

careful on that. It turned out pretty well.

[Hassam] Arsenjani was the agriculture minister. He was a tough little turkey.

Q: I've seen the documents suggested that Arsenjani pushed fairly hard on land reform, and the Shah removed him from power. The document that I've seen suggested that there was some interest in the U.S. in perhaps getting the Shah to move against Arsenjani, because there was some concern in the U.S. that pushing land reform too hard would be de-stabilizing in some respects.

Komer: It well had been. The Agency [CIA] had its own policy. You never knew what the hell the Agency was doing! Only knew what they told you. State Department sometimes didn't come fully clean either.

Q: The CIA had its own purposes in Iran in some respect?

Komer: No. It was supposed to be supporting--was supporting--We had a very influential CIA presence in Iran.

Q: Yatsevitch.

Komer: Yes. Julius Holmes came out and said "There can't be two ambassadors here," and fired Yatsevitch. Or, relieved him. I was strongly opposed to that. I thought any sensible ambassador would certainly want links to the Shah and others like Yatsevitch had. He was a personal friend of the Shah. So I would have brought him in

and said, "You're working for me, buddy, and here's what I want you to tell him. I don't want to catch you going off on your own anywhere."

But I had problems with the Agency. Jim Critchfield was the Agency man who handled the Middle East. He and I were old friends, worked well together, but I never was confident that I knew more than half of what he was playing around with. We had some run-ins on Nasser. He thought the best thing to do with Nasser was eliminate him. I didn't think much of that.

Q: I had a sense that during the 1950s the CIA had a fairly dense network of Iranian agents in Tehran and elsewhere. By the early 1960s did you have a sense that this was still the case?

Komer: I don't think that we cut back a lot between the 1950s and 1960s, which makes me think your 1950s thing is overdone. I don't think they had a dense network. But they were well connected. We used SAVAK, the Iranian internal security service, and CIA. We practically--no, I won't say we created SAVAK, but we provided them with an awful lot of assistance, specialized equipment and stuff like that. We felt in return they were going to give us a lot of information, which they did. Sometimes it was information that they had concocted for us.

Q: Was that understood at the time, that it was unreliable information?

Komer: No, I think we got to be more tied up with SAVAK than we really should have been. But it wasn't that important.

Q: This is through the 1960s, basically.

Komer: Yes. We did later cut back on our establishment in Iran--it was a big mistake. It blinded us at the wrong time.

Q: Cut back on the CIA's presence in terms of political officers.

Komer: That's right. That was in the 1970s.

Q: That's right. Back to the White Revolution for a little bit. I've seen a memo for the spring of 1963 that you wrote, that suggested that you and Kenneth Hanson at the Budget Bureau were concerned that the Shah was not moving fast enough on a reform program, or in expanding the economy--there was a recession, at this point, in Iran. In a memo you further suggested that Ambassador Holmes, and the State Department generally, was taking sort-of a passive approach to the problem. You urged a more active, somewhat interventionist approach to reform. Do you recall why you thought that the State Department course was somewhat careless or misguided?

Komer: No. I vaguely remember the episode you refer to. I can't for the life of me remember what triggered it. It might have been Hanson. Ken was always sparking one old line that the Agency or State wasn't doing what it was supposed to do, etcetera. He may have

conviced me at one point.

Q: It was in the context of a discussion in this paper on Iran that was produced by the State Department. I think it might have been a reaction to that, to the tone of the document.

Komer: They always wrote crappy papers.

Q: The State Department.

Komer: Yes. Too bland. Too cautious. Too prudent to be useful.

Q: Let me ask a couple more questions, then we can wrap it up for now.

In June 1963 there were major anti-Shah demonstrations that broke out in a number of cities--Tehran and elsewhere. The Shah responded with military repression, which led to some loss of life. Ayatollah Khomeini was a major figure in these demonstrations against the Shah. Now, do you recall at the NSC staff where you held any special discussion of these developments at that time, in mid 1963? Or how you interpreted these developments at the time?

Komer: I'm a blank on that one. After all, these things are twenty years old.

Q: Exactly. Exactly. Now also in 1963, or perhaps in early 1964, the U.S. and Iran held joint military exercises in Iran, which

involved the movement of a few thousand U.S. troops in to Iran in cooperation with the Iranian military. Do you recall anything about that exercise?

Komer: Wasn't that a CENTO exercise?

Q: It may well have been.

Komer: We would have wanted reasonably good political cover for that, because the Russian might have got nervous. But, beyond that I don't recall.

Q: What its purpose might have been.

Komer: Yes. Well we, you know, we tried to do that in a lot of places. I notice we're conducting an exercise with the Congolese, down in, what, Shaba? Where there's a big airfield. I'm sure that we decided, "We haven't done this for fifteen years. We'd better do something like that!". Or the locals asked for it or something. But I don't remember the specifics about this.

PMK

Interviewee: Robert W. Komer

Session # 2

Interviewer: William Burr

Washington, D.C.

August 11, 1987

Q: Whenever the Shah or the Iranian Foreign Minister visited the United States in the early 1960s and later years, Iranian students usually protested, which led to complaints by the Iranian embassy to the United States. Did this issue ever reach the White House?

Komer: It may have. I don't recall it, but it is not an issue that we would have gotten involved in. We would have left that to the State Department.

Q: After Lyndon Johnson became President, in late '63, did he sustain the main lines of Kennedy's policy towards Iran?

Komer: Yes.

Q: To what extent did he continue to press the Shah for internal reform? Was pressure continued at the same level of intensity as before?

Komer: No, because the Shah had by that time accepted most of the reforms. As I recall we were interested in land reform and I think Johnson may have written a letter or two to the Shah, but there wasn't the same degree of personal Presidential interest.

Q: So he didn't have that much interest in Iran compared to--

Komer: Compared to Kennedy, and the emergency had tailed off. Then, when the '73 oil embargo occurred, we had a different kind of crisis, an oil crisis, and we found that the Shah was a great protagonist of higher oil prices. That created a lot of problems too, but we generally let the State Department handle that one as well.

Q: At the June, '64 meeting with President Johnson in Washington the Shah received a \$200 million credit for military purposes in the United States and the credit would be disbursed in \$50 million allotments for a year as I recall. Did you participate in any discussions that led to Johnson's decision to grant the Shah large credits?

Komer: Yes. I can't recall anything particular about them though. It sounds to me like a slightly different form of packaging the ongoing military aid program.

Q: It may well be. I had the impression that over the year Johnson had downplayed the Shah's request for more aid. The Shah had written him a letter asking him for more aid and Johnson downplayed it in his response, but then when the Shah visited later on he granted the Shah these credits.

Komer: But you've got to look at where that stood in comparison to the normal levels of military aid. The Shah was always after military aid. We may have just packaged it differently. That's what it sounds like to me.

Q: Now in his request for aid the Shah tried to convince Johnson that he faced a threat from Arab radicalism such as Khuzistan and Nasser and so forth. To what extent did you and other embassy officials agree with his assessments?

Komer: We disagreed with them rather vigorously. So did State. We did not see that the Nasserite threat to Iran or the radical Arab nationalist threat to Iran amounted to very much, and there was very little evidence that much was happening in Khuzistan

that would suggest external influence. Khuzistan after all was the cause of the current Iraq-Iran war. The Iraqis tried to cut off Khuzistan because they said the bulk of the population was Arabic.

Q: From what you can recall, what kind of considerations would have led Johnson to grant the Shah more money?

Komer: We don't know if it's more money.

Q: Well, I think the earlier military program had been like \$50 million annual settlements. No, no, wait a second, less than that. I'm not sure, now that I think about it. I have a feeling that it was an increase in the annual levels compared to what he had before.

Komer: Well, you said a \$60 million grant. That's little more than one year's normal military assistance then. We were trying to wean the Iranians away from reliance on U.S. military assistance. This was obviously very different from the Shah's concerns. He wanted U.S. military assistance. He saw it in political terms as well as in military terms and we used that desire for continuing assistance as leverage to get him to equip and train his forces the way we wanted them trained. We had a

military mission in Iran. Of course this all changed, as I say, after the oil crisis began, because then the Shah was getting literally billions for his oil, so he didn't need U.S. military assistance then. So we changed to U.S. military sales. And this was when I recall Nixon said, "Sell them anything," and we did sell them quite a bit. As long as he could pay for it with dollars, which he could, and he concluded that he had enough money coming in that he could both promote Iranian domestic development and also increase his military forces. He really went at it in a big way. We tried to discourage him but when there was a Presidential directive in effect under Nixon to sell him anything we want (that's the way we get our dollars back that we're spending for oil).

Q: Now, back to this June '64 visit by the Shah. Do you recall any of the meetings? Does that ring a bell in terms of attending meetings with Johnson and the Shah? Do you have a sense of how they got along?

Komer: They got along perfectly well. The Shah I suspect found Kennedy more congenial than Johnson. Johnson told him a lot of stories. I'm sure that in '64 I wrote the two-page memo for him in which I said these are the issues he's liable to bring up, these are the issues we ought to bring up and here's what they're

all about and what we recommend you do. He generally studied those fairly carefully.

Q: Okay. Now, during this period--

Komer: Have you interviewed Talbot [Phillips]?

Q: Yes.

Komer: Okay. He should remember something about this. He was there at the meetings as I recall.

Q: We discussed some of these things. Now, during this period who were some of the influential people, in the mid-sixties. Who were some of the influential people in the executive branch who would have participated in decisions concerning Iran, besides Phillips Talbot I suppose?

Komer: And his people.

Q: Yes.

Komer: And I and [McGeorge] Bundy was in--Bundy would not have gotten involved but he would have supervised my performance or

what I was involved in. I would have kept him clued. Over in the Defense Department I think we had Frank Sloan, who was the Deputy Assistant Secretary ISA [International Security Affairs] for the Middle East.

Q: Who at AID [Agency for International Development] was involved? Do you recall?

Komer: McComber probably. Wasn't he still there at AID?

Q: I think so. William McComber. Anybody at the CIA that you can think of offhand?

Komer: Well, they didn't participate in the meetings I can assure you.

Q: Did they have like a desk officer who--

Komer: They might have been involved and they tried to keep up with these things. Generally the way the agency operated was to try to have a separate meeting. If they had any big issues they wanted to take up with the Shah they invited him up to Langley.

Q: Okay. Was Henry Kuss, in the Pentagon, influential in terms of an arms sales policy?

Komer: Not really. Kuss handled the procedures but didn't make any of the policy.

Q: More the mechanics of the operation--

Komer: That's right.

Q: Okay. How influential were the ambassadors? [Julius] Holmes and then Armin Meyer?

Komer: Holmes was quite influential. Armin, whom I know well, was a lot less so. How can an ambassador be influential when you don't have any big issues? Both Holmes and Meyer were rather more sympathetic to the Shah's concerns than we. We were less sympathetic so we didn't pay much attention to them.

Q: Now, I've read that during '65 the Shah had plans to build up Iran's naval presence in the Persian Gulf but that the U.S. tried to discourage him from pursuing those plans. Was there any NSC discussion on this issue?

Komer: No NSC discussion.

Q: How was it handled? How was the effort to discourage him-

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Komer: Talbot and I would discuss it. We'd send a message to the ambassador or we would tell the Pentagon to lay off and the Pentagon would tell the navy.

Q: Not to sell certain things?

Komer: Yes. The Navy was naturally happy to have anybody else build up a navy because it created positions of influence for them. It also enabled them to sell ships secondhand.

Q: What kind of considerations went to form the decision to try to restrain the Shah? Was it more like waste of resources?

Komer: Yes. After all, we thought the main threat to Iran, and the threat that concerned us most, was from the Russians in the north coming down through the mountains. We didn't see that an Iranian navy in the Persian Gulf would do any good against this. And, looking at the current situation where we're escorting

tankers in the Persian Gulf, you can see that the smaller the Iranian navy, the better off we'd be.

But this was an example of the failure to include strategic considerations in our military aid program. Iran was a member of CENTO. Iran was very concerned about the Soviets. The strategy and logic would suggest that Iran would orient its defenses towards the north, which it did in many respects, and that all these other concerns of the Shah were secondary. You know one can argue that he, there in Tehran, could see the thing more clearly than we, but we couldn't see how an Iranian navy would serve much of a purpose and it would take money away from the Iranian army and air force. So we who thought more strategically about the problem naturally wanted to damp down this influence and I had a lot to do with that. I've always felt that we could use our military aid program more effectively than we sometimes do.

Q: Do you recall the Shah's reaction to this effort?

Komer: He really listened. He saw the point but he said he wasn't cutting back on the army or the air force. He just wanted to have a navy too. All great powers had navies and he saw Iran as a potential great power.

Q: Also during this period, I think about the same year, '65, the Shah visited the Soviet Union where he concluded economic cooperation agreements that led to the bartering of natural gas for the construction of a steel mill by the Soviets in Iran. How did White House officials and policymakers assess that kind of development. Was there concern about this?

Komer: Of course there was. Any time one of our close friends, and partial allies, gets involved with the Soviet Union it makes us nervous, naturally, because the Soviets use military and economic aid agreements as avenues for political influence, getting people into the country, providing ways to get information out of the country, giving them political and economic influence. There were a lot of general negatives. But in the last analysis the Shah was a sovereign and if he wanted to go to the Soviet Union and get a steel mill, c'est la vie. He had a lot of natural gas, too.

Q: According to a declassified CIA report the U.S. tried to induce the Shah to seek Western offers for the steel mill project. Was that discussed at the White House?

Komer: That's sort of standard. It was discussed at my level. The CIA is pretty influential on big scale plays, but they can't provide steel mills.

Q: Right. Were you traveling to Iran during the Johnson years? Did you visit there, the early '60s, any visits after '60, '62, '63?

Komer: I think I made one visit there after 1963.

Q: The one you mentioned the last time?

Komer: Which one did I mention.

Q: When you--

Komer: No, that was during Kennedy's era.

Q: Yes, that was during Kennedy. Right.

Komer: Yes, I went once more to Iran when I was out in the area. I liked Iran.

Q: Do you recall the circumstances of this visit?

Komer: No, there was nothing special. I was just going there to renew contacts with the embassy and others and really passing through.

Q: Now, by the mid-sixties--I guess you've sort of answered this already but I'll just ask again--by the mid-sixties, did you have less concern about Iranian stability than you had in the earlier--

Komer: Yes. Definitely less concern. The same in State. Of course, we were perpetually concerned. Anything that was run the way Iran was by the Shah, who retained a great deal of power even though he had a majlis government, worried us. It had certain inherent instabilities but the real, you know, the more volatile internal and external threat that we had seen in the late '50s and early '60s had calmed down a great deal. There were other troubles that I must say I think in hindsight we underestimated, like the threat of the religious fundamentalists. But then at that time Khomeini was off somewhere in Iraq or in Paris.

Q: Was much known about him at that time? Were you aware of him personally?

Komer: I was aware of him but, you know, you're aware of anybody who leaves Iran, goes to Iraq, goes to Paris, maintains a constant drumfire of propaganda. The embassy used to tell us about what was up and that was one of the things that was up and the Agency. But we did not foresee the kind of revolution that occurred in '78, '79.

Q: At that point though had you more or less assumed that the Shah's reform program would help put the country towards greater stability?

Komer: Yes. It did, and one of the things that was a part of the Shah's reform program and that we strongly endorsed and supported, was land reform. He took a lot of land away from the clergy and that led them to get progressively more unhappy with him. We knew about their being unhappy but we did not know what Khomeini was organizing. Maybe he wasn't even organizing at that time.

Q: I'm not sure. I guess you left the embassy staff in the fall of '65, is that correct.

Komer: ~~No, not the fall of '65. I became the Deputy Chief of~~
the NSC staff in the summer of '65.

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Q: You went to open a Vietnam reconstruction project.

Komer: That was in 1966, early '66.

Q: Before you went to that, went to the Vietnam project, is there anything about Iran that I haven't asked you about that comes to mind?

Komer: Not that I can recall.

Q: I can't think of any major issues that were bubbling up in this period. Well, how much change had the NSC staff undergone, in terms of the way it worked, how much change had occurred until about '65 or '66 with the earlier period of the Kennedy administration?

Komer: Very little. It was still quite small but was somewhat bigger. Institutions have a tendency to grow, bureaucracies I should say, but basically we were operating in the same way. As far as my role was concerned, it was more influential because by that time I was a known quantity and I had five years of experience. The support that I got from the President had been demonstrated time and again. So I don't recall a lot of changes