

Spring 2013

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Recommended Citation

Collins, M. K. (Spring 2013) "The Effect of the Iranian Hostage Crisis on the 1980 Presidential Election," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol2/iss1/6>

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THE EFFECT OF THE IRANIAN HOSTAGE CRISIS ON THE 1980 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

By M. K. Collins

Fifty-two Americans were taken hostage in the United States Embassy in Tehran, Iran on November 4, 1979, exactly one year prior to the 1980 presidential election.¹ President Jimmy Carter had precisely 365 days to save both his presidency and the lives of the innocent public servants who were being held captive by angry Iranian students. Carter damaged and ultimately ended his presidential career by failing to properly resolve the crisis in a way that would ensure the hostages' safety and quick release as well as prevent an economic disaster in America. This dramatic and lengthy crisis came to an end on Inauguration Day, 444 days later, with the release of the last hostages being held. Carter's incompetent management of the situation in Iran played a major role in his inability to be re-elected and consequently helped the Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, to win his first term in office.

The initial spark that caused the students' takeover of the American Embassy in Iran has not been discovered. However, many historians link it to the 1953 Iranian coup, when the United States essentially restored Mohammad Rezā Shāh Pahlavī, the Shah, to power, regardless of whether the Iranian people wanted this or not. The coup d'état, which went against the will of the Iranians, was sponsored by the American government, straining the relationship between the two nations. In 1979, radical Muslim university students were very aware of America's involvement in bringing the Shah back to power, and they were upset at the United States for becoming involved in their domestic affairs and defending their oppressive leader.² These students were enraged by the American government's involvement in their own government. Adding to this, the apparent last straw for these radical Muslims was Carter's granting the Shah a temporary visa to enter the United States for medical treatment while he was in exile. When this happened, the students immediately began protesting outside the embassy, and these protests quickly escalated into an attack on the embassy, which then began the months-long standoff between America and the new Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini.³

Before the Shah was exiled, he frequently bought weapons from America. President Richard Nixon's Administration had capitalized on the sale of these arms by the U.S. to the Shah, which both preserved Iran's military forces and

¹ Pierre Salinger, *America Held Hostage: The Secret Negotiations* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1981), 28.

² Tyler Q. Houlton, "The Impact of the 1979 Hostage Crisis in Iran on the U.S. Presidential Election of 1980" (master's thesis, Georgetown University, 2011), 29.

³ Salinger, 28.

profited America's economy.⁴ The relationship between the two countries relied heavily on the selling of these arms. Iran had a large oil and natural resource supply, and the country paid for the weapons with both oil and revenues.⁵ However, when Carter became President, his administration issued a directive on May 13, 1977, saying, "I have concluded that we must restrain the transfer of conventional arms by recognizing that arms transfers are an exceptional foreign policy implement, to be used only in instances where it can be clearly demonstrated that the transfers contribute to our national security interests."⁶ This hurt American businesses that were producing and selling the arms not only to Iran but also to other nations.

At the end of the revolution in Iran in 1979, the nation cast the Shah into exile. He spent time traveling across the Middle East and eventually settled in Mexico, where he became very ill. Dr. Georges Flandrin, a French doctor, diagnosed him with both spleen and blood cancers. An American doctor, Benjamin H. Kean, declared that, in addition to these cancers, he had obstructive jaundice and needed surgery within the next forty-eight hours.⁷ His doctors encouraged him to go to the United States for treatment since the hospitals there had more technologically advanced equipment than the hospital where he was in Mexico. The Shah did not want to go to the U.S. for treatment because he did not feel welcome there, and U.S. officials also had mixed feelings about the idea. However, Carter decided to admit the Shah to the U.S. during one of his weekly Friday morning foreign policy breakfasts on October 19th.⁸ Three days later, on October 22, he was flown to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where he was quietly admitted into the country, sped through immigration procedures, and then moved to La Guardia Airport in New York.⁹ All of these plans were specifically made to keep the Shah's travels to America a secret, but this plan failed. His arrival at Cornell Medical Hospital in New York began a chain reaction with both domestic and international reverberations.¹⁰

As soon as the news reached Iran that the Shah had been admitted to the U.S., the radical Muslim student groups began gathering and discussing ways to retaliate. One report of the incident states, "The instigator, Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, put together the group of student radicals from the major

⁴ Don Hopkins, "The October Surprise: The Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission, and the 1980 Presidential Election," *Hopkins Online Journal* (December 1988), <http://www.donhopkins.com/drupal/node/104> (accessed November 19, 2012).

⁵ Houlton, 23.

⁶ Jimmy Carter Library, "Carter Presidential Directive 13, 1977," under "Presidential Directives (PD)," <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/pddirectives/pd13.pdf> (accessed November 19, 2012).

⁷ Salinger, 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰ Lyn Boyd, *A King's Exile: The Shah of Iran and Moral Considerations in U.S. Foreign Policy*. Case Study, (Washington D.C.: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 2000). 9.

Universities in Iran in opposition to both the Shah and the United States. This group was formed to show their support for both the Islamic Revolution and their leader Ayatolla Khomeini.¹¹ The students divided into small groups and delegated the jobs to different committees to simplify and speed up their work. Historian and author Mark Bowden records, “They would need about four hundred students to carry out the assault and thousands more to rally in support outside the embassy walls.”¹² Once enough students had been recruited and the plans had been finalized, the Muslim students put their plan into action and stormed the embassy. On the morning of November 4, throngs of students showed up at the embassy to protest America’s support of the Shah and its decision to admit the Shah into the U.S.¹³ They took fifty-two members of the American Embassy hostage, blindfolded them, and paraded them around the city. The students not only caused an international crisis for the country they hated, they also unintentionally caused the downfall of President Jimmy Carter.¹⁴ His decisions throughout the rest of the crisis ultimately led the American people to determine he was inadequate in his ability to lead the country and that the Republican candidate Ronald Reagan was better suited for the job.

As many Presidents’ ratings do after national crises or acts of terrorism, Carter’s approval ratings shot up immediately following the initial takeover in Iran. Pierre Salinger, former White House Press Secretary and ABC News correspondent, stated, “The professionals around Carter, as well as Carter himself, knew that the response was a reaction against the Iranians more than a positive response to the President, and they all knew it wouldn’t last.”¹⁵ In the weeks following, the Americans’ passion transitioned from hate towards Iran to frustration towards their president for not getting the hostages out of captivity. President Carter began deliberating various courses of action with his Cabinet, but the proposed solution did not solve the problem at hand and ended up hurting the nation’s economy in the process.

On November 9, four days after the takeover, Carter declared that the U.S. would cease all shipments of spare parts for military equipment to Iran until the safe release of all hostages.¹⁶ The next day, the President also cut off all oil imports from Iran. This not only further strained the U.S.’s relations with Iran, it also damaged the American economy. Gas prices quickly spiked, as the U.S. relied on Iran for nearly four percent of its daily consumption.¹⁷ In addition to

¹¹ Houlton, 27.

¹² Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in America’s War with Militant Islam* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 9.

¹³ Houlton, 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁵ Salinger, 63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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affecting America's trade with Iran, *Newsweek* magazine reported, "Iran's oil minister Ali Akbar Moinfar warned Iran would stop oil sales to anyone who supported U.S. sanctions. And Iran's Commerce Minister Reza Sadr declared that a U.S. naval blockade in the Persian Gulf 'will result in war.'"¹⁸ The use of force through a naval blockade of the Persian Gulf remained an option for the Carter Administration. However, Carter and his Cabinet preferred to "punish Iran with an economic boycott joined by Japan and some Western nations."¹⁹ Iran's stance discouraged any other countries that may have been willing and able to assist the U.S., for they could not afford to lose oil imports from Iran. In Carter's message to the nation on November 28, he recognized America's problem with dependence on other nations' natural resources, stating, "Our entire nation is vulnerable because of our overwhelming and excessive dependence on oil from foreign countries." He went on to say, "We have got to accept the fact that this dependence is a direct physical threat to our national security."²⁰ Throughout the crisis, the United States' dependence on Iran for oil made the situation more complicated than merely retrieving the captives.

Five days after the halt on oil imports, Carter took another significant step and froze approximately ten billion dollars of Iranian money being held in American banks. Although there were negative effects on the U.S. economy from the oil embargo, Iran suffered much worse economic hardship from the combination of the embargo, economic sanctions, and frozen assets.²¹ With the American economy struggling even a minute amount, however, voters did not want to reelect a candidate that was contributing to the downfall of the domestic economy.

Numerous polls were conducted throughout the presidential campaign in the time leading up to the 1980 election. A Gallup poll conducted between September 28 and October 1, 1979 found that fifty-eight percent of respondents believed inflation, a high cost of living, and taxes were the most significant issues facing the United States a year before the election. Energy, fuel shortage, and the price at the pump came in second place at eighteen percent.²² Nearly a year later, the Columbia Broadcast System (CBS) and the *New York Times* gave a second poll. This poll was two months before Election Day, between September 23 and 25. It showed that thirty-two percent of respondents believed inflation was the biggest problem facing the country. A broad "other economy" came in second place at twenty-one percent.²³ These two polls show that the economic issues during the election cycle were at the forefront of the voters'

¹⁸ John Nielsen, "A Long Wait in Iran," *Newsweek*, January 21, 1980, 36.

¹⁹ Nielsen, 37.

²⁰ Marvin Stone, "Carter's Message on Iran," *US News and World Report*, December 10, 1979, 100.

²¹ Houlton, 44.

²² *Ibid.*, 71.

²³ *Ibid.*

minds. Voters began to see, through the rising prices of gas and other daily goods, that many of the economic challenges they were battling were a direct result of the international crisis at hand. Thus, voters were not only concerned about the domestic policies and economy but also about foreign policies and how they affected the nation. The international crisis, they realized, had taken a toll on the economy and affected daily life in America as the gas prices shot up when the oil imports from Iran suddenly stopped.

Eventually, Khomeini began periodically releasing a few hostages at a time for different reasons. On November 17, he ordered the release of all women and black hostages, as they were minorities like the Iranians.²⁴ Ten others were later freed, and then nineteen more were released in time for Thanksgiving Day. In a collection of Jimmy Carter's Public Presidential Papers, a White House statement released on November 19, 1979 states, "On November 18, three persons were released from the American Embassy and flown to the U.S. Air Force hospital in Wiesbaden, Federal Republic of Germany. On the following day, the Iranian captors released ten more persons, who joined their colleagues in Wiesbaden before they all were returned to the United States."²⁵ Later, six of the hostages escaped Iran with the help of Canada's government and arrived at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware.²⁶ These six diplomats stayed in hiding in the Canadian ambassador's house until their escape by way of a CIA covert extraction.²⁷ While the Carter Administration was pleased that even these few hostages returned to America, Carter knew he needed to implement an official plan for complete extraction to satisfy the American public and win voters' confidence.

This called for a military mission that was designed to rescue the hostages. The plan became known as Operation Eagle Claw. This mission employed a fleet of eight C-130 gunship helicopters, nicknamed "Bluebeard," in addition to Army Rangers and Green Berets. Operation Eagle Claw failed and consequently damaged Carter's image as Commander in Chief. The mission failed mainly due to inadequate and outdated machinery and the inability of the operation's leaders to properly forecast the weather conditions that would ultimately lead to its downfall. The mission began at 7:30 P.M. on April 24, 1980. It was a complicated and covert mission. A report by historian Paul B. Ryan says, "The helicopters would be concealed at a site about 15 miles away. That evening the raiders would be clandestinely driven in vans and trucks to Tehran. About 11 P.M. that night, they would storm the compound, immobilize the guards, and free

²⁴ Salinger, 331.

²⁵ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1977-81), 2142.

²⁶ Salinger, 315.

²⁷ William J. Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 184.

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the hostages.”²⁸ Unfortunately, the helicopters never made it to any of the checkpoints or to Tehran.

Within two hours of the mission’s beginning, one of the eight helicopters was down with mechanical issues. While the helicopters were in route to their first checkpoint, a sandstorm made it difficult to see and caused damage to the machines’ engines.²⁹ The crew soon realized it had already suffered more damage than it could overcome to be able to carry out a successful rescue. As too many mechanical errors had occurred, Major-General Vaught, the commander of the Joint Task Force and leader of the Operation Eagle Claw, radioed D.C. to seek permission from President Carter to abort the mission. Hours later, Carter approved the abort, and the surviving troops returned to the U.S. The death of eight crew members and the wounds of five others added to the number of lives Carter had put at risk throughout the catastrophe. On April 25, 1980, a grief-stricken Carter sat at his desk in front of television crews and announced to the world that he had recalled a failed mission to rescue the hostages.³⁰ The failed mission caused the American public to become even more upset about the crisis in Iran, having now taken even more American lives. Many congressmen and senators were also upset that Carter’s Administration had authorized the use of out-of-date helicopters for such a complex mission.³¹ Even though Americans supported sending out rescue missions to extract the hostages, Carter’s approval ratings went down from forty-seven percent to forty-two percent, according to historian Mark Bowden.³² This complicated things for Carter even more, as he was still responsible for securing the hostages’ release while also trying to improve his odds of winning the ever-nearing election.

The national crisis attracted much media attention. News stations were battling for viewers, and a story of this size immediately catapulted to the headlines. The American Broadcasting Company (ABC) began the show *Nightline* on November 8, 1979, just four days after the hostage crisis started. Ted Koppel, a popular news anchor, hosted the show that night, *America Held Hostage*. The ABC news special covered the entire Iranian affair.³³ The media and news stations had a story that would bring in viewers across the country. ABC made sure the public had access to the latest developments in the crisis in Iran each night. Their rival station, CBS, used Walter Cronkite, a man trusted by Americans, to bring the truth to the public. He kept heavy pressure on Carter by showing the total number of days the hostages had been held captive every night

²⁸ Paul B. Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why it Failed* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 1-2.

²⁹ Houlton, 49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Bowden, 480.

³³ Houlton, 61.

before he signed off.³⁴ In his book entitled *Nightline: History in the Making and the Making of Television*, Koppel claims, “The effect the show ultimately had on the American public notably changed the public discourse on the presidential election of 1980...The nightly reminder of how long the hostages remained in captivity surely impacted the American electorate.”³⁵ With every signoff at the end of the show, viewers were reminded that their president, Jimmy Carter, was failing to bring their fellow Americans home.

Ronald Reagan, the former governor of California had mastered how to handle the media and used this to his advantage throughout the campaign. During the crisis, America’s economy was in shambles. The national media favored Reagan due to his gregarious personality and image and thus sided with him from the start.³⁶ While the media showed favor towards Reagan, Carter experienced quite the opposite. His failure to successfully resolve the situation in the Middle East and the media attention it brought only helped the Republican nominee. According to historian Tyler Houlton, “The Carter Administration’s struggles in foreign policy directly worsened America’s economic crisis at home. The Iranian oil embargo helped cause stagflation—high inflation along with high unemployment—one of the most notable problems of the Carter presidency.”³⁷ Due to the media and news networks showing non-stop coverage and updates concerning the Iran crisis and its impact on daily American life, President Jimmy Carter’s political future became a target in front of the nation every night on their television sets.

While the foreign policy issues that resulted from the hostage crisis may not have directly determined the outcome of the election, the economic problems did. The hostage crisis severely damaged America’s economy. The actions Carter took and the policies he implemented, such as the termination of the selling of arms to Iran and other nations as well as to the cancellation of oil imports, caused gas prices to skyrocket. These high prices in oil and weapons helped to determine how the voting public cast their ballots in the election. Exactly a year after the hostage crisis began, on Election Day, the American electorate chose Republican candidate Ronald Reagan with 489 electoral votes, which beat out Jimmy Carter’s 49.³⁸ Not two hours after Reagan was inaugurated, on January 20, 1981, the last of the hostages were set free.³⁹ While Carter managed to negotiate with the barely standing Iranian government and

³⁴ David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

³⁵ Ted Koppel and Kyle Gibson, *Nightline: History in the Making and the Making of Television* (New York: Time Books, 1996), 5.

³⁶ Houlton, 65.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁸ The Election of 1980, “The American Presidency Project”, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1980> (accessed November 19, 2012).

³⁹ Salinger, 305.

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free the Americans there, his inability to get it done quickly, and without injury to the American economy, was the demise of his career as President of the United States.