

THE PRESIDENT, THE SHAH AND THE IRONIES OF IRAN

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Persia, with its volatile mixture of peoples, has been governed by authoritarian rulers for more than 2500 years. Dominant families and their councils have ruled in the harsh Persian manner—accepting tribute and the privileges of rank—since the times of Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes. The empire has persevered through centuries of conquest, revolt, accommodation and religious turmoil. Not until the turn of this century did some form of constitutional government come to the kingdom; and only in 1925 when the governing assembly elected Reza Kahn Pahlavi Shah of Persia and granted right of succession to his heirs, did true reform and modernization begin. In 1941, when the old Shah abdicated, his son, the European educated Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, announced his intention of ruling Iran as a constitutional monarchy with transition to a democratic regime. Except for a very brief interval in 1950 when he fled to Rome during Prime Minister Mossadegh's tempestuous attempt at nationalization, the Shah remained in power until the recent upheaval.

For almost 40 years as America's closest ally in the Middle East, the Shah had been a force for diplomacy and a pillar of stability in a turbulent region. In spite of his firm and often oppressive rule, which was entirely in keeping with Iranian tradition and the necessities of its society, the Shah was a dedicated reformer determined to modernize and industrialize his nation in the image of and as a major partner of the West. He reformed the parliament and decentralized the government. He revitalized the economy. He instituted vast programs of agrarian reform that distributed lands to the farmers. He broadened women's rights. He sent hundreds of thousands of students to foreign countries on government scholarships. His attempts to raise the standard of living met opposition, not from those who wanted more democracy, but from those being dispossessed by change: the feudal landholders, the religious mullahs deprived of privilege, the functionaries of the old order, the communist radicals wanting to impose their own power structure, and many of the young students and intellectuals whom he had educated at home and abroad at government expense. Throughout it all, even well into the 1970s, as more unrest developed and criticism of the Shah's "ruthless" control became more open, the Shah remained a leader whom eight American Presidents of both parties had endorsed unreservedly. In late 1977, at the end of his first year in office, President Carter, in Washington and in Teheran, welcomed and embraced the Shah as a true friend and ally of the United States.

The debacle of the Iranian situation and its amateurish handling by the Carter administration has been beset with irony. After initially embracing the Shah, Carter, piously mouthing his platitudinous devotion to Human Rights, turned his back on Iran

during a time of increasing rioting and religiously inspired political dissent. In 1978, his failure to support a long-time ally gave encouragement to the rebels and set in motion the forces that eventually undermined the Shah's authority and precipitated the political chaos that sent the Shah packing. Ironically, the new regime, which had bitterly complained of the Shah's oppression, immediately imposed its own control in the traditional manner. The fanatic Khomeini and his vengeful followers, with little regard for human rights, instituted their own purges, imprisonments, persecutions and executions. After January 1979, Carter, in his vacillation and his fear of antagonizing the new Iranian regime, ultimately denied asylum in this country to the deposed Shah.

President Carter's popularity in the polls dropped precipitously during 1979; he was perceived at home and by most of our allies abroad as a weak and ineffective leader. By October, with confidence in his administration at its lowest point, he allowed the Shah to enter the country for medical treatment. Shortly afterward, the militant student rebels in Teheran responded by seizing the American Embassy, kidnapping American personnel, and demanding as ransom the return of the Shah and his fortunes.

But suddenly, after the November 4 takeover, a new, tough and decisive Carter emerged to deal with the hostage crisis. He would not be intimidated. He called for economic sanctions, a refusal to buy Iranian oil, deportation of Iranian students and diplomats. He would not rule out severe military reprisal. His firm and dramatic response regained for him the nation's confidence. Just as suddenly, his popularity soared in public opinion polls. It was the boost needed to create momentum and launch him into a primary campaign for reelection.

Now almost five months have elapsed since the embassy was seized. Carter has hedged on or abandoned most of his stern pronouncements. No economic sanctions have been imposed; we are buying more Iranian oil than ever; only a handful of Iranian students and diplomats have gone home; 2000 new Iranian students have been welcomed into the country; thousands of other Iranians have come as businessmen and tourists. The embassy is still occupied by the militants; the hostages have not been released. Yet, ironically, again, Carter is still winning Democratic primaries. But the nation's confidence in Carter is disappearing. The latest Harris poll indicates that the majority of people no longer support him; the momentum generated by the Iranian crisis is petering out.

We don't usually agree with anything written by ultra liberal columnist, Tom Wicker, but his recent evaluation of Jimmy Carter says it all. "An incumbent president with a record of ineptitude unmatched since Warren G. Harding, and whose campaign is based on foreign policy crises largely of his own making." It may yet prove to be the final irony if the Iranian crisis, which has been carrying Carter toward victory as the

Democratic nominee, dumps him unceremoniously in the final contest for a second term, November one year later.

We waiver to be written.

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