
A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of The School of Continuing Studies and of The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

Tyler Q. Houlton, B.A.

Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.
April 12, 2011

Tyler Q. Houlton, B.A.

MALS Mentor: Ralph Nurnberger, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Over the last century, U.S.-Iranian relations have been turbulent at best. As the United States pressed for more influence in Iranian affairs, due to Iran’s strategic location and natural resources, we created a backlash from the Iranian population.

After ousting Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 with the help of the British, the Iranian population became more incensed with the United States and its support of the Shah of Iran. This, in turn, helped fuel Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic revolution in Iran twenty six years later.

The Islamic revolution in Iran, led by Muslim cleric Khomeini, proved to be a serious setback for U.S.-Iranian relations. The seizure of the American embassy in Tehran by the Muslim Students Following the Imam’s Line, a radicalized Islamist student group, caused an international crisis for U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his administration. Over the course of the 444 day crisis, national media outlets constantly targeted Carter and his mishandling of the Iranian hostage crisis. Nightline, hosted by Ted Koppel, counted the amount of days the hostages had been held during each broadcast.

As negotiation attempts by President Carter to release the hostages proved futile, the American military attempted a rescue mission that ultimately failed. President
Carter’s reelection hopes depended on releasing the American hostages safely and in a timely manner.

Polling of the American electorate was an important instrument at gauging public opinion on the Iranian hostage crisis and the national economy. With unending media coverage of the crisis, the assumption was that the Iranian hostage crisis fueled an anti-Carter sentiment that led to his presidential reelection loss in 1980 to California Governor Ronald Reagan. However, this proved not to be the case. Polling during the 1980 presidential election year showed an overwhelming majority of the electorate viewed the national economy, the high unemployment rate, the high inflation rate, and high gas prices as the motivating factors behind their votes for president.

International crises rarely impact national presidential elections. The Iranian hostage crisis, although important to American voters, was not the driving issue behind their votes for Ronald Reagan over President Jimmy Carter. According to polling, the weakened American economy was the most important issue facing America and it was this issue that sunk Carter’s reelection bid.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT** ........................................................................................................ iii

**CHAPTER I: U.S.-IRANIAN RELATIONS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW** .......................1

  U.S. Support of the Shah ................................................................. 10
  The Islamic Revolution ................................................................. 21

**CHAPTER II: THE FORMATION OF THE MUSLIM STUDENTS FOLLOWING THE IMAM’S LINE** ...........................................................27

  Symbolic Action Turns to Crisis ....................................................... 33

**CHAPTER III: THE AMERICAN RESPONSE UNDER JIMMY CARTER** ............41

  Operation Eagle Claw and the Sandstorm ..................................... 47
  The American Public Response ..................................................... 51
  The Iranian Response ................................................................. 55

**CHAPTER IV: THE RISE OF NIGHTLINE** ....................................................60

  Ronald Reagan and the Media ....................................................... 65
  President Carter’s Approval Ratings ............................................. 70

**CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION** ...................................................................77

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** .....................................................................................83
CHAPTER I
U.S.-IRANIAN RELATIONS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The unstable relationship between the United States and Iran dates back to the very end of the 19th century. Over the following decades, U.S.-Iranian relations became increasingly important to both countries as the world began to modernize, and small military conflicts turned into world wars. The influence the United States had in the Middle East, and specifically Iran, became more prevalent and more opportunistic due to its strategic location, geographic benefits, and its natural resources. The United States, in its fight against global communism in the Cold War, substantially increased and exerted its influence in Iran to combat an aggressive Soviet power.

During World War I, the United States was increasingly concerned about the power the British and the Russians had in the Middle East. Iran became a central hub of military activity due to its strategic location. The Germans, the Ottoman Empire, the British, and the Russians all strived to exert their influence in the region.\(^1\) Nikki Keddie, long time professor of Middle Eastern and Iranian history at the University of California, Los Angeles wrote as follows:

Nineteen seventeen was a year of turmoil with battles throughout Iran. The power of Iranian nationalists at Qom and in central Iran ended when the Russians moved into the area. British and Russian troops occupied nearly all of Iran by late 1917.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Nikki Keddie, Modern Iran (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 73-74.

\(^2\) Ibid., 74.
The Bolshevik revolution in Russia changed the interests of occupying forces in Iran, which Britain came to dominate and control. The Bolsheviks had their own civil issues and problems at home, while the British were at liberty to influence Iran with little to no opposition; the exception being the occasional nationalist uprising.3

Britain continued to move forward with their plans to control Iran. The British government, through subsidies to the Iranian government and people, was able to install a pro-British ruler. The British push for a treaty with Iran, under the pro-British Premier Vosuq ad-Dauleh, essentially provided a British protectorate over the Iranian nation. Despite the Bolshevik government’s attempts to influence Iranian leaders, the British had a strangle hold on the political elite through subsidies and bribes.4

The Anglo-Persian Treaty of 1919 established a British monopoly, both economically and administratively, over Iran. The British supplied arms and government advisers in return for favorable trade policies and virtual economic control of the country. Iranian trade with Russia came to a standstill due to the high tariffs initiated by the British government. It is not surprising that this monopoly worried both the United States and other countries due to the rising importance of Iran and its abundance of natural resources. The treaty, though never officially ratified, was enforced by the British-supported government in Iran. Mass protests, popular uprisings, and democratic

3 Ibid., 75.

4 Ibid., 76.
movements became the norm as more Iranians became aware of their corrupt and pro-British leaders.\(^5\)

Fighting over power in Iran continued to escalate. The popular movements in Iran forced the resignation of the pro-British Premier and replaced him with a nationalist leader who overturned the Anglo-Persian Treaty. The new rulers’ tenure did not last long. British influence helped oust Moshir al-Dauleh and replace him with another pro-British ally, Prime Minister Fathollah Akbar Sepahdar. Sepahdar was a seasoned government official and previous cabinet member under Vosuq ad-Dauleh. “The Sepahdar government was never able to put the treaty to the majles [Iranian Parliament], however, owing to continued opposition.”\(^6\)

The United States became increasingly interested in Iranian affairs in 1920. The growing unpopularity of British control in Iran led the Iranian government to ask for U.S. backing and aid, as well as help from Russia. The Iranians needed loans, help with infrastructure projects, and American intellect to modernize their economy. Concurrently, America began expressing a new interest in Iran and its oil.

In August 1920, the State Department instructed its Tehran representative to seek business concessions from the Iranian government and to establish a pro-American business culture in the country. American, Russian and Iranian nationalist influence

\(^{5}\) Ibid., 76-77.

\(^{6}\) Ibid., 78.
prohibited the British from formally ratifying the Anglo-Persian Treaty and forced the British to abandon their plans to force it on the Iranian people.\footnote{Ibid., 79.}

At this time, the rise of Reza Khan – soon to be Reza Shah – as the leader of the Cossack Brigade, the Russian-trained Iranian military force, led the overthrow of the Sepahdar government. Backed by the British Foreign Office and British General Edmund Ironside, Reza Khan was the head of the military side of the coup d’État. “Sayyed Zia ad-Din, known as a pro-British moderate, led the civilian side of this movement.”\footnote{Ibid., 80.} Reza Khan became his war minister in 1921.

Control over the modernized Cossack Brigade, was a power base for the new government, and particularly for Reza Khan. By 1921 the British saw a protectorate was impossible and favored a strong government that could suppress the jangalis [populist forest dwellers] and other threats from leftist or Russian-backed movements.\footnote{Ibid., 80-81.}

Modernization was the central theme of the Prime Minister and Reza Khan. Both believed in Iranian exceptionalism and had a hunger for a dominant Iran in the world arena.

As the years progressed, Reza Khan became increasingly powerful due to his direct control of the Iranian military. His dedication to modernizing and strengthening the Iranian military provided Reza Khan the ability to manipulate the government in Iran. “Personal ambition and policy disagreements led Reza Khan to force Sayyed Zia’s

\footnote{Ibid., 79.}

\footnote{Ibid., 80.}

\footnote{Ibid., 80-81.}
resignation and make him flee Iran.”\textsuperscript{10} A new government was formed that held the same
nationalist beliefs as Reza Khan.

From 1923 to 1925, Reza Khan consolidated his power through military might. Reza, and his Iranian military, forced a southern Iranian separatist movement, led by tribal chief Shaikh Khaz’al, to surrender, while simultaneously building a coalition around him.

In 1924, influenced by Ataturk in Turkey, Reza inspired a campaign for a republic. This was too radical for clerical and other conservatives, who inspired hostile demonstrations.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite these setbacks, Reza Khan was able to garner support from Islamic clerics by formally taking the name Pahlavi, a name of an ancient Iranian dynasty.\textsuperscript{12}

The final stepping stone to power was in the hands of foreign nations and Ahmad Shah Qajar, the final Shah of the Qajar dynasty in Iran. Due to health concerns, Shah Qajar was forced to move to Europe in 1923. Once Reza Shah knew the British would not challenge his coup, he overthrew the Qajar dynasty and established his own in 1925.

Life under Reza Shah Pahlavi was oppressive and difficult. The Iranian economy and industry were still developing at the outset of Reza Shah’s reign. His dedication to Iranian nationalism led to serious civil rights abuses by his regime. The centralized government was notorious for censorship, imprisoning opposition leaders, such as

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 82.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 85.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 86.
Muslim clerics, and even future Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who was an early critic of Reza Shah.

Throughout Reza Shah’s reign as Prime Minister, strict controls were put in place over the Iranian population in order to consolidate his power. State sponsored propaganda, high taxes on certain goods and services, mandatory military service, and forced disarmament of Iranian nomads were instituted by Reza Shah under the guise of modernization.

By 1930 the foundations for a program of economic modernization from above had been laid. Most important was centralization, accomplished via a growing bureaucracy and a strong army.\(^\text{13}\)

Reza Shah’s views on Islam were inconsistent at best. At the beginning of his reign, tradition played an important part in Iranian society. Thus, Reza Shah did not allow women the same equal protections as men. It was extremely difficult for an Iranian woman to divorce her husband, while Iranian men were entitled to practice polygamy and even temporary marriages. Women were still rare in the workplace; in part because husbands were legally allowed to prohibit job opportunities their wives might be afforded.

Reza Shah desperately wanted a judicial system in Iran that mirrored his Western counterparts.\(^\text{14}\) As time progressed, he abolished the defacto supremacy of Sharia courts in Iranian culture. Despite protests from conservative Muslims, Reza Shah instituted

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 92.

secular education reforms, which allowed some women to become educated, as well as other changes aimed at modernizing the Iranian economy. He also established the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and introduced modern activities and Western sports. Towards the end of his tenure, Iran saw an increase in women’s rights, though still discriminatory by today’s modern standards. Polygamy decreased, and women were better represented in divorce and marital matters.

After a visit to Turkey in the mid-1930’s, Reza Shah ordered all Iranian women to unveil. Many conservative Muslims saw this as an assault on their religion, while many Muslim women refused to go outdoors because they felt naked without their hijabs. During this same time frame, Iran went through a major modernization at the expense of individual freedom and liberty.

The United States began to pay more attention to Iran as World War II began.\textsuperscript{15} The Allied Forces especially worried their investments in Iranian oil would be commandeered by the Nazis, and that they would lose their influence in the region. Thus, at the outset of World War II, the Nazi-friendly Reza Shah was deposed and deported by the Allied Forces.

Meeting in Tehran on September 29 [1941] – thirteen days after the abdication [of Reza Shah] – twenty-seven younger members of the famous ‘Fifty three’ Marxists imprisoned in 1937 announced the formation of a political organization with the ambitious label of Hizb-i Tudeh-i Iran (The Party of the Iranian Masses).\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15}William J. Daugherty, \textit{In the Shadow of the Ayatollah: A CIA Hostage in Iran} (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 17.

The leftist Tudeh Party in Iran, backed by Soviet Russia, began pushing labor restrictions to the chagrin of the occupying powers. In response, the British allowed the former pro-British, conservative Prime Minister Sayyed Zia to return to Iran and establish his own political party, with the goal of quashing the pro-labor Tudeh. Zia was later even considered a top candidate to replace Mossadegh once the British decided to overthrow him.17

Concurrently, a seemingly moderate, yet also nationalist party arose, which would ultimately rule Iran. The populist streak within the Iranian populace paved the way for new Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh to take the reins of the government.

After the Allied invasion of Iran in 1941, Reza Shah’s son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi replaced his father as ruler of Iran. The younger shah was less dictatorial in his views on government than his father. With Allied pressure, and the younger shah in power, Iran was divided into zones; the north controlled by Russia and the south by Britain. The United States had its own influence within government agencies.

The war period in Iran was one of ferment. It saw a growth of economic problems: inflation, famine, deterioration of the modern sector, and disruption of government finances.18

As World War II came to an end, problems continued to plague Iran. Radicalism was prevalent throughout the nation, especially in the north, and foreign countries

---


continued to exert influence over the country. Control of Iranian oil reserves became the driving force behind Allied interest in the country. In light of continued foreign involvement, the Iranian population became very politically active after the war’s end. Many Iranians were uncomfortable, if not vocally combative, towards the occupying powers and the status quo.

Although natural resources continued to play a major role in U.S. interests in Iran, Washington was even more concerned about the expanding Soviet presence in the Arab world following the defeat of the Axis powers in World War II. Dr. William J. Daugherty, a former Marine, and Central Intelligence Agency operations officer stationed in Iran, and later a hostage, noted, “Iran’s location as a port of entry to the Middle East and to historically coveted warm-water ports assigned this ancient country a substantial role in Soviet expansionist goals.”19 The United States simply could not ignore Iran, and its geographical benefits, while fighting the new Cold War with Soviet Russia. The shared border between Iran and Russia potentially provided the Soviets with an easy route to Tehran should they have decided to invade Iran. Soviet control over Iran would certainly mean Soviet control over the Strait of Hormuz – an indispensable port of entry into the Middle East and to its resources. Thus, one of the policy goals of the new Eisenhower Administration was to subvert Soviet and populist influence in Iran, and to keep its government leaders loyal to American interests, at any cost.

---

U.S. Support of the Shah

Stephen Kinzer, a professor of journalism and foreign policy at Northwestern University and a former reporter and bureau chief with the New York Times, noted the budding relationship the United States had with Iran in the early 1950’s.

In 1953 the United States was still new to Iran. Many Iranians thought of Americans as friends, supporters of the fragile democracy they had spent half a century trying to build. It was Britain, not the United States, that they demonized as the colonialist oppressor that exploited them.20

The quasi-election of Mohammed Mossadegh as Prime Minister of Iran in 1951 was the tipping point in U.S.-Iranian policy that led to the adoption of a regime change policy towards Iran. Iran, and Mossadegh, had already been on the radar screen of policymakers, and even the President, in Washington, D.C. Mossadegh, a popular and fervently nationalistic Prime Minister, assumed the office of Prime Minister despite the wishes of the Shah. His government took control of the British oil company, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), and promised to return Iran’s petroleum reserves back to the Iranian citizenry. This action “outraged the British, who indignantly accused Mossadegh of stealing their property.”21 Predictably, the British initially retaliated with tough economic sanctions, a show of military force in the Persian Gulf, and a plea to other nations around the world for help.


21 Ibid.
The obvious choice for help in overthrowing the Iranian Prime Minister was the United States under President Dwight Eisenhower – a fervent anti-communist. His predecessor, Harry Truman, was opposed to entangling America in a conflict between Iran and the British, but also knew the danger the Soviet Union presented to American national security and our interests abroad.

As 1951 turned into 1952, [President] Truman became increasingly worried about the support Mossadegh (a wealthy and popular, if eccentric, career civil servant and uncompromising nationalist) was receiving from the Tudeh party.  

The Soviet backed Tudeh party was viewed as a serious threat to American interests in Iran, and to regional stability. Mossadegh’s popularity among the communist party worried the Washington brass all the way up to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who claimed the Shah was the only pro-western Iranian leader with enough political strength to hold off a Soviet Union takeover of the nation.

The United States had very little experience in overthrowing regimes to this point, and Truman had no interest in changing that course and adopting a military option. The idea, however, appealed to “the two brothers who would direct American foreign policy after Eisenhower’s inauguration.”

John Foster Dulles, the incoming Secretary of State, and Allen Dulles, the incoming CIA director, were among the fiercest of Cold Warriors. They viewed the world as an ideological battleground and saw every local conflict through the prism of the great East-West confrontation. In their eyes, any country not

---

22 Daugherty, In the Shadow of the Ayatollah, 32-33.

23 Kinzer, All the Shah’s Men, 4.
decisively allied with the United States was a potential enemy. They considered Iran especially dangerous.\textsuperscript{24}

This world view led the United States to aid the British in an effort to overthrow the Iranian Prime Minister. Named Operation Ajax, the plan consisted of removing Mossadegh from office and installing the pro-American Shah Pahlavi back to his original role as the head of Iran.

Soviet aggression, the spread of communism, and Iran’s strategic location drove Washington policymakers to plan the overthrow of the anti-western Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh.

American support of Shah Pahlavi was due mostly to the continuing aggressive behavior of the Soviet Union and the anti-communist fervor in the United States. Both political parties, Democrats and Republicans, feared Soviet expansion and oppression. Most Americans feared Soviet global expansion because the Soviets possessed an atomic bomb, and the totalitarian and authoritarian political philosophy espoused by the Kremlin worldwide.

The United States knew the Soviet Union was developing a nuclear program with the goal of building an atomic arsenal to rival that of the United States. “One highly important facet often overlooked and inevitably underestimated is the value of the Tacksman sites.”\textsuperscript{25} These sites, located in Iran, were critical to U.S. intelligence gathering.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{25} Daugherty, \textit{In the Shadow of the Ayatollah}, 31.
on Soviet atomic testing and antiballistic missile defenses. The Shah of Iran eventually made these sites available for use by the United States.

Economic circumstances and stability within the region, due to Soviet interest in Iran, also drove policymakers in Washington. Not only was the spread of communism unacceptable to the United States, access to natural resources and important ports in the Middle East were paramount to a thriving American economy.

As the Iranian Prime Minister continued to push for the nationalization of British oil reserves, neither side could come to an agreement over the reserves. This lack of understanding and cooperation led to the British boycott of Iranian oil, an action supported by the United States under President Eisenhower. After a trip to Washington, D.C., Mossadegh ordered Great Britain out of Iran and broke off diplomatic ties.

This action incensed both the British, who already had broken off ties with Iran, and the United States. The British, with theoretical and ideological support from the United States, developed an exceptionally complicated plan to overthrow Mossadegh. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, together with high ranking officials in Britain’s Foreign Office set up meetings with their counterparts in the United States in late 1952. Although Eisenhower did not support the British plan to overthrow Mossadegh when he first entered office, the continuing erratic and anti-Western behavior of Mossadegh led him to join the British in their covert operation.26

26Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 160-168.
The British and the Americans differed less over interests and strategy than over timing and tactics. Whereas the British argued consistently and insistently from the very beginning that Mossadeq would never give way on the issue of [oil] control, the Americans spent fourteen months – from April 1951 until July 1952 – searching for ways to persuade or hoodwink him into settling for a ‘compromise’ in which Iran in theory would retain the nationalized industry, but in practice would hand over the actual running of that industry to a consortium of AIOC and other major Western companies.27

The United States and British oil boycott hurt Mossadegh’s popularity at home, but it did not ruin it. While most Iranians supported the nationalization goals of the Prime Minister, the negative economic consequences of a British and American boycott on the main Iranian export hurt all aspects of Iranian society. Though this was not part of the covert plan, the oil embargo was the first economic step in overthrowing Prime Minister Mossadegh.

Operation Ajax was drawn up and adopted by both the United States and Great Britain. The plan to overthrow the Prime Minister was directed by Kermit Roosevelt, grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt, with the help of high ranking military officers such as retired General Norman Schwarzkopf, “who had gained the Shah’s confidence when he commanded Iran’s gendarmerie during 1942-48.”28 Roosevelt and CIA operatives, together with British Intelligence, MI6, set up a psychological campaign against Mossadegh through the use of American-funded Iranian agents in government, private sectors, military, and even in religious circles. These agents were paid to provide


information on the Prime Minister and his supporters, as well as denounce him in news outlets and through word of mouth campaigns. “One of the CIA propagandists, Richard Cottam, estimated that four-fifths of the newspapers in Iran were under CIA influence.”

General Schwarzkopf was tasked with persuading the Shah to support the operation through personal visits to the Shah’s residence in Iran.

Together with this unyielding assault on Prime Minister Mossadegh’s character, carefully orchestrated protests in support of the Shah became a daily occurrence throughout Tehran. The CIA aided these protests by printing false attacks against Mossadegh in local newspapers. Some of these attacks claimed Mossadegh was a communist, while others accused him of being loyal to the British, and still other attacks claimed he originated from Jewish descent.

As the coup efforts continued, Roosevelt needed signed decrees from Mohammad Reza Shah dismissing Mossadegh as Prime Minister and installing General Fazlollah Zahedi. Zahedi was a retired military officer who was prospering from American bribes. Washington policymakers believed Zahedi was the right type of Prime Minister to balance the Shah’s incompetence and lack of leadership skills. He was considered able enough to advance the interests of the United States and Britain in his new role as Prime Minister.

The final obstacle in successfully undertaking the coup was the Shah himself. It took a long time to convince him that he should support the British and American

---

29 Kinzer, All the Shah’s Men, 6.
operation. The Shah knew Mossadegh was extremely popular across the nation due to his role in nationalizing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and most of its oil wells. Eventually, the Shah succumbed to the pressure put on him by Roosevelt and accepted the four part plan to oust Mossadegh.

The first part of the plan was the anti-Mossadegh propaganda, which the CIA had already established. The second was to arrange for royalist military officers, loyal to the Shah, to deliver his signed royal decrees, or firmans, ousting Prime Minister Mossadegh.30 The third stage was to orchestrate massive street protests in favor of the Shah and push back any pro-Mossadegh mobs. Finally, newly appointed General Zahedi would emerge and accept the Shah’s nomination to become the next Prime Minister of Iran.

As the plot unfolded, it became clear that a general loyal to Mossadegh had become aware of the coup. Instead of General Nematollah Nassiri, who had been Roosevelt’s handpicked choice to deliver the decrees secretly at Mossadegh’s residence, forces loyal to the Shah arrived there first and arrested Nassiri on the spot. Operation Ajax had failed.

The thwarted coup was celebrated throughout Iran as a victory for Prime Minister Mossadegh over the undemocratic Shah and his foreign backers. The morning after

---

Nasiri’s arrest, Iranian radio stations lauded the perceived victory of the populist Mossadegh over foreign control.\(^{31}\)

Undeterred, Kermit Roosevelt decided to remain in Iran for one more attempt at overthrowing Mossadegh. “He had built up a far-reaching network of Iranian agents and had paid them a great deal of money.”\(^{32}\) His final plan was to instigate riots in the streets of Tehran to “create the impression that the country was degenerating into chaos.”\(^{33}\) Roosevelt paid the leaders of both the factions, those loyal to either Mossadegh or the Shah, to demonstrate in the streets.

On August 19, 1953, four days after the failed attempt to relieve Mossadegh of his duties, thousands of demonstrators in the streets of Tehran called for the resignation of Mossadegh. Roosevelt quickly summoned General Zahedi from his safe house and drove him to Radio Tehran to claim his rightful seat as Iran’s Prime Minister.

Later that day, a CIA-backed, pro-Shah mob descended upon Mossadegh’s residence and arrested him. Mossadegh originally received the death penalty for treason, until the Shah reduced it to three years in jail and house arrest. He would remain under house arrest until his death. Many of Mossadegh’s supporters were also imprisoned, tortured, and killed.

Reinstalling Reza Shah Pahlavi as the ruler of Iran was celebrated in Washington and London. Roosevelt’s work was complete. The pro-western General Zahedi assumed


\(^{32}\) Kinzer, *Overthrow*, 126.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 127.
the office of Prime Minister, but his tenure would only last two years. The Shah went through a succession of Prime Ministers as he tightened his grip on the Iranian population. The Shah ruled Iran for another 26 years until Ayatollah Khomeini challenged his power.

As the Shah instituted martial law in Iran, the United States and Great Britain ended their oil embargoes and gave significant amounts of foreign aid to Iran. The Shah did not intend to lose his control over the population.

To strengthen his control over the country the Shah initiated a building program for his army to create a force able to defend the realm not only against attacks from without but – significantly – also from dissidents within.34

Paranoid that he could lose his control over Iran, the Shah established a security organization known as SAVAK. The new organization began monitoring both criminal activities and threats to national security. Although the United States advised against providing one agency so much power over domestic and international threats, the Shah allowed SAVAK to extensively crack down on the civil rights of all Iranians. As former reporter, author, and broadcaster, William Shawcross notes, the Middle East had become arguably the most unstable part of the world.

As the fifties proceeded, a succession of coups, countercoups, wars, revolutions, and civil disorders made the Middle East one of the most volatile areas on earth, a place that in the words of one historian, ‘reverberated with the sound of crashing thrones.’35

34 Daugherty, In the Shadow of the Ayatollah, 40.

As Eisenhower left office, and President John F. Kennedy replaced him in 1961, Iran was turning into a police state with domestic dissatisfaction with the Shah. Students and teachers went on strike, religious and tribal groups were angered by the Shah’s decision to normalize relations with Israel, and the countries near Iran, namely Egypt and Russia, still harbored resentment and imperialistic sentiments towards the country.\(^\text{36}\)

The Shah’s new Prime Minister Ali Amini supported new and progressive land reforms in 1961 and 1962. These reforms were opposed by the *ulama*, the historical religious circle of Shi’a scholars known as ayatollahs. These Shi’a leaders ultimately forced Amini’s resignation. “Amini’s resignation provided the opportunity the Shah wanted to replace him with one of his trusted servants, Assadollah Alam, three days later.”\(^\text{37}\)

Alam took over in 1962, and soon women’s suffrage was introduced as a nationwide reform. This was immediately met with public opposition by the *ulama*, especially by Shi’a cleric Ayatollah Khomeini, who for the first time publicly expressed his religious objections to the idea and to the Shah’s rule. The combination of such progressive ideas and the authoritarian rule of the Shah would ultimately lead to chaos.

The Shah continued his crackdown on the Iranian population using SAVAK as his own personal secret police. The Shah’s unpopularity culminated in a mass uprising in 1963, which the Shah successfully crushed with the aid of his secret police and U.S. aid.

\(^\text{36}\) Ibid., 85.

The leader of the opposition, Ayatollah Khomeini, was arrested for his role in the uprising and jailed for 10 months. This was the first of many major public actions taken by the ayatollah that would ultimately lead to his exile to Iraq.38

President Kennedy, in his final year, pushed for reforms in Iran. The Shah ultimately instituted the ‘White Revolution’ in Iran to appease his Washington onlookers.

There were six principal areas to the White Revolution. It provided for nationalization of forests, the sale of some state-owned industries to provide money for agricultural development, some worker participation in profit sharing, revision of electoral laws (including significant rights for women), the formation of a Literacy Corps in an attempt to take education to the countryside, and, above all, land reform.39

The reforms of the ‘White Revolution’ produced noticeable results in Iran. As the sixties came to a close, the Shah gained popularity in the western world for his leadership and his pro-western values. In 1967, the Shah even backed Israel in the Six Day War against Egypt under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and other Arab nations. Israel would humiliate these Arab countries and greatly expand their territory during the war. The Shah’s decision to back Israel was opposed by many Iranian Muslims who despised the very existence of Israel.

Although corruption and human rights abuses thrived under the Shah, more U.S. money began flowing into the Iranian economy in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. The Shah, despite his despotic rule, was still considered a necessary friend to Presidents


Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter. The Shah’s dedication to economic growth over economic development led to high inflation, civil unrest, and increasing corruption. The general populace became even more dissatisfied with the Shah’s leadership.\(^{40}\) The religious and economic dissatisfaction thriving across the masses in Iran would spark a revolution in a few years.

**The Islamic Revolution**

In January 1977 President Carter, in toasting the Shah, stated: ‘Iran under the great leadership of the Shah is an island of stability in one of the most troubled areas of the world. This is a great tribute to you, Your Majesty, and to your leadership, and to the respect, admiration, and love which your people give to you.’\(^{41}\)

As the Shah increased his control over the Iranian population, he became less popular with many Iranians. Between the late 1960’s and the early 1970’s, “the Shah established his power and authority by suppressing all opposition forces who were critical of his authoritarian rule.”\(^{42}\) Most Iranians felt the Shah’s capitulation to the United States showed weakness, and his authoritarian rule was undemocratic and unacceptable. Along with this sentiment, the growing economic problems in Iran, such as food shortages and budget problems, plagued the Shah. Author David Farber notes;

In October 1971, the Shah celebrated his thirtieth year in power (he did not count British and Soviet occupation or the Mossadegh usurpation against his reign) and the 2,500\(^{th}\) anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great with one of the most expensive parties the world had ever seen. Kings, emperors, author David Farber notes;


\(^{41}\) Daneshvar, *Revolution in Iran*, 94.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 56.
princes, presidents, sheiks, sultans, and hundreds of immensely wealthy jet-setters came to a tent city the Shah had built on the ruins of Persepolis.\footnote{Farber, \textit{Taken Hostage}, 67.}

Despite extreme poverty across Iran, with an estimated average per capita income of $250 a year, “the Shah’s shindig cost the Iranian people some $200 million.”\footnote{Ibid., 67.} Student protests, with support from the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, were met with beatings from SAVAK. The Shah simply could not irresponsibly spend Iranian dollars, ignore the ayatollahs and religious elements in Iranian society, and expect his secret police to crush the coming revolution.

Nixon assumed the office of president in 1969 with the father of détente, Henry Kissinger, as his National Security Adviser. Détente is the political philosophy of using nonaggressive actions against enemies through the use of agreements and negotiations with the end goal of cooperation and compromise between the two nations.

Both Nixon and Kissinger were staunch anti-communists. The two worked to fight global communist expansion through diplomatic efforts. As Nixon began to scale down the Vietnam War during his term, he felt he was in no position to start another conflict due to widespread opposition to war in America. As a result of American anti-war sentiment, Nixon was only in a position to negotiate through diplomatic means with the newly formed communist People’s Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and with leaders like the Shah of Iran. Nixon knew the only way to combat a growing communist threat was to maintain American allies around the world. Under Nixon, the United States
would sell billions of dollars in weapons to the Shah in return for his support of American
interests in the region.

The Shah paid for his weapons with oil revenues. The 1970’s were the glory years for OPEC [Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries] and the Shah was instrumental in engineering the price hikes that brought previously unimagined riches to the Persian Gulf.45

As President Jimmy Carter assumed office in 1977, the Shah’s dominance seemed unstoppable. The Shah had survived many coup attempts, uprisings, and thwarted his main rival’s plan to overthrow him. Shiite Muslims loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini felt the Shah ignored the importance of Islam and its inherent values in Iranian culture. The modernization of Iran, with land reforms and women’s suffrage, were considered to be in direct conflict with the Koran and Islamic law. This break with traditional views angered many religious Muslims in Iran, especially the ulama which had “been the guardians above all of a certain body of traditional learning and devotion that had been the whole underpinning and basis of social and political action”46 since the 16th century.

In 1978, very few people in the United States cared about Iran or the Shah. Mostly, they worried about inflation, which, mid-year, was merrily ripping along at a life-altering annual rate of 10 percent, and about the unemployment rate, which remained stuck at around 6 percent.47

The Carter Administration’s domestic problems prohibited him from focusing on foreign policy full time. Many observers and advisers were surprised Carter had an

45 Ibid., 70.


47 Farber, Taken Hostage, 83.
interest in foreign policy because of his humble roots as a Georgia peanut farmer. His National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, advocated a realist approach to the Iranian uprisings by focusing on “safeguarding of the American and, more generally, Western interest in the oil region of the Persian Gulf.” Brzezinski sincerely believed the United States should back the Shah under any circumstance, though he did not believe a revolution was approaching. His rival at the State Department, Secretary Cyrus Vance, had a different viewpoint. Under his tenure, the State Department was preoccupied with democratizing Iran, even if the Shah were to fall as a result. The battle for control over the president’s foreign policy would cost the United States an immense amount of time in dealing with the coming revolution and the lack of action as a result would ultimately give Ayatollah Khomeini the keys to the kingdom.

Ayatollah Khomeini, the public figurehead of the ulama, managed to lead the opposition to the Shah from exile in Iraq. As he had fourteen years earlier, Khomeini continued to criticize American involvement in Iran and the Shah’s consistent accommodation of U.S. interests. Although most Americans had no knowledge of previous CIA activities in Iran leading to the overthrow of Mossadegh, even the uneducated class of Iranians knew of America’s shadowy influence in their country and believed the U.S. still harbored the same influence with the Shah.

The ayatollah’s followers, disgusted with the substandard economy and the Shah’s dereliction of duty, ramped up their street protests. The immense wealth the Shah

had built up throughout the 1970’s from his role in OPEC did not trickle down to the general populace. The Shah’s unending corruption and bribes to supporters and family members, extravagant lifestyle, and massive military buildup left the Iranian population poor and incensed. “The Shah also continued his modernization and secularization campaigns aimed at the power of the Islamic religious establishment, thus further politicizing this explosive force in Iranian society.”49 Although very few Americans predicted the coming revolution, millions of Iranians were ready to topple the Shah’s regime.

As 1978 progressed, the Shah noticed the increased amount of protests and upheaval in his country. The Shah continued to ask President Carter and his foreign policy team for help and support in quashing the brewing rebellion. The United States pledged its unyielding support of the Shah and his pro-Western policies, but as the situation grew out of control the U.S. reconsidered their full support of his regime.

Iranians unrelentingly protested in the streets of every major city demanding that the Shah step down. Student groups and protestors attacked American property while industrial workers went on strike all across the nation. As these events unfolded, the British pulled their support for the Shah, fearing a repeat of 1953.

In the final months of his reign, the Shah pleaded with the Carter Administration for help. Carter, like the British, was weary of directly intervening on the Shah’s behalf. However, Carter also lost confidence in his own Secretary of State and the State

49 Farber, Taken Hostage, 87.
Department’s recommendation that the U.S. completely abandon its support of the Shah.\textsuperscript{50} President Carter’s middle-of-the-road approach in supporting the Shah and his new Prime Minister Shapur Bakhtiar as the legitimate government of Iran would not prevent the ayatollah from taking the reins of government. Professor at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology, Michael M. J. Fischer writes of the commonalities between the Shah’s initial departure from Iran to his final exile from his home country.

On January 16, 1979, the shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, was forced from throne and country for the second time. He left behind a government headed by an opponent, Dr. Shapur Bakhtiar, much as in 1953 he had fled the country leaving Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh in charge.\textsuperscript{51}

Carter’s decision to allow the cancer-ridden Shah asylum in the United States would give more legitimacy to the Ayatollah’s claim that the Shah was a puppet of the United States. The reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was over.

On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from his sixteen years in exile as the new religious leader of Iran. The anti-American sentiment the ayatollah had exploited for his political triumph would become a serious foreign policy crisis for President Carter and would ultimately lead to his political defeat in 1980 at the hands of the former California Governor Ronald Reagan.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 100.

CHAPTER II

THE FORMATION OF THE MUSLIM STUDENTS FOLLOWING THE IMAM’S LINE

The country harbored severe anti-American sentiments after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini took power as supreme leader of Iran. Most students within Iran did not support the Shah’s modernization policies, his western values, his human rights abuses, or his massive wealth, which had been amassed on the backs of Iranians. Many radical student leaders professed their support for the traditional Muslim values Ayatollah Khomeini advocated as a member of the historical Shi’a religious circle, the ulama.

Radical Muslim student groups began forming across Iran, but only one conglomeration would greatly impact U.S.-Iranian relations. The Muslim Student’s Following the Imam’s Line was initially established to follow the fundamentalist teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini and support his bid to turn Iran into the first Islamic Republic. The Islamist students who created the organization had deep loyalties to the ayatollah and believed in a strict interpretation of Islam. The ringleader, Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, organized a handful of radical students from Iran’s major universities in opposition to the Shah and the United States. Students from the University of Tehran, Iran University of Science and Technology, Amirkabir University of Technology, the most fundamentalist university in Tehran and the initial location of the groups meetings, and Sharif University of Technology came together to protest the United States for granting permission to the deposed Shah to seek medical attention in America and to show their support for the Islamic Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini.
Scholars and government officials disagree on the motivations of the Muslim Student Followers’ decision to seize the U.S. embassy. According to some like David Patrick Houghton, an English academic and associate professor, former National Security Council staffer Gary Sick, and a TIME magazine article from November 19, 1979, the ayatollah was fully aware of the initial plans to take over the U.S. embassy and aided the student group. President Jimmy Carter suggested in his memoirs that Khomeini and his followers were simply irrational human beings. Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski claimed it was simply an internal strife between pro-Khomeini and pro-Shah forces that resulted in the externalization of the problem and the attack on the U.S. embassy. Other scholars believe the 1953 coup d’état was a driving motivation for the students.¹

Although each theory suggests one motivation played more of a role than another, all four motives for the hostage crisis were present in the minds of the hostage takers. All of the members of the Muslim Student’s Following the Imam’s Line had close ties to the ayatollah, as many of them worshipped at his home mosque, and it would have been simple for them to contact the ayatollah through back channels.

It is also apparent that these young and reckless students were acting irrationally by climbing the gates of a heavily armed U.S. embassy during a very unstable time. The Marine Corp guards could very well have killed many of the perpetrators for trespassing on American property.

Brzezinski’s suggestion that an internal Iranian conflict led to the scapegoating of foreign nations, especially America, is a fairly obvious observation after thirty years of analysis of the hostage crisis. Many Iranians knew of the role America played in their history and its unyielding support of the Shah, whose forces clashed with Khomeini supporters on a regular basis before his ouster. Deserved or not, America earned a reputation for negatively intervening in Iranian politics.

This leads to the final point. The 1953 coup d’état sponsored by the American government was well known throughout Iran. In 1979, young student radicals, mostly fundamentalist Muslims, were very much aware of the U.S. involvement in returning the Shah to power, and they despised the United States for interfering in their domestic affairs on behalf of their tyrannical leader.

After President Carter granted the Shah a temporary visa for immediate cancer treatment in the United States, on the advice of Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, and Chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations, David Rockefeller, Iranian students began hosting daily demonstrations against the administration’s decision. These protests eventually culminated in the attack on the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the 444 day standoff between the United States and Ayatollah Khomeini’s new Islamic regime.

The initial plans for the embassy takeover by the Muslim Student Followers were meant to be symbolic in nature. The student group planned to overrun the Marine Corp guards of the U.S. embassy and take control only until the Iranian military came to restore order. An emphasis was put on obtaining national and international media
attention with their actions to show their disgust with the decision by the United States to
grant amnesty to the Shah. The student groups, along with many radical Iranians,
believed the Shah should have been brought to trial and executed in Iran for his failed
leadership, human rights abuses, and disregard for Muslim values and Iranian culture.

The plan was the brainchild of three young men, Ibrahim Asgharzadeh, an
engineering student from Sanati Sharif University, Mohsen Mirdamadi [the son of
a Shi’a cleric] from Amir Kabir University, Habibullah Bitaraf from Technical
University. Asgharzadeh was the first to suggest it.2

The inner circle of the Muslim Student group met with other local student groups
to discuss the plan. The group, called the Strengthen the Unity, was split on which
embassy to attack.3 Conflicting reports note that one young radical Islamist student, and
future President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, may have been part of this inner circle.
Some reports suggest Ahmadinejad supported the idea of focusing their demonstration
and attack on the Russian embassy. Although all of the members of the inner circle
despised the Russians, Ahmadinejad was supposedly overruled by Asgharzadeh,
Mirdamadi, and Bitaraf. The plan was to be carried out at the American embassy for
betraying the Iranian population and allowing what they perceived to be a murderous
tyrant to obtain asylum and medical attention inside the United States.

The group ‘divided up the work into six committees: Documents, Operations,
Public Relations, Logistics, Hostage Control, and Information. They would need

---


3 Ibid., 10.
about four hundred students to carry out the assault and thousands more to rally in support outside the embassy walls.\textsuperscript{4}

On November 4, 1979, the Muslim Student’s Following the Imam’s Line put their plan into action. “Early that Sunday morning [on the anniversary of the killings of Iranian students by the Shah], about 300 Iranian students had gathered at a secret location to hear details of a plan to seize the embassy building.”\textsuperscript{5} By 10 A.M., thousands of students arrived at the U.S. embassy to protest the America’s consistent support of the Shah and its decision to allow the Shah to seek medical attention within the borders of the United States. As the crowd of students amassed, the leaders of the Muslim Students Following the Imam’s Line led the charge over the gates of the U.S. embassy with the help of a coordinated group of radical students.

The student leaders of the Muslim group surveyed the Marine Corp guards over the past few weeks and knew there was a good chance they could be met with force. As TIME magazine notes, “No shots were fired inside the chancellery, which may have disappointed the students. Said one: ‘If the Marines don't shoot, we take over. If they do, we have our martyr. Either way, we win.’”\textsuperscript{6}

Despite a U.S. report six months earlier that claimed Iran was not ripe for a revolution, this was not the first time the U.S. embassy in Iran was overpowered by local protestors and student radicals. A similar situation occurred nine months earlier, though

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{5} Houghton, \textit{U.S. Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis}, 51.

those protestors turned out to be more of an annoyance than a real threat to the embassy and its staff.

As the leaders of the protest flooded the embassy campus, the gate holding out the rest of the students gave way. The masses were free to overrun the U.S. embassy. Marine guards blockaded the doors, dispatched tear gas, and loaded their weapons for the impending invasion. “Outside the door, demonstrators with bullhorns were repeating reassurances in both Farsi [the native language of Iran] and English, ‘We do not wish to harm you. We only wish to set-in.’”\textsuperscript{7} Top embassy officials, including acting-Ambassador Bruce Laingen, phoned the provisional Iranian government to ask for help defending America’s embassy. It quickly became apparent that the local police in Tehran and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, who were preemptively notified of the student group’s plan, had no intention of aiding the U.S. embassy and restoring order.

After struggling to take over the embassy for three hours, the Iranian students had taken all 65 Americans hostage.\textsuperscript{8} Their plan to occupy the American embassy worked due to the security forces inability to hold off the unending student attack. Once the embassy was in their hands, the students blindfolded their hostages and paraded them around for the international media to see. The plan was to publicly renounce the United States and its support of the Shah using the hostages as a visual aide for the world to see. The end result, in the minds of the hostage takers, was that Iran would finally be respected in the

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{7} Bowden, \textit{Guests of the Ayatollah}, 34.

\textsuperscript{8} Dilip Hiro, \textit{Iran Under the Ayatollahs} (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 137.
\end{flushright}
international community for strongly opposing American intervention in their domestic affairs. Soon enough, the radical Muslim students would gain the public support of the ayatollah and begin one of the biggest American foreign policy crises in the 20th Century.

President Carter soon found out that the symbolic action of the Muslim Student’s Following the Imam’s Line would turn into an international crisis that would severely damage his domestic support and ultimately end his presidency at the hands of Republican nominee, California Governor Ronald Reagan.

**Symbolic Action Turns to Crisis**

The acting ambassador to Iran, Bruce Laingen, was not present at the American embassy that morning. Instead, the top diplomat in Iran was at the Foreign Ministry meeting with its director general for political affairs to discuss “the diplomatic immunity status of our six-man Defense Liaison Office, a new element in the embassy staff, intended to replace the cast of hundreds who during the Shah’s rule had implemented an enormous arms sales program and advised on its use.” After the meeting, Laingen received a notice from the American embassy that it was under siege by the Muslim student groups, and he was advised to stay at the Foreign Ministry to ask for help from the Iranian government.

At the embassy, the armed Marine guards and embassy staff burned classified documents, blockaded the entrances, and radioed for help. Within three hours, the Iranian students took full control of the American embassy and began what would become the

---

444 day hostage crisis. Once inside, the radical students found evidence that would prove the United States was interfering in Iranian affairs.

On the chancery second floor, in the heart of the evil beast, she [radical engineering student and protestor, Farouz Rajaeeefar] and the others stared in amazement at the piles of shredded documents they found on the floor of some offices. What more proof of American plotting and trickery was needed? . . . They would study this den of espionage and piece it all back together and reveal its evil machinations to Iran and to the world.10

More Iranian students began pouring into the compound and overtaking the embassy, and the other buildings, room by room. A vault, which was commonly installed in all embassies for keeping classified documents, money, identification cards, and other valuables, was the final room the Muslim students found. During the siege on the embassy, communications staffers within the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency were busy shredding documents and dismantling communications equipment to prevent the students from using it after the inevitable takeover. The staff was able to lock the vault before the students got to their location.

Once the Muslim students realized the vault was locked they demanded someone open it. The communications staffers caught shredding classified documents and dismantling equipment were brutally beaten, tortured, and threatened at gun point by the students. CIA agent Bill Daugherty initially said he was unable to open the vault. However, after the hostage takers threatened to interrogate a female secretary, Daugherty relented and opened the vault filled with shredded papers and classified documents.11

10 Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah*, 68.
11 Ibid., 108.
With their blindfolded American diplomats in tow, the Muslim students began reading their prepared communiqué over the radio for all to hear. The statement praised Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamic Revolution that represented “a new achievement in the ongoing struggle between the peoples and the oppressive superpowers.”\(^\text{12}\) In the minds of the students, their planning and sacrifices on behalf of Khomeini paid off tremendously. Not only were they able to cause an international crisis for the United States, an unintended consequence would be the downfall of President Jimmy Carter at the hands of the American electorate.

Although the original objective of the Muslim Students Following the Imam’s Line was to take over the American embassy for a short period of time and gain national media exposure to the supposed injustices America had inflicted on Iran, the success of the embassy takeover was not expected. The Muslim student group wanted to express their solidarity with Ayatollah Khomeini and his coming Islamic Revolution but they did not know how much influence and notoriety they would gain from their embassy occupation.

The Muslim students chose the U.S. embassy as their target to express their contempt of the 1953 U.S.-backed coup in Iran and the longstanding U.S. support of the Shah. The Muslim students also felt Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, appointed by the Shah and therefore an American puppet, should resign along with his cabinet to make way for the Iranian revolution and the new theocratic constitution put forth by Ayatollah

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 69.
Khomeini. Khomeini’s Islamic governing constitution was due for a nation-wide vote within a month of the U.S. embassy takeover and the Muslim students did not want to miss an opportunity to advocate on its behalf to the Iranian populace.

Although the driving motivation behind the initial plans to overrun the United States embassy was mainly due to the Muslim student group’s opposition to United States involvement in Iranian affairs, the Muslim students were staunch supporters of Khomeini’s plans to transform Iran into an Islamic Republic. As previously noted, the majority of Iranians were aware of the U.S. involvement in the 1953 coup d’état that removed Prime Minister Mossadegh from office and reinstalled the Shah of Iran. The Shah’s perceived, and likely real, tyrannical rule over the Iranian population provoked a serious backlash against his human rights abuses, his modernization policies, and his massive wealth built through government corruption and on the backs of everyday Iranians. The Muslim students felt betrayed by the Shah and the unyielding support he received from the United States and other western nations. Since the members of the Muslim Students Following the Imam’s Line were already radicalized by, and supportive of, Ayatollah Khomeini, the United States embassy was a commonsense target to express their anti-Western and anti-foreign influence views.

After the Muslim Students Following the Imam’s Line seized the U.S. embassy and began addressing the global media with their anti-American, anti-interventionist, and pro-Khomeini beliefs, the student organization realized their mission had the support of many Iranians. Within two days of the embassy takeover, Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and his entire cabinet resigned, which was accepted by Ayatollah Khomeini.
Although scholars and government officials, like Gary Sick, debate whether Khomeini knew of the Muslim students plans prior to their siege on the American embassy, author Mark Bowden claims the ayatollah did not. According to Bowden, Khomeini first instructed Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yazdi to kick out the protestors after learning about their plan. However, the ayatollah would soon praise the embassy takeover in a radio address after learning from his son, Ahmad, that the students were loyal supporters of the Islamic Revolution, and not part of the leftist groups usually behind such displays of anti-Americanism.13

The taking of the American hostages marked the onset of Ayatollah Khomeini’s phantasmagorical struggle with the imperialist Satan [USA]. The first advantage Khomeini drew from this struggle was to assure the ratification of the clericalist constitution.14

Ayatollah Khomeini seized this opportunity to continue his anti-American rhetoric and further his goals of consolidating power behind his Islamic Revolution. The slogan, “America can’t do a thing,” coined by Khomeini, became the motto of the fundamentalist revolutionary forces in Iran.

The Ayatollah’s positive reaction to the mission and hostile takeover of the embassy emboldened the hostage takers. With astounding support across Iran, the Muslim students decided to hold the hostages for much longer than they previously planned.

13 Ibid., 94.

The press coverage of the Muslim student’s seizure of the American embassy in Tehran began making international news. The American hostages and their captors, “listened to Radio Tehran and the BBC international report, and [the hostages] could see that the students seemed a little disappointed when the embassy takeover was treated in the London report as a relatively minor story.”15 This international apathy, however, would not last long.

Once the American media began covering the hostage crisis, military officials in the United States began planning hostage recovery exercises.

Two days after the embassy takeover, General David Jones, chairman of the joint chiefs, and the rest of the Pentagon brass met in the “Tank,” the top-secret briefing room in the massive building’s inner rim, to hear what kind of emergency plan their staff had prepared for rescuing the hostages. A twelve-man team had been working around the clock for two days, sketching out a reckless thrust that, if necessary, could be attempted immediately.16

On Thanksgiving Day, and a few weeks into the hostage crisis, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the hostage takers to let the women and minority hostages go, claiming they were oppressed minorities. It was the Ayatollah’s goal to prove Islam’s mercy towards the plight of second-class citizens and was meant as “a gesture to oppressed African-Americans and as a demonstration of the ‘special status’ accorded to women under Islamic rule.”17 The gesture proved to be futile in assuaging the hatred for the new Iranian government across the United States.

15 Bowden, Guests of the Ayatollah, 95.

16 Ibid., 136.

17 Ibid., 198-199.
The conditions for the remaining 52 hostages were poor from the beginning and became more draconian as time endured. Many hostages were bound for days at a time, beaten, starved, and threatened. Despite the positive publicity the Iranian government propagated to the world media, hostages continued to live in horrendous conditions.

Rocky Sickmann, a young Marine Corp security guard at the American embassy in Tehran, noted in his journal as follows:

The endless, early days had been very difficult for all of us. Physical discomforts were compounded by a deafening silence from the outside world. We had been so sure, at first, that help was on the way. As the days wore on, that confidence was eroded.18

Another hostage, Army Colonel Charles W. Scott, wrote of the beatings he was subjected to in his memoirs.

I’ve been subjected to at least twenty interrogation sessions by four different teams of ruthless, paranoid questioners…Physical and emotional exhaustion have taken their toll; I’m weak and confused. I’ve lost track of time, and I haven’t seen daylight since I became a hostage.19

Acting Ambassador Bruce Laingen was treated better than the other hostages due to the fact that he was in charge of the entire embassy staff and operations. Laingen, in an attempt to improve the living situations for his fellow staff, wrote letters to the foreign ministry explaining their conditions.

18 Rocky Sickmann, Iranian Hostage: A Personal Diary of 444 Days in Captivity (Topeka: Crawford Press, 1982), 8.

As he wrote to the foreign minister, “my government remains deeply troubled by the persistent lack of knowledge of the welfare, both physical and psychological, or our Embassy personnel…not even prisoners of war are subjected to such treatment.”

In Washington, policymakers began covertly preparing for a rescue attempt. The Muslim students, expecting an inevitable attempt, decided to move some of the hostages away from the American embassy “as insurance against a rescue attempt.”

The symbolic action planned by the Muslim Student Following the Imam’s Line had gone from a small takeover to a worldwide press event with unending media coverage. President Carter and his Washington policymakers were forced to play by the rules of Ayatollah Khomeini. As Carter and his team prepared to rescue the hostages, it would be months before the rescue mission would be attempted. The hostages would remain prisoners in Iran at the mercy of the ayatollah.

---


21 Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah*, 145.
CHAPTER III

THE AMERICAN RESPONSE UNDER JIMMY CARTER

Initially, “many members of the Carter administration believed that the students who comprised the vast majority of the occupiers would be evicted by the new regime, and quickly.”¹ This rosy view of the new Iranian regime was summarily changed by the reality of the circumstances. Carter’s foreign policy and political team, including Bruce Laingen and Zbigniew Brzezinski, were busy attempting to persuade the Iranian government to remove the hostage takers from the American embassy and restore order. The United States was promised by the Iranian government that their diplomatic corps in Iran would be protected by the Iranian police and military. “Although by November 1979 President Carter had reduced the embassy staff substantially, he had declined to recall all personnel, in spite of the signs of impending chaos.”² As the events unfolded and Khomeini’s new Islamic government endorsed the student’s actions, the effort to release the hostages through diplomatic means proved to be futile.

In Washington, the first policy meeting took place on November 5, 1979; the day after the Muslim students seized the embassy. According to National Security Council staffer, and principal White House aide during the hostage crisis, Gary Sick, the key objective was to obtain the immediate release of the American hostages. All other issues,


including resolving U.S.-Iranian issues over the Shah and negotiating contracts for military supplies and weapons, were far less important to this newly formed special coordination committee.³

Along with the diplomatic meetings focusing on releasing the hostages without the use of force, Washington was busy preparing a rescue mission to free the American hostages. President Carter appointed his National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski to lead and coordinate the mission in conjunction with the Defense Department. Paul B. Ryan, a former Navy Captain and fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, wrote:

Dr. Brzezinski and his fellow planners comprised a so-called special coordination committee. The members included Defense Secretary Harold Brown; Admiral Stansfield Turner, director of the CIA; and probably at times, General David Jones; chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Lieutenant General John S. Pustay, his assistant.⁴

This committee would meet almost daily over the course of the next six months to discuss strategy and updates concerning the hostage crisis. President Carter and White House advisors were keenly aware of the importance of obtaining the release of the American hostages, both morally and politically. Failing to do so as soon as possible would reflect poorly on Carter’s job performance and almost certainly lead to his defeat in the 1980 presidential election.

³ Gary Sick, All Fall Down: America’s Tragic Encounter with Iran (New York: Random House, 1985), 207-08.

⁴ Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission, 12.
National Security Advisor Brzezinski was a strong advocate for a swift military rescue. In his view, not only would the hostages be rescued quickly, it would send a message to the Soviet Union of America’s ability to strike anywhere and on short notice. The initially hawkish Brzezinski also favored a strong military response to force Khomeini to release the hostages in fear of a full scale military response from the United States. “Specifically, he proposed that U.S. forces capture an Iranian port, clamp a naval blockade on the Persian Gulf, and send air strikes against Iran (presumably by carrier planes).”5 However, after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan the following month, December 1979, Brzezinski felt his previous assessment would be counterproductive to the American goals to have the hostages released and might inflame tensions with the Soviets.

Although Brzezinski was placed as the head of the committee by President Carter, he “had no official command authority.”6 Defense Secretary Brown was in full control of the military operations of the rescue plans and, predictably, the Defense Department was in charge of planning and carrying out the rescue mission. Brzezinski’s role was to act as an advisor to the committee due to his detailed knowledge of foreign policy, not military operations.

In concurrence with planning a rescue mission, President Carter and his staff were working on diplomatic measures and economic sanctions aimed at Khomeini’s regime in

---

5 Ibid., 15.
6 Ibid., 14.
order to hinder the Iranian economy and, hopefully, force Khomeini to release the
American hostages.

On November 9 President Carter ordered a halt to the shipment of spare parts for
military equipment so long as the hostages were held. The following day the
President ordered the Justice Department to deport Iranian students in the United
States who were not in compliance with visa requirements. Two days later the
President cut off oil imports from Iran – a measure that hurt the United States as
well as it did Iran, since Iranian oil accounted for nearly 4 percent of daily U.S.
consumption.  

On November 12, 1979, eight days after the embassy takeover, Major General
James B. Vaught was selected to lead the rescue operation, “the planning phase of which
was named Rice Bowl.”  General Vaught had a strong background in the Army as a
disciplined soldier with covert operations experience. It was Vaught’s team that would
attempt the helicopter rescue mission known as Operation Eagle Claw.

Alongside the military planning of the rescue mission, Carter would also push for
diplomatic pressure from American allies against Khomeini’s regime. On November 14,
1979, Carter froze all Iranian assets in American banks, a total of approximately $10
billion. Although there were negative economic impacts to the U.S. economy from the oil
embargo on Iran, the Iranian economy suffered much worse economic hardship from the
embargo, economic sanctions, and frozen assets.

Operation Eagle Claw required a fleet of C-130 gunship helicopters, and a team of
Army Rangers and Green Berets. The plan was supposed to be a forty hour night rescue

---

7 Pierre Salinger, America Held Hostage: The Secret Negotiations (New York: Doubleday &

8 Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission, 18.
mission with two desert rendezvous locations for the rescue team to refuel and prepare for the assault on the American embassy in Tehran.

According to Paul B. Ryan, Operation Eagle Claw faced serious and difficult intelligence tasks, among them were the following:

- Find a remote desert site where the helicopters could refuel from air-dropped fuel bladders. When this proved infeasible, find a remote landing strip suitable for receiving six C-130 transport planes and eight helicopters.

- Insert secret agents into Tehran and arrange for their communication with Washington.

- Locate a hiding place within about two hours driving time from Tehran to shield the rescue force during fourteen hours of daylight.

- Locate a suitable airfield in a friendly nation within flight distance of Iran both to serve as a launching point and, possibly, to receive the C-130s after the mission.

- Locate an airstrip in a friendly nation near the Arabian Sea for refueling the C-130s.

- Find out exactly, by agent reports and satellite photography, where the hostages were being held within the 27-acre embassy compound.

- And transfer eight helicopters from the United States to an aircraft carrier in the Indian Ocean without arousing suspicion.9

Operation Eagle Claw was put on hold for a few months as American officials attempted to negotiate with the new Iranian regime. Planners of the operation continued to work on it in case the diplomatic course of action failed. Ultimately, negotiations

---

9 Ibid., 32-33.
would fail to secure the release of the hostages, Carter would lose confidence in his
diplomatic negotiations, and the rescue mission would be attempted.

Coinciding with the planning of Operation Eagle Claw, American officials,
mostly C.I.A. agents, were working with the Canadian government to extract six
American hostages who managed to escape from the U.S. consulate, “directly northeast
of the [American] chancery building.”¹⁰ The fourteen American diplomats split into
groups in an attempt to avoid being taken hostage by the Muslim students. Six of the
Americans ended up hiding at the Canadian embassy. The other group was caught by
Iranian students and escorted to the U.S. embassy compound.

Canadian Ambassador to Iran, Ken Taylor, was recruited by the Central
Intelligence Agency to prepare an evacuation plan for six Americans taking refuge in the
Canadian embassy. After months of planning, the six Americans were given Canadian
passports, cover stories as Canadian movie stars, and limousines to the airport.
Ambassador Taylor, who purchased multiple plane tickets for the group to leave at
various times on January 28, 1980, believed the plan to exfiltrate the Americans would
work. Although President Carter and Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner
were “scared to death that the houseguests’ story would leak”¹¹ and the exfiltration plan
would be uncovered, the plan worked perfectly. The Canadian embassy personnel all left


¹¹ Ibid., 285.
the country the same day too, in order to protect themselves from Khomeini’s government once they found out their role in helping the American diplomats escape.

“More than anyone else on that plane [out of Tehran], of course, Ken Taylor knew that the rescue of the six American diplomats had done nothing to mitigate the broader tragedy.”12 52 American hostages remained prisoners of Khomeini’s brutal Islamic regime.

As the diplomatic offensive proved to be futile and negotiations between the United States and Iran continued to breakdown, the Carter administration decided to put Operation Eagle Claw into full motion. After being persuaded by most of his advisors, with the exception of Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Carter realized diplomacy had failed and decided to cut off diplomatic relations with Iran on April 7, 1980. The rescue plan had officially been approved by the President and the Pentagon was given the order to proceed with Operation Eagle Claw.

**Operation Eagle Claw and the Sandstorm**

On April 24, 1980, Operation Eagle Claw began at 7:30 P.M., “when eight Sea Stallions rose in succession from the *Nimitz*, cruising in the Arabian Sea.”13 During the failed negotiation attempts, the special operations team was training in North Carolina to prepare for a rescue attempt at the American embassy in Tehran. According to military

---

12 Ibid., 286.

The rescue plan called for six giant C-130 transport planes to lift the men, equipment, and helicopter fuel from an Egyptian air base to an island airfield off Oman [Masirah Island] for a refueling stop. The planes would then fly to a secret landing strip in Iran, designated “Desert One,” 265 miles from Tehran. There they would be joined by eight Sea Stallion helicopters launched three hours earlier from the aircraft carrier \textit{Nimitz}, on station in the Arabian Sea. The rescue force would then transfer to the helicopters and fly to Desert Two, a remote mountain hideaway 50 miles from Tehran. The helicopters would be concealed at a site about 15 miles away. That evening the raiders would be clandestinely driven in vans and trucks to Tehran. About 11 P.M. that night, they would storm the compound, immobilize the guards, and free the hostages.\textsuperscript{14}

The rescue plan did not end up working as the military had planned. The Sea Stallions initial flight into Iran was the beginning of the end of the rescue attempt. The eight Sea Stallion helicopters were codenamed Bluebeard 1 through 8. Bluebeard 6, one of the rescue helicopters leaving from the U.S.S. \textit{Nimitz}, received a warning signal that the helicopter blades were failing. The BIM signal, known as blade inspection method, warned the pilot only two hours into the flight that the rotor blades could be cracked. This could potentially cause the rotors to fail which would result in a crash. The pilot and the crew decided to land Bluebeard 6 in the Iranian desert and abandon their helicopter. One of the other helicopters, Bluebeard 8, picked up the crew and continued the mission. Unfortunately, this was only the first problem in a series of misfortunes and mistakes to come.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 1-2.
During the flight, a sandstorm unexpectedly overcame the rescue crew. Called a *haboob* in Arabic, these sandstorms are a blend of sand particles and rain water from an impending thunderstorm. The sludge-like mixture made it very difficult to fly in, especially at night.

Bluebeard 5 was the next victim of the eight original Sea Stallions. Flying into the sandstorm, Bluebeard 5 had to abort the mission due to instrument errors that made it impossible for the pilot and crew to see where the helicopter was headed. Bluebeard 5 returned safely to the U.S.S. *Nimitz*, though it was only minutes away from Desert One, the initial rendezvous point. A third helicopter, Bluebeard 2, also sustained instrument malfunctions and it was unusable for the remainder of the mission. Down three helicopters only a few hours into the mission, the success of the rescue plan was beginning to look grim.

After the sandstorm grounded three helicopters, Colonel Charlie Beckwith, commander of the Special Operations Delta Force for the mission, determined his forces had already hit the threshold for aborting the mission. Major General Vaught, commander of the Joint Task Force and leader of the rescue mission, radioed Washington to request an abort order from President Carter. Hours later it was granted.

As the crews of both the Sea Stallion helicopter group and the C-130 transport planes prepared to abort the mission, tragedy struck. The sandstorm caused most of the helicopters to be low on fuel because of the lengthy flight and the long amount of time each had spent idling at the Desert One location waiting for the order to abort the mission from Washington. The helicopters were not able to move into a refueling position by
ground. Instead, they had to fly low and slow in order to refuel. An Air Force marshaller attempted to guide the pilot of Bluebeard 3 toward the back of the C-130. As he was guiding the helicopter, a blast of sand from the helicopters rotors knocked him off balance. With limited visibility, the pilot of Bluebeard 3 “collided with the C-130 refueling aircraft, which immediately burst into flames. Eight crew members died and five others were wounded.”15

The rescue team was forced to make a daring evacuation from Desert One back to Masirah Island off the coast of Oman. The pilot and co-pilot of Bluebeard 3 were the only survivors of the crash and were badly injured. As members of the team scrambled to gather and destroy classified evidence and the helicopters, Colonel Beckwith ordered his men to board the C-130s for an immediate evacuation. Eventually, the White House received news of the failed rescue attempt and the eight casualties. President Carter knew his announcement the following morning would not be easy, or well-received, by the American people.

The tragedy that unfolded in the Iranian desert caused dramatic problems for the Carter Administration both in Iran, and at home. A complicated and poorly planned rescue mission, along with an unexpected sandstorm, cost the lives of eight U.S. military men. The domestic and international reactions diminished President Carter’s credibility and hampered his ability to negotiate for the hostages. It was another failure by Carter’s

15 Sick, All Fall Down, 297.
administration, deserved or not, that Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign would capitalize on.

**The American Public Response**

On 25 April 1980, an anguished President Carter, seated at his desk before the television crews, announced that he had recalled a carefully planned mission to rescue the hostages, which had failed because of mechanical difficulties. He praised the brave men who had died, accepted full responsibility for the tragedy, and promised to pursue every avenue for the release of the hostages by peaceful means.\(^16\)

In the United States Congress there was a new push to increase federal spending on defense, an attitude that had not been pervasive since Vietnam. To many, including Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill and Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd, the failure of three helicopters was unacceptable. Many hawkish Congressmen and Senators were livid that the Carter Administration decided to use out of date helicopters for such a complex mission.

Other government officials attempted to place blame on anyone but themselves. Admiral Thomas Hayward, the chief of naval operations, blamed the Joint Chiefs of Staff for approving a mission that “let America down.”\(^17\)

The criticism of the rescue mission’s failure did not stop there. “Former CIA director and former secretary of defense James R. Schlesinger, who had served under

\(^{16}\) Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 95.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 97.
Presidents Nixon and Ford, commended Carter as courageous but condemned the mission as too complex.”18

Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, a critic of a rescue mission from the beginning, resigned his post in protest over the failed rescue attempt and for not being notified of the mission’s approval prior to its launch. Many of Carter’s most loyal supporters turned against him in the aftermath of the failed rescue attempt.

Immediately following the failed rescue attempt, criticism in the press across the nation ensued. *Time* summed up the general mood within the journalism community well. They “awarded the administration an A for effort, an F for executive competence, and asked if Carter had mounted a rescue because of the presidential race.”19 As editorial boards and political commentators across the nation began disparaging Carter’s handling of the rescue mission, “voters wondered how a nation so advanced technologically could have botched the raid so badly.”20 Although the American public supported a rescue mission, Carter’s approval ratings dropped from “47 percent to 42 percent,”21 but he was still ahead of Reagan in the polls.

Other smaller media outlets across the nation criticized Carter’s actions too. “The *News-Tribune* in Tacoma, Washington, boldly concluded, ‘It may be too early to make a

---

18 Ibid., 96.
19 Ibid., 98.
20 Ibid., 96-97.
judgment, but first impressions are that the U.S. badly bungled the rescue mission.”

This same sentiment hit newspapers all over America, though some were slightly less
critical of the administration than others. The Chicago Tribune praised Carter for making
the right decision and blamed the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the aborted
mission.

The criticism began to pile up on Carter and his staff. Carter was in the middle of
a heated Democratic primary contest with Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy, brother
of the former President, and the timing of the failed rescue mission could not have come
at a worse time politically. The initial increase in Carter’s approval ratings, that typically
follow a national tragedy, began to fall “one month before the eight crucial primaries of
‘Super Tuesday’ on June 3 [1980].” Kennedy seized the opportunity to highlight
Carter’s ineptness throughout the hostage crisis, and even labeled Carter’s campaign
strategy of dodging debates with Kennedy as “the Rose Garden strategy.”

After the inglorious failure of the rescue mission, the public reservoir of goodwill
and tolerance began to run dry, and Carter’s reelection campaign began to falter;
it was time for the President to step out of the Rose Garden.

The media grabbed hold of this campaign theme forcing Vice President Walter
Mondale and Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan to push for Carter’s return to the campaign
trail.

22 Ibid., 481.

23 Gary Sick, October Surprise: America’s Hostages in Iran and the Election of Ronald Reagan

24 Ibid., 18.
On the Republican side, Ronald Reagan, well on his way to securing the Republican nomination for president, called the failed rescue mission a national disgrace and would use it as another example of the inexperience and incompetence that had become the staple of the Carter presidency. Although former CIA Director, Congressman, and eventual Vice Presidential nominee George Bush was challenging Reagan in the primary, Reagan’s star power in conservative circles made him the odds on favorite to win the nomination. The presidential election of 1980 was only six months away, and the Reagan team planned on exploiting Carter’s poor foreign policy decisions, in addition to the fledgling American economy, to win the election.

In Washington, plans for another rescue attempt began to evolve. “Two days after the task force’s return from Desert One, Brzezinski, in response to Carter’s order, began organizing a second assault.”25 Operation Credible Sport, as it was called, was never carried out due to the increasingly long days in Iran, the public outrage, and the inability to covertly operate within Iran. Another rescue mission was too risky to undertake after such an abysmal failure the first time, especially considering the intense summer weather conditions in Iran. Carter’s White House would resume diplomatic courses of action in attempting to secure the release of the hostages. A second attempt also proved to be unnecessary as the Iranian parliament ended up voting for a framework to release the American hostages two days before the November 4th election in 1980.

---

The Iranian Response

Upon first hearing about the failed rescue attempt, which occurred late on April 25\textsuperscript{th} due to poor intelligence, the Iranian government immediately transferred the hostages away from the American embassy in order to deter another rescue attempt. “Within twenty-four hours, the captives were dispersed to remote hiding places miles from Tehran.”\textsuperscript{26} The hostages were taken all over Iran, some to the south, others to the northern mountainous region.

Although he did not know where he was at the time, C.I.A. officer Bill Daugherty, who had spent the last six months in solitary confinement, was taken to “Evin Prison, the most notorious of the jails in Tehran.”\textsuperscript{27} Again in solitary confinement, with the exception of a four hour stint with another American cellmate, Daugherty faced worse conditions, including extreme cold, than he did previously.

As expected in any Islamic Republic dominated by conservative religious leaders, many in Iran believed the failed attempt was the work of \textit{Allah}. Iranians across the nation were ecstatic that the Americans failed to rescue their compatriots from the embassy-turned-prison. The failure emboldened Khomeini and the hostage takers, who increasingly believed they had the upper hand in their dealings with the United States. Iranians celebrated America’s failed rescue attempt, “where the failure of the rescue mission was seen as nothing less than divine intervention and a heavenly blessing on the

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 100.

\textsuperscript{27} Bowden, \textit{Guests of the Ayatollah}, 474.
gerogan-girha, the hostage takers.”28 Throughout the night, triumphant chants of ‘Allahuakbar!’ or Allah is great, could be heard around Iran.

Barbara Timm, mother of hostage Kevin Timm, was on a quixotic trip to Iran to see her son during the failed rescue attempt. After being heckled by irate Muslim students following the failed rescue attempt for her purported role in planning it, Timm released a statement condemning the military actions of the United States and apologizing to the Iranian people for President Carter’s actions. It was an effort to prevent the Iranians from taking any vengeance out on the hostages, which Khomeini previously threatened to do if the United States used military force in any way. Alongside Timm’s apologetic press conference, Khomeini lambasted President Carter for his “‘foolish maneuver’ and warned that any further military action by the United States would prompt the immediate execution of all hostages.”29

The following day, Khomeini held a press conference of his own at the American embassy. A Khomeini aide, Ayatollah Khalkali, was in charge of orchestrating the press conference. The barbaric manner in which it was held was shocking by Western standards. Khalkali put the remains of the dead American soldiers on display and “unzipped one of the plastic body bags and withdrew a blackened severed hand and forearm to show off its military-style watch.”30 Khalkali also claimed to have nine skulls

28 Ibid., 487.

29 Ibid., 479.

30 Ibid.
in the bags, despite the fact that only eight American soldiers were killed, and mockingly joked;

   I can show you nine skulls. Perhaps President Carter can explain how some American soldiers have two heads?31

   The remaining hostages spent the rest of the spring and summer spread out across Iran. Some hostages, such as Bruce Laingen, were treated far better than others. Kathryn Koob and Ann Swift, who were not released with the other women due to their supposed importance to the American diplomatic mission, lived in better situations than most of the men, though not by much. Though the hostage crisis became a staple of the nightly shows, especially on ABC’s Nightline, the hostages felt as though they were no longer important. Unbeknownst to the hostages, Ted Koppel, the anchor of ABC’s newest show, made a point to count the number of days the hostages had been held captive during every broadcast.

   By the end of the summer, the hostages were all relocated back in Tehran due to the students’ inability to manage the hostages across Iran. On July 27, 1980, “even the death of the shah in Cairo failed to produce the slightest change in the standoff.”32 Many hostages felt bored, hopeless, and sad. They knew of the regular executions of suspected spies by Khomeini’s henchman Ayatollah Khalkali after phony public trials. Some wondered when their turn would be, others knew they were only valuable to Khomeini alive.

______________________________
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 498.
There was internal dissent in Iran as to whether the hostages should continue to be held or tried in court. In the Iranian parliament, the Majles, many felt the hostages should be tried in Iranian courts for their subversive acts. Ibrahim Yazdi, the foreign minister during the embassy takeover who resigned after his government was disbanded by Khomeini, was now a member of the Iranian parliament. He advocated for the public trial of the American hostages in an attempt to engage the U.S. government for their past atrocities in Iran. Ironically, president of Iran Abolhassan Bani-Sadr was in favor of negotiating with America on the release of the hostages since he was sworn into office in January 1980. His Foreign Minister Sadegh Ghotbzadeh was also in favor of negotiating the release the hostages due to the harsh economic realities Iran was facing from economic sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies. Both still professed anti-American sentiments on a regular basis, and both were particularly opposed to American involvement in their internal affairs. Yet, both also knew Iran’s standing in the world was damaged and their economy stood on the brink of collapse.

Negotiations for the actual release of the hostages would continue well beyond the campaign season of 1980. Two months before the November election, “Khomeini stated four conditions for the release of the hostages: the United States must return the shah’s wealth; cancel all financial claims against Iran; free Iranian assets in the United States; and promise never to interfere in Iranian affairs.” Later in September, when Iraq

---

invaded Iran over border conflicts, the United States felt they had a strong chance of securing the release of the hostages. Unfortunately for the American hostages, the beginning of the eight year Iran-Iraq War would not provide the opportunity for the Carter Administration to secure their release before the election. However, the Iran-Iraq War would have serious economic consequences on an already struggling Iranian government. Iranian rulers, including President Bani-Sadr and Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh, knew it was next to impossible to fight a war of this magnitude against a strong Iraqi army while suffering from economic sanctions from the United States and its allies.

President Carter continued to struggle to obtain the release of the hostages from Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamic regime. As the events continued to unfold over the summer and into the fall of the 1980 presidential election year, Carter’s support began to dwindle. Ronald Reagan, with the uncoordinated help of the national media, continued to exploit Carter’s inability to release the hostages as a referendum on his job as chief executive of the nation. Ironically, Carter’s plan to secure the release of the hostages, using the government of Algeria as an intermediary for negotiations, was passed by the Iranian parliament on November 2, 1980; two days before the 1980 presidential election. Since Carter proved unable to bring the hostages home over the past year, however, voters would elect Ronald Reagan would win overwhelmingly.
CHAPTER IV

THE RISE OF NIGHTLINE

In 1977, two years prior to the Iranian hostage crisis, there was an internal push at the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) to find a new program to compete with the National Broadcasting Company’s (NBC) The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. NBC’s Johnny Carson “owned late-night. He was late-night.”¹ The new president of ABC news, Roone Arledge, wanted to fill the 11:30 P.M. weekly spot with a news program. “For more than two decades, NBC’s Tonight Show had dominated the late-night time slot, with Steve Allen and Jack Paar preceding Carson at the helm.”² Producers at ABC, under Arledge’s direction, were tasked with creating a news program that would lure viewers away from Carson and over to ABC.

Initially, Arledge’s news specials attracted viewers across the nation, but he had trouble uncovering enough news to make the show relevant every weeknight. The first broadcast covered the death of Elvis Presley on August 16, 1977. “Over the next two years, there would be more than forty late-night news specials on subjects ranging from the fall of Skylab [the first space station launched by the United States] to President Jimmy Carter's visit to the Middle East.”³ After two years of intermittent news shows, the


³ Ibid.
Iranian hostage crisis would provide the nightly coverage desired by Arledge and his bosses at ABC.

In 1979, the majority of Americans did not have an understanding of the events unfolding in revolutionary Iran. Outside of Washington, D.C., most Americans’ understanding of international crises and events were hampered by the lack of information provided by the national media. At the time of the Iranian hostage crisis, local papers rarely covered any news outside of their community or state.

For those Americans who did not choose to wade through the New York Times every morning (it was possible but not always easy to buy the paper in much of the country), Iranian news was hard to come by...CNN had yet to make its debut, network television rarely gave over its few precious minutes to troubled Iran, and local newspapers – then still a rich source for news, at least for Americans over forty – tended to have extremely limited coverage of international events.4

The show that would become Nightline began on November 8, 1979; four days after the hostage crisis began. That night, the news special was titled America Held Hostage and it was hosted by ABC evening news anchor Frank Reynolds. Reynolds reported on the four day long hostage crisis and the inhumane way his fellow Americans were being treated. Blindfolded and handcuffed diplomatic officials were paraded around in front of the American embassy for the world to see. The new ABC special would cover the whole dramatic event.

From the beginning, ABC and its producers believed the hostage crisis would be resolved quickly based on the past takeover attempt that was quelled within hours by the

provisional Iranian government the previous February. ABC news president Roone Arledge wanted the news to have the 11:30 P.M. weekly slot for the entirety of the crisis. Arledge pleaded with ABC president Fred Pierce that the hostage crisis would be resolved in three to four weeks. Pierce signed off on Arledge’s plan to keep ABC’s coverage of Iran until the conflict was resolved. However, the crisis continued much longer than anyone at ABC, or even at the White House, imagined. After years of individual news specials, ABC finally had an interesting subject matter to draw in viewers across the nation.

From the very beginning, the hostage crisis had exerted a striking effect on ordinary Americans, who gradually became as obsessed as Carter with the fate of their countrymen. On ABC television, Ted Koppel began hosting a nightly programme – which later became Nightline – endlessly detailing the latest developments in the crisis, while on CBS Walter Cronkite, a man implicitly trusted by most Americans, kept up the continual pressure on Carter by signing off his newscast each night with the number of days the hostages had been held in captivity.5

By mid-December 1979, Frank Reynolds dropped out of America Held Hostage news series. “His duties as Washington anchor of World News Tonight, he said, were enough.”6 Ted Koppel, ABC’s diplomatic correspondent and a former Saturday news anchor, filled in for Reynolds. ABC’s producers liked Koppel’s intellectual approach to the hostage crisis. His long experience reporting on international events and foreign affairs suited his new reporting role on the Iranian hostage crisis. Koppel had “more than


6 Koppel, Nightline, 13.
a decade and a half with the network, eight years at the State Department, Latin
American bureau chief, Hong Kong bureau chief, and three and a half years covering
Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.” The producers also incorrectly believed the hostage
crisis would be resolved relatively soon and Koppel would go back to his original
position reporting from the United States Department of State. As the hostage crisis
dragged on, *America Held Hostage* became a hit across the nation and attracted the
viewers needed to establish a late-night news show.

By January 1980, ABC felt their news series on the Iranian hostage crisis was
popular enough to draw an audience even after the crisis ended. Roone Arledge and the
rest of the top staff began planning a full time news show to replace *America Held
Hostage* in the coming months. Initially, Ted Koppel was not seriously considered to host
the new show full time. According to Arledge, Koppel did not fit the stereotypical news
host he envisioned. Koppel’s young demeanor “at thirty-nine, he could pass for twenty-
nine on camera.” However, Koppel’s skills in the international arena proved essential to
the news network. In January, Koppel interviewed Secretary of Defense Harold Brown
and remarkably covered President Jimmy Carter’s State of the Union speech. His
performances caught the attention of the top brass at ABC and he was asked to host the
new show *Nightline*.

---

7 Ibid., 17.
8 Ibid.
On March 24, 1980, *Nightline* began as a nightly news show at 11:30 P.M. Eastern Time. It was day 142 of the hostage crisis and the first show aired an interview with a wife of one of the American hostages. Although initial reviews of *Nightline* were critical of the new show, ABC continued to air it permanently. In order to combat the joke, *Nightline* “the show brought to you by the Ayatollah Khomeini,”9 ABC’s producers began covering other news, both national and political. However, the premise of the show continued to focus on the Iranian hostage crisis.

Koppel’s sign-offs were all variations on a theme: ‘It is day 399 for the hostages in Iran.’ ‘Today marked the four hundredth day of captivity for the Americans being held in Iran.’ ‘This is day 401 of the Iran hostage crisis.’ *Nightline* was sticking by its commitment to provide updates on the crisis every night, no matter what the main topic of the broadcast.10

*Nightline* was born out of the Iranian hostage crisis. The effect the show ultimately had on the American public notably changed the public discourse on the presidential election of 1980, but it did not do much to influence voters in the 1980 presidential election. Although Carter’s missteps, both mistakes he made and events out of his control, fueled the nightly news programs, polling taken in 1980 showed the Iranian hostage crisis was not a top issue to American voters. The nightly reminder of how long the hostages remained in captivity surely impacted the American electorate. However, the tragedy that was the 444 day Iranian hostage crisis did not factor heavily into the voting decisions of every day Americans who were bombarded with news

9 Ibid., 44.

10 Ibid.
coverage of the event for exactly one year prior to the November 4, 1980 presidential election. The economy historically drives voter opinion and 1980 was no exception. The economic problems facing America at the time, such as high unemployment and inflation, greatly outweighed the Iranian hostage crisis as the top issue facing the United States. Republican candidate for president, Ronald Reagan, used the poor economy to advance his limited government, and low tax platform in his bid for the Oval Office.

**Ronald Reagan and the Media**

‘Television elects Presidents’ – the men around Reagan saw television as the path to power, the ultimate technical fix, the modern American King Maker. More than most of their peers in the politics business, they [Reagan media advisers Michael Deaver and David Gergen] appreciated that without a sophisticated knowledge of how to exploit television, any politician’s hopes of wielding power on a national scale were doomed.11

California Governor Ronald Reagan certainly had the media skills, and the message, to beat President Jimmy Carter in 1980. At the time, the U.S. economy was in shambles, and Carter was extremely vulnerable to a strong challenger from the Republican Party. Reagan’s favorable coverage by the national media was due to his affable personality and image, as well as the national media themselves. David Burke, an ABC News executive vice president, and former aide to Senator Ted Kennedy, had a theory on why Reagan was treated so well by journalists across the nation.

The key, in his view, was Reagan himself. His personal gifts – an amiable personality, sincere manner, perfect vocal delivery and photogenic persona – made him the television era equivalent of the Pied Piper of Hamelin; he played a

---

tune so gay and skipped ahead so cheerily that others could not help but trust and follow him. To attack such a man was unthinkable.\textsuperscript{12}

Burke was not the only high ranking member of the national media to note Ronald Reagan’s ability to obtain favorable press coverage on the national stage. Benjamin C. Bradlee, the executive editor of \textit{The Washington Post}, also speculated on the reasons behind Reagan’s conquering of the media.

Bradlee explained that when Ronald Reagan came to Washington in 1980, journalists at the \textit{Post} sensed that ‘here comes a really true conservative…And we are known – though I don’t think justifiably – as the great liberals. So, [we thought] we’ve got to really behave ourselves here. We’ve got to not be arrogant, make every effort to be informed, be mannerly, be fair. And we did this. I suspect in the process that this paper and probably a good deal of the press gave Reagan not a free ride, but they didn’t use the same standards on him that they used on Carter and on Nixon.’\textsuperscript{13}

Tom Brokaw, the anchor of the \textit{NBC Nightly News}, also compared the two different public styles of Reagan and Carter. Brokaw noted, “In part it goes back to who he [Reagan] is and his strong belief in who he is. He’s not trying to reinvent himself every day as Jimmy Carter was.”\textsuperscript{14} Brokaw compared Ronald Reagan to some of the Fortune 500 Chief Executive Officers he knew, claiming Reagan had the same general philosophy of how he wanted the government run and did not spend much time dealing with the mundane details of how to implement his goals.

Although Reagan was viewed as the darling of the national media, Carter found himself in a very difficult situation. His mishandling of the Iranian hostage crisis, and the

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 4-5.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 5.
national media attention it garnered, only aided the Republican nominee. The Carter Administration’s struggles in foreign policy directly worsened America’s economic crisis at home. The Iranian oil embargo helped cause stagflation – high inflation along with high unemployment – one of the most notable problems of the Carter presidency. The direct connection between Carter’s foreign policy and its effect on the deteriorating national economy simply could not be explained in a favorable manner to the national press corp. Author Mark Hertsgaard noted the unpleasant coverage Carter received by television stations across the country.

Television was the proverbial double-edged sword, King Slayer as well as King Maker. As Democratic presidential candidate Gary Hart discovered to his dismay in 1987, when the press decided to go after a politician, the effects could be lethal….Jimmy Carter had learned this truth the hard way during the Iranian hostage crisis, and the lesson was not lost on the men in charge of managing the public presentation of Ronald Reagan.15

Reagan’s public persona was far better than Carter’s, and the national press helped portray Reagan in more positive light than the incumbent president. Carter’s inability to control the negative media reports on both the Iranian hostage crisis and the national economy clearly hurt his reelection chances. It is also important to note that although there are clear advantages to being the incumbent president during an election year, such as name identification and fundraising capabilities, it is impossible to distance the president from national problems. America was facing serious economic problems at the time and Carter, deserved or not, was the man Americans held responsible. While Reagan could simply lambast Carter’s leadership without having to prove his own

15 Ibid., 18.
capabilities on the national level, Carter was stuck defending his poor handling of America’s top job.

Reagan’s background as an actor and radio broadcaster dramatically helped him influence the media in positive ways. As a sports broadcaster for various radio stations in Iowa in his twenties, Reagan learned the necessary skills to be an effective communicator at an early age.

Reagan's principal gift as an announcer was his voice, which, in the words of a subsequent observer, "recedes at the right moments, turning mellow at points of intensity. When it wishes to be most persuasive, it hovers barely above a whisper so as to win you over by intimacy, if not by substance…."\(^{16}\)

As he worked his way up from Iowa’s WOC radio station to WHO in Des Moines, “Reagan became a well-known sports announcer whose specialty was creating play-by-play accounts of Chicago Cubs baseball games that the station received by wire.”\(^{17}\) Although Reagan made a name for himself as a sports broadcaster, he always had an attraction to Hollywood and acting in general.

After meeting a movie agent on a trip to California to cover spring training for the Chicago Cubs, Reagan was offered a chance to try out for an acting job. Reagan did well at his tryout and “made his film debut in June 1937 as a crusading radio announcer in a minor crime movie, ‘Love Is On the Air.’”\(^{18}\) Reagan would go on to make over fifty

---


\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
movies in his career and learn the acting skills that would help propel his political career to the Oval Office and earn him the nickname the Great Communicator.

After Reagan’s career turned from acting in B-films to running for public office, he used his media skills to his advantage. In 1964, Reagan delivered a passionate speech for Republican presidential candidate and Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater. The speech raised $1 million for Goldwater, an unheard of amount in 1964, and turned Reagan into a conservative celebrity across the nation. Two years later, Reagan won the governor’s race in California and was reelected to a second term four years later. In 1976, Reagan challenged President Gerald Ford in the Republican primary but lost by 117 delegate votes. Reagan’s national presence and media skills helped win him the Republican nomination and, ultimately, the presidency in 1980.

Ronald Reagan’s long career in the media particularly helped him win the press battle over President Carter in 1980. Reagan was comfortable around cameras, in front of reporters, and delivering speeches. His charming image and candor played well in the media, both on television and in print, and made it difficult for Carter to compete for the same favorable coverage.

Not only did Reagan have the persona and background in media to win the 1980 presidential election, he also had the issues on his side. Carter’s perceived failure of leadership on economics and foreign policy and his inability to explain his record as president gave Reagan an advantage in the press. “Time pointed to the voting public’s anger and discontent and declared that Carter might have a far more difficult time in
beating the Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan.”19 Reagan’s ability to manipulate the media, through his demeanor and his advisers, gave him a distinct advantage over Carter. The fact the national press also gave him more favorable coverage than other candidates seeking the presidency worked to his advantage as well. This combination of factors proved to be lethal for Carter’s reelection hopes in 1980.

President Carter’s Approval Ratings

The presidential election of 1980 was mainly a referendum on President Jimmy Carter’s handling of the national economy. Stagflation continued to plague the national economy and his presidency. Although the Iranian hostage crisis was a factor in shaping the President’s public approval rating, it was more significant in improving Carter’s image at the beginning of the hostage crisis than it was in hurting his approval rating during the final months of his presidency.

Carter’s approval rating in the Gallup poll leaped from 32 percent in early November 1979 to 61 percent in early December. Pollster George Gallup called the turnabout “stunning…the largest increase in the four decades the Gallup poll has made measurements.”20

“News coverage of Carter grew suddenly kinder immediately after the embassy seizure, but as months passed without the hostages being released, and as the domestic economy continued to deteriorate, the press seemed to turn on Carter with a


vengeance. “Unfortunately for Carter and his administration, this high approval rating at the beginning of the Iranian hostage crisis fell flat in the final year of his presidency. The economy continued to be the driving factor behind his approval ratings. The Iranian hostage crisis and foreign policy in general did not influence voters in the 1980 U.S. presidential elections. International events, with the possible exception of war, are rarely noticed by the majority of Americans who infrequently pay attention to foreign affairs. Polls conducted throughout the last two years of the Carter presidency give insight into voter opinions and attitudes of Carter’s handling of America’s top job.

A Gallup poll conducted between September 28 and October 1, 1979 found that 58% of respondents believed inflation, a high cost of living, and taxes were the most important problems facing the United States. Energy, fuel shortage, and the high price of gasoline came in second at 18%, followed by unemployment, jobs, and the recession at 10%. The Middle East only garnered 1%. While this poll was taken before the Muslim Students stormed the U.S. embassy, the poll numbers did not change drastically in the next year.

Almost a year later, a CBS and New York Times poll conducted between September 23 and September 25, 1980 found that 32% of respondents believed inflation was the biggest issue facing America. A generic “other economy” came in second at

21 Hertsgaard, On Bended Knee, 98.

21%. Interestingly, the USSR and war in general came third with 9%, probably due to Soviet aggression in Afghanistan and around the globe. Iran and terrorism came in tied for fifth at 5%. Although concern about the Middle East and terrorism clearly increased, it polled at a statistically insignificant rate.\textsuperscript{23}

A lack of a deep understanding of foreign policy by the general public clearly translates to voter apathy in presidential elections regarding international events. However, when American lives are at stake in international crises, voters usually take notice, hence Carter’s high approval rating at the beginning of the hostage crisis. Although President Carter’s approval ratings increased dramatically at the beginning of the crisis, as do most presidential approval ratings during the initial stages of national emergencies, Carter’s support dropped over the coming months due to America’s economic conditions.

In comparison to Carter, it is interesting to note the general attitudes of the voting public in the 2004 presidential election between Republican President George W. Bush and Democratic Massachusetts Senator John Kerry. Three years after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the war in Iraq was the top issue of concern to voters at 23%. The ‘general economy’ came in second at 21%, while terrorism came in third at 16%.

Healthcare came in fourth at 13% and unemployment fifth at 12%.\textsuperscript{24} Although the terrorist attacks on September 11\textsuperscript{th} were far more serious than the Iranian hostage crisis, this is a noteworthy comparison because both events were the driving factors in President Carter and Bush’s foreign policies. Clearly, American voters believed terrorism was a much bigger threat in 2004 than they did in 1980, which furthers the conclusion that the Iranian hostage crisis was not the major factor in voters’ decisions in 1980.

In late June 1979, Carter’s approval rating was a dismal 28%. Only two other presidents since 1945 had, at one point in their presidency, lower approval ratings than Carter; Presidents Harry Truman and Richard Nixon.\textsuperscript{25} It is interesting that Carter’s lowest approval rating during his presidency was four months before the Muslim Students Following the Imam’s Line seized the United States embassy in Tehran.\textsuperscript{26} Carter’s approval ratings improved significantly during the first few months of the Iranian hostage crisis. However, beginning in March 1980 Carter’s approval ratings

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}
dropped below 50 percent and never recovered. He finished the election year with approval ratings in the mid 30s.27

The 1980 presidential debates did not help Carter’s image improve either. After refusing to debate his Democratic primary opponent Senator Ted Kennedy, Carter again refused to attend the first general election debate in Baltimore, Maryland on September 21, 1980. Republican nominee Ronald Reagan and independent candidate John Anderson were afforded the opportunity to pitch their platforms to a national audience and contrast their ideologies with Carter’s.28 Carter declined to participate with Anderson involved in the debate, while Reagan refused to participate if he was barred from the debate.

John Anderson, a moderate Republican congressman from Illinois, ran in the Republican primary in 1980 and performed decently due to his moderate views and his new found opposition to the Vietnam War. During the Republican primary Anderson famously admitted his vote for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was a mistake. The resolution gave President Lyndon Baines Johnson carte blanche to use military force in Southeast Asia without a formal declaration of war from Congress. Admitting his mistake proved to be a savvy political move, especially in the Northeast where Republican voters tended to be more centrist in their political views. Anderson eventually withdrew from

---


the Republican primary and ran as an independent who favored a gas tax to encourage conservation.

The second, and final, debate occurred a week before the election on October 28, 1980. Independent candidate John Anderson was not invited to participate in the event due to a drop in public opinion polls leading up to the election. Although terrorism came up during the debate between Reagan and Carter, the economy was the most contentious issue between the president and his Republican challenger. Reagan’s performance solidified his impending victory, especially in his closing remarks when Reagan asked, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” The American people overwhelmingly decided they were not. Reagan went on to win in a landslide by taking 489 electoral votes to Carter’s 49.

Carter’s approval ratings as president of the United States plummeted over the course of his final year in the Oval Office. “By the summer and fall of 1980, Carter’s performance ratings decreased to the mid-30% range and by September, in Gallup's last pre-election approval rating, Carter's was at only 37%.” Although Carter’s handling of the Iranian hostage crisis had a negative impact on his declining popularity, the poor economic conditions in America at the time contributed more to his reelection woes. Carter’s poor leadership on a variety of issues, especially the American economy, was

29 Ibid.

exploited by the Reagan campaign for their political gain in the 1980 presidential election.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The tumultuous relationship between Iran and the United States began over a century ago. By the 1920’s, as the world began modernizing and waging world wars, U.S.-Iranian relations began to take shape due to Iran’s strategic and geographic location, and its natural resources. The United States, over the coming decades, pushed for more influence in Iranian affairs. Britain and the Soviet Union, long time colonizers of Iran, earned negative reputations with the Iranian population for their perceived exploitation of Iran.

The United States capitalized on this sentiment and paid more attention to Iranian relations at the outset of World War II. Nazi Germany, like the Allied Forces, had an interest in Iranian resources, especially oil. The Allied powers simply would not allow Nazi Germany access to Iran’s oil and its strategic ports. By the end of World War II, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union divided Iran into zones controlled by each nation. Concurrently, the Nazi-friendly Reza Shah was deposed by Allied Forces and replaced by his less dictatorial son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

As Iran continued to struggle economically in the post-war 1940’s, the rise of Mohammed Mossadegh, a populist and fervent Iranian nationalist, began. Mossadegh won a quasi-legitimate election against the wishes of the Shah in 1951. By 1953, the United States, with the help of the British, ousted Mossadegh from power in a coup d’état. America, and our British allies, worried about Soviet expansion in the region due to Iran’s strategic ports and vast oil reserves. The United States was also able to monitor
Soviet nuclear activities from Iran under the Shah, which Mossadegh was not enthusiastic about. For these reasons, the United States and Britain backed the pro-Western Shah over the populist and nationalist Mossadegh. U.S. support of the Shah lasted another quarter century until he was forced out of Iran by loyal supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini during the Islamic revolution.

By this time in Iran, the majority of the Iranian population knew of the United States involvement in their domestic affairs. Radicalized Muslim students who helped perpetrate the attack on the American embassy were keenly aware of America’s imperial reputation and the covert actions the United States had taken in Iran, especially the 1953 coup d’état that ousted Mossadegh. The students had every intention of helping Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic revolution by any means necessary, including illegally seizing a foreign embassy.

After the Muslim Students Following the Imam’s Line seized the American embassy in Tehran, the United States had a serious international crisis to deal with. President Jimmy Carter, and his administration, believed the provisional Iranian government would restore order and free the American hostages as they had nine months prior. Unfortunately, Ayatollah Khomeini supported the Muslim students and refused to negotiate for the release of the hostages. It was his goal to make ‘The Great Satan’ pay for their unwavering support of the tyrannical Shah.

After months of failed diplomatic negotiations, the Carter administration attempted a complex and covert rescue mission to free the American hostages. Operation Eagle Claw began on April 24, 1980 only to fall short due to a sandstorm that paralyzed
the rescue helicopters. As the rescue team of military Special Forces began to abort the mission, the weather conditions and a pilot’s flying error caused a crash that resulted in the deaths of eight American soldiers. The failed rescue attempt and the deaths of American servicemen devastated Carter and his staff. No other military rescue was attempted.

After the failed rescue attempt became public, Iranians across the nation celebrated the failure as an act of God. Ayatollah Khomeini chastised the U.S government for their foolish ideas and lambasted America for its imperialistic foreign policies. The newly formed Islamic republic, emboldened by America’s failed rescue attempt, had no intention of releasing the hostages any time soon.

The 1980 presidential election was heating up. Carter was attacked on both sides of the aisle by Democratic Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy, who challenged the President in a contentious primary, and by the Republican front runner for President Ronald Reagan. During this time, the media hounded Carter’s handling of the Iranian hostage crisis and the national economy. Stagflation, or high unemployment along with high inflation, harmed the American economy, and Carter was blamed for it by the general electorate.

By the time of the November 1980 presidential election, Carter’s approval ratings were in the mid-30s. His inability to defend the actions of his administration cost him dearly in the election. Former California Governor Ronald Reagan, a former actor and expert in media relations, handily defeated Carter in the 1980 general election. As one
final slap in the face to Jimmy Carter, the remaining 52 American hostages in Iran were released following President Ronald Reagan’s inaugural address.

In his memoirs, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski admits “Iran was the Carter Administration’s greatest setback.” The top foreign policy adviser to the President had an indisputable role in shaping the president’s foreign policy goals. Although Brzezinski felt the Iranian crisis was the greatest setback, the American public clearly didn’t agree. The effect the national media had on President Carter’s role in the Iranian hostage crisis clearly impacted his reelection chances negatively. However, high gas prices, stagflation, and a poor general economy weighed more on voters’ minds than any other issue.

Ted Koppel’s rise as the anchor of Nightline promoted the international crisis across the country. Koppel’s nightly sign-offs always mentioned the American hostages and the number of days they had been held in Iran. Beginning in November 1979 as a miniseries titled America Held Hostage, the show went on to become the regular late-night news program Nightline. Viewership increased over time and critics became supporters as the show progressed. However, even with the constant reminder of the Iranian hostage crisis broadcasted across America, the general electorate was seemingly unaffected by the situation abroad.

---

Ronald Reagan and his campaign team successfully portrayed Carter as a weak and ineffective leader. The Reagan campaign’s success in the media was due to Reagan’s acting skills and likeable demeanor, as well as Carter’s inability to defend his administration’s handling of the national economy and the Iranian hostage crisis. The constant attacks on Carter’s failure to lead drove his approval ratings into the ground. By the time the election took place, on November 4, 1980, the American electorate overwhelmingly decided Ronald Reagan was better suited to serve as President of the United States than Jimmy Carter.

Poll after poll showed American voters consistently ranked the economy far ahead of national security and foreign affairs as the most important issue facing the United States. Although the Iranian hostage crisis penetrated every American television set over the course of the 444 day incident, the American public either became immune to the national tragedy or simply felt the national economy was far more important in their day to day lives.

Voter attitudes and opinions can change drastically in a short period of time. President Carter enjoyed a 30 point approval rating gain in one month, between November and December 1979, at the outset of the Iranian hostage crisis. This, however, is not unusual for a president during a time of a national emergency.

Although Carter’s approval rating increased substantially at the beginning of the hostage crisis, the motivating factor behind voter decisions was generally unchanged during the last year of his presidency. The American electorate, though clearly upset with the situation in Iran, viewed the weakening economy in the United States as the most
important issue facing America by a wide margin. American voters across the nation were more concerned over the direction of the national economy than with the Iranian hostage crisis, or any potential foreign threat. Ultimately, the concern over the economy, and not over President Carter’s lack of leadership in the face of an Iranian dictator, led to his defeat in the 1980 presidential election. To the average American, gas shortages, high inflation, high unemployment, and a rising cost of living impacted their daily lives far more than a standoff in the Middle East. Polling during the election cycle and the campaign rhetoric focused on the economy prove that international issues did not sway American voters one way or another. Rather, the driving concern behind voting behavior in 1980 was the economy.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


