George Lenczowski

IRAN: THE AWFUL TRUTH

Behind the Shah's fall and the Mullah's rise.

Why did the Shah fall? The answer is by no means clear. Certainly there was no great mystery as to the identity of the forces opposed to his regime. They embraced Islamic groups, the bazaar merchants, Mossadegh-type liberals, and the radical Left. And despite the fierceness of their opposition, the Shah appeared to exercise effective control. With a large army, a ubiquitous secret police, and plentiful oil-generated funds, he seemed well equipped to thwart any attempt to upset his rule. Yet notwithstanding its apparent strength, the royal regime collapsed less than 12 months after the beginning of serious riots in 1978.

One explanation has by now achieved the status of popular myth: that the overthrow of the Iranian monarchy was the inevitable consequence of the Shah's "oppressive" rule. Excesses of the secret police (SAVAK) and rampant corruption are said to have constituted the two essential ingredients of oppression. Some commentators who adopt this view have even gone so far as to deny the obvious: that Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian mullahs are a reactionary group opposed to modernization and progress. The religious leaders' wrath, it is maintained, was merely directed against the terrible cruelty of the regime.

Such arguments cannot survive critical scrutiny. It is true that the Shah's regime was authoritarian, that supreme power rested in his hands, and that the secret police actively engaged in suppressing the opposition. Yet at the same time, Iranians who abstained from political activity were free to practice the religion of their choice, to engage in trade, industry, and profession, to travel and study abroad, to dress as their taste dictated, to choose the forms of entertainment that suited them, and—broadly—to conduct their social and sexual lives according to their individual preferences. Mail with foreign countries (even if subjected to spot-checks) functioned regularly and without delays, contacts with foreigners could be freely maintained, artistic expression (provided it kept clear of politics) was unimpeded—sometimes even boldly avant-garde—and foreign correspondents enjoyed numerous opportunities to ask the Shah embarrassing questions (some of a truly insulting nature), and freedom of reporting. No foreign newspaper was ever threatened with arrest and imprisonment for the contents of his dispatches.

Compared with most of its neighbors, the Shah's Iran was freer than either the socialist military dictatorships or the conservative religious monarchies. To arrive in Teheran from one of the ideologically propelled Arab "socialist" countries was to escape from a stifling climate of suspicion, an absence of foreign press and periodicals on the newsstands, and the poverty of local four-page newspapers carrying mostly the speeches of the "exalted leader of the revolution," official announcements, and extraordinarily long sports sections. Similarly, departure from such countries often requires obtaining an exit visa, which, though mostly an annoyance, makes a visitor feel a virtual prisoner of the country he is visiting.

By the same token, the conservative religious monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula, though much freer than the socialist dictatorships, impose many restrictions—social, cultural, and religious—on their own subjects and foreigners alike. Executions for adultery, deportations for consensual acts deemed incompatible with religious mores, bans on non-Islamic houses of worship—all testify to the authorities' penetration of nonpolitical areas of life. Moreover, these social restrictions tend to accentuate class cleavages and double standards of morality: The wealthy can always escape local limitations by going abroad and seeking entertainment in Paris, London, Cannes, or Las Vegas.

By limiting its control to the political sphere only, the Shah's regime was not totalitarian. The Shah justified his authoritarianism by the two considerations of security and development. Discovery, in 1954, of a major Soviet espionage ring involving 60 army officers (60 of whom were of colonel rank) underscored the need for a well-organized security apparatus, although there is no doubt that as time went on it transcended its anti-espionage function. As for development, the Shah was in a hurry. Somewhat unrealistically he tried to impose upon his people a pace of industrialization which exceeded their capacity and tolerance. This was linked with various acts of reform, especially in the land sector. To carry out this forced program, he felt he needed strong powers undiluted by the procedural and substantive delays of democratic process.

Beyond these official rationalizations, there were other reasons for the concentration of power in his hands. He clearly enjoyed the reality of power and would not have been satisfied with a nominal position as head of state. "I will behave like the King of Sweden," he was reported to have said, "when my people will behave like the Swedes." In this respect, of course, there was a long way to go. The Shah's experiments with democracy in the 1940s and 1950s (partly imposed by circumstances)
had left him with a bitter taste; he did not intend to return to the turmoil of the Mossadegh era.

There is no doubt, too, that under the Shah corruption was practiced on a major scale. But in this respect, Iran was and is not an exception. Since antiquity the Middle East has had a reputation as an area where the power of money—symbolized by the Phoenician god Mammon—is tremendous. (Philip of Macedon, Alexander's father, was reported to have said, "There is no wall that a donkey loaded with gold could not climb over.") The pattern of corruption is ubiquitous around the Persian Gulf—hardly surprising since there is much money to be spent and many government contracts to be secured. The Middle East today, with its billions of oil dollars, provides mind-boggling opportunities for the classic triangle composed of a foreign entrepreneur, who provides expert organization and technology, a local middleman, and a ruling minister or prince, who by the weight of his name and influence ensures the success of the enterprise. Commission fees running into the tens of millions of dollars have been secured on government contracts throughout the Gulf area. On a per capita basis, Iran was not the wealthiest of the oil-rich states, hence perhaps not the most corrupt.

As for the attitude of the Shia religious establishment towards modernization, the matter has often been obfuscated by trivia. Naturally, even a poorly educated, simple mullah enjoys having a telephone, running water, electricity, etc. as occurs more and more frequently since the revolution—his own automobile. But while he appreciates the products of Western techniques, he neither understands nor accepts the intricate process by which they are produced. This process calls for an emphasis on secular education, science, freedom of inquiry, work habits, and a hierarchical social structure which does not square with the mullahs' concept of the right social and moral order and threatens to whittle down their authority among the populace. The Pahlavis were reformers, modernizers, and, in certain ways, Westernizers—and invariably their first major clashes were with the Islamic establishment. Indeed, Khomeini's violent opposition had been triggered back in the early 1960s by the Shah's land reform, which greatly reduced the power of the feudalists and their religious allies.

But if the "oppressive" nature of the Shah's regime was not the primary cause of the revolution, what was? What gave the protest movement its special and unprecedented intensity, and ultimately led to its success? A tentative answer is suggested by a perceptive remark once made about the Russian revolution: that it occurred not because of the internal forces weakening the Czarist empire were new in 1917, but because of their untimely convergence with Russia's military defeats in World War I.

By the time of the upheaval, the Shah had antagonized the already hostile religious leadership with an untimely cut in government subsidies; he had irritated large segments of the intelligentsia with seemingly excessive arms purchases; he had restrained the traditional bazaar merchants from receiving their due share of lucrative government contracts; he had failed to organize an effective pro-government party; and he had done little to counter the massive migration of people from the countryside to the slum areas in big cities. His $70 billion development plan first produced rampant inflation and then a slight but painful recession in 1976-1977. Many Iranians had grown increasingly resentful of the corruption of SAVAK (perhaps felt more acutely than its repressive methods), of conspicuous consumption by the upper and nouveau riche classes, and of the presence of great numbers of privileged foreigners serving in various technical and managerial capacities. All the while the Shah remained distant from the people and surrounded by subservient advisors—in contrast to the earlier period of his reign when he had benefited from the prudent advice of elder statesmen who had already served his father and steered Iran successfully through the perils of World War II. The concept of Achaemenian kingship which he revived in the 1970s proved a double-edged sword: On the one hand it conformed to ancient Iranian traditions and reinforced royal legitimacy; on the other, it forcefully propagated the semi-deification of the king in a time of growing worldwide populist trends. Except for the intelligent counsel of Empress Farah, an ex-nouveau fiche, the Shah found himself increasingly lonely at his summit of power.

But if increasingly isolated at home, the Shah faced hostility and abandonment abroad. The French, though insisting when granting asylum to Khomeini (following his long exile in Iraq) that the Ayatollah refrain from political activity, did not object when he made his headquarters near Paris, center of violent revolutionary propaganda. Their attitude may have been based on a pessimistic evaluation of the Shah's position—an evaluation that President Giscard d'Estaing reportedly conveyed to President Carter at the Guadeloupe meeting in January 1979. The Soviet Union, of course, had long shown a consistent interest in destabilizing Iran, targeting its attacks on the Shah as the main defender of Iran's independence and alliance with the United States. Over the years, direct Soviet intervention and threats alternated with indirect methods, such as support of the Tudeh (Communist) Party. (In the 1950s a series of Soviet broadcasts entitled "Behind the Walls of Saadabad" had aimed to discredit the Shah, and Iranian Communists had lent their support to Mossadegh's National Front.) Although persistent, the Soviets were also flexible: After failing to dissuade the Shah from signing the Baghdad Pact, Moscow reverted to a policy of aid-and-trade, building a steel complex in Isfahan and constructing, jointly with the Iranians, a pipeline linking Iran with the Soviet Union. In 1977, Soviet-Iranian relations could be described as "correct.

As the revolutionary turmoil started shaking Iran in 1978, Soviet radio stations began beaming information increasingly critical of the Shah's regime. Iranian student groups at home and abroad openly cooperated with Communist organizations in...
violence-studded demonstrations against the Shah. Oil workers, among whom Communists traditionally wielded considerable though not exclusive influence, went on a prolonged strike. On November 19, 1978, Brezhnev publicly warned the United States not to interfere, thereby signifying Soviet interest in the continuation of Iran's internal strife.

American newspapers carried a number of commentaries arguing that the Soviet Union really wished to see the Shah continue in power, both because it had normalized relations with him and because it feared instability on its southern periphery and the harmful effect the Islamic resurgence in Iran might have on its own Central Asian populations. There is no doubt that the tumult in Iran posed the risk of certain inconveniences to the Soviets. Gas deliveries to Russia were, in fact, temporarily disrupted; and one cannot reject out of hand the possible impact of events in Iran on Soviet Moslems. But these disadvantages must be weighed against the fundamental gains of detaching Iran from the United States, disrupting Iran's essentially capitalist economy, stirring up the working classes against both the Shah and his religious successors, and creating a disarray from which Iranian Communists could derive handsome benefits. Moreover, those who detected a superior organizational skill and a surprisingly effective inner communications system in Khomeini's camp had good reason to wonder whether such efficiency was not due to the seasoned experience of Communist elements who cooperated with or infiltrated Khomeini's ranks. That this cooperation may today be accepted as fact rather than speculation has been attested by the radical Left's complaint that Khomeini, ungrateful for their contribution to victory, has failed to include their representatives in the revolutionary cabinet.

The United States also played an important role in bringing down the Shah. This was not, of course, a premeditated policy, contrary to the theories voiced by some exiled and disgruntled Iranians. There was no valid reason why Washington should try to weaken, discredit, or help to overthrow an ally who served as a major pillar of the American-sponsored security system in the area. Rather, the United States failed to anticipate and understand the repercussions that certain of its official actions were likely to produce.

First and foremost in this respect was President Carter's human-rights crusade. While nobly motivated, in practice this policy was bound to encounter many pitfalls. To make it a central theme of U.S. foreign policy (as it appeared to be, judging from various official pronouncements) posed serious questions. Had such a policy been conducted in World War II, a wartime alliance between Stalin's Russia and the United States aimed at crushing Nazi Germany would not have been possible. In the 1970s, the human-rights campaign lacked consistency and proved harmful to U.S. allies who did not practice democracy at home. It was a fact of Iranian political life that its participants—whether pro- or anti-government—were very alert to any signs emanating from Washington (or, in an earlier era, London). The Shah, true enough, desired to implement his own gradual program of reforms in order to pave the way for a smooth transition to the future reign of his son, Crown Prince Reza. But the pace and scope of this program were to be conditioned by Iran's traditions and circumstances. What happened after 1977 was that the Shah experienced subtle or not-so-subtle pressures from Washington to hasten liberalization, and the rebellious opposition, aware of this psychological skirmishing, was ready to take its cue from any act or gesture that appeared praiseworthy to its demands and objectives. In August and September 1978, the Shah introduced a multi-party system, abolished press censorship, repeatedly released political prisoners, and promptly granted excessive wage increases. These acts formed the links in a chain of concessions which ultimately undermined his authority.

Apart from this basic American policy, and notwithstanding repeated assurances of support, President Carter took three other actions which helped to speed the Shah's collapse. First, in December 1978, he commissioned former Undersecretary of State George Ball to prepare a report on Iran for the White House. Ball, a statesman noted for his courage and vision, was certainly not motivated by any hostility to the Shah. According to available information (fragmentary at best, since his report remained confidential), he was initially seeking a practical way to transform the Shah's absolute rule into a constitutional one, and thus save the monarchy while ensuring a peaceful transition to a new order. In a subsequent interview granted to the Paris-based Politique Internationale (No. 4, Summer 1979), Ball defined his task in somewhat stronger terms: Considering that the Shah's position had deteriorated in an "irreversible way," he centered his efforts on devising a method for "a transfer of power into more responsible hands." It is unclear how much of the report's substance had become known to the Shah. In evaluating the report's effect—due to its excessive publicity—much depends on whether Ball's view of the "irreversible" nature of the Shah's weakened position was correct. If so, his report could not have been a real factor in the demise of the regime. If not, it was bound further to undermine the Shah's morale and his will to resist.

Second, the President sent NATO Deputy Commander General Robert Huyser to Teheran with the purpose of advising the Iranian military against a coup d'etat. Washington's official explanation was that it hoped to avert a civil war. Yet what advantage was to be expected from the monarchy's capitulation to the rebel forces without a fight? There was an unconfirmed theory floating in Western capitals that Giscard d'Estaing's pessimistic estimate of the situation conveyed to President Carter at Guadeloupe had raised the specter of Soviet intervention if the American-adviced Iranian army resorted to a coup. If this theory is correct, it meant that the administration acted out of fear of provoking Moscow. Whether the Soviets would have intervened, considering their stake in detente and SALT II, remains a matter of speculation.

The third American action—openly acknowledged by Secretary Vance—was to advise the Shah to leave temporarily for the sake of Iran's stability. The White House apparently assumed that with the Shah gone some sort of normalcy would return to Iran, whether by a complete rebel victory or by some grand reconciliation between the opposing forces. Even without the benefit of hindsight, one could question the wisdom of such expectations at the time the advice was offered.

There is no doubt that the Iranian revolution has had a major impact on the political and strategic situation in the Middle East. Iran itself is now threatened by the possibility of disintegration as a state, with Kurds, Baluchis, Turkmens, and Arabs of the oil-rich province of Khuzistan pressing demands for autonomy or separation. The army, crippled by desertions and purges, has left the borders of Iran virtually undefended. The revolution has signalled the resurgence of politically motivated Islam in the broad region stretching from Pakistan.
to Libya, reinforcing the zeal of the Shia Moslems, earlier identified with revolutionary unrest in such countries as Lebanon and Iraq. Oil has become subject to further political manipulation. Denial of exports to Israel and limits on production have introduced new uncertainties on the world energy scene. Khomeini has repudiated the Shah’s neutrality toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, expelling Israel’s mission from Teheran and assuring its replacement by an office of the PLO. The collective security structure built with such verve in the Northern Tier and expressed by CENTO has come to an end. Similarly, a major force for stability has been removed from the Persian Gulf, leaving the distinct possibility that the Aden-supported guerrilla movement in Oman might be revived. And last but not least, American credibility in the Middle East, and especially in the Arabian Peninsula, is now exposed to a severe strain.

The future does not look very encouraging. Iran has recently been racked by new violence, this time in the form of street fighting between rival religious and leftist groups. Khomeini’s regime has curtailed civic freedoms and established a virtual dictatorship, creating a backlash among liberal as well as politically noncommitted Iranians against the imposition of a theocratic order. Communists have identified themselves with this discontent and, because of their superior organizing skills, may well emerge as the leading component of the new protest movement. In fact, probably only the Communists and the army—if reconstructed—have the ability to challenge Khomeini’s rule. Undoubtedly aware of the military’s potential power, Khomeini has done nothing to restore a minimum level of efficiency to the armed forces. Should the ethnic-regional movements or a strong Communist upsurge compel him to agree to rebuild the army, he may find himself facing a new and powerful threat to his survival.

Kenneth L. Adelman

THE SEVEN LESSONS OF SALT

With or without the treaty, America may or may not be defended.

SALT is stultifying stuff. Seldom has such a critical issue induced such public somnolence. Yet historical events often generate “lessons” more captivating than the episodes themselves. Though dangerously distant from past realities—as Ernest May shows*—such lessons prove useful to policymakers. If lucky, SALT II will soon take its rightful place beside “Munich,” “Vietnam,” and “Watergate”—whether ratified by the Senate or not. Here presented are the “Seven Lessons of SALT.”

1. U.S. Strategic Might Is Dwindling Mightily. During the Foreign Relations Committee hearings, Senator Jacob Javits pressed witnesses as to how it happened that America “goofed off” (his words) for 15 years in the strategic realm. How indeed. Partly because frazzled senators (like Javits) never gave the matter any thought, until the treaty’s submission demanded that they do so.

Our representatives and reporters dozed, lulling the public on security concerns. SALT II—for all its innumerable failings—has awakened Americans from their torpor to the coming strategic inferiority. History may judge the treaty’s prime contribution as setting into motion pressures which, over time, redressed the strategic imbalance (regardless of ratification). Perhaps unwittingly, Secretary Vance may have started the ball rolling; time after time throughout the hearings he promoted SALT II first because it “will permit, and in fact aid, the necessary modernization of our strategic forces” and only second because it “will slow the momentum of Soviet strategic programs.”

2. Defense Efforts Should Be Augmented Across-the-Board. It is no coincidence that senators, boning up on defense because of the pending SALT rally, recently voted $5-42 for 5 percent real defense spending increases in the next two years’ budgets—something inconceivable before the SALT debate and a sharp rebuff to the administration (keen to stick with 3 percent). Nor is it a coincidence that the Senate passed $3 billion more for defense this year (fiscal 1980) than the House—a startling turnabout since my Pentagon days and earlier, when the House was more hawkish.

It’s nothing new that the U.S. is falling behind the Soviet Union militarily. This has been happening for years. What’s new is that the U.S. is now seen as falling behind militarily. Soviet military expenditures have become 25-45 percent greater than ours, and the Russians now spend three times more on strategic arms and one-third more on general purpose forces than we do. And there’s no relief in sight. Moscow’s military infrastructure, upon


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