



The Iranian Revolution: An Oral History With Henry Precht, Then State Department Desk Officer

Henry Precht, Country Director for Iran in the State Department, 1978-80, held a key position during the Iranian Revolution. Previously, he had served in Embassy Tehran, 1972-76, as political-military officer. Here follow relevant excerpts from his interview with Charles Stuart Kennedy, Oral Historian of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. The full text of Precht's oral history is available from the Association. Used with permission of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project.

Q. Henry, you took over the Iran desk in June 1978. Will you explain the situation you found at that time?

PRECHT: Iran's troubles (we didn't call it a revolution until it was over) had started in January when the Shah's people and newspapers insulted Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and religious students demonstrated in Qum at the seminary. A number were shot, touching off a series of mourning demonstrations. They began in January and at intervals of three or forty days there would be mourning marches, in Tehran, Tabriz, and other cities. Each time the troops would crack down and there would be more commemorations for those who were killed. The country was getting out of hand, and the Shah was getting nervous. He began promising a more liberalized regime. Unfortunately, people weren't buying that.

I had been concerned about what was happening in Iran. The Embassy indicated some worry, but the press, which was not represented in Tehran by American reporters, downplayed the incidents. US papers had stringers who we always thought had dual employment, the other employer being SAVAK, the secret police. So, the level of concern was muted at best. In June when I came on board, things had, in fact, quieted down. The mourning ceremonies had come to an end. There was tension but not recurring violence.

Q: At that time was it the perception that you were getting from other people and your own view that the problem was that the Shah either had to liberalize or become more conservative and religious?

Henry Precht is currently preparing for publication a collection of ten fictionalized tales of diplomatic adventure in and about the Middle East.

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10 ★ MIDDLE EAST JOURNAL

PRECHT: Basically, Washington didn't believe the Shah, who had been through a lot of trouble at different times since 1941, was in any real danger. Some people thought liberalization was the answer. That is, to lighten up. No one suggested that he join the church or start contributing to the building fund, because religious people weren't so prominent in American thinking at that stage.

Q: Was it also because we couldn't talk to mullahs, and also Americans, particularly in those days, didn't think in terms of Islam or church in any place? We are secular people and have secular solutions.

PRECHT: Don't forget we are looking at this in retrospect. There had never been an Islamic revolution. There had been political demonstrations led by clerics, the last one 25 years earlier led by Khomeini, at which time he was jailed and sent off in exile in Turkey, then Iraq. The religious aspect wasn't the main focus in the spring of 1978; it was a popular uprising. It wasn't even viewed as being a long-term thing. After all, the Shah had a pretty tough secret police apparatus and an army deemed to be loyal. The presumption was that it might be messy and might take a little while, but they could do the job. I recall a cable coming in from the Embassy in May 1978 which identified Khomeini, who figured in the troubles but wasn't revered yet as leader of the stature he later acquired. That the Embassy had to identify him in a cable to the Washington audience tells you something about how much we knew about Iranian internal politics and Khomeini's role in it.

One of my first visitors on the desk was the Israeli Embassy officer who handled the Middle East. He had been born in Iran. He told me, "We are already in the post-Shah era." I had not heard that before. He felt the Shah was in deep trouble. The officer was basing that view, I guess, on what he knew of Iran and was getting from the unofficial Israeli Embassy in Tehran.

Another incident occurred just shortly after I came on board. I was told that Henry Kissinger [former Secretary of State] had just returned from Iran and gotten in touch with the State Department to report on his conversation with the Shah. The Shah told him he didn't see how it was possible for a bunch of ignorant mullahs to lead demonstrations so precisely organized and so effective. There must be some other force leading them. He concluded that the CIA must be behind them. He asked why the CIA would do this to him. Why would they turn on him? He suggested two answers: Perhaps the Americans felt that, with his dealings with the Soviets for non-lethal military equipment, a steel mill and such, he was too cozy with the Soviet Union. If Americans thought he was soft, maybe the religious people would be more staunchly anti-Communist and stronger in supporting the containment policy. His other theory was that the Americans and the Russians, as the British and the Russians in the beginning of the century, had decided to divide Iran into spheres of influence. We would take the south, which had most of the oil, and the Soviets could run the north, as they had in the past.



IRANIAN REVOLUTION ★ 11

Q: Basically the pre-World War I division.

PRECHT: These were the Shah's two theories as to why the CIA should be stirring up trouble against him. I was dumbfounded. This was the man we were relying on to save our terribly important interests in Iran. He was a nut. This was the person I was going to have to deal with. The job was going to be a lot more complicated than I thought.

Then Bill Sullivan, who had been named Ambassador when President Carter came into office, came back for home leave. The Shah had been terribly concerned about Carter's ascension to the presidency even before he was nominated, fearing he would be another Kennedy who would force him down a liberal path. When Carter was elected, I guess the Shah's anxiety rose. But, although President Carter had spoken about human rights and excessive arms sales in his campaign, in office he didn't really want to implement those programs. In fact, he didn't want any trouble in Iran. He didn't want Iran as an issue. The Arab-Israel question was looming large on the American agenda as was the Soviet Union and China. Iran in turmoil was an unnecessary addition to our agenda. Carter had chosen Bill Sullivan, a tough-minded, highly competent professional diplomat, to reassure the Shah of our continuing support.

We heard from Sullivan after his meeting with Carter, before he went to Iran, that he didn't want any pressure applied to the Shah on human rights. He wanted to continue the relationship the United States had always had with the Shah. We would sell him whatever arms we could, maybe being a little more cautious, but wouldn't press him on human rights. Essentially it was to be business as usual.

Sullivan, who in June 1978 had been in Iran a year or so, came back for home leave in Mexico. He came through the Department to consult, and obviously the months of disturbances were on everybody's mind. I went along on most of his meetings. Sullivan's line then was that it's all been taken care of. The Shah's people have found the right address for the mullahs and, providing them with money, satisfied their earthly needs. They would go back to their mosques and remain quiet. Essentially they had been bought off. It was a very optimistic report. But nothing of concern was happening in Iran at the moment. He went off to Mexico for two months.

Then the Shah disappeared from the media. I think Lady Bird Johnson went to Iran and the DCM/Chargé Charlie Naas took her to see the Shah. He was subdued. He was not in the papers or on television. We didn't know what was wrong with him. In retrospect, I think he may have been having some physical examinations and learned the bad news about his health. That is pure speculation on my part. We were never told anything about the Shah's health.

Q: Had you ever gotten an equivalent of a psychological profile from the CIA?

PRECHT: That came later during the revolution. It was so bland it was worth-



less.

The Shah reappeared around the first of August and was back on the job. Around mid-August a mullah of some prominence was hit and killed in a highway accident. The immediate supposition was that this was the work of SAVAK, and there were big demonstrations in Isfahan causing it to be placed under martial law. August coincided with the month of Ramadan in the Muslim calendar. Subsequently, towards the end of August there was a fire in a theater in Abadan, and I think 700 people were killed because the doors were locked. A terrible disaster. The Shah's people blamed the mullahs. During the previous month of demonstrations, movie theaters had frequently been targeted by the clerics because they showed sinful Western movies. So, SAVAK let it be known that this was another act of the mullahs. Nobody in Iran believed that. They all believed that the regime had done it and blamed the mullahs. That showed you the level of mistrust of the regime. We received at that time a very short CIA report saying SAVAK had been responsible according to one of the Agency's SAVAK contacts. Whether it was true or not, who knows?

About that time Sullivan returned from his home leave to find Iran again in turmoil. He made another round of people in the Department still showing optimism that the Shah would be able to take care of the situation. During a meeting with [National Security Adviser Zbigniew] Brzezinski, the latter told Sullivan that the Shah was our man, and we had to stand behind him at whatever cost. There would be no compromise, and we would do whatever was necessary to support him. Brzezinski's position was much tougher than Sullivan's.

Sullivan went off to Iran and when he got there, around the end of Ramadan, one of the first things he did was go to see the Shah whom he found terribly depressed. He couldn't understand why his people had turned against him. He had done so much for them and they were so ungrateful and disloyal. Sullivan said in his reporting cable something must be done to buck him up. So, he drafted a message from the President to the Shah. I liked it, took out a couple of sentences praising the monarchy which I thought were not appropriate for a democratic country to say, and got it cleared around the government.

By this time there were huge demonstrations all over Iran. Millions of people were out in the streets protesting non-violently.

I should note that during the month of August Hal Saunders, Assistant Secretary of State [for the Near East] was totally preoccupied with preparing for the Camp David conference. Bill Crawford was Deputy Assistant Secretary with jurisdiction over me and Iran. An Arabist, he knew little or nothing about Iran and left me to do most of the business on Iran. When Sullivan's draft letter cleared, I sent it to the White House. There, it was put in a suitcase for people going to Camp David and who were then sealed off from the outside world. Sullivan's literary effort was to spend two weeks in a suitcase.

The demonstrations continued into September. The day before September 7, I believe it was, the Shah imposed martial law in Tehran. Nobody was allowed to demonstrate on the streets. Martial law was imposed on a Thursday, and on the



IRANIAN REVOLUTION ★ 13

Friday (later known as Black Friday), the Muslim sabbath, people hadn't gotten the word and came out to demonstrate. In Jaleh Square in south Tehran, troops shot down martial law violators. How many people were killed? If you ask the opposition, it was well over a thousand and if you asked the Shah's people it was well under a hundred. The Embassy finally came up with something like 125, which they got from Iranian press sources who were present. No one really knew. The perception, however, was that a heck of a lot of people had been killed and that the structure of the regime had been severely shaken.

The day after the massacre I was taking my morning shower and the thought came to me that the Shah was indeed finished. This was a war between him and his people, and he could not prevail in such a war. When he might go and how I didn't know. Whether he would be able to make some compromise that would diminish his powers, I didn't know. But, it was clear to me that the Iran of the future was not going to be the Iran of the past. The opposition elements would play a much larger role and the Shah a much smaller role, and we needed to adjust to that. That was a view directly contrary to American policy. It was not a view, to my knowledge, that was shared by anybody else in the American government, certainly not Dr. Brzezinski. I reckoned that if I announced my conclusions in the Monday morning staff meeting I might well find myself at FSI (Foreign Service Institute) studying a language that wouldn't be Persian. So, I would just have to play this slowly and at the margins. I would have to try to modify policy so that it began to conform to what my conception of the reality was and not to confront it head on and end up bringing myself down while not changing the policy.

But back to Friday: At the end of the day there was a big meeting on the 7th floor chaired by [Under Secretary] Dave Newsom, who I think was the ranking official in town, on what we could do in reaction to the massacre. Well, it was clear that the letter, Sullivan's draft, was overtaken by this event. We decided it would be best to use the telephone. So, the following morning, as I came out of the shower, Hal Saunders telephoned me from Camp David. He said that [Egyptian President] Anwar Sadat had telephoned the Shah and so had [Israeli Prime Minister] Menahem Begin, or Foreign Minister Moshe Dyan, and the President was going to. What should he say?

Here was the first test of my new wisdom. I said, "It seems to me that we have to support him. We can't turn our back on him. But, we have to say something that indicates we understand the situation in Iran. And the message should be very brief." I can't remember whether I dictated it over the phone, but in one paragraph we stated our firm support of the Shah and in a second stated our belief in the liberalization measures that would bring a better future for Iran. That was the message that Carter delivered. We heard from Sullivan that the Shah was pleased — so much so that he published the text of the message the next day.

It didn't work out the way we had hoped. What it said to the people in the streets was the Americans were standing behind the Shah, supporting his shooting of the people in Jaleh Square. So, it really worked very much against us. The lid stayed on but things began to get progressively worse. There hadn't been real labor unions



in Iran before this — only labor leaders appointed by the regime. Now, real labor groups began to develop with their own programs supportive of revolutionary objectives. Progressively you had oil workers going on strike, then government people, central bank staff, etc. These industrial actions virtually shut down the country. And, there were demonstrations while martial law was still in effect.

The Shah was following a bifurcated policy. On the one hand the regime had shot a lot of people. On the other hand, he tried to appeal to the population by appointing a new prime minister having jailed his former prime minister. He also jailed other people who were deemed corrupt. He let some dissidents out of jail. It was a confusing time if you were not an Iranian. Is he soft or is he hard? In fact, he was both, groping for a solution.

During this period, September/October, there seemed to be any number of Iranian occasions that needed to be celebrated by Washington. That is, the President needed to send a public message congratulating the Shah on his birthday, the Crown Prince's birthday, etc. It was part of the traditional flattery that showed what great friends the two regimes were.

Q: But, it was particularly pronounced in this case wasn't it? It sounds like compared to other leaders we were spending an awful lot of time flattering the Shah.

PRECHT: That's right. He had an ego that had to be frequently anointed. With my new, private perspective on the Shah's future, I tried to tone down the flattery. The Shah continued to broadcast each of our greetings. I felt it was not a very smart thing for us to do. I also thought that we ought to begin to know the opposition. Neither the Department nor the Embassy had ever had any contact with it. Richard Cottam, the [Pittsburgh University] political scientist who was persona non grata at the State Department contacted Gary Sick, who was the National Security Council staffer handling Iran, suggesting that he meet with Ibrahim Yazdi, who was an Iranian doctor in Texas on his way to Paris to work for Khomeini. Yazdi would be passing through Washington. I thought that was a good idea, but Gary thought that his level was too high for this encounter. Maybe I should be the one to meet with Yazdi. I readily agreed, and an appointment was made. Then [Deputy Secretary] Warren Christopher got wind of it and instructed me not to meet with Yazdi. There shouldn't be any conversation with an American official. I was disappointed but thought we ought to find some way to contact these people. The Embassy at that time had no useful contacts with the opposition.

Along about mid-September, early October, the press still wasn't paying serious attention to what was going on in Iran. However, the *Washington Post* one morning carried a headline saying "Iran cancels nuclear power contract." This was big money but due to labor unrest the Iranians had been unable to carry out its contracts. We had known about it, for it had been reported by the Embassy days before. Nevertheless, I got a call from the 7th floor asking what was going on and why should they do this? My theory at the time was that there is a period when a crisis is developing in which the desk officer is in complete charge, because no one above him knows anything



IRANIAN REVOLUTION ★ 15

about it or takes any interest in it. Then there is this golden moment when the seniors take an interest, and they ask the desk officer's opinion. From then on the crisis proceeds, but people on the 7th floor are in charge and the desk officer is diminished. This was my chance to brief people, for from then on, the 7th floor was seized of the Iran problem.

Around the same time I was at a party and met Marvin Kalb, the network anchorman. I said to him, "Man, you are missing a big story. The Iranian story is not figuring on any of the nightly news, but you can be sure it is going to be much bigger and you better get on it now." I wanted people to pay attention to what was going on in Iran and I couldn't get them to. Press attention was the only way that the 7th floor would wake up to a problem. Everyone was focused on the Arab-Israel question. Iran wasn't getting any sustained attention. This began to change as things in Iran got worse and worse.

At one point in October, the US Navy wanted to sell the Shah some more F-14s and Mr. Duncan, number two in the Department of Defense, was going to make a trip to Iran to talk to the Shah about a buy. I said that they were crazy. The F-14 was one of our most valuable military resources and Iran was now an unstable country and it was absurd to sell them any more. Well, they went off to Isfahan where the planes were based, and they were pinned down in their hotel unable to leave because of the fighting outside in the streets. It was little incidents like this that began to convince Washington that they had a serious problem in Iran.

Q: We talked before about the lack of Embassy reporting in Iran because we didn't want to upset the Shah. How did you feel you were supported by the reporting on developments in Iran?

PRECHT: Reporting from the Embassy was generally terrible, and I told the domestic reporting officer in August that they really needed to get geared up and give much better coverage to what was going on. Sullivan had earlier pushed the Embassy staff into reporting like a normal Embassy and talking to some opposition leaders. I think it was in November when they finally decided to do that. I continued to think they were not doing a good job. It is very hard for a desk officer to guide his colleagues in the field, however. There was a seven and a half hour difference between Washington and Tehran. When I arrived at work at 8:00 in the morning the Embassy would be going home, and Charlie Naas or Sullivan and I would review what had happened during the day.

As the crisis developed, tensions within the American government began to build. We had the liberals in the human rights bureau and conservatives in the White House, if you want to call them that. Back in August, CIA had prepared a national intelligence estimate mentioning there was trouble but nothing serious in Iran. The Shah has it under control. There was one notable sentence saying Iran was not even in a "pre-revolutionary situation." Well, I wouldn't sign off on it. In a footnote, I said that I didn't agree with these findings and the State Department would not be a participant in the report.



Particularly over the recurring messages of congratulations, I began to feel tension building up between me and Gary Sick. I had known Gary from days when I was in Alexandria and he was an assistant naval attaché in Cairo. When I was moving into the Iran desk, he had my wife and me to dinner with Jessica Matthews and other people from the NSC (National Security Council) staff, introducing me as the guy who really understood Iran. Later on, though, when things became increasingly tense during the fall of 1978, we fell apart. If you read his book, *All Fall Down*,¹ he puts it in rather melodramatic terms that we had been close friends, but I use to lecture and shout at him in such a way that he just stopped calling me. I suppose I did rant because I was so deeply frustrated that he was supporting the Brzezinski line and wouldn't listen to any other argument.

But, in the State Department, people at my level began to group around me so we had a kind of working level cabal. I began to describe rather graphically at staff meetings the problems that the Shah was facing. There was always a good audience for that. Gradually I was building up some support for the position that I held.

Later in the fall, the MacNeil Lehrer show, the PBS evening news, contacted the State Department for someone who could talk on Iran. Nobody wanted to talk, so the request found its way down to me and I agreed. Well, I wasn't going to sit there and condemn American policy in front of a national audience. [Journalist] Joseph Kraft was on the show and he was expressing deep concern about the Shah. I was trying to make people feel better. They asked me at one point, "Do you think the Shah might leave Iran?" I said without a moment of hesitation that there was no chance at all of that happening — while not believing that myself. In fact, I lied. That was what we needed to do because we had a dilemma. We couldn't pull the rug from under the Shah because there was no structure to replace him. I didn't want to panic him and have him do something drastic. What I wanted was some kind of gradual response that would phase into a new situation peacefully and with the preservation of America's position there.

From that meeting I got to know the producer for Middle East news on the show. Journalists by that time were coming around frequently. There were also frequent high level meetings in the White House and in the State Department. So, the government was now galvanized. I used to attend meetings in the White House situation room, generally with Hal Saunders. Sometimes the meeting would be chaired by Brzezinski and occasionally by [Vice President] Mondale. I recall sitting in one of those meetings and looking around the room at the others present, all far senior to me, and thinking that there was nobody in the room who knew anything about Iran except me, and I knew how inadequate my knowledge was. So we were really in the soup during this crisis.

Q: From my own experience the greater the crisis the more the action-oriented people are apt to grab the reins, and they squeeze out those who have been on the ground.

1. Gary Sick, *All Fall Down* (New York: Random House, 1985).



IRANIAN REVOLUTION ★ 17

PRECHT: That is the point I was making earlier. There is a moment when the desk officer is listened to and then after that he is pushed into the background.

At the end of October, the Shah's son had a birthday. This young man was 18 years old. At the Shah's wish he had been assigned to flight training in Lubbock, Texas, and had been equipped out there with a nice villa, an elaborate stereo system, a Swedish girlfriend — all things an aspiring fighter pilot and Prince should have. The Iranian Ambassador, Ardeshir Zahedi, gave a party for him. I had gotten to know the Ambassador when I took over the desk and went to call on him at his grand Embassy. Well, he invited Marian and me to come to this birthday party. Brzezinski was there. [Journalist] Carl Rowen was there. It wasn't the *crème de la crème* of Washington society but not bad. I was quite impressed by the young Prince. He seemed well-informed and quite mature for an 18-year old. But, there was no indication from him or anyone at that gathering that Iran was in serious trouble.

The demonstrations and strikes continued. Perhaps as a safety valve, the Shah had allowed the press to publish rather freely. November 4, however, was the anniversary of student killings in the university, and the Shah had to reimpose martial law because there were riots all over the city. Some people said the Shah himself had instigated them. At that time another Prime Minister was appointed, this time the head of the military, General Gholam Reza Azhari, a mild mannered, loyal gentleman. A few days beforehand we had word that something like this was going to happen — that a military regime was going to be imposed.

Sullivan by that time, often in the company of the British Ambassador, Tony Parsons, was seeing the Shah quite frequently, and the Shah was always depressed about what he should do. He wanted guidance from us. There was a debate in Washington about how to advise him. There were essentially two lines of thought. One was kind of weak-kneed: to continue liberalization or accelerate it. The other was the iron fist. That is, to send troops out and shoot down as many people as necessary and bring an end to the rebellion once and for all. Dr. Brzezinski was the advocate of the iron fist, but President Carter was not buying that kind of policy. So, what you had was Brzezinski in touch with Zahedi sending messages to the Shah of his own design, and we in the State Department, good and proper bureaucrats, clearing our instructions all over the government and sending out messages to Sullivan in regular channels, suggesting he encourage the Shah towards moderation. The Shah, poor fellow, was confused by the conflicting advice. He was getting one line from Brzezinski, and another from Sullivan, and was desperate to know what to do.

In retrospect, we know now that he knew he was a sick man and what he wanted more than anything was to pass on to his son a viable monarchy. He wanted his son to inherit the throne. He was afraid if he slaughtered people in the streets and turned over to a teenager a situation he could not handle the dynasty would be swept aside.

On November 9th, Sullivan sent in a message captioned "thinking the unthinkable." You had to read it very closely, but the inference was that maybe something was happening to the Shah. He didn't say clearly that the previously presumed 100 percent popular support for the Shah was weakening. It was an effort, I guess, to get



the Washington community to think more creatively. Well, it went up stairs and didn't prompt anything. Nobody reacted. And Sullivan didn't follow up.

I, around the same time, was terribly concerned that we were going to apply the iron fist. So, I devised a message saying that the military would be unable to end the popular revolt. The military leadership was not capable of running the country. The Shah was going to weaken the regime rather than strengthen it if he depended on a military that was very much untested in this kind of business and of questionable loyalty in the end. Soldiers would be firing their rifles at their brothers across the barricades. How long would they continue to shoot them down?

I don't remember if my telegram was actually released or not. Unofficially, I sent it to the post and, I think, they began to think in terms of a non-military solution.

Q: Were you getting any questioning reports on the Iran military from our military attachés who had a very close relationship with the Iranian military?

PRECHT: My thoughts were based on my political/military experiences in dealing with the Iranian military, largely with the senior generals. The position you have just described is what most people, including many Iranians, believed. They felt our military was in bed with the Iranian military and knew everything about them. But our military were advisers, first and only. They deemed themselves as non-political, forbidden to be interested in loyalty or political questions of any kind. They were interested in whether they could crank up an F4 and fly it. They didn't have any language ability, didn't socialize with the military except in a very structured environment. Of course, we had the attachés whose job it was to understand the Iranian forces, but they were fenced off both by the Iranians and the American advisors. So, our military was useless. CIA had no lines into the military that were useful. Finally, the Embassy, as I mentioned, began to contact opposition people. One of their first forays occurred when Steve Cohen, who was one of our human rights people and anti-Shah, visited and insisted that the Embassy take him to see opposition people.

Along about November I was asked again to be on the MacNeil-Lehrer show. I had the sense I was getting too much visibility from the media. Perhaps I had better pull in some. So, I declined the offer but told the producer he might invite Ibrahim Yazdi to be on the show. After the show he should invite him to dinner and I would come along. We went to dinner at a Washington restaurant with some of the show's participants, and Yazdi and I had a chance to talk to him. I wrote a memorandum of my conversation with him outlining his position. He was the most senior person in the opposition we had met at that time.

Towards the end of November Mike Blumenthal, Treasury Secretary, went to Iran. Senator Robert Byrd was also there. Both went to see the Shah. They found him at lunch, propped up, popping pills and virtually comatose. His wife did all the talking. When they came back they were in a state of shock. [White House aide] Ham Jordan had said to the press that the Shah is our man and he is the only person we support in Iran. I think it was Blumenthal who said that if we did not have



IRANIAN REVOLUTION ★ 19

anybody else we had better find someone quick because this guy didn't have the stuff.

Nevertheless, Gary Sick prepared a memo prescribing a more active leadership role for the Shah. In effect, the Shah should mount a white horse and show himself to his people as often as possible in person and on television. He should act out a stern father figure role. I thought Gary was way off base. The Shah was hated by his people and the sight of him would enrage them. Moreover, he was in no mental condition to inspire anyone. Like so much that was written or said during that period, no one grasped Gary's ideas. No one had any good ideas and no one had confidence or knowledge enough to accept or reject the proposals of others. Our government was largely passive.

In early December, Brzezinski asked me to come to his office. Already it was clear that there was tension between me and the White House, and Hal Saunders said he would accompany me. Brzezinski said that he wanted to see me alone. I went over and we had a businesslike meeting. He began to ask me questions about the future of Iran because he had clearly been told by the Iranian Ambassador, I assumed, that a Khomeini victory would lead Iran to fragmentation — the Kurds would go one way and Baluch another way. I disagreed. Then at the end, he said to me, "All right, if I point a pistol at your head and say to you, 'You have to tell me what you honestly think is going to happen in Iran or I will shoot you,' what would you say?" I said, "I would tell you that we have three months at most for the Shah. If we don't work out some kind of deal between him and the opposition between now and then, he will be gone in three months." It turned out I had two weeks to spare — it all ended in mid-February.

Q: Did you feel that Dr. Brzezinski was having second thoughts?

PRECHT: No, I thought he was trying to be a professorial type with me to smoke out what I really thought. Essentially, he was a cold warrior. He was a Pole with terrible feelings about the Soviet Union, and he didn't want to see the Iranian part of our containment barrier weakened. That is, the Shah was needed to keep the Soviets from moving towards the Gulf.

Q: Were the Soviet Union or the Iranian Communist Tudeh party factors as this was going on or not?

PRECHT: I think there may have been a few elderly Tudeh gentlemen whom the Shah let out of jail or return from East Germany, but they didn't figure in the equation. The Russians seemed as baffled as we were about what to do. We had very little contact with them about Iran. Still, I think they may have been a little ahead of us. Most foreign governments, I think, were ahead of us. The French, I think, were probably as far ahead in their thinking as anyone, but they never shared information. Only occasionally would you get word of what the French thought. The British were quite good in sharing Ambassador Parson's reporting, and I thought he was excellent. He was cautious but quite insightful, and he was bringing to the attention of London the terrible situation he saw. I tried to bring his reports to the attention of the 7th floor,



because we weren't getting the same message out of the Embassy in Tehran. The Israeli government along about this time began to change its tune having woken up to the dire future the Shah and they faced in Iran. It seemed clear to me that the Israeli government had become alarmed at the situation and instructed its man in Washington to urge Americans to have the Shah crack down.

It was a week or so before the 10th of December, and we were now in the Iranian month of Moharram. The Shiite calendar has a series of mourning days for their early leaders who were martyred. The radio will play nothing but mournful prayers. People go around lashing themselves with chains. We began to feel quite nervous how this was going to affect the safety of our people in Iran. At one meeting in the White House in December someone brought up a letter in the *Washington Post* from the wife of a sergeant who said, "Here we are in this country where shots are being fired at crowds on the street and American lives are in danger." (Actually, I think, maybe one American at that point had been killed and virtually no hostility towards Americans had been shown.) She continued that "we have had no information from our Embassy, and all of us are at risk."

Someone in the meeting read that letter and said if American casualties occur as this mourning period reaches its peak, we will be held responsible. Maybe we should start to evacuate people from Tehran, dependents and non-essential personnel. I said, "If you do that, the Shah will get the message that you have lost faith in him and maybe he will pack up and go to Nice. You have to take the risk and protect your position there." I was told to go back to my office and prepare a message of evacuation. "Handle it as skillfully as you can, but get this letter-writing lady out of there." So, I went back and called Sullivan who agreed with me. He said, "Don't send me any instructions to evacuate. The effect will be disastrous for our position." So, I called (Under Secretary for Management] Ben Reed's office in the administrative section of the State Department, and said the White House wanted to evacuate people from Tehran. How can we get them out without calling it an evacuation? Can we give them all a holiday and airline tickets and let them go? Nope, US government regulations say that the only way you can provide people with airline tickets is with evacuation orders. I said, "Can't we just call it advance R&R or whatever?" Nope, it has to be an evacuation.

So, I drafted the cable, got it approved and placed it in my inbox over night and went home. Subsequently I thought, if Americans had been killed because I was trying to protect some foreign monarch's skin, I would have no excuse whatsoever. It was wrong of me to do that. The next morning I said to Sullivan that perhaps he should alert the Shah in advance. He went to the Shah and told him that we were going to evacuate non-essential employees and those dependents who wanted to go. It was going to be strictly voluntary and low key. The Shah said, "I understand." He never mentioned the subject again. Not too many people left but a fair number did. We had a very large Embassy there. It was the slow start of a movement that became a flood of departures.

Q: It was just the Embassy, but this would also send word to the Bell Helicopter



and everyone else, too.

PRECHT: That's right, but they had contractual obligations to stay on the job. Only the civilian and military people attached to the mission were covered by this order.

Around this time, Carter asked George Ball to come to Washington and undertake a study. The President saw the State Department and Brzezinski at loggerheads, things drifting steadily downhill and nobody with any bright ideas. He wanted a wise man to reassess the Iran situation and suggest solutions. So, George Ball, distinguished former Deputy Secretary, came down. In his book he said he went to see Dr. Brzezinski who said that he wanted Ball to talk to everyone — except the Iran desk officer at the State Department who was hopelessly biased against the Shah — and come up with an independent judgment on the Iran situation. Ball says in his book, “naturally the Iran desk officer at State was the first person I called.” He had Hal Saunders and me to dinner in his suite at the Madison hotel. I talked quite freely about Iran, not pulling any punches. Gary Sick, Brzezinski's man, was there taking notes. Then Ball went off to talk to Iranian Americans and a variety of people in New York. He came back after a week or two and made his report while things had continued to go down hill. The report called for the convening of a council of elders, wise Iranians from a variety of sectors, who would consult and decide how the Shah and his regime should adjust to the opposition they were facing. On the list were people from the opposition, supporters of the Shah, a bag of people many of whom would never have entered the same room with the others. But, it was months too late. New Year's was now approaching and by that time there was really no initiative from the United States that could take hold.

Q: Were we making any attempt through our Embassy in Paris to make contact with the opposition, which was Khomeini in Paris?

PRECHT: After Yazdi and I had dinner in Washington he went to Paris and I had his telephone number. So, we had a channel of communication. I would call him and he would call me. But, we also had the Embassy as an intermediary. Warren Zimmerman was political counselor. We would send Warren a cable requesting him to go see Yazdi and tell him such-and-such and see what he says. So we had two means of communication, either formally through Warren, who did a splendid job, or informally from my house via telephone to Yazdi.

There had been a few Iranians other than Yazdi who would come around, and the Embassy was beginning to have contacts. Professor Cottam visited Tehran over Christmas and introduced the Embassy to Ayatollah Behesti, the most senior cleric we knew.

During this period also, the press was after us with a vengeance. Not so much over what was going on in Iran but on the internal conflict that was dividing us in Washington. Any message that we got from Tehran would likely appear in the *New*



York Times or the *Washington Post* the next day. The rule became write your messages for publication because they were constantly leaking. I devised one approach which was to send an unclassified message, an administrative message, and add on several paragraphs about some sensitive, but not super sensitive, matter, because no one would read those. Finally, we got a system setup in the Operations Center which was online. We would type out a message which would immediately play on the screen in Tehran, and then they would type out a reply that would come back to us. Then we would make two copies, one for the White House and one for David Newsom. I usually sat in on these sessions.

Q: Who was leaking, do you know?

PRECHT: White House people suspected me but I can assure historians that I did not leak. Other suspects were in the Human Rights Bureau who desperately wanted our policy towards Iran changed, but they denied the leaks. Who knows? When you have messages in the State Department there are so many copies it is almost impossible to track them down.

To leap ahead, after the Shah had left and Shapour Bakhtiar was made Prime Minister, Marvin Kalb did an evening news segment on the situation in Iran in which he said “the official US policy is to support the Bakhtiar government. But, if you ask State Department officers, they say he has no chance whatsoever. So this policy is really quite hollow and doesn’t have the support of people who know the country.” The next day, Hal Saunders said to me, “You have to come with me to the White House.”

So, I went to the White House with Hal and I entered a room with a huge round table. Seated around that table was everyone above me up to Secretary Vance — all the assistant secretaries, etc. Then Brzezinski, aides Ham Jordan and Jody Powell, and Carter filed in. Carter was in a rage. He said, “Somebody is talking to Marvin Kalb and that broadcast last night was disastrous for our policy. Someone is feeding him information and it is quite impossible for us to conduct policy. I am telling you that if this happens again, the person who is guilty is going to be fired and not only is he going to be fired but his superior is going to be fired. We are going to put a stop to this. I can’t tolerate this kind of disloyalty.” He and all the White House people then left the room. Mr. Vance, a paternal figure, said, “We have a serious problem in our relationship with the White House. We can’t function in this way. We have to be able to stop this problem.” I looked around and everyone was looking at me. People like Les Gelb and Tony Lake said, “I think the President is quite unfair. He doesn’t know who did this leaking and to threaten us this way is unfair.”

I agreed with the President. I thought it was impossible to conduct a policy with such leaking of information. I acknowledge that some people may have told Marvin Kalb of my views. I had spoken to him myself but never told him anything sensitive. However, other people may have said that the Iran desk doesn’t support Iran policy. But, it wasn’t me. Two or three weeks later there was a leaked short article in the *Atlantic Monthly* or *Harper’s* which described our White House meeting against leak-



ing quite accurately.

Okay, now let's get back to the end of December. Things are getting worse daily. Sullivan, I believe it was Sullivan, came up with the idea that in addition to the exchange of indirect messages with Yazdi, it would be important for some American official to meet with Khomeini. Washington agreed. We appointed Ted Eliot, a retired foreign service officer who had been Country Director for Iran in the late '60s and Ambassador to Afghanistan and was then Dean of the Fletcher School. I devised talking points for him. Sullivan went to see the Shah telling him that we were going to do this. The Shah said that it was quite understandable that we would want to protect our own interests in this crisis and you might talk some sense into this crazy man. Everything was all set to go.

Then there was an Economic Summit meeting on Martinique. Carter and Brzezinski attended. My understanding was that Brzezinski felt the Ted Eliot trip was a bad idea. When Carter came back he vetoed the plan. We sent a message to Sullivan. Sullivan went into a rage. He asked me over the telephone, "What numbskull made this decision? This was probably one of the most important moves that we could make in this crisis and now it has been ruined." I had to get on the classified phone to Sullivan and say, "Listen, it was the President." He almost lost his job then. But it would have been unseemly to have pulled out the American ambassador at that time. Anyway, he went back to the Shah and told him the trip was off. The Shah said he agreed with Sullivan that it was a bad decision.

Meanwhile Brzezinski was still insisting on the idea of an iron fist and a crack-down but he couldn't persuade Carter to go along. As a compromise Carter said, "Look, we will send an American military official to get in touch with the Iranian military leadership to see how well prepared they are to handle the situation if it should collapse. General Huyser, who was the Deputy CINCUR in Europe and who had been to Iran several times, was named to go to Tehran. He didn't have any particular knowledge of Iran or the senior generals concerned. Sullivan wasn't too keen on the idea but then Sullivan didn't want a rival in the Embassy. After Huyser arrived, he and Sullivan worked out a relationship that was pretty productive. Huyser talked to the generals and Sullivan stayed in control of the entire show. None of us knew exactly what Huyser was doing, however. If Brzezinski's plan was being followed he was telling the generals they ought to get ready to pull a coup when necessary. Huyser stayed until his life was threatened, and it was pretty clear that the game was about over.

Another DOD official went to Iran. Eric von Marbod had been the senior defense representative in Tehran during the time I was there. The Iranians' payment system had collapsed, owing to the strikes at the Central Bank and Ministry of Finance. They were not able to pay bills owed and did not want to take delivery of some military items. So, von Marbod was sent out to regularize things. He drew up a long memorandum of understanding between the Iranians and ourselves canceling a variety of sales, putting off others, diverting funds from one operation to another. He did it all by himself with no input from anybody else. What he accomplished remains the big issue on the claims agenda at The Hague now: How these unresolved sales are



24 ★ MIDDLE EAST JOURNAL

to be settled and will Iran get money back from them.

In early January 1979, I don't know whether Sullivan suggested that the Shah leave the country or it was the Shah's idea or somebody else suggested it to the Shah. But, the Shah said that he was leaving for the US. I was asked if that would be a good idea. I said that I thought the Iranian population would be delighted. So, we found a place for him to go to, the Walter Annenberg estate in California. Annenberg said we could have it for a month but then there was going to be a wedding there and he needed it back. Well, that was fine. We told the Shah we had this place for him, and he packed his bags and around the 15th of January flew out to Egypt.

As he left, someone advised him not to leave the Middle East. Perhaps Zahedi or Brzezinski. He was told to stay in the area because the Americans were able to save his skin when he left in 1953 and went to Rome. They could do it again. I think he believed we might just have a plan to save his throne. So, it was better that he be nearby so that he could fly back in triumph after the Americans pulled something out of the hat. He stayed in Egypt for a few days, Egyptian President Sadat being one of his great buddies. But, as Sadat was having some trouble with Islamic folk himself, the Shah took off and went to Morocco where he was when the revolution crashed through on February 11.

In the meantime, Bakhtiar was asserting himself as Prime Minister. Bakhtiar was one of the old National Front stalwarts, a real opportunist, I had always thought. When he became Prime Minister he immediately began to throw his weight around as if the Shah no longer counted for anything. However, no one really paid serious attention to him. Bakhtiar allowed Khomeini to return on February 1. When he came in on an Air France plane full of journalists and his entourage, there was a tremendous reception by the Tehran populace. It even surpassed the festivities when the Shah left.

Khomeini quickly established himself in Tehran. His people soon began to move in while Bakhtiar was still hanging on. There were almost two governments. Then there was some kind of ruckus at Doshen Tapi airbase in southeastern Tehran. A group of technicians there, people who were recruited and specially trained, brighter than your normal troops, were demonstrating their loyalty to Khomeini on the 9th or 10th of February. There was a conflict between them and the command of the base. These men underscored an analysis that I had always maintained. The Shah had recruited his military on the principle of loyalty and approved every promotion over major, colonel, or whatever. But when he began to buy all that sophisticated American equipment, he had to breach that principle and go to people who had technical skills. People who have technical skills think for themselves and that is what these air force technicians were doing. There was a clash on the base and the military collapsed. They opened up all their arsenals and in a matter of days or hours it was all over. Bakhtiar fled the country and Khomeini's group was in complete charge. The military went into hiding, fled the country or were arrested and held in jail. The revolution had succeeded by February 11.

As fighting between military units was still going on, I spoke to Sullivan on the phone. He said he had just come off the line with Brzezinski, who had told him to tell



IRANIAN REVOLUTION ★ 25

General Gast, who was our MAAG chief and senior military officer, to tell the Iranian leadership now was the time for a coup. They must overthrow Bakhtiar and take control of the country and do whatever is necessary to restore order. Sullivan said, “I can’t understand you. You must be speaking Polish. General Gast is in the basement of the Supreme Commander’s headquarters pinned down by gunfire and he can’t save himself, much less this country.” That was the last gasp, for the Iranian regime collapsed at that point.

Before we get back into the oral history chronology, let me offer a couple of observations of the revolution that may not have gotten into my narration. First of all, in Dr. Brzezinski’s book I merit one mention that describes me as being very anti-Shah. That is inaccurate. On the other hand, my son, who was a senior in high school at the time, was very much motivated by liberal ideology, human rights, etc., and he wanted me to be the way Brzezinski described me. He was disappointed. I was not anti-Shah although I can’t say I admired the Shah’s lack of adherence to democratic principles and human rights. My real preoccupation was in protecting American interests with Iran during this period. I wish I could have satisfied my son by being a human rights activist, but that wasn’t to be. I was somewhere in between my son and Dr. Brzezinski.

Q: I want to catch the perception while we are at it. During this period did you have the feeling that you were seen by the whole NSC as being anti-Shah and was this a problem?

PRECHT: Oh, definitely. That’s a second observation I wanted to make. Gary Sick and I fell apart. The failure of the two responsible people at the working level to work together was disastrous for American policy. I didn’t realize it at the time that there was great friction between Vance and Brzezinski as well. Brzezinski throughout the revolution was communicating with Zahedi or the Shah himself, to give his own personal opinions of how Iran should conduct itself in the revolution without coordinating with Vance. Apparently he promised Vance at one point in the fall of 1978 that he wouldn’t do that anymore. I didn’t know that. Once I mentioned to Hal Saunders that I had heard from Sullivan, who had heard from the Shah, that he had been on the telephone with Brzezinski. Hal said, “Come with me.” We immediately went up to Vance’s office where he was having an early morning staff meeting, and Hal said, “Now, tell the Secretary what you just told me.” And I repeated it. None of the men in the room would look at me. They looked down at the floor. They were disturbed but didn’t want to show their concern to an outsider. So, there was that tension.

Then there were the divisions within the Department of State. There were the human rights folks pulling in one direction, there were other people pulling in another direction, and the Defense Department pulling in their direction as was the CIA. Everyone was pursuing his own ends, leaking to the press to obtain those ends. It was a textbook case of how not to conduct diplomacy.

A few years later, when President Ferdinand Marcos fell in the Philippines, I



asked one of the people who had been managing the Philippine crisis at the White House how they had managed to accomplish that smooth transition in American policy from Marcos to his successor. He said, "Henry, we went to school on you. We learned our lesson from all the mistakes made with Iran. We didn't fight or leak. We resolved our differences; the government stayed together. And the transition was successfully handled." I think the Philippine crisis was also assisted by the fact that America knew Marcos had a fatal illness and wasn't going to be around a great deal longer. We didn't know that about the Shah. People who believed that he was our necessary instrument didn't see any end to his employment in our service.

Anyway, February 11. Shortly after the end of the Shah's regime, there was a White House meeting to which I was not invited but Hal Saunders went. When he came back he said to me that the decision had been made to try to reconstruct a normal relationship with Iran. The country was too important for us to ignore. We have to rebuild some kind of a connection. He said, "You will be pleased by that." Well, I was pleased, it was a challenge, but it seemed to me a rather unrealistic proposition frankly. We had been perceived by the opposition, the Khomeini forces, as being on the side of the Shah and against them.

Q: Well, we were, weren't we?

PRECHT: Yes, we were, although the Shah thought we were undercutting him in the clumsy, conflicted way we were trying to support him. Rebuilding from ground zero was going to be extremely difficult, but that was the order.

The first event after that, I think, was Valentine's Day and I was asleep at home. It was about 5:00 a.m. At that time we had round clock watch standers in the Department. That is, we had a room with a bank of telephones in the Op Center where we worked people on duty at night to handle calls. We were constantly getting calls from around the country as well as internationally. The fellow on duty called and said, "Henry, there is a problem in Tehran." I said, "What is the problem?" He said, "They are shooting at the Embassy." I said, "They have been shooting at the Embassy for weeks. It is 5 am, what can I do about it?" He said, "Let me connect you with George Lambrakis on the telephone." George was the political counselor. I was connected with him, and he said, "I am lying on the floor in the Ambassador's office, shots are coming in the window and we are under heavy siege." You could hear shots over the phone. Then the Op Center fellow came back on the phone and said, "Don't you think you should come in?" I said, "What can I do if I am in there? I will be in in a few hours. I have to catch some sleep sometime." "Secretary Vance is on his way in." "I'll be in in half an hour," I replied.

That was also the night Spike Dubs, Ambassador to Afghanistan, was shot. So there was in one room in the Op Center the Afghan task force with [Deputy Assistant Secretary] Jane Coon in charge, and I and the Iran group were in the other room.

The Embassy in Iran was seized, and we lost all communications with them but managed to establish communications with an assistant naval attaché who happened to be outside the building and who got himself to a place where he could look down



IRANIAN REVOLUTION ★ 27

on the compound. It was only later that we learned that the staff were all taken by this mob and then freed by Yazdi, soon to be Foreign Minister and Ayatollah Behesti. The people who had seized the Embassy were convinced that we were hiding people from the Shah's regime in the basement or somewhere, and they wanted to take them out. They were afraid we were going to use these people in a counter coup. But, before we knew that the Embassy was freed. Secretary Vance was supposed to take off at 8 or 9 o'clock to go to Mexico. He didn't want to leave because he didn't think that would be responsible. So, through this naval attaché we devised an answer that everything was all right. I wasn't at all certain that it was all right, but it seemed to be headed that way. So, Vance took off. It wasn't until some time later that the final marine guard, who had been wounded and taken to a hospital, was returned to the Embassy and things got back to "normal."

Bill Sullivan, the Ambassador, and Charlie Naas decided to reduce the staff to zero practically. From a mission of some thousands, I think they went down to less than a dozen people, and immediately began evacuating people on a large scale including private Americans as well. This had been going on for a while but it was now stepped up. One of the things that occupied us heavily the last weeks of the revolution was arranging for TWA and Pan Am charters.

I have left out one key episode that I ought to step back and fill in.

Q: Go ahead.

PRECHT: The Ross Perot story. Ross Perot through his corporation EDS (Electronic Data Systems) had a contract with the Iranian social security administration to computerize their operations. This involved big dollars. In December, I believe it was, a judge, one of the Shah's appointees, arrested the two top officials of the Tehran office of EDS and held them under something like \$36 million bail. He said their investigations had proved that was the amount of money EDS had paid in order to get the contract — in other words, a bribe. This judge, who wasn't a revolutionary but was an Iranian nationalist of some integrity, would not listen to any plea we made at whatever level. He was adamant. EDS pays up or they don't get their guys out of jail.

Well, I don't know if you ever experienced Ross Perot in action, but he felt personally responsible for these guys in a way he must have felt about the POWs in North Vietnam. He mobilized everyone he could to bring pressure on us to get these guys out of there. I and Dave Newsom were the focus of this pressure. Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts called me up. Why? Because one of these guys was from Massachusetts. Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called me asking for an appointment to come and see me. I had to shift him off to the third guy on the desk because I was called to a meeting up on the 7th floor.

Every day I would call Charlie Naas or Ambassador Sullivan and would open with "What have you done for Ross Perot today?" They would say, "Forget about Ross Perot, we are trying to organize the evacuation of Americans or protect F-14s, etc. Nothing can be done for Ross Perot." I would say, "Listen Charlie, we are going



to start getting calls in half an hour or so. Tell me something that I can tell these people.” He said, “Well, our consular officer went to visit these guys in jail and found out that they were being well treated.” That kind of thing. Two or three times a day I would be on the phone about Ross Perot’s people from December, I think, and into January and February. They would be coming to see us, writing letters, telephoning. And Perot was also calling Naas in Tehran.

Once we had a big meeting in Dave Newsom’s office with all of Ross Perot’s lawyers. I said, “Why, do you suppose they suddenly went after EDS of all the American companies operating in Iran. Who was your agent?” Abdul Fath Mahvi was the answer, a man who had been excluded from defense business by the Shah because he was so notorious as a 5 per center involving military contracts. He was not allowed to participate in any military deal because he had such a terrible reputation for raking off money. The Perot lawyers said that he was absolutely innocent in their dealings with him, “simply the man who guided us through Iran.” I said “no one would believe that. Everyone would believe that he was your bag man distributing money for you around the country. You should have checked on his reputation. That was obviously the root of the problem.” Well, they wouldn’t believe me. They wanted us to bring their men home. So, I said, “We can go to the Shah, and being the supreme autocrat of the country, he can order the judge to release them. He could send the troops in and put them on the plane. However, he is already in a very weak position and if we order him to do that it will be devastating politically. He would be seen as our puppet, doing our bidding for an American company that is perceived to be corrupt. We can’t do that. Short of that, there is no way to get these guys out of there.” After his prolonged and unsuccessful haranguing of us, Perot went to Tehran to harangue the Ambassador and Charlie Naas. Finally, he decided to pay up. They were going to put their money up and had to do it in a complicated way. This \$36 million had to be transferred to Iran through banks in Oman, etc. It was a very complex procedure.

In the midst of that process came February 11, when the revolution succeeded and the walls came tumbling down. All the jail doors opened and people walked out. Many of them, as did the Perot pair, got on donkeys or taxis and went to the Turkish border and walked across making their way back to the United States. The Iranians, though, when they saw what had happened — that not only had political prisoners walked out, but the Perot pair as well — were furious. We had evacuation flights leaving twice a day and they would hold up the flights to inspect them to see if the Perot pair were on one board. In effect, freedom for the Perot pair put the safety of other Americans in jeopardy.

Later on, when I was in Cairo, Ken Follett the author, telephoned me and said he was writing an account which he wanted to be as factual as possible about the Perot episode. I said, “Fine.” “I would like to send you the chapters for your review and I will take your views heavily into account.” Well, I did that, this was 1985 I think. Lou Goelz, who was our consular officer at the time and the man who was the connection with the jailed Perot people, refused to have anything to do with this author. So, he got damned in the book. I was furious with Follett because Lou wouldn’t talk to



him for his own personal reasons.

Q: He had had so much of Perot that he couldn't stand it.

PRECHT: Yes, that is right. Anyway, he became the villain. I also was a villain. At one point somebody in the book referred to me by a foul word. When I came back to Washington in 1985, I found out that this author's agent was an old navy friend of mine. I called him up and said, "Listen, I am going to sue you all if you publish this thing. I'm serious. I don't want to be maligned in your book." So, they took it out. I found out from Charlie Naas that the author had also contacted him. He had better terms with Follett than I did. Charlie said that the author told him that Perot had guaranteed him a certain writer's fee, that is, he should write the book the way he wanted to but if Perot didn't like it, it would not be published and the author would be paid. I don't think that is generally known and does not seem quite ethical.

Q: The book was "On Wings of Eagles."²

PRECHT: Back to the time after the seizure of the Embassy on Valentine's Day. We were still having lots of meetings in Dave Newsom's office. The Shah by this time had left Iran for Egypt and then Morocco. His fellow monarch King Hassan in Morocco began to feel a little uncomfortable with his long staying guest. He also had an Islamic component in his society that was quite disturbed by the Shah's presence. So, Hassan wanted him to move on. The Shah thought he would take up our invitation of January to go to the United States. So, after one of these meetings in Newsom's office, he asked me to stay behind. Then he said, "It appears that the Shah is coming to the United States, a decision is about to be made." I said, "You can't do that. This is not January. Iranians will not be happy to see him come. You will not be able to reconstruct a relationship with Iran if that happens." He kind of blanched. Then I went down to my office and telephoned Sullivan telling him that they were about to admit the Shah to the United States. Sullivan said "if they let him in they will bring us out in boxes." He conveyed the same message to either Newsom or Vance and it reached Carter somehow. Carter declined to admit the Shah which meant that he first had to go to the Bahamas and then on to Mexico. He mobilized his supporters in this country who were quite influential — David Rockefeller, Henry Kissinger, Brzezinski inside the White House, etc. There was intense pressure that we admit the Shah. I argued against it. Carter wasn't buying it. He said, "What will you do when they seize our Embassy?" He was firm on that point.

That was one of our problems but we had any number of problems in dealing with a new revolutionary regime. The situation in Washington, however, from my standpoint improved enormously. I no longer felt the tension with the White House. They weren't playing a role, as far as I could tell, leaving Iran to the State Depart-

2. Ken Follett, *On Wings of Eagles* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983).



ment. No voice from Brzezinski or Gary Sick came down. I pretty much had my own way, although it wasn't an easy way because the Iranians were terribly suspicious of us. The American press became a problem. During the final months of the revolution the media had been anti-Shah and supportive of Khomeini and the revolution. When the revolution succeeded they immediately became anti-Khomeini. There were reasons for their shift, of course. The Iranians began executing people with abandon. Any Iranian senior military officer or other official was likely to come before the Islamic courts accused of being corrupt on earth and then executed.

All this time the Embassy was trying to put together a normal relationship. It had to clean up the old relationship which meant all the cars and household effects left behind had to be shipped out of the country. And we had this huge tangle of civilian and military contracts. The Iranians had ceased paying, so a lot of people had pulled their employees out, and conflicting claims had to be resolved. There was constant turmoil and suspicion and tension between us and the new regime. The Iranians would shoot some Kurds and when the US press attacked them, they thought we were guiding the press. It was the same way the Shah thought. When he got negative publicity in the United States he would send word to Jerusalem to control the American press, which he deemed to be controlled by Jewish or Israeli interests. The revolutionaries felt the same way, and they also blamed Jewish interests in New York as controlling the press.

On the subject of Israel, the Israeli Embassy, or non-Embassy, was maintained there until the end. But, when the revolution succeeded, what was going to happen to these staff members? Well, Charlie Naas got word from the Israeli Embassy that they needed help. I heard the same thing and asked Charlie to help them leave. He got them out with the connivance of the Foreign Ministry. The new regime didn't want any additional trouble with Jews – which would mean trouble with the US and Europe.

There were all sorts of little things like that that had to be cleaned up. There were the CIA listening posts that we had in Iran and had been seized. The Iranians allowed us to close them down quietly and move those people out. They didn't make a big stink about it. Essentially, the new Iranian government under Prime Minister Bazargan and his secular colleagues wanted a decent relationship with the United States. They wanted to reestablish it on a basis in which they could express their independence. They wanted all past business between us reviewed. They weren't going to buy a lot of arms from us or spend a lot of money on projects, but they didn't want to fight with us because they knew they had a big enough agenda on the home front.

In May, Charlie Naas thought it would be a good idea if he could make an official call on Khomeini and get that unfinished business out of the way of a new ambassador. Every other diplomat in the city seemed already to have called on Khomeini. We hadn't done it as we had been prohibited from doing so by Carter/Brzezinski. Charlie arranged through Yazdi to see Khomeini before we appointed a new Ambassador. The administration selected Walt Cutler, who was then the ambassador in the Congo and who had served in Tabriz to be the new ambassador. I thought



IRANIAN REVOLUTION ★ 31

he was the perfect selection. He picked a staff to go with him. Then the Iranians executed a wealthy Jewish businessman with close ties to the Shah, and our Senate, led by Senator Jacobe Javits, passed a resolution condemning Iran for its brutal policies. The Iranians went up in smoke. I learned subsequently from Yazdi that they had to show the Americans “they can’t treat us this way.” Khomeini instructed him, “we don’t want to break relations with them but go right up to the point of doing so. Make them know that they can’t insult us this way.” So, they cancelled the meeting with Khomeini and rejected Walt Cutler. Any hope of developing normal relations was set way back. We kept at it, however, until the Hostage Crisis finally killed that hope.