GEORGE C. HERRING

FROM COLONY TO SUPERPOWER

U.S. FOREIGN RELATIONS SINCE 1776

THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

V

The beginning of the end for the Carter administration came in the fall of 1978 when revolution erupted in Iran. This first U.S. clash with Islamic radicalism—an unmitigated disaster for the nation and especially its president—was totally unexpected.[98] When Carter took office, Iran appeared one of America's closest and most reliable allies. Put in power by a U.S.-British sponsored coup in 1953, Reza Shah Pahlavi had used his nation's oil revenues to build up a modern military machine and initiate a top-down "White Revolution" that seemed to bring Western-style modernization to one corner of the turbulent Middle East. The shah maintained close ties with his U.S. patron and used Iran's strategic location and precious oil reserves to extort massive aid. Nixon had made Iran a pillar of American security interests in the Persian Gulf, fueling the shah's ambitions and filling his arsenal. Iran served as a key U.S. listening post to monitor Soviet nuclear tests and missile launches. Forty-five thousand Americans worked there. Carter had aroused concern in Tehran with his talk of promoting human rights and curbing arms sales, but, as in other geopolitically important areas, practicality trumped principle. Shortly

96. Gilderhus, *Second Century*, 206–8.
97. David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post Cold War Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 28 (January 2004), 119.
98. David Farber, *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam* (Princeton, N.J., 2005), 4–5.

after taking office, he approved the sale of seven high-tech AWAC intelligence aircraft and 160 F-16 fighters. The shah visited Washington in late 1977 and greatly impressed the president, although on one ceremonial occasion they had to fight off tear gas wafting across the street from Lafayette Park, where police combated anti-shah demonstrators, most of them Iranian students. On New Year's Eve 1977, at the shah's sumptuous palace, Carter offered an effusive toast whose words would come back to haunt him: Iran, "under the great leadership of the Shah, is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world."[99]

Even as Carter spoke, rumblings could be heard of the revolution that within little more than a year would sweep the shah from power. The White Revolution enriched the few at the expense of the many. A lagging economy caused widespread distress among Iranians. Popular anger was fueled by opulent displays at the shah's court, rampant corruption among his inner circle, and the brutality of his secret police. Westernization threatened Islam and angered the clergy. A profound religious revival brought forth emotional protest; many Iranians in the face of rampant societal change turned to Islam for order and spirituality. Rioting broke out in 1977 in several cities and gradually spread across the country. The shah's attempts to silence dissent with brute force brought thousands of deaths and further outrage. His efforts to contain unrest by shuffling top officials, in the words of one of his diplomats, was like using first aid "where immediate surgery was required."[100] Because the United States had put the shah in power, helped keep him there, and encouraged his modernization policies, it became a handy target for revolutionaries. America was the "Great Satan" in the eyes of Islamic militants; the shah was "the American king."[101] Ill with cancer, the shah fled to Egypt exactly one year after Carter's toast, leaving behind a caretaker government. By this time, Iran verged on anarchy. Students ran the universities, workers the factories, and armed mobs exacted retribution. A series of moderate governments presided uneasily over the political maelstrom. Behind them loomed the scowling visage of the charismatic and bitterly anti-American Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, then in exile, the nation's most revered religious leader and increasingly its most powerful political figure.

"President Carter inherited an impossible situation," historian Gaddis Smith has written, "and he and his advisers made the worst of it."[102]

99. Bill, *Eagle and Lion*, 233.
100. Ibid., 240.
101. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York, 2004), 125.
102. Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, 188.

Americans initially assumed that the shah, as before, could control the uprising. They disagreed whether he should use force or conciliation, Brzezinski not surprisingly favoring the former, Vance the latter, a debate that quickly became irrelevant. Even after the shah left the country, some top officials expected him to return; others counted on the military to take power. When neither happened, the administration sought to maintain contact with the moderates who succeeded the shah, not perceiving their lack of staying power or that ties with the United States could be fatal to them. The dispatch of a U.S. Army officer on a typically confused mission perhaps with the goal to engineer a military takeover seemed to confirm Iranian suspicions. The Islamic component of the revolution was beyond American comprehension. Ambassador William Sullivan urged the president to "think the unthinkable," but he refused to authorize contacts with Khomeini. As things went from bad to worse, U.S. officials played the blame game with each other. In truth no one knew what was happening or how to respond. With the country virtually in a state of anarchy, Khomeini returned to Tehran on February 1, 1979, to the adoring cheers of millions of well-wishers.[103]

Although probably nothing could have been done to head off or control the revolution, the United States might have done more to mitigate its anti-Americanism. It could have minimized its presence in Tehran—no more than "six men and a dog," one sensitive diplomat quipped.[104] It could have remained silent. But as Iranians increasingly denounced the United States, Americans responded in kind. Top U.S. officials issued threats. Congress passed anti-revolutionary resolutions. Senator Jackson again demonstrated a penchant for the perfectly mistimed misstatement by publicly proclaiming the revolution doomed. The most damaging mistake, made for the most humane of reasons and after months of agitation by such luminaries as Kissinger, David Rockefeller, and John McCloy, was Carter's reluctant October 1979 decision to admit the dying shah to the United States for medical treatment. That ill-fated move aroused profound suspicions among paranoid Iranian radicals of another 1953-like countercoup and provoked wild demonstrations in Tehran. Shortly after, Brzezinski met with moderate Iranian leader Mehdi Bazargan in Algiers, fueling revolutionary outrage and anxiety.[105]

The revolution abruptly changed from a serious problem for the United States to an all-out crisis on November 4, 1979, when young radicals

103. Kaufman and Kaufman, *Carter Presidency*, 158.
104. Bill, *Eagle and Lion*, 280.
105. Ibid., 285; Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 120–27.

stormed the U.S. embassy—the "Den of Spies"—and took hostage the sixty-six Americans still residing there. The immediate provocation was Carter's decision to allow the shah into the United States, but the hostage-takers also feared a CIA plot to restore him to power, suspicions encouraged by Jackson's statement and the Algiers meeting. Some former hostage-takers now admit, moreover, that their real purpose was to push the Bazargan government in more radical directions. They had no idea the takeover would lead to a prolonged crisis; some now concede it to have been a mistake.[106] Khomeini at first opposed the takeover, but when he recognized its popularity he exploited it to get rid of Bazargan and solidify his own power.

The crisis quickly took on a life of its own. Iran made demands for the hostages' release that Washington could not have met if it had wanted to, including the return of the shah for "revolutionary justice" and the surrender of his fortune. Threats from the United States only exacerbated tensions; the cessation of oil purchases and freezing of Iranian assets accomplished nothing. The crisis became the object of close international media scrutiny, keeping it constantly in the public eye. United States television news broadcasts solemnly counted off each day of captivity. Carter unwisely staked his political future on the outcome, vowing not to rest until the hostages were safely home. The more importance Carter attached to it, the more valuable the crisis became to the revolutionaries and the less likely any kind of settlement.[107] While Brzezinski pushed him to use force, the president explored without success every conceivable diplomatic channel. Americans at first rallied around their leader, as at the start of a war. His approval ratings rose. But as the crisis dragged on with no sign of an end, popular anger surged. Coming on top of America's failure in Vietnam and a steadily worsening economy, the hostage crisis came to symbolize for Americans a rising sense of impotence and belief that the nation had lost its mooring. The United States itself seemed hostage to forces it could not control.[108] The crisis aroused a fury that Americans directed first toward Iran and especially Khomeini, then against their unlucky president.

The hostage crisis came at a low point of Carter's chronically embattled presidency. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) raised oil prices four times in five months in 1979. Shortages

106. Mark Bowden, "Among the Hostage Takers," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 2004, 77–96.
107. Pollack, *Persian Puzzle*, 161.
108. Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 1–2.

orced hour-long waits at gas stations. Increases in gasoline prices fueled rice hikes across the board, causing inflation to rise at an annual rate of 4 percent. The liberal wing of his own party denounced Carter's budget roposals calling for austerity to combat inflation. Congress routinely hredded the administration's domestic programs. First brother Billy Carter, who carefully nurtured his redneck image and exploited his family connections, caused a mini-scandal (called, naturally, "Billygate") by maintaining dubious—and profitable—contacts with terrorist-sponsor Libya and speaking critically about Jews on national television.[109]

The president's efforts to deal with the emerging crisis only highlighted his seeming inability to do anything about them. In the early summer, the White House announced a major speech on the energy crisis only to cancel it thirty minutes before airtime. When finally given on July 15, the so-called malaise speech offered a remarkably candid assessment of what the president called a "crisis of confidence"—a "crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul of our national will." The speech earned good reviews from pundits, but its gloomy tone did nothing to lift the nation's spirits. A clumsily executed reshuffling of the cabinet and White House staff in the summer of 1979, while getting rid of troublemakers and incompetents, seemed further evidence of a government in disarray. Polls for the Democratic presidential nomination showed potential challenger Edward Kennedy leading Carter by a wide margin. The Carter presidency was "malleable and weak," pundits complained. The president would likely be a lame duck before the primaries began.[110]

Carter's foreign policy also came under fire. The administration did register major accomplishments in 1979, completing the process of normalization with China and making progress on SALT II negotiations with the USSR. But each of these gains came with domestic political costs. Chaos in the global economy, the Iranian revolution, the assassination of U.S. ambassador Adolph Dubs in Afghanistan in February, China's invasion of Vietnam later the same month, and the subsequent outbreak of civil war in Nicaragua created for Americans the sense that the world was both dangerous and hostile, the United States increasingly vulnerable.[111]

During the last half of 1979, Carter's critics zeroed in on SALT II. At a Vienna summit in June, Carter and Brezhnev finally signed the long-delayed treaty. Upon returning home, the president launched a major

109. Kaufman and Kaufman, *Carter Presidency*, 165–77, 228–30.
110. Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 143–44; Kaufman and Kaufman, *Carter Presidency*, 177–84.
111. Kaufman and Kaufman, *Carter Presidency*, 159–63.

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campaign for its ratification. Critics wasted no time responding. Liberals protested that the treaty did not do enough to reduce nuclear armaments. Carter's inclusion of a new and enormously expensive missile system to appease Senate conservatives further angered liberals. The Committee on the Present Danger led the conservative charge. The CPD included leading hard-line Democrats, such as Nitze, who had been passed over by Carter for top-level positions and went after the treaty with a vengeance. Critics warned that SALT II put the United States at a disadvantage militarily and might lull Americans into a false sense of security. They questioned whether it could be properly monitored. In the Senate, the balance of power had shifted from those liberal internationalists who had bedeviled Ford to a loose, bipartisan coalition of conservatives whose ranks were strengthened by Republican and conservative gains in the 1978 elections. Howard Baker, who helped secure passage of the canal treaty, came out against SALT before Carter returned from Vienna. Democrat Sam Nunn of Georgia demanded sharp increases in overall defense spending in return for his support. Jackson predictably denounced the treaty as "appeasement in its purest form." Approval of the treaty was doubtful from the start; the embassy takeover further lowered its chances.[112]

Liberals' efforts to save their political skins added to Carter's difficulties. In September, Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Frank Church of Idaho, facing a strong conservative challenge for reelection, announced the "discovery" in Cuba of a brigade of Soviet troops that in fact had been there since 1962. Already on the ropes over Iran, Carter sought to ease popular fears by affirming that the brigade had "evidently" been in Cuba "some time" and in any event did not threaten the United States. To show their toughness, he and Vance insisted that it could not stay and beefed up U.S. military capabilities in the Caribbean, thus stoking the very fears they had attempted to calm. This tempest in a Cuban teapot dragged on for weeks, doomed SALT, infuriated the Soviets, and left the administration more vulnerable to conservative attack.[113]

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on December 27, 1979, pushed Carter into the camp of the hard-liners and provoked him to escalate the Cold War into its climactic phase. During most of the Soviet-American conflict, that isolated, landlocked nation had remained non-aligned. A 1973 coup brought to power a pro-Western government, which, five years later, was overthrown by leftist army officers. Following firmly established

112. Kaufman, *Jackson*, 385; Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War*, 243–46.
113. Garthoff, *Détente*, 828–29.

Cold War patterns, Moscow promptly sent aid and advisers to a potential client. Still in a detente frame of mind, the United States at first responded with remarkable equanimity, maintaining relations with the pro-Soviet regime and even sending limited assistance. United States policy changed in 1979. Allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia pushed Washington to do something. In January, Carter authorized a covert operation providing aid to Islamic rebels, even though Brzezinski warned it might prompt large-scale Soviet intervention. Both men saw advantages in luring the USSR into the "Afghan trap."[114] By late 1979, Afghanistan's government was teetering from destructive internal rivalries and Islamic insurgents. Fearing its collapse, the Soviet Union intervened. The Kremlin acted reluctantly to protect what it viewed as a crucial buffer state. The Islamic revolution in nearby Iran seemed to endanger its own Muslim "republics." It especially feared China, which had close ties to Afghanistan's eastern neighbor, Pakistan. Perhaps more paranoid than their U.S. counterparts at this time, Soviet leaders took seriously alarmist KGB reports that the Afghan prime minister sought ties with the United States. Moscow thus sent a brigade of troops. Soon after, it overthrew the government and launched a costly and ultimately suicidal war against the insurgents.[115]

Viewing Soviet moves from a worst-case standpoint, Carter responded with a decisiveness quite out of character for his presidency. He was angered by the Kremlin's action, perhaps even took it personally since it seemed to prove that his original assessment of Soviet motives and goals had been wrongheaded. Already under fire at home from Cold Warriors and facing a tough campaign for renomination, he may have concluded that a hard-line policy was necessary to give him any chance for reelection. Whatever the precise reason, henceforth he was squarely in Brzezinski's camp. With the Middle East and crucial Persian Gulf region in turmoil, he viewed a Soviet takeover of Afghanistan as a dire threat to vital U.S. interests. In a notably alarmist speech on January 4, 1980, he condemned Soviet "aggression" and warned of the danger to Persian Gulf oil fields.[116]

To combat the Soviet intervention, he took a dazzling variety of steps. He drastically stepped up U.S. covert aid to the mujahideen rebels, laying

114. Mark Danner, "Taking Stock of the Forever War," *New York Times Magazine*, September 11, 2005, 49.

115. Martin Walker, *The Cold War: A History* (New York, 1994), 251–55; "The Soviet Union and Afghanistan, 1978–1989: Documents from Russian and East German Archives," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* (Winter 1996–1997), 133–84.

116. Carter speech, January 4, 1980, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=32911 andst=andst1=.

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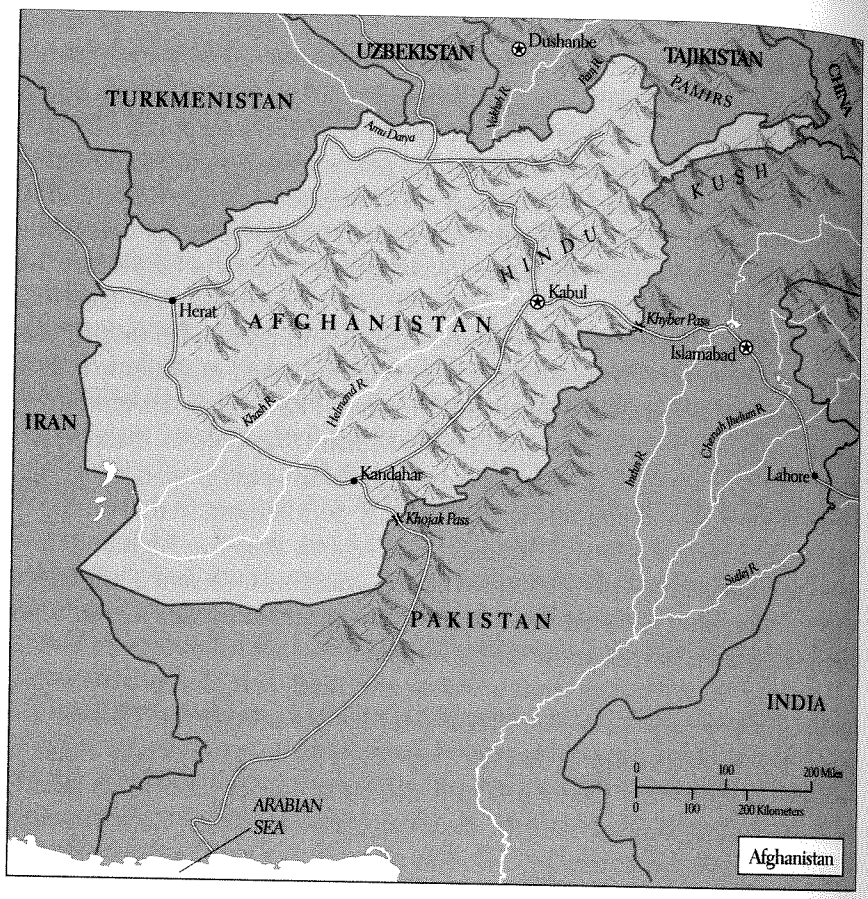

the basis for an assistance program that, as he and Brzezinski hoped, would in fact help make Afghanistan the Soviet Union's Vietnam.[117] He tabled the long-delayed SALT II agreement. Without giving much thought to their possible effectiveness, implications, or consequences, he instituted an array of punitive sanctions, embargoing the shipment of new technology to the Soviet Union and, over the loud protest of farm states, banning further grain sales. He later boycotted the Olympic Games scheduled for Moscow that summer. In his State of the Union address, he proclaimed what came to be called the Carter Doctrine, sternly warning that any attempt by an "outside force" to gain control of the Persian Gulf

117. William J. Daughtery, *Executive Secrets: Covert Operations and the Presidency* (Lexington, Ky., 2004), 189.

region would be "regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States" and would be "repelled by force." To back up his warnings, he initiated registration for the draft, asked for a 5 percent increase in military spending, proposed major aid for Pakistan, and beefed up the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.[118] Much like Truman at the onset of the Korean War, he set out to shore up U.S. alliances, even in cases like the Western Hemisphere and South Asia where his actions compromised established policy on human rights and nuclear non-proliferation.

In a move that sent shock waves all the way to Moscow, Carter in January 1980 dispatched Secretary of Defense Harold Brown to Beijing to discuss the establishment of military ties. The United States to this point had scrupulously—and sensibly—avoided such steps. Some Americans hesitated to bolster Chinese military power while the status of Taiwan remained unresolved. Vance also correctly warned that, instead of forcing Moscow to be cooperative, cozying up to China would make working with the Soviet Union much more difficult.[119] Egged on by Brzezinski, Carter after Afghanistan threw caution to the winds. Brown made clear on arrival that he hoped to deal with "complementary actions in the field of defense as well as diplomacy." He arranged for the sale of non-lethal military equipment including radar and other high-tech electronic items long sought by the Chinese and denied the Soviets. He proposed that the two nations cooperate in sending arms to the Afghan insurgents and take joint action should Vietnam invade Thailand. The Chinese happily accepted U.S. electronic equipment but stopped well short of the de facto alliance Brown advocated, agreeing only to step up covert aid to the Afghan rebels. Later in the year, the United States opened preliminary discussions for the sale of military equipment. Disguised with a mustache grown especially for the occasion, CIA director Stansfield Turner secretly traveled to Beijing to discuss the sharing of intelligence. The 1980 tilt toward China ended any semblance of balance in U.S. relations with the two Communist powers.[120]

In July 1980, Carter approved Presidential Directive 59 (PD-59), a fundamental reassessment of U.S. nuclear strategy. The doctrine of mutual assured destruction had provided a measure of deterrence through the grim certainty that each nation could destroy the other's primary population centers. Nervous U.S. strategists increasingly feared, however, that

118. Garthoff, *Détente*, 945–57.
119. Mann, *About Face*, 110–11.
120. Ibid., 109–14.

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an apparent Soviet lead in conventional weapons as well as qualitative and quantitative improvements in their nuclear arsenal gave them the means to target U.S. military installations and wage nuclear war short of annihilation. Their conclusion, outlined in PD-59, was equally disturbing but to them unavoidable: The United States must develop a strategy and the instruments to strike military as well as civilian targets. It must be able to fight and win a nuclear war. As significant for its era as NSC-68 for the 1950s, PD-59 also called for a huge boost in military spending and for the largest buildup of conventional and nuclear arms since the Truman years.[121]

The U.S. response to Afghanistan marked yet another major turning point in the Cold War. Carter's early 1980 initiatives constituted a clean break with policies pursued since the mid-1960s. The United States relegated detente to the scrap heap, sharply reescalated its Cold War rhetoric, and reinstituted policies of global containment reminiscent of the early days of the Soviet-American struggle. The sanctions initiated in haste took on a life of their own. Along with the scrapping of SALT II, the development of new missile systems, and the U.S. deployment of missiles to Europe, PD-59 appeared to Moscow to represent a menacing U.S. quest for nuclear superiority—"madness," *Tass* screamed; "nuclear blackmail," according to *Pravda*—reigniting the arms race and sending it to its most fearful level.[122]

As with the Korean War and other Cold War crises, the flare-up of 1979–80 stemmed at least in part from misperception and miscalculations on both sides. The Soviets saw themselves acting defensively in Afghanistan. The last thing they wanted was to spur a major U.S. rearmament program and drive Washington further into the arms of Beijing. Their move into Afghanistan thus took the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy, making a reality of the Sino-American collaboration that in their imagination had aroused grave concern about Afghanistan. The Soviet incursion deserved to be condemned and opposed. But at least in the beginning it was not truly an "invasion," as U.S. officials repeatedly charged. Nor did it represent the "greatest threat to world peace" since World War II, as Carter often affirmed, or the first step in a drive to the Persian Gulf. Americans seem to have found in Afghanistan an outlet for the frustrations that had built up in recent months. They were more comfortable with the clarity

121. Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York, 1984), 580; William E. Odom, "The Origins and Design of Presidential Directive-59: A Memoir," in Henry D. Sokoloski, *Getting MAD* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa., 2004), 175–96.

122. Kaufman and Kaufman, *Carter Presidency*, 231.

and certitude of a new era of confrontation than with the confused and uncertain state of detente. Whatever the cause, the Soviet move into Afghanistan and the U.S. overreaction provoked a new and especially dangerous phase of the Cold War.

Carter's political fortunes got no more than a short-term boost from his decisive moves. As in the first stages of the hostage crisis, the public initially rallied to their president. His poll numbers shot up. Although the grain embargo threatened to hurt farmers, Iowans overwhelmingly voted for Carter over Kennedy in that state's Democratic caucuses. But the president could never really overcome his reputation for indecisiveness. Indeed, Republicans and conservative Democrats insisted that his weakness and naïveté had brought about the situation he was forced to respond to.[123]

More important, during Carter's last months in office, everything seemed to fall apart. A crippling recession proved impervious to the numerous countermeasures attempted by Ford and Carter. In the summer of 1980, corporate profits dropped by almost 20 percent, one of the biggest downturns in the postwar period. Unemployment rose to almost 8 percent with forecasts that it might hit 10 percent by the end of the year. A sagging economy sparked racial violence from Boston to Miami. Eight years of hard times with no end in view left the nation in a surly and angry mood.[124]

There were more foreign policy setbacks. The European nations questioned Carter's hawkish response to Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, opening new rifts in the Western alliance. The Camp David Accords, one of the president's major achievements, came apart at the seams. Israeli prime minister Begin defined Palestinian autonomy as narrowly as possible, stopping far short of the self-determination to which Sadat was committed. During 1980, Carter made several futile efforts to salvage his handiwork only to recognize that the agreements whose negotiation he had so painstakingly overseen were fundamentally flawed.[125] Closer to home, the administration's efforts to channel the Nicaraguan revolution in a moderate direction failed badly. The United States was no more successful using carrot and stick with embattled dictator Anastasio Somoza than it had been with the shah. Wisely, it refused to bail out his despicable regime when it crumbled, but its attempts to control the revolution through an unwieldy electoral device that would have limited the power of leftist rebels had no chance of success. The president at first tried to work with and even secure assistance for a new government headed by the

123. Ibid., 197.
124. Ibid., 221–22.
125. Ibid., 225–27.

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Sandinistas, the dominant group whose choice of name (for rebel leader Augusto Sandino) made clear its political orientation and attitude toward the United States. While Congress dawdled with Carter's request for aid, the new government shifted to the left, secured assistance from Cuba and the Soviet Union, and established ties with leftist groups elsewhere in Central America. Carter came under fire from conservatives for allowing another Cuba in the hemisphere.[126]

The hostage crisis that at first worked in Carter's favor by the spring of 1980 had also turned against him. The crisis became the media event of its time. For months, it dominated the headlines and filled television screens, even late-night viewing, where ABC's new *Nightline* news program sometimes outdrew popular variety shows. Television especially played the story for maximum dramatic effect. Images of young Iranian women in strange clothing and bearded young men shouting anti-American slogans and burning U.S. flags piqued the emotions of an already frustrated and angry public. The loud demands of Iranian students in the United States that the shah be returned to Iran provoked from Americans counterdemands that all Iranians be deported. In time, the crisis became a rallying point for a bitterly divided people. It inspired popular songs such as "Go to Hell Ayatollah" and the more somber "Hostage Prayer." To show solidarity with the hostages, Americans kept their car lights on, rang church bells, and, following the example of another popular song, tied yellow ribbons around trees and light poles. In the early months, the solidarity extended to Carter, whose approval ratings soared. The president was the first to appreciate that American patience was limited, however, and by late March, with no end to the crisis in sight, he was in trouble again. It was in this context that he approved the ill-fated hostage rescue mission.[127]

No single event did more to highlight the nation's sense of impotence and destroy the Carter presidency than the botched attempt in April 1980 to rescue the hostages. Carter approved the plan out of desperation. It was the longest of long shots and risked the hostages being killed in retaliation or even escalation into a bloody war. In what was dubbed Operation Eagle Claw, eight helicopters from the aircraft carrier *Nimitz* in the Gulf of Oman were to rendezvous with C-130 transports at Desert One in the Iranian desert. A newly formed Delta Force rescue team would proceed to Tehran by helicopter and truck, seize the hostages,

126. Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York, 1984), 241–42.
127. Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 141–71.

and return to an airfield for evacuation. In execution, a plan with virtually no margin for error turned out to be Murphy's Law in operation, self-destructing almost from the start. In a bizarre and totally unexpected development, the would-be rescuers, landing at midnight, stumbled upon some Iranians crossing the desert in a ramshackle bus, blowing their cover. A blinding dust storm—the Iranians called it a *haboob*, and Khomeini hailed it as an act of Allah—hampered the desert landing and along with mechanical problems crippled all but four of the helicopters, forcing the mission to be aborted. To add to the embarrassment and tragedy, a helicopter crashed into a C-130 during evacuation, killing eight Americans, all of whom had to be left behind.[128]

The desert debacle had a huge impact for the unfortunate Carter. In terms of the immediate problem with Iran, it completely backfired, confirming America's hostile intentions, strengthening the position of Khomeini and the extremists, and providing a huge boost to Iranian nationalism.[129] At home, the nation once again initially backed the president, but as time went on and the details became known, frustrated Americans increasingly turned their anger against him. The Congress and allies complained about not being consulted. Vacationing in Florida, Vance had been deliberately and entirely left out of the loop because of his known opposition to any military action. He quickly resigned, the first secretary of state since William Jennings Bryan in 1915 to leave office on a matter of principle and only the third in U.S. history. Carter's approval rating plunged to 40 percent. "As things now stand," *Newsweek* opined, "the President's uncertain diplomatic strategy has left allies perplexed, enemies unimpressed and the nation as vulnerable as ever in an increasingly dangerous world."[130]

The nation's lack of confidence in Carter's ability to lead cost him reelection. Given all the misfortunes that beset him, he hung remarkably close to Republican challenger Reagan up to Election Day. Had he been able to secure release of the hostages early in the campaign, he might still have snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. He seemed to achieve a breakthrough in negotiations that promised to gain freedom for the hostages several days before the election, but it did not produce immediate results and was of dubious value anyway since Republicans had warned of an eleventh-hour trick to sway the election. Reagan proved a more adept campaigner than Carter. He and his simple and

128. Mark Bowden, "The Desert One Debacle," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 2006, 62–77.
129. Bill, *Eagle and Lion*, 302–3.
130. Kaufman and Kaufman, *Carter Presidency*, 213.

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sunny conservative message, delivered with charm, wit, and at times eloquence, contrasted sharply with a sitting president who seemed unable to present a vision of any sort. Economic issues continued to loom largest with the voters. In this area also, Carter failed the test. The result was a Republican victory that in its magnitude shocked the experts. The actor-turned-politician won 51 percent of the popular vote, 489 electoral votes to a mere 49 for Carter. Republicans gained control of the Senate for the first time since the early 1950s and made big gains in the House.[131]

CARTER HAS BEEN MUCH MALIGNED over the years for his handling of U.S. foreign policy. Conservative publicists have made him, along with 1972 presidential candidate George McGovern, into living symbols of the Democratic Party's alleged weakness on national security issues, an image that has dogged the party at election time for more than thirty years. Like other such political myths, this one distorts the record. Carter had the misfortune to serve in a complex and confusing time of transitions—in foreign affairs, from Cold War to detente and back again, at home from the liberal consensus to a more conservative outlook. Upon taking office, he hoped to shift the focus of U.S. foreign policy from the Cold War to North-South problems and human rights and to restore the United States to what he considered its rightful position of moral leadership in the world, a not unreasonable agenda in post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America. He sought also to further detente. His administration from the start was hampered by his own inexperience and sometimes naïveté. His goals were sometimes contradictory, and the Vance-Brzezinski feud gave a certain schizophrenic quality to some of his initiatives. Unschooled in the complexities of international relations, he initially underestimated the difficulties of dealing with the Soviet Union. His clumsy efforts to resolve differences with Moscow were also repeatedly undercut by conservatives in Congress. In part responding to their pressures, he overreacted to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, reescalating Cold War tensions. It was he, in fact, who initiated the military buildup, confrontational approach, and covert action in Afghanistan that the Republicans took credit for and claimed to be decisive in America's Cold War victory. Carter was thus also unlucky. He did not even get the satisfaction of having the embassy hostages released on his watch. Not until shortly after Ronald Reagan took office on January 20, 1980, would they be set free.

131. Ibid., 239–46.

III

In the April 1, 1985, issue of *Time* magazine, conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer hailed the emergence of a "Reagan Doctrine" of "overt and unashamed" aid to "freedom fighters" seeking to overthrow "nasty Communist governments."[45] Although it was given a name only in the second term, and then by a journalist, what came to be called the Reagan Doctrine was established policy from the start.[46] The administration's major innovation in foreign affairs, it marked a sharp departure from the dominant trends of Cold War foreign policy. John Foster Dulles had talked of rolling back Communist gains in Eastern Europe. The United States at times had attempted to destabilize and even overthrow leftist governments. But in general, containment had meant acquiescence in Communist governments already in power. The Reagan Doctrine was rooted in long-standing right-wing disdain for containment. It was pushed by conservative members of Congress and administration hardliners, especially CIA director Casey, as a way to exploit Soviet overextension, roll back recent gains, counter the noxious Brezhnev Doctrine, by which the Kremlin had claimed the duty to intervene anywhere socialism was threatened, and even undermine the USSR itself. Reagan enthusiasts claim great success for the doctrine, especially in Afghanistan, where they assign it a major role in America's Cold War victory.[47] In truth, the vigor of its implementation never matched the heat of its rhetoric. Even in Afghanistan, where it enjoyed some tactical success, its strategic impact has been overstated.

Although it is not generally included under the Reagan Doctrine, a non-military covert program in Poland stands as a modest success story. In Eastern Europe, generally, the CIA after 1982 had encouraged and helped finance protests, demonstrations, newspaper and magazine articles, and television and radio shows highlighting the evils of Soviet domination. Carter had initiated covert action in Poland. In June 1982, Reagan gained Pope John Paul II's blessings for an expanded program for the pontiff's native country. Casey and others considered Poland the weakest link in the Soviet bloc. The United States helped the non-Communist opposition group Solidarity stay in contact with the West and promote its cause inside Poland. United States funds purchased personal computers

45. *Time*, April 1, 1985.
46. James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, N.C., 1996), 19–21.
47. William J. Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency* (Lexington, Ky., 2004), 189.

and fax machines and assisted Solidarity members in using them to publish newsletters and propaganda. The covert program helped keep Solidarity alive during the years of martial law and prepared it to seize power when the regime collapsed.[48]

Elsewhere, the Reagan Doctrine was applied unevenly and with mixed results. As part of its broader strategy of opposing Soviet expansionism and that of its clients, the administration furnished limited, covert aid to a disparate and unwieldy coalition of insurgents opposing the Vietnamese-imposed puppet government of Cambodia. No U.S. officials were eager for reintervention in former French Indochina. They also worried that aid might fall into the hands of the despicable Khmer Rouge, the most potent of the rebel factions. Assistance therefore remained very small, was distributed through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and had no more than a marginal effect on the diplomatic settlement that led to eventual Vietnamese withdrawal.[49]

In southern Africa, race and the Cold War defined U.S. policies. Reagan and his top advisers had little sympathy for black nationalism, linking the African National Congress with Communism. Rather than challenge apartheid, they claimed to follow a policy of "constructive engagement," but they said nothing when the South African government brutally cracked down on dissidents. Under the inspirational leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, black protest in South Africa won rising international sympathy during the 1980s, along with growing demands for sanctions against the Pretoria government. In the United States, the drive for sanctions came mainly from private-sector pressure groups, with vocal support from college campuses. Responding to moral issues and political exigencies, Congress in 1986 passed over Reagan's veto a bill imposing broad sanctions. Shultz admitted that the domestic costs of leaving the South African government to its own devices far exceeded the benefits.[50]

The Reagan Doctrine was employed in southern Africa in a cautious and entirely practical manner. State Department pragmatists fended off heavy pressures from congressional conservatives and administration hardliners to assist a brutal right-wing rebel group in Mozambique. Indeed, ironically, as part of its regional strategy, the United States furnished limited aid to a leftist government.[51] In Angola, U.S. aid was employed to support a broader diplomatic effort to get Cuba and South Africa out, end the

48. Ibid., 186, 201–3.
49. Scott, *Reagan Doctrine*, 108–10.
50. Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 260–61.
51. Scott, *Reagan Doctrine*, 207.

civil war, and secure independence for Namibia. The administration in 1985 initiated covert assistance through Zaire to UNITA's Jonas Savimbi, the darling of the American right. But as administered by the State Department, the assistance was used not to defeat the Soviet and Cuban-backed MPLA but through what Shultz called "stealth diplomacy" to encourage a diplomatic settlement. By helping achieve a military stalemate after Cuban and South African escalation, U.S. aid may have contributed to the withdrawal of outside powers and the beginning of negotiations. Continued assistance to Savimbi actually delayed an end to the Angolan civil war.[52]

The Reagan Doctrine enjoyed major success in Afghanistan, the largest covert operation to that time, but even here the administration's noisy rhetoric belied its generally cautious actions. The role of U.S. aid was less decisive than the Reaganites have claimed. Carter had initiated limited, covert assistance to the Afghan and foreign mujahideen fighting the Soviet invaders. From the outset, Casey pushed to "bleed" the Soviets in Afghanistan, but the administration moved slowly for fear that direct U.S. involvement might provoke Moscow to escalate the Afghan war or even attack Pakistan. Responding to mounting pressure from Congress and public lobbying groups, the administration increased aid to the Afghan "freedom fighters" in 1983 and 1984. But it was only in March 1985, in response to a threat of Soviet escalation, that Reagan ordered his advisers to do "what's necessary to win."[53] Aid jumped from $122 million in 1984 to $630 million in 1987. Working through Pakistani intelligence, the CIA provided rebel forces intelligence gathered from satellites and other sources, established training camps for Afghan fighters, and even helped plan some operations. In what is generally considered the decisive move, the administration in early 1986 provided the Afghans with lethal handheld Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. The Stingers at first exacted a devastating toll on Soviet helicopters and have been labeled the "silver bullet" that drove the USSR from Afghanistan.[54]

The allegedly decisive significance of the Stingers has swelled into one of the great myths of the Cold War. After heavy early losses, the Soviets developed countermeasures to neutralize the missiles. In any event, the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, largely out of a need for U.S. trade and technology, had decided to withdraw from Afghanistan even

52. Ibid., 121, 147.
53. Ibid., 47, 58.
54. Alan J. Kuperman, "The Stinger Missiles and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan," *Political Science Quarterly* 114 , no. 2 (1999), 220, 244–45.

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before the first Stingers arrived.[55] Like most military victories, moreover, the Reagan Doctrine's success in Afghanistan bore hidden costs in the form of what the CIA calls "blowback." The need for Pakistan's support in Afghanistan led the United States to turn a blind eye toward its nuclear program. The cultivation of heroin financed much of the war in Afghanistan, undermining the simultaneous U.S. "war" on drugs. As the CIA had feared, large numbers of Stingers ended up on the shelves of the international arms bazaar. Some were purchased back at grossly inflated cost. United States aid also helped ensure the eventual triumph of the fundamentalist Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The Islamic fighters the United States helped train would in time turn on their benefactors, launching deadly attacks against U.S. assets abroad and even the American homeland itself.[56]

Clinton's administration was the first to deal systematically with what would become the most pressing national security issue of the new century: international terrorism. It responded perfunctorily, normally with sporadic air strikes, against terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center in 1993, a U.S. Air Force barracks in Saudi Arabia in 1996, embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and the destroyer USS *Cole* on the eve of the 2000 election. The president authorized the killing of al Qaeda terrorist leader Osama bin Laden, scoring one near miss with a missile. But he never seriously considered ground operations against bin Laden's base camp in Afghanistan or going after his host, the Taliban government. Behind the scenes, the administration worked with other governments to foil several major terrorist plots, including one against the Los Angeles airport on the eve of the millennium. It named the indefatigable and

59. Little, *American Orientalism*, 301–4.
60. *Newsweek*, April 7, 1997.
61. Garry Wills, "The Clinton Principle," *New York Times Magazine*, January 19, 1997, 44.

abrasive Richard Clarke as coordinator of counterterrorism operations. But there was no real sense of urgency and thus no strong incentive to take drastic action. "What's it gonna take, Dick?" a terrorism specialist asked Clarke prophetically. "Does Al Qaeda have to attack the Pentagon to get their attention?"[62]

In foreign as in domestic policy, the administration's major claims to success were in the realm of economics.[63] A timely bailout loan of $25 billion helped avert economic disaster in Mexico in 1995. By keeping U.S. markets open, the administration also helped contain the impact of the Asian economic meltdown of 1997. During the Clinton years, the United States concluded more than three hundred trade agreements. While the country enjoyed unparalleled prosperity, there was little sign that globalization was advancing prosperity in less developed nations or producing the stabilizing and democratizing results its enthusiasts claimed. On the contrary, by the end of the century it had provoked a strong backlash from labor unions and some liberals at home, and from leaders of developing nations who on the one hand resented the competitive edge enjoyed by the rich nations and on the other feared outside reformers who sought to impose on their shops labor and environmental standards.

The American mood at the end of the century was one of triumphalism and smug, insular complacency. According to a January 2000 poll, Americans ranked foreign policy twentieth in terms of importance. Following the lead of cable television, network news focused increasingly on entertainment and trivia and further slashed its coverage of events abroad. On college campuses, the teaching of foreign languages and area studies declined sharply. Defense spending remained at a remarkably high level through the 1990s—more than $325 billion in 1995. The United States maintained the capability to fight two major wars simultaneously. But the foreign affairs budget was sharply reduced. The United States was deeply in arrears to the UN and the World Health Organization. The State Department closed thirty embassies and twenty-five United States Information Agency libraries, provoking Christopher to protest that we "can't advance American interests by lowering the flag."[64] Foreign policy played no more than an incidental role in the 2000 presidential campaign. To foreigners, self-indulgent Americans seemed to revel in their prosperity, a minority of the world's population recklessly consuming a huge proportion of its resources. America was both admired

62. Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 385; *Washington Post Weekly*, January 7–13, 2002.
63. *Newsweek*, March 6, 1996.
64. *New York Times*, October 17, 1996.

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and feared. Other peoples saw its ability to project its values abroad as a threat to their identities. The awesome display of U.S. military power in Kosovo worried allies as well as potential enemies. German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder fretted about the danger of U.S. unilateralism. A French diplomat observed in the spring of 1999 that the major danger in international politics was the American "hyperpower."[65]