

Eliot: In the summer of 1973 I was appointed ambassador to Afghanistan.

Q: During this period, did any issues involving Iran come to your attention?

Eliot: The issues involving Iran which involved me during the period I was in Afghanistan were those involving Afghan-Iranian relations. And one of the--if I could say just a few words about that. One of the principal policy objectives of the United States vis-a-vis Afghanistan was to limit and diminish the dependence of Afghanistan upon the Soviet Union, so as to increase the chances that Afghanistan could maintain its independence vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. So we were looking for ways for Afghanistan, and supporting ways in which Afghanistan could become more closely linked to, for example, Iran and the Gulf Arab states. In that period--I believe in 1974, but I'm not absolutely certain on my dates anymore--the Iranians and the Afghans began talking about a major program of economic cooperation in which the Iranians would provide major economic assistance, including building a railroad link between Mashad and Kabul, and to develop other Afghan resources. They also were bringing to a conclusion a long, long, long negotiation on what to do with the Helmand River waters. The Helmand rises in Central Afghanistan, and peters out in a bunch of pools and lakes in Southeastern Iran and in the Seistan area. And this was a long-standing dispute between the two countries. So there was real reason to hope that Iran and

Afghanistan would start cooperating, and this would be another link with the non-Soviet world for Afghanistan. I was encouraging this, and I was in touch with Ambassador Helms, and later Ambassador [William] Sullivan in Iran to encourage it.

The Shah didn't need much encouragement--he saw the strategic importance of this also. He was very worried about the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. In fact, during his visit in 1973 to Washington, I had a brief conversation with him about the fact that I was about to go out to Afghanistan. And this was right after--he must have come back to Washington in the summer of 1973 now that I think about it, because this must have been in, my guess is in August of 1973. And Mohammad Daud had just thrown out the King and had taken over power as the first president of the Republic. The Shah considered Daud pro-Soviet, and he took me aside, and he told me how worried he was, and what a difficult job faced the United States, and how he was concerned about the future of Afghanistan. So we had no trouble--he was already convinced of the importance of Iran having good relations with Afghanistan. But the cultural differences, the historical differences--the Iranians looked upon Afghanistan as some kind of Appalachia, and the Afghans tended to look on the Iranians as a bunch of effetes: "one Afghan could lick twenty Iranians with one hand tied behind his back." The problem of overcoming this cultural problem--the foreign minister of Afghanistan once pointed out to me that when he was with the president of Afghanistan he would shake his hand, look him straight in the eye; whereas the foreign minister of Iran had to virtually kow tow with his head on the floor when he was speaking to the Shah. This kind of cultural difference was very hard

to bridge. And so, lower levels in the Iranian bureaucracy tended to drag their feet, and not much ever came of this effort. On the Afghan side there was also great reluctance to get into bed with the Iranians. So that's one of the sort of sad chapters of that part of the world, that those two countries couldn't cooperate more closely with each other. The Afghans used to worry about the Iranian tie with Pakistan, also. Of course, the Afghans had a major dispute, long-standing dispute, with the Pakistanis over the Pushtun tribal area. We tried to help these two countries get closer together, we succeeded in some minor ways, but not in a major strategic way at that time.

Q: After Afghanistan, what was your next assignment?

Eliot: After Afghanistan I was briefly--five or six months-- Inspector General of the State Department. And at this period Iran was falling apart, and the Communists had already seized power in Afghanistan. And then I was asked to become dean of the Fletcher School [of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts] and I actually left the Service in October 1978, and I was packing to go to the Fletcher School in early January 1979 when I got a call from the State Department to come on in. This is when Secretary [Cyrus] Vance through Under Secretary [David] Newsom, but at the recommendation of Ambassador Sullivan, was suggesting that I go to Paris to see Khomeini.

Q: I want to go back to October, the fall. How surprised were you by the outbreak of the revolution? In the late summer, early fall?

Eliot: I don't want to duck that question, but I think it's fair to say I was not following Iran in any great detail. It was absolutely clear by some time in the fall that the gig was up. I had heard about problems while I was still in Afghanistan. I believe that preceding spring. I believe I wrote Bill Sullivan a letter saying I had heard the Shah had cut off his subsidies to the mullahs. This word had trickled back to me, I think, through the Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan. And I remember thinking to myself: "That's a terrible mistake to have made." And I was also aware--our oldest son spent a junior year abroad or something from college at what was then called Pahlavi University in Shiraz. And I heard from him, sort of at the student level, some of the ways in which students in Iran were laughing at the excesses of the Shah. There were pictures of him standing on a cloud looking heavenward, you know. And this stuff became a butt of jokes. Now, dictators start falling when people laugh at them. So I was aware of a good deal of disquiet, I was aware of growing problems. And then when the Qom riots and things began, I wasn't alone in being aware. But that the regime would deteriorate and fall that quickly--I think, I am sure it was a surprise to me.

Q: Now in terms of this special mission to Khomeini which you mentioned a minute ago, what did Ambassador Sullivan think would be accomplished with it?

Eliot: Well, I don't want to rely--

Q: The State Department generally.

Eliot: Yes, well--I don't want to rely on my--I'll say a few words about it but I don't want to rely on my memory when it's been sort of well documented now in both Bill Sullivan's and Gary Sick's books. The basic idea behind it was to try and preserve the Iranian military. And, in retrospect, clearly it was a mission that could not succeed. Khomeini was not going to permit any rival power center like the Iranian military to exist in Iran once he had seized power. But let me say a few things that haven't been in print so much about that. [interruption] I'll have to quit right after I answer this question.

Sullivan and Vance and Newsom; Saunders, Henry Precht at the State Department--all felt this was a very important mission. Some effort had to be made to establish contact with Khomeini: even if the substance wouldn't succeed, we needed the contact. Sullivan had been requested to ask the Shah if it was O.K. with him for me to undertake this mission, and the Shah said, "Fine." In fact, if I remember correctly, he said something like, you know, "You'd be foolish if you didn't try something like this." The President was down in Martinique at some summit meeting, with Giscard [d'Estaing] and others, and [Zbigniew] Brzezinski was down there with him, played a key role and determined the mission should not go ahead. Vance then called me into his office to explain to me why the mission shouldn't take place, and I confess to you I've never understood the reasons that Brzezinski and presumably Carter offered for their

decision not to have me proceed with the mission. But obviously, the mission didn't take place because the President vetoed it. Vance's explanation was such that I didn't really understand the explanation. When I left Vance's office, I was with Henry Precht, and Henry said he figured it was just a question of one chief of state not being willing to conspire in the overthrow of another chief of state, and I said, "That's the best answer I've heard."

Now, there are a couple of vignettes here which are kind of interesting, I think. One is that it was my clear recollection from reading into the file--mind you, I had to read a lot very quickly because I had been out of the picture a very long time--that Khomeini had agreed to receive me. And this had been arranged through our embassy in Paris. Quite a considerable period later, I happened to be sitting next to Brzezinski at some luncheon, and the subject came up, and I told him what I had just said. And he said, "That's not true." He said, "Khomeini had not agreed to receive you. If we had known that it would have put a different light on it, but certainly the State Department had no authority to ask Khomeini if he were willing to receive you." So later I asked David Newsom what the facts were, and David Newsom answered it by saying some of the communication between the Secretary of State and the President was done without Brzezinski's knowledge.

So I think I'm right on that. I think Khomeini had agreed to receive me. Now if that were the case--what's going on in Khomeini's mind when a mission is canceled--and as you no doubt know there has never been an official face-to-face American contact with Khomeini? There had been a couple of academic missions, but no official

contact. So maybe we missed an opportunity to establish some kind of contact; maybe it would have made a marginal difference in Khomeini's view of the United States. The balance of the evidence is that it wouldn't have made any difference: that Khomeini needed the American devil for his own domestic political reasons. But we'll never really know because the effort was never really made, and I think it's too bad it wasn't made.

Q: Any further comments?

Eliot: The only other thing I think I might say, and then I should stop, is that when I had this conversation with Vance, Vance asked me what he thought would happen when the Shah left Tehran. And I said I thought Khomeini would be on the very first plane. And Vance looked slightly surprised that I said that, and his next question was, "What would happen next?" And I used a word like, "There'd be a major brouhaha," or something of this kind, by which I meant that the people of Iran would get together in major celebration and so forth and so on. And my impression of Vance's reaction was that Vance, and I think Saunders too--the pace of events had outstripped their ability, intellectually, to cope with them as well. And I think Gary Sick puts it all together very beautifully in terms of the disarray in Washington in that period. The United States was just bereft of policy, bereft of influence over a revolutionary situation.

Q: One question; one more question. Sick's very critical of Ambassador Sullivan's role. Do you think his assessment is fair?

Eliot: Well, I think Bill Sullivan was in an exceptionally difficult position, because everything he'd send into Washington would appear on the front page of the New York Times. And under the circumstances, I think he performed extremely well. But by the fall of 1978, the gig was up--there wasn't a darn thing the United States could have done to make it come out differently in my opinion.

Q: Mr. Eliot, thank you very much for your time.

Eliot: Thank you.

[end of interview]

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