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Diplomatic Debacle: What Went Wrong in Iran?

MISSION TO IRAN. By William H. Sullivan. Norton. 296 pp. $14.95.
INSIDE THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION. By John D. Stempel. Indiana University Press. 348 pp. $17.50
ROOTS OF REVOLUTION: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran. By Nikki R. Keddie, with a section by Yann Richard. Yale University Press. 321 pp. Paperback, $5.95
AMERICA HELD HOSTAGE: The Secret Negotiations. By Pierre Salinger. Doubleday. 359 pp. $16.95
IRAN: The Untold Story. By Mohamed Heikal. Pantheon. U.S. publication forthcoming in February.
INSIDE AND OUT: Hostage to Iran, Hostage to Myself. By Richard Queen, with Patricia Hass. Putnam. 286 pp. $13.95
NO HIDING PLACE: The New York Times Inside Report on the Hostage Crisis. By Robert D. McFadden, Joseph B. Treaster, Maurice Carroll et al. Times Books. 341 pp. $15.50

By SCOTT ARMSTRONG

AS AMERICANS, we have learned to appreciate the delicate balances of a complicated world. We are often reminded that Europe, the Pacific, and the Persian Gulf are so frighteningly interdependent that no crisis can be dealt with in isolation. We understand, for example, how even a temporary disruption in the flow of oil to the United States or its allies can escalate rapidly into the most global, and the most final, of wars.

Intimidated by these new dimensions, we are ever more willing to cede to our government broad authority to conduct foreign policy. We accept that much of the information on which its deliberations are based, along with portions of the deliberations themselves, must remain secret for the time being.

Yet an Islamic revolution halfway around the world has uprooted our confidence in the government's ability to conduct foreign policy. Critics from both the right and the left have replaced Vietnam with Iran as the contemporary paradigm of American diplomatic arrogance, ignorance and impotence. The public has the right to demand more than a new president; it is time for an explanation of what went wrong in Iran.

We must halt the assembly line of conspiracy theories that continue to undermine our confidence in the way foreign policy is made. Did America covertly plot a military coup to prop up the shah before he fell? Did Jimmy Carter entice him to leave Iran with a secret deal, only to admit him to this country for medical treatment as a pretext for returning him to power? Did the Carter administration attempt to subvert the new revolutionary government during the summer of 1979 by seeding the clouds of tribal unrest in Baluchistan, Kurdistan and Azerbaijan? Did White House concern about the presidential election make the American negotiating posture so rigid that 52 Americans spent many months needlessly imprisoned? Was the plan for a rescue mission so seriously flawed that, had its failure not resulted in the deaths of eight servicemen (and uncounted secret agents), its success would have resulted in hundreds or thousands of deaths from the initial assault and its aftermath? And have the Carter and Reagan administrations provided secret aid to Iraq in its war with Iran?

Most such speculations are ridiculous, if not irresponsible. But some are so well-clothed in tailored facts that they must be authoritatively confirmed or discredited.

Surely we deserve reassurance that our government has learned some basic lessons from our experience in Iran. Who lost Iran is no longer the most pressing question. First we need to answer lingering questions about the epistemology of American national security and foreign policy. How does America go about perceiving change in the world? Who gathers the raw data? With whom is it shared? How is it analyzed? Who suggests—and who decides—what actions should be taken?

Although these seven books on the Iranian revolution and hostage negotiations raise more questions than they put to rest, each touches at least obliquely on more fundamental points. While they do not agree on many of the whys and wherefores, the authors seem to agree that:

- When the shah insisted on gorging his appetite for sophisticated U.S. military hardware in spite of a severe shortage in trained Iranian technicians, he had to increase drastically the number of Americans working in Iran. This in turn gave the Islamic leadership the palpable proof they needed to show their followers that the shah must be purged before Western values totally corrupted the society.
- By early 1977, nearly a year before Jimmy Carter toasted "the great leadership of the shah" that had made Iran "an island of stability," the shah and his regime were immensely unpopular with all segments of Iranian society except the most affluent reaches of the upper class and the military hierarchy.
- Although this was recognized by the lower and occasionally even the middle ranks of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, our ambassador, his ranking staff and official Washington all felt the shah's problems were manageable and failed to recognize that the shah's regime was crumbling until well after the shah and virtually every other Iranian had begun to come to grips with it.

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- Once the U.S. ambassador had granted the inevitability of the shah's decline, he was unable to convince Washington how completely identified the U.S. presence in Iran had become with the shah.
- Even after November 4, 1979, when our diplomats were taken hostage, the United States government was still unable to develop any direct access to the clerical elite in the new revolutionary government.
- During and after the revolution, everyone—the shah, the opposition, the Iranian generals, the United States—believed that the Iranian army would be crucial to any lasting hold on power, yet the United States was unable to utilize contacts cultivated over 20 years to help replace the discredited command structure with one acceptable to the new government.
- Zbigniew Brzezinski consistently alternated between incorrectly appraising events in Iran and recklessly recommending dramatic steps that would have accomplished nothing but to reintensify Iranian hatred of the United States.
- Jimmy Carter lurched from one plan to the next, apparently without appreciating that his every effort to bolster the shah seared itself into the consciousness of the Iranian people, reintensifying their hatred for the United States.

Even these few nodes of agreement vanish when one turns to precisely how or why the shah fell and whether he could have been saved by some prompt and firm American action. The spectrum of opinion reappears, but with some surprising patterns.

The Last Ambassador

WILLIAM H. SULLIVAN—who during the final two and a half years of the shah's reign presided over our embassy as America's last ambassador to Iran until his abrupt departure and resignation in April 1979—offers a remarkably candid assessment of his role in events in *Mission to Iran*. He presents a workmanlike portrait of his embassy, the shah (the most sensible and objective rendering I've read) and the procession of prime ministers designated by the shah to accommodate the opposition or hold the line against them. The most interesting details come from the closing sequences as Sullivan, unable to get approval from Washington to initiate official contact with the opposition and to facilitate meaningful contact between an outgoing and an incoming regime, is repeatedly frustrated in his attempts to find a common ground for negotiation.

Sullivan's greatest triumph may be the quiet and persuasive manner in which he presents the evidence that he was not as villainous or thickheaded as some critics have maintained. He describes his own early doubts that the shah's economic and military expansion programs would ever work, his staff's early contacts with members of the moderate opposition (at a time when most critics of the State Department have charged there were no such contacts) and his fierce bureaucratic battles with Washington. The book's most important observations, first published in a magazine article last year, seem to have been accepted by most other commentators, including those considered here, as the authoritative account of American indecisiveness in Iran.

In one respect, Sullivan misleads his readers. Despite his warning in the preface that the book is not strictly chronological, he uses the format of an ambassador's journal to describe the day-to-day developments of his tour of duty.

But at crucial points he casually slips away from the strict chronology of a journal and telescopes the elapsed time between his initial observations and his eventual follow-up action. This makes it seem as if he were registering with Washington as he went along his concerns about the stability of the shah's regime, his skepticism about its ambitious economic plans, and his objections to the shah's arms acquisitions lists. But, in fact, Sullivan did not share his private concerns and doubts with either Washington or his junior staff in Tehran until considerably later. Sullivan's blurred chronology reconciles his sometimes tardy actions with what in hindsight appears to be the obvious turning points in the revolution and entices the reader into accepting his point of view.

Sullivan suggests that he disguised his pessimism about the shah's future from his staff until the very end to avoid creating a panic that might accelerate the shah's downfall. This does not, however, account for Sullivan's extraordinarily vigorous campaign to sell the shah's weapons wishlist in Washington, nor does it explain complaints of junior officers who served under Sullivan that he did not forward to the State Department their earliest observations of growing Iranian dissatisfaction with the regime.

Generally, however, Sullivan's version of events is candid. At one point, Sullivan says he recommended that the president send a personal letter to the shah reiterating his support. This occurred when, or just before, the shah's troops massacred several hundred peaceful Iranian protestors at Jaleh Square—an action widely perceived to be the turning point in the revolution. Instead of writing the suggested letter, Carter apparently chose to telephone the shah instead. This well-publicized call was noted thereafter by the opposition as an example of United States support for bloodthirsty reaction.

As the already falling shah comes crashing to the ground, Sullivan describes with evident bitterness his inability to focus the attention of senior officials such as Secretary of State Cyrus Vance or National Security Adviser Brzezinski on the imminent succession of a revolutionary regime.

Sullivan never departs from his perspective as a participant. He devotes little discussion to the points of view either of those in the U.S. government who urged a move away from the shah even earlier (he tends to dismiss them as mindless human rights fanatics) or of his superiors in Washington. His soliloquies deprive the reader of the broader context in which American policy was being formulated. But when his personal frustration boils over, for example when his communiques home disappear into a bottomless, bureaucratic abyss, Sullivan reaches a vivid and dramatic tone absent from all the other books reviewed here except Pierre Salinger's.

Other participants will quarrel with certain of Sullivan's assertions, and I would love to dictate a list of still unanswered questions. But, in general, public officials would do well to emulate the clarity and detail of his account.

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The Lessons of Hindsight

JOHN STEMPEL, the deputy chief of the embassy political section under Sullivan, takes in *Inside the Iranian Revolution* a more analytical look at much of the same material. Although general readers may find it too long and detailed, it is written in a readable, almost chatty style. Stempel, like Sullivan, paints a somewhat different picture of the period than he did in his cable traffic from the embassy. But it is a picture based on good old-fashioned hindsight, tempered with a persuasive account of how U.S. diplomacy often misses the point.

For certain details, Stempel relies on his contacts as an embassy officer with Iranian officials and opposition members; for other details, particularly those dealing with stateside decision-making, he relies on public accounts. Although Stempel distinguishes among some of these in his occasional footnotes, readers may puzzle at the origins of certain crucial details.

In an apparent effort to respond to severe criticism that the embassy was totally out of touch with reality in Iran, Stempel goes into far greater detail than Sullivan on early contacts with the opposition. Stempel's sense of chronology is more scrupulous than Sullivan's, and he makes extensive use of the omniscient perspective and interconnections that hindsight makes possible. This can again leave the reader with the impression that the embassy was considerably more prescient than its actions at the time would indicate.

Stempel provides the most comprehensive and organized rendering of events from April 1977 to the release of the hostages, almost four years later. His reflections on the foreign policy establishment's failure to resolve the Iranian crisis, though not fully persuasive, will make this book useful to students of the subject for years to come.

Both Sullivan and Stempel are critical of the effects of the Carter human rights policy. Sullivan acknowledges the CIA's extensive assistance to SAVAK but denies any "offical United States complicity" in SAVAK's brutality. Stempel laments that this relationship, which had grown in response to "the common threat of the Soviet Union," declined as a result of these human rights concerns and that "the discreet tempering presence of U.S. personnel working closely with [SAVAK] was not there to press for restrained alternatives to the brutal tortures inflicted upon many captured terrorists." Stempel also says SAVAK and the intelligence agencies of two other countries (neither of which was the United States) encouraged the shah to have the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini assassinated.

Other matters touched upon by both are left unresolved. For example, Stempel says that U.S. officials were not aware of the shah's cancer until October 1978 when they learned of it from French intelligence. Sullivan fudges when they first knew the shah was ill and when they first knew he had cancer, but points out that failure to learn of it until late in the game left the shah's often listless behavior unexplained.

Yet Richard Helms, who had served as director of the CIA and ambassador to Iran, learned about the cancer and its debilitating treatment during his visits there in the first half of 1978 (according to Cynthia Helms' book, *An Ambassador's Wife in Iran*). And intelligence officials here acknowledge that the CIA learned of the cancer much earlier—certainly before 1978. It is not unheard of for the CIA to fail to tell an ambassador such vital information, but it is unlikely that they would know of it and not make use of Sullivan's frequent visits with the shah for feedback on his mannerisms and behavior. Surely someone would have alerted Sullivan to watch for certain symptoms. If not, why not?

Historical Context

NIKKI KEDDIE's *Roots of Revolution* is essentially an economic history of Iran. Its discussion of the U.S. reaction to the revolution and the hostage negotiations is safe, condensed, readable and almost wholly derived from previously published accounts, much of it from the exceptional work of *Le Monde's* Eric Rouleau.

The book's strong suit is the authority with which a scholar of contemporary Iran can speak about the history of clerical and dissident ferment up to the point of the revolution. The book's real gem is a sturdy discussion of contemporary political Shiite Islam, written by Yann Richard, which puts into immediate perspective much of what we have read and will read elsewhere.

At several points, Keddie fails to give any benefit of doubt to American players in the final days of the shah. For example, in discussing Sullivan's frustrated attempts to get permission from Washington to meet with the opposition, Keddie concludes that Sullivan would have failed anyway to moderate the effects of the new regime. But Sullivan's purpose at the time—as he espoused it in Tehran and to Washington—was simply to open a line of official communication with the Khomeini camp.

Overall Keddie has managed, without a loss of scholarship, to bring to life much of what we puzzled over each evening as we watched angry young men, their faces contorted in hatred of America, the Great Satan. If one has only limited time to gain an appreciation of the revolutionary force of Islam in Iran, it should be spent here.

Negotiations

Based on his remarkable television reporting, first broadcast on the evening of the hostage's return, Pierre Salinger's *America Held Hostage* is an entertaining, neatly packaged account of the Carter administration's attempts to negotiate the release of the hostages.

Regrettably Salinger spends too much time answering the classic question: What if Abraham Lincoln's doctor's dog had bitten its master's patient during the afternoon of April 14, 1865 . . . ? So, although the most readable of the seven, Salinger's book centers far too much on the the thin, and ultimately abandoned, negotiating strand of two Paris-based middlemen, one an Argentine entrepreneur and the other a leftist lawyer, who try to sustain a line of communications with the most moderate elements of the Khomeini regime in Iran.

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But this flaw, while fatal to the book's historical balance, does nothing to reduce Salinger's interesting use of the information uniquely available to him. The mere fact that the White House had no better line of communication than two such obscure but dedicated souls is a testament simultaneously to the difficulty of the negotiations and the enduring American ignorance of Iranian power politics. An important and sympathetic portrait of Hamilton Jordan emerges, no doubt partially from Jordan's own account, and through it an insight into the Carter administration's isolation and desperation.

Although Salinger fails to touch on certain negotiating sequences at all and often misses the context in which they are occurring, he does a very credible job with the ultimately successful negotiations begun under German auspices. Overall, the book is fast paced and well written, interrupted only by Salinger's regular interjections of his own rather trivial contacts with the principals.

Embassy Spy?

MOHAMED HEIKAL, the prominent Egyptian journalist, former Nasser confidant and one-time Egyptian foreign minister, has written his own intriguing, if chaotic, account of events behind the scenes. As much a participant as a journalist, Heikal brings a Middle Eastern politician's firm grasp of the intricacies of Islam into a mixture of fact and interpretation that is intermittently authoritative and excessively casual. Heikal captures the wider regional political context of the Persian Gulf, Southwest Asia and the Horn of Africa better than any of the other books reviewed here.

Heikal offers up the most astounding new information with the slimmest of sourcing. Early in the book, he says that the shah's secret police, SAVAK, had a non-Iranian, non-American spy planted inside the American embassy. This spy was able, according to Heikal, to latch onto copies of top secret cables between Washington and Tehran which told the shah's government of virtually every move—or non-move—of the U.S. government.

When the shah fell, General Nematollah Nassiri, the head of SAVAK, was arrested and tortured. In an effort to save his life, Nassiri revealed the existence and the identity of this spy inside the U.S. embassy. Rather than seize and execute the spy, the new revolutionary government extended his tenure and asked him to continue on behalf of the new government.

The new arrangement did not last long, but before departing for France, the informant passed on crucial cables. At least one told the new government that the United States was planning to admit the shah before there was even a pretext of illness. Others provided details of U.S. attempts to destabilize the revolutionary government by providing aid to rebels in Baluchistan, Kurdistan and Azerbaijan. It was this information, Heikal implies, which led the revolutionary government to interpret the shah's arrival in New York as the first step in a plan to overthrow the new regime. It was on the basis of these secret documents that Khomeini charged the United States with meddling in Iranian affairs. And it was these documents that provided the rationale for taking over the U.S. embassy and holding its occupants hostage.

If Heikal's account is true, the entire equation of responsibility for the hostage crisis changes and makes a liar out of Jimmy Carter and every other administration spokesman who has claimed the attack on our embassy was unprovoked. A less prominent journalist would be dismissed out of hand for repeating such a sensitive and sensational tale without nailing down the details or providing specific attribution. But Heikal has a track record for gaining access to the right people and returning with the seed of an important story that others missed.

Hostages

RICHARD QUEEN's book is the least ambitious effort of the group. In his dry, homespun manner, Queen helps the reader share the dull, repetitive routines of hostage life. Obviously hamstrung by his sensitivity to the longer captivity of the colleagues he left when he was released for medical reasons, Queen's account is more pedestrian than anyone might expect.

Yet Queen's book brings home for even the most cynical of observers the terrifying frustration and rage that the hostages must have felt believing that the world was ignoring their plight for so long. The reader absorbs, bit by bit, page by page, months of tedious and fruitless waiting for some action by the United States or her traditional allies to seek their freedom.

From his narrow perspective as a junior diplomat just arrived in Iran, Queen demonstrates the reciprocal ignorance of U.S. diplomats toward a revolution they could not comprehend and of Iranian militants who saw in every American another embodiment of the Great Satan which sustained their despised shah and nurtured his hated SAVAK. Queen's humanity comes through most clearly as he describes the comparative compassion and decency of Akbar, the most humane of the guards.

Along the soup to nuts continuum of the Iran book banquet table, *The New York Times* has contributed an indigestible after-dinner mint, a sort of Chiclet in the junk food genre of the instant book. (A far better example of the genre is the *Los Angeles Times*' earlier entry — Doyle McManus' *Free At Last!*, which covers the same ground, often with the same quotes from hostages, much more coherently.)

The first section of *No Hiding Place* is a reprint of *The Times*' articles on the hostage's lives in captivity, which was published two weeks after their return. Organized by topic rather than chronologically, its repetitions of silly detail and sophomoric reflections on man's ignoble nature make it nearly as tedious as Queen's book.

The second part of the book, with a somewhat lower ratio of obvious space filler to information, is a reprint of the May 17, 1981 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. With two exceptions—well crafted and informative articles by Terence Smith and Drew Middleton—it is devoid of information that was even new or meaningful when it first appeared.

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Missing Perspectives

THESE BOOKS suggest that the eyes and ears of the U.S. foreign policy apparatus work about as well or better than we have any right to expect. Lower-level personnel seem to make appropriate observations—provided, of course, that they are prepared to translate the meaning of events from one culture to another. For example, with rare exception (the insights of Keddie and *The New York Times'* Smith providing them), these seven accounts depict a foreign policy bureaucracy without any appreciation for the intricacies of nonviolent revolutionary activity, regardless of the culture. American observers, in hindsight, give great credit to the Islamic opposition for exercising remarkable subtlety and restraint in the period just before the shah's departure from Iran. But anyone who watched antiwar and civil rights protests in America and their nonviolent confrontations with armed authorities should have recognized the same tactics when they were used to sway public opinion in Iran. Whether or not Iranian student revolutionaries honed their organizing skills in the States is beside the point. For whatever reason, U.S. diplomats failed to understand the catalytic effect the Islamic opposition's strategy would have on the Iranian people.

The evidence in these books suggest that the sheer size of the American foreign policy bureaucracy precludes lower-level officers from direct contact with their superiors and with the decision-makers back in Washington. But, more significantly, the rapid growth of an American presence in Iran created a backlash of resentment against American personnel that forced them to reduce their contact with the populace.

This increased remoteness, coupled with a tendency to perceive only what they were seeking and little more, clouded judgment. In the growing chaos of the revolution, our diplomats were looking for signs of someone in control, an authority with whom they could negotiate. They equated their inability to find a mechanism of control with a lack of one.

American journalists were in more direct touch with the broader constituency of the Iranian opposition and became the best source of information available to U.S. diplomats. But they too were looking for a structure that was not there. Few on the scene were willing to accept things as they came. Few realized therefore that Khomeini intended much of the chaos and disorder that ensued. It was a revolutionary purge of precisely those Western processes that had corrupted Iranian culture.

Diplomats are often willing to leave much of their chore to others. For example, in the shah's waning days General Robert "Dutch" Huyser, the deputy commander of U.S. forces in Europe, arrived in Tehran ostensibly to hold together the Iranian military. There have since been many journalistic suggestions that Huyser carried, but was unable to implement, a more elaborate brief for action. Because these accounts give no additional details about Huyser's activities, they ultimately fail either to put to rest or confirm rumors of secret military coup plots. All this seems to be deemed irrelevant to the diplomatic task. Ironically, it was over precisely the opposite point that General Alexander Haig, Huyser's boss, resigned his command of NATO. Huyser, Haig thought, was not the man to send on diplomatic business.

Other important diplomatic details never get fleshed out, again apparently because diplomats do not regard it as their responsibility to respond for other bureaucracies. America's repeated messages of encouragement to the shah—phone calls by Carter and Brzezinksi, visits by American officials, and Rosalynn Carter's strongly worded and mysterious letter to the Empress Farah—were later used against the United States by the revolution as incitements to massive violence, but they are mentioned only in passing in these books. The sudden emergence of the shah's oldest friend and most trusted compatriot, General Hossein Fardust, formerly the deputy director of SAVAK, as the director of Khomeini's revolutionary equivalent, SAVAMA, is left unexplained, although Stempel speculates that Fardust cooperated "with the religious leadership for the good of the country" when he saw an ailing shah losing his grasp.

A major problem—only alluded to in these seven books—is that the security constraints imposed to protect sensitive information end up preventing meaningful internal debate or analysis. Regulations meant to shield secret sources can instead stifle debates that could better shield whole societies. The most knowledgeable analysts are often at levels too low or locations too remote to hear about the latest Washington analysis or to see the important back channels of information.

Jimmy Carter's presidency is popularly perceived as discredited by events in Iran. But it is time to find out precisely how fair that assessment is. The causes may lie less with Carter and Brzezinski than with some of the most deeply ingrained bureaucratic processes of national security and foreign policy.

These seven books stop short of accounting for the top level of decision makers. But piecing things together, one begins to suspect that by the time things reach the top the common denominators for making bad decisions are

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seemingly minor distortions of information, skewed emphasis and a dearth of detail. But testing this hypothesis beyond the ambassadorial level requires a view from the top down, recreating events as they appeared to the principal participants.

To date, the burgeoning library of Iran profiles sheds barely a glimmer of new light on the actions of the principals in the unfolding drama—the shah, Khomeini, Carter, Brzezinski, Vance, Harold Brown, Stansfield Turner, Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, the late Ayatollah Behesti. The shah's autobiography, published last year, was pathetically inadequate, noted primarily for being in character with the man's legendary and graceless inability to understand what he had done to his country.

Although none of these seven books is prepared to defend either the analysis or decisions of Jimmy Carter and his closest associates, none presents substantial enough evidence to safely discard their points of view. If we ever have the details that these missing perspectives could provide, much in these books would become obsolete.

When Carter, Brzezinski and others at the top sit down to explain to an entire country why it had to assume such precarious and humiliating postures from November 1979 until January 1981, they will have an opportunity—and an obligation—to go beyond the surface answers, to address more than just the truth, but to take us step by step through the process to explain what they knew and when they knew it. Only after such a thorough autopsy can we begin to diagnose the failures of successive administrations to understand the Third World. □

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