

whap, whap--my confidence grew. I had a big discussion with MacMillan for about twenty minutes. We went rather deeply into some of the issues. The President, instead of leaving, was sitting right there smoking his cigar and listening to this thing with a smile! [laughs] So finally MacMillan says, "Well Mr. Komer. You're pretty articulate on the subject. I can't think of any more reasons to advance. So you can tell the President that we'll live with it. I presume the President is gone." I said, "No sir! He's sitting right here watching me perform." And I handed the phone back to the President! [laughter] Kennedy says, "You see Harold? I was right!" [laughs] MacMillan must have said something like, "Well, you win on points for the time being.", and a cordial good-bye. Well. I was elated. Here I had, in the presence of the President of the United States, had a debate with the British Prime Minister, and I had won. That really made me feel good. So I dropped by Bundy's office to clue him. He wasn't there so I left a message, and went home about eight p.m..

The next morning I got to the office, my usual tardy arrival about 9:15. My secretary said, "Bundy has called about fifteen times. He wants to talk to you immediately." So I said, "Oh shit." I went over to Bundy's office. He said, "Bob. What the hell happened last night? I want to tell you what happened after you left. I got back to the office about eight, and there was a call immediately thereafter from the President. The President said, 'Who's that guy Komer?' Mac said, 'I told you about him fifty times. He's been in here since the beginning. He was a couple of classes behind you at Harvard.'" "Well", the President said, "I hadn't

noticed him much before, but I want to tell you, that guy knows the Yemen thing cold. He talked down MacMillan!" Then he asked a few more questions about me. And then Mac said, "You have now become a person in JFK's mind! He has noticed you! Let me tell you--from here on, you're doing business directly with him. I'd appreciate it if when you send him a memo you send me a copy tooone too so I know what the hell is going on. But let me tell you, from now on the President will call you frequently. He'll call you directly instead of calling you through me. He will know who you are, so you deal with him directly." Well, I didn't quite believe it. But it meant I had arrived.

That very afternoon, the phone rang, and it was the Jack Kennedy. He had some silly-ass question that I answered! [laughs]

Q: What year was this?

Komer: I think late 1962. From then on I was a marked man. The President thought of me, he invited me to all sorts of affairs. He sent me off to the Middle East with LBJ. It was true! I had arrived. I feel sure that if Kennedy had not been assassinated I would at some point have been raised up higher. Cause I had his confidence. Funny! Comes because I'm there at his request, and had a phone discussion with Harold MacMillan.

He used to consult me on everything under the sun! We had state visits--you know, everybody and his brother. Along came the Somali Prime Minister, [Ali Scermarche] Abdirascid. The State Department sent over the briefing book. It was miserable! Kennedy took a look

at this stuff, and he said "Hell. I can't give these toasts or welcoming statements." Calls me up, he says "Bob, have you read this crap?" I said, "Yes sir, I read it." He said, "It's no good!" I said, "It ain't very good." "Well," he said, "I want you to do something about it. Do me a new toast, a new welcoming statement, a new this and that." My God! I looked at my watch. The Somali was coming at eleven, and it was already 9:30! I had an hour and a half to do what, I guess, some guy at State had worked on for a week! Didn't know quite what to do.

Then it struck me--find somebody who knows something about Somalia. I knew one guy--he was in the agency. I called him up. I said, "I got a problem!". [laughs] "For God's sake, what can I say about Somalia?." He said, "I can't help you. I can't think of anything that would be striking and theatrical, etcetera, etcetera." He said, "You know the Somalis are the Irishmen of Africa." I said, "What?." He said, "That's what they're called--the Irishmen of Africa." "Well," I said, "Tell me no more--I've got what I need." So I wrote a nice little arrival statement about the Irishmen of Africa. Kennedy loved it. He used "the Irishmen of Africa" in about fifteen statements while Abdirascid was here. At the end he called me up, he said, "Bob. You have firmly recommended we do nothing for the Somalis because we're tied in with the Ethiopians, and those two don't get along." I said, "Yes sir!." He said, "Can't we do something for these guys? They are very attractive! They really are the Irishmen of Africa." I said, "No sir, Mr. President. I'll think about it, and I'll try and come up with something useless." I was being critical, "But," I said, "It ain't a good bet." Two years



later the Dergues come in, in Addis Ababa. The Somalis are pushed to one side by the Soviets. The Soviets take over the Ethiopians. Then we take over the Somalis. Now we've got Somalia, and they've got Ethiopia. They're two fine countries, both being miserably mismanaged. It wasn't a good trade. But at any rate, I really loved that. Kennedy had a great sense of humor.

Then, you know, they had sent Vice-president Johnson off to the Far East. He'd gone down to Saigon, and called Ngo Dinh Diem--

Q: "The Churchill of Asia."

Komer: "The Churchill of Asia", and the best leader the country--any country--could have then. He'd gone to Pakistan and picked up a camel driver, and all that kind of stuff. So he said, "Look Mr. President. The State Department was supposed to give me full political backing and advice." They did a lousy job, but they did as well as they could--Johnson wasn't very controllable. So he said, "I'm not going to go to the Middle East unless you send Mac Bundy with me." Mac was in the room along with Kennedy and LBJ. Kennedy picked it up so fast, he said, "Look. Bundy's not my Middle East guy. Bob Komer is." Bundy said, "That's absolutely right! I don't do anything East of Suez. Komer does all of the Middle East!." LBJ quite understandably says, "Who the hell is Komer!."

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Both the President and Bundy convinced LBJ. Then Bundy came back, and called me up and said, "You're going to go to the Middle East with the Vice-President." I said, "Oh God! I don't even know the Vice-President." "Well," he said, "You're going to get to know him well." He described this story to me, and I knew there was no recourse since the President was obviously with him. So Bundy said, "You better get over to the Capitol and meet the Vice-President. I've arranged for you to go over at two this afternoon." Then I began calling up around town to find out about Lyndon Johnson. Practically everybody was scared to death of him!

I went over at two to the Majority Leader's office. I want to tell you this is a lot bigger than the President's office. Also big glass chandeliers! It was three stories high. There was a huge conference table in it. Down at the far end of the conference table is sitting what looks like the Vice-President. Up at this end of the conference is my friend Phil Talbot. Well, I walk down to the other end toward the Vice-President, who said "Look. I'm having an argument with your friend down there at the other end from the State Department." It was about the Pakistanis. Happened to be an argument about the one issue on which Talbot and I have had words. I happen to agree with the Vice-President's view. "Well," the Vice-President said, "What do you think about this?" "Well," I said, "You happened to have picked the one issue that Phil Talbot and I have had an argument on. I agree. I think we should do a-b-c." He said, "That's just what I've been telling him!" So we became friends right off.

Kennedy knew how to send off a Vice-President. You know, get rid

of him for three weeks. We had a helicopter departure from the rose garden, right outside the Oval Office. LBJ loved it. Kennedy came out to see him off, the whole cabinet was there, and everybody else. Mac had told me to bring my family. So my family went down--it was the first time they'd been in the cabinet room, or the rose garden. They all watched as the Vice-President and I were loudly praised by the President. [laughs] We walk over, get in the helicopter, and take off. First time I'd ever left via the rose garden, not the last.

° But, soon as the plane got airborne, something buzzed beside my seat. Vice-President says, "Come in! I want to talk to you." So I went in. Sits me down. He said, "I know you Harvard boys. You guys are ruining the country." He said, "But I want to ask you just one question. Why are you Harvard boys supporting India and neglecting our stalwart friends the Paks, and General Ayyub." Well, he couldn't have asked me a question on which I had more strong views. Well, I gave 'em to him. I said, "I want to put it very simply, the same way I did to the President. There are 100 million Paks, and 650 million Indians. Now from the standpoint of the interest of the United States, are we going to back 100 million Paks against 650 million Indians.." He said, "I understand what you're saying. But I don't see why we couldn't be a little more sophisticated about it." I said, "If we try to get sophisticated we screw ourselves with Paks and Indians." We had a discussion, and I went away feeling I may not have sustained his friendship, but boy I really had a chance to let him have it, and I did. He remembered that. He pursued the policy I wanted, and Mac wanted, on subcontinental affairs.



Q: What countries did you visit, with Johnson, on this? Pakistan?

Komer: We went to Lebanon. From Lebanon to Tehran. Tehran to Ankara. Ankara to Istanbul. Istanbul to Cyprus. Cyprus to Rome.

Q: This is your first time in Iran. This visit, with Johnson.

Komer: I can't recall whether I had gone there previously. I went out to Pakistan with Walt Rostow. He came directly back and I came back through Tehran, and stopped off for a weekend because I wanted to see Shiraz, where the nightingales sing in the bul bul trees, and Persepolis. I saw that, and Naqsh-e Rostam--those royal tombs, on the cliff side. God I had a good time. Julius Holmes--who had wanted me out of town, so it worked like a charm--he gave me the Chief of Station to fly me down to Shiraz in a private airplane. God I got sick! [laughs] That was the redoubtable Gratian Yatsevitch.

Q: Old CIA station.

Komer: Yes. But I got back in time to have dinner with Julius, who served a brace of wild duck that he had just shot that weekend in the Caspian. God he had a good cook, and boy those were good duck! It was a splendid evening. Julius Holmes was regally hospitable. I told him I had written the history of his World War II exploits. He was very pleased. We got along famously. But he sure got me out of town the next morning at six a.m. after sleeping in a very good bed

in the embassy.

Q: When is the visit with Johnson? When did that occur? 1963?

Komer: No, I think it was 1962. I can tell you a hundred stories about that trip. But, I'd sum it up by saying that I had established a very good rapport with Lyndon Johnson. He wrote me a letter afterwards in which he said, "I hear that you want to be known as the man who said 'No' to Lyndon Johnson. Well I want to be known as the man who listened to Bob Komer. Thanks for all your help--Lyndon Johnson." Then, he invited me out to the Vice-president's house several times, invited me down to his office. I was the one member, I think, of the Kennedy staff who had a good rapport with the Vice-president. I always cultivated it. The Kennedy staff, generally, did not think much of LBJ, and he was uncomfortable with them. So there wasn't that much dealing. Most of the dealing was at the President-Vice-president level. But I kept LBJ informed. You know, when I sent memos to the President and they were the kind I could afford to send to the Vice-president. I sent him a blind copy.

Then, with the assassination, I was in like Flynn. I was one of the first people he invited over to see him. I wasn't even a special assistant! I was just NSC staff member. It was onward and upward with LBJ, 'til he sent me to Vietnam--for which I was not grateful. But I did all right by me there too. Why don't we get back to your questions.

Q: Okay. All right. This trip to Iran with President Johnson. Did



you meet with the Shah at that point?

Komer: I did indeed. When the Shah made available some of his special golden caviar for us to take back, I signed up for two kilos! We put them in the plane's icebox. When I got back, I found that they had been delivered to the Vice-president's house by the Secret Service, which had gone through the plane and taken out everything that they thought was the Vice-president's, and sent it off his way. Well, I felt very unhappy about that. So I talked to the Secret Service guy, and he said, "Well that's tough titty. It's gone! We're not going to go to the Vice-President's house." I happen to know the head of the Secret Service, who ate in the White House mess with me. At noon, I talked to him. "Oh," he said, "We'll get it. That guy didn't give you a very good answer." I said, "Make him go out and raid the icebox." "Well," he said, "We'll take care of it." So there were some Secret Servicemen on detail out there. They just went into the icebox, got the two kilos, and delivered them to my home, for which my wife was very grateful.

Q: During this visit to Tehran with Vice-President Johnson. Was this your first meeting with the Shah? You saw the Shah in person?

Komer: Yes.

Q: What were your impressions of him?

Komer: He was on good behavior. He seemed a stern, martial man. He

seemed rather impressive. Since LBJ didn't know much about Iran--though I tried to tell him a few things--he did not get into big, substantive subjects. Which left the Shah a chance to try and influence Lyndon Johnson, which he did. Johnson knew enough--he's an old pol--he knew enough not to absorb. But, it was a very pleasant sojourn. The Shah put us up very well. Gave us some splendid luncheons and dinners. Took us up to the Caspian. The usual thing--we were only there for two days, I think. Two and a half days. It was not a very substantive occasion. Since I was the guy on the White House staff who would have used Lyndon Johnson's visit to deliver messages, and I had not come up with any messages. I probably had failed to do my job. But I was feeling at that point still pretty put-upon, that they had decided to send me off as a sacrificial lamb. It turned out to be the most profitable trip I ever took. I guess.

Q: You sort-of indicated this earlier in the interview. How did administration officials during the Kennedy era--or Johnson era, for that matter---define U.S. interests in Iran?

Komer: Oh, we didn't go in much to that, since we didn't have to write NSC papers anymore. But, our interest in Iran was the oil, and the access which Iran would give to the Arab states. We pursued a firmly anti-communist policy. Since the Shah was firmly anti-communist, he was our big buddy. It wasn't until much later that we saw Iran under the Shah as our chosen instrument in the Middle East--after the 1973 oil crisis and the collapse of CENTO. At

this point we were just interested in keeping the Soviets out of any country around the Soviet periphery. We did not have a lot of specific interests, there was not a lot of American business there. The oil company, I think, was still owned by the Brits.

Q: The consortium of British and American firms, and a Dutch firm.

Komer: Right.

Q: Now, I've seen a sanitized copy of the task force report of May 1961. There's some discussion of the measures that the U.S. could take to assure the Shah that the U.S. would act as a guarantor of military stability for Iran. What kind of conclusions did administration officials reach about the steps that they could take--that they could reasonably take--that would satisfy the Shah at the same time?

Komer: My memory doesn't serve me very well on that. I'm sure if I read your sanitized version I could do a little better. I don't recall. At any rate it worked--we were very pleased with our Iranian policy because the Shah seemed to be getting more popular, and the land reforms seemed to be rather successful. This was a period when with all the other problems we had, it was a good thing that Iran was getting more stable rather than less so.

Q: In general, what was the importance of military aid in U.S. policy towards Iran? What did the U.S. think it would get out of



giving military assistance.

Komer: Very high. The U.S. saw the military aid dollar as buying us a lot more influence with the Shah than the economic aid dollar. The Shah was fascinated by the military, thought of himself as a latter day field marshal. Really took a great personal interest in all things military--resolved a lot of issues himself!

Secondarily, military aid was seen as shoring up a strong quasi-ally who had a common border with the Soviet Union. We had by this time created the Baghdad Pact through Nuri [al-Said] had disappeared as Prime Minister of Iraq, which made Iran even more important. And it was adjacent to Turkey. The Paks and the Turks were strong supporters of Iran. So, military aid was seen by us as strengthening an alliance which we had created--part of the containment alliance against the Soviet Union. Remember the Americans never joined the Baghdad Pact. In hindsight, it's probably a good thing. But, military aid was very important, and we never really questioned the fact of military aid. We had a lot of questions about the size--and so did the Shah. So it was a constantly active dialogue, with him asking for things.

I remember one time when he asked for a certain tank. We didn't even know about it! I mean none of the people--Talbot didn't know, [James] Grant didn't know, I didn't know. So I called up a friend of mine who was a Colonel in the Ordnance Department. I said, "What in the hell is the M48-A5 tank?". Well he said, "How did you know about that?". I said, "What do you mean?". He said, "Well we've only got two of them. They're experimental models. It's a product

improvement of the M48-A3." Well, so I told him who had requested them. He said, "We don't know how the Shah found out about this. He must have been reading Army Ordnance, the magazine." "Well," I said, "I can give you an alternative explanation. He asked the Israelis what tank he should order, and the Israelis told him." One guy said, "How do the Israelis know?" I said, "Because they know everything that goes on in the Pentagon 'cause you guys don't know who the hell you're talking to." It's true. If I ever wanted to know what was going on in the Pentagon I would ask the Israelis, and would be happy to do so! They owe us. But, military aid was quite important.

Q: Did you participate in discussions on economic aid as well?

Komer: Oh Yes!

Q: How would you characterize the general approach that the policy makers took toward economic aid?

Komer: Same as for military aid, basically. These were instruments of influence. We tried to use them in a constructive ways to promote the modernization of Iran. We bankrolled land reform to a certain extent, as an example.

Q: What kind of an Iranian society did you and your colleagues hope that aid would promote?

Komer: A stable society that would be increasingly able to meet the

aspirations of the Iranian people. I don't think we were trying to create a developed country or anything like that. Some aid people may have had special axes to grind, but in Talbot's mind and mine it was just keeping Iran stable and modernizing.

Q: Was there some interest in trying to find ways to develop sort-of a more-or-less modern middle class?

Komer: Yes. It wasn't all that easy. Iran does have a middle class. I don't know how modern it is. I guess you'd include the bazaaris in the middle class, and I think they're a throw-back.

Q: Around the time that the task force was deliberating, back in May of 1961, the Shah appointed Ali Amini--who you mentioned earlier--appointed him as Prime Minister. Was there any U.S. role in the Shah's decision to appoint Amini?

Komer: I don't think so, though we expressed our support for Amini.

Q: I asked because my interview with Harold Saunders he said that he had a strong impression that the U.S. had a role in encouraging the Shah to appoint Amini or somebody like him.

Komer: Hal may be right.

Q: He wasn't there then, I don't think. I think he was still at CIA.



Komer: That's correct. But they read all the State cables, which didn't always tell the whole story. Let me simply say that I do not recall the U.S. having much role in the original appointment of Ali Amini. But at the same time, Hal may be right. We didn't have a very forceful ambassador then. I don't think we knew much about Amini at that point.

Q: I read that Kennedy knew him somewhat because he was ambassador to the U.S. in the 1950s, and then was brought back--. [Tape stops and starts] You were mentioning earlier that the U.S. had tried to find ways to encourage economic modernization, social modernization. What extent was there interest at this time in encouraging political modernization, encouraging the Shah to develop modern political institutions that would outlive him, and so forth.

Komer: Well, that's always one of the objectives of the State Department. They did it in Vietnam when I was there, for State. True, that was one of our objectives. We did promote, the ajlis.

Giving it greater power. The Shah was a bit of an absolutist--he always wanted to keep things in his hands. We didn't get very far. But that was not a dominant motif of our policy. I would say that, the idea of containing the Soviet Union had a lot more to do with our operative policy than almost anything else. The Shah played on that adroitly.

Q: Now I've read that after Kennedy's Vienna summit meeting with

Nikita Khrushchev in, June 1961? Somewhere about there. Kennedy returned to the U.S. with some apprehension about the Iran situation. I think Khrushchev made some comment about Iran falling like a ripe apple, or something like that.

Komer: Yes, yes.

Q: Do you recall discussion of that?

Komer: We were asked what we thought about it. We didn't take it all that seriously. Because we couldn't find any physical evidence--the Russians weren't doing anything. But I think Khrushchev was really using Iran as a good example of what he could do around the Soviet periphery, and that made us nervous not just about Iran, but about other places which we thought were a good deal weaker. But it contributed to this general motivation that I described. We were proud of being pragmatists. I was less pragmatic than some, but I tried to keep my eye on what I thought would influence our policy rather than trying to achieve the impossible in three short years.

Q: Earlier you were talking a bit, you were talking about the efforts to scale down the size of the Iranian army. From what I've read in April of 1962 the NSC approved a five-year plan of military aid that tied military aid to the scaling down of the Shah's army. Do you recall any role that you might have had in shaping that plan?

Komer: Frankly, I don't recall the plan. Not that it couldn't have existed. That the NSC approved something like that surprises me. The President had a very good grasp of the essence of the NSC, which is that it's all advisory. The President makes the decisions. The NSC can advise him to stand on his head if it wanted to.

Q: Well it was NSC paper. I'm not sure if there's a formal NSC meeting to approve it. I'm not sure about it--there's a distinction obviously. But it was NSC paper with a number, and so forth.

Now apparently there was a fair amount of planning for the Shah's visit in April 1962. Did you take part in the discussions of that? Do you recall anything striking about it?

Komer: One thing that NSC guys always had to do, that was pay a lot of attention to visits. Who was being visited? "The President of the United States." "Who are you working for?" "The President of the United States." Usually the State Department would produce a great big massive briefing book, and then a great big massive back-up book with documents and cables, and stuff like that in it. We used to get regular Presidential complaints that these books were terrible. So Bundy and I, and a couple others, made the decision, "For Christ sake don't send the goddamn books to the President." Read the books. Distill the essence. Add what you, yourself, want to say and write the President a short memo. Two or three or four pages, if it's an important visit. Tell him what the issues are, tell him what you think he ought to say. Then if you want, add in at the end "I have in my office a large State Department briefing book



and if you want to see it, just say so. We'll send it right over." I do not recall a President ever asking to see the State Department briefing book. Of course he had to see the arrival statement, the toasts, the dinner statement, the speeches, or whatever--the talking points. But generally we incorporated the talking points that we wanted and left out the rest. Didn't send him the State version. I found Kennedy very receptive to that. He had more trust in me than he did in the State Department. Not Rusk, but the Middle East guys. It always worked out.

Johnson was the same way. Except that Johnson, when he first came in, was a little non-plussed at the informal ways of his NSC staff, and of Bundy. You know, we did our best to treat Johnson just like we treated Kennedy. It was not the same guy. He usually asked more questions--this, that, and the other thing. But soon he became happy with what we did. There were some adjustments made. Johnson was never really fully confident and trusting of Mac Bundy. Kennedy had known Bundy, Johnson did not know Bundy. Besides which he was a "Harvard boy", etcetera. I was about the only guy in whom he had full personal confidence. Not that I was a genius, but I had this rapport with him from the trip. He sure argued with me enough! My last big thing as the Deputy NSC Assistant was the great Indian famine, and the visit of Indira Gandhi in 1966. Boy he gave me a hard time on sending food to India. Not that he didn't want to send food, but he sure as hell didn't want to waste leverage by sending it before it was needed and let the rats eat it! That was tough, but that's not Iran.

Q: We were talking about Ali Amini a little bit ago. Was there a special effort to put pressure on him to pursue a line of reform?

Komer: Not pressure. I don't think we were dumb enough to pressure.

Q: Maybe pressure is too strong a word to use.

Komer: Yes. We tried, but we didn't have the kind of rapport in dealing with the domestic ministers in Tehran that we did with the Shah, or with the military. Our aid didn't go directly to the Prime Minister, or anything else. So we talked with him, we wrote him letters--the ambassador usually did that. Yes, we tried to offer our two-cents worth to advise him on things we thought were dangerous or injudicious. But basically it was his program, and his problems were mostly with the Shah. The Shah did not like us giving gratuitous advice to his people. We were generally pretty careful about that. There are some countries where we run the prime minister. We write his speeches, etcetera, etcetera. Iran was not one of them.

Q: I got the sense that there was, maybe in the first year of the Kennedy administration, there was some effort to sort of induce the Shah to move on reforms. You talked about that. I guess pressure is too strong a word, but was it sort-of subtle diplomatic hints that he should do certain things.

Komer: On what score?

Q: In terms of internal reforms--land reforms and so forth.

Komer: Yes we communicated a lot with the Shah on internal reforms. I did not hesitate to put in the Presidential correspondence specific policy advice. For example, we were all for land reform. We pressed the Shah on it. We didn't pressure him all that much, because he was a volatile character. We didn't want him to decide that the Americans were more of a pain in the ass than their aid was worth. He didn't yield all that much. But on the other hand, he was susceptible.

Q: In late 1962 the Shah announced the White Revolution program--submitted it to a national referendum, I think.

Komer: The Shah kicked out Ali Amini and appropriated Amini's program. Which I thought was pretty shitty at the time. But what can you do about it?

Q: Was there any effort to sort-of support Amini's position?

Komer: Yes. We tried to very politely indicate to the Shah we thought Amini was the greatest thing since ice cream. But, he made up his own mind.

Q: So Holmes approached him with that?

Komer: Oh! You know, in conversations you can. We were very