

Chapter VII

“The 54th Hostage”

At the beginning of the hostage crisis Carter announced that he would not campaign and would not leave the White House until the hostages were released. Some columnists began to refer to him as the “54th hostage.” On April 30, after the failure of the hostage rescue mission, he suddenly announced the termination of his Rose garden strategy, saying that he changed his mind because the situation had been “alleviated” and had become “more manageable.” How the rescue failure produced this miraculous improvement of our fortunes he failed to explain. But unnamed White House officials leaked Carter’s decision to stop treating the subject of the hostages “as a major crisis,” and to take “steps to deflect public attention from the hostages.” The officials also pointed out that it was not Carter but “the news media that kept the hostages in the public view day after day since they were taken prisoners last November 4.” However Secretary of State Muskie, in his discussion with reporters in Brussels during his visit there in May, pointed out that Carter “kept the visibility of the hostagel problem alive by tying it to his own campaign plans.” Public opinion polls indicate that the hostage issue helped Carter in the primaries, but as pollster V. Lance Tarrance of Houston observed in May, the issue was “receding in voters’ minds.” A news report pointed to the “evidence that the issue is in

decline with no measurable harm done to the President.”

During the half a year period from the capture of the hostages in November to the rescue failure in April “Carter took every opportunity to point out the plight of the hostages and his efforts to secure their release.” His rating in the polls soared. A White House official said that, “In almost every one of the three-minute speeches that the President made to some group visiting the White House he brought up the hostages.” These meetings had been well publicized until May, but “now he never brings the subject up.” Even a White House visit by the hostages’ relatives went unreported. “There were no photographers at the meeting and no news coverage.

It was noticed that “the extended use of symbols to remind Americans of the hostages—not lighting the national Christmas tree last December and the flying of the flag at half-staff—has been stopped.” A resolution to fly the flag at half-staff for two weeks in memory of the eight men killed in the rescue mission was signed by most of the senators but “at the request of the White House” the time was reduced to three days, and “the flag now flies at the top of the pole.”

Oddly, Carter’s manipulation of events and the media, his tying of the hostage crisis to his own campaign plans and then de-emphasizing it to suit his plans, has inspired little indignation. Some have suggested that such manipulations are well within American tradition. John Herbes of *The New York Times* cited the Pueblo incident early in 1968 when 83 crewmen were taken prisoner by the North Koreans. President Johnson called up the reserves and threatened military action by the time of the New Hampshire pri-

mary but later “ceased threatening military action and appealed to other countries for diplomatic help. By election time, the Pueblo was virtually a forgotten issue.”

The question of whether or not Carter provoked the hostage crisis has attracted almost no attention. As a rare exception, Edward Pesson, Distinguished Professor of History at the City University of New York, examined “Carter’s Curious Switch on Admitting the Shah” and asked “Did President Carter agree to take in the Shah and initiate the crisis that he evidently knew would follow in order to promote his electoral chances in 1980?” Pesson pointed to Carter’s initial refusal to admit the Shah and then admitting him, although “according to Times reporter Bernard Gwertzman, Mr. Carter predicted that American acceptance of the Shah might be followed by Americans taken hostage in Iran. Why then did he change his mind?” Pesson suggested,

The President, who was prescient enough to have anticipated the actual consequences in Iran of his policy reversal, must surely have anticipated the surge here of patriotism and of his own popularity in the wake of the Iranian enormities that his own action touched off.

An editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* did not accuse Carter of “sordid and selfish motives,” as did Pesson. Instead it described Carter’s “vacillating” over admitting the Shah as a “mistake... suggesting that our internal policies are subject to blackmail.” The editorial, however, noted that “indeed at one point the State Department said in public that it would not admit the Shah for fear the Iranians would take hostages—inviting and writing a script for the current troubles.”

Our “current troubles” started with the Shah’s downfall. “Did Carter Send a ‘General to Hasten the Shah’s Fall?’” asked the headline of an article by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak. They reported that General Alexander Haig had “accused the Carter Administration of assigning his NATO deputy to hasten” the Shah’s fall. According to the report, General Haig, the NATO Supreme Commander, disagreed with Carter’s order to send his deputy, Air Force Major-General Robert E. Huyser, to Iran. The purpose of the order was then ambiguous, but it eventually resulted in preventing Iran’s military from defending the Shah and resisting the takeover of Iran by Khomeini’s fanatics.

Haig, noted the report, “has not gone public with his sensational charge.” What he told privately finds confirmation in the Pentagon records, which show that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General David Jones, called Haig in December 1978 “to inform him that President Carter wished to send... Huyser to Teheran for meetings with Iranian military leaders.” Haig asked whether the purpose of Huyser’s mission was “to urge the Generals to reestablish law and order or to tell the Shah to leave the country.” Jones said that the mission was to “keep the Iranian military united and effective.” What else Jones told Haig has not been reported but Haig’s reply dispels the mystery. “I non-concur,” said Haig adding that it was “wrong to use a professional military man to execute a political mission; if dirty work was in the~ offing, a political emissary was more appropriate..., an attempt by the United States to force out the Shah would lead to disaster in Iran.”

Charles Duncan, then the Deputy Secretary of Defense, discussed Haig’s reservations with the Joint Chiefs (Defense Secretary Harold Brown was in Cali-

fornia) and took the matter to Carter and Brzezinski. Carter told Duncan “to overrule Haig and to cut the orders for the Huyser mission to Teheran.” Duncan still insisted that “the purpose of the Huyser mission was to cause the military in Iran to have confidence in U.S. support, to avoid disintegration of the military” but he also acknowledged that “the military did ultimately decide not to resist Ayatollah Khomeini.” According to the report, Haig has not taken seriously Duncan’s explanation—he regarded it as a “smoke-screen” and believed that “Huyser was an instrument of Carter’s policy to drop the Shah....” The correctness of such an assumption is supported by the record at the time of “leaks out of Washington that U.S. policy makers finally had concluded the Shah must go.” These leaks coincided with Huyser’s mission and State Department advice to the Shah to leave the country.

The Shah’s own memoirs, according to excerpts published in the December 1979 issue of the London magazine *Now!*, leave no doubt about his interpretation of the Huyser mission. The Shah wrote that at the beginning of January 1978, “when I was still on the throne of Iran,” Huyser arrived secretly in Teheran “with the clear purpose” of “neutralizing” the Iranian Army and preventing it from fighting the Khomeini mobs. When he received Huyser and Ambassador William H. Sullivan, “The one thing that was on the minds of both men was to know on what day and at what time I should be leaving.” He left Teheran on January 16. On February 11 Khomeini took over and started mass executions, in which all the Generals whom Huyser had “neutralized” perished. General Huyser was appointed the Chief of the United States Military Airlift Command at Scott Air Force Base in

Illinois. He refused to comment on either the American reports or the Shah's memoirs, saying through his spokesman that any statement by him could be "counterproductive to our national effort."

Whether Huyser's reticence helps or hurts our national effort may be a matter of opinion, but the fall of Iran into the hands of a maniac definitely is to our great disadvantage. To say the least, the Administration's plea that it could do nothing to save the Shah is not the whole truth. Strangely enough, the Senate and Congress have not questioned the participants in the events that resulted in Huyser's mysterious mission, although it was suggested that "Senators Stennis and Tower ought to get to the bottom of this."