

# AN AMERICAN COUP

BOOK REVIEW BY VIC CAMPBELL

In the first half of the 20th century, there was a great struggle toward democracy in Iran. Following a fifty year effort to form a parliament, write a constitution, develop a division of power between monarch and prime minister, one man emerged capable of leading the country into an era of democratic government. He cared passionately for the future of democracy and self-sufficiency in Iran, and fought tirelessly for it. Then on August 19, 1953, the CIA overthrew his government and installed one favorable to the dethroned Shah.

A detailed account of the coup is now available in a book: *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup & the Roots of Middle East Terror* (John Wiley & Sons, 2003) by Steven Kinzer, veteran *New York Times* correspondent. Gripping in narrative, well articulated by facts, the book is an excellent moment-by-moment documentation of events leading up to the coup. It describes how the CIA toppled a new and fragile democracy in Iran, and how that newly formed agency became an instrument of U.S. foreign policy used to undermine "undesirable" governments throughout the world.

Unlike most borders in the Middle East drawn arbitrarily by the British in their colonial period, Iran's reflect a cohesive culture that extends back thousands of years. A Persian empire, Shiite Islamic rule, domination by Ottoman Turks all shaped the Iranian character and its desire for independence and self-rule. In the mid-20th century various cultural themes — sometimes volatile, sometimes conflicting — coalesced from this complex history to form Iran's first few steps toward democracy. And one man was playing a pivotal role in that effort.

Mohammad Mossadegh (pronounced like rose-a-day, emphasis on the first syllable) was an immensely popular figure in Iran at the time of his overthrow. He was born into an aristocratic family, was politically brilliant from a young age, was fiercely principled, a towering intellect. And he loved his country so passionately that he stirred the hearts and minds of Iranians. He was educated, schooled in more than one culture. He was articulate, capable of stirring oratory and convincing debate. And he was incorruptible, refusing to take payments, even sometimes a salary, for his political work. He was, in short, the kind of charismatic figure around which a fledgling democracy can rally and succeed.

Mossadegh was at the height of his power in the early 1950s. World War 2 had ended and communism begun its ascendancy. It was a time when foreign policy in the West was shaped by a desire to contain communism, and Iran, because it bordered the Soviet Union, was seen as vulnerable to a communist takeover. Some argued it could become a satellite state like those in Eastern Europe.

U. S. President Truman felt supporting independent nationalist movements like Mossadegh's that derived their strength from the aspirations of a people to be free and democratic best contained that communism. Great Britain, however, had a long legacy of colonization in Iran. It had struck deals with the petty Turkish monarchs in control of Iran in the 19th century, giving Britain sweeping access to lucrative resource rights there. When oil was discovered, Britain developed a refining industry that shared little of the profits with Iran. Mossadegh argued that his country remained backward and poverty-stricken because of foreign exploitation. And to this end, when he became Prime Minister, he nationalized the British oil industry in Iran.

Britain needed Iranian oil to fuel its empire. And Prime Minister Winston Churchill was willing to use any means to regain the lost refinery, including undermining Mossadegh's administration through covert means. Then as now, diplomatic embassies played a role in espionage; they were places where intelligence operatives could be cultivated, and where information could be passed to home governments under the twin cloaks of secrecy and immunity. When Mossadegh got wind of Britain's clandestine efforts to undercut his regime he expelled their diplomats and closed the embassy, effectively shutting down Britain's espionage in Iran.

Under Truman, the U.S. had refused to collaborate with the British in this matter. However, in 1952 Dwight Eisenhower was elected President and U.S. foreign policy changed toward Iran. When the British ambassador approached the Eisenhower administration, he was careful to frame a coup in something other than British colonial interests, describing it instead as an effort to stop the expansion of Soviet influence in the region.

The British were helped by two prominent members of the new American administration: John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, and Allen Dulles, Director of CIA. These two brothers ran much of the foreign policy apparatus of the U.S. government — one overtly, the other covertly — working simultaneously and in harmony to realize their staunchly anticommunist views. They



CONRAD (THE LOS ANGELES TIMES)

no longer wanted an Iran that was merely independent of the Soviet Union, they wanted it completely loyal to the U.S.

They argued that Iran under Mossadegh was sliding toward instability, chaos, and an eventual Soviet takeover. With the fall of Iran, other countries in the Middle East would suffer the same fate, this in a region that had 60% of the world's oil reserves. Such claims, the veracity of which can never be known, were the motivation for the U.S. President's decision. Using CIA-paid elements of the populace, the Dulles brothers set about destabilizing Iran. In part by using the destabilizing they themselves created as evidence of its need, they convinced Eisenhower it was in the best interests of the U.S. that he approve a coup d'etat. And he did.

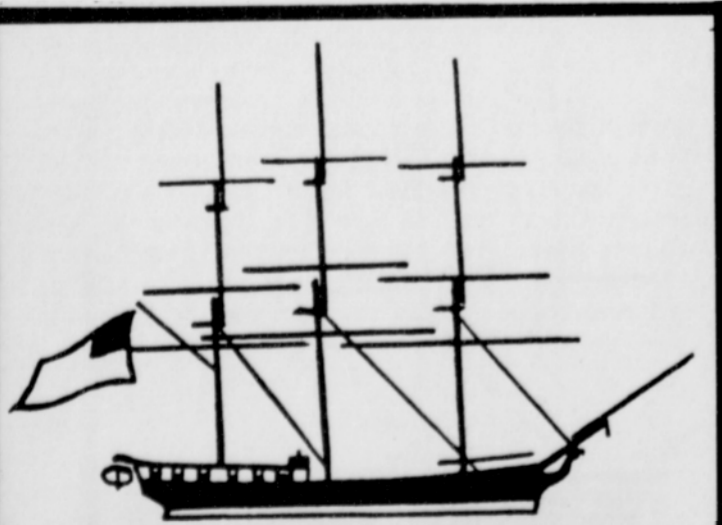
What follows in Kinzer's book is a story of high intrigue and espionage as chilling as any spy novel. The author recounts in remarkable detail the events of the coup, code-named 'Operation Ajax', that deposed the democratically elected government of Mossadegh and restored the Shah to power. By making use of an extensive array of operatives who bribed newspapers and mullahs for support, promised promotions to military officers, and made payoffs to Iranian organized crime, the CIA exploited inherent vulnerabilities of the young Iranian republic. It is an intimate portrait of the CIA in its infancy, carrying out its first violent covert overthrow of a foreign government, and lays blame for the failure of Iranian democracy squarely at the door of the American government. The coup proved so successful that the CIA took center stage in American foreign policy as it again and again attempted (and often succeeded) to overthrow governments such as Guatemala, Cuba, Chile, the Congo and Vietnam through covert means.

Kinzer's clear exposition of the coup helps to explain the events that followed, and why they had such impact on the United States. In 1979, the Iranian people overthrew the Shah, who had become progressively more brutal and repressive,

and established a republic. Radical elements — enthused with anti-American sentiment, created in part by the U.S. role in the coup and its 26-year support of the Shah — co-opted the revolution and imposed an extreme form of fundamentalist Muslim theocracy still in place today. Soon thereafter Tehran Iranian students seized the U.S. embassy and took hostages there, an event whose images are still seared into the American psyche. Knowing the CIA had been responsible for toppling Iranian democracy in the 1953 coup, and knowing that embassies are notorious for being centers of espionage, it is not difficult to conclude the Iranian students were acting to prevent another CIA-backed coup, real or imagined. Without at all condoning the violent taking and handling of hostages, it can at least be acknowledged that the vitriolic anger of the Iranian people can find some justification in the past actions of the U.S.

The American coup in Iran in 1953 had violent consequences spanning two generations. This history should make current Middle East policymakers very uneasy. The United States continues to support governments throughout the region that ignore or subvert the hopes of their own people to be free. In the same way that events of modern Iran have come back to haunt the U.S., so may the support of non-democratic governments in the region also invite unwanted compensation, and bring those to power who are alienated by, and averse to, the government of the United States. And the consequences of these acts may be visited not on this generation, but on its children in unknown ways and proportions.

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## NATIONAL SECURITY

The national security complex became, in the Eisenhower years, a fast-growing apparatus to allow (the U.S.) to do in secret what (it) could not do in the open. This was not ... an isolated phenomenon but part of something larger going on in Washington — the transition from an isolated America to America the international superpower; from Jeffersonian democracy to imperial colossus. A true democracy had no need for a vast, secret security apparatus, but an imperial country did. As America's international reach and sense of obligation increased, so decreased the instinct to adhere to traditional democratic procedures among the inner circle of Washington policymakers. (The U.S.'s) new role in the world had put (it) in conflict not only with the communists but with (its) own traditions. What was evolving was a closed state within an open state.

The men who were the driving force of this new philosophy... worried endlessly that the very nature of a democracy, the need for the consent of the governed, made this nation vulnerable to a totalitarian adversary. Therefore, in order to combat the enemy, the leaders of the democracies would have to sacrifice some of their nations' freedoms and emulate their adversary. The national security apparatus in Washington was, in effect, created so America could compete with the communist world and do so without the unwanted clumsy scrutiny of the Congress and the press.

~DAVID HALBERSTAM  
from his book *The Fifties* (1993)



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