

States of the Union

IRAN: NOTES OF A CONFUSED AMERICAN

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

BY THE TIME you read this, the blindfolds in Teheran may have been removed and the crisis resolved one way or another, either by blood or bluster. At this moment, however, on the eighth day of terror, we Americans remain in hostage—to history as well as to the murky meditations of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his brother mullahs. What follow here are a week's notations marking one confused American's thoughts and feelings about the Persian outrage.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 6—A dying ex-Shah in Manhattan for some 60 compatriots in Teheran: Not a bad exchange in theory, but one few Americans seem prepared to accept. There is pride at stake and simple morality, too, though the latter is wearing thin in places, a consequence of the Shah's own shoddiness. We would be unwise to forget the barbarisms once practiced by Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi—the jailings, the tortures, the slaughter of the innocents—and our complicity in all of the above. The Eisenhower Administration had to reinvent the Shah, and each of Ike's successors, including Jimmy Carter, renewed the patent with bountiful shipments of

guns and planes, not to mention some special on-the-job training of the Shah's secret police.

I'm reminded of a comic-ugly, maybe true story heard during the days of John F. Kennedy. It seems the Shah was paying a state visit to the White House and having a fine old time of an evening with Jack and some other New Frontier mullahs. At a very late hour one of those sages, drifting into an amiable stupor, put a hand on Mohammed Pahlevi's knee and murmured, "Know what? You're my kind of Shah." *In vino veritas*—but we had to wait 17 years for the hangover.

We are told that Ayatollah-type Moslems don't drink (so many ways in Iran to have unclean fun), yet Persians do, or did, if we are to credit Herodotus. Cyrus did not just sip cider. Indeed, booze back then was mixed with the headiest sort of brainstorming. "They [the Persians] are accustomed to deliberate on matters of the highest moment when warm with wine," observes Herodotus, "but whatever they in this situation may determine is again proposed to them on the morrow, in their cooler moments, by the person in whose house they had before assembled. If at this time also it meets their ap-

probation, it is executed; otherwise it is rejected." Moreover, Herodotus notes, the process could with as much efficacy be reversed: "Whatever also they discuss when sober, is always a second time examined after they have been drinking." All of which suggests there may be too much sobriety abroad in Iran.

WEDNESDAY—This morning I visited a local elementary school where I'd been asked to read some stories I had written for children. It turned out the children had a surprise for me: A second-grade class had produced a puppet show adapted from one of the stories, *Big Bear to the Rescue*. The fable, dedicated to "all rushers to the rescue," concerns a certain Mr. Mole who every afternoon repairs to the bottom of an abandoned well, there to take a pleasant nap. One day Big Bear sees him lying at the bottom of the well and assumes he has fallen in and needs to be rescued. Big Bear runs around the neighborhood trying to alert his friends to the emergency, but it is hard going: The friends are all busy with their own problems and would prefer to rescue Mr. Mole at a more convenient time. The whole mixup is finally straightened out when Mr. Mole surfaces, along with a moral: "A person should never be too busy to rescue a friend—even when the friend doesn't need to be rescued."

I sat there enjoying the puppetry and wishing such small art could mirror the enormities of life. Is the Shah really our friend? If so, does he need to be rescued? And what about those hostages? Shouldn't we be running around the neighborhood, Earth, shouting, "Help! Help! Sixty innocent Americans have fallen in the well!"

When I got home, a state politician called on another matter, but the conversation soon turned to "The Crisis." I asked him what he thought we should do. Well, he said, some kind of "paramilitary action" seemed in order. What did that mean? Well, it meant sending in troops to rescue the hostages. But then, what if the students killed the hostages? Well, "there are risks in everything." While listening to those

discouraging words I happened to glance at a chess set that decorates our mantle, and the sight reminded me that words like “chess” and “checkmate” derive from “shah,” which means king. “It’s a stalemate,” I said to the man on the phone, and hung up.

THURSDAY—“The Persian messengers,” marveled Herodotus, “travel with a velocity which nothing human can equal. . . .” What swift messages are the Persians now sending us? First, it seems they want to execute their former Shah before he uncooperatively dies of natural causes. That’s grisly and inefficient, of course—but when vengeance rides, reason gets off the road. Besides, a deposed leader, even one said to have gallstones and malignant tumors, is always a threat to the deposers. The Ayatollah Khomeini probably never read Emerson, but he surely knows the truth of that shrewd transcendentalist’s observation, “When you strike at a king, you must kill him.”

Second, the Persian messengers are saying they wish to recover the billions of dollars that the Shah is alleged to have snuck out of the country. But do the mullahs really expect to find all that illicit cash in the patient’s pajama pocket? Or are they in fact suggesting that we cough up the money as ransom for the 60 hostages? Only Allah knows.

Lastly, I think the Iranians feel the need for a grand catharsis that can only come from parading a captured Shah through the streets of Teheran, then putting him in the dock and compelling him to hear the litany of crimes committed and miseries endured, to witness the Ghost of his own Tyrannies Past. That message is understandable, though the medium remains execrable.

FRIDAY—On television today, in full view of the world, some Iranian students trotted out an American captive, bound and blindfolded, and triumphantly paraded him in front of the cameras. It was an ugly moment—a lesson in old-fashioned bullying—and one hopes it inspired revulsion everywhere. Even zealots, I suppose, prefer respect to revilement, which probably

explains why thus far there have been no real atrocities committed inside the embassy. What is always hard to understand is the sense of virtue and rectitude that comforts persons in their cruelties. Surely truth is in the eye of the perpetrator. In Robert Graves’ poem, “The Persian Version,” are the lines:

*Truth-loving Persians do not dwell upon
The trivial skirmish fought near Marathon.*

SATURDAY—Our State Department has been wisely hesitant about releasing the names of hostages, not wanting to invite reprisals against the hostages’ families by Iranian students in America. Yet little



MUHAMMEDI RIZA PAHLEVI

by little, through the enterprise of journalists, the names are coming to light. What interests me is that these unfortunate prisoners of Islam-run-amuck seem a fair sample of the entire American population. There are blacks and Chicanos in the hostage group, women and men, young and old, skilled and unskilled workers. They come from all regions of the United States and from most classes of society. They *represent* us; they’re our folks.

One yearns to do something for them, to toss them a rope and hoist them mercifully into the light. Yet the President was doubtless correct when he told us to cool it and warned that any act we committed in anger or frustration could be dangerous to the hostages’ health. Already some citizens

have blundered—roughing up Iranian students and chanting “Death to Khomeini.” A group in Denver, whose paramilitary slogan is “Remember the Embassy,” calls for the deportation of all Iranian students, visas be damned. One sympathizes a little, and then shudders.

The President has asked us to display outrage, or patriotism, by driving in daytime with our headlights on and by flying the American flag. Those may be sensible gimmicks, polite and low-key, but so far I have seen very few lights or flags. I think the problem with Carter’s idea is that such devices must be resorted to individually, each of us protesting alone in our separate car or house, when what we want now is a way to come together, some method of reaffirming our threatened sense of community.

What I personally have been searching for, in discussions with friends and colleagues, is an appropriate medium for our message, one that could travel to Persia “with a velocity that nothing human can equal.” I think I have found one.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 12—This morning I sent the following telegram to an acquaintance on the White House staff:

URGENTLY RECOMMEND THAT THE PRESIDENT ISSUE A PROCLAMATION NAMING APPROPRIATE TIME WHEN ALL AMERICANS CAN JOIN IN A SILENT BLINDFOLD VIGIL TO DEMONSTRATE OUR SYMPATHY FOR AND SOLIDARITY WITH THE 60 AMERICAN HOSTAGES. THE VIGIL SHOULD OCCUR SIMULTANEOUSLY IN EVERY CITY AND HAMLET. IT COULD BE AN ELOQUENT BUT NON-INFLAMMATORY STATEMENT OF CITIZEN DETERMINATION, AND A DRAMATIC REMINDER TO THE WORLD OF THE INJUSTICES BEING COMMITTED IN IRAN.

After the Western Union operator finished reading back my telegram, I asked her what she thought of the idea.

She answered, “I’m not allowed to say anything, Sir.”

“But if you were allowed,” I insisted, “what do you think you’d say?”

A long pause. Then: “Well, I think I’d say let’s do it.”