

# A Failure to Communicate

## PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

*The American Experience and Iran*  
By Barry Rubin  
Illustrated, 428 pp. New York:  
Oxford University Press, \$17.50.

By DANIEL PIPES

**W**HEN President Carter recently dismissed as "ancient history" the question of American help in returning the Shah to his throne in 1953, he ignored the fact that American activities in Iran during the past 40 years constitute the key disagreement today between Iran and the

United States. Ayatollah Khomeini's followers insist on our apology, and we refuse it. What did the United States do there that so enrages some Iranians?

By way of an answer, the State Department has just compiled a 60,000-page record of the American role in Iran since 1941. The Government might have saved itself the trouble. In far fewer pages, Barry Rubin, a young specialist on international affairs at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, has produced a masterly study on exactly this topic. Many books have been published recently about Iranian politics; here is one at last that makes sense of the Shah's reign and Khomeini's revolution, and provides a full, objective assessment of the American role in both eras.

"Paved With Good Intentions" devotes about equal space to United States relations with the two regimes. In both cases, Mr. Rubin argues that "all sides have

Daniel Pipes, a historian at the University of Chicago, is writing a book on the role of Islam in recent politics.

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Drawings by David Johnson

tended to exaggerate the importance of American actions and decisions on events in Iran. In studying the history of the nations' relations one is most impressed with Washington's difficulties in influencing Iranian affairs." The Shah was no American puppet, but a headstrong, independent monarch, and Khomeini's desperate fear of American intervention reflects more on his psychology than on American power.

During the Shah's reign, American-Iranian relations centered on one issue: Iranian military spending. The long-standing differences between the two nations emerged as early as 1947: "The Shah wanted his own full-scale military deterrent" against Russia, while the Americans thought their "military umbrella, rather than a large showy Iranian army, would provide the best deterrent to Moscow's ambitions." From that time on, successive American administrations argued with the Shah about his military expenditures, urging him to spend more on economic and social reforms, with only mixed results.

Already in 1949, "problems were created by the differences between Iranian [military] aid requests and

limited American responses"; these same problems persisted through the next 20 years, despite American military aid totaling \$1.8 billion. During those years, American pressure on the Shah for reforms had some success, but he always showed more interest in modernization for the power it gave him than for its benefits to his subjects.

American restraint on the Shah ended abruptly in 1963, when Richard Nixon came to office and made Iran "the key pillar of support for American interests" in the Persian Gulf area. Pressures for reform stopped, and in May 1972, President Nixon gave the Shah permission to buy from the United States any non-nuclear weapons he

wished. This decision "marked the triumph of the Shah's own long-held view of a proper role for himself over twenty years of State Department reservations." Mr. Rubin argues that by allowing the Shah to make Iran into a major regional power, the United States lost control over him; quite the opposite of what his domestic foes claim, the Shah's enormous military expenditures gave him wide economic and strategic leverage over the United States.

The decision to give the Shah carte blanche will be recognized in time as one of the critical events of our era. Among its many consequences, Mr. Rubin concentrates on two. First, the United States acceded in the Shah's efforts for an increase in oil prices during early 1971 in order to provide him with money for weapons purchases. Adding 10 cents to the 90 cents a barrel he already received seemed harmless at the time, yet this was the key move ushering in the unending escalations leading to the current oil price of about \$32 a barrel.

Second, the vast weapons procurement exacerbated

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# Iran

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economic and social tensions within Iran, amplifying the disparity between rich and poor, distorting cultural values, and bringing into the country thousands of foreign technicians.

"In Iranian eyes, it was the arms-sale program, more than any other aspect of the alliance between the United States and Iran, that compromised the Shah's image with Iranians and led them to believe that the Shah was America's 'man.'"

Although focusing on American relations with Iran since 1978, the second half of "Paved With Good Intentions" at the same time provides the finest analysis of the Islamic revolution yet in print. No summary can do justice to Mr. Rubin's skillful and subtle interpretation of the extraordinary events of the past two-and-a-half years in Iran, his keen feel for Iranian

national culture makes sense of national drama.

Concerning the United States, Mr. Rube explains that "hostility to and the United States was inventing marginal for the humanists but stood at the center of their thinking." "The only explanation Khomeini would accept" for all of Iran's troubles since the Shah's fall was that C.I.A. agents and spies trained by them were working to create them, prevent employees from working, "sabotage, and sabotage factories." Iranian leaders were also pathologically afraid of American intervention. "In Washington's view, the Shah was gone forever, but no words or expressions of goodwill could convince Khomeini of American sincerity."

Despite American attempts to come to terms with the new regime, relations between the two countries grew more tense. Radical Iranians, "committed to the position that America saw its success as inseparably tied to those of the Shah and that therefore it could never accept the Shah's removal from power

... believed that, as in 1953, Washington would plot a counter-revolution." As for the United States, says Mr. Rube, "the importance of the Khomeinist ideology was underestimated [by] the American government [which] never really appreciated how filled with hatred the new Iranian government was toward the United States." In short, each side mistakenly dismissed the other's words as mere rhetoric.

All this culminated in the embassy seizure. Khomeini's followers dreaded normal relations with the United States, which they were convinced would undermine their independence. "Iranians wanted America to stay away. The freer the United States tried to be, the more suspicious were the hardliners." For them, taking the hostages "was good preventative medicine ... to wreck bilateral relations beyond hope of restoration."

Mr. Rube concludes that given this attitude on the part of the Iranians, any attempt to convince them of Washington's conciliatory intentions was doomed in fact. "In the face of the hostages lies in a veritable of domestic Iranian politics: they will be freed only when the Iranians are ready to do so. In the meantime, American threats and ultimatums are futile. ●

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