

**The Carter Administration and the “Arc of Crisis”:
Iran, Afghanistan and the Cold War in Southwest Asia, 1977-1981**

A Critical Oral History Workshop

**The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
July 25-26, 2005**

Organized by
The Cold War International History Project (WWICS)
The National Security Archive
with
The Middle East Program (WWICS)

Agenda

Monday, July 25

09:00 AM *Welcome and Opening Remarks*

Christian F. Ostermann (Director, Cold War International History Project)
Malcolm Byrne (Deputy Director, National Security Archive)

09:15 AM *Panel I: **The Lead-Up to the Revolution** (Jan 1977-Sep 1978)*

Main topics:

- Iran policy in transition from Nixon/Kissinger/Ford to Carter: Continuity or change? To what extent did Carter adopt the Nixon Doctrine? In what ways did he fundamentally alter the U.S. approach?
- Strategic surprise: Was there an intelligence failure or was it “structural inadequacy” -- the inability to reassess basic assumptions? Who “got it right”?
- Missed opportunities? At what points might a U.S. policy change have had a measurable effect? When was it too late to make a difference?
- The regional context: (a) the impact of Afghanistan’s Saur revolution and perceptions of the Soviet threat; (b) the Arab-Israeli peace process and the importance of the Shah’s position.

Related and additional questions:

- What were American perceptions of the Shah and Iran's domestic scene?
- What were the nature and extent of Embassy contacts with the opposition?
- Were warning signs about the Shah's tenuous position noticed but disregarded? Was there internal disagreement over how to act? Did anyone "get it right" -- among analysts or allies (e.g. the Israelis)?
- What prompted Carter to make his New Year's Eve toast in Tehran?
- How specifically did the President's perceptions (and those of his advisers) clash with data and analyses from other sources?
- Did Cold War concerns have to weigh as heavily on Iran policy?
- Did Carter's policies on arms sales and human rights encourage the revolutionaries?
- Were there internal discussions about the importance of U.S. and allied interests in protecting access to oil -- including securing Israel's requirements?

11:15 AM *Coffee Break (15 minutes)*

11:30 AM *Panel II: **The Revolution Underway** (Sep 1978-Feb 1979)*

Main topics:

- The debate over whether to back the Shah: How did Carter mediate between views represented to him by Vance and Brzezinski? Were alternatives to the Shah seriously considered at the top?
- What sources did Carter rely on regarding Iran? How much intelligence actually reached him? How much exposure did he have to alternate views?
- Embassy contacts with the opposition inside Iran: How extensive were they, and what was their effect? What was the view from Washington, particularly the White House, on such contacts?
- U.S. contacts with the Khomeini camp in Paris: Why were they not pursued more fully? Were there important indirect (e.g. third-party or third-country) channels? At whose initiative?
- Debates over the state and potential role of the Iranian military: Did U.S. plans for the Army go beyond enforcing order?

Related and additional questions:

- What sources of information did key U.S. policy-makers rely on (for example, Brzezinski's well-known trust in Zahedi)? What effect did this "stove-piping" of sources have on the policy process?
- Did Carter's high-profile, personal involvement contribute to or impede the handling of the crisis?
- How much did White House preoccupation with competing international issues (SALT, China, Camp David) actually impede Iran policy?
- Could the U.S. have influenced the Shah in a more positive and effective way?
- Why did U.S. intelligence not know about the Shah's health problems sooner?
- Why did Ted Eliot's mission to Khomeini fall through? What was the nature of the flare-up between Sullivan and Carter in early January 1979 over the question of contacts with Khomeini?
- How consequential for Carter's policy decisions vis-a-vis the Shah was counsel from Rockefeller and Kissinger?
- Did the Ball report have any impact? If not, why not?
- What did the Huyser mission accomplish? Could it have been handled better?
- What steps were taken to minimize the expected damage from the loss of intelligence listening posts in northern Iran and U.S. military equipment generally? How was the integrity of these systems protected? Did the prospective loss of the TACKSMAN sites influence the final normalization deal with China (in order to replace them)?

12:30 PM *Lunch (immediately outside the conference room)*

1:30 PM *Panel II (continued)*

2:30 PM *Coffee break (15 minutes)*

2:45 PM **Panel III: The Revolution in Power: From Khomeini's Return to the Embassy Seizure (Feb 1979-Nov 1979)**

Main topics:

- How to deal with the revolution: What was the nature of the internal debate? Was a full range of options considered -- from full acceptance of the regime, to a U.S. military solution, to helping to overthrow the new regime?

- Embassy/CIA goals in recruiting Iranians: What were the objectives of these activities with respect to the likes of Bani-Sadr, Shariatmadari, Khosrow Qashqai, Beheshti and others? Were there any particular successes?
- Admitting the Shah to the U.S.: Was there ever a serious possibility the Shah would not be allowed into this country? How important were the various considerations -- the views of the Shah's American supporters, the potential impact on allies, public reaction?
- How important were outside Iran experts (Richard Cottam, e.g.) in facilitating communications and providing expertise?
- Costs of the revolution for the United States: What were U.S. assessments of the costs of the Shah's collapse -- in terms of the increased Soviet threat, the loss of intelligence assets, etc.?

Related and additional questions:

- In retrospect, what policies should the U.S. have followed after the revolution? Why, for instance, was there no decision to contact Khomeini directly? Should a new ambassador have been named immediately after the Iranians rebuffed the Cutler nomination?
- Did Washington have difficulty comprehending the new reality in Iran, and did that hamper efforts to devise a coherent policy?
- Why did Naas and Laingen never receive detailed policy guidance during this period?
- Why were American officials kept in Iran after the revolution, especially after the February 14 assault?
- What were the circumstances surrounding George Cave's mission to Tehran in October 1979? Why did the NSC staff not know about it?
- If the Shah had come directly to the U.S. instead of tarrying for several months, could demands for his extradition have been easier to control, and the ultimate result of his presence in the U.S. possibly have been avoided?
- What role did U.S. domestic politics play in this period? Did Congress enter into the picture in a meaningful way? (One obvious example appears to be Senate passage of the Javits Resolution.)
- Should the U.S. have consulted the Bazargan government in October on whether to admit the Shah to the U.S., rather than simply informing them of the decision, as Laingen was instructed to do?
- Was it a mistake for Brzezinski to meet with Bazargan in Algiers?

04:45 PM Conclusion of the day's session

5:00 PM *Informal reception (Wilson Center Boardroom)*

Tuesday, July 26

9:00 AM **Panel IV: The Hostage Crisis (I): From First Reactions to the Takeover, to the Tragedy at Desert One** (Nov 1979-Apr 1980)

Main topics:

- Contacts with the Khomeini group and the PGOI: What was the nature, extent and purpose of secret contacts with the Bazargan government? How frequent and significant were contacts with the radicals? How likely were they to produce results?
- Aid to the opposition: What steps were taken or contemplated for backing either domestic opposition elements (Madani, Qashqai, the Nozheh coup plotters), or émigré efforts to mount a coup?
- Hostage diplomacy: Beyond the extensive literature on diplomatic efforts to gain the hostages' release, are there significant channels or new facts that should be explored?
- The rescue mission: Are there important elements of this landmark event that have not fully been appreciated: for example, the background to the president's decision, the recruitment and use of Iranian assets, and the risks to the hostages?
- Afghanistan: What were the effects of the Soviet invasion on Iran and U.S. policy, including strategic policy and the Carter Doctrine?

Related and additional questions:

- What arguments took place regarding formulation of the Carter Doctrine?
- Was the U.S. prepared to consider tactical nuclear weapons to counter a Soviet invasion of Iran (as per media reports)?
- What consideration was given to using the invasion as a point of common cause with the PGOI, as was the case during the arms-for-hostages negotiations in the mid-1980s?
- Why did Carter make the decision on the rescue mission at the time he did? Whose counsel was decisive? How political was the decision? What other influences were significant?
- How and from where were Iranian intelligence assets recruited for the rescue mission? What was their fate?
- Did the rescue attempt create a real risk to the hostages' lives? Were they ever in danger of being killed?
- What contingency plans were made in the event Americans were put on trial or executed?
- How seriously was a second rescue attempt considered?

11:00 AM *Coffee Break*

11:15 AM **Panel V: The Hostage Crisis (II): The Road to a Resolution** (May 1980-Jan 1981)

Main topics:

- Negotiations for the hostages' release: Continuing efforts, options raised, interpretations given for Iran's stance.
- The Iran-Iraq War and its impact on the hostage crisis and on U.S. policy toward Iran.
- The regional context: What was the impact of the revolution on Iran's neighbors and on U.S. planning?
- The impact of the U.S. presidential election on both the situation inside Iran and on U.S. policy

Related and additional questions:

- Why did it take so long for Iran to begin true negotiations? Was it because Khomeini was waiting for a new Parliament to assume responsibility, as Sadiq al-Mahdi told David Newsom?
- What effect, if any, did U.S.-led sanctions have on the ultimate resolution of the crisis?
- Was an apology for 1953 ever given as a condition for the hostages' release?
- Did the Iran-Iraq War provide a window of opportunity for obtaining the hostages' release? Was there an initial U.S. "tilt" toward Iran? Conversely, was there discussion in any quarters of encouraging Iraq to exploit Iranian weakness?
- Is there new evidence pointing to secret contacts between the Reagan campaign and Iran?
- How should the Algerian role be assessed? Were there hopes for using the hostage negotiations as the basis for a future dialogue between the U.S. and Iran?

1:15 PM *Lunch (immediately outside the conference room)*

2:30 PM **Panel VI: Legacies and Lingering Questions**

4:00 PM *Conclusion of the workshop*