

IRAN: U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AND THE TRADITION OF PERSIAN STATECRAFT

by Adda B. Bozeman

That the American foreign-policymaking establishment was not prepared for the kind of turbulence that gripped Iran in 1978-1979 seems to have signaled the need to upgrade existing methods of intelligence collection and evaluation in order to improve the art of political forecasting with respect to the non-Western world. A task force for the study of the Iranian debacle and for the preparation of new diplomatic guidelines was thus set up by the Carter administration in November 1978,¹ and, according to preliminary reports, the main defect of existing intelligence operations has been diagnosed as the practice, said to have been common among U.S. political agents over the past ten years, of focusing on the thinking of the ruling Iranian elites and ignoring "social changes." Since the latter changes had been identified with the rise of opposition groups in Iran's intellectual and religious circles, and with the consequent erosion of what had appeared to be a stable monarchy, Carter's task force has the further mandate to examine the aims and strengths of opposition movements in other strategically important states whose governments are, at the moment, still considered friendly to the United States, among them the Islamic states of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt.

It is not my purpose to take issue with these initiatives or to argue a case for or against the Central Intelligence Agency's work in Iran. Rather, the intent here is to suggest that the Iranian Revolution is representative of very complex culture patterns, that it cannot be understood solely as a function of events in the past decade, and that the monumental American failure in Iran is ultimately a result of our long-standing misperception of that country's place in the Islamic Middle East and our widespread ignorance of all that has been distinctive about Persian history during the past 2,500 years.

¹ See Richard Burt, "U.S. Seeks Ways to Gauge Foreign Nations' Stability," *New York Times*, January 29, 1979.

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The major impediments to an accurate understanding and evaluation of all Islamic societies, whether orthodox Sunni or of the Shiite persuasion, seem to be as follows. In contrast to the United States, which prides itself on emancipation from the past and which has therefore allowed respect for history and cultural tradition to atrophy in the nation's consciousness, Islamic societies are riveted to the past. And in that past, no era is deemed to have equaled that of the life span of Mohammed in the seventh century after Christ, when Islam was announced in the Arabian Desert and proved victorious over all adjoining high civilizations, including that of the illustrious Persian Empire. Generations of believers have ever since held fast to the belief that everything, including government, was perfect in those success-filled decades because the community of the faithful followed Allah's law as revealed and administered by the Prophet. Subsequent history heaped all manner of failure upon the Dar al-Islam: anarchy, disunity, defeat and, after about A.D. 1200, the arrest of creativity. No tribulation or humiliation, however, was ever allowed to dislodge the image or remembrance of that early state of perfection. The question of just what had gone wrong in Allah's domain, or why success had eluded the Islamic (notably the Arab) peoples, was asked insistently, especially after the intellectual, religious and political elites were forced to take cognizance of the phenomenal ascendancy of the Christian West. Yet, it cannot be said that the search for answers has ever led to sustained self-examination. What one finds instead is this: a rich literature of apologia for failure, a rather routine disposition to seek scapegoats in the ranks of successful alien nations and to indict their nefarious non-Islamic ideas for the crime of corrupting Islam, and an intense readiness to activate that ever latent "longing for the dependable situation" (Gustave Von Grunebaum's phrase) which invariably conduces to retreat into the glorious past.

Thus, aspirations toward progress, emancipation, development or reform, which Americans commonly project into future time, are customarily cast in terms assuring the revival of ancient truths and bygone days. These themes, too, are rendered clearly in the present Islamizing revolution in Iran. Asked what form of government was planned for the country, the Ayatollah Khomeini's appointee for the post of prime minister is said to have replied that what was wanted was a government of the type seen during the

ten-year rule of the Prophet and during the five years under his son-in-law Ali, the first Shiite imam.²

Other Islamic norms and dispositions, likewise alien to our modern thought world, relate to the linkage between religion and political organization. The political vocabulary now in use throughout Islamic society, including Iran, is replete with words derived from Greek, Latin and other European languages. Yet, it has long been obvious to students of modern Islam that such familiar Western words as state, nation, republic, democracy, constitution and referendum acquire wholly different and unfamiliar meanings when they are transplanted to contexts shaped by non-Western linguistic and cultural factors. For example, traditionalists as well as modernists in Islam have always been at one in conceiving of the *umma* ("community of the faithful") comprehensively, unbounded by space or time (a model not readily compatible with that of the territorial, sovereign nation-state), and in insisting that religion cannot be separated either from law or government. As a spokesman for the Muslim Brothers (a traditionalist group in Egypt) put it some time ago, "Islam is at once religion and state, spirit and work, Holy Book and sword."

All discrete definitions for different norms, institutions, forms of government and political activities, as these have long been taken for granted in Europe and America, were thus automatically invalidated when the Occidental vocabulary of terms and concepts was grafted upon Islamic societies during the Westernizing processes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even the core idea of the state continues to sit uneasily in this culture realm — especially in its Arab provinces — where not even the concept of the caliphate, as envisioned by Koranic scholars in the distant past, was ever allowed to evolve into a politically trusted and effective system of rule. Indeed, since just about all caliphates had fallen short of the ideal in the view of religious authorities, each could be, and usually was, impugned as illegitimate on one ground or another. Assassinations, coups d'état and civil wars are thus commonplace entries in the annals of this region's history,³ and in this all-Islamic perspective, the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran is neither unusual nor untoward.

The only principle of political organization recognized by the sacred law is the imam, the religious leader who qualifies as the

² *New York Times*, February 4, 1979.

³ See, for example, Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), "Chronological Table," pp. 179-183.

authoritative keeper of truth and knowledge. Yet, here again one looks in vain for unequivocal instructions in orthodox Sunni doctrine on just how such an exponent of divine authority is to be found and appointed, or on what his jurisdiction really is. Shiite Islam — the heretical faith that the Persians accepted after they were conquered — is somewhat more explicit in this regard. It holds to the principle, first of all, that the office of imam rests exclusively with descendants of Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law who was the fourth caliph, and secondly, that the judgment of such a "legitimate" imam is infallible. That is to say, contrary to orthodox Sunni believers, who rely mainly on instructions found in the Koran and in the body of canonical tradition as accumulated over the course of time, the Shiites are invited by their faith to exalt one man. In the case of Iran, this disposition is fortified by pre-Islamic religious texts and understandings, notably the Avesta, which predicted the coming of a savior.⁴

These interlocking sets of persuasion explain why Shiism often served as a rallying point for political opposition to the ruling political establishment. In fact, as William Haas⁵ has pointed out in regard to Iran, not only is all secular power transitional and defective, it is also a usurpation from the religious Shiite point of view. It is in this ambivalent context, then, that one should interpret the following statement by the Ayatollah Khomeini: "I also should remind you that I am doing this [i.e., appointing Mr. Bazargan] because I am religiously entitled to do this. I must warn everyone that they must obey this government. Opposition to this government will be considered opposition to Islamic laws and traditions."⁶ References to "Islamic Jurisprudence" as the exclusive source of constitutional and criminal law, and as the only valid guide for the administration of physical and other punishments have been frequent and emphatic in Iran's modern revolutionary circles. Their general purport is the disestablishment of all codes and constitutions borrowed from the West, as the following statement by Ayatollah Muri illustrates: "In reality, the legislative power cannot under an Islamic government be

considered an independent legislative authority. In Islam, God is the lawgiver and the legislator. Rather, this assembly [a projected Islamic Consultative Assembly that is to coexist with an assembly of theologians, senior ayatollahs and experts in Islamic law] is in a sense the expounder of the principles of Islam and applies them to current conditions."⁷

Such official pronouncements, in conjunction with the open admission that the theocratic Islamic Republic may, after all, arrange for a popular referendum or election in order to satisfy world opinion, are said to have alarmed some of our diplomatic observers of the Iranian scene. It is true, of course, that modern Persian law was modeled carefully on French and also Italian law, and that the 1906 Constitution followed major leads supplied by the Belgian Constitution. Our intelligence analysts in the 1970s, however, should have remembered that the Constitution explicitly invests religious leaders with the authority to declare legislation null and void if they find it to conflict with the principles of Islam. Even more important, in light of America's expressed concern for the internal stability of other Islamic states in the Middle East, it is high time to reread all the various constitutions written in that region, together with all the solemn legal documents justifying the murder of heads of state, the forceable seizure of power and the instigation of coups d'etat and civil wars that were produced in the 1950s and 1960s.⁸ Such study may also, albeit belatedly, supply Washington with the intelligence that civil liberties and political freedoms are not accommodated in Islamic culture and that, therefore, it is not only illusional but counterproductive to make "human rights" the focus of our foreign policy.

III

The successful revolution of the "opposition groups" as led by the mullahs should be seen, in essence, as a victory for the general cause of Islam and as a defeat not so much for the Pahlavi dynasty as for the Iranian nation-state. It is this dimension of the recent upheaval and of the failure of American diplomacy that has thus far not received the attention it deserves.

⁷ *Ibid.*, February 4, 1979.

⁸ See Hisham B. Sharabi, *Nationalism and Revolution in the Arab World* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1966), pp. 107-173, for some of these texts. For a general analysis of Islamic patterns of administration and law, see Bozeman, *The Future of Law in a Multicultural World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 7-14, 50-85.

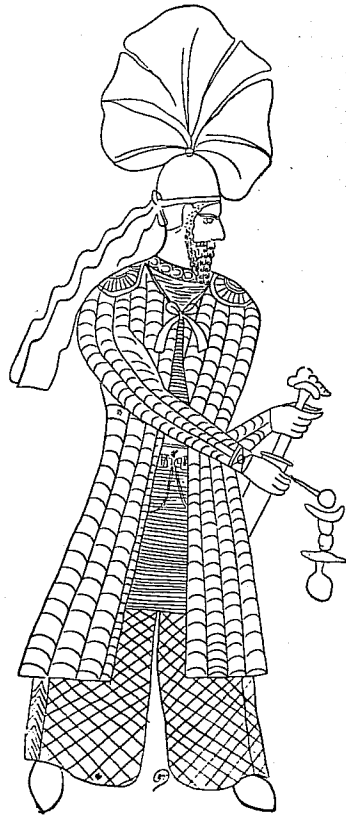
⁴ See below, in sec. III, for discussions of pre-Islamic creeds and thoughtways.

⁵ *Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), p. 113. It is relevant to this article's main themes to remember that Shiism has brought forth a unique religious doctrine permitting a Shiite to pretend that he is a Sunni, or even a Christian or a Jew, if he is at any time in danger by virtue of his being a Shiite. The ramifications of this "Doctrine of Dissimulation" extend beyond religion. As Richard Frye notes in *Persia* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972) p. 116, Iran's religious leaders have often saved themselves in the past by withdrawing in times of political turmoil and practicing this doctrine — a method of retreat that has enabled them to survive and resume their public functions when circumstances became more auspicious.

⁶ *New York Times*, February 6, 1979.

Mention has already been made of the all-important historical fact that Persia was conquered by the Islamized Arabs. This terminated the Sassanian Empire (ca. A.D. 226-630), which had been conceived as a revival of the Achaemenid Empire (sixth to fourth century B.C.), and disestablished Zoroastrianism as Iran's state religion. In the ensuing centuries, however, there occurred a subtle reversal in the give-and-take of influence and control which is known in history as Iran's "Conquest of Islam," a phrase referring to the massive borrowing of Persian principles of statecraft and administration by conquerors ill-equipped, either by their religion or their tribal, desert traditions, to stabilize and rule the vastness their arms had won. Iran, and to some extent the Christian empire of Byzantium, thus became the model not only for the first dynasties of the Umayyads and Abassides but for the later Islamic caliphates of the Mongols and the Turks. Indeed, it can be argued in retrospect that these processes of Persianization were more effective and enduring in the Near and Farther East than those identified in modern times as Westernization.

An appreciation of this aspect of the Iranian presence in world affairs requires one to remember that Persia, the modern state's heartland, was recognized throughout antiquity as a "prestige nation," and that its position in the Eurasian world as a whole was once analogous to the place of Greece in the narrower Mediterranean sector. Ideas emanating from Iran had thus challenged the self-views of Jews as well as Greeks, had profoundly affected the political order of the Indians no less than that of the Arabs, and had radiated themes in ethics and religiosity that were to be substantiated in various forms both in Christianity and Islam. In short, ancient Iran was the watershed between Orient and Occident — an



enigmatic position that has been acknowledged by many modern Europeans as well as by Asians. Hence, whereas Lord Elphinstone, Lieutenant Governor of Bombay from 1819 to 1827, could regard Persia as part of the West, observing that a European might think himself still in Europe until he reached the Indus, Jawaharlal Nehru was to single out Persia as India's closest kin and supreme mentor in matters of language, art and statecraft.

A comparative historical survey of these various borrowings suggests that those nations to the west of this cultural divide were impressed chiefly by the thought content of Zoroastrianism and related Iranian faiths, whereas those eastward responded more to certain examples set by Iran in the arena of political organization, international relations, art and architecture. It is true, of course, that the Alexandrian Empire — usually viewed as the first of the West — relied heavily upon administrative institutions bequeathed by the conquered Achaemenids. However, it was in Hindu and Buddhist India, the various Islamic caliphates of the Near East, and the Mogul Empire that Persian statecraft, with its stress on espionage and policing activities, exerted its greatest impact. These particular aspects of rule, rendered concrete in Pahlavi Iran in such institutions as Savak, are generally viewed with unmitigated loathing in the United States because they violate commitments to human rights and to "open" ways of conducting affairs of state. In the perspective of Oriental history and government, by contrast, Savak agents are more likely to be perceived as somewhat degenerate descendants of those renowned Achaemenid overseers — the "eyes and ears" of the King of Kings — who were admired and emulated by other ruling despots throughout the centuries precisely because they knew how to watch over the security interests of the realm. No single document attests to this Persian legacy more faithfully than the Indian *Arthashastra*, a manual on the science of government composed in the fourth century B.C. by a Brahman adviser for his sovereign, the Maurya king Chandragupta, who founded in northwestern India the first vast, centralized Indian state.

As in all cases of cultural borrowing, these were highly selective, being restricted to what could be securely integrated into existing Oriental systems. Thus it is interesting to note that the Asian dynasties were, by and large, not attracted either to Persian ethics or to those imperial institutions that might have had the effect of curbing absolutism — the principle, for example, of national self-rule. As Hegel was to observe correctly in a perceptive comparative survey (contained in his *Philosophy of History*), ancient Persia was already

a "modern" empire in the sense that it comprised a multitude of subject nations, leaving to each its particular character; and in this sense, it was quite different both from the consolidated totality of China and from the anarchy and caprice of Hindu life. Whereas China and India remained stationary, Persia identified its course with the "principle of development," in accordance with which a nation aspires constantly to realize its potential. From "this circumstance Hegel concluded that the Persians were the first "historical people" and, consequently, that world history begins with the history of this Aryan nation⁹ — a point of view held also by Friedrich Nietzsche, who became convinced after his study of the Iranian conception of time that "the Persians were the first to think history in its Great and Total sense."¹⁰

The new approach — to time, to the past and to writing about the past — that the Medes and Persians introduced into the Near East revolved around the idea of a bounded time span, a "world time" of twelve millennia with a beginning, a middle and an end, moving forward in ascending phases of 3,000 years each. Explained in cosmogony and myth as the first creative act of the great God Ormazd, this "Limiting of Time" provided the setting within which the forces of Light and Darkness, or Good and Evil (the Better and the Worse in another version), were locked in combat for the soul of man. Each mortal was presumed not only to be aware of this great and fateful contention, but also capable of distinguishing truth from falsehood, right from wrong. The vast span of bounded time was brought into a directly meaningful relation to every individual, since the soul of each was not only the prize but the arena of battle. In contrast to other Near Eastern religions that had taught resignation, moral neutralism or compliance with priestly commands and fixed rituals, the faith of these Aryan peoples, as epitomized in Zoroastrianism, insisted that the individual human being must himself make a choice between Good and Evil, between the values of two exclusive deities of the universe and earth. Only if men engaged themselves voluntarily, with all their thoughts, words and deeds, could Ahriman, the presiding spirit of the world of lies and treachery, be permanently defeated.

Another unusual aspect of the Persian myth of time was its announcement that a wholly new spiritual order would follow

⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (New York: Collier & Son, 1905), pp. 174, 242f.

¹⁰ Nietzsche's remark on Persia's relation to history is said to occur in notes preparatory to *Also Sprach Zarathustra*; see H. H. Schaefer, *Der Mensch in Orient und Okzident, Grundzüge einer eurasiatischen Geschichte* (Munich: Piper, 1960), p. 84ff.

the appointed end of "limited time" and the eventual victory of Good; this motif, in conjunction with the Zoroastrian theme of dualism, prefigured the message of redemption, fulfillment or progression toward another hallowed end in time that Christianity was to carry forward into the mainstream of Occidental theories of history. In the Persian belief system, the idea of the new spiritual order was inseparable from the assumption that the world was corrupt not by nature but by accident, that it was in need of human transformation, and that this transformation was furthered through voluntary human participation — all premises utterly missing in the records of the Orient. Persian religiosity thus deviated radically from Eastern teachings counseling disengagement from the worldly scene. But it also differed significantly from the later Christian conviction, which stipulated that an original human sin, not the malice of an antigod, had caused the corruption of the world.

The evolutionary process toward excellence that is implicit in Zoroastrianism thus excluded the view that present and future must reproduce the past. Furthermore, the past was not identified with deified ancestors; nor, for that matter, with deified dynasties and kings. In other words, the cause of unity in the Imperial Persian domain was not linked to the type of cult that had been used to secure other empires in the Far and Near East and that was to make its appearance again in the Mediterranean area after Persian power passed away. The Achaemenid Empire, as a matter of fact, was not supported even by the dogma of a state religion. Darius and his successors are known to have identified themselves closely with Zoroastrianism, and a Zoroastrian calendar, based on an Egyptian model, appears to have been introduced in 441 B.C., during the reign of Artaxerxes I; but the records show convincingly that the royal representatives of this Persian house did not promote their imperial administration by insisting on the primacy of their faith over other religious beliefs in the realm. (Zoroastrianism, however, was to become the state religion of the later Sassanian Empire.)

One of the most likely reasons for this kind of tolerance lies in the fact that the heart of Zoroastrianism resided in moral abstractions, not in racial, ethnic or political myths. This meant, firstly, that the governing religion was not necessarily incompatible with communal non-Persian faiths and could command the respect, if not the loyalty, of subject peoples. Secondly, it meant that the imperial policymakers — not being themselves prisoners of an ethnically biased religion — could think freely and imaginatively in strict political terms and relate rationally to the religious traditions

of dependent nations. Moreover, since an Oriental people's religion is, in most if not in all instances, the depositary of that people's past, upper-class Persians could arrive at an appreciation of the idiosyncracies and accomplishments of alien nations in a way that had been impossible for other governments and societies. Such an attitude of cosmopolitan understanding was entirely new in Asian intercultural relations, and the conclusion may not be too farfetched, therefore, that the Iranians subtly changed the Oriental concept of the past by viewing it as a nonparochial, comprehensive category, capable of accommodating the destinies and annals of many different peoples.

It is not clear whether an all-Persian legal code existed, but the solid legal framework and efficient administration of justice to which many texts testify (and upon which Herodotus commented with admiration) reflect a pronounced Persian aptitude for legal thought and the use of legal devices. As H. H. Schaeder reminds us,²¹ because of Persia's religious policy, there could not have been a general, empirewide public law. As a minority among the ethnic groups encompassed in the realm, the Persians could not have ruled solely by force even if they had wanted to. Furthermore, the Persians realized at an early stage in their imperial mission that their cause would best be served by a watchful reliance on native authorities. That is to say, the system known to nineteenth- and twentieth-century European imperial administrations as "indirect rule" commended itself also to the Achaemenids, with the proviso,



however, that the will of the monarch might override all local custom. And since most, if not all, of Persia's subject peoples were ruled by religions and did not recognize law as distinct from religion, this imperial policy of religious tolerance and delegated authority was tantamount to respect for indigenous law. What is significant here is that Persia herself did not confound law and religion. Rather, Persia's law-mindedness was part of the same complex of thought that had produced her history-mindedness.

Achaemenid Persia, then, was not simply a strong national state: she made the first deliberate attempt in history to unite heterogeneous African, Asian and European communities into a single, organized international society. As "King of Kings" in this world-state, each Persian monarch also tried to establish himself as the legitimate successor to the conquered kings. Thus it was that Cyrus publicly appeared in Babylon as the devoted servant of the religion of the defeated and accepted the throne as the gift of Babylon's own god Marduk. All Achaemenid monarchs, furthermore, honored the policy of returning and re-establishing exiled persons and local gods, and in encouraging, wherever possible, the continuation of existing forms of government. The Phoenician city-states thus continued to be governed by their own kings; the Egyptians had their chiefs; the Anatolian Greeks retained their model of the polis; and the Jews kept their high-priestly government. Indeed, no case study of Persian behavior toward satellite or subject groups illustrates the issues at stake better than the history of Persia's relations with the Jews. It is a historically documented fact, one which is also prominently cited in the Old Testament, that Cyrus liberated the Jews. According to Isaiah, the Jewish God commissioned the Persian king to free the exiles and subdue all other nations. According to Ezra, when Cyrus made the proclamation throughout the empire, putting in writing that "the Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah" (King James version), he was stirred by the Lord. Later Persian policies — transporting the Jews back to Jerusalem; returning the vessels of their temple that Nebuchadnezzar II had taken; conveying timber for the temple from Lebanon to the Sea of Joppa (Jaffa); rehabilitating all their settlements; and instituting far-reaching local autonomy in judicial matters, instructing Ezra, for example, to proclaim the Mosaic law as the "constitution" of the Jewish community within the empire — all these probably evolved

²¹ *Der Mensch*, p. 70. Schaeder assumes there must have been an all-Persian code.

from a combination of motivations.¹² What is noteworthy or relevant about this record in modern times is that the Pahlavi regime's friendliness toward Jews in Iran as well as toward Israel was deeply rooted in the nation's pre-Islamic history.

Missing in all the annals of Iranian law and government, however, is any sense for the political freedom and dignity of the individual, whether Egyptian, Jew, Iranian or Greek. "History" and "law" had to do with kings and nations, not with the thoughts and actions of those outside the ruling elite. The absence of that dimension, in marked contrast to the ethical tenet that each individual is endowed with free will and the capacity to make moral decisions independently, may have been the fatal flaw in the character of this remarkable society, at least from the perspective of the modern West. In any case, the ideas and practices that had set Persia apart from the Orient and made of it a watershed between Eastern and Western cultures, were to atrophy under Darius's successors, as the older Near Eastern mythological orders revived and the non-Persian Orient slowly but ineluctably reclaimed its own.

IV

In light of the foregoing, well-documented experiences, surely it is not surprising that Iran's ruling intellectual and administrative elites, challenged in the twentieth century to respond to Occidental ideas of the secular nation-state, law, economic development, education and the conduct of international relations, should have chosen to return to their ancient heritage. Both Pahlavi shahs — and it must be noted that this royal family is of Shiite persuasion — were thus determined to reactivate the political and artistic achievements of the Achaemenid age in the minds of the citizenry in order to foster a spirit of national pride, strengthen and unify the country, and ready it for numerous far-reaching reforms, among them measures to curb the power of Shiite theologians over the thinking of the people. The first Pahlavi went out of his way to adapt Achaemenid styles of art and architecture to modern buildings (an effort exemplified by the National Bank of Iran in Teheran), to represent the glory of Achaemenid monuments on postage stamps and bank notes, and to subsidize scholars who might eliminate Arabic words from the Persian language and discover suitable ancient substitutes.¹³

¹² See Bozeman, *Politics and Culture in International History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 17-56.

¹³ See Richard N. Frye, "The United States and Iran," in Lewis V. Thomas and Richard N. Frye, *The United States and Turkey and Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University

Similarly, studied efforts to anchor modernization in the revival of relevant Iranian traditions were carried out in public administration. In regard to the military, for example, great care was taken to maintain not only the identity but also the historic reputation for excellence of the elite "Immortals," the core of the standing Persian army. Herodotus tells us in his account of the Persian Wars that this prestigious guard was "known as the Immortals, because it was invariably kept up to strength: if a man was killed or fell sick, the vacancy he left was at once filled, so that the total strength of the corps was never less — and never more — than 10,000." (bk. 7.) Historical records and Persepolis sculptures depicting those martial heroes have imbued generations of Persians with pride in the continuous service of the nation's prestigious defenders — a fact that may explain why the general public was recently reported to have been disturbed at the news that revolutionary Islamic "guards" of Ayatollah Khomeini's regime had dared tamper with the physical integrity of such an Immortal.

The second shah accentuated those commitments and orientations. His coronation and the celebration of Iran's 2500th anniversary — events widely viewed in the United States as costly manifestations of an empty, pretentious exhibitionism — were calculated acts of statesmanship, meant to display to the nation and the world at large the greatness of Persepolis, of the tomb of Cyrus and of countless other treasures that had been for so long consigned to neglect and oblivion. They were now destined for careful restoration, a process that was nearing completion when the Islamic counterrevolution intervened. The same end motivated the decision, a few years ago, to backdate the Iranian calendar to the sixth century B.C. and thus supersede the Islamic reckoning of time, whereby generations of Persians have had to accept A.D. 622 (when Mohammed fled Mecca) as the year 1 in their history.

This last decision proved as offensive to the Shiite establishment as all other related reforms and policies, including, of course, the subtle yet deliberate affirmation of the virtues of Zoroastrianism, Persia's earlier faith. In fact, the calendar episode may have been the event that brought to public attention in 1976 an ayatollah who emerges from press accounts as an earlier incarnation of the Ayatollah Khomeini.¹⁴ What is certain in retrospect is that the Islamic

Press, 1951), p. 214, for these examples and other interesting comments. For a comprehensive analysis of the pre-Islamic Persian past, see Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (New York: Mentor, 1966).

¹⁴ See the account by Eric Pace, "A Mystery in Iran: Who Killed the Mullah?," *New York Times*, May 12, 1976: "The personal influence of the mullah who was stran-

power structure had remained well entrenched throughout the twentieth century.

Although it may be idle to speculate in 1979 whether the Pahlavi program of state- and nation-building might have succeeded if promoted more slowly and less stridently, it is not so to inquire how U.S. foreign-policymakers erred in their appraisal of modern Iran. Two images appear to have controlled our perception of the Iranian state: (1) that of an all-important ally capable of supporting our interests by protecting geopolitically vital space against the inroads of the Soviet Union and its auxiliaries and (2) that of an indispensable source of oil for ourselves and our allies, including Israel. Both concerns seemed vaguely linked to the belief that Iran, in this respect not unlike Turkey, had certain qualities assuring its viability as an independent state that were not so clearly discernible in other Middle Eastern areas. In contrast to earlier times, however, when it was a well-articulated American concern to assess, and if necessary support, state-sustaining potential in the international environment, we now tend to accept all states — whether of recent or ancient origin — as equally fragile or enduring. The Carter administration has thus been focusing on one variable only: a people's form of government. In this respect, moreover, the assumption rules that only democracy merits or makes for viability. The historical reality, amply documented from the era of the Assyrians onward, that the political destinies of all Near Eastern peoples have always been cast in the mold of the "power state," can thus be effectively screened today, all the more so as there is obviously no agreement in our policymaking circles about what "democracy" means.

Evidence had been accumulating in the years preceding the upheaval in Iran that the term "democracy" might be severed entirely from the context of government-by-rule-of-law — which had been the exclusive meaning of democracy in the American past — and that it might now be made to cover just about anything that the "people" or the "masses" appear to want in opposition to the policies their government espouses. That the Iranian govern-

gled, Ayatollah Shamsabadi, had several roots: himself a Shi'ite, he was said to be descended from the Prophet Mohammed, he was the son of another well-known ayatollah, he supervised the financial affairs of theological centers here [Isfahan] and in Qum, he oversaw a group of mosques in the Isfahan area and, at the age of 78, he had a long-standing reputation for piety and honesty. A dignified figure with a broad, dark beard, he lived in a humble two-room house in an unfashionable quarter of this city. . . . "The ayatollah had been strangled, and a variety of purported killers were blamed at the time, among them Bahais, Kurds or other adherents of Sunni Islam, the lover of the ayatollah's young wife, Marxist terrorists seeking to weaken the shah's regime and exacerbate discord in society, and the state's security forces.

ment was a despotic monarchy no doubt contributed to official acquiescence in the reversal of democracy's meaning: "monarchy" is a bad word in the American experience; "republic," in contrast, is a good one. This deferential trust in nomenclature together with blindness to the patterns of culture that set Middle Eastern societies apart from the American nation, seem to have kept too many of our modern spokesmen from seeing that the "people" were generally better off — in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example — under their Islamic kings than under those who slew the monarchs in order to establish their own lawless dictatorships under such titles as "People's Democracy" or "Islamic Republic."

The Carter administration's Iranian disposition (it cannot be called a policy) was ambivalent to say the least. On the one hand, there certainly was the realization that a pro-American, pro-Western Iran was the capstone of our strategic design in the Middle East and, therefore, a vital link in the chain of our worldwide security arrangements. On the other hand, one finds what can only be described as an obstinate, even irrational, insistence to embarrass the one internationally prestigious ally we had in the region; and in the measure that we accomplished this, of course, our own strategic design was invalidated.

The main mechanism upon which Washington's foreign policy elites relied, as they gradually achieved this perverse yet evidently willed objective, was Carter's human rights "policy." Heedless of the threats that had been accumulating steadily on Iran's northern and eastern frontiers — which, lest we forget, had been recognized also as the boundaries of our own security zone — and unconcerned about the nature of Iran's Islamic and pre-Islamic orientations toward the rights and obligations of citizens, we chose to indict the Teheran government publicly, time and time again, for violating norms and values unique to Western civilization. One of the last of these exercises in studied self-righteousness occurred *ex post facto*, as it were — namely, after the Pahlavi government and its immediate successor, the Bakhtiar government, had been duly overthrown so that a theocratic republic might be established in Iran. Speaking in a ceremony at Washington in honor of Black History Week, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations explained that the Iranian Revolution had been brought about largely by 25,000 to 50,000 Iranians who had learned about democratic processes as students in this country and then proceeded to apply their new perceptions in their own society. "We should not be afraid when people begin to feel a sense of their own power," the ambassador said, add-

ing that he felt a close sense of identification with Iranian demonstrators because their beliefs were similar to those of the American civil rights movement.¹⁵

Reflection upon the causes of America's recent diplomatic failures in Iran (and elsewhere in the non-Western world) suggests strongly that "strategic thinking" has been assigned too narrow a range by our regnant foreign policy elites. Plans to bolster the defenses of friendly or allied governments or to assure our supplies of oil and other needed material resources are certainly necessary and thus deserving of careful planning. However, they are liable to be unreliable, short-term political arrangements if they are not integrally linked to a true perception of the other nation's total configuration as a culturally discrete state.

Foreign-policymakers, including the newly formed task force discussed at the beginning of this paper, would also be well advised to stress the search for affinities rather than antipathies in the political cultures of the United States, on the one hand, and actual or potential allies, on the other. If this had been America's orientation in her relations with Iran, if our diplomatic vanguard had been assigned the task of gathering intelligence in the Department of State library, we would no doubt have discovered certain correspondences in Western and Iranian philosophical and religious thought that would have inclined us to give Teheran more constructive, and hence more acceptable, advice than that which has been pouring forth from Washington in the past few critical years. These extended dimensions of strategic thinking are sorely missing today.

¹⁵ *New York Times*, February 3, 1979.