

Foundation for Iranian Studies

Program of Oral History

TALBOT, PHILIPS

RESTRICTED

INTERVIEWEE: PHILIPS TALBOT

INTERVIEWER: WILLIAM BURR

NEW YORK: NOVEMBER 21, 1985

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IRANIAN - AMERICAN RELATIONS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Philips Talbot

Oral History Research Office
Foundation for Iranian Studies

1992

PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a series of tape-recorded interviews conducted for the Oral History Program of Foundation for Iranian Studies by William Burr with Philips Talbot in New York in November 21, 1985.

Readers of this Oral History memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Foundation for Iranian Studies is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein.

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PREFACE

The following oral history memoir is the result of one tape-recorded interview session with Philips Talbot on November 21, 1985. The interview was conducted by William Burr in New York, New York.

This interview is one of a series on Iranian-American relations in the post-World War II era which were conducted as part of a joint project between the Oral History of Iran Archives of the Foundation for Iranian Studies and the Columbia University Oral History Research Office. Similar projects have been undertaken in England and France.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that he or she is reading a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Columbia University in the City of New York | New York, N.Y. 10027

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

Butler Library

April 2, 1991

The Honorable Philips Talbot
The Asia Society
300 East 68th Street
New York, N.Y. 10021

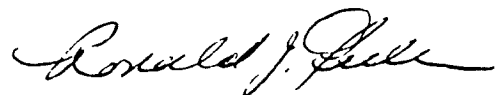
Dear Ambassador Talbot:

In early January of this year we wrote to you concerning the transcript of your interview for the Foundation for Iranian Studies/Columbia University Oral History Research Office oral history project on American relations with Iran.

Essentially, that letter stated that if we did not receive the edited version of your transcript by March 8, 1991, we would proceed with processing and archiving the interview. As part of this process, we will do relatively minor editing: checking dates, names, etc... and clearing up stylistic problems. We will then index and abstract the interview and submit it in our Collection. Copies will also be held at the oral history archives of the Foundation in Washington, D.C. and at the Hoover Institute. The interview will be closed for five years, until April 1, 1996, unless an interested researcher receives your written permission to consult the transcript. If you prefer, we can open the interview immediately. If you do want us to open it now, please let us know.

Thank you for your consideration. Please feel free to contact me at (212) 854-2273 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Ronald J. Grele
Director

cc: Dr. Mahnaz Afkhani

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Philips Talbot served as the Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East and South Asia between 1960 and 1965. His tenure of office coincided with an important time in Iranian history. Mr. Talbot's reminiscences outline U.S.'s relations with Iran during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and shed light on U.S.'s policy towards the Amini government, the White Revolution of 1963 and economic change and military build-up in Iran between 1960 and 1965.

CORRECTIONS LIST

PP.25-26 and 39

Massadegh should be Mosaddeq

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Interviewee: Philips Talbot

Date: November 21, 1985

Interviewer: William Burr

Q: The following interview with Philips Talbot took place on November 21, 1985. The interview is part of a joint effort between the Columbia University Oral History Research Office and the Foundation for Iranian Studies.

Tell me where you were born and raised?

Talbot: Well, I was born in Pittsburgh but I was raised mainly in Wisconsin and Illinois because I come from an Illinois family. And I was in public schools in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, outside of Milwaukee and then at the University of Illinois, Class of 1936.

Q: So you did a B.A.?

Talbot: I did two B.A.'s, one liberal arts and political science, the other in journalism.

Q: After you graduated from college, how did you make a living?

Talbot: I went to work for the Chicago Daily News as a cub reporter.

Q: You were there through the 1930s or through the late 1930s?

Talbot: I was there a couple of years. And then I got a chance at a fellowship that took me ultimately to India. And I began my India studies in 1938 with a year in England at the Indian Civil Service Probationer's course and then two years in India, one on the Muslim side, the other on the Hindu side.

Q: Were you at a university there?

Talbot: In my Muslim year, I was half year at the university and half year in a village in Kashmir. On the Hindu side, I was mainly in ashrams and some urban settings.

Q: Then World War II came along and you served in the--

Talbot: I served in the Navy in Bombay for two years and Chungking for two years and then back in Washington. Then I went right back to the Chicago Daily News and became their correspondent in South Asia, Southeast Asia at the time of the transfer of power from Britain to India and the partition of India.

Q: Were you--took your duties in the Navy?

Talbot: Naval liaison officer in Bombay and an assistant naval attache in Chungking.

Q: And then after the war you were back at _____ was in in India. From then you--how long were you with the Daily News again?

Talbot: A couple of years until the new independent nations of India and Pakistan were established. Then I went back to Chicago and took a doctorate at the University of Chicago in international relations and then got involved in founding an inter-university organization called the American University's Field Staff which was really an academic foreign service, American, mainly scholars who were specialists in foreign areas, studying and writing on those areas and returning to the campuses of the sponsoring universities for periods of lectures and so on.

Q: This funded American scholars going overseas?

Talbot: That's right.

Q: It was a very broad-gauged affair?

Talbot: Very broad.

Q: Was it privately funded?

Talbot: It was funded mainly by the universities that were members, corporate members and by foundations.

Q: What was your position with this?

Talbot: Executive director of it for ten years.

Q: Was it mostly Third World oriented?

Talbot: Largely. We didn't call it the Third World. We called it those parts of the world that are least known to Americans.

Q: And you were with that through the 1950s?

Talbot: That's right, until I was invited into government at the beginning of the 1960s.

Q: How did it come about that you were appointed as the Assistant Secretary of State for _____ ?

Talbot: I've never been terribly sure. But my belief is that, because I was known to both Dean Rusk and Chester Bowles--they were the ones who put up my name. The people in the White House had never heard of me. I knew that.

Q: Did you know Rusk through his Rockefeller Foundation?

Talbot: That's correct, yes. Actually, we had met briefly in India during World War II when he was a colonel out there. And I'd known Bowles also in India.

Q: In the wartime period?

Talbot: Not during the wartime, but when he first became Ambassador in 1952.

Q: That's right. So they helped bring you in basically with their influence. When you became assistant secretary, what were your general responsibilities?

Talbot: Eighteen countries. The State Department divided the world into five different regional areas and mine extended from the eastern Arab countries and Israel to Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan, the subcontinent, right through Ceylon which is now Sri Lanka.

Q: How did the division run on a sort of day to day basis? How did it work in practice? Did you meet with desk officers constantly? Or how did the work process occur?

Talbot: Yes. Obviously foreign policy brings in a number of different elements within the State Department. The geographic bureaus had primary responsibility for developing programs and policies and maintaining relationships with our embassies and consulates in the area and with those governments. But the work at the geographic bureaus all was interrelated with the functional bureaus, like the Bureau of Economic Affairs and so on, that had global oversight. In addition, of course, we were responsible for liaison with AID, with Agriculture, with Commerce, with Treasury, with the Pentagon, other governmental agencies, and we reported essentially to what is called in the State Department the Seventh

Floor, the Secretary and the Under Secretaries.

Q: You reported directly to Rusk or did you deal with the Under Secretaries more often than you dealt with Rusk?

Talbot: It depended on the level of concern about a particular area at a particular time. Rusk was the Secretary for much of the period; George Ball was the Under Secretary, and then there were others. I dealt primarily with those two while they were there. I reported primarily to those two.

Q: Who did you rely upon for advice and information when it came to Iranian issues? Who were your main people you worked with when it came to decisions on Iran at this time?

Talbot: On a day to day basis, the Iran Desk was at the point of all advice, organizations [?] or consultations. All copies of telegrams from the embassy in Iran were received by me, often by the Secretary, but particularly by the Iran Desk. And when the telegram would refer to something that was of an earlier period that I wasn't familiar with, or in some depth that I wasn't familiar with, it was normally the Iran Desk to which I turned for information. However, the pattern broadened very rapidly and very widely out of this because AID, as it now is, and the other agencies had very strong interests in Iran. So we would have different levels of meetings constantly to be sure that there was a coordinated U.S. Government position on the issues that came up.

Q: Did much of this go through the NSC? Was that sort of any focus for you or less so?

Talbot: There was an NSC representative, Robert Komer, who sat in on the interagency talks that we had. We'd try, oh, sometimes once a week to have a luncheon that included the half a dozen people who were most involved around the government in, in this case, Iran. It could have been Israel. It could have been Turkey, or any other country in the region. Usually, most of these people at the weekly luncheons had responsibilities for the same general--[tape interruption]--a variety of people. I've mentioned Komer. Bill Gaud of AID was a considerable factor. There would be different people from the Pentagon, but usually just somebody from ISA, International Security Affairs, who was there. There'd be an agency man there, usually a man--

Q: --an intelligence agent?

Talbot: Yes. USIA (U.S. Information Agency) would have somebody there but that would change, too. The lists are available. Treasury was much interested although I don't remember a very senior person in Treasury participating at this time.

Q: Who was the country desk person at this point? Do you remember the name of the person?

Talbot: Well, Robert Minor was the head of what we call GTI which was Greece, Turkey, Iran. And he was at the next level down who reported to me from those three countries. And then he had a assistants dealing with each of the countries.

Q: A specialist?

Talbot: Yes, he was a specialist. There was a woman named Katherine Bracken who was one of his specialists very early. There were several others who were at various stages of seniority and who ultimately became more and more responsible. Sometimes they became desk officers and so forth.

Q: Was this task force the first major Iran issue that came up when you were Assistant Secretary?

Talbot: Yes, yes.

Q: What were the issues, the concerns, that led to its formation? What inspired it?

Talbot: I think, basically, it was the sense that seven or eight years had passed since the Shah's return, that there were concerns about the direction in which Iran was going and about our relationships with him. The Shah was pressing for more aid. We needed a coordinated U.S. government position on this. The different elements of the government were not agreeing at the beginning of that

administration. There had been a very vigorous involvement with Iran during the Eisenhower Administration starting with the return of the Shah. And there was a feeling that we needed to look at what American interests in Iran really were and get, as they say, our ducks in order. This was really it. There was an effort to get agreement in the U.S. government on what Iran's real needs were. And there were, as usual, differences between those who thought that military aid was the best solution and those who thought that economic and social development was more important.

There were concerns already about what we now call human rights. There were questions as to whether the U.S. was supporting things going on in Iran it didn't really care for, and so on.

So all these questions came up. It was an examination of the Iranian situation that set the tone, I think, for the next year or two, although I have to add that later Ambassador Holmes felt that we'd been too doctrinaire, if you will, too much concerned about somebody else's economic and social, cultural problems, not enough concerned about sustaining the Shah as an important feature in this region.

Q: The report that I read, that was by John Bowling, who was involved in those issues apparently, suggested that there was some concern in early 1961 that the Shah might drift to sort of a neutralist posture. Was that a highly felt concern at that time?

Talbot: That was a part of it and was part of the argument for involving in more in terms of military assistance. I'd have to say

that, at the beginning of the 1960s, the U.S. government wanted to have good solid relations with the Shah but was not prepared to make him a surrogate of the region. I think from 1972 onwards it changed quite substantially.

Q: When the task force was set up considering the issue of Iran, what kind of policy options did they consider? Do you recall any of the controversies over what would be the best approach to take?

Talbot: I think I've indicated that there were those who argued in favor of essentially a military based relationship, that the primary concerns were security concerns as far as the United States' interest in Iran went. And the importance of the Persian Gulf was pointed out, and all the rest of it. There were others who felt that the internal strength and stability of Iran depended upon the Shah's relationship to his own people, on modernization of development programs, and that side of the picture. There was some considerable concern about the situation in Iran.

Q: I guess what I meant to say is that, well, there's a report by Bowling that I've seen which suggests that--he laid out like several options in terms of the support of the Shah. One was the Committee to Support the National Front, Frontites, give them more political support, or to support a sort of a conservative military group, or support the Shah, support the Shah and expand American support for the Shah as the central focus of Iranian politics or just to continue the existing policy of trying to get him to liberalize a little bit.

Were those options laid out that--?

Talbot: I think that paper was circulated.

Q: Yes, yes.

Talbot: Bowling was in part doing his own thinking and in part expressing the views of different groups. So he was personally involved but also reportorially involved.

Q: Was it like sort of a think piece that he thought up?

Talbot: That's right.

Q: Was there like a real serious discussion, let's say, supporting the National Front as opposed to the Shah? Was it ever actually brought up as an option?

Talbot: Oh, everything was discussed. And the question of whether the Shah could survive, given the course he was taking, what would happen if the Shah were to disappear by whatever reasons, health, assassination, whatever, these were all discussed. I don't have the papers in front of me, but I understand that somebody has gotten them under Freedom of Information--

Q: Probably some of them are. Not all of them, though. Certain documents have been. Some of them are sanitized in the parts so you

can't really tell what considerations were discussed. What were the task force final recommendations to ? Do you remember?

Talbot: Well, Julius Holmes was sent out with a brief to encourage the Shah to open up the system somewhat, to get more public involvement in public life, to look to cultural and economic advances but not to undermine the Shah or to encourage real alternatives. In other words, the Shah remained the force and the influence with which we were dealing.

Q: When officials discuss Iran at this point, early 1961 or so, how important was Iran as the country to Kennedy Administration officials? What was its value as a--what kind of interest did they have there? How did they perceive their interest in Iran, I guess, is what I'm trying to say?

Talbot: Well, it was definitely important. The task force was set up only because it was regarded as important. It was the first task force set up during the Kennedy Administration for that part of the world. There wasn't any task force at that time for Israel or for the Arab states or for the subcontinent area. So it was regarded as key. And the reasons were multiple. The Bagdad Pact had only recently run into severe trouble and converted into CENTO. The oil industry was of great significance in the recovery of Europe and Japan and also in terms of world fuel supplies. Prices were low then. Of course, we didn't know it. But as compared to the later times, it was certainly low. The potential for difficulties in the

Gulf region were strong immediately after the British ended their responsibility for Kuwait. Iraq made moves which the Kuwaitis interpreted as threatening take it over. There were problems with the Kurds, who, of course, lived in Iran, Iraq and Turkey and so they affected all three. There was a sharp awareness that any serious difficulty in the Persian Gulf would have global repercussions.

Q: Now was there concern at this time--I guess back to the task force deliberation, was there concern that the Shah's position was sort of basically unstable? How concerned were they about the stability of the situation in Iran at that time?

Talbot: Well, that's where one of the differences appears. There were those who felt that he was firmly in control and others who felt that the students and some other groups were really not under his control and instability was definitely possible. This was one of the issues discussed.

Q: So you said Holmes had instructions to go to the Shah and try to bolster his position in some way or get him to reform a bit?

Talbot: Well, in the end, the feeling was that, yes, that our posture should be one of encouraging the Shah to look to reforms which seemed to us important and to work actively to broaden the system of government, the support for government, so that the instability would be decreased.

Q: How responsive was the Shah to Holmes suggestions at that point? Do you recall?

Talbot: In a way, fairly responsive. Among the American ambassadors in Iran after the 1953 period, Holmes was almost the last who could have a semi-avuncular relationship with the Shah. He was senior. He was experienced. The Shah was young. He'd been back in power only eight years.

Afterwards, when we sent ambassadors, we did not have that kind of seniority relationship with the Shah and the relationship to the American ambassador changed substantially. Now, it went up and down. Some of our ambassadors had more influence with the Shah than otherwise. But there ambassadors dealt with a Shah who had bitter self-confidence and determination to do it the way he wanted to. Holmes was really able to talk with the Shah on a quite open basis. And it was about this time that Shah decided to go ahead with an active development program, the so-called White Revolution or People's Revolution, as they called it at the time, in order to get more economic development more broadly. Although I don't think he was terribly responsive in such things as the role of SAVAK, the single-minded control of any sort of agitation, nor was he able apparently to stamp out evidences of corruption including, perhaps, in high places.

Q: Apparently one move the Shah made, I guess in May of 1961, was that he appointed Ali Amini Prime Minister. Was this move made in

response to American pressure? I've got some impression that there was some U.S. pressure but it's not clear to me.

Talbot: Well, I never know how to define "American pressure" or "no pressure." Clearly, we felt and conveyed to the Shah that we thought a more modern-minded, vigorous Prime Minister would be helpful in these goals which we were talking about and with which he agreed in his discussions. We were encouraged by the appointment of Ali Amini. I don't think--I'm not aware--I certainly don't remember that we were ever crass enough to say to him, "Look, this is the man for you to put in."

Q: Later on he makes some kind of accusatory statements about what happened at that point, but it's hard to evaluate some of these succinctly. But someone suggested to me at one point that he needed special assistance, foreign aid, a grant or something like that in order to make a decision. But it's not clear whether that was significant--

Talbot: You know, this issue of the hidden foreign hand comes up in country after country. Normally speaking, or often enough, a decision that's unpopular with some element within a country or not is ascribed to American pressure as a way of making it accepted. Whereas, in fact, it frequently is the decision of the local leader for generalized reasons, perhaps including questions of aid availability and such, he needs to make some moves and this is the reason he's going to use for the moves he's going to make. We

thought of that as a constructive move on his part.

Q: One document that I saw suggested that officials hoped that the appointment of Amini would sort of turn the Shah into more of a constitutional monarch and so you have the regulars of a prime minister who would have major authority in the country. Was that talked about at that point?

Talbot: It was certainly talked about on that ground that stability would be strengthened in the country if there were broader participation in public processes in government. I think that there was a feeling in Washington at that time that the concept of the all powerful monarch was not going to survive forever.

Q: Did you talk about these questions with Rusk? Questions about the Shah and Amini at this point, you know, early 1961? Did you discuss these things with him at any length?

Talbot: Regularly, we reported to him on the deliberations of the Task Force and he would have reactions to them. I don't know that I'd characterize these as long discussions, but certainly he was kept informed all the time. And I, all the time, had the impression that [?] his reactions to what we were doing.

Q: Did he have any special input that he made into the policy?

Talbot: Only in these comments that he would make, I would think

about and carry back to the group.

Q: Did you get any sense of what Kennedy's position, President Kennedy's position, was towards these matters? Did you ever hear him talk about it or meet with him and other officials?

Talbot: I recall meeting him fewer times on Iran than on several other issues that came up during that period. Now the NSC representative who spoke for McGeorge Bundy and presumably for the President was a very active participant. Sometimes he was expressing his own views and sometimes he was relating attitudes in the White House.

Q: This is Komer?

Talbot: Komer, yes. And we usually had a pretty good idea which was which.

Q: This is the point, though, when the State Department's views had some primacy in the policy making process. I mean, did the NSC have a strong influence in policy making or was he more--?

Talbot: Well, I would say with Komer and with Bundy, but especially with Komer who was sort of given charge in our area, we were open and frank, candid. Sometimes we agreed. Sometimes we disagreed. He presented his views vigorously because he's a vigorous person. And I would present our summations. I don't recall any occasion when they

really overruled us especially in that Task Force force period when we were meeting very frequently on Iran. The point was to get to some kind of consensus and we usually managed it.

Q: When Amini became Prime Minister, I guess, May or June of 1961, was there any effort to sort of work with him and give him special support in preparing a reform program of some sort? Was Holmes encouraged to--?

Talbot: Yes, yes, indeed. And he was treated as Prime Minister. Now, this didn't mean that Holmes stopped seeing the Shah or stopped discussing great strategic issues with the Shah, and so on and so on. But a fair amount of the day to day business, which had to do with aid programs, which had to do with positions to be taken in international bodies, all sorts of things were done with him[?].

Q: Did the State Department officials have some sort of view of what they would hope Amini could accomplish, a specific view of what they would have liked him to accomplish? Did they talk about the things that they'd think would be useful for him to do or was it much more indirect than that?

Talbot: Do you mean in terms of specific policies?

Q: Yes, yes.

Talbot: Well, the answer is yes. There were certain things. In the

AID program, for example, we were very much interested in institution building and infrastructure building and rather urged the Iranian government to pursue those lines as, indeed, that government did do reasonably well in some areas. Similarly, we would argue and urge in favor of certain positions at the U.N. or in regional organizations or something of that sort. So there was that that was done. Obviously, our posture was the benefits of an opening up of political and social and economic activities.

Q: I have the impression that (Walt W.) Rostow, among others, I suppose, was trying to encourage heavies, like _____, into developments of pro-Western middle class that would act like a bed rock of stability in these countries like Iran. Was that talked about or discussed as sort of like a goal or a purpose of American aid policy, I suppose?

Talbot: Yes. Walt's influence was, of course, very strong in the thinking of the Administration. I'll take off on all of that. But the concept of a middle class that would have a vested interest in a more open society was certainly there.

Q: Now, when it came to foreign aid decisions, did you take part in discussions with allocations of aid, like size of the shares of aid that would go to countries like Iran and other Middle Eastern countries?

Talbot: Oh yes, oh yes.

Q: Did the size of allocations become an issue? In U.S.-Iran relations, were there complaints about, "We want have a lot more money than this," or "This is not enough"? Was this ever a problem?

Talbot: I can't think of a single country where that kind of discussion didn't go on all the time.

Q: Yes, I can imagine.

Talbot: This was an administration that was focusing very heavily on growth and development around the world, particularly in the poorer countries. That very fact encouraged a lot of these countries to press for substantial aid increases. And then these requests rapidly got beyond resources. The debates came in Washington as to the size of the aid package for a particular country and the split between military and economic aid. Then the debate went on to particular types of programs: should housing be a major priority, or roads, and so on? The aid debate was carried out at all levels of government starting, I guess, with the desks, the country desks in State and aid in Pentagon, especially--sometimes others--and then going to the Assistant Secretary level, where it really was a main feature. And in that really it is the AID, the Pentagon and the NSC working with me that tried to hammer out decisions. We didn't often have to send disputed positions to the NSC official. Occasionally, it would happen.