

Cyrus the Great, the Mahdi, and the CIA

October 17, 2005

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It was drizzling a bit as I approached the small coffee shop two blocks from the White House where I had agreed to meet my old college classmate. I can't give his real name. He had recently retired from the CIA, but was still doing work on contract. So I shall call him Joe.

"Joe, how the hell are you? It's been a long time."

He rose from the table and greeted me with a smile. But I noticed that he looked a bit gray. And tired. I wondered if he was well. But more on that later.

We spent a good half hour bringing each other up to date on the years since we last met. Then I got to the point. "Joe, I know you can't talk too much, but you were a CIA specialist on Iran for many years, and I have a thousand questions. I want to write a paper on Iran for the Literary Club in Cincinnati, and I want to get it right."

Joe smiled. "Don't worry, I can talk about Iran for years without revealing any secrets. What do you want to know?"

"Well, I've dug up a lot about the past, but it's the future that worries me. Some people say that Iran is likely to become the most democratic country in the Middle East. It has the *structure* of a democratic government and a restive young population, but it's held back by a bunch of hard line theocrats. Others say they are developing nuclear weapons and will exchange missiles with Israel before too long. They think we should try for regime change. Who's right?"

Joe smiled and pulled at his pipe. "That's easy. I can answer that. I have a sure fire method of predicting the future."

I was incredulous. "You have a what? Nobody can predict the future. Except perhaps God. And you don't look like God."

Joe took another pull at his pipe. "No, I'm not God. But I have found a way to look at the past and extrapolate into the future pretty accurately. It's easy. I predicted the Mossadeq affair in 1951, the Khomeini revolution in 1979, the Iraq's attack on Iran in 1980, and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991."

My mouth dropped. "You did what? If you were on the Iranian desk at that time, why weren't we better prepared. Why was our government surprised?"

"Ob, nobody listened to me. You've heard that before. The top guys in the government believe what they want to believe, and us experts at the bottom of the food chain don't have much influence. It happens all the time. You remember that Moses gave Pharaoh lots of warnings but Pharaoh wouldn't listen until disaster finally struck. All the first-born in Egypt

"Oh, very well, if you insist. I guess I'm in for a history lesson. But don't take too long. Remember my question was: Will Iran become a democratic country, or will it develop nuclear weapons and exchange missiles with Israel?"

"I'll get to that in a moment, but first let's go back a bit in time.."

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"To start with, you have to remember that the Iranians --or at least most of them --are not Arabs. They were originally nomadic horsemen who migrated out of Central Asia into the Iranian plateau around 1000 B.C.E. And they are very proud of the fact that they are not Arabs. Their language is Farsi --which is among the Indo-European family of languages that includes English, French and German --and not a Semitic language such as Arabic and Hebrew.

In addition to Iranians, there are lots of smaller ethnic groups in the country, left over from the ebbs and flows of history --Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Turkomans, Baluchis, Bakhtiari, Qashqais, Gilakis, and Mazanderanis. But well over half are pure Iranian, and Iranian culture, history and outlook dominate the country. Collectively, they are a proud people.

A major source of pride is their past. They very much remember the grandeur of Cyrus the Great, Darius and Xerxes. It was Cyrus who began the expansion of what used to be called Persia in 550 B.C.E when he absorbed the Medes to the north and then moved over the mountains into Mesopotamia, conquering Babylon in the south and Anatolia in the north. He was famous not only for his magnetic personality and his military prowess, but also for his magnanimous treatment of those that he conquered. You will remember that it was Cyrus that not only permitted, but encouraged the Jews held in Babylon to return to their homeland."

"That's about all I knew about Cyrus until now," I said. "He was mentioned in one of my Sunday School lessons a long time ago." Joe took another pull on his pipe.

"But he was killed in battle, and two of his successors --Darius and Xerxes --completed his work. By the time they finished, the Persian Empire included all of what is today Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and a bit of the Balkans. Quite an achievement.

The kings ruled as absolute monarchs, but their rule was tempered --or at least were supposed to be tempered --by justice. A lot of that was inherited from Cyrus, but it was a principle deeply imbedded in the state religion --Zoroasterism. Not all of their successors adhered to that rule, but Iranian culture still places a high premium on justice. Rulers can rise or fall based in part on whether their regime is perceived as just. You'll see that in some of things in the twentieth century that we'll come to in a minute."

" All very interesting," I said, "but what's that got to do with my question?"

"Patience, old buddy. The most important thing to remember about Cyrus is that Iranians today are immensely proud of his accomplishments and their history as an empire. It

Ali" (*shiat-u-Ali* in Arabic, or simply *shia*). As opposed to the Sunni, they believed that the leader of the faithful should be a direct blood line descendant of Muhammed. For some time they continued to select the eldest of Muhammed's descendants at their leader, or *Imam*. And partly in memory of Husayn's death at Karbala, the tradition developed that the Shiites represented the disinherited and under-privileged of the world.

They now live not only in Iran, but also in the southern part of Iraq, in Bahrein, in the northeast part of Saudi Arabia, in Syria and in Lebanon.

All went well for a time, but the twelfth Imam of the Shiites disappeared under mysterious circumstances in 874. The belief developed that he had gone into hiding and he would return at the end of time as the *Mahdi* to restore the community to its rightful place and usher in a perfect Islamic society of peace and justice."

At this point I could not help injecting, "Sounds very much like the Second Coming of Christ."

"Yes, it does, but the Shiite tradition is much milder and less violent than that depicted in the Book of Revelation.

To continue. In the absence of the disappeared *Mahdi*, it is believed that leadership of the Shiite community should be vested in one man --the wisest and most learned of scholars. This is a major difference between the Shiites and the Sunnis. In the Sunni tradition, interpretation of the tradition is vested in a consensus of scholars --not one man. You can see this difference in recent events in Iraq. In the Shiite community the Ayatollah Sistani is clearly the most influential, while in the Sunni community most of the guidance has come from a Committee of Muslim Scholars. Quite a difference, and one that will become increasingly interesting when we come to present day Iran. On the other hand, both Shiite and Sunni give equal weight to the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*, or sayings of the Prophet, as the foundation of their faith. It's in interpretation and tradition where they differ.

One more point. There is no institutional hierarchy in Islam --neither among Shiites nor among Sunnis. There are no ordained clergy, and no authority such as the Pope or the Presbyterian General Assembly to adjudicate differences or decree orthodoxy."

"But, wait a minute," I said. "I hear talk about Ayatollahs and Grand Ayatollahs. How do they get those titles?"

"That's the most interesting point of all. They get those titles because people start calling them that. As a Shiite scholar becomes more and more respected for his knowledge and his piety, as more people read what he writes, and as more people start coming to his lectures, people start calling him a *mujtahid*. As he gains an even greater following, people start calling him *Ayatollah*. And if one gets *really* respected, he becomes a *marja-e taqlid*, who is recognized as the representative of the Hidden Imam on earth with absolute authority to

"As you know, the Persian Empire was defeated by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C.E. and then divided up among his generals. In the centuries that followed Iran emerged as a separate entity ruled by a long succession of dynasties. In 1501 a young zealot named Ismail rode out of Asia Minor, conquered all of Iran, and decreed that the Shiite version of Islam be adopted by the entire country. His intent was to bind together the varied ethnic groups with a common sense of cultural identity. Iranians have been Shiite ever since.

However, by the 1890s the ruling *Qajar* dynasty had sunk into decay. The ruler --*Nasir ed-Din Shah* --presided with absolute authority over a thoroughly backward nation --mired in despotism, traditionalism, illiteracy and poverty. Pressure had also begun to be exerted on the country from the Russians in the north and British in the south, as an adjunct to what Kipling once called "The Great Game" of struggle for control of Central Asia.

There was one bright spot. The sons of the royal family and landed aristocracy developed the habit of making a long, difficult journey through Russia and Central Europe to Paris to study for up to as much as six years. They returned thoroughly enamored of the West and Western ideas --including the idea of converting Iran into a constitutional monarchy, with an elected assembly and laws limiting the absolute power of the Shah. Some, but not all, of the Shiite clergy saw no conflict between Western liberalism and a Shiite desire for justice. Together, these two groups began to agitate for change. But initially to no avail.

What brought the issue to a head was a bizarre episode in 1891 involving --of all things --tobacco. The Shah --Nasir ed-Din --exercising his absolute authority over everything in Iran-- for a fee of fifteen thousand pounds a year --granted the British Imperial Tobacco Company the exclusive right to buy and sell the entire tobacco crop of Iran. The country was enraged. The chief cleric of the day issued a *fatwa* that --as long as the concession was in effect --*any* use of tobacco in the country constituted an attack on Islam. *The entire country stopped smoking!* The Shah was forced to back down and the concession was rescinded. The clerics and the people had spoken.

In 1896 Nasir ed-Din was assassinated, and he was succeeded by his barely competent son --Muzaffar ad-Din. (The bloodline of the dynasty was not especially good.) Agitation for change continued, but the country continued to decay.

Then, in 1900, the new Shah borrowed twenty-two million rubles from Russia to finance a royal tour of Europe, with all receipts from Iranian customs given as collateral. That was too much. In protest over this and other abuses, riots spread across the country. The demand arose for a written constitution limiting the monarchy and the power of government. European constitutions were cited as an example. This was the beginning of the love side of the love/hate relationship. The hate side of the love/hate relation comes later, when we get to the role of the CIA

This provoked riots again, and in the confusion that followed the Majlis won out --temporarily. Muhammed Ali Shah was deposed and replaced by his twelve year old son --Sultan Ahmed Shah. But that didn't last long. In 1911 the young Shah's cabinet staged a *coup d'etat* (with the help of twelve thousand Russian troops) and dismissed the *Majlis*."

"Wait a minute," I said. "I'm confused."

"So were the people of Iran. All you have to remember is that the early days of constitutional government were pretty chaotic. What was needed was a strong hand to set things straight. And that's what they got --in a huge, scowling hulk of a man with a savage temper named Reza Khan.

But now I need to go back and talk about the role of Britain and oil before I explain Reza Khan. That role began in 1908 when a British company discovered oil in western part of the country. Shortly thereafter the British government converted its navy from coal to oil, and in 1919, to ensure a supply, it signed an agreement which gave it significant influence in western Iran. So now we have Britain in the south and Russia in the north meddling in Iranian affairs.

At this point the Russian Revolution inspired an area in northern Iran to break away and declare itself the independent Republic of Gilan. The only effective military force in Iran at the time was a division organized and trained by Russian Cossacks, and one of the officers in that division was Reza Khan. The British demanded command of the Cossack division to put down the rebellion, but before the government could comply the division marched on Tehran and demanded that Reza Khan be placed in command. The Shah acquiesced. Reza Khan's army then put down the rebellion in the Soviet republic, and went on to disburse smaller rebellions in other parts of the country.

Amid all of this there arose a clamor in many quarters for a republican form of government. Reza Khan wavered, but then he was called to the holy city of Qom by the senior clerics there and told that --if he would oppose a secular republic --they would support a change of dynasty with him as the new Shah. He agreed. Accordingly, on October 31, 1925, a reconvened *Majlis* deposed the Shah and replaced him with Reza Khan --who became Reza Shah.

Theoretically, this was a *constitutional* monarchy, but Reza Shah behaved more like an *absolute* monarch. By sheer force of his personality, he attempted to drag his backward country into the modern world. In the sixteen years of his rule, he:

- o Mandated Western-style dress.
- o Prohibited women from wearing the veil.
- o Removed beggars from the streets of Tehran.
- o Forcibly resettled nomads into villages

- o Changed the names of cities from Arabic ones to Iranian ones.
- o Decreed the use of the style of ancient Iranian architecture for all public buildings.
- o Ordered everyone to chose a family last name, and recommended names from among those in use in the ancient past. (Prior to this people did not normally use family last names. It should come as no surprise that the majority of people followed his recommendation.)

The clergy essentially retreated from politics, but their influence remained strong among the masses, and the condition of the masses did not improve significantly. A split therefore developed between the increasingly Westernized middle class and the traditionalist lower classes.

The end came in 1941. Reza Shah had made the mistake of calling on Germany to help him keep Britain and Russia at bay in the early days of World War II. Bad mistake. Had he bowed to the wishes of the Allies and indicated his willingness to cooperate fully with them, he might have survived. But he was too proud. As a result, in August, 1941, Russia and Britain invaded from north and south and in September, 1941, the Shah abdicated in favor of his twenty-one year old son Muhammad Reza. Reza Khan went into exile in South Africa where he died in 1944 --a broken man. What's the old saying? 'Pride goeth before a fall?'

"True," I said. "But he did play the nationalist card --to the hilt. And he did move the country a long way into the modern world. How did his son work out?"

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"Not too well. He was a rather weak character *initially* and didn't do a very good job. And here's where Muhammed Mossadeq, oil and the CIA come onto the scene. Our country won the battle, but our maneuvers left many Iranians with real bitterness about the United States. Some of it is still evident today."

"That's the other side of the love/hate relationship you talked about."

"That's right. And the bitterness runs pretty deep. But to explain it I have to start with a word about Britain and oil... This is complicated. The problem started with the disparity in income earned from the extraction and sale of Iranian oil. The British government itself had acquired 51 % ownership in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, and, as a result, in 1950 the British government earned \$142 million from profits and taxes on crude and the sale of downstream products, compared with \$56 million earned by Iran from crude alone. This provoked increasing anger, which coalesced in the *Majlis* around Muhammed Mossadeq, a fiery speaker leading a National Front made up of diverse groups and supported by the small *Tudeh* communist party. British intransigence over renegotiating its contract simply fed the fire and led to a demand to nationalize the company and return complete control of oil to the Iranian people.

On March 3 1951 the Shah's prime minister Ali Razamara told the *Majlis* that instead

of Iraq in 1991) and Kermit Roosevelt (grandson of Teddy Roosevelt) organized a plot to get rid of Mossadeq.

They had the Shah send a messenger to tell Mossadeq that he was removed. Mossadeq arrested the messenger and the Shah fled to Switzerland. Roosevelt then persuaded the army to put down communist street mobs, and paid \$100,000 to gangs of young men to create wild demonstrations calling for return of the Shah. It worked. Mossadeq was driven from office and the Shah returned --reportedly under the impression that the people loved him.

Mossadeq was put on trial, spent three years in prison, retired to his country estate, and died in 1967 at the age of 85. In many ways he was a tragic figure. The Shah was rejuvenated and began to rule with a firm hand and a great sense of his own importance. Oil production gradually resumed --technically under Iranian ownership, but aided by contractual arrangements with a consortium of international companies.

But the real legacy of the whole affair was an abiding hatred of the CIA and the United States by those nationalists who were angered by the *coup d'etat*. That anger simmered for a long time and then exploded in the revolution of 1979."

"I can see where they could be angry with us," I said, "but what did the Shah himself do that caused the revolution? Surely he could not have been that bad?"

"Think again. He was.

Apparently emboldened by the support of the United States and the impression that his people loved him, he underwent a radical change in behavior. He recalled his father's admonition to "trust no one" and demand absolute obedience, and he build his rule on the army, the secret police (known as SAVAK), and the money that flowed with the rise in the price of oil in the 1970s. In addition, the United States supplied him with a huge amount of military equipment and technical support as a counterweight to the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

But speaking of the law of unintended consequences --a byproduct of all this pouring in of American aid was the transformation of the northern part of Tehran into a subculture of Hollywood films, fast food restaurants, and shops that sold only American-made goods priced in American dollars. And there was a terrible insensitivity to Iranian culture --with Americans referring to Iranians as "rag-heads" and "sand-niggers," shop windows displaying skimpy women's swim suits, and even women walking through mosques talking away while prayers were in progress. There was also the disparity in wealth between the Americanized Iranian upper class and the underprivileged masses. All of this contributed to the anger that exploded toward America in 1979.

More significant however was the Shah's focus of his rule on the secular side of

also undercut the sources of funding for rural clerics and for the senior clerics who mostly came from large landowning families. All of this planted the seeds for the religious establishment to strike back."

"We had lots of people over there. Why didn't we see it coming?"

"Unfortunately, the Americans talked almost exclusively to the upper class Westernized Iranians and to the members of that class in government. What I just told you we found out after the fact.

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The country was ripe for revolution, but it had lacked a charismatic leader. It found one in Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the most respected scholar in the holy city of Qom. In 1978 Khomeini began to thunder denunciations of the Shah's White Revolution as unjust and contrary to the basic tenets of Islam. This got him jailed briefly, and then exiled first to Iraq in the city Najaf (the site of Ali's tomb) and then to Paris. From there he continued his violent denunciations of the Shah and had them circulated back to Iran by audio tape. Most important, Khomeini developed the theological argument that --until the return of the Twelfth Imam --the most just and knowledgeable among the clergy should direct not only the religious, but also the *political* affairs of the Muslim community. This was a new departure, and that was the role to which he aspired.

The revolution of 1979 was not a carefully planned event. It was a spontaneous uprising of action and counter action that spun out of control. The initial spark was a slanderous letter planted in a newspaper in January 1978 accusing Khomeini of both homosexuality and being a British agent. A student riot erupted in Qom, and the Shah's troops put down the riot, killing hundreds in the process. Demonstrations at the funerals of *those* students turned into *bigger* riots, with more students shot. The country began to come unglued. At this point the mobs protesting against the rule of the Shah began to include both religious and secular forces. Even soldiers in the Shah's army began to desert.

On January 16, 1979 the Shah appointed Shahpur Bakhtiar as prime minister and left the country "on vacation." On February 1 Khomeini returned to a tumultuous welcome. He immediately appointed a Provisional Revolutionary Government in exact parallel with the Bakhtiar government. The country descended into chaos. Street committees based on mosques emerged to rival the police. Independent religious tribunals were formed and decreed the execution of some 600 "enemies of the revolution." A Revolutionary Guard was formed in exact parallel with the army. But there was still no formal revolutionary government.

At this point an Assembly of Experts was chosen to draft a new constitution. What emerged was modeled on the Constitution of 1906 with an elected *Majlis*, but with a significant difference. In parallel to the *Majlis* there would be a Council of Guardians to

considerable violence erupted. But Khomeini's forceful prestige combined with the Revolutionary Guard put it down with a reign of terror. In 1981 more than 1800 people were executed for "waging war against God."

Joe's voice began to waver, and he looked a little gray.

"Are you OK?," I asked.

"Sure," he said, "Just a little tired." And he kept going.

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Success in Iran was not enough. Khomeini wanted to export the Revolution. He sent Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon to train and support the Shiite Hizbollah. He exploded bombs in Kuwait, and he instigated bloody riots against the Saudi regime during the *haj* in Mecca. More significantly, he launched a thunderous verbal attack against Saadam Hussein as a "puppet of Satan" and called on the Shiites in southern Iraq to rise up and depose him.

Saadam, motivated partly by fear of his own survival, worried that the Shiites might actually do that, and he struck out in what he perceived as self defense. In September, 1980 he invaded Iran. Bad mistake! With a vastly larger population --aroused by the attack on its own land --coupled with fanatic young people willing to sacrifice themselves in the cause of Islam - Iran fought back. Within two years Iran had essentially won the war and driven Iraqi troops from its territory. But Khomeini refused to stop, and the war dragged on for six more years until a truce was brokered by the UN in 1988.

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Khomeini died the next year --in June of 1989. Within 24 hours the leading clerics chose Ayotollah Ali Khameni, then president of Iran, as Khomeini's successor. In spite of the theoretical requirements for the position, Khameni is not an intellectual giant. He is a skillful politician chosen for his ability to unify clerics of many persuasions. So he is now the supreme authority in today's Iran.

Since 1989 the government of Iran has mellowed somewhat and the economy has begun a slow recovery. But it continues to support Hizbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, is subject to partial U.S. sanctions, is a member of George Bush's "axis of evil;" and has apparently been attempting to develop nuclear weapons.

On the one hand, the clerics are in firm control and show no signs of relinquishing it that easily. On the other hand, Iran does have the structure of a democratic republic and a population 40% under the age of 19 with a growing interest in the outside world. Baring a major upheaval-- which is always a possibility --Iran could evolve into a genuine democracy, one of the few in the Muslim world."

"But didn't the election earlier this year tip the scales *away* from democracy? The new