



## THE NEW REPUBLIC

JULY 8, 1985

### SHIA STOOPS TO CONQUER

---

All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran  
by Gary Sick

(Random House, 366 pp., \$19.95)

American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis  
by Warren Christopher, Harold H. Saunders, et al.  
A Council on Foreign Relations Book

(Yale University Press, 443 pp., \$25)

When news of the hostage-taking reached Washington, Jimmy Carter responded with emotions similar to those of most of the American public. According to Harold H. Saunders, his assistant secretary of state in charge of Middle Eastern affairs, "President Carter in his initial reactions may simply have been acting as Jimmy Carter—an outraged

and concerned American who happened to be President." The White House adviser on Iranian affairs, Captain Gary Sick, notes that a similar reaction was widespread in the government. "When President Carter said, as he did on many different occasions both publicly and privately, that the fate of the hostages was on his mind at every



waking moment, he was . . . expressing what was a daily reality for almost all of us who were caught up in the crisis." Sick then relates his own reaction:

I remember discussing the crisis with my family shortly after the hostages were seized and telling them until the hostages were freed, their welfare would take priority over everything else in my life. It was almost like taking religious vows, and that sense of personal dedication remained vivid and strong until the Algerian plane carried the hostages safely out of Iranian airspace many months later.

**W**HEN these men say that for 14 and a half months, from November 4, 1979, until the very last moments of the Carter presidency on January 20, 1981, the issue of the American captives in Iran dominated the Carter administration's concerns, they are admitting to one of the most bizarre developments in the history of American government. That the president of the United States, the chief executive of the federal government, the commander in chief of the military forces, the head of the Democratic Party, and the leader of the free world devoted his "every waking moment" to the fate of 52 persons almost defies belief. It is only somewhat less preposterous that for 444 days the president's specialist on Iran concentrated with near-religious intensity on the welfare of the hostages, to the detriment of all other issues connected with Iran—the rebellions that threatened the central government, the tripling of the price of oil, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Iraqi invasion.

The United States paid in many ways for the emotionalism of its leaders, as these two books indicate. American government officials devoted so much time to this issue that their attention to matters of greater significance was much reduced. "As the agenda for dealing with the hostage crisis jelled," Mr. Saunders notes, "other important issues were gradually crowded off the agendas of each of the principals involved." For almost a year, a large portion of the cabinet met almost every day to keep up with developments in Iran, the president frequently joining them. Warren Christopher, Carter's deputy secretary of state and the official in charge of the final negotiations, estimates that

as many as ten of the most important officials in the executive branch were diverted each day from their other duties for one to two hours or more. . . . Take two hours out of the morning of the most important

Cabinet secretaries to meet on an almost daily basis on any specific problem, and you will see a government so highly focused on that issue that other issues may be neglected.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, just eight weeks after the embassy occupation, can be attributed at least in part to Moscow's realization that American fury toward Iran would prevent any cooperation against its forces. Obsession with the hostages diminished scrutiny of Soviet actions; Mr. Saunders observes that "much later, Secretary Vance would wonder whether sharper warnings to the Soviet Union before the invasion might have headed it off—warnings that were not given because of our absorbing immersion in the hostage crisis."

Even after the Soviets invaded, the president and other top officials continued to allow their attention be diverted by the 52. For example, on January 4, 1980, a week after the Soviet assault, a day after President Carter recognized this as "the most serious international development that has occurred since I have been president," and a moment when response to Moscow was urgent—even then the president interrupted everything else to hear a petty accounting of "several conversations with significant international figures who had been in and out of Tehran."

The hostage issue may have spurred the Soviet invasion in another way. Relations with the allies suffered because other governments, unable to fathom the American obsession, were reluctant to isolate Iran in accordance with Washington's insistence. Not only did the United States isolate itself in the process, but cooperation on other issues—such as Soviet aggression—was much weakened. The result was American anger, allied resentment, Iranian derision, and Soviet delight.

**I**F ALLIES were alienated, enemies came closer. The desperate search for an intermediary with the ayatollah led Washington to ask favors of, and obligate itself to, the Palestine Liberation Organization. Principles were eroded: enraged with Iran, the president blocked its presence at the United Nations. In so doing, he reversed a permanent rule of American policy, which is always to allow member states the opportunity to discuss their grievances before the Security Council. Ironically, absorption with the hostages interfered

even with ending their captivity. The faction holding them profited immeasurably in Iranian politics from the fact that their actions induced a crisis in the United States. Also, unquenchable American media interest undoubtedly spurred the embassy occupiers to stay in the spotlight.

In Washington, overemphasis pushed American officials in wrong directions. "One of the consequences of this intense personal commitment," writes Gary Sick, "was a strong impulse to *do something*, almost as if action was a necessary end in itself." As the Americans tried ever more fanciful and hysterical expedients, they broadcast ever more clearly that the Iranians, in Jimmy Carter's words, "have us by the balls." Writing years later, Sick acknowledges that "doing nothing was in fact the wisest course of action."

**T**OO MUCH media fascination at least twice obstructed a resolution. On one occasion, it spoiled the unique chance for American emissaries to go to Iran. NBC News got wind of the travel plans and made these known, inducing Khomeini to reject the American mission even before it arrived. On another occasion, President Carter confided to the families of hostages his threat to disrupt Iranian commerce if the hostages were put on trial, only to find this information the next morning in *The New York Times*.

Hostage mania entailed more abstract costs, too. Government behavior led to a national sense of humiliation, confusion, and weakness. It also caused international disrespect for the United States, reducing the country's reputation and influence. Worse, the American response helped those forces most antagonistic to the United States win full control of the government in Tehran. In all these ways, Washington's hysteria harmed the United States much more than did developments in Iran.

Why this extreme perversion of priorities? These two accounts point to a number of factors. First, most of the hostages were State Department employees. Gary Sick observes that "to Washington policy makers, the hostages were not just abstractions: in many cases they were friends." Officials felt a personal responsibility to the hostages and therefore devoted disproportionate energies to their release.

Second, being friends helped the hostages' families win unprecedented priv-



ileges. They had daily access to members of the Iran Working Group at the State Department, and a "family branch" of the working group kept the families continuously informed. Unlike the Vietnam prisoner of war families—provincials without connections in high places who could hardly get a hearing—the hostage families' organization, FLAG, received office space right by the crisis center in the State Department. The families met early and often with the secretary of state and the president, the first discussion with Carter taking place just four days after the embassy takeover. Several hostages' wives met with heads of government and heads of state during a trip they took to Europe.

**T**HIRD, the situation was such that government officials could easily empathize with the victims. Passengers of a single downed Korean passenger jet receive more attention than tens of thousands of Afghan peasants because Americans can picture themselves sitting in a 747, but not in an Afghan village; similarly, fellow bureaucrats can imagine themselves in an embassy surrounded by violent hordes.

Fourth, Iranian actions had a particularly humiliating quality. The violation of old and sanctified diplomatic practice guaranteed strong responses, especially among diplomats. This explains why Warren Christopher describes the embassy occupation as an act of "extraordinary repugnance." Though relatively nonviolent, Iranian behavior disdained cherished norms in a manner calculated to provoke outrage.

Fifth, as Saunders notes, "What the president faced daily from the media, from the Congress, and from the public at large was an angrily insistent, 'Why aren't you doing something?'" As a politician, he felt compelled to respond.

Sixth, the presidential primary campaign was just getting started (both Edward Kennedy and Jerry Brown declared their candidacies the week of the hostage-taking), and Jimmy Carter did not want to miss an occasion to display his leadership abilities. Harold Saunders delicately phrases the opportunity this way:

Politically, for a President under challenge by Senator Kennedy for leadership of his party, it must have seemed virtually unthinkable to try to put such a problem on the back burner. Americans do not respond warmly to a leader who coldly stacks up human lives against some rational calculation of "national interest."

Seventh, opposition candidates picked up the hostage issue and made it a central theme of the presidential campaign. Republicans in general, and Ronald Reagan in particular, rode hard the hostage indignity for the benefits it offered.

Finally, winning international attention for the hostages was seen (mistakenly) as a way to keep pressure on Iran. American officials "felt it was important to deny the Iranians the option of ignoring their obligations to release the Americans being held." Keeping the issue prominent was used to prevent the Iranians from avoiding a decision. Saunders reveals that, "in the hostage crisis, the test for a lot of us became

whether we could outlast the Iranians." Cyrus Vance suggests in his memoirs that "the glare of publicity may have helped to save [the hostages'] lives." This misguided sense of strategy, together with the other influences at work, combined to make every official dealing with Iran exaggerate the importance of the hostages. *Every one:* Sick writes that no significant voice in the government argued for lessening the emphasis.

But, despicable as the hostage seizure was, the president had no right to respond "as an outraged and concerned American who happened to be President." Government officials have an obligation to keep their wits. How-



ever dry it may seem to the public, the "rational calculation of 'national interest'" is the president's duty. Like a doctor, he must steel himself against individual pain or he loses his efficacy. A state, especially a great power, cannot make foreign policy on the basis of the interests of a handful of individuals.

The Carter administration immediately adopted as its goal the freeing of the hostages, without considering other factors. It ignored the costs of confronting Iran with regard to relations with the allies, the situation in Afghanistan, or the oil market. It paid little attention to the internal politics of Iran and apparently never anticipated the problems of massive press coverage or too-close consultation with the captives' families.

**S**EVERAL lessons emerge from this American experience. The less press attention a hostage drama receives, the easier it is for the government to handle it. Keeping the hostage affair out of the news is not, of course, a government decision, but its efforts to lessen the media's obsession with an issue can do much in this regard. If it wishes to avoid headlines, the White House must stay completely away. Had President Carter kept aloof from the issue and relegated discussion of the hostages to the Department of State spokesman, the press might have lost interest.

President Carter eventually realized this point. In April 1980 he announced a more normal schedule of activities, hoping this "might contribute to an expeditious decision by the Iranian parliament to release the Americans." Secretary of State Vance also recognized that "it was a mistake for us not to have played down the crisis as much as possible." Families of hostages should have been kept away from officials. By meeting the families, leaders cultivated personal bonds that obstructed the objective consideration of larger issues.

Finally, the United States should have responded to the hostage-taking with a policy of deterrence. As Gary Sick puts it:

Declare that any physical harm to the hostages would result in severe punishment to Iran, but that the onus for securing the release of the hostages fell exclusively on Iran and its leaders: in the meantime, the United States had other important business to attend to and did not intend to let

itself be tied in knots by the illegal activities of a band of extremists.

Implicit in Sick's approach is the correct assumption that preventing an opponent from adopting a new measure is easier than changing a measure already taken. In the case of hostage-taking, he advises, the U.S. government should concentrate on preventing future steps, not undoing past ones. His words ought to be inscribed on a great block of marble and placed in the lobby of the State Department.

**A**T THIS WRITING, two groups of Americans are held captive by Lebanese friends of the Iranian government, seven men abducted off the streets of Beirut as long as 15 months ago and around 42 passengers on a hijacked TWA airplane. The lessons of Tehran apply to both these groups. American officials must suppress emotional reactions, remain coolly aware of the effects of their statements and actions, and keep the interests of the whole nation firmly in view. The issue of a specific American response is not to be discussed publicly, while the terrorists should be informed that harm done to captives will bring certain retaliation.

Such a policy, however, faces two problems. First, threats do not intimidate suicide squads, and some Lebanese terrorists seem to be so highly motivated they either do not fear death or they welcome it. Fortunately, these appear to be few in number. Reports from Lebanon indicate that, for the time being anyway, their ranks may be depleted. At this point, the Americans' captors are probably susceptible to conventional pressures. Second, the United States government has uttered many ferocious words but nothing more. Inaction has undercut Secretary of State George P. Shultz's frequent and forceful calls for reprisals. By now, words have no further utility. Seriousness about protecting American citizens can be proven only with deeds.

As indicated by his sound advice, Gary Sick recognizes the mistakes of the past and has learned from them. Of the three writers under consideration, he alone profited intellectually from the 1979-81 experience. Harold Saunders halfheartedly defends the Carter administration's actions by acknowledging the validity of criticisms while pointing out that the person on the spot

must act quickly and responsibly. In effect, he pleads the press of events as an excuse for mistakes.

In contrast, Warren Christopher stoutly defends American policy. But the former deputy secretary of state's efforts are undercut by his limited grasp of the issues. He was so deeply involved in the American dimension of the problem that he lost sight of—or never understood—two critical facts: that the hostage-taking was primarily an event in the conflict between rival factions over control of the Iranian government, and that the Americans were let go when the radical faction won and had no more use for them.

Unaware of these matters, Christopher misjudges the consequences of the hostage-taking. He believes that "the professed aims of the embassy occupiers went unrealized," and that the drama was "a long-running ordeal that would cost Iran dearly." He draws exactly the wrong conclusions: "There is scant incentive for others to copy the Iranian action in the future" and "The hostage crisis was as much Iran's quagmire as it was ours."

Oblivious to the real reason for the hostages' release, Christopher indulges his vanity with the notion that it was American eloquence that ended the affair; it was "the force of our arguments . . . that ultimately prevailed." Worse, he sees the outcome as a victory for the United States and a model for future confrontations. "We should take the crisis as a clear vindication of talking as a means to resolve international disputes"—showing that the same people who argue that "force does not work" wish to transform failure into victory. (Also, despite his advocacy of negotiations, Christopher does admit using President-elect Ronald Reagan's "blunt language . . . as an added incentive for the Iranians to come to terms.")

Sick's book is wise, even profound. Saunders has written a bureaucrat's apology. And, understanding little about American policy and less about Iran, Christopher in his essay precisely embodies the weaknesses of the Carter administration.

#### DANIEL PIPES

Daniel Pipes, associate professor of strategy at the U.S. Naval War College, formerly served on the Policy Planning Staff of the Department of State.