Foundation for Iranian Studies

Program of Oral History

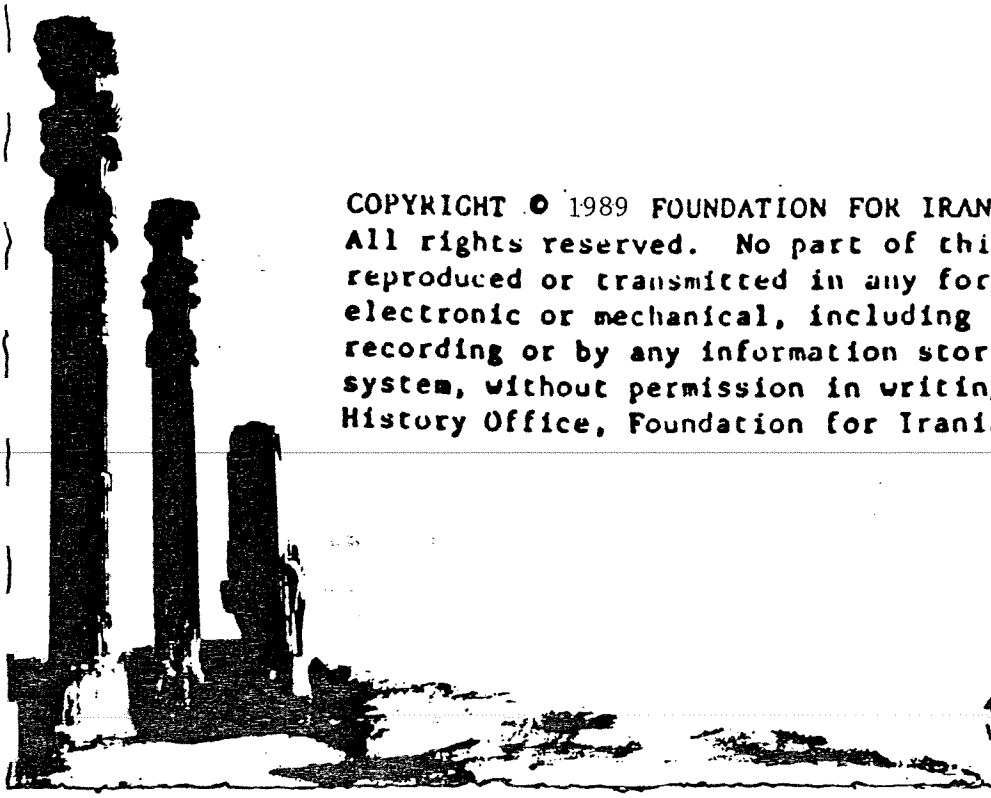
JOHN IRWIN

بنیاد مطالعات ایران
Foundation for Iranian Studies

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN IRWIN

INTERVIEWER: WILLIAM BURR

NEW YORK: APRIL 23, 1987 AND
APRIL 7, 1988



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PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a series of tape-recorded interviews conducted for the Oral History of Iran Program of Foundation for Iranian Studies by William Burr with John Irwin in New York in April 23, 1987 and April 7, 1988.

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.

FORM H

Dear Dr. Grele:

This letter will confirm my understanding and agreement with the Foundation for Iranian Studies Oral History of Iran Archives and Columbia University with respect to my participation in a series of interviews conducted by the Columbia University Oral History Research Office.

1. The interviews will be taped and a transcript made of the tapes. The transcribed interviews will be maintained by the Oral History of Iran Archives and the Columbia Oral History Research Office.

2. I hereby grant, assign and transfer to the Oral History of Iran Archives all right, title and interest in the interviews, including the literary rights and the copyright, except that I shall retain the right to copy, use and publish the work in part or in full until my death and thereafter my heirs shall continue to have such rights.

3. The interviews will be made available for use by researchers at both institutions in accordance with Foundation and Univesrity rules and general policies for research and other scholarly purposes with (no) (the following) restrictions.

Very truly yours,

Dr. Mahnaz Afkhami
Foundation for Iranian Studies

Date April 13, 1988

Ronald Grele
Oral History Research Office

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

John Irwin was trained as a lawyer. In 1958 he joined the Eisenhower administration, first as the director of International Security Agency (ISA) and later as the Assistant Secretary of Defense. He was later appointed as the Under-Secretary of State. During the Nixon administration, Mr. Irwin served as the U.S. representative in several international negotiations, including those involving the OPEC nations and international oil companies. Mr. Irwin was subsequently named as the U.S. Ambassador to France.

ALM

Interviewee: John Irwin Date: April 23,1987

Interviewer: William Burr Place: New York, NY

Q: The following interview with John Irwin, by William Burr, took place in New York City on April 23, 1987. The interview was part of a joint effort by the Columbia University Oral History office, and the Foundation for Iranian Studies.

Ambassador Irwin, could you tell me where you were born and raised?

Irwin: I was born and raised in Keokuk, Iowa. Small town on the western bank of the Mississippi. Very happy place to have been a boy.

Q: Could you tell me about your educational background?

Irwin: Well I went through school in Keokuk, and came east to Lawrenceville, and Princeton. Followed by two years at Oxford, where I took a Bachelor of Arts and Jurisprudence, as the English call it. Then I studied at night in New York, at Fordham University Law School, until I could take the New York bar--an English law degree in those days made you about half a lawyer in the United States. Following that I spent approximately five years in the army--four of

them in the Pacific during the [Second World] War. Came back to practice law in New York.

Q: What law firm did you first work for.

Irwin: I started to work for Davis, Polk, Wardell, and Sunderland, as they were then known. Joined Patterson, Belknap, and Webb in 1950. Have been here ever since.

Q: What kind of cases did you handle--can you recall--during the 1950s?

Irwin: A general run of cases. Mostly at the end, and through most of my legal career, it was what you might call the "corporate" field.

Q: Did you handle international corporate cases, or mostly domestic?

Irwin: Very seldom does a lawyer handle true international cases. You may handle foreign law--businesses doing business in a foreign country, the interplay of the two laws. But if you're speaking strictly of international law--which really means law among governments, among nations--you really do not get much of that in private practice. I think I only did one or two jobs of such a nature. That is the type of practice done by the legal counsel of the State Department.

Q: I guess I meant foreign law cases, as opposed to international.

Irwin: There it depends on dealing with a corporate client who does business abroad. You do a reasonable amount with that.

Q: Could you say who some of your major clients were during that period--for instance, the firms?

Irwin: Well, perhaps one most involved in the foreign field was IBM World Trade Corporation.

Q: Did you participate in Republican party activities during the 1950s, before you worked for the Eisenhower administration.

Irwin: In essence I've always been a Republican, although I've never been active in the political side. I have voted on occasion for Democrats. Had the good fortune of working for two Democratic Presidents as well as four Republican Presidents.

Q: Now I notice that your Who's Who actually says that you were a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Were you a member during the 1950s, before you went to government?

Irwin: I forget exactly when it was I joined the Council. I've been a member quite a long time, but whether I was there before I went to Washington in 1956 I would have to check the record.

Q: How was it that you were appointed to a fairly senior position at

the Defense Department in the late 1950s? How did that come to pass?

Irwin: Just good fortune, I suppose. I'd always thought it would be interesting to work in Washington. I'd been some seven years as a partner in Patterson, Belknap, and Webb. So I let it be known to a few people I knew in Washington I would be interested in working there. Then Mansfield Sprague, who was Assistant Secretary of International Security Affairs--ISA, invited me to come down and talk with him. I joined him, ultimately, as deputy assistant secretary. He remained in his post for about a year. Then when he left voluntarily--wanting to do other things--then secretary, who was I think Mr. Neil McElroy, appointed me assistant secretary. But I'd gone in first as deputy assistant secretary.

Q: What year was that?

Irwin: 1957.

Q: As a deputy, what were your overall responsibilities?

Irwin: Well, partly administration of the office. But then working on perhaps any international issue that came up that the assistant secretary wished me to handle. Then attending--at that time there were, as I suppose there are today, lots of committee meetings and things of that sort, sometimes to take the place of the assistant secretary, who may have been doing something else, or sometimes your own level--that is, a meeting among deputy assistant secretaries.

Q: I guess maybe I should ask, what were the overall functions of the ISA at this point?

Irwin: It may seem pretentious to call it the State Department of the Defense Department, but this in essence was what it was. In essence it handled all the foreign policy aspects of the Defense Department, working a great deal with State, and of course with the three services.

Q: Did you attend the National Security Council [NSC] meetings, or NSC planning board meetings as a deputy?

Irwin: Yes. That was the assistant secretary's normal responsibility. But if he did not go, I would go in his place. Then of course when I became assistant secretary, I attended.

Q: When you became assistant secretary--was that the next year? 1957?

Irwin: Probably in 1958--about a year or so after I went to the Defense Department.

Q: How closely did you work with Secretary McElroy?

Irwin: Quite closely.

Q: You met with him several times a week?

Irwin: Yes I would. When he went on a trip, I generally went with him.

Q: How would you characterize,let's say, his management style as Secretary of Defense?

Irwin: He was an effective manager. Had a very easy, attractive personality. He followed Secretary Charles Wilson, who had a less open style of management. You might say more--.

Q: McElroy was succeeded shortly thereafter, I think, by Thomas Gates. I think that was in 1959, maybe, or early 1960?

Irwin: Mr. McElroy, I think, was there two years and then Mr. Gates was there a year plus, 'til the Kennedy administration was elected.

Q: You worked with Gates as well?

Irwin: Yes. Mr. Gates, I think, was just a great Secretary. I thought Secretary McElroy was a very good Secretary and a fine man. But overall I think, at least in my limited experience, that Secretary Gates was the best of all.

Q: Can you sort of identify or specify what kind of contribution he made, what kind of impact that he made, upon policy?

Irwin: Well I don't know that I could do that specifically without going back to lots of records to try to point out that he was a able man, he was a thoughtful man. He had had primarily a banking experience, I think, before he came in to the government. But he was in the Navy--he was Secretary of the Navy. Then he became Deputy Secretary of Defense, and then Secretary of Defense. So he had a broad background in defense. But it was basically his innate abilities and character.

Q: Did you get to know Eisenhower or Dulles fairly well when you were working at--

Irwin: Yes. I had the good fortune of traveling with Mr. Dulles. Again, being in ISA--that area that was primarily limited to the State Department--when the Secretary of State took a trip and took members of his staff, he generally took a representative from the Pentagon with him. That, in most cases, usually was the assistant secretary of the ISA. Obviously, I did not know President Eisenhower nearly as well, although one got to know him through serving on the NSC, attending NSC meetings. Then I did go on one or two trips with him. One particularly I remember, was a trip he took to London, Paris, and Berlin. When would that have been--1960?

Q: Probably around 1960.

Irwin: I think it probably was. Then Secretary Dulles--who you know

died in office, after which Secretary [Christian] Herter took over. In the summer of 1959 there was a conference in Geneva between France, England, Soviet Union, and the United States principally on Germany, and Berlin. We spent the summer in Geneva, under the direction of Secretary Herter.

Q: did you get some sense of how Eisenhower made foreign policy--security policy--decisions? Was it through the NSC or other mechanisms as well?

Irwin: It was, I think, a combination through the NSC and from his own background in international affairs. Both as a general in Europe, and perhaps as president of Columbia University. In those days, I thought he was a remarkable man. A man who had the ability to delegate, which so many Presidents do not seem to have. The fact that he delegated authority did not mean he didn't know what was going on, or keep in very close touch. Secretary Dulles always was in close touch with President Eisenhower. As you know, recent books have begun to give a different picture of President Eisenhower than what was popular--at least in the press--at that time. I couldn't imagine two cabinet officers quarelling in public under Eisenhower as you often see disputes in the press ever since. I think he would have treated them as staff officers, in a sense. He wouldn't have permitted a public argument. He would have got them together and decided it. That would have been that.

Q: While you were at ISA, what kind of programs did the division

have that related to Iran? How did Iran fit in to the work?

Irwin: Well, I suspect primarily it would have been concerned with military assistance of one kind or another. Although at that time there was also a CENTO pact, which included some of the countries--Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and others. That would be part of the responsibility that ISA would share.

Q: Who in ISA worked on Iranian issues? Was there an Iran Desk person, or a Near East specialist?

Irwin: Yes. At that time ISA was divided somewhat similar to the State Department areas. There was the Middle East, and the Far East, America--Latin America, Europe--Africa being generally treated as part of the Middle East.

Q: Okay. Do you recall some of the names of the individuals who worked on Near East and Iran issues at that time?

Irwin: I hesitate to say because I might pull out one or two names and miss names of people who really had an important part in it. There were some very able men in the Pentagon. One of my early impressions, which has stayed with me, is the excellence of our Foreign Service at State. I think they're a dedicated, hard-working, intelligent group of men and women who have received far less recognition than they deserve. They've been criticized without deserving it. They've not been appreciated, either by Congress or

often the administration for whom they serve. The same can be said, in my experience in those days, of the Pentagon. The military often get criticized in the press, but they are a very able, dedicated group of men.

Q: You mentioned a few minutes ago that there was a military assistance program going on at that time. Why did policy makers think it was useful to offer military assistance to Iran? What were the sort of general purposes at that time?

Irwin: Well, put yourself back in to those days thirty-odd years ago, which I find somewhat difficult to do in memory. But there was some instability east of Iran and in the subcontinent of Asia--in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan. There was uncertainty in the Middle East. Iran was becoming a stable state at that time under the Shah. The Shah appeared to be acting as almost a modern Ataturk, as far as domestic matters--trying to lift Iran up and bring it in to a modern world. He was developing a military organization in Iran. It seemed a potential stable area between two other areas that were perhaps less stable. And it was stable for quite a while. Even though during times of stability often governments take action which result, eventually, in instability. Particularly when you're dealing with an authoritarian government or a dictator such as the Shah turned out, ultimately, to be.

Q: So when policy makers of that time looked at Iran they saw it as area that would stabilize--Iran would contribute to stability in the

overall region?

Irwin: I think that would have been one of them, certainly as a reason. It might be as well that if you went back and did more thorough research in there you might come up with a broader picture that would fit that in to an overall base. Just as a snap memory, I would say that certainly was one factor.

Q: What was the importance of petroleum in the way the policy makers assessed American interests in Iran? Was it a high ranking factor?

Irwin: Well I think petroleum has always been an important aspect of our foreign policy, both for our own supply and also for the supply for Europe and for Japan. It wasn't just Iran, although Iran had important resources--it was the whole Persian Gulf area. As it is today!

Q: Did you ever talk about Iran--Iranian issues--that you can recall, with Eisenhower or Dulles, or Herter?

Irwin: I really don't recall specifically. I didn't keep any papers when I left--some people pack up all their papers and take them with them to write books. I never had that proclivity. I did not bring papers back to civil life from the government. I suppose one could go and search out all sorts of old files, ultimately, and find what one participated in. Not having done that, I've had nothing to perk my memory except occasional conversations with friends. Discussions

of a particular subject, if it comes up either in social conversation or perhaps in a meeting at the Council on Foreign Relations, or in Washington. Ultimately somewhat like what you're subjecting me to today.

Q: How would you characterize, if you could, the general approach of the administration toward the Shah? Was it strong support?

Irwin: I would say it was strong support in those days. Not uncritical support, perhaps, but strong support is a fair summation. I think, again, that as one looks back--not on Iran per se, but take Central America or other areas--an administration often follows policies more or less established and followed along. Unless the President or the Secretary of State, or the Secretary of Defense, or the National Security Assistant really keeps reviewing it and seeing what happens, so often I think policy carries on by itself, to a point where warnings should be taken, which perhaps have not been taken. It can move from administration to administration--doesn't matter whether its democratic or republican. For example, I think in the case of the Shah, at what point the absolute power of the Shah began to reach a state of--I don't whether corruption is quite the right word--in a sense a state of corruption whereby people in the country began to be disaffected, ultimately, and gave more support to Khomeini. You can look at Latin America. How do you handle dictatorships which are friendly to the United States, which may be endangered by rebels--whether you call them communist or not is another question--how do you handle that circumstance? When you should see that internally there is unrest building up. Well, I

think a sensible government ought to try to take some action, or some bother, to change the nature of the path of the individual running the government, or at least present to him what the problems are. Take Korea today. What should the past Democratic administration and the present Republican administration do in Korea to try to avoid the problems, that are fairly apparent to all of us who read the newspapers, of a more and more authoritarian government and a hostile people. It's very hard, often, for an administration--it seems to me--to change directions. Not even change directions--just change interests to try to avoid what I'm sure many people within State, Defense--perhaps even the White House--see as problems. You scholars ought to come up with answers to this!

Q: We'll see.

Now when you were at ISA in the 1950s, did you ever travel to Iran?

Irwin: Yes I did.

Q: What were the circumstances, as you can reconstruct them?

Irwin: I suspect there was a CENTO meeting held in Tehran at some point. But then I think at other times I may have gone, if the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense were going for some purpose. Or, one time I was sent on a trip from the Pentagon to sort of view and see certain countries, partly with respect to military assistance, partly with respect to just general foreign

relations in which the Pentagon one way or another, or Foreign Service, might be involved.

Q: So it was a number of occasions, then.

Irwin: I would say I probably was in Tehran two or three times in the late 1950s. Maybe only twice--again, I would have to go to the record.

Q: Yes, exactly. Did you meet the Shah on those occasions?

Irwin: Yes I did.

Q: What were your impressions of him during that period?

Irwin: I was impressed with a man who worked hard, who was intelligent, who had a vision for his country, who wanted to bring them into modern times, who had pride of family and heritage of his country. He'd been brought up--his father'd been in the military, so he had military backing as an individual. He'd attended school in Switzerland--he was fluent in English. I would say one of my personal impressions from that time was that he really would love to have been a marshal of armies back in eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. I think he had a feeling of seeing himself as a general of the armies. That may have been truly a personal impression. I got that over the times I met him when I was in Tehran. The last time I met him--I skip to 1971. At that time I felt he had become much

more conscious of protocol, and procedure. I didn't remember that so strongly from the 1950s. But in the one meeting that I had with him in 1971, people were briefing you how to enter in to his presence, how to back out from his presence. It seemed to me he'd been influenced over those years by the power which he held. Go back to Lord Acton's famous dictum. Maybe it applies one way or another.

Q: Do you recall any of the subjects you discussed in those early meetings in the 1950s? Was it military aid, or CENTO matters like you suggested?

Irwin: It probably would have been CENTO matters and military aid. Yes. In ISA there was a section devoted to military assistance. While I was there Charles Shuff was the deputy assistant secretary in charge of that. Later on, after Charlie left the Pentagon, back to private life, a four star General came in as deputy assistant secretary. A name I know as well as my own, but can't remember it.

Q: They would have traveled with you?

Irwin: They would generally have traveled with me. I can't say specifically they were with me on any particular trip. But if it were going to deal much with military assistance, he or a representative undoubtedly was. Also, the representative from the section or the office that was dealing with that country or even so-called desk officers, as his counterpart in State.

It all depended. If I went with State, probably I was the only

one to go. If we went on a mission that was more oriented to the Department of Defense there would probably have been other people going.

Q: I see. During this period, the end of the 1950s, was there much concern in the Eisenhower administration about the stability of the Shah's regime, or any concern that you can recall?

Irwin: I suppose I'd say always there's concern of one kind or another when you're dealing with a completely authoritarian government. At least I think, in my experience, everybody has some concern in the back of his mind as how to handle it, what to do in looking to the future. But as far as any immediate concern, or as to the stability of the government, I would say they did not have. That would probably be better answered by one of the ambassadors that were there at that time.

Q: One of the unclassified documents I saw referred to a Newsweek item that appeared in the Periscope column. It attributed to the White House a comment that Iran had a case of bone cancer--you can't see it, but it's deadly. That suggests a fairly serious concern, at some level, about the future of Iran.

Irwin: That's what I said. In the background there always is concern. Just like I'm sure today there's concern on Korea, and concern in Central America, Latin America. Concern with what's going to happen in the Philippines. It doesn't reflect itself necessarily

in a concern that there's going to be immediate instability. For example Iran, of course, remained stable for another decade.

Q: Now during the summer of 1958, a coup d'etat toppled the monarchy in Iraq. Apparently this development greatly alarmed the Shah, from what I've read. Can you recall any of the discussions of the implications of the coup, of this development, for U.S. policy in the Near East generally?

Irwin: I think that one thing that it led to was the demise of CENTO. I don't know that I'd blame it specifically on that, but it was certainly, again, one of the factors that caused CENTO gradually to disappear. I don't recall too much of the detail. I can recognize that the Shah would have been concerned with suddenly a new government. Any government would be concerned, and any authoritarian government, or dictatorship, would be even more worried when you have revolution on your borders, does it effect you? Just look at eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union today. Afghanistan.

Q: That's right.

Apparently one implication of the coup was the discussion between the U.S. and Iran of a bilateral defense agreement, which I think was ratified, or signed, the spring of 1959, I think? Do you recall any discussion of that agreement, bilateral security arrangement?

Irwin: No, really no detail. Although I think it was related to

what we started talking about--hoping to have a stable area between the area you had concern about in the Middle East and the area you were concerned about in the subcontinent of Asia.

Q: Now, one thing I've seen in a declassified cable from the then-ambassador Thomas Wailes. He wrote that the Shah had an insatiable appetite to expand his army. He feared that this effort to expand the army would have a destabilizing impact for internal financial and economic condition generally. It would be too much resources going to defense, and not enough for development. Did officials in the ISA see this problem in a similar way, that you can recall?

Irwin: I'd hesitate to say that we did, because in effect I'd be saying we were more perceptive of the future than perhaps we were. I think obviously it was a perceptive cable. Just what reaction we had in ISA, or in State at that time, I can't really say for sure. I used to think, in those days, that it was a waste of money for Iran to build up as big a military as it did. I often thought back to the British legion in Jordan. If you had a very efficient, small force you were better off than if you had just built up a larger and larger army that was less efficient and less well equipped on the overall basis. Just how in practical terms that was reflected, I would hesitate to say today without a lot of research.

Q: I've read also that at one point, maybe 1959 or 1960, Secretary Herter proposed cutting back on military aid to the Shah to get him

to rethink his military spending priorities. Does that ring a bell in any connection that that suggestion might be made?

Irwin: Not other than the general statement of it. I couldn't begin to say what the actual practical effect in the next couple of years, or so, of military assistance was if any. Although military assistance, as you undoubtedly know, it may have started in ISA--often it started in the services in ISA, the services recommending what they thought this needed or would be helpful. Then it would go to the State Department, and be reviewed there from a policy and political point of view. So, if the Pentagon came up with a program which they thought was too large or handled in the wrong direction not only would they be expected to, but they did, alter it. So ultimately what went up to Congress as a military assistance program went with both the backing of State and Defense. Obviously there are all sorts of compromises, not only among the services but with the office of the Secretary of Defense, and then between Defense and State. With Congress, often your most difficult problem is a combination of rivalry between the services, which could be solved by any administration, Democrat or Republican. Except for Congress! I think Congress, in many ways, bears more responsibility than any administration, Democrat or Republican. Because the committees of Congress are divided up in certain ways. If you take action in, say, the Defense Department which would, in effect, limit or eliminate the need for a particular Congressional committee you immediately run in to the prerogatives of the Congress, and what the responsibilities, and what the possibilities for the individual Congressmen are when

dealing with these subjects and participating. So it's not an easy problem to solve by any administration or by any Secretary of Defense, or Secretary of State, or Secretary of one of the services. You soon get them intertwined.

You may have seen in the Graham-Rudman bill, just to give a modern example. Congress directed the Pentagon to save so much money. Then they said, "But don't close any bases." Well, one of the Democratic Secretaries of Defense for whom I have a lot of respect told me one day, he said "When I went in to office, one of my goals was to close many of our bases. We had enough bases for a 10 million man army, and we had two and one-half million, at that point, under our control." He said, "So I really tried to close them on a sense of strategic and military use basis. I just got nowhere with Congress. After about six months the White House finally called me up and said, 'You're just going to have to stop talking about closing bases. You're creating too much of a problem with Congress." So it's a very difficult situation for any administration. I understand Congress's situation, but that could be part of the answer as well as being part of the problem.

Q: That is interesting. One other thing I've read about the late 1950s in terms of the U.S.-Iran relations was that there was some concern that the Shah was not implementing internal reforms rapidly enough as a way to get more stability internally. There was some kind of pressure on the Shah was put -- Dulles and Herter put pressure on the Shah in a very diplomatic kind of way to get him to reform Iranian institutions and modernize the society. Did