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ROBERT W. KOMER

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The Reminiscences of

Robert W. Komer

Oral History Research Office

Columbia University

1987

INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT W. KOMER

INTERVIEWER: WILLIAM BURR

WASHINGTON, D.C., APRIL 27 AND

AUGUST 11, 1987

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## Preface

The following oral history memoir is the result of two tape-recorded interview sessions with Robert W. Komer on April 27 and August 11, 1987. The interview took place in Washington, D.C. and was conducted by William Burr.

This interview is one of a series on Iranian-American Foreign Policy 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.

Mr. Komer has reviewed the transcript and made minor corrections and emmedations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.



#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Robert Komer was a member of the National Security Council during the Kennedy administration. He was a key decision-maker on issues pertaining to the Middle East in general and Iran in particular. He served as a Presidential advisor on key decisions regarding Iran, and was a participant in policies such as U.S. posture towards arms sales, land reform or CENTO. Mr. Komer moreover, accompanied Vice-President Johnson on his tour of Iran in the early 1960s.

Form H

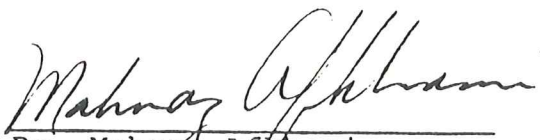
Dear Dr. Grele:

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 the earlier of my death or \_\_\_\_\_ 19 \_\_\_\_.

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



Dr. Mahnaz Afkhami  
Foundation for Iranian Studies

Very truly yours,



Ronald Grele  
Oral History Research Office



Date 2 Aug 1987

CORRECTION LIST

P.11	Mossadegh	should be	Mossadeq
P.14	Arsenjani	should be	Arsanjani
P.16	Hanson	should be	Hansen
P.22	Abdirascid	should be	<sup>c</sup> Abd al-Rashid
P.23	Abdirascid	should be	<sup>c</sup> Abd al-Rashid
P.35	ajlis	should be	Majles
P.36	Khruschev	should be	Khrushchev
P.41	Hassam Arsenjani	should be	Hasan Arsanjani
P.43	Hanson	should be	Hansen

ALM

Interviewee: Robert W. Komer

Date: April 27, 1987

Interviewer: William Burr

Place: Washington, D.C.

Q: This interview with Robert W. Komer, by William Burr, took place in Washington, D.C. on April 27, 1987. The interview is a joint project by Columbia University Oral History office and the Foundation for Iranian Studies.

Now before we get to the NSC and Iran, I'd like to ask some background questions. Where were you born and raised?

Komer: Chicago, and raised in Saint Louis.

Q: You received your primary education in Saint Louis?

Komer: Yes.

Q: And your higher education?

Komer: Harvard, Class of 1942.

Q: Did you serve in World War II?

Komer: Yes.

Q: Army?

Komer: Army.

Q: Europe, or Pacific, or--?

Komer: Europe. Mediterranean.

Q: Did you go to school after the war?

Komer: Yes. I graduated from Harvard Business School.

Q: MBA?

Komer: MBA.

Q: How is it that you came to join the CIA in 1947?

Komer: Some old friends of mine from World War II days told me in 1946 that the war wasn't over, that we just had a different enemy. That it was nationally important so, "we set up a new intelligence agency," and that I would be a ideal candidate.

Q: What division did you go to work for at first?

Komer: Western European and International Organizations.

Q: Is that the analytical branch?

Komer: Yes, the analytical branch.

Q: Who was your boss there, at that point?

Komer: Julius Rosenberg.

Q: And your duties at the branch?

Komer: I did something on the new United Nations and its subsidiary organizations. But I later came to specialize in the European multi-national organization, and, as a result, became the first NATO analyst in Washington.

Q: Like the OEEC [Organization for European Economic Cooperation] and Marshall Plan.

Komer: Yes.

Q: Were you with the Marshall Plan developments at all?

Komer: Yes.



Q: Sort of just kept track of them?

Komer: Yes.

Q: Did you duties at the CIA change over the years?

Komer: In 1950 I went up to the Office of National Estimates [ONE]. I had joined CIA before it was called CIA--that happened a few months later. Then I joined the new Office of National Estimates that [Walter B.] "Beedle" Smith was creating. He brought down Professor [William] Langer from Harvard to head the new office. Langer said, "Who do I want on my staff?". He picked two of us who had studied under him. Ray Cline and myself. So I was a charter member of the new office. I became a Western European estimator, and head of the Western European part of the staff. Then I became head of the Middle East part of the staff, and Deputy Chief of the estimate staff, then Chief of the estimate staff. Then I went off to the National War College, came back and spent a year heading the Soviet staff. Then, I left ONE to become assistant to Robert Amory, who was the Deputy Director for intelligence. My main function was to be the agency's liaison with the National Security Council staff.

Q: What year was this?

Komer: I think it was 1958. Subsequently I spent half my time over at the NSC. I was the alternate planning board member as well. Amory was the planning board member. He got so disaffected with the



NSC and with the administration that he never went to meetings, so I became the acting planning board member. It was interesting.

Q: Now you mentioned a minute ago that you worked on the Middle East staff with ONE for a while. At that point did you do any research on Iran.

Komer: I don't think so. I kept track of Iran, but I don't remember much in that period about Iran, in any detail.

Q: Then at the NSC planning board, 1958, was there any Iran work that you might have been involved in?

Komer: I don't think so.

Q: Because they did a number of NSC studies on Iran.

Komer: Did they do any from 1958 to 1960?

Q: Yes. They did updates on the basic policy statement. As far as the things I've seen they would be de-classified manuals.

Komer: Well, I was drawn off for about a year to be the CIA detailee to Charlie Coolidge's study of disarmament options. So it could have happened during that period, I guess.

Q: So your Iran work really started with the Kennedy administration?

Your work on Iran?

Komer: Yes.

Q: Now what were the circumstances that brought you into the Kennedy NSC staff?

Komer: Well, Kennedy and [MacGeorge] Bundy decided to dismantle the NSC machinery that had been created under Eisenhower. Since that would put me out of a job, I wrote Mac Bundy a little note saying "You've broken my rice bowl, but I think it's a great idea to get rid of these things--they were paper mills!" It was a little, two paragraph letter specifying some of the priority matters the President ought to address. About two days later I got a call from Bundy, and he said "Look, we got your letter. We appreciate it. Could you come over and talk about it a little bit?". I said, "Certainly." So he said, "Well, when could you come over?". I said "How about right now?". We agreed on the afternoon--I went over. Bundy and [Walt W.] Rostow were in the office. We talked for about ten minutes about the NSC machinery under Eisenhower. He said, "Well that's enough of that. We seem to be on the same frequency. Let's talk about a few other things." They asked me some questions, posed some propositions, and we discussed them. After about an hour, Bundy said, "How'd you like to work for the President?". I said "I'm a Democrat, and I'd be delighted to!". I'll resign from the agency. Ergo, I went back, and told Amory I was leaving and going over to the new NSC (where I was the first man they hired on the foreign policy

side). I went down to say good-bye to Allen Dulles. He said, "Bob, you don't have to resign from the Agency to go over to the White House. I'll give you an unlimited leave of absence." I said, "No, sir. I would rather resign. I don't want to be looked on as anybody's inside man at the skunk works. In any case, if I've been any good I'm sure that you all will be happy to have me back, so that I don't lose much by resigning." Well, he grinned and said, "That's fine." Gave me a picture, and off I went.

I guess within a week after I'd arrived Bundy came in one morning--we had a meeting every day practically--and said, "I have a letter here from the Shah to the President. It needs an answer." I said, "Mac"(we were feeling each other out at this point) I bet I can tell you what the letter says without reading it." Bundy said, "All right, fall on your face." So I said, "The Shah writes the President how happy he is to have a new, young, active President of the United States who he is sure will understand the world the way the Shah sees it. That he is surrounded by enemies--not just the Soviets but Gamal Abdal Nasser and others. That he desperately needs some more military equipment. That he hopes the new President will be smarter than the old President, and will give him--or sell him--this equipment." Mac looked at me, he said "By God you did it!". [laughs] That's exactly what the letter said. Well, I said, "I wouldn't give him a blood nickel. His problems are internal more than external. He has always seen the Soviets and Nasser as about eight times larger than they really are. Mac said, "You don't have to go on. I take the point. Because you've been so good, you can write the answer. [laughs] Over Kennedy's signature." Well, I took



it over to [Philips] Talbot at the State Department. We concocted an answer, and I Englished it a bit. The President looked at it, may have changed a word or two, and signed it.

Well, since I had handled the first Iranian letter I became by a process of osmosis the Iranian guy in the White House. Then, being the Iranian guy, it was easy enough to become the Turkish guy, and the Pakistani guy, and the Indian guy. I ended up being the Middle East-South Asia man of the White House staff. Originally, Bundy said "Look. Don't send stuff directly to the President. Send it to the President through me. I mean mark it for the President, but run it through my office. Because until we know each other better, I'd sort-of like to keep my hand on everything that goes to the President. I'm the guy he's gonna ask about it. So that was fine. He sent forward a very high proportion of the stuff that I prepared. Sometimes he sent it back to me with a question or if there was an add-on. My empire grew out to the Straits of Gibraltar, because the states on the Southern Mediterranean littoral were all Arab states.

Then, Christmas of 1961 I made the mistake of going home for Christmas. Came back, and found that Bundy had given me the rest of Africa. We had a guy--I forget his name at the moment--from State who'd been handling that. He promoted himself a job as political counselor in London. So, instead of getting a new guy Mac gave Africa to me. Now I had all of Africa, plus all the area from the Straits of Gibraltar to Burma. Well I said, "Mac. I can't follow all this without a couple of assistants." So he said, "Recruit a couple." The guy I brought in from State was a guy named Rick Haynes. A black officer, brilliant guy. He handled most of Africa

south of the Sahara. Left me after a year or so, went into business in New York. When Jimmy Carter came in, we appointed him ambassador to Algiers. He and I did some business later. Fine fellow. I had Hal Saunders as my general assistant.

[tape interruption]

Q: Okay, I wanted to ask you one thing. How did the NSC operate under Kennedy in general?

Komer: The NSC operated very informally. We didn't really have much of an NSC. The President called very few NSC meetings. He preferred to be more informal, and to get together a group of cabinet officers and others whom he wanted. The NSC had a fixed membership, but he didn't want to see some of those fellows, especially the head of NSRD. This continued right up to his death. The Ex Com [Executive Committee] in the Cuban Missile Crisis is a good example, where he put together his own team and didn't call it the NSC.

The NSC staff was very small. They'd been mostly paper shufflers in the Eisenhower years. Bundy wanted a few smart, substantive people. I was one. He brought in Mike Forrestal. We only had five or six substantive guys. We divided up the world.

Q: These are the senior staff.

Komer: Yes. There weren't any juniors, though. Well, there were a few assistants here and there. But basically it was five or six people, and maybe a half dozen assistants, plus two or three special

types. He made Bromley Smith, who had been on the previous NSC staff, Chief paper shuffler. He had another guy watch out for security questions. That was it! We operated very informally. We watched all the things going on in our area--read all the State Department cables, Defense Department stuff, lots of stuff from the Agency, and all sorts of compartmented intelligence. I generally took the initiative. If I decided I saw an upcoming problem, I'd write Bundy or the President a memo on it. If it was important enough and going to involve U.S. policy, I wrote the President--which Mac naturally read. So, it was an informal process during which a small number of bright guys generally took the initiative and raised problems.

But we also moved problems out. I was reading the same things that the Assistant Secretary of State was reading. But I generally got them before he did! That was just because we had a very efficient distribution mechanism, and it was distributing to only a dozen people at most: the President, the Assistant for National Security Affairs, and this group of six guys. Whereas over in the State Department they were distributing to a thousand people, or more. So I would read a cable, I would see a problem, and I'd call Phil Talbot on the phone--or call Jim Grant, who was his deputy--and sometimes we'd have a little session. I would attend any meetings called by State or Defense. I would call meetings of my own. It worked very well. I must say the State guys were particularly congenial. I had long felt that we were over-focused on the Arab-Israeli problem, and that we looked at the Middle East as Arabists. There were plenty of those at State. I felt, and so did



Talbot and Jim Grant, that the key area from the standpoint of U.S. interests was the Subcontinent. We ought to focus a lot more on India--Pakistan. We did.

One of the very first problems we had was Iran, because the Shah, who had returned after Mossadegh, was feeling much more uncertain in his country. There was a certain increase in pressures on him, though the pressures were mostly domestic rather than foreign. He was frustrated. He was complaining. It looked as though we were heading maybe for an overthrow, or an attempted revolution. This raised the question, first off, of whether the Shah was an adequate instrument. Whether the Shah could run things in Iran. Or whether he was not likely to get picked off by his domestic opposition. The question became one of "Is the Shah modernized enough to get along in the mid-twentieth century? Or didn't he try to emphasize too much the divine right of kings, which we all knew came from World War I and his father who had been a sergeant in the Cossacks, and who had taken over, what--

Q: Early twenties, I think.

Komer: Yes. Just about the end of World War I. The old man was a tough cookie, if you remember. The Brits kicked him out at the beginning of World War II. The new Shah--we had had the Mossadegh affair when he left the country, and came back.

I took the position that a known quantity--an old hand, who also seemed to have some modernizing instincts--was a better bet than the possibility of--well, we didn't know who would take over, but we sure knew there'd be lots of trouble. The Russians might mess around in it, Nasser might mess around in it, etcetera.



So I proposed a task force on this issue. I think it was the first or second task force which we created under Kennedy. This was another field expedient--it was ad hoc. I proposed that Phil Talbot be head of the task force, and that I be the secretary. One of the first things we decided was that we needed a new ambassador. We then had to find a new ambassador, and that's where Julius Holmes came in. I happened to know of Julius Holmes, because he had commanded the civil affairs lash-up in North Africa in World War II. He was a former army officer, and had a very good record. Very broad gauge. But, he was one tough cookie. He too thought the Shah was the guy we should continue backing, rather than looking for new leadership. So in this task force we first decided the question whether the Shah was the last stop on an old railroad or the first stop on a new railroad. We came up with various propositions and proposals. The Shah had a Prime Minister named [Ali] Amini, who's still living--I think he's in London. Amini had come up with the idea of a White Revolution as the alternative to a Red one.

Q: The expression was his?

Komer: Yes.

Q: He coined it.

Komer: I think he did. Maybe the Shah did, but I think it was Amini. Amini came in with some reforms, that seemed to work very well. We were all very pleased with Amini's work. The Shah was also pleased. He was so pleased that he took over Amini's program lock,

well. We were all very pleased with Amini's work. The Shah was also pleased. He was so pleased that he took over Amini's program lock, stock, and barrel, and got rid of the Prime Minister so that he, the Shah, would get credit for the White Revolution. Things went on that way. I never got to go out to Iran at that time.

But my contribution was that the Shah was spending too much on the army, and it was a lousy, low-grade, inefficient army. So we recruited a regular brigadier general named Hamilton Twitchell, and we told Twitchell to go out to Iran for three months or as long as it took him, and to try and convince the Shah that part of the White Revolution should be trying to cut the size of the army.

Q: When did the General Twitchell go to Iran.

Komer: I think it was in 1961-1962. I forget the precise time. But, he actually convinced the Shah to cut 60,000 men out of the armed forces. I never thought he could have done it! The Shah was so pleased with him that we sent him out as the head of the military mission. He was there for two or three years. Then it became time for him to retire, and the Shah asked for him to come out and work for him as a private citizen. But we weren't prepared to do that. I was prepared to extend Twitchell for another three years. I mean anybody who can convince the Shah to do something the rest of us thought was impossible, is pretty good!

Q: Who took him up with the idea that the five year plan that tied military aid to reducing the size of the army?

Komer: Well I don't recall that we tied military aid to it. We may have. It sounds like something I'd do.

Q: In early 1962.

Komer: No, I'm not so sure that was Twitchell instead of me. But, whoever it was it was a good idea. It worked. The Shah became the great protagonist of the White Revolution, brought in a new Secretary of Agriculture, and then Prime Minister. What was his name? Arsenjani?

Q: Rasanjani, something like that.

Komer: No. I don't think so, anyway. So, the second Iranian crisis was survived by some adroit footwork on our part. President Kennedy was very pleased. He kept writing letters, which I drafted, to the Shah telling him that the problems were internal, that reform was difficult but that he, the Shah, was the great reformer. We played the Shah like a violin.

Q: I have some background questions about the task force that you discussed earlier. That was around May 1961, as I recall.

Komer: Yes.

Q: You suggested that there was some concern about internal

instability in Iran. Was it more concern about a possible military coup, or more of a mass revolution, a popular revolution.

Komer: Well, it was a fear of revolution, though it wasn't clear how it would come. We weren't really thinking much about a military coup. But, at the same time we weren't thinking about mass revolution. It was hard to see what would happen.

Q: To what extent did the policy makers and officials fear that instability could produce an Iran with a neutral foreign policy posture. Was that an issue?

Komer: What we were thinking of was that a volatile Iran without a strong government would become prey to the Tudeh Party and the USSR. That was what worried us more than anything else. Tudeh was a significant political force.

Q: Now about the task force itself. Who were some of the main participants besides Talbot and I guess yourself.

Komer: We had--I forget who we had from Defense. Julius Holmes met with us, several times. He was an ex officio member until he left and went out to Tehran. We had another very strong voice from Bureau of the Budget, where assistant director Ken Hanson had just come back from three years working in Iran. He thought he was very knowledgeable. I liked him, and I thought some of his ideas were quite useful. The State Department regarded him as an unmitigated



nuisance!

Q: Was it Kenneth Hanson?

Komer: Ken Hanson, exactly right. Did you talk to Ken?

Q: No. I think he's dead! That's what I've been told.

Komer: Probably. Makes me feel uncomfortable to find out that all these guys I worked with are dead.

Q: That's what I've been told. I mean I don't know for a fact.

Komer: Well ask away! My memory's sustaining itself so far.

Q: What were some of Hanson's ideas in terms of the task force? Do you remember anything specific?

Komer: No I don't.

Q: Okay.

Komer: He liked the task force. He claimed to like what I was saying. He claimed to dislike what the State Department was saying. But I didn't see that much difference.

Q: Were there any officials who suggested that perhaps the U.S.

should withdraw support for the Shah and find alternative leadership?

Komer: Yes, I think there were. That was very actively discussed. But I can't connect it with any name at the present time. There were voices like that in State. We gave that a fair run. The whole thing! We ended up deciding that the Shah was still the best bet.

Q: During the month before the task force started out, Walt Rostow and Robert Johnson of the NSC staff had a meeting with an academic expert on Iran named T. Cuyler Young. He was at Princeton. According to the memo which I saw, Young suggested that the only way to get action from the Shah on reform was through some sort of a shock treatment, like maybe withdrawing aid or cutting back on aid--something along those lines. To what extent did you or other NSC officials see shock treatment as an option, or was that discussed as an option?

Komer: Yes, we thought of it. Johnson and Rostow had nothing to do with this particular exercise. I was the NSC rep. I can't recall that I ever kept, well, Bob Johnson--I didn't know quite where he fit in. But, Rostow was Mac's Deputy. I think Mac asked me to keep him, Bundy, directly informed--i.e. let's keep Rostow to one side. I don't think Walt was much of an Iranian expert, but boy he made contributions on everything.

Q: I mentioned T. Cuyler Young a minute ago. Did he meet with the task force, or something like that?

Komer: I don't recall T. Cuyler Young as serving any role at all. I remember reading his memo, but I don't--.

Q: Did you discuss the task force report with President Kennedy, to any extent?

Komer: Yes. When the task force finally came out with its conclusions, I probably sent them to Kennedy. I do not recall any discussion with him.

Q: Did you get a sense in general what kind of a role that he thought the U.S. should play in Iran?

Komer: He generally went along with the conclusions we'd come up with.

Q: Besides supporting the Shah, how would you characterize the general approach of the task force?

Komer: Promoting reform. Cutting back the armed forces, which were taking an unconscionable amount of a rather limited budget. Land reform was a big issue--that's where Arsanjani came in. Under our urging, and I suspect urging from many Iranians, the Shah promoted a rather extensive land reform. I forget precisely when, but it was pretty good. And generated a lot of opposition, not least from the clergy, who as in Europe centuries earlier, were losing some of the



church lands.

Q: Did you get a sense of President Kennedy's attitude towards the Shah? I got the impression that it was fairly critical.

Komer: Yes. I don't think Kennedy thought much of the guy. Went around in these fancy uniforms. I don't think he was much impressed with the correspondence. My impression was, I don't recall much in the way of Presidential interjection in that early period. He didn't say, "I think this," and "I think that," and "Those are your guidelines." We mostly told him what we were thinking about, and where we came out. Since he signed the letters, and approved the recommendations, that showed us that we were on his frequency--or that he was on ours.

Life wasn't always like that. Kennedy had some very deep, personal convictions on a lot of issues. Like Yemen. My God! If there was ever a backward corner of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen is it! But he was very actively interested in the war between the Yemeni Royalists and the Republicans. That's where I made my number with JFK. His secretary, Mrs. Lincoln, called me one day and said that the President was going to be talking with [Harold] MacMillan, British Prime Minister, at MacMillan's request. That the main item was going to be Germany. MacMillan also wanted to talk for a few minutes about Yemen, and the President wondered if I'd sit in. I said, "Of course!". So, she called back a couple times during the day to make sure I hadn't forgotten--as if I was going to forget that. I went over to the Sitroom [Situation Room] at 6:45, or

something like that. Immediately thereafter the President came in, lit up a cigar. Said, "Bob, I think that MacMillan's gonna protest our intention to recognize the Yemeni Republic." The British were backing the Nationalists. He said, "I'd just like to have you around. I'm no expert on Yemen, and if I run out of gas maybe you can help me." The phone rang--it was MacMillan. He and the President disposed of Germany in about five minutes. Then MacMillan turned to Yemen. It was clear that he was pleading with the President to postpone, if not completely discard, our proposed recognition of the Republic. Kennedy gave him all my answers. My God! He gave them as if he had just read all the memos I'd written him in the previous six months. MacMillan wasn't having any of it, and MacMillan came back and re-argued. So Kennedy went through the whole thing again. MacMillan still wasn't having any. The President, I could see, was getting a little frustrated. So finally, he says to MacMillan, he says "Look, neither of us is an expert on this. I have my expert sitting here right with me. I'll have him talk to you." What could MacMillan say. He hands me the telephone. I almost died! I mean, I had never talked with MacMillan. I had seen MacMillan in action during World War II. But, I said "Hello, Prime Minister?" He said, "Yes, Mr. Komer." I think he called me "Mr. Colon because he he hadn't gotten it very clear. I said, "No! Komer, Prime Minister." He said, "Well look. I've been arguing with the President about your recognizing Yemen. That's going to embarrass us." He gave me the whole song and dance he'd just given the President twice. I went back at him and said, "As one of the experts involved I want to tell you how we look at it." I went whap,