

# Confronting Threats Before They Materialize: The United States and the Overthrow of the Iranian Government

— Daniel Goldsmith

In 1953, the United States government funded and orchestrated a coup that deposed Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh, the popular, democratically elected leader of Iran. Although Mossadegh's government never professed Communist allegiances, members of the Eisenhower administration accused it of harboring nascent Communist influences imported from Moscow. In the early years of the Cold War, American officials perceived Communism's spread as a palpable threat. The United States intervened in Iran in 1953 due to a combination of geo-political and ideological interests, in conjunction with a strong sense of fear and paranoia. This was a significant example of "big stick" diplomacy, and proved to be a decisive turning point in Cold War international relations. It set a precedent for many future American interventions and an example for non-aligned nations that would have a far-reaching impact on diplomacy worldwide.

## **Early US Cold War Policy: The Truman Years**

The intervention must be understood as the culmination of several years of early American Cold War policy. Although it took place under Dwight D. Eisenhower, its formulation came as a result of global developments that began during the presidency of Harry Truman. After the Second World War, Soviet Communism became an aggressive challenge to US interests. This threat intensified during the late 1940s with the Czechoslovak coup, the Berlin Crisis, the fall of China, Soviet development of nuclear arms, and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, prompting both official and popular fears of Soviet expansion. Creating stable regimes in uncommitted countries became essential to protecting American military, economic, and political security.<sup>1</sup> As the possibility of Soviet encirclement increased, the added importance of these countries radically altered US foreign policy towards the respective regions of which they were a part.

The American policy on the spread of Communism was not clearly defined until 1950. George Kennan's 1947 article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," proposed the American government's strategy of "containment," which maintained that various pro-US strongholds around the USSR would be

sufficient to contain Communist expansion.<sup>2</sup> After the fall of China and the outbreak of the Korean War however, the government recognized the need for a more coherent, organized policy. Consequently, in April 1950, the Truman administration formulated National Security Council (NSC) resolution 68. NSC-68 systematized and attempted to find the means to make Kennan's ideas of containment work.<sup>3</sup> By proposing a symmetric challenge to any Communist aggression through the militarization of a defensive global perimeter, it was primarily defensive in nature. US interests were seen only in relation to the perceived Soviet threat. It stated that "the assault on free institutions is worldwide now... and in the context of the present polarization of power, a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere."<sup>4</sup> This set the standard for Washington's newfound resolve to resist and contain Communist aggression.

In its practical application, however, NSC-68's proposed strategy was costly to maintain. The massive military spending required to defend the entire free world would have decreased American economic productivity. By 1952, increases in military spending were burdening the growing US economy, but the Communist threat was becoming no less severe.<sup>5</sup> In that year, over 800 million people in the world were living under Communism and in the minds of many US government officials, no further Communist victories could be tolerated without upsetting the global balance of power.<sup>6</sup> Any nation that became Communist was a loss for the US and the West. Eisenhower's subsequent "New Look" policy came out of his administration's desire for greater security for a lesser price.

### **The Objectives of Eisenhower's "New Look"**

The purpose of the New Look policy was to maintain the Truman containment doctrine while lowering overall costs. It included the policy of nuclear retaliation in response to Soviet infractions. Since the US already had a quantitative nuclear advantage, the Eisenhower administration viewed this as an inexpensive deterrent. The New Look proposed a policy of asymmetric response: the US would confront all Soviet aggression, but the nature of its response would remain uncertain. The New Look advocated a variety of methods including alliances, psychological warfare, and covert action, in addition to the threat of nuclear weapons, to discourage the spread of Communism.<sup>7</sup> These methods would provide maximum deterrence at minimum cost. Covert activity, which the NSC defined as "all activities... so planned and executed that any US Government responsibility for them is not evident to unauthorized persons and that if uncovered the US Government

can plausibly disclaim any responsibility for them,” would have direct consequences for Iran.<sup>8</sup>

Eisenhower also appointed John Foster Dulles, and his brother, Allan Dulles, to the influential positions of Secretary of State and director of the newly created Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), respectively. The result was a close coordination between the CIA and the State Department.<sup>9</sup> Like Eisenhower, the Dulles brothers regarded the conflict in primarily ideological and moral terms.<sup>10</sup> In the spring of 1953, Eisenhower proclaimed that “anyone who doesn’t recognize that the great struggle of our time is an ideological one... [is] not looking this question squarely in the face.”<sup>11</sup> He believed that internationalism was an intrinsic part of Soviet ideology, and that Moscow’s master plan was to “pick off countries one by one through subversion or indirect aggression until the US and its allies had been encircled, isolated, and ‘strangled into submission.’”<sup>12</sup> As Eisenhower saw it, the Soviet Union would export its own socialist revolution until the whole world was under its control. As such, the US could no longer afford to merely keep Communism at bay.

In endeavoring to contain Communism, Eisenhower adopted a Machiavellian approach in which the ends justified the means.<sup>13</sup> His end (the preservation of democracy) would require subversion and destruction, often employing clandestine and illegal methods. The CIA became the vehicle to carry out these operations, and Eisenhower gave it a very broad mandate, along with an \$82 million annual budget for covert operations alone.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Oil Controversy in Iran During the Truman Administration**

In the years preceding the 1953 American intervention, the Iranian government was involved in a bitter dispute with the British owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). For decades, the AIOC operated and profited from the world’s largest oil refinery, located at Abadan. In 1933, the company and the Iranian government made a 60-year agreement stipulating the conditions between them. By the 1950s, Iran had become the fourth largest exporter of oil, and was supplying 90% of Europe’s petroleum.<sup>15</sup> Britain provided the necessary knowledge, equipment, and capital, while Iran supplied the labor and received a small share of royalties. Living conditions

for the Iranian laborers, however, were wretched in contrast to those of the British workers. Whereas the Iranians lived in abject poverty, the opulent British facilities included tennis courts and golf courses.

Throughout the late 1940s, Iranian discontent over the terms of this agreement rose. In March 1950, Mohammed Mossadegh was appointed Prime Minister amid civil disorder. He had achieved political success through the National Front, a party he had helped to establish in 1949. It consisted of a coalition of unions, civic groups, and other pro-democratic groups, and would become the basis of his power as Prime Minister. An ardent nationalist throughout his long political career, Mossadegh was a highly skilled orator who believed that Iranians must resist foreign powers and rule themselves. He declared that, "All of Iran's misery, wretchedness, lawlessness and corruption during the last fifty years has been caused by oil and the extortions of the oil company."<sup>16</sup> The core issue for Mossadegh, however, was more than an increase in royalties. He believed that Iran's national sovereignty had to be restored and that it could never attain true independence as long as Britain continued to dominate its oil industry. Riding a wave of popularity into power, Mossadegh promptly succeeded in convincing the Iranian parliament (*Majlis*) to nationalize the AIOC's property. Upon doing this, he became a national hero.

Not surprisingly, nationalization infuriated British investors who immediately began to pressure their government to find a way to reclaim their lost property. For the British government, however, the issue was about more than just lost assets: it was about reasserting control. Allowing Mossadegh's move to go unanswered might encourage fledgling nationalisms in other parts of the crumbling British Empire.<sup>17</sup>

The British patrolled the coast offshore from Abadan in preparation for a possible invasion for nearly a year, but they could not act unilaterally. British intervention would undoubtedly provoke a Soviet response, an unacceptable possibility for the American government, which understood that any military action "might split the free world... and...cause the Iranian Government to turn to the Soviet Union for help."<sup>18</sup> Britain exerted significant diplomatic pressure on the Truman administration to oppose the nationalization decree, arguing that Iran's nationalist spirit could spread to other Middle Eastern countries. During the period following nationalization, however, the US military was largely preoccupied with Korea, which it viewed as demanding more immediate attention than Iran. Therefore, a diplomatic solution to the matter was preferable. Secretary of State Dean Acheson

articulated the Truman administration's position towards the oil dispute: "While in general [the] US does not favor nationalization, [the] US recognizes [the] right of sovereign state[s] to nationalize."<sup>19</sup> In Truman's view, nationalism was a force that needed to be recognized in the post-war world, and if Americans were viewed to be supporting the continuation of colonialism, the Soviets could present themselves as the liberators of the oppressed. The president thus resisted direct military intervention not only to avoid the risks of escalation, but also because he feared that the US would be "tarred with the colonial brush."<sup>20</sup>

In April 1950, US intelligence agencies began expressing concern over the growing dispute between Iran and Britain. Depicting the situation as "dangerous and explosive," they feared that Iran could become a "second China."<sup>21</sup> The question of oil became secondary to growing concerns that either Western military action or Iran's own financial crisis would drive it into the arms of the Soviets. According to Truman, the Soviets were "sitting like a vulture on the fence waiting to pounce."<sup>22</sup> Broaching this sensitive subject, Truman wrote to British Prime Minister Clement Atlee:

I am sure you can understand my deep concern that no action should be taken in connection with this dispute which would result in disagreement between Iran and the free world... it is essential to maintain the independence of Iran and the flow of Iranian oil into the economy of the free world.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, deprived of the £10 million it had formerly received each year in royalties, Iran had fallen into economic chaos since nationalization.<sup>24</sup> Although most Iranians were willing to accept some economic difficulties accompanying the change in ownership, the country was heading toward financial ruin. By 1951, revenues from oil export had been cut in half, and in 1952, were nearly zero.<sup>25</sup> Without British-trained technicians and oil tankers, the Iranian government could not profit from the wealth that lay beneath its soil. Thousands of Iranians had lost their jobs at refineries, and Britain was boycotting what little oil Iran did produce. The only way Mossadegh could create new employment was to sell oil.

Mossadegh pleaded with the US for a bailout loan, but Truman (and later Eisenhower) showed little enthusiasm. Mossadegh responded to American indifference with anger: "The US had given [a] billion dollars aid to Turkey and yet when Iran was bankrupt and on [the] verge [of] Communism,

it had refused financial assistance.”<sup>26</sup> The Soviets would have undoubtedly been more than happy to provide the necessary expertise and reap the eventual profits from Iranian resources. Even if Mossadegh did not turn directly to the Soviets, the US government felt that the financial crisis “could lead to weakening authority of the Iranian government and create confusion conducive to establishing Commie or Commie-dominated regime.”<sup>27</sup> Were the situation left unresolved, concluded the Truman administration, “the loss of Iran to the free world is a distinct possibility through an internal Communist uprising.”<sup>28</sup> As explained in NSC 107/2, the official position stated:

It is of critical importance to the US that Iran remain an independent and sovereign nation firmly aligned with the free world... It is important that there be a government in power in Iran on the side of the free world, capable of maintaining internal order and determined to resist Soviet aggression.<sup>29</sup>

For different reasons then, Mossadegh presented a threat to both British and American perceived interests.

With these fears in mind, with Mossadegh intent on proceeding with nationalization, and with the British equally determined to stop it, Truman pleaded with Atlee and Mossadegh to submit to arbitration. Consequently, in October 1951, Mossadegh flew to New York and presented an unprecedented challenge on behalf of a Third World nation to the United Nations. In response to the British contention that the oil beneath Iran’s soil was the property of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, Mossadegh retorted that:

[Iran’s] greatest natural asset is oil... Its exploitation should properly be our national industry, and the revenue from it should go to improve our conditions of life... If foreign exploiters continue to appropriate practically all of the income, then our people will remain forever in a state of poverty and misery.”<sup>30</sup>

The UN Security Council refused to exercise its authority in the matter and turned it over to the International Court of Justice. Although the court eventually ruled in Iran’s favor, numerous British appeal efforts kept the situation in deadlock through 1952.

## **Changes in Leadership**

By late 1952, diplomatic attempts to solve the oil situation had reached a stalemate. But changes in both the British and American administrations that year created an environment in which foreign intervention became a much more likely solution to the standoff. Winston Churchill, who was historically opposed to Third World nationalism throughout his career, was re-elected Prime Minister. An advocate of the colonial system, he was intent on confronting Mossadegh whom he had labeled as “an elderly lunatic bent on wrecking his country and handing it over to the Communists.”<sup>31</sup> British intelligence concluded that, “Even if a settlement of the oil dispute could be negotiated with Mossadegh...he was still incapable of resisting a coup by the [Communists].”<sup>32</sup> Given this conclusion, Churchill unsuccessfully applied greater pressure on Truman to act throughout the summer of 1952. This changed with the election of Eisenhower the following November, since in the new president’s view, Truman had failed to adequately encourage a resolution and left Iran teetering on the brink of Communism. Eisenhower’s administration “could no longer approve of the Mossadegh government and would prefer a successor government,” since the risk of Communist domination of Iran and its resources was increasing daily.<sup>33</sup>

Eisenhower’s administration saw the control of resources and territory as a zero-sum game: if Iran was not definitively aligned with the Americans, then it was within the Soviet orbit and likewise, if the US and its allies were not benefiting from Iranian resources, the Soviets would. Losing Iran could only strengthen Communism worldwide.<sup>34</sup> John Waller, a veteran of Operation AJAX (the CIA codename for the operation intended to bring down the Mossadegh government), stated that,

It was a question of much bigger policy than Iran. It was about what the Soviets had done and what we knew about their future plans. It’s interesting to see what Russia put on its priority list, what it wanted. Iran was very high on it.<sup>35</sup>

Eisenhower resolved “not [to] sit by idly and see Iran fall behind the Iron Curtain.”<sup>36</sup> The lurking fear of the USSR and his interest in assuring Iran’s continued cooperation with the West convinced Eisenhower to take a more aggressive approach within the framework of the New Look.

Mossadegh’s drastic efforts to maintain domestic order best explain the shift in American policy. Because of the financial crisis, in 1952, Mossadegh pushed parliament to extend his term for another six months, and then an additional six months when that expired. US state department officials

stationed in Iran concluded that, “Mossadegh appears clearly embarked upon personal authoritarian rule.”<sup>37</sup> Washington also became aware that Iran’s Communist party (the *Tudeh*) was gaining influence in governmental coalitions. John Foster Dulles stated that, “recent developments in Iran, especially the growing activity of the illegal Communist party, which appears to be tolerated by the Iranian government, have caused us concern.”<sup>38</sup> The CIA concluded that, “the *Tudeh*, which [is] controlled and financed from Moscow, has now thrown its weight and money behind Mossadegh.”<sup>39</sup>

The strong trend away from democracy and towards authoritarianism alienated former supporters and frightened many inside Iran. Seemingly on the path towards dictatorship, Mossadegh garnered 99% of the vote in a June 1953 referendum on his rule. This worried the leader of the religious element of the National Front, Ayatollah Kashini (who the CIA later recruited), and split the loyalty of army officers. The decision to stage a coup would have been impossible if these internal elements were not sure to cooperate.

## Operation AJAX

Eisenhower formally approved US involvement in Iran’s regime change, dubbed “Operation AJAX,” at a cabinet meeting in June 1953.<sup>40</sup> Kermit Roosevelt, the CIA agent largely responsible for the coordination and execution of the coup, was tasked with Mossadegh’s overthrow. He explained the necessity of the coup and cautioned that if anything were to go wrong, “Iran would fall to the Russians, and the effect on the rest of the Middle East could be disastrous but...these are the same consequences we face if we do nothing.”<sup>41</sup> Even prior to receiving official approval, however, the CIA had prepared for a potential coup by establishing many espionage networks throughout Iran. As early as 1948, it had conducted Operation BEDAMN, a propaganda campaign to counter Soviet influence in Iran through newspaper articles and cartoons.<sup>42</sup> As the coup approached, Roosevelt expanded these efforts.

As a result of the expansion of Operation BEDAMN, Iran felt the influence of CIA-sponsored propaganda every day during the spring and summer of 1953. This was “an all out effort” to undermine Mossadegh’s support base through “an orchestrated program of destabilization.”<sup>43</sup> As part of his war of nerves against Mossadegh, Roosevelt sponsored elements within Iran to denounce the Prime Minister, and supplied American-written, anti-Mossadegh articles in the Tehran press. Richard Cottam, one of the propagandists, estimated that in the months preceding the coup, four-fifths of

Tehran's newspapers were under CIA influence. The articles, he said, were "designed to show Mossadegh [as] a Communist collaborator and as a fanatic."<sup>44</sup> Roosevelt also instructed the CIA art team to "prepare a considerable number of anti-Mossadegh cartoons," which were reproduced *en masse*. Another aspect of the destabilization campaign was the allocation of \$10,000 to "purchase the cooperation of members of the Iranian [parliament]."<sup>45</sup> The CIA made a concerted effort to alarm religious leaders, who received threatening phone calls in the name of the *Tudeh*. Mossadegh was completely ignorant as to who was creating the instability.

The CIA also profited from British intelligence agents who had established numerous contacts in Iran throughout the years. These agents had already identified the strongest person to replace Mossadegh, General Fazlollah Zahedi. He and many other notable critics of Mossadegh began to meet with CIA agents to discuss the overthrow of the government. Roosevelt understood that the coup had to appear "quasi-legal," so the plan called for the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, to issue a *firman* (royal decree) formally dismissing Mossadegh as Prime Minister, and appointing Zahedi as his successor.<sup>46</sup> By August 1953, Roosevelt felt that the country was ready for a change in government, and received the green light from his superiors. The original date for the coup was August 16, 1953, but the first attempt failed when elements within the Iranian army leaked information to Mossadegh, who began to arrest those he suspected of involvement. The Shah subsequently fled the country.

Against the advice of the American government, Roosevelt stayed in Tehran and began to brainstorm other strategies. The success of another attempt was contingent on convincing the Iranian public that it was, in fact, Mossadegh who had staged the coup, and that Zahedi was the legal head of the government. In the days following the failure of the first coup attempt, CIA agents began to reproduce and publicly distribute large quantities of the *firman* dismissing Mossadegh. It had a tremendous impact on the people of Tehran who "had already been shocked and angered when they realized that the Shah had been forced to leave Iran because of Mossadegh's actions."<sup>47</sup> The CIA-influenced newspapers ran fabricated interviews with Zahedi, who stressed that only his government was legal. Radio Tehran also aired statements by Mossadegh that intimated that he was intending to eliminate the monarchy and assume an outright dictatorship.

Roosevelt recognized the potential benefits of this domestic turmoil; if it escalated sufficiently, he thought, Iranians might turn against Mossadegh

completely. Thus, once the date for the second coup was chosen, he arranged for mobs both supporting and opposing Mossadegh to begin protesting. The pro-Mossadegh mobs were advantageous because “the more they shouted against the Shah, the more the army and the people recognized them as the enemy. If *they* hated the Shah, then the army and the people hated them.”<sup>48</sup> The anti-Mossadegh mobs ran through the streets feigning support for the Shah so that Mossadegh would look much weaker than he actually was. Along the edges of these crowds, CIA agents passed out money to bystanders to entice them to join the movements. The mobs, according to members of the Operation AJAX staff, “had no ideology... [they were] paid with American dollars.”<sup>49</sup> The mass chaos forced Mossadegh to call for police intervention. This angered many army officers since they took it as positive proof that Mossadegh had turned against the Iranian people.

Additionally, Roosevelt coerced Radio Tehran officials into announcing the defeat of Mossadegh. The army’s support for Mossadegh consequently evaporated. In the midst of the chaos, many army officers felt that they had to decide between Mossadegh and the Shah.<sup>50</sup> Given this choice, most chose to support the Shah, leaving Mossadegh with no organized defense against Zahedi’s forces. After a lengthy battle at his estate that left nearly 300 dead, Mossadegh fled Tehran, and the Shah returned triumphantly in his own airplane. Mossadegh was eventually caught, brought before a military tribunal, and sentenced to three years in prison followed by a lifetime of house arrest. A roundup and mass arrest of government officials also occurred. With Prime Minister Zahedi, the Shah subsequently assumed dictatorial powers and banned both the Communist Party and the National Front. The coup permanently changed the face of the Middle East.

### **Aftermath and Interpretations**

The success of Operation AJAX gave US government officials the confidence to overthrow other governments that threatened US global interests, and gave the CIA an aura of invincibility. With minimal expense and risk to the US, a government friendly to the US and its fight against Communism had been installed. The tactics used in Iran became blueprints for future operations. Roosevelt, recognizing that the events in Iran could have easily gone the other way, warned that the success in Iran was not a *carte blanche* to overthrow governments at will. The Iranian coup only succeeded because of blind luck and fortuitous circumstances. In the White House briefing following the operation, however, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles reacted differently. Roosevelt recalled Dulles “gleaming; he seemed to

be purring like a giant cat. Clearly he was not only enjoying what he was hearing, but my instincts told me that he was planning as well.”<sup>51</sup> He was indeed planning, and less than a year later, the government orchestrated an operation using very similar tactics to achieve a very similar result in Guatemala.

The question of why the American government was willing to risk its international reputation in order to overthrow the Iranian government is a difficult one. It is tempting to explain US actions in purely economic terms. After all, the American companies owned a 40% share in the international oil consortium.<sup>52</sup> Although this interpretation cannot be entirely dismissed, the more accurate interpretation is that the US genuinely feared the impact that Communism would have were it to take root in Iran and mistook Mossadegh’s nationalism for Communism.

The NSC’s conclusion accurately expressed the US government’s motivations. It stated that the American public would have adopted a negative view of the administration “if the US stood idly by and let Iran fall into the hands of the Soviet Union.”<sup>53</sup> The Eisenhower administration was mildly sympathetic to nationalism, provided that it was truly independent, but in the heat of the early Cold War, Eisenhower had little faith that nationalism could be non-Communist.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, John Foster Dulles feared that Moscow would manipulate true nationalism for its own purposes. Dulles stated that, “the forces of [nationalist] unrest are captured by the Soviet Communists, because they are smart at that.”<sup>55</sup> Because of this fear, Eisenhower’s administration acted hastily and with little foresight, showing supreme indifference to the welfare of the Iranian people.

Upon further investigation, the American government’s justification of the coup came into question. The actual influence of the *Tudeh* in Mossadegh’s government was negligible; its support declined from 1948 to 1953. After the coup, CIA agents admitted that, “the *Tudeh* was really not very powerful, and that higher-level US officials routinely exaggerated its strength and Mossadegh’s reliance on it.”<sup>56</sup> Further, the Soviets’ relationship with Mossadegh was distant and distrustful, since they saw him as a “bourgeois nationalist.”<sup>57</sup> The US government thus misperceived this threat to national security.

US officials were convinced that Communism did indeed exist in Iran, despite conflicting evidence, because the CIA and State Department only saw what they wanted to believe, which was that Communism was present and

dangerous. When confronted with evidence to the contrary, many members of the US government refused to re-examine their reasoning. From Washington's perspective, the late 1940s demonstrated that international Communism was aggressively on the march. US officials needed to be proactive, and the coup was the result of a desperate impatience on their part to do something that would seem like a victory over Communism in order to reaffirm their steadfast commitment to the preservation of a free world. In contrast to the perceived weakness of Truman, the coup, along with one in Guatemala less than a year later, constituted the first steps in Eisenhower's active worldwide effort to halt Communist expansion. These coups reflect the McCarthyist mindset overseas, and in both cases, ideology triumphed over reason.

Beyond the threat of Communism, the other element influencing US government officials was the "domino theory." This idea reasoned that once one country succumbed to Communism, others around it would inevitably capitulate. The US could scarcely afford to allow a place as geographically important as the Middle East to fall to Moscow. John Foster Dulles concluded that, "if Iran succumbed to the Communists there was little doubt that in short order the other areas of the Middle East with some 60% of the world's oil reserves, would fall into Communist control."<sup>58</sup>

Mossadegh, more than anything, was a nationalist and did not completely align himself with any foreign nation. In his determination to carry out his grandiose vision of freeing Iran from colonialism however, the country merely shifted from the control of one colonial power to another. Mossadegh's mistake was in thinking that he could separate his country's grievances from the superpowers' struggle for power and security. He stated that, "My only crime is that I nationalized the Iranian oil industry and removed from this land the network of colonialism and the political and economic influence of the greatest empire on earth."<sup>59</sup> Although he may have been right, he did not fully calculate the potential impact of his decision.

## Consequences of the Coup

This operation taught the leaders of the Third World an important Cold War lesson: the world's most powerful nation was willing to allow tyrannical oppression and the suspension of democratic principles as long as the governments engaging in these activities were firmly aligned with the West. The US extinguished Iran's indigenous democratic movement before it could

mature. The ideology behind the coup was the source of American policy towards the Middle East for decades.

In Iran, the coup left a legacy of hardship and bloodshed. Violence, torture, death, and a culture of fear emerged under the Shah's 26 year exploitative, authoritarian, and dictatorial rule. The American government ignored all of this however, and anointed the Shah as the policeman of the Middle East. He became a subservient ally, safeguarding American economic and security interests. He was given *carte blanche* to purchase high-tech American weapons and almost any non-nuclear weapons system he desired. Between 1972 and 1976, at an expense of more than \$10 billion, the Shah built the fifth largest military force in the world.<sup>60</sup> Despite periods of moderate reform, his rule alienated many elements of Iranian society.

Religious leaders especially became increasingly disillusioned with the Shah's program and accused him both of destroying Iran's Islamic identity and compromising its sovereignty.<sup>61</sup> This discontent eventually culminated in the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini and the cataclysmic 1979 Revolution, which transformed not only the internal structures of the Iranian nation, but also American policy towards the region. The longstanding American-Iranian alliance ended, and the anti-Americanism inherent to the Revolution's radicalization rendered Iran a serious threat to regional stability.

## Conclusion

The United States viewed itself as the beacon of freedom in direct opposition to Soviet oppression during the Cold War, but in reality, the game of power politics influenced similar actions in both countries. Third World nations like Iran were caught between diametrically opposed ideologies that thwarted their attempts to modernize and reform. In the fog of the Cold War, the Eisenhower administration destroyed a developing democracy in Iran and replaced it with a dictatorship using illegal, unethical, and undemocratic means. Although large economic interests were at stake, the decision to overthrow the government was primarily motivated by the desire to halt the spread of Communism. The CIA, as specified by Eisenhower's New Look Policy, played a vital role, thereby setting a precedent for future operations. The coup in Iran was prompted by a policy that served temporary American interests, but created larger problems in the long run.

The Eisenhower administration worked under the logic that Communist threats must be confronted before they materialize. If the US did

not act, then it was inevitable that its interests and security would be jeopardized. However the logic of the preemptive strike is inherently flawed, because it validates action to prevent what it labels 'inevitable' developments. In reality though, events are never inevitable. To assert otherwise is to deny freedom of choice, and to treat events as determined and not contingent. The variables that produce particular socio-political situations are always dependent on free actors, and always subject to alteration.

For the most part, the US has promoted the development of democratic institutions similar to its own in all parts of the world. Given the current composition and sentiments of the Iranian government, it is easy to forget that there was a time when a functioning, multi-party democracy was present. Overthrowing foreign governments is risky because the long-term consequences are entirely unpredictable and often catastrophic. In Iran, it is clear that the 1953 coup set the stage for eventual revolution. Monty Woodhouse, a high-ranking British intelligence officer who laid the groundwork for the coup, concluded: "It is easy to see [the coup] as the first step towards the Iranian catastrophe of 1979. What we did not foresee was that the Shah would gather strength and use it so tyrannically, nor that the US government and the Foreign Office would fail so abjectly to keep him on a reasonable course."<sup>62</sup> One can only speculate as to how vastly different the Middle East would be today were it not for this intervention.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Douglas J. MacDonald, *Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention for Reform in the Third World*. 12. Douglas J. MacDonald *Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention for Reform in the Third World*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- <sup>2</sup> George Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." From *The History Guide: Lectures on Twentieth Century Europe*. 1 April 2005. <<http://www.historyguide.org/europe/kennan.html>>
- <sup>3</sup> John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*. (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1982), p. 90.
- <sup>4</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) Volume 1, 1950*. (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. 237-292.
- <sup>5</sup> John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 133.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 130.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 127-145.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 157.
- <sup>9</sup> Stephen Kinzler, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*; (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley and Sons, Inc, 2003), p. 153. As Kinzler notes, "During their terms as Secretary of State and Director of Central Intelligence, they worked in near perfect harmony to achieve their common goals. Among the first and most urgent was Mossadegh's overthrow."
- <sup>10</sup> John L. Gaddis *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 139-141.
- <sup>11</sup> Alfred Chandler, ed. *Papers of Dwight D Eisenhower*; (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1979), pp. 531-32.
- <sup>12</sup> John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 135.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Kinzler. *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*. 94.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp. 87-88.

<sup>18</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, vol. 10 [*Iran 1951-54*]. (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. 71-81.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Zachary Karabell, *Architects of Intervention: The United States, the Third World, and the Cold War*, Quoting Memorandum for Truman on Churchill Talks, December 21, 1951, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, Vol. 5 [*Near East, South Asia, and Africa, 1950*], (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. 510, 523.

<sup>22</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department*, (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 504.

<sup>23</sup> *FRUS, Iran*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Kinzler, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, p. 104. Figure quoted for 1950.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 138.

<sup>26</sup> *FRUS, Iran*, p. 427.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 346.

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- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 73.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp. 71-73.
- <sup>30</sup> Stephen Kinzler, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, pp. 123-24.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 132.
- <sup>32</sup> Mostafa Zahrani, "The Coup that Changed the Middle East: Mossadegh v. the CIA in Retrospect," *World Policy Journal*, (19: 2002), p. 93.
- <sup>33</sup> Wilber, Donald. "Overthrow of Premier Mossadegh of Iran, November 1952-August 1953," *New York Times*, 16 Apr. 2000, p. 1.
- <sup>34</sup> John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 137.
- <sup>35</sup> Stephen Kinzler, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, p. 205.
- <sup>36</sup> Donald Wilber, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadegh of Iran, November 1952-August 1953," *New York Times*, p. 34.
- <sup>37</sup> *FRUS, Iran*, p. 742.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 338.
- <sup>39</sup> Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for Control of Iran*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 90.
- <sup>40</sup> Stephen Kinzler, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, p. 161.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 14.
- <sup>42</sup> Mark Gasiorowski, "The 1953 Coup d'Etat in Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies [GB]* 19 (1997): 268.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 272.

- <sup>44</sup> “Anatomy of a Coup: The CIA in Iran,” *History Undercover*. The History Channel, 2000.
- <sup>45</sup> Donald Wilber, “Overthrow of Premier Mossadegh of Iran, November 1952-August 1953,” *New York Times*, pp. 10, 19.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.
- <sup>48</sup> Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for Control of Iran*, p. 180.
- <sup>49</sup> Stephen Kinzler, *All the Shah’s Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, p. 180.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 180.
- <sup>51</sup> Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for Control of Iran*, p. 209.
- <sup>52</sup> Mark Gasiorowski, “The 1953 Coup d’Etat in Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, p. 278.
- <sup>53</sup> *FRUS, Iran*, p. 696.
- <sup>54</sup> John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 141.
- <sup>55</sup> Douglas J. MacDonald, *Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention for Reform in the Third World*, p. 34.
- <sup>56</sup> Stephen Kinzler, *All the Shah’s Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, p. 206.
- <sup>57</sup> John L. Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 166.
- <sup>58</sup> *FRUS, Iran*, p. 693.
- <sup>59</sup> Mohammad Mossadegh, *Mossadegh’s Memoirs: Dr. Mohammad*

*Mossadegh, Champion of the Popular Movement of Iran and Former Prime Minister.* Homa Katouzian, ed. (London: Jeebe, 1988), p. 74.

<sup>60</sup> Cleveland, 286.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 400-405.

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Kinzler, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, p. 201.