

Jimmy Carter's Human Rights Policy and Iran: A Re-examination, 1976-79

John Gilbert
History

In the late 1970s, the Iranian Revolution and the Iranian hostage crisis replaced America's ally, the Shah, with an Islamic Republic that, to the present day, poses a threat to American interests in the Middle East. The two aforementioned events left searing images in the minds of Americans and signaled the beginning of America's global struggle against Islamic extremists. The individual who is often blamed for this "loss" of Iran is former president Jimmy Carter. Because the crises in Iran occurred while Carter was in office, many critics have come to the conclusion that Carter was a "weak and indecisive" president.¹ By examining outcomes alone, they appeared to be correct. Although Carter publicly professed the desire to change America's role in international relations, his foreign policy was not particularly distinctive from his Cold War predecessors in practice, and many critics believe that his unwavering commitment to the Shah helped bring upon the revolution. However, outcomes alone do not tell the whole story. As president, Carter was not blindly idealistic or loyal to the Shah or to the Iranian government, and his policies were not solely responsible for "losing" Iran. In order to pass judgments on the quality of Carter's foreign policy, historians and critics must first carefully research the origins of individual policies in order to determine why Carter chose the particular courses of action that he did, and what other alternatives might have been available.

A foreign policy initiative of Carter's that has especially been misunderstood was his global human rights policy. Like much of the administration's foreign policy, its intentions were to set a new moralistic course in international relations and to move America away from outdated Cold War ideologies.² However, Carter's inconsistent implementation of the policy has led most historians to disregard its importance. Because Carter appeared to defer to the foreign policies of previous Cold War presidents, the issues of human rights and an American foreign policy infused with morals appeared to be little more than shrewd political rhetoric. In terms of Iran, and like most other Cold War foreign policy makers,

¹ Robert Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2000), 280.

² Frank Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century: U.S. Foreign Policy since 1900* (Chicago, IL, 1999), 248.

Carter was reluctant to pursue a drastic new course. For many years, the Shah had been effective at providing a certain level of stability to the Middle East, and Carter did not want to be remembered as the president who upset this delicate balance. Consequently, the issue of human rights would become the wildcard of Carter's term in office. The new and strikingly liberal policy would embolden Iran's intellectual opposition and raised the world's hope in American humanitarianism, but it would also place Carter in a vulnerable political position. As biographer Robert Strong writes, "Carter tried to deal with human rights in a serious fashion without ignoring other foreign policy goals."³ This gave the appearance that Carter was trying to have it all ways, and in the process he would satisfy no one.

This essay will demonstrate what effects Carter's human rights policy had on the Iranian Revolution and Carter's presidency. In particular, my analysis will focus on the first two years of Carter's term, when human rights were especially a priority in his foreign policy and when Iran's various opposition movements experienced resurgences. Before examining Carter's human rights policy in relation to Iran, I will first examine the ideological constructions of the policy to determine Carter's motives for advocating human rights and why Carter placed it so high on his foreign policy agenda. Following this, and through the use of declassified government documents, the Carter administration's inconsistencies will be explored in order to determine how the application of the administration's human rights policy affected internal events in Iran. Particular focus will be given to the Iranian opposition movements and how Carter's promise of human rights affected the nature of their protests. This essay does not absolve Carter or his policies from responsibility, like many of his biographers have done. Nor does it contend that Carter was solely to blame for the unfavorable events that occurred in Iran, like many of his sharpest critics have claimed. What this essay argues is that during the first half of Carter's presidency, the policy of human rights gave his administration an opportunity to change America's relations with Iran and to cut ties with the Shah. More than anything, this essay may be viewed as a case study of how the Carter administration's human rights policy was applied in countries and regions where great American interests were at stake. From this point, it can be determined how the Carter administration formulated and practiced its foreign policy in Iran, the reasons Carter chose to maintain his support for the Shah, how Carter's support of the Shah affected Iran's internal struggles, and how the policy of human rights continues to obscure his legacy as a foreign policy maker.

³ Strong, 96-97.

The idea of a foreign policy framed around human rights publicly emerged first in 1976 as part of the Democratic Party's election platform.⁴ It was conceived by Carter and other Democrats as a way for America to return to its "fundamental liberal principles that all too often had been ignored or even ridiculed by cold war foreign policy professionals."⁵ According to Carter, American foreign policy had been promoting repression instead of progress.⁶ A year before the election, Carter had expressed concern in his autobiography, titled *Why Not the Best*, that the U.S. had fallen away from morality in its foreign policy.⁷ In Carter's eyes, recent foreign policy makers, notably Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, had promoted a policy that defended American interests at the price of disregarding morality and America's duty to uphold a high standard in the world.⁸ This doctrine of "realpolitik" was first implemented in the U.S. by America's original "Cold Warriors," such as George Kennan, and had been applied by many American leaders throughout the Cold War.⁹ It stated that the U.S. must set aside its moralistic policies and instead pursue a careful, pragmatic, and realistic foreign policy. A foreign policy crafted around morals and idealism, according to the doctrine, only agitated nationalism and communism in the third world, and would lead to more violence and upheaval, thus compromising American interests abroad.¹⁰ However, Carter believed it was unnecessary for American foreign policy makers to choose between morality and interests; both could be achieved if the overall moral standard in the world was raised. Carter believed it was the duty of American leaders to construct a foreign policy "rooted in our values" that could properly "serve mankind".¹¹ In addition, Carter and the Democrats believed America's realpolitik was playing directly into the hands of the Soviet Union. According to this thinking, the U.S. was in no position to call attention to the "deplorable repression" sponsored by the Soviets, since the U.S. itself was supporting authoritarian dictators for the sake of its interests.¹² To Carter, the lack of morality in foreign policy exemplified a broader trend of amoral American

⁴ Joshua Muravchik, *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy* (Lanham, MD, 1986), 2.

⁵ Ninkovich, 249.

⁶ Michael Ledeen and William Lewis, *Debate: The American Failure in Iran* (New York, NY, 1980), 68-69.

⁷ Muravchik, 1.

⁸ H.W. Brands, "The Idea of the National Interest," *Diplomatic History* 23 (Spring 1999): 258.

⁹ For an explanation of "realpolitik" in the context of American moral and humanitarian initiatives, see Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love, The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), chapter 10.

¹⁰ Hoffman, 255

¹¹ Brands, 258.

¹² Ledeen and Lewis, 68.

policy that culminated in the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation.¹³ By reinstituting morality at home and abroad through the promotion of global human rights, Carter believed he could restore the standing of America's political institutions, both in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of the American people.

Politically, Carter's human rights policy was perceived as being a "no lose issue".¹⁴ According to Carter's speech writer during the 1976 campaign, "liberals liked human rights because it involved political freedom" and an end to America's support of dictatorships, while "conservatives liked it because it involved criticisms of Russia."¹⁵ In addition, even though the American public may have disapproved of the tactics employed by Nixon and Kissinger's foreign policy, they did not widely disapprove of the results.¹⁶ Carter rightly sensed that the public did not want to sail too far off the foreign policy course set by the Republicans. However, promoting continuity would not win Carter an election.¹⁷ By advocating for human rights, Carter could set himself apart from the Republicans without appearing to be too radical. Beyond bipartisanship, human rights were perceived as the glue that could hold the Democratic Party together, which had been bitterly divided in the previous two election losses.¹⁸ In the mid-1970s, the general public continued to hold Democrats responsible for the escalation of the Vietnam War under President Lyndon Johnson.¹⁹ Therefore, the promotion of global human rights and policies that distanced the Democrats from the Cold War era could help them escape their damaging legacy of the 1960s.

However, the motives behind Carter's desire to restore morality and promote global human rights went much deeper than politics. His personal experiences as a southerner growing up in Georgia influenced his future decisions as a foreign policy maker.²⁰ Carter's Christian background and his mother's atypical beliefs heavily affected the mindset of the budding politician. Young Jimmy had been an anomaly in the American segregated south because he spent a considerable amount of time interacting with African Americans as a child.²¹ In addition, his mother had participated in the Peace Corps in India and believed very strongly in

¹³ Ninkovich, 249.

¹⁴ Muravchik, 2.

¹⁵ Muravchik, 2.

¹⁶ Strong, 73.

¹⁷ Strong, 72-73.

¹⁸ Muravchik, 2.

¹⁹ Muravchik, 2-3.

²⁰ For a brief explanation of Carter's upbringing and the origins to his support for human rights, see Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 243-245.

²¹ Borstelmann, 243.

desegregation.²² These experiences and ingrained beliefs would profoundly affect Carter's mindset towards race relations and human rights for all people. When Carter served as a member of a local school board as a young man, he refused to join the White Citizens' Council that strongly opposed integration in public schools.²³ Although he did not always publicize his beliefs for fear of political backlash, Carter's human rights policy was derived from an upbringing in which he witnessed the dilemmas of an unequal society first hand. As president, Carter would draw upon these experiences as he attempted to bring human rights and equality to the political limelight.

Carter entered the Oval Office in January of 1977 believing that the Cold War had neared its conclusion, and that the traditional fight against the Soviet Union and communism had become outdated.²⁴ In recent years, Nixon and Kissinger's foreign policy, no matter how morally bankrupt, had brought about a détente between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and the Cold War seemed to be burning itself out. As historian H.W. Brands remarks, Carter "strove manfully to refashion the national interest to suit the new post-Cold War era."²⁵ New methods and ideologies had to be implemented in order for America to restore its standing in the world and make amends for its ill-conceived war in Vietnam. As Carter stated, an "inordinate fear of communism" drove American foreign policy makers to "fight fire with fire" in areas of the world that otherwise were unimportant to the U.S. The "tragic experience of Vietnam", according to Carter, had shown Americans that "fire is better quenched with water".²⁶ Although it would soon be proven that the Cold War was far from being over, a "soft" foreign policy promoting human rights initially appeared to be the solution for the new global picture that Carter envisioned.

In his inaugural address, Carter stressed that America's "commitment to human rights must be absolute."²⁷ In the early weeks and months of 1977, Carter, along with several key members of his administration, set out to articulate what exactly he meant by "human rights".²⁸ Although there were other key elements to Carter's foreign policy—such as scaling back armaments and nuclear weapons, improving relations with America's allies, and assisting developing nations—human rights, at

²² Borstelmann, 243.

²³ Borstelmann, 244.

²⁴ Ninkovich, 248.

²⁵ Brands, 258-259.

²⁶ Brands, 258.

²⁷ Peter G. Bourne, *Jimmy Carter: A Comprehensive Biography from Plains to Postpresidency* (New York, NY, 1997), 384.

²⁸ For an explanation of Carter's human rights policy, as defined by the administration, see Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *Human Rights and American Foreign Policy* (Gambier, OH, 1982), chapter 1.

least publicly, was the administration's top priority.²⁹ In a speech delivered by the new Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, in April 1977, Vance explained that all persons of the world possessed the "right to be free from governmental violation of the integrity of the person."³⁰ This meant that America must treat harshly those governments who sponsored "torture; cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; and arbitrary arrest or imprisonment." In addition, Vance stated that "civil and political liberties" must be upheld, and that "vital needs," such as "food, shelter, health care, and education," must be ensured for all citizens. It appeared as though the Carter administration would grant no exceptions to human rights violators. In terms of the Shah of Iran, the administration privately expressed concern in classified correspondence that their traditional ally was exercising "unsatisfactory" human rights practices.³¹ Although not known at the time, the way in which Carter chose to address these practices in Iran would turn out to be the major foreign policy issue of his presidency.

In order to enforce the human rights policy, the Carter administration realized that clear consequences had to be established for violating nations. The leverage for this was American humanitarian aid and financial assistance. To ensure that nations were in compliance with the human rights standards set by the administration, as well those of the UN and Amnesty International, the Carter administration dangled the carrot of the American dollar.³² As Carter stated early in his presidency:

In distributing the scarce resources of our foreign assistance program, we will demonstrate that our deepest affinities are with nations which commit themselves to a democratic path to development. Towards regimes which persist in wholesale violations of human rights we will not hesitate to convey our outrage nor will we pretend that our relations are unaffected.³³

Many of the regimes in question, including the Shah's government in Iran, relied on American financial and military support for survival. By stating that human rights violators would no longer be American aid recipients, the Carter

²⁹ Bourne, 385.

³⁰ For a summary of Vance's speech from April 22, 1977, see Kirkpatrick, 1-2.

³¹ Classified memo: "Significance of Iran to United States Global Policy and Regional Objectives," January 1977, National Security Archive, *Iran, the Making of U.S. policy, 1977-1980*, edited by Eric Hooglund (Alexandria, VA: Chadwyck-Healey, 1990), Accessed through University of Delaware Library Microfiche.

³² Ladeen and Lewis, 68-69.

³³ Michael Stohl, David Carleton, Steven E. Johnson, "Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Assistance from Nixon to Carter," *Journal of Peace Research* 21 (September 1984): 222.

administration was hoping to force nations into compliance. The nations that did comply were supposed to receive considerable amounts of humanitarian and economic assistance. Since many of the nations in question were poor and politically unorganized, they were also extremely dependent on American assistance. Carter believed that not receiving American aid was a choice most countries would not dare to make.

However, some nations would challenge Carter's resolve. The policy's greatest test would come in countries where the U.S. possessed historic mutual interest-based relationships. The clearest example of this in the 1970s was Iran. For years, American leaders had maintained a delicate relationship with Iran's government under the Shah. In 1953 the CIA covertly participated in a coup in which "the pluralistic regime of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq" was overthrown and replaced with the Shah.³⁴ The Shah, or Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was descended from a family dynasty that had long claimed authority as the historic rulers of Iran.³⁵ The close relationship the Pahlavi dynasty shared with Great Britain and the United States encouraged the CIA to reinstall the Shah to power. The fear of Soviet expansionism, combined with Iran's geographic position on the Soviet Union's southern border, aroused enough fears in Washington to plot a replacement to Mosaddeq's government. Also, the "loss" of China in 1949 and the war in Korea beginning in 1950 heightened concerns that other nations in Asia and the Middle East would quickly succumb to communism.³⁶ Additionally, an unfriendly Iranian government could have devastating consequences for Western economies heavily reliant on imported Iranian oil.³⁷ The end result of the coup was a puppet regime in Iran, and the Shah legitimized his government through authoritarianism and repression.³⁸ A mutual alliance was established in which the U.S. and Iran defended one another's interests. The U.S., through the Shah, could contain communism and ensure access to Iran's oil, and the Shah could maintain authority and power in Iran through U.S. military aid and technical assistance. In 1955 the Shah even signed his country into the Baghdad Pact, which stated that its purpose was "the containment of the Soviet Union" in the region's affairs.³⁹

³⁴ For a historical framework of the 1953 coup and its implications in future American foreign policy, see Mark J. Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* (Ithaca, NY, 1991).

³⁵ For a history of the Pahlavi dynasty and the Shah's family lineage, see Marvin Zonis, *Majestic Failure: the Fall of the Shah* (Chicago, IL, 1991), chapter 2.

³⁶ A brief evaluation of Iran in the context of early American Cold War policy can be found in Gasiorowski, 50-56.

³⁷ Gasiorowski, 82.

³⁸ Gasiorowski, 152.

³⁹ Christos Ioannides, *America's Iran: Injury and Catharsis* (Lanham, MD, 1984), 3.

As much as the Shah was favorable to the interests of the U.S., he was equally as detrimental towards the humanitarian situation in his own country. Even amidst the Shah's many reforms, the underclass of Iranian society showed little upward mobility.⁴⁰ In addition, the civil rights and political freedoms in Iran under the Shah were generally regarded as deplorable. Although the middle class in Iranian society grew steadily, the extent to which Iranians could conduct collective political action was extremely limited. The historic liberal opposition to the Shah, the National Front, was almost completely shut out of the political process.⁴¹ The Iranian secret police, SAVAK, would arrest political opponents without cause, imprison them, and sentence them without trial.⁴² Traditional political uprisings and protests through the media were also ruthlessly suppressed. This environment created a climate of fear that helped to secure the Shah's power. Much of the technical apparatuses that SAVAK used to gather intelligence and repress political opponents of the Shah were supplied by the U.S.⁴³ As the Shah's power waned in 1970s, SAVAK became increasingly violent; assassinations, bombings, staged fires, and torture were all used to discourage Iranians from acting in opposition to the Shah. This led Amnesty International to declare in 1975 that "no country in the world has a worse record in human rights than Iran."⁴⁴ For many years, the Shah got away with brutal governing tactics because the U.S. supported his regime. However, by 1977, this era appeared to be coming to an end as Carter's human rights policy spoke directly to the type of humanitarian and civil rights violations that the Shah had relied on for years to maintain authority.

In the early months of his presidency, Carter did not publicly address the Shah's human rights violations, saving his concerns for private conversations. Carter realized that he had to choose his public pronouncements carefully, lest he jeopardize American's considerable interests in Iran. As a confidential State Department memo explained, "A frontal attack by the United States government on the human rights situation in Iran will backfire."⁴⁵ However, the Shah took notice that Carter was dissimilar in many ways to most other Cold War-era presidents. Carter's vow to promote human rights in every corner of the globe signaled to the Shah that his special relationship with the U.S. might be affected.

⁴⁰ The Shah's repressive tactics impacted the economic as well as social situation in Iranian society. For further detail, see Gasiorowski, chapter 5.

⁴¹ See Gasiorowski, chapter 7.

⁴² For a brief explanation of SAVAK and other repressive police and paramilitary Iranian groups and activities sponsored by the Shah, see Gasiorowski, 151-165.

⁴³ Gasiorowski, 158-159.

⁴⁴ Gasiorowski, 157.

⁴⁵ Classified Memo: "USG Actions Over the Next Six Months," June 1977, National Security Archive, *Iran, the Making of U.S. policy, 1977-1980*, Accessed through University of Delaware Library Microfiche.

The first major sign of this change was the decision to restructure arms sales to Tehran.⁴⁶ To help ensure that his government's relationship with the U.S. did not wane, the Shah began to relax restrictions against political protesters in the spring of 1977.⁴⁷ Iran's liberal nationalists took this as an opportunity to "start their campaign against repression."⁴⁸ In June of 1977, three members of Iran's liberal movement published a short letter demanding "the respect of constitutionalism and human rights."⁴⁹ In addition, the newly revived Iranian intellectual circle known as the "Writers Association" published a similar letter signed by forty members later in the month. As one of the signers of the second letter stated, "The government wouldn't dare jail us in the present climate on human rights."⁵⁰ Many liberal opposition groups began to meet regularly and publicly. SAVAK and other security forces were arresting fewer protestors and were employing less violent tactics than in previous years.⁵¹ The relaxation of repression due to Carter's human rights policy allowed the liberal opposition a chance to grow and flourish. The members of these groups varied in occupation and ranged from doctors and lawyers to writers, intellectuals, and other professionals.⁵² The common goal of these groups was to force the Shah to put an end to his despotic practices and uphold Iran's 1906 Constitution.⁵³

In addition to relaxing repression and allowing for some measures of peaceful protest, the Shah also responded to the Carter administration's private pressures that International Red Cross volunteers be allowed to inspect Iran's human rights situation.⁵⁴ In the summer of 1977, as the Shah allowed the Red Cross access to Iranian prisons and Iranian courts, the Carter administration began to take notice.⁵⁵ As a confidential memo stated in the summer of 1977, the Carter administration was pleased by the Shah's "recent significantly more open approach to human rights matters."⁵⁶ Another state department official also noted that the Shah had made "significant and important developments in the field of human rights" that

⁴⁶ See Ladeen and Lewis, chapter 3.

⁴⁷ Siavoshi, 130.

⁴⁸ Siavoshi, 134.

⁴⁹ Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 17-19.

⁵⁰ Kurzman, 18.

⁵¹ Kurzman, 18.

⁵² Siavoshi, 130-140.

⁵³ Siavoshi, 130-132.

⁵⁴ Classified Memo: "USG Objectives," June 1977, National Security Archive, *Iran, the Making of U.S. policy, 1977-1980*, Accessed through University of Delaware Library Microfiche.

⁵⁵ Siavoshi, 131.

⁵⁶ Classified Memo: "USG Objectives," June 1977, National Security Archive, *Iran, the Making of U.S. policy, 1977-1980*, Accessed through University of Delaware Library Microfiche.

year.⁵⁷ It was clear that the Shah was at least trying to meet the human rights principles that Vance articulated in his April speech. Because of this, Carter's relationship with the Shah began to improve by the fall of 1977. The administration believed that the Shah was moving in a liberal direction and Carter believed that it was safe to work out a new arms deal with Tehran.⁵⁸ Of course, the Shah's reforms were largely for show, as he desperately tried to avoid falling out of Washington's favor. In the same vein, Carter granted the Shah a great deal of leniency because of the unique relationship between the two nations. As a classified memo titled "Human Rights Goals – Iran" stated in the first part of 1978, "U.S. interests in Iran must be seen against a complex set of factors," which included "the unusually broad and valuable relationship between the two countries" and "Iran's ancient tradition of authoritarian government."⁵⁹ By framing the relationship with Iran in this context, the Carter administration enabled the Shah to view his relationship with Washington as purely interest-based and not pursuant on Iran's commitment to human rights. The Carter administration also intentionally refrained from keeping human rights-related data on Iran in order to put off having to take action against Tehran.⁶⁰ The Shah would not have to democratize, as long as he was saving political face by meeting Carter's minimum human rights guidelines and was protecting American interests in the region. This type of relationship would spell trouble for both leaders in the second half of Carter's term.

The warming of relations between Carter and the Shah allowed both leaders to go ahead with the Shah's scheduled year-end visit to Washington in November of 1977. Amidst a barrage of protest outside the White House, the two leaders met inside for talks that mainly focused on oil, weapons deals, and the economic issues of the world.⁶¹ The Shah's human rights practices were touched upon but were in no way the main focus of the talks. This agenda was hardly in line with Carter's public pronouncement that human rights were his administration's top foreign policy priority. Following the November talks, the White House released a statement to the press indicating that "the two men had reviewed the positive steps Iran was taking on the matter of human rights."⁶² A secret State Department paper

⁵⁷ Kurzman, 19.

⁵⁸ John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-Evaluation* (New York, NY, 1995), 162-163.

⁵⁹ Classified Memo: "Human Rights Goals – Iran," May 1978, National Security Archive, *Iran, the Making of U.S. policy, 1977-1980*, Accessed through University of Delaware Library Microfiche.

⁶⁰ Zonis, 265-267.

⁶¹ For a summary of the November 1977 meeting between Carter and the Shah in Washington, see Kurzman, 19-21; Dumbrell, 162-64.

⁶² Kurzman, 20.

addressed to Carter stated that “the Shah left Washington ‘profoundly satisfied’ with the results of his talks with you” and that he was equally “gratified by your strong reiteration of the special relationship with his country.”⁶³ This illustrates how the president and the Shah were mutually relieved that human rights had not gotten in the way of seemingly more important matters, such as oil prices.

Much of the same sentiments were expressed during Carter's New Year's visit to Tehran. In preparation for the trip, the Deputy Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, addressed a memo to Carter outlining five imperative American foreign policy objectives relating to Iran that Carter was encouraged to pursue in his talks with the Shah.⁶⁴ They included energy and oil concerns, nuclear cooperation, and Middle East stability. Christopher's last listed objective was human rights concerns, and only as they related to maintaining Iranian law and order. The low priority given to human rights would continue during the actual visit. Even as Iran's human rights situation was once again deteriorating in the last three months of 1977, Carter was encouraged by State Department officials not to pressure the Shah on the issue for fear that the Shah would not “prefer it”.⁶⁵ The toughest action Carter was urged to take in regards to human rights in Iran was to “encourage the Shah to continue the positive course” established in the spring and early summer of 1977.⁶⁶ During the New Year's talks, Carter gently broached the subject of human rights and was once again reassured by the Shah that his regime was very much concerned with human rights for all of its citizens. This appeared to be good enough for Carter, because on New Year's Eve, he would deliver the greatest praise for the Shah of his presidency. At a state dinner that night, Carter toasted the Shah by claiming that “Iran, because of great leadership, is an island of stability.” Carter continued by stating that the Iranian people loved and admired their leader, and that a “remarkable” transformation had taken place in Iran due to the Shah's great “wisdom,” “judgment,” and “sensitivity.”⁶⁷ Although some of

⁶³ Classified State Department Paper: “II: Setting,” November 1977, National Security Archive, *Iran, the Making of U.S. policy, 1977-1980*, Accessed through University of Delaware Library Microfiche.

⁶⁴ Classified Memo: “Warren Christopher to The President,” December 1977, National Security Archive, *Iran, the Making of U.S. policy, 1977-1980*, Accessed through University of Delaware Library Microfiche.

⁶⁵ Classified State Department Paper: “II: Setting,” November 1977, National Security Archive, *Iran, the Making of U.S. policy, 1977-1980*, Accessed through University of Delaware Library Microfiche.

⁶⁶ Classified State Department Paper: “II: Setting,” November 1977, National Security Archive, *Iran, the Making of U.S. policy, 1977-1980*, Accessed through University of Delaware Library Microfiche.

⁶⁷ Full remarks of Carter's toast can be found in: *Public Papers of Presidents: Jimmy Carter, 1977*, Accessed through Santa Barbara, CA: University of California [online], 2220-2222.

Carter's hyperbole must be understood in the context of the festive environment, his toast cannot fully be dismissed because it did represent the administration's reinforcement of its commitment to the Shah.

The friendly manner of the Carter-Shah meetings in November and the new year encouraged the Shah to believe that his relationship with Washington was solidly intact. This allowed the Shah to once again disregard human rights in Iran since he had little fear of reprisal from his lifeline, the United States. Crackdowns on liberal opposition groups by the police and SAVAK intensified in the winter months of 1977, including those on opposition meetings and peaceful protests.⁶⁸ The correlation between the Carter-Shah meetings and an increase in government-sponsored repression appears high. Beating, arrests, and covert violent attacks against "freedom seekers" all increased as 1977 came to a close.⁶⁹ The Muslim wing of opposition fared even worse. SAVAK launched a campaign in the late months of 1977 and the early months of 1978 to eliminate the leaders of "clandestine guerrilla groups."⁷⁰

However, by the middle of 1978 it became clear that the Shah's strategy had backfired, as the many resistance factions began to join together in order to achieve the common goal of ousting the Shah.⁷¹ The Shah's violent tactics especially encouraged the poor masses of Iran's urban centers to join the emerging Islamic movement. State sponsored repression had encouraged many Iranians to collectively rally around their religious institutions located in large urban areas. Demographically, Iran had transformed from a rural nation into an urban one with fifty percent of the total population residing in towns or cities by the late 1970s.⁷² This dense concentration of population "provided the occasion for substantial displays of mass protest" that would not have been possible years before.⁷³ It also allowed the Islamic movement to preach its simple message to Iran's large population of poor Muslims—that the Shah was degrading "Islamic standards of behavior and belief" and thus had to be replaced.⁷⁴ Religion, according to some historians, was "the most efficient vehicle for channeling the revolutionary mood"

⁶⁸ Kurzman, 20-21.

⁶⁹ Kurzman, 20-21.

⁷⁰ Ladeen and Lewis, 99.

⁷¹ For a comparative evaluation of the secular liberal opposition and the religious Muslim movements in Iran, see Ladeen and Lewis, chapter 4; Kurzman, chapters 5, 6, and 7.

⁷² For a brief explanation of how Iran's changing demographics affected the nature of the Iranian revolution, see Fred Halliday, "The Genesis of the Iranian Revolution," *Third World Quarterly* 1 (Oct. 1979):13-15.

⁷³ Halliday, 14.

⁷⁴ Ladeen and Lewis, 105.

among the masses.⁷⁵ The liberal opposition did not possess this advantage, as they preached reform messages that most of Iran's Muslim citizens could not relate to their own circumstances. The outcome in 1978 was that Iran's liberal movement weakened while the Islamic movement gained strength.⁷⁶ The result for Carter was a nightmarish scenario, as his "island of stability" was about to become anything but.

Although the liberal opponents of the Shah were not fond of America's historic intervention in Iranian affairs, their yearnings for a liberal and democratic society matched up well with Carter's human rights policy and America's founding principles. In contrast, the radical Islamic movement expressed no desire to modernize Iran or embrace liberal reforms.⁷⁷ As the Shah continued to waver on human rights, and as the religious movement gained strength, the question over why Carter was not able to shift course and endorse Iran's moderate liberal reformers remains. As explained earlier, liberal nationalists originally considered Carter's human rights policy to be an opportunity for mobilization. The tactics of these liberal opposition groups were almost completely non-violent, and its members consisted of professional and intellectual citizens. They professed their displeasure by writing pamphlets, demonstrating in small groups, and publishing newspapers.⁷⁸ This non-violent civil disobedience should have appealed to a man like Carter, whose own personal experiences included a southern upbringing in the midst of the American civil rights movement. The liberal opposition of Iran gave Carter an opportunity to fully implement his human rights policy and support a much needed and peaceful regime change in Iran. The public principles of Carter's human rights policy, as stated by Vance in April of 1977, were very much consistent with the demands of Iran's liberal opposition. However, these reasons were not enough for Carter to terminate his relationship with the Shah. The Shah may have been a world class human rights violator, but he had been the safe option for many years. Carter, like his predecessors, was reluctant to give up on America's friend and ally.

Both Carter and the Shah were caught off guard in the latter part of 1978 when protests in Iran began to bolster popular resentment.⁷⁹ One of the reasons for this

⁷⁵ Gholam R. Afkhami, *The Iranian Revolution: Thantos on a National Scale* (Washington, D.C., 1985), 201.

⁷⁶ The Islamic movement in Iran did not fully take hold until the second half of 1978. With the Shah's power waning, the liberals possessed a real opportunity to spread their movement and attain power. For an explanation of why this did not come to fruition, see Afkhami, chapters 6 and 7; Gasiorowski, chapter 7.

⁷⁷ Afkhami, 209.

⁷⁸ For a summary of the liberal oppositions protest tactics, see Siavoshi, 134-137.

⁷⁹ Zonis, 254.

was the reliance of Carter and the Shah on SAVAK intelligence briefings. Because the U.S. Foreign Service, including the CIA, did not collect data on Iran in order to hide human rights violations, SAVAK became the eyes and ears for the conditions on the ground.⁸⁰ The reason for the lack of U.S.-produced intelligence is because Carter remained adamant in allowing the Shah to work out his internal problems without covert or direct American interference.⁸¹ However, this stance led to flawed intelligence that only told the Shah what he wanted to hear, which in turn misled American foreign policy makers as well. As an intelligence briefing summarized from September 1978: “the Shah is expected to remain actively in power over the next ten years.”⁸² In disgust over such a misevaluation, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives would later state in a study on Iranian intelligence that “no reports based on contacts with the religious opposition had appeared” before late 1977, and that “there was absolutely no reporting on the internal situation during the first quarter of 1978.”⁸³ Carter’s inaction on Iranian matters was directly connected to the misleading intelligence reports he received, which led him to believe that the Shah had accepted the message of promoting human rights and that political opposition in Iran was still moderate and peaceful in nature. In addition, these reports encouraged the perception that the Shah’s power was firm. However, as 1978 came to an end, this fallacy began to reveal itself. As far back as January 1977, before Carter’s inauguration, the State Department produced a policy paper stating that a “smooth transfer of power” in Iran was unlikely after the fall or death of the Shah because of Tehran’s reliance on “one man” leadership.⁸⁴ The fact that Carter knew this but did not take steps to line up a proper successor in Iran shows that he had been misinformed of the real political situation. Even Carter, whose close personal ties to the Shah have been well documented, would likely have withdrawn his support earlier if he was aware that the Shah’s government was on the brink of collapse.

However, by the end of 1978, even misleading intelligence reports could not mask the truth. Protests were increasingly turning into violent unrest, and the Shah’s security forces became reluctant to use force to suppress them.⁸⁵ Amidst this turmoil, Carter finally began to publicly distance himself from the Shah. In

⁸⁰ For an explanation of American intelligence failures in relation to the Iranian Revolution, see Zonis, chapter 10.

⁸¹ Zonis, 266.

⁸² Zonis, 268.

⁸³ Zonis, 265.

⁸⁴ Classified memo: “Significance of Iran to United States Global Policy and Regional Objectives,” January 1977, National Security Archive, *Iran, the Making of U.S. policy, 1977-1980*, Accessed through University of Delaware Library Microfiche.

⁸⁵ A detailed description of the Iranian Revolution in 1978 and 1979 can be found in Zonis, chapter 10.

December 1978, he stated that although his administration would “prefer the Shah to maintain a major role in the government,” it was “in the hands of the Iranian people” and he would not intervene with U.S. forces to bail out the Shah.⁸⁶

Carter's sentiments signaled the death knell for the Iranian leader as he could no longer rely on the American umbrella to keep him safe. As 1979 began, it was too late for Carter to distance the U.S. from Iran's problems—the historical relationship between the two nations was too deep and his own words and actions had been too supportive of the Shah. The Islamic movement led by Ayatollah Khomeini referenced the Shah's closeness with America as a way of agitating the Iranian masses and bolstering the revolution.⁸⁷ By the end of the next year, an Islamic Republic was solidly established in Tehran, and the Shah was receiving treating for his cancer in exile.

The Shah had served as America's greatest and most important ally in the region. He had allowed the U.S. cheap and unrestricted access to Iran's oil, and had presided over a long period of Middle East stability. However, with the Shah out of power, America suddenly appeared vulnerable. Following the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, Carter was forced to institute the “Carter Doctrine” in his 1980 State of the Union address. In it, he warned that “an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States.”⁸⁸ Carter's early pronouncements were correct: the U.S. had entered a new period in history. However, it was not an era in which outdated Cold War ideologies would be replaced with new liberal foreign initiatives, such as human rights. Instead, as historian Andrew Bacevich explains, the last two years of Carter's presidency marked the beginning of a new effort on the part of American foreign policy makers to “guarantee the ever-increasing affluence” of American society, meaning the protection of America's access to cheap Middle Eastern oil.⁸⁹ Since the U.S. had lost their most reliable ally in the Middle East, American leaders felt compelled to forcefully defend its interests in the region in the years that followed. In the face of such momentous problems, it is easy to understand why Carter's human rights policy in Iran has been misrepresented and even forgotten about.

Carter's human rights policy also failed in Iran because, much to his chagrin, it could not escape the boundaries or the ideologies of the Cold War. As stated previously in this essay, Carter believed that America had entered a new phase in

⁸⁶ Zonis, 257.

⁸⁷ Ladeen and Lewis, 107.

⁸⁸ For an explanation of Carter's last two years in office in the contexts of the Carter Doctrine and the importance of Middle East oil to American prosperity, see Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism* (Oxford, U.K., 2005), chapter 7.

⁸⁹ Bacevich, 182-183.

foreign relations upon his election in 1976. He believed that the traditional fight against Soviet communism had become outdated and unnecessarily taxing to the U.S., both in dollars and in American effort. However, even before the fall of the Shah and the Carter Doctrine, Carter's foreign policy in practice was still framed around the same concerns as his predecessors. Carter's promotion of human rights indirectly supported the "realpolitik" doctrine he sought to escape. Although professing different rhetoric in public, Carter's secret correspondence within his administration was littered with references to the Soviet threat and containing communism. As Frank Ninkovich explains, "human rights, because they epitomized the enormous contrast between the ways of life created by the two ideologies, was also useful as a symbolic way of fighting the Cold War."⁹⁰ Since Carter practiced a foreign policy very similar to that of his Cold War predecessors, he could have framed human rights as a tool of fighting global communism. But by insisting that his foreign policy and human rights initiatives existed outside of the Cold War, Carter confused foreign governments and alienated the very groups that a pro-human rights policy was best suited for. Iran's liberal opposition is a perfect example. Carter could never bring himself to support Iran's liberal nationalist movement as a successor regime, even though his human rights policy appeared to speak directly to what they were advocating for. The leftist leanings of the liberal opposition and their supposed sympathies to communists could never be accepted by Carter or any American foreign policy maker.⁹¹ This was predetermined by traditional Cold War concerns, whether Carter acknowledged it or not. Similarly, and following perfectly with the doctrine of "realpolitik," Carter put aside his moralistic impulses in Iran because of the Soviet Union's geographical proximity and the desire for regional stability.⁹² For the first twenty-five years of the Cold War, the U.S. had formed a "special commitment" to the Middle East by supporting especially oppressive monarchies in Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁹³ Carter was in no way ready for America to withdrawal its historic support from such oil-rich nations, even if their leaders blatantly continued to deny human rights. Once again, Carter's human rights policy was halted by Cold War realities and American interests. In the last two years of his presidency, Carter would be forced to publicly embrace his failures and accept the continued existence of the Cold War. The Carter Doctrine, which came on the heels of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and the beginning of the Iranian hostage crisis, put

⁹⁰ Ninkovich, 249.

⁹¹ Siavoshi, 161-162.

⁹² Ninkovich, 249.

⁹³ Ladeen and Lewis, 86-87.

Carter into the uncomfortable position of ratcheting up military spending and admitting that the Cold War had not yet reached a conclusion.⁹⁴

The result of this was a foreign policy and a president that appeared inconsistent and indecisive. The great moral principles that had driven his entire life seemed lost in Carter's last two years in office, as he was forced to go against his initial policy of human rights and reinvigorate the Cold War. However, this does not mean his administration's human rights policy was directed by empty idealism. As biographer Peter Bourne states, "Carter was guided by a consistent set of values and beliefs" that remained with him for his entire life, including while he was president.⁹⁵ Carter was not a political "flip-flopper," nor did he hastily throw together different policies in hopes that something positive would result.⁹⁶ Carter was a firm proponent of human rights and remains so to the present day. His human rights policy has been much maligned and yet Carter has never regretted it; ideological consistency has never been his problem. However, Carter ultimately fell short because, for over half of his presidency, he refused to acknowledge that he was a Cold War president. Similarly, and for various reasons, Carter could not change course in his official Iranian policy, even as the Iranian revolution engulfed and destroyed the Shah's regime. His human rights policy appeared to give his administration a great opportunity to end America's client relationship with Iran and to formulate a new Middle East policy for the post-Cold War world Carter envisioned. However, Carter, like most other Cold War presidents, could not commit to the unknown and felt it was safer to continue the foreign policy already in place. The fear of being responsible for losing Iran, what historian Frank Ninkovich would define as the fear of a "terrible failure," moved Carter to continue America's support for the anemic Shah.⁹⁷ A regime change did eventually come to Iran, but it came in the form of a revolution that was unfavorable to the interests of the U.S. Even amidst these outcomes, Carter stated in his memoirs that the effectiveness of his human rights policy should not always have been measured by "inches, pounds, or dollars"; better judgments of him were to be found in the "revival of hope" and the "lifting of the human spirit" in oppressed peoples.⁹⁸ If this standard was universally applied, than Carter's human

⁹⁴ Ninkovich, 251-252.

⁹⁵ Bourne, 508.

⁹⁶ Strong, 280.

⁹⁷ "The fear of the terrible failure" derives from Ninkovich's idea of "Wilsonianism" or "crisis internationalism". It states that American leaders have become involved in world affairs in the twentieth century primarily to protect against threats to U.S. interests and defend against "terrible failures" including ideologies such as communism, world wars, and nuclear holocaust. For further detail, see Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century: U.S. Foreign Policy since 1900*.

⁹⁸ Strong, 97.

rights policy in Iran was, in part, a success. Carter's human rights policy did revive hope in Iran's liberal opposition. However, because of the Cold War and America's historic relationship with the Shah, Carter could not follow their "hope" and "human spirit" for liberalization all the way through. Thus, the failure of the United States in Iran became the failure of Jimmy Carter as well.

Bibliography

Books

- Afkhami, Gholam R. *The Iranian Revolution: Thantos on a National Scale*. Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 1985.
- Bacevich, Andrew J. *The New American Militarism*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Borstelmann, Thomas. *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*. Cambridge, MA, 2001.
- Bourne, Peter G. *Jimmy Carter: A Comprehensive Biography from Plains to Postpresidency*. New York, NY: Scribner, 1997.
- Dumbrell, John. *The Carter Presidency: A Re-Evaluation*. New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 1995.
- Gasiorowski, Mark J. *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Hoffman, Elizabeth Cobbs. *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of them 1960s*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Houghton, David Patrick. *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Hostage Crisis*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Ioannides, Christos P. *America's Iran: Injury and Catharsis*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984.
- Kirkpatrick, Jeane J. *Human Rights and American Foreign Policy*. Gambier, OH: Public Affairs Conference Center, Kenyon College, 1982.
- Kurzman, Charles. *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Ledeen, Michael, and William Lewis. *Debate: The American Failure in Iran*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf Publishing, 1980.
- Muravchik, Josua. *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy*. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Press, 1986.
- Ninkovich, Frank. *The Wilsonian Century: U.S. Foreign Policy since 1900*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Siavoshi, Susan. *Liberal Nationalism in Iran: The Failure of a Movement*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990.

Strong, Robert A. *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2000.

Zonis, Marvin. *Majestic Failure: the Fall of the Shah*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Journal Articles

Brands, H.W. "The Idea of the National Interest." *Diplomatic History* 23 (Spring 1999): 239- 261.

Halliday, Fred. "The Genesis of the Iranian Revolution." *Third World Quarterly* 1 (Oct. 1979): 1-16.

Stohl, Michael, David Carleton, and Steven E. Johnson. "Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Assistance from Nixon to Carter." *Journal of Peace Research* 21 (Sept. 1984): 215- 226.

Primary Sources

National Security Archive. *Iran, the Making of U.S. policy, 1977-1980*, edited by Eric Hooglund (accessed through University of Delaware Library Microfiche). Alexandria, VA: Chadwyck-Healey, 1990.

Woolley, John T., Peters, Gerald. *Public Papers of Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977*. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=6937>