

# King to Pawn

## *The Iranian Hostage Crisis*



*President Carter (left) toasting the Shah of Iran*

"Death to Carter!" "Death to the Shah!" "Death to America!"

It was 1979 in Tehran, the capital city of Iran. Day after day tens of thousands of frenzied Iranians marched past the U.S. embassy chanting slogans of hatred. The daily demonstrations of Iranian loathing of the United States were dramatic evidence of the emotional intensity surrounding one of the most complicated problems faced by the United States in this century.

On a drizzly Sunday morning, November 4, 1979, the words of hatred turned into action. Hundreds of young Iranians, many of them university students, scaled the walls encircling the sprawling U.S. embassy. The 66 Americans working there were captured, blindfolded, and tied up. Some were beaten. The militant Iranians announced that they would hold the Americans hostage until the United States met their demands. These demands would cause Jimmy Carter the most anguishing times of his presidency.

The forces that led to the hostage crisis had been building for decades. They were forces that resulted in a bloody revolution overthrowing the shah of Iran, a man who had held power for 37 years. They were also forces that most Americans, including top government officials, could not understand.

It is especially difficult for Americans, and most citizens of Western nations, to understand the power of religion in Iranian life and politics. There are many different religions in Iran, but the vast majority of the people, about 90 percent of the population, are Shiite Moslems, members of a branch of the Islamic faith. Speaking from their mosques, religious leaders have a strong hold over the lives of their followers. One of the most powerful religious leaders, the Ayatollah Khomeini, played a key role in the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis.

Another key actor in mid-century Iranian history was Shah Reza Pahlavi, the "King of Kings," who ruled Iran from the Peacock throne. Early during World War II, the Iranian government was developing close relations with Nazi Germany. Fearing that Iran would allow Germany to control the strategically vital Persian Gulf, England and the Soviet Union invaded. The Iranian government was overthrown and the shah placed in power. After the war, the British withdrew, but the Russians seemed determined to remain. Finally, after intense pressure from the United States, the Soviet troops were withdrawn. Thereafter, the shah intended to develop close relations with the United States.

As the years passed, the shah became one of the most powerful rulers in the world and one of America's most important allies. The United States wanted friendly relations with Iran. Iran, a major oil-producing country, borders the Persian Gulf. Much of the world's oil supply passes through the gulf. If Iran interfered with the flow of oil, it would cause major problems in the industrial nations of the world. U.S. leaders have long feared what might happen if the Soviets were in a position to control the gulf. Since Iran stands between the Soviet Union and the gulf, a strong, friendly Iran would help keep the

Soviets from gaining control. In addition to its strategic location, Iran was also economically important to the United States as a major trading partner. Billions of dollars of U.S. goods and military equipment were sold to the shah. Iranian oil was exported to the United States.

Many groups in Iran opposed the shah, and his grasp on power was not always secure. In the early 1950s he was driven from power and replaced by a new leader. U.S. officials were convinced the new leader planned to develop friendly relations with the Soviet Union and to disrupt the oil trade. In 1953, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) aided pro-shah forces in Iran, and the shah was returned to power. It is possible that the shah might have recovered his throne without CIA help, but many Iranians became convinced that the shah regained power only because of U.S. intervention. Many of those who hated the shah also hated the United States.

Having regained power, the shah was determined to hold it. In 1957 he created SAVAK, a type of secret police force. SAVAK worked to eliminate political opposition to the shah. Its tactics could be brutal. Real and suspected enemies of the shah were often tortured and killed. Many Iranians have reported that members of their families disappeared, presumably eliminated by SAVAK. It was claimed that the CIA helped train the members of SAVAK.

The shah was interested in more than simply holding power. He had many ideas of ways to improve life in Iran. He wanted his nation to become more like Western industrial nations. Factories were built, highways constructed, television and other forms of electronic communications were established. In 1963 he began what is known as the "White Revolution." Among the changes brought by the revolution was an effort to break up large landholdings so that more people could own property. He also ruled that women could have the right to vote.

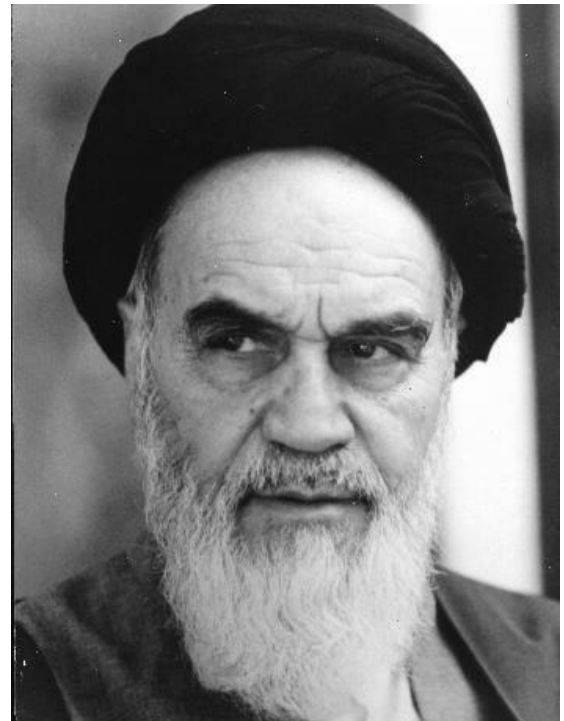
The shah's efforts to change Iran were vigorously opposed by many religious leaders. They condemned his policies on women's rights. They were disgusted with the influx of foreigners and with the night-clubs and gambling casinos the shah permitted to operate.

Major riots in opposition to the shah and his White Revolution occurred in the streets of Tehran and elsewhere. The ayatollah was a major leader of the religious opposition to the shah and active in encouraging the rioting. Khomeini was arrested and sent out of the country. Years later he would return in triumph.

The shah's efforts to change Iranian life brought continuing controversy. Anti-shah demonstrations and riots became more frequent, as did bloody clashes with the police. From outside the country, the Ayatollah Khomeini called for the overthrow of the shah and a return to traditional Islamic ways. Tape recordings of the ayatollah's speeches were smuggled into Iran, and his followers listened intently to his messages.

U.S. leaders continued to support the shah. They did not understand the degree to which his reign was threatened. They also did not realize how much hatred there was for the United States among the anti-shah forces.

In December 1977, President Jimmy Carter visited the shah. At an elegant New Year's Eve dinner he toasted the monarch. He praised the shah as a great leader who was loved and respected by his people. In closing the president said, "There is no leader with whom I have a deeper sense of personal gratitude and personal friendship." The president's speech reinforced the belief that the United States would be unwavering in its support of the shah.



*Ayatollah Khomeini*

Neither the shah nor SAVAK could restrain the revolutionary feelings sweeping Iran. Demonstrations and riots continued even though hundreds of people were killed by the police. The lives of Americans and other foreigners were threatened. Mobs attacked banks, night clubs, and other symbols of foreign influence in Iran. Police stations were overrun. Workers went on strike. Through it all came messages from the ayatollah encouraging the revolution. He spoke of the evil influence of the United States. He called the United States the "Great Satan" of the world. He said proper religious authority must be established in Iran.

It became clear that the shah could no longer rule. On January 16, 1979, the shah and his family left Iran. He claimed he was taking a vacation, but he would never return. Now, who would govern Iran?

The shah had appointed a new government before he left, but it was unable to establish firm control. On February 1, the Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran and thousands cheered his arrival. An intense power struggle began.

The revolutionary forces had been united in their opposition to the shah and their hatred of the United States. They were not united, however, in their opinions about how Iran should be ruled once the shah was gone. The ayatollah had a devoted following, but not all revolutionary groups wanted a government based on his strict religious beliefs.

The 78-year-old ayatollah formed his own government. For a time there were two governments claiming the right to control Iran. It was not clear who had the right or the power to govern. Various groups continued to compete for power and street violence was common in Iran.

The United States had ordered most of its employees home, but a small staff remained at the embassy in Tehran. In February the embassy was attacked, and the workers taken prisoner. Representatives of the ayatollah persuaded the mob to release the prisoners and to leave the embassy. The brief but frightening incident was a preview of what was to come in November.

The ayatollah's government worked to establish control. Hundreds of people were executed without fair trials. Many had been members of SAVAK, others were charged with vague crimes such as "war against God," or "corruption on earth." The ayatollah, convinced that he spoke for God, gave many orders. Music and dancing were forbidden. Nightclubs were closed. Women were ordered to wear the chador, a full-length traditional Islamic garment. Strict censorship was placed on newspapers and other forms of mass communication. In his speeches the ayatollah continued to condemn the shah and the United States—"the moral corrupter of the world."

The shah was a man without a country. The king became a pawn in a diplomatic chess game. Many nations, once friendly with the shah, refused to admit him. They feared their citizens in Iran might be attacked or that vital oil supplies would be shut off. In addition, citizens in many countries believed the shah to be a brutal dictator and did not want their governments to offer him refuge. For a time the shah stayed in Egypt, Mexico, and elsewhere. He knew that many in the United States would not welcome him. There had been many anti-shah demonstrations in the United States.

For years the shah had been suffering from cancer, but he kept his illness secret from the public. While in Mexico his condition worsened. Some medical experts said the shah's disease could only be properly treated in the United States. Would the U.S. government allow the shah to enter the country?

President Carter discussed the shah's difficulties with his advisors. Some prominent Americans had urged the president to admit the shah for treatment. They argued that the shah had long been a faithful ally of the United States and deserved to be well treated. The president initially opposed allowing the shah to enter but changed his mind after being convinced of the seriousness of the shah's illness. The president feared trouble. He asked his advisors who had recommended admitting the shah, "What are you guys going to advise me to do if they overrun our embassy and take our people hostage?"

On October 22, 1979, the shah was flown to New York City for treatment. On November 4, the U.S. embassy in Tehran was overrun and its occupants taken hostage. The captors announced that the hostages would not be released unless the shah was returned to Iran to stand trial for his alleged crimes.

The embassy takeover, a major violation of diplomatic law, was condemned by virtually every nation in the world. In effect Iran had become an international outlaw. In Iran, however, the takeover was

a cause for great celebration. Hundreds of thousands marched past the embassy chanting their support for the radicals who had seized it. The ayatollah praised the radicals. The embassy was called a "nest of spies," and the hostages were to be placed on trial as spies. The United States was told that the hostages would be immediately killed if an effort was made to rescue them by force.

President Carter and most of the American people were outraged by the takeover. A majority of Americans favored military action against Iran if any of the hostages were hurt. Polls also showed that people favored the admittance of the shah for medical treatment but opposed allowing him to remain permanently. A majority of Americans rejected the idea of returning the shah to Iran in exchange for the hostages, although about 30 percent favored the idea. The president would not trade the shah for the



*American embassy personnel taken hostage in 1979*

hostages, but he did not want him to remain in the United States. It was arranged for the shah to move to Panama.

Some Iranians living in the United States supported the ayatollah. A group of them requested a permit to hold a pro-Khomeini demonstration in front of the White House. Many groups were routinely given permits to demonstrate. This time, however, the president ordered that no permit be given. In part he feared the demonstrators would be attacked by angry Americans. If such an attack occurred, the president feared the hostages might be hurt or killed in retaliation.

The president began what would be a long, painful, and frustrating process of trying to in release of the hostages. The ayatollah had ordered that no Iranian officials speak to Americans. Behind the scenes, however, third parties attempted to negotiate with some Iranian officials. Time and time again the secret negotiations led to arrangements for the hostages' release, but time and time again the deals fell through at the last moment.

The United Nations condemned Iran, but still the hostages were held. The International Court ordered the hostages to be released, but still they were held. No one could persuade the ayatollah or the radicals to release the hostages.

President Carter ordered an end to oil imports from Iran. He ordered that military supplies scheduled for delivery to Iran not be sent. He ordered that all Iranian money in U.S. banks be frozen. This meant that Iran could not withdraw any of its billions of dollars deposited in U.S. banks. Still the hostages remained captive.

Months passed. Secret negotiations continued to fail. Political and economic pressure, although hurting Iran, could not secure the hostages' release. Finally the president made a fateful decision. Since the beginning of the hostage crisis, military experts had been developing a plan for the rescue of the hostages. From a secret base in the Iranian desert, helicopters would be flown to the embassy. Specially trained troops would storm the embassy, surprise the captors, and release the hostages. It was a risky plan. It was possible that hostages would be killed. The president became convinced that all efforts to free the hostages had been made and failed. He ordered the rescue mission to be attempted.

Late in April 1980, the rescue raid was attempted. It failed. Sand-storms in the desert disabled some of the helicopters and, in a fiery crash, eight American servicemen were killed. A deeply saddened President Carter announced the failure of the secret mission.

Many feared the hostages might be killed because of the attempted military rescue, but they were not. Instead the hostages were removed from the embassy to secret locations throughout Iran.

The hostage crisis dragged on. Various factors led to its final resolution. In July the shah died. Demands for his return were now pointless. In September, Iran went to war with its neighbor Iraq. Money was needed to fight the war. The release of the approximately \$8 billion frozen in U.S. banks could help pay the costs of war. The delicate secret negotiations succeeded at last.

On January 20, 1981, 444 days after their capture, the hostages were released in exchange for the frozen Iranian dollars. It was the day of Ronald Reagan's inauguration as president. In part because of his inability to solve the hostage crisis sooner, Jimmy Carter had failed in his attempt to be reelected.

The major sources for this story were:

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*Time* (January 7, 1980)

#### QUESTIONS FOR "KING TO PAWN"

*Write all answers on a separate sheet of paper.*

#### **Historical Understanding**

1. How did Shah Reza Pahlavi originally come to power in Iran?
2. What were two reasons that a stable, friendly Iran was believed important for U.S. interests?
3. How did the United Nations, the International Court, and most nations of the world react to the embassy takeover?
4. Why were many nations unwilling to admit the shah after he left Iran?

#### **Reviewing the Facts of the Case Answer briefly:**

5. What did the militant Iranians demand before they would release the hostages?
6. Why did many Iranians despise the United States?
7. Why did Iranian religious leaders oppose the shah's attempts to change Iran?
8. How did Ayatollah Khomeini continue to influence events in Iran after he was expelled from the country?
9. What were three policies enacted by the ayatollah when he gained power in Iran?
10. How did President Jimmy Carter respond to the pro-Khomeini Iranians' request for a permit to demonstrate in front of the White House?
11. What were three things President Carter did to try to gain the release of the hostages?

#### **Expressing Your Reasoning**

12. Should President Jimmy Carter have allowed Shah Reza Pahlavi into the United States for medical treatment? Why or why not?
13. While the shah was in the United States, the hostages were taken. Their captors said they would not release the hostages unless the shah was returned to Iran. Should the president have traded the shah for the hostages? Why or why not?
14. The president finally ordered that a military rescue attempt be made. Should the president have done that? Write a paragraph explaining your answer.