

Truth Takes a Beating

Fifth Estate Collective

TEHRAN — In the flurry of yellow ribbons, parades, and righteous indignation at a nation Ronald Reagan characterized as barbaric, the identity of the real barbarians has been obscured. The fact that the Shah was a corrupt despot propped up by the force of U.S. arms was becoming apparent to increasing numbers of Americans prior to the hostage seizure. But after the embassy take-over, the U.S. ideological apparatus was able to shift the public's awareness from the tyranny of the Shah to the plight of the hostages at the hands of "terrorist fanatics".

The Iranian students who seized the embassy—in a gross miscalculation of their ability to compete with the power of the American media to shape and influence events—had hoped to convey to the American people the true nature of the Shah's regime and the U.S. government's complicity in its maintenance. (Though shortly thereafter the Ayatollah made use of the fervor generated by the situation to prop up his faltering regime.) But the mass media, in a display of hysterical patriotism unrivaled since the early days of the anti-communist crusade in Vietnam, won the day with a campaign of sanctimonious indignation at this "violation of American sovereignty". This campaign in fact served the larger end of attempting to cure the so-called "Vietnam syndrome," namely the generalized suspicion, cynicism, and hostility of many Americans toward the policies of the U.S. government.

Since the CIA-sponsored coup in 1953 which overthrew the popularly-elected nationalist Mossadegh and installed the Shah on his Peacock throne, the U.S. had been building up the military capability of Iran to serve as local watchdog of U.S. economic and strategic interests in the Persian Gulf region. Iran was quickly transformed into one of the major military powers of the non-industrialized world, developing the capability both to crush insurgencies in the Persian Gulf region and suppress any internal opposition. The texture of Iranian society quickly became that of a police state, with the will of the Shah exacted through the instrument of the dreaded and omnipresent Iranian secret police, the SAVAK.

The Shah liked to portray himself—and this was generally accepted by most commentators in the U.S. media—as a great "reformer" and "modernizer" opposed by Moslem fanatics and Marxist extremists. Without attempting to assess the actual extent of his opponents' commitment to reform, one can say that the Shah's charges that his opponents were against his attempts to reform Iranian society are unprovable, since no reforms of any positive significance to the population ever took place.

The supposed cornerstone of the Shah's policies in predominantly peasant Iran was his "agricultural reform" program. Well-known French agronomist and former advisor to the Shah, René Dumont, reported in 1978 that he was "appalled" when he discovered that the "reforms were a farce" that forced peasants into urban slums from their land, which was taken over by agribusinesses. Some ten million peasants were left with less-than-adequate acreage for even subsistence purposes, and soon agricultural production fell drastically. The results of the Shah's reforms by 1978 were that "large numbers of people face starvation" (Dumont), the real income of most Iranians had declined significantly, and much of the society's resources were being wasted on weapons and consumption for the newly rich.

Reza Baraheni, a noted Iranian writer (who, like Solzhenitzyn before him, chronicled his experiences of imprisonment and torture at the hands of his nation's "security forces"), described the effect of "modernization" on Iran's

community life as providing “the worst taste in architecture...complemented by a sickening dosage of cheap Western goods and commodities.” Baraheni saw “...ancient cities...subjected to the opprobrious indecencies of a tinsel westernization, despoiled by a regime which neither values nor understands the living attainments of the East or the West...” As in most third world and “developing” nations, modernization meant for Iran a gloss of Western-style consumption for the few covering extensive immiseration for the many. As Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman penetratingly observed, “...the police and military establishments are probably the only elements of Iranian society that could be described as fully “modernized’...”*

The Shah spent fantastic sums on a modern array of weaponry. In just the period 1972 through 1978, over \$20 billion in arms were purchased. U.S. military aid to Iran from 1946 to 1975 approached \$1.5 billion. Along with regular military supplies, the U.S. also supplied to the regime equipment such as anti-riot gear, used to suppress dissent. This equipment, as well as generous training by the CIA and the U.S. military, aided the efforts of the Shah to suppress discontent with his policies.

Michael Metrisko, a career foreign service officer and one of the 52 former hostages, recently stated that although the SAVAK definitely “Did do a lot of things that would be considered torture,” Americans were in no way responsible. “Americans,” Metrisko said, “weren’t commanding it or controlling it. SAVAK was an Iranian organization staffed by Iranians. There were no Americans in the torture rooms...” Perhaps there were not, but former chief CIA analyst on Iran, Joseph J. Leaf, said in 1979 that a senior CIA official was involved in instructing officials in the SAVAK on torture techniques which were based on those employed by the Germans in WWII. Considering the extent of American aid to SAVAK and the military and police forces in general, Metrisko’s assertion is at best myopic and at worst a deliberate falsification.

The number of Iranian citizens imprisoned and tortured by SAVAK is astounding. Amnesty International’s Annual Report 1974/1975 estimated that there were between 25,000 and 100,000 political prisoners in Iran in that year alone. They estimated that at least 300,000 people had been in and out of SAVAK prisons during its existence. Three hundred prisoners were officially acknowledged to have been executed in the three years prior to 1977. Many thousands were tortured, with permanent injury or death a common result.

SAVAK’s tentacles spread throughout Iranian society, with agents reportedly in the political parties, labor unions, industries, tribal societies, as well as abroad, especially where the large numbers of Iranian students congregated. The International Commission of Jurists pointed out that the chief of SAVAK was given the title of Deputy Prime Minister, a fact reflecting its tremendous power in Iranian society. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the secret police and the massive military apparatus were the Shah’s regime, without which, lacking popular support, he couldn’t have lasted a week.

Martin Ennals, secretary-general of Amnesty International, underlined the repressive nature of the Shah’s regime in *The Amnesty International Report, 1975/1976*, noting that Iran had the “...highest rate of death penalties in the world, no valid system of civilian courts and a history of torture which is beyond belief. No country has a worse record in human rights than Iran.”

With the hostages’ return came a host of stories about ill-treatment and torture by their Iranian captors, triggering Reagan’s remark about “barbarians.” Many of these stories, upon closer examination, turned out to be distortions, or in at least one case—that of a hostage who was supposed to have been forced to play Russian Roulette—an outright lie, prompting her to denounce the media, at a major press conference in Washington, D.C., as “irresponsible.” A balanced assessment leads to the conclusion that, while they were not lightly treated, most of what was described as torture was in fact the condition of imprisonment.

While it is undoubtedly horrifying when speaking of imprisoned human beings to make distinctions about what constitutes torture, such an inquiry has the virtue of enabling one to appreciate the hypocrisy of those who would label others “barbarians” while ignoring or condoning worse practices in their midst.

One U.S. official said that it was almost a “miracle” that most of the hostages seemed to be in good shape physically, though understandably a number of them were suffering from psychological disorders as a result of their ordeal. The most recalcitrant hostages were roughly treated, especially at the beginning. One hostage described an argument with one of his captors as ending in him being punched and his glasses knocked across the room. Another hostage complained that their shoes were taken away and they were forced to wear plastic slippers. There were beatings in several instances, the food was bad (but perhaps not worse than that available to many Iranian

citizens), living quarters were cramped and there was scant opportunity to bathe or, for some, to even change clothes. There were other stories, some of dubious merit, but it nevertheless appears that much of the treatment afforded the hostages was consistent with usual prison practices, and that there was no systematic torturing of them. Many of the hostages said that their imprisonment, in its boredom, tension, and uncertainty of duration was “psychological” rather than physical torture.

Nobody knows how many people were killed in SAVAK torture rooms, but the maimed and mutilated number in the many thousands. The American hostages might well have suffered significant psychological damage from their imprisonment, but SAVAK detainees have revealed to the world permanent disfigurements, including the severing of limbs, and an array of tortures employed against them, both medieval and modern.

Charles Jones, one of the more outspoken hostages, complained that “I was treated like an animal in a zoo,” a remark that drew considerable attention. Asked in a press interview to elaborate, Jones said that all the hostages had been treated in this manner, not that his treatment had been uniquely harsh. He further stated that what he meant by his remark was that the hostages were “fed on a schedule” and “watched all the time”. Jones’ feeling brings to mind the identical observation of psychiatrist Dr. Arnold Abrams that inmates in the Control Unit of Marion Prison, the U.S.’s maximum security prison in Marion, Illinois, by their behavior reminded him of “animals in a zoo.” As we shall see, Abrams’ remark is directed at a situation worse than that experienced by the hostages.

The Control Unit at Marion is a “sealed prison within a prison where ‘troublemakers’ and recidivists are broken through isolation and sensory deprivation” (in David Zucchino’s words, from his feature article in the 2/1/81 *Detroit Free Press*). Characterized by prison reformer Scott Meyers as a “repressive model” for the entire U.S. penal system, the Control Unit employs what Carbondale Prison Rights Group attorney James Roberts has called “a crude form of behavioral modification” whereby prisoners are kept in solitary until they “improve.” The most troublesome Control Unit prisoners are placed in the notorious “boxcars,” eight-by-six foot solitary confinement cells. A place of “perpetual dusk-like dimness” where “a man might spend a month, a year, two years...23 hours a day in solitary, every day, every night...” (Zucchino), and where suicides are common and inmates often cut themselves because, according to one psychiatrist, “seeing the blood is almost an affirmation that one is still alive.” The boxcars were temporarily shut down by court order in 1978. In his ruling on the Bono vs. Saxbe class action suit that temporarily halted use of the boxcars, Judge James Foreman called them “odious” and a violation of “society’s standards of humanity and dignity,” and found that the Control Unit had been used to “silence economical and philosophical dissidents...”

Dr. Abrams, testifying about the Control Unit in Bono vs. Saxbe, argued that “They produce the very opposite (of controlled behavior), and then proceed to punish it even further...” The result is “behavior that is recalcitrant, explosive, compulsive, out of control, paranoid...” Noticing the inmates’ “compulsive, obsessional pacing,” Abrams made his above-cited remark that the inmates seemed to him like “animals in a zoo.” The boxcars, by the way, after minor changes termed “cosmetic” by critics, were soon back in use.

The extent to which the media can generate patriotic impulses in this divided society is an open question. Already one senses a dwindling enthusiasm on the part of those segments of society aroused by the media blitz, with the fading of the images from the TV screen. Cynicism or indifference vie with patriotic pride as the dominant emotion: Vietnam vets see the hype in its precise nature as propaganda, contrasting the artificial “hero worship” of the hostages with their own negative reception by society; people complain to a talk-show host that too much was made of the issue in the first place. But the media serves as much to confuse as to overtly propagandize: hostility toward the greedy and corrupt Shah can coexist easily with the desire to bomb Iran back to the stone age, a contradiction which exists only by virtue of the media’s dispersion of the truth among a multiplicity of “points of view,” a feature which allows fragments of the truth to slip through the propaganda net, yet cripples the ability to synthesize, to grasp events in their interrelatedness. The function of the media as a “supermarket of ideas”—all of equal validity—neatly complements its parallel function as propaganda device, for who can deny the “objectivity” of the media when it presents an “expose” of the torture of Iranian citizens by SAVAK? But nowhere are the actions of the Iranian militants and the hostility of a nation linked to the 25 years of misery suffered by Iran at the hands of the Shah and his American sponsors. Without this essential understanding, and considering the role of the media in preventing its emergence, truth must, as a consequence, take a beating.

* from Vol. 1 of their two-volume publication *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (South End Press).



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