward affair and the *Pueblo* incident. The former dated back to the early days of the Cold War in November 1948 when China was in the midst of revolutionary upheaval; the US Consul and 20 diplomatic staff in Mukden (now Shenyang) were seized by Communist forces and held captive for more than a year. They were essentially being used as tools of the revolutionary movement, but President Truman rejected the use of military force and instead chose to apply patient diplomatic pressure, which eventually paid dividends with their release in December 1949.¹¹⁰ The second incident was more recent and much fresher in the memory, for most of the Carter administration at least, and had special resonance for Vance due to his own personal involvement as a presidential envoy. In January 1968 the *USS Pueblo*, a naval intelligence vessel, was captured by North Korean forces who claimed it had violated their territorial waters. The crew was taken hostage while the North Korean government demanded an apology for US spying, with President Johnson opting for a strategy of diplomatic pressure combined with negotiations.¹¹¹ After eleven months, a deal was struck whereby the US government signed a document admitting that the *Pueblo* had been spying illegally in order to bring about the release of the crewmen; the admission and apology were subsequently retracted by the US as soon as the hostages were safely across the border in South Korea.

Vance sought to draw attention to these cases as proof that the patient approach was the safest and most effective way of bringing the hostages back in one piece. But there

were also more recent examples of successful military interventions to hand for Brzezinski and those in favour of decisive action – most notably the Entebbe action (1976). There was also the successful West German Mogadishu rescue in October 1977, in which GSG-9, a specialist anti-terrorist unit, stormed a hijacked Lufthansa aircraft and succeeded in rescuing all eighty-six hostages; the Mogadishu example had impressed Carter and had been the catalyst for the continued development of Delta Force.¹¹² Both Entebbe and Mogadishu demonstrated that if the circumstances were right a military rescue attempt could be a dramatic success.¹¹³ It is worth remembering, however, that at the very outset of the crisis the unfavourable comparison with Entebbe was very clearly stated. Despite this, the Entebbe example still became a reference point for many in the Carter administration. David Houghton argues this is because it was a well-known rescue mission; Gary Sick described the parallel with Entebbe as being quite obvious, yet the Angus Ward and *Pueblo* examples were not so well known – for example, Brzezinski doubted whether Carter would have been aware of the Angus Ward analogy before Vance had brought it to his attention.¹¹⁴

Ironically it is the oldest analogy, the Angus Ward case, which actually appears to share the most parallels with the situation facing Carter in Iran and with hindsight it is easy to see why Vance drew on this in his attempts to persuade the President to back his policy – what Hemmer describes as his drawing on ‘the State Department’s institutional memory’.¹¹⁵ Both cases involved State Department personnel and both took place in nations with unstable and volatile revolutionary political atmospheres. Yet other members of the administration failed to see the link; Brzezinski was always predisposed to the military option while Jordan, Powell and Mondale, the so-called ‘presidential supporters’ who were primarily concerned with Carter’s re-election prospects, could not recognise the contemporary political relevance – after all, Truman had not been fighting re-election at the time. The most recent analogy on which Carter and his advisors could draw was of course the February 1979 Tehran embassy takeover, something which quickly became redundant once the crisis had lasted for more than a few days.

The timing of the final authorisation for the rescue operation has proved controversial, as it occurred when Vance was away from Washington and unable to voice his strong

opposition. On Friday 11 April 1980, Warren Christopher attended a special NSC meeting at the White House as acting secretary in Vance's absence – he had departed for a weekend break in Florida. The President opened the meeting by saying he was seriously considering an attempt to rescue the hostages and that an expert paramilitary team was confident in their ability to do the job.¹¹⁶ For Christopher this came as a bolt from the blue – he had not been told about the hostage rescue mission such was its secrecy. Out of the loop and caught off guard, he nevertheless argued along the same lines Vance had previously, namely that there were still political and diplomatic options on the table that should be considered before taking the military route.¹¹⁷ As Christopher recalls, Harold Brown completely disagreed with his analysis saying he thought the only viable option was a rescue mission. When Carter went around the table and canvassed the opinions of all the others, including Mondale who had at times sided with the State Department, Christopher was alone in his view that they should continue along the diplomatic course.¹¹⁸ Mondale had been another early sceptic of the rescue plan who saw “a lot of problems up front”; but, as the situation developed and each stage was reviewed in more detail, he felt reassured by the confidence of those who knew about the plan and their belief it could work. The Vice President concluded that the risks were worth taking.¹¹⁹

By the close of the meeting Carter had finally decided to go ahead with the plans, setting 24 April as the provisional date, in what he claims was a unanimous vote of all present – not accounting for Christopher's refusal to take a position because he had not yet discussed the issue with his superior at the State Department.¹²⁰ Christopher was very surprised by the outcome of the meeting and knew that Vance would feel similarly; he felt that Carter had misled him into thinking Vance was well aware of the possibility of such a meeting before he had gone away.¹²¹ Carter's handling of the affair and the apparent hastiness with which the decision was made, suggests it was less problematic for him to have his Secretary of State out of town.

Having been informed of the developments by Christopher on his return to Washington, Vance wasted no time in explaining his objections to the President. For his part, Carter admitted it was the toughest decision he had made since entering the White House and that Vance's arguments were telling.¹²² Vance was invited to address the NSC meeting later that day (15 April) but by this point there was no going

back and minds had been made up. He spoke of unilateral action betraying America's allies; the likelihood of many deaths and casualties; damage to US interests in the region and the Islamic world; and the possibility of more hostage-takings as an Iranian reprisal.¹²³ When Vance had finished he was met with an awkward silence. It was clear that he was alone in his views.

Carter believed – perhaps even assumed – that because Vance had been party to the preparations for the mission that he agreed with it regardless of the timing “...the only thing we lacked from his approval was an exact date”.¹²⁴ Vance naturally saw things very differently and was particularly upset that such a major decision had been made in his absence. Carter's explanation that “we thought the appropriate time had come with the moonlight and that sort of thing”,¹²⁵ fails to explain why the final decision was made in Vance's absence. Later discussions clearly indicate that Carter still harboured his own doubts about the rescue, doubts that matched some, if not all, of the concerns raised by Vance. Therefore it was easier for him eventually to give the go ahead with Vance's nagging reservations briefly and temporarily out of the picture.

Diplomacy and restraint had been the default setting for the Carter administration since he had come to office and authorising the rescue operation was an agonising judgement. Carter's reluctance is evident in his rejection of Brzezinski's suggested retaliatory actions and the need to bring in the military leaders to run him through the details – in what Betty Glad termed “a reassurance ritual for the president”.¹²⁶ Brzezinski and Brown, the leading backers of the plan, saw the President needed reassurance and was yet to be convinced the rescue could be a success. Phil Wise felt that Carter gave the go-ahead for two reasons. The first was his desperate desire to find a way of breaking the impasse; the second was that the military came to him and made a strong case they could pull it off – they brought in Colonel Beckwith, a soldier from south Georgia with whom he could identify.¹²⁷ Indeed it is perhaps telling that in the 16 April NSC meeting in which those leading the mission – task force commander General James B. Vaught, General Philip C. Gast, and Beckwith – clarified the operational details, Hamilton Jordan rushed to highlight Beckwith's background before he began his briefing.¹²⁸ At the end of the meeting and having re-affirmed his decision that the operation was to go ahead, Carter sought personal assurances from his fellow Georgian; that he pass on a personal message from the President to the

troops prior to the mission and, in the event an American was killed, he made sure the body came back.¹²⁹ Despite his naval service, Carter was by no means a military president and clearly this action, and the responsibility he felt for ordering it, weighed very heavily upon him.

Numerous attempts have been made to explain why Carter changed his mind in April 1980 and authorised the rescue mission. Rose McDermott examines the decision using 'prospect theory' – where different alternatives that involve risk are evaluated and decisions are made based on the potential value of losses and gains. McDermott contends that Carter took a 'risk-seeking' choice, as he had other less militarily and politically risky options open to him, but instead he went for the one gamble that offered a chance of recouping all of his previous 'losses'.¹³⁰ Yet according to this theory, the most desirable outcome was inevitably offered by an option with a high probability of failure. While it was undoubtedly a gamble, it is wrong to see it as Carter jumping for the military solution and completely rejecting the diplomatic route – McDermott mistakenly describes continued political and economic sanctions as "the real world equivalent of a sure thing".¹³¹ The reality was of course very different in April 1980 as sanctions had been largely ineffective and political pressure on Iran was proving counterproductive.

A different approach has been taken by Scott Sigmund Gartner, who attempts to explain the decision's timing using a model that focuses on the intersection of foreign policy and domestic issues. By monitoring the attitudes of key presidential advisors, Gartner argues the rescue decision was split between the Carter hawks and doves for some time, but that the balance was eventually swayed by the group he calls the 'presidential supporters', whose focus was on the re-election campaign. He contends that Carter's dramatic drop in public popularity during March was the trigger for the presidential supporters to back the military option.¹³²

While there is little doubt that the unanimity of his advisors was very significant, this explanation overplays the importance of the polls and the fears about Carter's political future. At the beginning of November 1979, Carter's approval ratings were very poor and they were given a huge boost thanks to the patriotism espoused by the public in the wake of the hostage taking. The White House knew this was only a short-term

gain that would not last and that public patience with their measured approach would eventually run out,¹³³ which of course it did a few months later. However, even though Carter's popularity dipped in March it still remained a few percentage points higher than it had pre-hostage crisis.¹³⁴ It was true he had lost the Connecticut and New York primaries to Kennedy on 25 March, but he had also won decisive victories in the Illinois and Wisconsin primaries and the Virginia and South Carolina caucuses in the weeks prior to taking the 11 April decision, therefore remaining firmly in control of the nomination race.

With the decision to initiate the rescue operation made, the administration knew that, be it a complete success or an abject failure, they were certain to face criticism from all sides. This was brought home following a briefing on Iran delivered by Brzezinski to senior Democratic Senators just a week prior to the rescue mission, in which Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd (D-WV) had a stern message for the administration. He believed there had been "too much loose talk about military action" which built up expectations and thereby made its use inevitable in such a politically charged year. He also criticised the administration for failing to consult with the congressional leadership – he did not like to be briefed on Iran "intermittently" and wanted to be part of any consideration of the use of military force.¹³⁵ Some senators believed military force had to be a credible option while others winced at the idea. Herein lay the problem for Carter – the demands for transparent consultation from congressional leaders were, in one sense, only holding Carter to his lofty campaign promises, but they certainly heaped additional pressure on the President.

The days leading up to the rescue mission were dominated by the debate over whether or not to inform the congressional leadership beforehand. Vance urged Carter to do so, but Brzezinski and Mondale were paranoid about a possible leak. Once again Carter sided against his beleaguered Secretary of State.¹³⁶ By now Vance's disaffection and disillusionment was all too obvious. The general trend of American foreign policy had moved further away from his strategic vision and closer to that of Brzezinski; SALT II had collapsed, the situation in post-Shah Iran had worsened, plus there was the embarrassing fiasco of the US vote on the UN resolution on Israeli settlements in Jerusalem;¹³⁷ and he was evidently worn down by the personal and institutional struggles. Vance had been fighting a losing battle almost from the very

start of the hostage crisis – he had even threatened to resign as far back as 27 November 1979 over a disagreement about the president’s public comments that day.¹³⁸

The rescue mission, with which he fundamentally disagreed, was the final straw. After days of agonising Vance made clear to Carter his intention to resign, regardless of the mission’s outcome, before formally doing so on 21 April – though he agreed not to go public with the resignation and to stay on in post until the mission had been completed.¹³⁹ Ironically enough, the day the rescue attempt began Vance received a letter from the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, in which they reminded the administration of their obligations under the War Powers Act:

“...the advance consultation provisions of the War Powers Resolution are intended to come into play before any such decision has been made, in order to ensure that any such decision, if made, is a national decision jointly entered into by the President and the Congress.”¹⁴⁰

This issue would be much disputed by a shocked Congress in the wake of the failed rescue attempt.

The failure and the reaction

On the 24 April 1980 six C-130 US transport aircraft and eight RH-53 helicopters entered Iranian airspace to begin the first phase of the mission. However, en route to Desert One, two helicopters encountered mechanical difficulties and had to turn back; while one of the six that landed had hydraulic problems and could not fly on. With six being the minimum number required to bring all the hostages out safely, President Carter now made the decision to abort the mission based on the advice of his military advisers and Beckwith on the ground.¹⁴¹ This was despite one last effort by Brzezinski to see if Beckwith would be prepared to continue the mission by trimming down his force, but this was not feasible and the commanders were not willing to take such risks.¹⁴²

The developments throughout the day were met with increasing concern in the White House, where in the late afternoon President Carter gathered his advisers in the Oval Office to inform them of the aborted mission. During the announcement a visibly crestfallen Carter received the call from General Jones at the Pentagon, who was in direct contact with the Delta Force team, informing him that one of the helicopters

had collided with a C-130 aircraft causing US fatalities.¹⁴³ The crash turned a disappointing failure into a tragic debacle; during the ensuing chaos and scramble to get out of the Iranian desert on the five remaining C-130s, helicopters were abandoned, documents outlining the details of the mission were not destroyed, and there was obviously no chance to recover the charred remains of the deceased personnel.

Carter now had to inform the US Congress and the American public about the disastrous series of events that had taken place thousands of miles away in the Iranian desert. Mondale recalls calling Congressional leaders, Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill and Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd, in the early hours to tell them of the mission and its failure. Their shock at the news and the outcome was palpable and Mondale concluded there and then "...that was the end of us politically."¹⁴⁴ The public reaction and political fallout would obviously be shaped to a large degree by the administration's public response and explanation of the events. Jody Powell stressed to Carter the need to provide the people with a rationale for the mission – why they had done it and why at that precise moment; seeking to strike the right tone, Carter requested a copy of Kennedy's famous speech that followed the Bay of Pigs fiasco.¹⁴⁵ Early the next morning, 25 April, Carter went on television to address the nation. He stressed it had been "a humanitarian mission" that had been carefully planned and rehearsed over a number of months, but explained he had waited until now to put the plans into effect because the judgement had been reached that "the Iranian authorities could not or would not resolve this crisis on their own initiative."¹⁴⁶

That same morning Defense Secretary Harold Brown gave what Brzezinski described as a "superb briefing" to the press in which he explained precisely all the details of the operation's planning and execution.¹⁴⁷ Brown ended his summary of events with an explanation that although the mission was complex and difficult, both he and the Joint Chiefs judged it operationally feasible following a thorough assessment and many practice run-throughs.¹⁴⁸ This unequivocal statement of feasibility contrasted markedly with the pessimistic outlook the Joint Chiefs had offered back in November, and provides an indication as to the changing attitude of the military planners the longer the hostage situation dragged on.

The administration knew it would face a range of questions arising from the action, with the decision itself and the timing at the forefront of the queue. The principal reasons for undertaking the operation were articulated as follows: the failure of all diplomatic efforts; the absence of any reason to believe the hostages would be released any time in the foreseeable future; and the danger posed to them by the deteriorating situation in Iran.¹⁴⁹ Washington's belief that the hostage crisis was a stalemate was supported by feedback from Richard Cottam on the very day the rescue mission took place – he had met with Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh who openly stated there was “little prospect” of a resolution to the crisis.¹⁵⁰ The timing of the decision was also bound to come under scrutiny. Jody Powell recognised the administration could be subject to claims it was politically motivated following Carter's narrow loss to Ted Kennedy in the Pennsylvania primary a few days earlier, and decreasing public support for his handling of the hostage crisis.¹⁵¹ By this point a growing number of Americans were increasingly impatient and believed Carter's handling of the crisis was a failure by a margin of 47% to 31%.¹⁵²

The legal justification for the President's decision to use the armed forces without consulting Congress was also a key domestic concern and the administration had to demonstrate Carter had acted within his constitutional powers and the framework of the War Powers Resolution (1973). They argued the President possessed constitutional powers to use the armed forces to rescue American citizens detained illegally overseas. This included the power to act prior to consulting Congress if he concluded, as Carter did in this case, that informing the legislature may endanger the success of the operation.¹⁵³ In his letter to House Speaker Tip O'Neil, Carter stated the operation was:

*“...ordered and conducted pursuant to the President's powers under the Constitution... expressly recognised in Section 8 (d) (1) of the War Powers Resolution.”*¹⁵⁴

The exultant reaction in Tehran was no surprise. From the moment the White House first received news of the task force's problems in the Iranian desert they knew it was likely to be a propaganda coup for the Iranians, yet the wreckage and debris left behind at the crash site provided the perfect opportunity for Khomeini. On 26 April the *Tehran Times* carried the headlines ‘Nation jubilant at US mission failure’ and

'Carter ready to commit any crime for election'. There were stories of international condemnation and claims of between 600-700 Americans taking part in the operation, many of whom were allegedly still fleeing the region.¹⁵⁵ Thousands of Iranians took to the streets that surrounded the US embassy building to cheer and wave their anti-American banners, wreckage from the helicopters was paraded and the bodies of the dead US servicemen were put on public display. Khomeini had long been warning the Iranian people of an imminent US attack and now he had his evidence that God was acting as Iran's protector – in his words God had thrown sand into the motors of the US helicopters.¹⁵⁶

Harold Brown, an important figure in the decision to launch the rescue attempt, played a key role in the administration's public defence and explanation of its actions. Just a couple of days after the debacle he appeared on national television, CBS's 'Face the Nation', and condemned Iranian bartering for return of the US bodies – stating that there had been assurances from President Bani-Sadr that the bodies would be returned without condition. He reiterated the message that the deteriorating security situation had been part of the reason for launching the operation and maintained that the US government would not "foreclose any option" in future attempts to release the hostages.¹⁵⁷ For Carter it was vital to have a strong voice from the Pentagon and the military side to counter accusations of his timidity and portray a united front. Public and political support for the President's decision appeared fairly favourable in the immediate aftermath, but Carter recognised this was only likely to be temporary and would fade with time.¹⁵⁸

Measuring the impact of the rescue mission

The outcome of the rescue attempt was disastrous for the Carter administration yet within a matter of days some in the administration, led by Brzezinski, began exploring the possibility of another rescue – before the operational realities seemed to hit home.¹⁵⁹ Brzezinski, in typically belligerent fashion, preferred to try and find any positives he could from the wreckage of the first attempt, highlighting two aspects that would be lost in the focus on the failed operation. The first was the total surprise and operational security maintained for over four months; the second he cited were the lessons and developments in C³I (command, control, communications, and intelligence), many of which would have taken far longer through the usual

bureaucratic process, that provided opportunities for the Pentagon to exploit in the future.¹⁶⁰ These 'positives' aside, their failure served, as Brzezinski well knew, to strengthen Iranian resolve to resist 'US imperialism' and also made it nigh on impossible for any Iranian politician to support a negotiated settlement with the US. On the plus side, the State Department reckoned the militants would not harm the hostages for fear of losing their political leverage and viewed the chances of Iran rushing into Soviet arms in a security relationship as unlikely.¹⁶¹ All this pointed to the continuation of the damaging political stalemate that had hastened decisive US action in the first place.

For the administration itself, the major outcome was the resignation of Vance – which had been coming regardless of the success or failure of the operation. On 27 April senior government officials made a secret visit to meet some of the Delta crew and other personnel involved in the rescue effort, during which Vance informed Carter that he wished his resignation to be effective the next day.¹⁶² In the search for a replacement Carter overlooked Vance's deputy Warren Christopher, despite obvious admiration for him, and made the politically expedient choice of Democratic Senator Edward Muskie, a former Vice-Presidential and Presidential candidate. Muskie was far from a foreign policy expert, but importantly he was well respected on Capitol Hill and, unlike many US lawmakers, had established good working relations with the Carter White House.¹⁶³

Muskie's appointment would see a shift in style from Vance's stewardship, with the key aspect being his visibility. This was evident from day one of Muskie's tenure when he held court at the White House press conference introducing him for some time, despite the presence of the President and much to the amusement of Brzezinski and Vance who were also present.¹⁶⁴ Muskie was far more attuned to the use of news conferences and private interviews than his predecessor had been, but whether this had any positive impact is questionable. Some press reports indicated Muskie was establishing his authority and there had been a shift in the balance of power from the NSC back to State since he had replaced Vance,¹⁶⁵ but it was easy to form such an impression through the media.

The Washington press corps was awash with speculation surrounding the decision-making processes in the White House and, in the wake of Vance's resignation, attention turned to the Secretary of State's alleged exclusion. Almost inevitably the focus went back to the 11 April NSC meeting when Vance was not present and Christopher had been caught off guard, with the administration quick to refute the suggestion that Brzezinski had purposely called the meeting in Vance's absence. The line from the White House was that Carter had determined there should be an NSC meeting on that day to conclude the review of the rescue mission option and when Vance returned to Washington he was able to discuss the issue privately with the President, before expressing his views at another NSC meeting on 15 April.¹⁶⁶ The assertion in the media was that Brzezinski's dominance had forced Vance out, a simplistic but nonetheless semi-accurate representation of the power struggle at the highest levels of the Carter White House.

The rescue mission was the subject of a great deal of flawed media coverage and analysis in its aftermath. The administration's response was to send in the military men at the Pentagon to quash a variety of rumours. Allegations included the view that the operation was forced upon a reluctant Pentagon; that the military wanted a larger operation but the White House was timid about using force; and that Beckwith had wanted to continue the operation with the five remaining helicopters.¹⁶⁷ Yet none of these claims were remotely true. The idea that the mission was forced upon the Pentagon could actually be flipped entirely on its head; all five of the Joint Chiefs had concluded the operation had a good chance of success and it was they who had to convince the President that the plan was feasible, not the other way around. Carter was dismayed by the inaccuracy of the reporting, hence Beckwith was pressed into service to put the record straight and clarify exactly what had gone on.¹⁶⁸

Carter himself sought clarification from the Pentagon on a series of operational calculations and provisions made prior to the mission, including how they arrived at the number of helicopters to use and the minimum figure of six. Why had one helicopter turned back to the carrier; why had they failed to apprehend a third vehicle passing the desert landing site; and, perhaps most tellingly in the wake of the triumphant Iranian reaction, why had the helicopters not been destroyed prior to their exit?¹⁶⁹ Over the coming months more effective and probing analysis of the rescue

mission focused largely on the military planning, as the questions moved on from the actual decision taken by Carter and looked instead at the mission's failings. In May 1980 the Joint Chiefs commissioned a Special Operations Review Group, chaired by retired Admiral James L. Holloway, to conduct a broad and independent examination of the whole affair from start to finish.

The Holloway Report, as it became known, was published a few months later in August 1980 and became the key basis for a reassessment and strengthening of US Special Operations Forces during the 1980s. It clearly stated that although Operation Eagle Claw had been very high risk, it was feasible and external resources had adequately supported the task force. However, the findings also highlighted major issues in the military's planning and preparation. Criticisms included the lack of a full-dress rehearsal of the operation, despite Delta's seemingly exhaustive training exercises; the size of the helicopter force and provisions for weather contingencies – a larger helicopter force would have increased the probability of success; command and control had been 'fragile' at intermediate levels; and the Desert One site being so close to a road was more high risk than envisaged.¹⁷⁰ The Holloway Report proves that the military believed the mission could work and that the failings in planning and preparation were in no way the fault of the Carter administration. Right from the outset of the crisis in November 1979, Carter had tasked the military with preparing for a possible hostage extraction – this was months in the making, it was not as if the administration rushed headfirst into the decision. His critics can easily look back and say the mission was doomed to fail, but Carter was not predisposed towards taking such daring military action until his generals and advisers convinced him otherwise. The only administration figure who remained adamant the mission would not work was Vance, who was far more experienced in such matters from his work on the Armed Services Committee staff and at the Pentagon.¹⁷¹

The aftermath

It would take another nine months after the failed rescue mission, and a change of president, before the hostages would finally be released. Even though the Carter administration continued to explore different options and seek further cooperation and pressure from its allies across the globe, which was not always forthcoming, in reality there was little that could be done to force the Iranian hand. By the end of April 1980

the US government was forced into waiting for greater clarity in Tehran and could only hope that internal developments would at some stage precipitate a shift in the Iranian position.¹⁷² Former hostage Bill Daugherty supports such an assessment:

*“Once we [the hostages] became a major element in the internal political struggle... when, how, and whether we would be released was totally up to the Iranians. There was nothing Carter could do [to influence the Iranians].”*¹⁷³

The hostage crisis and mounting economic gloom at home were certainly not helpful to a President battling to win another four years in the White House. Carter recognised his behaviour had to change in the aftermath of the rescue mission; in the initial months of the hostage crisis he had been reticent to engage in any campaign activities and had left a great deal of the public appearances to his wife Rosalynn and running mate Walter Mondale. The retreat into a so-called ‘Rose Garden’ strategy stemmed from Carter’s belief that he should not be campaigning whilst the hostages remained captive, yet this self-imposed confinement became more and more problematic as the weeks wore on and the cycle was only broken by the failure of the rescue, which reinforced the likelihood of a further lengthy impasse. Carter’s team had been deeply concerned about the political fallout from the Iranian crisis, but the anticipated negative impact did not materialise and they successfully kept his Democratic challenger Ted Kennedy at bay. However, Jordan’s recollection that the primary victories felt hollow in the wake of the lost lives and hostages remaining captive, provides an accurate summation of the mood in the Carter camp in mid-1980.¹⁷⁴

While the campaign battle at least appeared able to limp onwards, the hostage situation remained badly stalled throughout the summer. Carter’s weary impatience with Iran surfaced in response to a strategy memo in August 1980. The President felt that the US should be pursuing diplomatic means far more aggressively and wanted the initiatives suggested in the memo acted on immediately and on a wide front, *“Put this now into action. Give me a plan... with dates for implementation.”*¹⁷⁵ Further complicating matters was the lurking opportunism of the Soviet Union, poised to take advantage in the Persian Gulf, which led the administration to reiterate the message of the Carter Doctrine, warning of “incalculable consequences” should the Soviets try their luck in the region.¹⁷⁶

However, Moscow would play no part in unlocking the door for the hostages; instead the unlikely protagonist was Saddam Hussein, the strongman leader of Iran's neighbour Iraq. On 22 September 1980, following a series of border disputes over the Shatt al-Arab waterway, Iraqi forces invaded Iran thus beginning a protracted and bitter conflict that would last for the majority of the 1980s. Washington responded by stressing its neutrality and desire for peace and stability in the region, in spite of its clear grievances with Iran over the continuing hostage crisis.¹⁷⁷ An initial CIA estimate was concerned that the fighting might further delay discussion of the hostages and endanger their safety as Khomeini sought to portray Saddam as a mercenary acting on America's behalf.¹⁷⁸ Yet Iraq's intervention would prove to be one of the factors that finally made the Iranians recognise it was in their interests to re-evaluate the value of the US hostages to the revolution and move towards releasing them.¹⁷⁹ Just a couple of weeks before the outbreak of hostilities, Warren Christopher had started a series of secret talks with an Iranian representative named Sadegh Tabatabai, brother-in-law of Khomeini's son Ahmad, brokered through the West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher. Although this initiative was temporarily suspended by Saddam's aggression, it laid the foundations for the terms of the hostages' release that would later be agreed when the talks resumed with the involvement of Algerian intermediaries.¹⁸⁰

In the final analysis, the Iranian hostage crisis was clearly the seminal event in the final year of Jimmy Carter's presidency. Those who criticise Carter for over-hyping the crisis and for the paralysing impact it had on his government,¹⁸¹ assume that there was a way of putting the issue on the backburner. This approach was simply not feasible as the issue had to be confronted there and then; what damaged Carter was that it could not be resolved immediately. The Carter administration was not responsible for the reaction of the American news media, driven early on by fervent public opinion, which followed developments through blow-by-blow accounts – Walter Cronkite famously displayed a tally of the duration of the hostages' captivity at the end of his CBS broadcasts. Again, the longer the crisis dragged on the more damaging this became and while the administration did not invite the media furore, it sometimes failed to adequately manage it and convey a consistent public posture. Vance has suggested they might have found some way of playing the crisis down

once it became clear it would be a long drawn-out process; but in the very same passage he admits there was no way of keeping the issue out of the evening news reports and little choice other than to treat it as a major national issue¹⁸² – which of course it was.

The crisis also exacerbated the strategic fault lines within the Carter foreign policy team between Brzezinski's hawks and Vance's doves. The distinction is perhaps best summed up by Jordan's comments less than a week into the crisis as the administration mulled over its response: "*Cy's calm approach sounded good, but Zbig's tough approach felt good.*"¹⁸³ Most observers assume that Brzezinski emerged victorious due to Vance's resignation, but in terms of the hostage crisis it was Vance's measured approach which ultimately proved successful even though Carter had briefly deviated off-course.

Political considerations were never far from the reckoning when it came to the handling of the hostage crisis, particularly as 1980 was an election year. It should come as no surprise that Carter's political aides such as Jordan and Powell were showing concern for the impact events would have on his re-election prospects – after all it was their business to do so. Carter's team were acutely aware they might be accused of playing politics with the hostages,¹⁸⁴ but that was something they could not control as developments changed on a daily basis. The rescue decision was certainly not motivated by the election even though it coincided with a dip in Carter's personal fortunes; it was a decision based on unmistakable diplomatic grounds and the breakdown of US-Iranian negotiations, not on any domestic political concerns.

As previously noted, Carter was not a president who relished the commander-in-chief role and the decision to put US lives at risk was a difficult one for him. In spite of this reluctance, he should be praised for not caving in and resorting to dangerous military escalation despite the hard line voices. In the end the hostages were released safely but at great personal cost to the President on whose watch they had been taken. White House aide Phil Wise remembers how Carter cared a great deal about the hostages and suffered in some ways as much as their families – for him it was a huge achievement when they all returned home safely.¹⁸⁵ Yet by the time this had happened Carter had been routed in the presidential election of November 1980 by his

Republican opponent Ronald Reagan – if events in Iran were not the decisive factor they certainly badly damaged the incumbent. Khomeini, on the other hand, fulfilled his wish and became the man who brought down both the Shah and Carter,¹⁸⁶ as the Iranians waited until Reagan's inauguration before officially releasing the hostages on 20 January 1981.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 9

¹ Mark Bowden's *Guests of the Ayatollah* is the most dramatic account of the hostage saga; David Farber's *Taken Hostage* is a definitive study of the unfolding event; Bill Daugherty (*In the Shadow of the Ayatollah*) and Bruce Laingen (*Yellow Ribbon*) were first hand participants; Warren Christopher & Paul Kreisberg (*American Hostages in Iran*) focus on the negotiations that took so long to secure the release of the hostages.

² There is a range of existing secondary material on decision making during the hostage crisis, largely journal articles rather than books. The list is summarised well by David Patrick Houghton in *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 11. Along with Houghton's account see, for example, Steve Smith, 'Policy Preferences and Bureaucratic Position: The Case of the American Hostage Rescue Mission' *International Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Winter, 1984-85), pp. 9-25 and 'Groupthink and the Hostage Rescue Mission', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (January 1985), pp. 117-123; Scott Sigmund Gartner, 'Predicting the Timing of Carter's Decision to Initiate a Hostage Rescue Attempt: Modeling a Dynamic Information Environment' *International Interactions*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1993), pp. 365-386; Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998); and Christopher Hemmer, *Which Lessons Matter? American Foreign Policy Decision Making in the Middle East, 1979-1987* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).

³ Report, 'The Hostage Crisis in Iran: 1979-81', Plains Subject File, Iran Report 1/81, Box 25, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁴ Daugherty, Interview and e-mail, March/April 2008.

⁵ Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010) p. 367.

⁶ Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 367.

⁷ See for example: Memo, Stuart Eizenstat to Hamilton Jordan, 9 November 1979, Hamilton Jordan's Files, Iran 11/79, Box 34B, Jimmy Carter Library; Memo, Hamilton Jordan to President Carter, Undated, Hamilton Jordan's Files, Iran 11/79, Box 34B, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸ Jordan, *Crisis*, pp. 18-19.

⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 477.

¹⁰ Interview with Bruce Laingen, p. 10, (6/13), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

¹¹ Filmed interview with Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi, p. 25, (4/16) Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

¹² 'Iran and the West: Episode 1 – The Man Who Changed the World', Brook Lapping TV Programme, Shown on BBC Two, 7 February 2009, 35-37 minutes.

¹³ Filmed interview with Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi, pp. 29-31, (4/16) Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

¹⁴ Filmed interview with Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi, p. 32, (4/16) Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

¹⁵ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 375.

¹⁶ Interview with Abolhassan Bani-Sadr pp. 21-22, (4/6), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

¹⁷ Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 375-376.

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- ¹⁸ Glad, *An Outsider in the White House*, p. 179.
- ¹⁹ Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, p. 198.
- ²⁰ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 477.
- ²¹ Memo, Brzezinski to President Carter, 16 November 1979, Brzezinski Material – Subject File, Weekly Reports 102-120: [7/79-12/79], Box 42, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ²² Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 478.
- ²³ Glad, *An Outsider in the White House*, p. 180.
- ²⁴ Wise, Interview, 2 April 2008.
- ²⁵ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 479.
- ²⁶ Memo, Bob Beckel to Hamilton Jordan, 8 November 1979, Staff Secretary – Handwriting File, 11/8/79[1], Box 155, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ²⁷ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 376.
- ²⁸ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 376.
- ²⁹ Farber, *Taken Hostage*, p. 150.
- ³⁰ Farber, *Taken Hostage*, p. 150.
- ³¹ Memo, Louis Martin to President Carter, 8 November 1979, Brzezinski Material – Country File, Iran 11/1-14/79, Box 29, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ³² Carter, *White House Diary*, pp. 369-370.
- ³³ Memo, Sick to Brzezinski, 13 November 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC 200: 11/13/79], Box 30, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ³⁴ Memo, David Newson and Harold Saunders to Secretary Vance, 11 November 1979, Brzezinski Material – Country File, Iran: Update 11/79, Box 32, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ³⁵ Memo, unspecified, 20 November 1979, NLC-6-30-1-10-0, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ³⁶ Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 376-377.
- ³⁷ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 479.
- ³⁸ Minutes, SCC Meeting, 8 November 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC: 11/8/79], Box 30, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ³⁹ Memo, Sick to Brzezinski, 13 November 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC 200: 11/13/79], Box 30, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁴⁰ Memo, unspecified, 21 November 1979, NLC-6-30-2-9-1, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁴¹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 480-481.
- ⁴² Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 375.
- ⁴³ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 482.
- ⁴⁴ Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 382-383.
- ⁴⁵ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 482.
- ⁴⁶ Daugherty, Interview and e-mail, March/April 2008.
- ⁴⁷ This language coming from Carter provides an indication of his sheer exasperation with the hostage situation. See interview with Gary Sick, p. 28, (6/26), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁴⁸ Minutes, SCC Meeting, 8 November 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC: 11/8/79], Box 30, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with Vice President Walter Mondale, p. 17, (6/16), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ⁵⁰ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 483.
- ⁵¹ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 377.
- ⁵² Minutes, SCC Meeting, 8 November 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC: 11/8/79], Box 30, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁵³ See interview with Gary Sick, p. 28, (6/26), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London; and Jordan, *Crisis*, p. 52.
- ⁵⁴ Jordan, *Crisis*, p. 52.
- ⁵⁵ Contingency paper, ‘Subject: Trials of Hostages’, 20 November 1979, NLC-6-30-1-10-0, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁵⁶ Carter, *White House Diary*, pp. 372-376.
- ⁵⁷ Memo, Harold Brown to Brzezinski entitled ‘Lesser Options’, 14 December 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, Alpha Channel (Miscellaneous) [9/79-12/79], Box 20, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁵⁸ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 484.
- ⁵⁹ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 398.
- ⁶⁰ Jordan, *Crisis*, p. 52.

⁶¹ Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 369.

⁶² Note on the President's comments at the State Department, 7 December 1979, Brzezinski Material – Country File, Iran 12/5-9/79, Box 30, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶³ Interview with Gary Sick, p. 29, (6/26), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.

⁶⁴ Daugherty, Interview and e-mail, March/April 2008.

⁶⁵ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 481.

⁶⁶ Memo, Lincoln P. Bloomfield to Brzezinski, 6 November 1979, White House Central File – Countries, CO71 7/1/79-11/30/79, Box CO-32, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶⁷ Memo, David Newsom and Harold Saunders to The Acting Secretary, 11 December 1979, Brzezinski Material – Country File, Iran: Update 12/1-14/79, Box 32, Jimmy Carter Library. Kermit Roosevelt's son had contacted the State Department's Iran Working Group saying that the book was due to re-emerge and asking whether an official request would be made to hold its publication. State responded that such a request would not be made but advised against its release at the time due to the 'delicate' situation. The book was eventually released as a paperback in 1981.

⁶⁸ Report by the Roper Organization, 'Iran and the American Public's Mood' (early selected results), 11 December 1979, Hamilton Jordan's Files, Iran 11/79, Box 34B, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶⁹ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 14 December 1979, NLC-1-13-5-10-0, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷⁰ Letter from Senators Bayh and Goldwater to William G. Bowdler (Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research), 14 November 1979, Brzezinski Material – Country File, Iran: Update 11/79, Box 32, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷¹ Terrence Henry, 'Into the Den of Spies', Interview with Mark Bowden, *The Atlantic*, November 2004, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/11/into-the-den-of-spies/3639/> [accessed May 2010].

⁷² Daugherty, Interview and e-mail, March/April 2008.

⁷³ Briefing memo, David Newsom and Harold Saunders to Secretary Vance, 24 November 1979, NLC-6-32-3-16-0, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷⁴ Daugherty, Interview and e-mail, March/April 2008.

⁷⁵ Henry, 'Into the Den of Spies'.

⁷⁶ Mark Bowden, 'Among the Hostage-Takers', *The Atlantic*, December 2004, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/12/among-the-hostage-takers/3596/> [accessed May 2010].

⁷⁷ Cable, White House Situation Room to Hamilton Jordan, 23 November 1979, Hamilton Jordan's Files, Iran 11/79, Box 34B, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷⁸ Memo, To William H. Webster (Director of FBI), 19 December 1979, NLC-12-53-8-8-4, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷⁹ Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 371.

⁸⁰ Memo, Brzezinski to Secretary Vance/DCI Turner, 4 December 1979, Plains Subject File, Iran 6/75-12/79, Box 23, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸¹ CIA Assessment, 'The Hostage Situation', 9 January 1980, NLC-6-30-6-3-3, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸² Memo, Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin to US Government, 4 December 1979, Plains Subject File, Iran 6/75-12/79, Box 23, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸³ Analysis, Bureau of Intelligence & Research, 6 December 1979, NLC-23-56-1-2-2, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸⁴ McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics*, pp. 99-100.

⁸⁵ Young was appointed as UN ambassador at the start of Carter's term in 1977. In the early part of 1979 he was frequently attacked for defending Ayatollah Khomeini, who had returned from exile to Iran. One infamous *New York Times* headline reported that Young had described Khomeini as "a saint", although his words were very much taken out of context (see Bartlett C. Jones, *Flawed Triumphs: Andy Young at the United Nations* (London: University Press of America, 1996) p. 124). He resigned from the role on 15 August 1979 after it was publicly revealed that he had met with Zehdi Terzi, the UN representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Under Nixon and Kissinger the US had pledged they would not negotiate directly with the PLO until it recognised Israel's right to exist. Although Carter bemoaned the ridiculous prohibition on meeting the PLO, he reluctantly accepted Young's resignation calling it "one of the most heart-wrenching decisions" he had to make as president (see Carter, *White House Diary*, pp. 351-352).

⁸⁶ Memo, Hamilton Jordan to President Carter, 22 January 1980, Hamilton Jordan's Files, Iran 1/80, Box 34B, Jimmy Carter Library.

- ⁸⁷ President Carter's State of the Union address, 23 January 1980, Jimmy Carter Library online <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml> [accessed October 2009].
- ⁸⁸ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 443-444; Glad, *An Outsider in the White House*, p. 201. Betty Glad covers the administration's decisions and disagreements over US responses to Afghanistan and the enunciation of the Carter Doctrine in excellent detail (pp. 197-204).
- ⁸⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 444.
- ⁹⁰ Memo, Hamilton Jordan to President Carter, January 1980, Hamilton Jordan's Files, Iran 1/80, Box 34B, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁹¹ Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 178.
- ⁹² Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled*, p. 205.
- ⁹³ Letter, John McCloy to Vance/Cutler, 12 March 1980, White House Counsel Files – Cutler, Iran – Shah 3/80, Box 93, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁹⁴ William Shawcross covers this episode in excellent detail in *The Shah's Last Ride* pp. 376-390.
- ⁹⁵ Minutes, SCC Meeting, 8 November 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC: 11/8/79], Box 30, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁹⁶ 'Our people, your islands', *The Economist*, 24 November 1979, p. 14.
- ⁹⁷ Paper, 'Foreign Policy: Coherence and Sense of Direction', circa March 1980, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC 293: 3/25/80], Box 32, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁹⁸ Memo, Brzezinski to President Carter, 18 March 1980, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Geographic, Iran – Meetings [on 3/18/80-10/30/80], Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁹⁹ Memo, Brzezinski to President Carter, 18 March 1980, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Geographic, Iran – Meetings [on 3/18/80-10/30/80], Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ¹⁰⁰ See Carter, *White House Diary*, pp. 411-412 and Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah*, p. 379.
- ¹⁰¹ Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 406-407.
- ¹⁰² This is a very basic summation of the rescue plan. For a more detailed account of the technical aspects see either Bowden's *Guests of the Ayatollah* or Colonel Charles A. Beckwith's *Delta Force: The Army's Elite Counterterrorist Unit* (New York: Avon Books, 1983).
- ¹⁰³ Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 412.
- ¹⁰⁴ Memo (with attachments), General David C. Jones to Secretary Brown, 9 April 1980, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, Alpha Channel Miscellaneous [4/80-6/80], Box 20, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ¹⁰⁵ Memo, Brzezinski to President Carter, 23 March 1980, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Geographic, Iran – Meetings [on 3/18/80-10/30/80], Box 12, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ¹⁰⁶ Paper, 'Foreign Policy: Coherence and Sense of Direction', circa March 1980, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection – Subject File, [Meetings – SCC 293: 3/25/80], Box 32, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ¹⁰⁷ Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 414.
- ¹⁰⁸ Interview with President Jimmy Carter, p. 5, (6/7), Iran and the West TV Series (Brook Lapping) Collection, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London.
- ¹⁰⁹ Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 408-409.
- ¹¹⁰ See Christopher Hemmer, *Which Lessons Matter? American Foreign Policy Decision Making in the Middle East, 1979-1987* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000) pp. 37-38 for a full account.
- ¹¹¹ See Hemmer, *Which Lessons Matter*, pp. 39-42.
- ¹¹² Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, p. 153.
- ¹¹³ Hemmer, *Which Lessons Matter*, p. 43.
- ¹¹⁴ Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, pp. 153-154.
- ¹¹⁵ Hemmer, *Which Lessons Matter*, p. 38.
- ¹¹⁶ Glad, *An Outsider in the White House*, p. 263.
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- ¹⁸¹ Glad, *An Outsider in the White House*, pp. 180-181.
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- ¹⁸³ Jordan, *Crisis*, p. 53.
- ¹⁸⁴ See for example Jordan, *Crisis*, pp. 247-249.
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CONCLUSION

Jimmy Carter's crushing defeat to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election came about due to the deepening economic crisis at home, his Republican opponent's sheer force of personality, and the embattled incumbent's poor approval ratings. Another considerable influence and one that contributed to the negative perception of his leadership was Iran; what had been a crucial pillar of American Cold War strategy in the Middle East now helped to shape the path of the US presidency. Reagan's cleverly phrased closing statement in the sole presidential debate in 1980 invited Americans to ask themselves whether they were better off than they were four years previously. Carter, politically speaking, was certainly not and the debilitating effect of the Iranian hostage crisis on his presidency cannot be overstated. Hamilton Jordan remembers the election aftermath and campaign post-mortem in which he disagreed with the overly simplistic analysis that Iran was the sole cause of the defeat. Yet he realised the significance of the anniversary of the hostage taking and the powerful reminder it provided of an issue which for many voters epitomised the Carter White House and the sense that the country was losing control of its destiny.¹

In the final reckoning Iran was crucial to the negative perception of Carter as the nation's leader, but more than thirty years have now passed since the polls closed in November 1980 providing the opportunity to make a more considered assessment of arguably the defining foreign policy problem of his presidency. What emerges from this study is a more nuanced picture of Carter and Iranian policy that is not as black and white as some scholars have contended. In a sense it endorses the early revisionist assessment of an underrated foreign policy president, but instead of focusing on areas traditionally recognised as successes, it makes this argument by examining Iran, perceived by many as Carter's greatest foreign policy shortcoming. A detailed examination of new archive documents at the Carter Presidential Library, recent recollections and interviews with the key protagonists, coupled with the existing memoirs and available literature makes it possible to produce a fresh interpretation of this vital period.

This study explains how the original breakdown of US-Iranian relations was not simply a one-president phenomenon and demonstrates that Carter's handling of Iran was not as dire as it is often portrayed. While it may be dismissed as another piece of idealistic Carter revisionism by those who have been and will remain ardent critics of his administration, the purpose of this debate is not about apportioning or absolving blame for today's deadlock, but rather to further our understanding of how relations between America and Iran fractured so irreparably in the late 1970s.

That Washington's remarkably consistent Iranian policy broke down during Jimmy Carter's one-term presidency is undeniable, but the damaging contention that the US 'loss' of Iran was solely down to his weaknesses as a foreign policy president is definitely worth disputing. The reality is that Carter ultimately got a lot right in Iran, much more than many of his critics are prepared to admit. Faced with an overcrowded international agenda and restrained by his own limitations, namely his inability to keep Congress on side and his sometimes restrictive management style, Carter still achieved some noteworthy foreign policy successes. There is very little chance of Iran ever falling into the 'Carter success' category but, regardless of future US-Iranian developments, his handling of a tricky and tumultuous series of events certainly deserves to be painted in a more positive light.

The importance of history

*"You have nothing to complain about. You took a whole country hostage in 1953."*²

Senior Iranian hostage taker to US Chargé d'Affaires Bruce Laingen during his time in captivity

Rather than jumping on and overstating the perceived failings of the Carter administration in the late 1970s, historians and others searching for an explanation for the perpetual disrepair of US-Iranian relations today would do well to focus their attention on the fatally flawed pro-Shah containment-era dogma that prevailed for over a quarter of a century before Carter entered the White House.

The early part of this thesis explores how Washington and Tehran became deeply intertwined during the Cold War in the years following Mossadeq's removal in 1953, which remains a damaging watershed from the Iranian perspective. Strong and at times over-effusive American support for the Shah under successive presidents,

particularly in the Nixon-Kissinger era, meant that when internal dissent bubbled to the surface in Iran the US government had only one option – to continue to support the Shah. Yet almost inevitably there would come a point, which turned out to be 1978, when this option would become both impractical and unpalatable. The Carter administration's actions and decisions were eventually hampered by the weight of America's historical association with the Shah and the flawed building-up of the 'policeman of the Gulf' by Nixon and Kissinger. The failure to change course earlier was undoubtedly due to the entrenchment and momentum of established pro-Shah policy throughout the Washington foreign policy establishment – an attitude Henry Precht encountered in the late 1970s when he dared to challenge the conventional wisdom on Iran.³

Carter thus inherited over twenty-five years worth of pro-Shah policy, the breakdown of which was to come on his watch but not because of his administration's approach. Even though Carter seemed to strike a markedly different tone to his predecessor Gerald Ford, he was very tentative in his early relations with the Shah and did not dismantle the established policy framework. This early hesitancy was borne out of the contradiction of offering full support for the Shah in a broad continuation of Nixon's twin pillar strategy, but at the same time seeking to condemn his regime's excesses. In this sense there was a degree of naivety and idealism in some of his pre-presidency statements indicating he did not fully appreciate the nature of American entrenchment in Iran, something which quickly became clear once he entered the White House. It is hard to be too critical of Carter the candidate because many politicians looking in from the outside have later recognised that the realities and restrictions of decision-making in elected office are somewhat different to the campaign trail.

Carter's widely recalled 'infamous toast' praising the Shah's leadership on New Year's Eve 1977 in Tehran was certainly a colossal error of judgement but it did not suddenly result in an out-pouring of discontent which had not previously existed. Over eager praise and generosity towards foreign dignitaries is not uncommon in international diplomacy, but the manner of Carter's message was badly misguided given his awareness of popular discontent in Iran. This was damaging in that it ran contrary to Carter's earlier human rights language and inadvertently dashed the expectations of Iranian dissidents. However, Carter's words alone were not

responsible for the fall of the Shah and 'loss' of Iran; the Shah was the problem and his regime's difficulties were largely self-inflicted.

Changing course

Carter's arrival in the White House and the change from a Republican to a Democrat-led administration was significant for US-Iranian relations, as the Shah favoured Republicans and was nervous about Carter's stated 'democratic' principles. A commitment to arms reduction was one of the few tangible foreign policy ideas of Carter's 1976 election campaign, yet arms sales had become a central component of US-Iranian ties in the 1970s. Carter thus assumed a position which offered little if any flexibility in Iran thanks to Nixon's 'blank cheque' agreement. From a strategic standpoint it was both difficult and not necessarily desirable to curb the Shah's military spending and appetite for American weaponry, as Carter himself later admitted. Despite the continued deals and contracts, many of them pre-existing from previous administrations, Carter did make some progress in moderating and rejecting some of the Shah's demands against a complicated backdrop of strategic considerations, domestic political pressures and his own personal directives.

The contention of some Carter administration critics that the human rights focus helped to destabilise the Shah are over exaggerated and inaccurate. The reality is quite different as Carter's policies did not contribute to the Shah's downfall; Carter actually recognised the unique significance of the Iranian case where strategic concerns would have to take priority over his own moral values. Yet Carter did not turn a blind eye to the reports of the regime's excesses and the Shah was certainly not given a blanket exemption when it came to human rights. Carter was realistic and responsible enough to recognise the limitations of what the US could achieve – it possessed neither the will nor the desire to exert control over Iranian affairs, despite the fanciful fears of many Iranians, but their close historical ties meant the Shah listened when Washington spoke. In this sense, Carter sought to have a positive effect and dissuade the Shah from such strict repression of Iranian society, without actually taking any action to force his hand; the Shah responded with what John Dumbrell accurately describes as 'cosmetic gestures'.⁴

That the Carter administration's attempt to promote democracy and human rights across the globe should falter in Iran is not surprising when his policy is considered in a wider strategic context. Although the basis of Carter's foreign policy seemed to fit with American public sentiment for a change of emphasis after the Vietnam debacle, it was ultimately not compatible with the need to maintain Cold War containment – particularly as the Kremlin was growing in confidence and influence in the Middle East and Africa by the late 1970s.

Reactive foreign policy

It is vital to remember that the Carter administration was always reacting to events in Iran, it was never in a position to fully grasp control of the situation. Also, and perhaps more significantly, there were very clear limits on what the US government could achieve in Iran. This is often neglected by those who accuse Carter of presiding over a disastrous and bungled Iranian policy because his government did not prevent the revolution or Khomeini's rise to ascendancy. As Harold Brown noted when the Shah appeared to be seeking another US rescue, quite simply 1978-79 was not 1953.⁵ In the end it was difficult for Carter to do anything other than take the pragmatic approach, particularly as the widespread consensus view in Washington and the embassy in Tehran, was that Iran was stable and would remain so for sometime under the Shah's direction.

The numerous flaws in the performance of the intelligence services have been widely recognised, but these weaknesses cannot be dismissed because they ensured the Carter administration was slow to comprehend the seriousness of what was happening and operated on the back foot from the very outset. The suggestion that Carter somehow created this situation himself through his targeting of the CIA is insufficient in explaining the failings; Carter's institutional reforms were actually part of a bigger picture and wide-reaching review of intelligence in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal and the Church Committee hearings in the mid-1970s. In addition, the importance of the removal of experienced diplomatic and covert personnel in Iran has potentially been overstated. Their length of service and ingratiating with the regime's people meant such figures were likely to be pro-Shah sympathisers accustomed to following, not challenging, 'established' US policy in Iran.

History tells us that revolutions are unpredictable and the US authorities were not alone in failing to foresee the Iranian crisis in 1979. Also unclear in the political upheaval that followed was who or what would emerge to fill the power vacuum left by the Shah's departure. That there was confusion in Washington early on is understandable as Iran threatened to undermine the very foundation of US strategy in the region. The US was not about to abandon Iran as it was in too deep and the Cold War stakes were too high with the Soviets poised to fill the void. Despite Brzezinski's protestations, Carter correctly recognised that the US was in no position to keep the Shah in power and it had to try and engage with the post-Shah order, whatever form that took, even if this ultimately proved impossible. Carter chose the right course in refusing to support a potentially disastrous military crackdown which might have brought about even graver consequences in the long-term.

A great amount of interest and attention has rightly concentrated on the Brzezinski-Vance power struggle within the administration, which became more evident in the second half of Carter's solitary term as Cold War tensions re-emerged and problems like Iran surfaced. The preoccupation with the Brzezinski-Vance divide has often painted a portrait of Carter as a president without a voice in his own foreign policy making, yet this could not be further from the truth. Robert Pastor, who worked under Brzezinski at the NSC during the Carter years, sums it up aptly by insisting that Carter was 'the policy maker'; even though he encouraged debate and sought a range of views he was definitely *'primus inter pares'* ('first among equals') amongst his team of top advisors.⁶ Carter's White House was micro-managed from the top and he did not delegate foreign policy decision-making to others; he wanted to see, hear and read a range of opinions and information to enable him to make his own choices. A review of the documents certainly confirms this was the case.

Despite the internal disagreements over Iranian policy amongst his top two advisors, Carter was able to assume the most rational and logical positions. Carter's middle ground position between his bickering advisors was not a default setting with the aim of placating Brzezinski and Vance, but was actually the most sensible and practical stance. His refusal to bow to Brzezinski's persistent pressure and, at times, his evident irritation with the blatant manner of his National Security Advisor's lobbying and calculating promotion demonstrate how Carter was his own man. Assessments that

insist Brzezinski emerged as the victor over Vance due to his force of personality and proximity to the president actually miss the key point. The principal reason Carter's position eventually hardened, and therefore swayed closer to that of Brzezinski, was because changing international circumstances and the actions of the Soviet Union forced a strategic shift – hence the enunciation of the Carter Doctrine.

The Carter administration's Iranian policy did suffer at various points, and certainly during 1978 as the revolution was taking shape, from the distinct absence of clarity. This was down to a couple of factors, one of which was the aforementioned lack of preparation and readiness for the rapid changes that occurred. The other was the actions of Sullivan in Tehran and Brzezinski in Washington, conflicting and diverging as they sometimes did from the administration's official position. Therefore one criticism of the administration that does stand up to scrutiny is that Carter's management and leadership style failed to articulate American thinking to the Iranians, thus allowing for misinterpretation and vacillation in Tehran.

Making the tough choices

Analysis of the two critical decisions made following the Iranian revolution, allowing the Shah into the US to receive medical treatment for his terminal cancer and undertaking the hostage rescue mission, shows that Carter's rationale can be justified on both occasions. At a time when it would have been easy to arrive at hasty judgements, Carter ensured there was careful consideration and consultation within his administration, which explains the almost unanimous agreement amongst all of his advisers on both decisions; the notable exception being Vance over the rescue attempt.

The controversial admission of the Shah into the US was by no means a naive error of judgement. In fact, Carter was acutely aware of the dilemma he faced with the Shah's deteriorating health and the continuing political instability in Iran. He actually saw things more clearly than his advisors and has not been given the credit for being far more perceptive than those around him. Carter was the last man standing; in the final reckoning it was a decision he agonised over and made almost against his better judgement. He relented only after his advisors rallied together in a rare show of agreement and did so based on humanitarian and compassionate grounds once he

became aware of the Shah's medical condition. The tragedy for Carter and the fifty-two hostages is that his gut feeling about the consequences of the decision for American diplomats in Tehran turned out to be jarringly accurate.

Despite existing strategic divisions the Carter administration's response to the hostage crisis was far more effective and coordinated than it had been to the fall of the Shah and the revolution. But even though there was greater unity of purpose, nobody in Washington could control the hostages' fate as they rapidly became pawns in the internal Iranian power struggle. In giving the go ahead for Operation Eagle Claw, Carter sought a decisive resolution to the impasse yet the failed hostage rescue is now cited as a pertinent example of his ineffective leadership. However, the rescue attempt should not necessarily be seen as a personal failure for Carter because in April 1980 the circumstances and situation combined to make it a reasonable course of action; threadbare US-Iranian diplomatic relations had disintegrated altogether a few weeks previously and indications accurately pointed to no apparent end in sight.

The operational inadequacies of the mission can be laid squarely at the feet of the nation's senior military figures, not the president. It was the military who made the preparations, evaluated the effectiveness and likely success of the operation, and convinced members of the Carter White House that their plan would work. From the perspective of this study the political reasoning behind the decision is more important than the military lessons. There can be no denying that it was a bold judgement as the mission was both extremely dangerous for the hostages and for Carter's own political fortunes. In the end it was a decision taken by a reluctant Commander in Chief not out of selfish concern for his own future, but rather out of a deep sense of personal responsibility he felt towards the hostages. There was undoubtedly a degree of exasperation and desperation in the estimations and this has led many to assume that Carter's primary focus was his re-election campaign, yet the available evidence refutes such a claim.

No regrets

*"In retrospect I don't have any doubt that I did the right thing. But it was not a popular thing among the public, and it was not even popular among my own advisers inside the White House. Including my wife."*⁷

Above are the reflections of Carter, interviewed in 2011, on his reluctance to use military power to solve the hostage crisis. Remarkably, they actually reveal a great deal about the nature of his leadership. Far from being weak and indecisive, Carter's strength is evident in his refusal to bow to political, public, and personal pressure which was demanding a more forceful response to Iran. He had the courage and conviction to exercise patience and play the long game; eventually this brought the hostages home safely, but it also had a fatal impact on his presidency.

The Shah's demise, the Islamic revolution and the hostage taking were not caused by the policies of the Carter administration. That is not to say that mistakes were not made both in the revolutionary period and the aftermath, where a lack of policy coordination and clarity stemmed from Carter's inability to control the internal strategic divisions within his administration. However, far from being responsible for the 'loss' of Iran, the Carter administration actually did its utmost to retain a realistic influence and positive relations with an ally of strategic significance as best it could. It had to achieve this against the backdrop of serious revolutionary upheaval and with the considerable constraint of recent history weighing it down. In what was not a battle of his own choosing, Jimmy Carter was destined to come off second best in his encounter with Iran.

NOTES TO CONCLUSION

¹ Jordan, *Crisis*, pp. 376-378.

² 'Reflections on the Iranian Revolution', Podcast featuring Charles Naas and Henry Precht, 11 February 2009, Middle East Institute, Washington, DC, http://www.mideasti.org/audio/by/artist/charlie_naas_henry_precht [accessed May 2009].

³ Precht, E-mail, September 2010.

⁴ Dumbrell, 'Jimmy Carter and Moral Purpose', p. 131.

⁵ Quoted in Moens, 'President Carter's Advisers and the Fall of the Shah', p. 233.

⁶ Robert A. Pastor, Review of Betty Glad *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy*, H-Diplo Roundtable Review, Volume XII, No. 6 (2011), 1 March 2011, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XII-6.pdf> [accessed September 2011].

⁷ Quoted in Carole Cadwalladr, 'Jimmy Carter: We never dropped a bomb. We never fired a bullet. We never went to war', *The Observer*, 10 September 2011.

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