

Vance, in Last Act, Turned to Iran Scholars

In one of his last acts as Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance arranged for five academics specializing in Iranian affairs to give a seminar at the State Department.

By the time the meeting was held, on 23 April, the hostage rescue mission to Teheran had been ordered and Vance had said he would quit, but neither decision had become public.

One point on which the five scholars were all agreed was that any use of force in the Iranian situation would be counterproductive. Vance, who spent over an hour with two of them on 25 April, "was extremely receptive to everything we had to say," notes William Beeman, a social anthropologist at Brown University.

It could perhaps be said of America's Iranian scholars that seldom have so few known so much and been so little consulted. Between them the handful of Persian-speaking academics possess a broad experience of Iran that extends to personal acquaintance with several of its present leadership. The religious community, like most of the Iranian polity, was largely ignored by U.S. diplomats and others in Iran. Yet one American academic, Michael J. Fischer of Harvard, is an expert on the political structure of Iranian religious institutions, and another, Hamid Algar of Berkeley, forecast a religious revolution led by Khomeini as early as 1972 (*Science*, 14 December 1979, p. 1281).

The views of these and other academics on American policy toward Iran were ignored by the Administration until the fall of the Shah. They were consulted by the State Department from then until 4 November 1979, when the Teheran embassy was taken. But thereafter the State Department ceased to call, perhaps because it was itself being cut out of policy making. "Paradoxically, since the crisis began . . . individuals best equipped to deal with its intricacies—American experts on Iran—have not been used effectively by our Government," Beeman wrote in an article in the *New York Times* on 11 April.

Iranian scholars, though not agreeing on everything among themselves, harbor a generally very different view

of the present crisis to that held by the Administration and the public at large.

For one thing, they consider that the hostage situation can be solved only by treating it as a subordinate issue in the wider context of U.S.-Iranian relations. They tend to view the Administration's present policy, of focusing on the hostages alone while putting maximum political pressure on Iran, as one that will succeed only in driving Iran into the arms of the Soviet Union. "Those of us involved in Iran gnash our teeth and tear our hair every time we see another U.S. government move," says Beeman.

The five scholars invited to the State Department last month were Beeman, Fischer, historians Richard Bulliet of Columbia University and William Royce of the University of Arizona, and political scientist Marvin Zonis of the University of Chicago. James Bill of the University of Texas was invited but could not attend. The seminar was attended by members of the Policy Planning Staff and Middle East desk. Beeman and Zonis had a private meeting with Vance the following day.

A distinctive feature of the scholars' view of the crisis is their ability to see it from the Iranian as well as the American side of the fence. After the fall of the Shah, Iranians were uncertain of America's attitude toward their revolution. In the absence of any convincing statement of support from the Carter Administration, they began to fear that the United States' real purpose was to restore the Shah for a second time. When the Shah was admitted to the United States, the fears gained momentum; in this context the U.S. embassy staff was taken hostage.

All major groups in Iran, James Bill wrote recently in *Newsday*, "are convinced that the United States is determined to roll back their revolution and to reinstate another oppressive Pahlavi or Pahlavi-like regime. They consider themselves a small and embattled nation born again by revolution and now threatened by a vindictive superpower. In such a situation, Shiite Islam is their ideology, Khomeini their leader, revolutionary zeal their armor, and the hostages their insurance."

In the scholars' view, the hostages are almost an irrelevance. If they hadn't been taken, the Iranians would have made their point in some other way; if they had been rescued, the Iranians would only have taken more

hostages, such as American newsmen or businessmen. The crux of the problem is not the hostages but the question of status.

"The primary problem is one of parity and dignity between nations," says Beeman. Even the Shah bent his efforts toward having the United States treat Iran with the same dignity as accorded to European nations. After the Shah's downfall, the United States pointed out flaws in the revolution, ridiculing the courts and the mullahs. "We delivered them an unconscionable blow to their national pride and their desire to be recognized as a nation of status and dignity," Beeman observes. The taking of the hostages was an expression of this hurt, among other things. But the United States then refused to discuss any other issue, adding to Iran's humiliation.

How can the situation be redressed? "The first step in my view," says Beeman, "is to try to elevate Iran's status to that of a nation with the same parity. Second, this message should be gotten across not just to a single leader but to the broad mass of the population. Third, by continuing to put pressure on them, we make it impossible for them to achieve the independent status they want; besides which it is a very short step from here to calling on the Soviet Union for help.

"It may be that Iranians don't want us to go away and ostracize them. They want to achieve parity in the world, but as a revolutionary government. The correct orientation for us would be to position ourselves as defenders of the Iranian revolution and nation," Beeman suggests. "The United States should make clear that it takes the Iranian revolution seriously and recognizes its moral goals," says Fischer.

In the scholars' view, it is American preoccupation with the hostage issue that is a major obstacle to the resolution of the crisis. "The White House keeps talking about the hostages as the only issue," says Fischer. "That is all the public ever sees on TV and it gets angry. So the White House says that the political climate doesn't allow the wider context of U.S.-Iran relations to be looked at. It has reached the point of absurdity."

How could the vicious circle be broken? "A little leadership at the top would go a long way," Fischer observes.

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