

C H A P T E R 17

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SPIRALING OUT OF CONTROL

*“Those who can make you believe
absurdities can make you commit atrocities.”*

(VOLTAIRE)

Events in Iran had only begun a downward spiral. Without White House authorization, Ambassador William Sullivan determined the reign of the Shah would have to end and began to communicate with leaders of the opposition to achieve that goal. Apparently, Sullivan felt that the Shah was losing his determination to remain in control. Through negotiations with leaders of Pahlavi's opposition, Sullivan amassed a list in excess of one hundred military men who would be certain to depart Iran with the Shah. It would then be up to the revolutionary organizers to choose their replacements. The more moderate elements in the revolution were expected to assure Sullivan that no revenge would be exacted from the military.³⁹⁵ What an absolute absurdity for a U.S. ambassador to suppose that he had the authority to retire the top brass of a foreign army and ask

a fanatical group of Islamic revolutionaries to submit a list of their replacements!

Was Sullivan's ambiguity regarding the Shah's situation in Iran only a reflection of that of the Carter administration? After all, it was Carter who proclaimed rather indecisively, "We have made it clear through my own public statements and those of Secretary Vance that we support the Shah and support the present government, recognizing that we don't have any control over the decisions ultimately of the Iranian people."³⁹⁶ And while Sullivan was pursuing his agenda, the president had been in Guadeloupe pursuing an agenda of his own—seeking the backing of European leaders for the deposition of the Shah. Perhaps the president had not read Dante Alighieri's famous quote, "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in times of great moral crises maintain their neutrality."³⁹⁷

In November 1978 Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader of the Communist Party, stepped into the fray with a warning to the U.S.: "I must be clear that any interference, especially military interference, in the affairs of Iran...would be regarded as a matter affecting security interests [of the U.S.S.R.]"³⁹⁸ (One of the Shah's major concerns was that civil strife in Iran would open the door for the Soviets to gain a foothold.)

The typically milquetoast response from the U.S. State Department indicated that nothing would be done to interfere with Iran's internal affairs. In fact, it was a statement by President Carter at a December 1978 press conference that seemed to seal the Shah's fate. When asked if the Shah would prevail in Iran, Carter answered: "We [the U.S.] personally prefer that the Shah maintain a major role in government, but that's a decision for the Iranian people to make."³⁹⁹ The press, foreign and domestic, reported the president's

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words and many interpreted them to mean that the U.S. government was standing ready to abandon Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

Following a November 1978 fact-finding mission to Iran by State Department insiders Stephen Cohen, George Griffin, and Carl Clement, they and Ambassador William Sullivan warned of the likelihood that the Shah would no longer rule Iran and that his successors might be less than enamored of a U.S. presence in the country. Sullivan wrote that the State Department needed to make contingency plans for a transfer of power to a coalition government consisting of Khomeini followers and the military. Was it possible that Sullivan was hoping to reach an accord with the opposition after the Shah left Iran? Was he simply waiting for the death rattle before stepping into the fray?

The *Washington Post* again took to its editorial page in late October to try to exonerate Jimmy Carter on his Iran policies with a rather one-sided viewpoint: “This administration inherited a deep American commitment to the Shah, and to his heady view of the importance of Iran in the strategic scheme of things...Jimmy Carter’s support of Iran...has emphasized political liberalization...[which] involves a great gamble...But the Shah...seems to be taking that gamble. At least for as long as he does, the United States has no good choice but to help see him through.”⁴⁰⁰

Scarcely a month later, in early November, the *Post* cataclysmically intoned, “The countdown [for the Shah’s fall] has begun.”⁴⁰¹ Not willing to place any blame on the Carter administration for its failure to support a strong U.S. ally in the Persian Gulf, the *Post* declared, “The popular tendency to blame it all on Carter’s civil rights policy is at best an oversimplification. In hindsight, it was only a question of time before the system the Shah had built collapsed.”

In yet another attempt to absolve the president from any failure, the *Post* continued to build its case by declaring that it was not Jimmy Carter's crisis.⁴⁰² Apparently, either the *Post* editorialist did not know Mr. Carter as well as he thought he did, or he was unwilling to place blame where blame was due. The Shah, and therefore Iran, was abandoned to the fanatical element that supported the Ayatollah Khomeini.

According to Dr. Abol Majid Majidi, Carter sent Theodore Eliot Jr. to Paris in October 1978 to talk with Khomeini and his entourage. Majidi said Eliot "had tried to create a new relationship, but Khomeini didn't show any sign of willingness... He was trying to facilitate a dialogue between Khomeini and the American government."⁴⁰³

The year had produced the Camp David Accords, Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) talks, and top-secret advances to the Chinese government, as well as the turmoil in Iran. Unfortunately, the White House was slothful in closely following events in Iran. For instance, it seemed to have escaped the CIA and other agencies that the military was demoralized, defections were the order of the day, and it would be of little use to a coalition government. In an attempt to shore up the flagging Iranian military, Carter dispatched General Robert "Dutch" Huyser, deputy commander-in-chief of the U.S. European Command, to Iran under Alexander Haig despite the misgivings of both Haig and Sullivan. Haig contacted Deputy Secretary of Defense Charles Duncan to express both his anger and concern over Carter's decision:

*This is bad policy. It is also just plain wrong, and what you have in mind for Dutch Huyser is no job for a military man. You're sending the wrong man for the wrong purpose.*⁴⁰⁴

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Haig's unease over sending Huyser to Tehran was overruled by a direct order from Jimmy Carter and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Huyser was ordered to Tehran post-haste with an admonition from Haig:

*Then you have to do what you have to do, Dutch. But watch yourself. You may end up destroying the Iranian military. And that would destroy any hope of a good outcome in Iran.*⁴⁰⁵

The Shah recorded that "as soon as Moscow learned of Huyser's arrival, *Pravda* reported, 'General Huyser is in Tehran to foment a military coup.' In Paris, the *International Herald Tribune* wrote that Huyser had not gone to Tehran to 'foment' a coup but to 'prevent' one."⁴⁰⁶

The Iranian generals, who would not attempt a coup while the Shah was on the throne, were awaiting the arrival of Alexander Haig and for some signal or some kind of guarantee from the U.S. that the Soviets would not invade Iran. But rather than send Haig to reassure his Iranian counterparts, his deputy, Dutch Huyser, was tapped for the mission. Huyser, for some unknown reason, did not notify the Shah of his arrival in Tehran as was customary; the Shah discovered he was actually in the country several days after Huyser's arrival.

Huyser's job was to inform the generals that Carter was in favor of democracy in Iran and to act as a morale booster. His orders were to try to persuade the military heads to remain in Iran and work with the U.S. According to former Israeli Ambassador to Iran Uri Lubrani, anyone who thought he could make a deal with the generals and not have made some arrangement with the religious establishment simply didn't understand the situation in Tehran.

General Huyser was soon to discover the truth in Lubrani's assessment: Although a plan was supposed to have been in place for

an eventuality such as an attempted overthrow of the Shah's government, these military leaders simply did not have a cohesive strategy to deal with the Shah's almost certain ouster by the Ayatollah's revolutionary forces. According to Lt. General Azarbarzin, former vice-chief of the Iranian air force, Huyser set the generals to work to draw up a contingency plan, although no one in the palace or the Shah's chain of command had authorized the meetings.⁴⁰⁷

Reportedly, Sullivan was less than ecstatic at Huyser's arrival and tried to intervene with Washington. This is not surprising given Sullivan's list of generals he was trying to place on the last plane out of Iran before Khomeini's ultimate power grab. In Dr. Tehrani's estimation, Huyser's mission was totally compromised when shortly after his arrival in Tehran several top military officials defected to the revolution.⁴⁰⁸

Lt. General Azarbarzin told me why the generals were so opposed to a coup:

The military commanders [were] picked by the Shah and reported to him alone, not through the chain of command. They were not picked because they were the most competent, but because they were weak and loyal to the Shah. So, when the time came that they could have staged a coup, they were not capable of doing it; they were used to taking orders not action...The air force cadets were neither officers nor non-commissioned officers nor enlisted men. They had a special contract that provided them pay higher than the colonels, special benefits, and paid education through a Ph.D. They were trained in the U.S. to run the most sophisticated technology. As part of their contract, once their service was over, they were to get a lump sum of money they could use to start their own business. For some reason, the chief of the air force decided to renege on the deal for six or seven cadets...against my advice. The chief went to the Shah and got his

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*approval. Word got out...and morale sank. The cadets no longer trusted the military or the Shah.*⁴⁰⁹

Empress Farah Pahlavi related in our interview that General Haig was concerned about Huyser's trip to Tehran:

I heard that after General Huyser met with President Carter, he went to Brussels when General Haig was there. General Haig told him, "I hope you go there to support the Shah." Huyser told him, "My instructions are otherwise." I wanted to write this in my book [An Enduring Love]; I called General Haig...to see if what I had heard was correct. He told me, "Yes, it is correct; and even more."⁴¹⁰

Haig was not the only insider to admit the Shah had human rights problems within his country; however, the general felt that as ruler of Iran, Pahlavi was "an essentially benevolent despot,... a good friend of the United States, an implacable enemy of the Left, and an obstacle to the religious Right."⁴¹¹ By turning a blind eye to the Shah's predicament, Carter allowed the door to swing open and aided Khomeini's takeover of Iran.

General Huyser was chosen as emissary because he had, over the years, built close relationships with a number of top-level Iranian military men. He had been a frequent visitor to the Shah's palace and had established a mutual respect and trust with the monarch. It had been Huyser to whom the Shah voiced his apprehension that he would estrange President Carter by not moving quickly enough to introduce sufficient changes to placate the administration's human rights policies.

Huyser wrote that Carter had charged him:

...to convey [President Carter's] concern and assurances to the senior military leaders at this most critical time. It was of vital importance to both the Iranian people and the U.S. government that Iran have a strong, stable government which would remain

*friendly to the United States. The Iranian military was the key to the situation.*⁴¹²

In my book *Showdown with Nuclear Iran*, I wrote of the meeting I had with Robert Huyser:

*Huyser was a man of principle and moral clarity and believed that his mission was to support Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar and Iran's generals. Carter promised that the U.S. would protect and provide all assets needed to shore up the government, which was increasingly endangered by violent protests against the regime of the Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Despite a history of support going back to World War II, Carter had no desire to see a pro-Shah regime in power. He preferred the Ayatollah, whom he seemed to regard as a Gandhi-like figure. The comparison made sense to a point: the Ayatollah opposed the Shah, who had a terrible record of human rights abuses. But that's where the comparison breaks down. Gandhi was nonviolent. The Ayatollah was anything but.*⁴¹³

General Huyser was dispatched to Iran to provide encouragement should a military solution be ordered by the Shah or should the military decide to implement a coup. According to the general, the Iranian generals might have been persuaded to take up arms in defense of the monarchy if—and only if—they had full military support from the U.S. Another of Huyser's aims was to encourage the more hard-line military men to accept Feridoun Jam, Bakhtiar's choice for defense minister. What proved to be even more difficult was to persuade Jam to agree to the appointment; he declined.

Ambassador Zahedi related his meetings to me, first with the Shah and later with some of the generals—Oveissi, Bad'ie, Toufanian, and Major-General Manuchehr Khosrowdad—regarding Huyser's mission. The ambassador initially suggested to the Shah that Huyser either be arrested upon arrival or put on the same plane

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and sent back to the U.S. The Shah was in favor of waiting to see what Huyser had to say. The military men felt Huyser was encouraging them to disobey the Shah's orders. General Khosrawdad was so angry that he threatened to shoot Huyser on sight. Zahedi very delicately suggested they behave rationally, and that they also wait to see what Huyser proposed. Zahedi was saddened that Huyser's visit seemed to totally destroy morale among the army leaders.⁴¹⁴

The Shah's opinion of Huyser's mission was vastly different than that expressed by the general, according to Pahlavi's memoirs. He felt that Huyser's interference had destroyed the Iranian army and decimated Bakhtiar's government. Pahlavi wrote that one of his generals, Gharabaghi, said of Huyser, "General Huyser threw the Shah out of the country like a dead mouse."⁴¹⁵

Huyser's departure from Iran left General Philip C. Gast, chief of the U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group, in a leadership role. It was he who then maintained daily communication with both the Iranian military and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown.

Within just two short weeks Pahlavi had flown from Iran, Khomeini had strutted into Tehran a triumphant ayatollah, the Shah's army had crumbled in humiliation and disarray, and the Peacock Throne was barren. Haig tendered his resignation: "I felt I could not continue to serve the Carter administration."⁴¹⁶

Huyser later recorded one of the ultimate ironies of his mission to Tehran. According to the general, he had the Iranian armed forces at his very command, yet was unable to complete the simplest goal: unloading an oil tanker.⁴¹⁷

In the midst of the turmoil in Iran, or perhaps because of it, President Carter asked for a meeting on the French Republic island of Guadeloupe in the Caribbean. Although Carter prompted the

meeting, ostensibly for him “and the leaders of Britain, France, and West Germany to talk informally about strategic and economic problems,”⁴¹⁸ the invitations were issued by French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing to West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and British Prime Minister James Callaghan. Carter was concerned that a meeting called by the U.S. would upset other NATO leaders, i.e., Canada, Japan, and Italy.

In a briefing by Zbigniew Brzezinski prior to his departure for Guadeloupe, the president was to have told the assembled world leaders, “President Carter will reiterate his support of the Shah.”⁴¹⁹ In his book, *Le Pouvoir et la Vie*, d’Estaing recalls the meeting:

The President Jimmy Carter told us suddenly that the United States had decided not to support the régime of the Shah anymore.

Without that support, that régime is now lost. I have kept in my mind the summary of the mission that Michel Poniatowski [French minister of the interior] had with the Shah on December 27 [1979]. He had found him with a clear mind but “sad, tired, and disillusioned.” He thought the Americans would support him to the end. But in a week, the tide changed...Jimmy Carter tells us what he sees coming. The military will take power and will bring order to the country. Its leaders are pro-West, and most of them have been trained in the United States. The Shah sees more clearly: speaking to Michel Poniatowski, he says, “It is all about a powerful religious renewal, which has allowed a long fifty-years-old struggle between the Shiite clergy and our dynasty to turn into a test of forces.” And it is the way things happen.⁴²⁰

Although not considered a “formal” meeting that required documentation, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski did keep a journal of the Guadeloupe meeting. He recorded his impressions of one session on security issues in his memoirs, *Power and Principle*:

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I must say that I was quite impressed by the discussion. It was a thoroughly stimulating and comprehensive review of the security situation, with Carter very effectively taking the lead and pressing the others to define their response to the perceived threat...Giscard was clear, to the point, and quite decisive. Callaghan displayed good political sense, was quite vigorous, and spoke very sensibly... [Schmidt] was the one who was most concerned about the Soviet nuclear threat in Europe and the least inclined to agree to any firm response.⁴²¹

While Carter, Brzezinski, his deputy David Aaron, Vance, and other administration bigwigs were busily plotting the Shah's future, Pahlavi was seemingly adrift in a sea of indecision. Should he form a military government? Should he, as Brzezinski suggested, act decisively toward his opponents? Bombarded on every side to either step up to the plate or step down from the throne, the Shah addressed his Iranian subjects in tones that could only be described as conciliatory and apologetic. He acknowledged that he had digested the calls for revolution and was ready to make amends. Pahlavi's remarks exposed his inner turmoil and struggles with what had become the proverbial handwriting on the wall: the monarchy was in its death throes and the Shah was in complete denial. Unable to make a clear-cut decision, the embattled ruler declared:

I commit myself to make up for past mistakes, to fight corruption and injustices, and to form a national government to carry out free elections...I guarantee that after the military government, freedom and the constitution will be re-implemented...Your revolutionary message has been heard.⁴²²

During the meeting in Guadeloupe, the president also wrestled with the issue of the Shah and the Ayatollah: Should the U.S. make contact with Khomeini? Would it be beneficial to support a military

coup? How long should the U.S. support Bakhtiar's interim government? Brzezinski detailed a telephone conference/meeting to which he was called the afternoon he arrived on the French island. The president was in deep conversation with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Vance was concerned that the Iranian military leaders would refuse to allow the Shah to depart Tehran and that massive bloodshed would follow that decision.

At the Guadeloupe summit Secretary Vance approached the president and asked that he "be authorized to open a direct channel to Khomeini in Paris." Vance's plan was to "do this through Ambassador Theodore Eliot, a very able, retired senior Foreign Service officer...I wished Eliot to urge the Ayatollah to give Bakhtiar time to restore order before he returned to Iran...The president rejected my recommendation...After a long discussion on January 10...Carter decided to telephone French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing to ask that the French government urge Khomeini to give Bakhtiar an opportunity to restore order, although he [Carter] agreed that the French should say this also represented American views."⁴²³ The French leader agreed to contact the Ayatollah.

Brzezinski, who along with Secretary of Energy James Schlesinger and Deputy Secretary of Defense Charles Duncan favored military intervention, was appalled that Vance seemed determined to moderate the instructions that had been given to General Robert Huyser. Carter refused to allow that to happen. Wrote Brzezinski: "I was gratified by his [Carter's] firmness and dismayed that anyone at this late stage would actually wish to prevent what was clearly in the collective interest of the West."⁴²⁴

Another item on the agenda in Guadeloupe was whether or not the U.S. should reach out to Ruhollah Khomeini. While Ambassador to Iran William Sullivan seemed eager for that to happen, other

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members of the administration were reluctant to do so without the prior approval of the Shah. Various reports on the four-leader summit indicate that no conclusion regarding Khomeini was reached while on the island.

Giscard d'Estaing expressed his shock at Carter's lack of regard for a country that had been a close ally for decades:

We were humanly shocked by the way Carter spoke because we knew at the end it would lead to the torture or the killing of the Shah. And he [Carter] was not embarrassed at all; no, no, he spoke very lightly of a man that we supported very strongly...He [Carter] was a bastard of conscience, a moralist, who treats with total lightness the fact of abandoning a man that we had supported together. At least you need to have some emotion. And we didn't have any discussion...No. No. It was, "We have decided." [We were shocked] by the lack of human consideration of the fate of the Shah. Because it was a man that we knew well. We worked with him, we had met with him and all that; so we could accept or understand that probably politically he cannot survive in Iran, or it would be very difficult; but it was some sort of anguish for us. Not someone who should be disgraced with one public gesture.⁴²⁵

Mir Ali Asghar Montazam wrote of the Guadeloupe meeting in his book, *The Life and Times of Ayatollah Khomeini*:

The Guadeloupe summit...was the convenient opportunity he [Carter] found to agree with the three European leaders that the Shah was doomed...all the allies needed was Iranian oil and stability in the region...So, when General Robert Huyser, Carter's special emissary, arrived unannounced in Tehran about the time of Shapour Bakhtiar's becoming prime minister, he represented the entire Western alliance, not the United States only. The Iranian army commanders assented to the Shah's exile only after Huyser showed them the minutes of the allies' summit meeting in Guadeloupe.⁴²⁶

The Shah was more astute than his so-called allies, however. In his memoir, *Answer to History*, the Shah wrote: “Giscard said they hoped to ‘evaluate the situation of the world,’ with special emphasis on events in the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. I believe that during those meetings the French and West Germans agreed with the British and the American proposals for my ouster.”⁴²⁷

The Shah continued: “About the same time French President Valery Giscard D’Estaing sent a personal envoy to Tehran, a man very close to him [Comte Alexandre de Marenches]. He too advocated a ‘political’ solution to the crisis, a euphemism for accommodation and abstention from the use of force.”⁴²⁸

Perhaps it was because, as Amir Taheri wrote in *The Spirit of Allah*, “The French were the first to be persuaded that a government under Khomeini would offer them a golden opportunity in Iran, Valery Giscard d’Estaing...also began advising his Western allies not to try to prolong the Shah’s regime.”⁴²⁹