

Crisis in Iran—none for me, thanks

Fifth Estate Collective

1979

Iran: the Ayatollah captures the revolution

The confrontation between Iran and the United States over the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran Nov. 4 and taking of 63 hostages (later reduced to 50) by Islamic student militants has brought to the fore the worst features of this epoch. The grotesque spectacle of a million Iranians marching in lockstep, chanting praises of a decrepit mullah and a reactionary religion is matched in this country by a sudden upsurge of patriotism one would have thought impossible just a few weeks ago.

As in all modern crises, the institutions of domination—the political state, capital, and in this case, religion—stand illuminated in such a manner as to make their social function obvious to all who are willing to drop the mystifications of this society. However, for those willing to continue behind the definitions of social reality and the crisis as posed by the leaders of nations, they are condemned to simply act out the age-old patterns of rulers and ruled.

While the clique of rulers in each country manipulates the real grievances or fears of the people for their own purposes, nothing should be allowed to obscure the righteousness of the anger of the Iranian people toward the U.S. government for the role it has played there. The U.S. Embassy in Tehran was, and is, a “nest of spies” that did indeed decide policy for its client state allowing it no more independence than the worst “banana republic” of Central America. It was the same gunboat diplomacy which installed the Shah Reza Pahlavi in power after the 1953 CIA-directed coup and which operated the Embassy as the Middle East office of the National Security Agency. It was a spy station par excellence—necessitated by the rich oil fields of Iran and its proximity to the Soviet Union’s southern flank—as well as dumping ground for sophisticated U.S. technology and weaponry geared toward maintaining American dominance in the region both economically and politically. So sensitive was Iran and the Embassy that no less than two ambassadors to that country later surfaced as directors of the CIA—Richard Helms and William Sullivan. All of the Shah’s brutal, repressive police force and military received training in the U.S. as did the torturers of the hated SAVAK.

To be frank, it is beyond our capacity to extend sympathy for the American hostages or to share any indignation about the seizure of the Embassy. Empty phrases like “violation of international law” or the “sanctity of diplomatic immunity” have meaning only to those who cherish the world as it is and have been made a mockery too many times before by every nation-state for us to show any concern.

Further, to suggest that one ought to be concerned with the rules governing the conduct of politics between segments of international capital is a bit much to swallow. We care naught what the vultures or their functionaries heap upon one another and when the hostages turn out to be imperialist diplomats, professional spies and career marines—sorry, but no sympathy. We have too many other hostages and prisoners being held in this country and around the world to shed tears over those who are part of the mechanism keeping our comrades imprisoned.

Still, none of this should be taken in any way as support for the Moslem fanatics parading in ant-hill fashion through the streets of Tehran, pledging their loyalty to Islam while whipping themselves with scourges. Rather, the

seizure of the Embassy has to be seen as part of the skillful maneuvering of a consummate politician, the Ayatollah Khomeini, to recapture the political support he had lost in the days prior to the crisis.

As in any revolutionary situation, the events of the last year in Iran have proceeded at a whirlwind pace. The overthrow of the Shah's bloody regime unleashed a torrent of popular revolutionary activity which extended well beyond the desires of the mullahs, who intended to capture all of the outpouring behind a reactionary twelfth century concept of an "Islamic Republic." Instead, again as in every Revolutionary situation, all things became possible. Iranian women discarded their symbol of submission, the chador (veil); thousands of oil workers, teachers and those in other industries formed workers councils, putting forth demands that had nothing to do with the Ayatollah Khomeini's religious fanaticism.

The main props of the bourgeois: state began to disintegrate: the military and the government apparatus collapsed, with as much as 50% of the Shah's army deserting and bureaucrats giving orders with no one paying any attention. Each day saw new demonstrations of workers demanding control of industry or women demanding equality. Publications of every political stripe began demanding a carrying through of the revolution that had only been begun with the toppling of the Shah. Unemployment reached almost 50%, leaving thousands free and undisciplined in the streets to demonstrate or to discuss the events of the day.

At the same time the forces of reaction led by the Ayatollah and the priesthood caste of mullahs began moving in an opposite direction: their idea of the overthrow of the Shah was to re-subject Iran to a different tyranny—that of Islam. In Khomeini's Islamic Republic everyone would submit to the iron laws of the Koran; women would appear in public fully veiled, employees would submit to their employers; movies, alcohol, extra-marital sex, homosexuality and other features of the "decadent" West would be ruthlessly removed. To enforce his vision of the future (based on the past) the Ayatollah's Islamic Guard began executions and public floggings of not only SAVAK police torturers (upon whom we shower no sympathy), but also those who violated the Ayatollah's moral preachments. The anti-Semitic bent of the religious regime became apparent as several unfortunate Jews met the firing squad as a result of charges of being part of a "Zionist conspiracy."

All of this did not go unresisted by those segments of Iranian society who would suffer the most cruelly at the hands of the proposed theocratic state. Opposition to the rule of mullahs had grown almost to the proportions of civil war during the summer. On August 12, 50,000 leftists and liberals marched in Tehran chanting "Death to this fascist government" and were set upon by 5,000 armed Islamic goons brought to the scene by Khomeini's trucks. Similarly, a march of women who refused to cover their bodies was also set upon by mobs of religious fanatics with iron bars and clubs.

Oil workers began strikes against the Ayatollah's harsh labor policies and in the capital of the province of Gilan, workers marched in the streets chanting "Death to Khomeini." Shortly before, fishermen in an adjoining region battled police after they had liberated a government fishing vessel and distributed its catch to a local village. Resistance to the mullahs also came from ethnic Arabs and other minority nationality and religious groups as well as among the separatist Kurds, who the new government attacked with a ferocity matching that of the Shah's 25-year campaign against them.

Seeing the opposition grow, the Ayatollah grasped desperately for a way of uniting the country around him. His seemingly senseless resumption of the Shah's war against the Kurds was in part an attempt to reassemble the Army which had disintegrated and partly an attempt to mobilize Persian nationalism against this minority to create a unity that was growing ever more dim.

The action of the students in seizing the hostages was, if you will, a godsend for the Ayatollah. The justifiable hatred of Iranian people for the U.S. government galvanized public support around Khomeini and re-established him as the symbol of the Iranian revolution as he was in the first days of the Shah's overthrow. It's not that opposition to Islamic reaction has diminished as much as it is almost impossible to air the grievances that had convulsed Khomeini's rule during this last summer when Iran is locked in combat with the behemoth of North America. Two weeks after the occupation began, tens of thousands of Marxist-Leninist Fedayee guerrillas marched in Tehran and several thousand unemployed occupied a government office demanding jobs, but these were heavily overshadowed by events at the Embassy.

The crisis has also reinvigorated the Khomeini-instigated Assembly of Experts which had been preparing a theocratic constitution for Iran embodying the most reactionary aspects of Islam giving the Ayatollah the legal

authority to rule. All of Iran's politicians, realizing they were being outflanked by the mullahs, opposed the Assembly, as did large sections of the populations. But with the Embassy seizure it was suddenly the duty of all of those faithful to Islam to support the constitution, and on December 2 and 3, the faithful dutifully trooped out to vote the priests the authority they sought.

The change in the people from a mood of opposition to one of compliance is rooted in the mass character structure produced by state society, which leaves its members feeling secure only when subjected. It creates the cannon fodder for the giant marches chanting pledges of fealty to Islam which culminated in the sickening spectacle of flagellants during the recent religious holidays. This is humanity reduced to its most grotesque, barely worthy of the name, a transformed species from that which we were in the wild.

The final piece in the puzzle of Iran comes together with the others when one looks behind the religious fanaticism to view the emergence of Islam in the modern world in contention with Marxism as the leading counter-revolutionary ideology. From Khomeini in Iran to Khadafy in Libya to Zia in Pakistan and throughout the Arab world, while presenting the face of religious fundamentalism separate from the political economy of their nations, the star and crescent is used as the ideology within which capital is developed in the Mideast and Asia. The Shah, for all of his much vaunted "modernizations," was like the Russian Czar acting as a fetter on the development of a truly modern economy. The Shah's systematic looting of the Persian economy to the tune of billions of dollars sucked from oil production condemned the country to an existence which supported only the limited expansion of capital. Just as modern capital was constructed in the USSR and China under the aegis of state socialism, in England under Puritanism and protestantism and in France under the scientific Enlightenment, in this epoch Islam has moved to the fore to organize national capital in Third World countries where Marxism is not a meaningful force. Islam contains the mass psychological elements necessary to mobilize large segments of the population around a program of self-sacrifice and submission necessary to exploit labor for the creation of a national capital that does not see its fruits flee the country to foreign hands.

Khomeini, however, must be seen as only a moment in the developments of events in Iran. The Ayatollah has support among the bazaar merchants and elements of the unemployed but eventually, when the current crisis has passed, the mullahs will be forced to confront the real crisis facing Khomeini's regime; the disintegration of the state apparatus, the massive unemployment and the total collapse of investment capital. Khomeini will have to be replaced by a force that can at once assume the mantle of religion and mobilize capital and the people in a coherent manner.

To deflect the trajectory of Iranian capital necessitates the throwing off of not only the mysticism of religion, but eventually confronting the fake opposition of the left in that country and take up the project begun in the first days of the revolution when all things were possible. Only at that time can a real transformation of human society occur.

The U.S.: The return of patriotism

Just as the Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded in consolidating his crumbling support among the Iranian masses by diverting attention from his own crises onto the U.S. Embassy and the Shah, the U.S. government and the politicians have been able to generate support and undermine growing political disaffection by whipping up an hysterical campaign around the issue of the embassy hostages in Tehran. Hence, the pervasive cynicism about politics in general and the government in particular, combined with the frustration and rage underlying life in every sphere of contemporary life, has given way to sporadic outbreaks of anger and violence against "Foreigners." Now everyone suddenly figures out what has been wrong all along about their lives and about the deteriorating social terrain: Iranians, anti-Americans, foreigners, etc.—just as certain sectors of the German population were to come to the conclusion that "Jews and communists" were responsible for their problems in Weimar Germany.

It is probably safe to say, however, that most Americans have remained unimpressed with the protests of a vocal minority of superpatriots. The burning of Iranian flags and similar displays of xenophobia have been limited to numbers in the low thousands and made up of student lunch-hour affairs, VFW/American Legion beer busts and the like.

This is not to say that public support for any sort of military adventure aimed at Iran or pogrom against Iranians in this country could not be mobilized as long as the majority of people refuse to see the U.S. as anything but a “benign giant” being victimized by religious fanatics; but at this point, neither Carter nor the media is interested in carrying on a “Remember the Maine” war drum campaign. What is particularly discouraging is the public anger and self-organized demonstrations over the freedom of a group of hostages whose sole function is to carry out the foreign policy of the U.S. generals and oil corporations, when this same public is faced with a thousand abuses every single day under this system with never a peep.

Despite our horror at seeing a revolution against the vicious police state of the Shah succumb to the inertia of Islamic totalitarianism, what unavoidably concerns us in a more direct way is the tense atmosphere created in the U.S. by bloodthirsty, jingoist militancy. Such an atmosphere, formed against a backdrop of mass passivity, makes criticism of and opposition to the government as well as opposition to the patriotic, warmongering posturing and hysteria a dangerous, even provocative act. “Don’t break step,” snarl the patriots when confronted by even the suggestion that the U.S. government is in the wrong or that the aspirations of the Iranian students may have a shred of legitimacy. Beat up the foreigners and anyone else who spits on the flag. We’ll all march together once more—the goose-step.

Of course this could not have happened at a better time for U.S. capital, which is falling apart economically and which has seen its support inside the U.S. and out eroding at a steady pace since the Vietnam War. Even sociologists are publishing reports describing how the “Iranian crisis” has managed to “unite” Americans around the flag, making it possible to forget much more pressing problems at home. Nationalism and militarism, long since discredited since the Vietnam debacle, are being revived.

If the American people allow the climate of hysteria and mob mentality to grow, then they may soon see themselves herded into a war to defend oil company profits in the Middle East. They will see the draft reinstated, see their children sent off in waves to die. Opponents and critics of the government could find themselves jailed or attacked by right-wing mobs. Any group demonstrating, say, against the construction of a nuclear plant, will face the possibility of having to defend itself from patriotic bullies who accuse anti-nuclear activists of putting the United States at the mercy of the sheiks and mullahs. Ultimately, the spectre of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union should be remembered, as well as the grim possibility of seeing racist riots and the detention of Arabs and other Middle Eastern people in the U.S. in concentration camps, just as Japanese and Japanese-Americans were victimized during the Second World War.

We say no to the hysteria and the patriotism generated around this pseudo-crisis of diplomacy! If the American people allow themselves to be suckered into a war against the people of Iran, then they will end by paying in blood. And if anyone comes out ahead, it will certainly not be the Iranian people, or the American people, but the politicians, the military, the banks, and the oil companies. Turn the guns around! We have enough grievances of our own! No to war! No to patriotism! No to the capitalists and the state! We spit on the American flag and the Iranian flag, on all flags. We have no use for flag-wavers. We have an entire world to recover. Let us begin by refusing to become pawns in the designs of leaders and politicians. Let us begin by taking control of our own lives.

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Fifth Estate #300, December 4, 1979

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