

Q: Now after the demonstrations you talked about, where buildings were burned and so forth in Tehran, the Shah set up a military government?

Lehfeldt: And Sharif Emami was removed and General Azhari took over, yes.

Q; What was your evaluation of this move? Did you think it would make a difference at this point? Maybe make things worse or make things better?

Lehfeldt: Well, it seemed to indicate that they were prepared to use the military in a forceful manner. In the event it didn't happen. That was, I guess, the thing that everybody thought the Shah had pulled out of his sleeve, that he'd install a military government and he'd restore order and then he'd go back to trying to put the pieces back together. But the Shah was unwilling apparently-- and again this comes out afterwards, we certainly didn't know it at the time-- was unwilling to order any drastic action. And, again with hindsight, it probably wouldn't have worked. They probably wouldn't have paid any attention to him by that time. Who knows?

Q: Now by November-- it's around the same time-- Ambassador Sullivan was concluding, I think, that-- or beginning to conclude that the Shah's position was hopeless, or apparently hopeless,

and it was necessary to be in the search for some alternative to the Shah.

Lehfeltdt: Thinking the unthinkable.

Q: That was the name of the famous cable he sent.

Lehfeltdt: Infamous cable, I would call it.

Q: How much did you know about his views at this time?

Lehfeltdt: Damn little, because about that time he had brought Senator-- who was it? Was it Senator Byrd? I guess it was.

Q: Possibly. Yes, I think he visited.

Lehfeltdt: I think it was Senator Byrd, yes. He was scheduled to address the Iran-American Chamber in November. And we had our monthly luncheon at the Sheraton, and Byrd couldn't make it because he had an audience with the Shah, and we sort of held forth until Bill got there. And then he filled us in on what was going on. But his message to us then was, stay put. There wasn't any give on his part, so if he was thinking the unthinkable at that point, he didn't let on.

Q: Now at what point did you conclude the Shah's position could

not be salvaged?

Lehfeldt: After I was back here in December.

Q: After you'd left?

Lehfeldt: After I'd left.

Q: Up till then, you still weren't--

Lehfeldt: I still kept-- I guess it was more hoping than anything else. Hoping that he would be, because I'm always very slow in withdrawing support. I was hoping against hope that he would be able to put it back together, and so I had a round trip ticket. But then the company wouldn't let me come back as things deteriorated, which was quite right. Because when I left in the third or fourth week of December, just before Christmas, I was just going home to spend Christmas with my family. I was not evacuating. I left my house intact, with all my furniture in it, and my houseboy, my dogs, and a gardener. Of course, my wife, when she had left three weeks before, she had packed up all the so-called valuables and shipped them out. Just as a personal note-- in the event, they didn't leave the country at that time, and it wasn't until May in '78 that they discovered them in the warehouse at the airport. They'd gone through customs and they were sitting there waiting for shipment on Lufthansa.

And so they finally shipped them and they didn't have to go through customs again. Otherwise we probably would have lost everything, because there were pictures of me with the Shah and there were some carpets and some pots and so forth and so on. The Revolutionary Guards would have confiscated-- also had all of our silver and a lot of personal things, photographs. But that finally showed up.

But as an example, I left my house intact, except for those few things that my wife had packed. Now that makes me look a little stupid maybe, but it showed the depth of my respect for the Shah's ability to come back. He had done it before.

Q: Now the same month, during the religious holidays of Muharram, there were huge demonstrations in Teheran, I guess involving millions of people?

Lehfeldt: Millions of people, right.

Q: Did you witness any of these?

Lehfeldt: We were well advised and did stay off the streets. My family had left by then. I was alone. I had a few people from the company over for lunch and we just stayed out of sight. Some of them even spent the night, because there was no point in trying to go back downtown.

But I talked to, then, a day or two later, Mehdi Sami'i.

Let's see, I've forgotten which demonstration it was, but there was a-- no, the Muharram demonstration, no, that was not the one. It was the one previous to that. He qualified it as a middle-class demonstration, a family demonstration. You had whole families walking down Semiran road carrying flowers and sticking flowers in the rifles of the soldiers who were guarding them. But it was a middle-class demonstration. Hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people, marching up and down Semiran Road, demonstrating for change, for democracy, for whatever. But this was not the madcap mujahidin revolutionaries or anything of that sort.

Now the Muharran demonstrations were massive. Well organized, well policed by the revolutionaries themselves. And there was a demonstration that had to have had a very debilitating effect on the Shah's psyche, and I guess it did. Because to have a couple of million people out was a fantastic sight. You know, I wouldn't have shown myself out there, frankly. It would have been foolhardy.

Q: Now when you returned to the States, you worked for GE? You continued to work for GE?

Lehfeldt: Yes, I continued. I ran Tehran-- because I left a staff. We didn't pull all Americans out when I left. I had about, oh, eight or ten people still there. Americans, plus all my Iranian staff. And so I moved to London personally. My

family went to Ohio to my wife's mother's town. And I commuted between London and the States when I could. I never did return to Iran, but I managed the withdrawal of people from Iran at the time, and it was about May, I think, that we got the last of our people out.

Q: Was GE closed up in Iran pretty much?

Lehfeltdt: Yes. Well, we left the local staff still. And they closed up the office in an orderly fashion. They packed up my house and shipped everything out. Everything that we wanted out. We didn't have any of the heavy stuff flown out. But it was an orderly departure, and even in May-- April-- if the situation had righted itself and the government had wanted us to come back and stay, we would have been in a position to do so.

Q: Now at that time-- late '78, early '79-- what was your interpretation of the origins or the basic causes of the revolution? How did you see it then?

Lehfeltdt: Well, I saw it then as a weakening of the resolve of the Shah, a growth of the opposition in terms of numbers and volubility and strength and economic strength to the point that they could do a lot of things. Now whether they were helped by outside forces, I didn't know, although towards the end of '78 it was clear that the religious element was doing a lot more than

they ever had before. They were able, because they were getting lots of money from the bazaaris in Tehran, from over in Najaf in Iraq. And then, I believe, with the connivance of General Fardust, the Shah asked the Iraqis, their now great and good friends, because they'd settled all their differences, to expel the Ayatollah. That happened in I think about September, didn't it?

Q: Then he went to Paris.

Lehfeltdt: Then he went to Paris, because the Kuwaitis wouldn't take him. And that gave him Open Sesame. He got access to world attention. If they'd kept him in Najaf, I bet nothing would have happened. Or very little would have happened. The mujahidin would have taken charge perhaps of the revolution then, but not the religious. Because the only one with the authority, moral and public relations authority, to take charge of the revolution at that time was Khomeini. Nobody else could. Shariat Madari-- any of the other ayatollahs who were in opposition to the Shah had been pretty much compromised over the years.

Q: I've read at that time that some American business leaders like David Rockefeller-- I read that he believed that ultimately the Communists were behind the whole thing. Did other American businessmen believe that?

Lehfeltdt: Yes, of course. You know, again, going back to the

November showdown-- and this is personal observation-- the leader of one of the gangs stoning shops and breaking windows and setting fire to things was a lady in a pants suit. And clearly she wasn't a religious lady. She wasn't wearing a chador. She was a real instigator, a real rioter, and probably left wing.

Let me move to another area, the television business. Iranian television and the AFRT, the American-- well, no, the Iranian television. Leave AFRT out of it. On the night before Muharram, before this big demonstration, when all the religious were out shouting "alla aqbar" and so forth, and the electricity was out and so forth and so on, on television, before the electricity went off, they were showing-- I guess it was Swedish--

Q: Oh, I think you talked about that.

Lehfeldt: A Swedish movie about lesbianism and nudity and everything. Totally designed, as far as I was concerned, to incite the religious conservative elements against the regime.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE; BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO.

Lehfeldt: So you had to assume that there was collusion, some planning, some reasonably bright psychological analysis that had taken place on how to turn off people from the regime and the

Shah, and that this is all sort of coincided. The mujahidin were probably the most adept at this part of it. I can't believe it was the religious. I don't think they would have done that sort of thing. The religious were doing other things. The religious were passing tapes around of the Ayatollah's speeches and so on. And the underground was working very nicely in that regard. No, it was a congeries of opposition to the Shah that coincided, as I've said before, on only one thing, getting rid of the Shah, but did not agree on what the form, substance or objectives of the government would be after the Shah left. And you could see that. The Ayatollah, who was probably one of the most surprised people of all when he found himself sort of in power, had nobody prepared to run a government. And that's why he named Bazargan, who was one of the few respectable Iranian politicians who had supported him and opposed his exile and opposed-- well, Bazargan was about the only politician with enough standing to head a government. But, of course, he headed a meaningless government. They wouldn't let him govern.

And the creation of the Revolutionary Guards, which was a mujahidin, I believe, operation at the outset, was gradually taken over by the religious, and maybe with the connivance of Communists, I don't know. Iranians today aren't sure and some still posit that the mullahs, the Soviet mullahs, are the ones who are running the show and eventually are going to turn it into a Soviet.

Q: What do you think of that?

Lehfeldt: I think it's highly unlikely.

Q: The Tudehs have been on the outs most of the time?

Lehfeldt: Well, the Tudeh Party was never highly respectable anyway, but the Soviet mullahs are another question, because the Soviet government did subsidize mullahs to a fare-thee-well for many years, and probably still do. And there is no-- apparently in their mind there is nothing wrong with them taking help from the Soviets.

Q: Now to what degree do you subscribe to the theory that U.S.-Iran relations in the late seventies represented what's called an intelligence failure, in the sense that the revolution and the Shah's downfall came as such a surprise to American policy-makers and American businessmen and so forth, who had to do with Iran?

Lehfeldt: I can only quote, I think, some of my academic friends. When I came back at the end of '78, I gave a lecture up at the Asia Society in New York, and I had a couple of academics there as well, who were talking at the same time. And they publicly admitted that they blew it, that they were looking at the wrong things, that the things we should have been noticing, we were so bedazzled by the magnificence of the Shah and his

imperial trappings, we simply couldn't see what was happening in the underbrush of Iranian politics and political sentiment. And if the professed experts at the subject don't see it-- and I believe if you'll read Tony Parsons' book, he expresses some of the same sentiment, that they missed it too. And Dennis Wright certainly missed it. He was one of the old pros at the business.

So that if the experts on the subject missed it, how the heck do you expect the poor businessman to see it. We were riding along on a wave of euphoria that hoped to take advantage of the oil income. Most of us. Maybe it was falsely engendered hope, but nonetheless there was that hope. And just poor simple businessmen, not political analysts. So although we pride ourselves usually, businessmen do, on being able to feel things better than embassies sometimes, the Embassy was no better off. I mean, we were all surprised. We were all caught off balance. And certainly the one factor that might have made a difference, certainly to policy-makers in the United States, was the knowledge of the Shah's illness. Had that one fact been known, a lot of things would have come clear. Maybe. Maybe, I don't know.

But the efforts to make sense out of the regime from 1973 to '78, to control corruption, to control conspicuous consumption-- which was ridiculous, the things that went on by some of the wealthy Iranians-- were simply ineffective and to use a terrible word, counter-productive, in terms of keeping popular support for the regime.

Q: This is a question I should have asked you in the very beginning of our interview, but when you were first assigned to the Embassy in Teheran, did you receive any special area training in Persian history or society, anything like that?

Lehfeldt: No. No, because I went-- if I don't miss my guess, I was under a good deal of pressure to get there in a hurry. I had come from Naples, where I'd been Deputy Principal Officer for the previous three years. And I went to home leave, had a little bit of consultation in the Department-- maybe a week, ten days-- and then I arrived and was thrown into the breach.

Now, of course, I had had some Persian language before. I'd served in Afghanistan many years before, and I had some knowledge of the area. I had served in South Asian Affairs, in Pakistan-Afghanistan affairs. So I wasn't totally abjectly stupid.

[laughs] Although I wasn't as well prepared as I would like to have been. Armin Meyer, who was the Ambassador at the time I was selected at least, and Nick Thatcher, who was the Deputy Chief of Mission, knew me well. So they were quite prepared to take me on faith.

Q: How many of the Embassy staff people at this time actually had area training before they took the job? Was your experience fairly common among-- ?

Lehfeldt: Well, no. The people who were in the Embassy at the time, some of them were long-time Middle East hands. Nick Thatcher was DCM. Jack Armitage-- this was his second time around. He was a Political Counselor. John Rouse, who was in the Political Section, was a Persian language officer. Ed Prince, who was my deputy in the Economics Section, had been there for four or five years and spoke Persian and was quite good. The Chief of Station was an old hand there, Bill Brommel. My oil man, Petroleum Officer, can't think of his name--

Q: Washburn?

Lehfeldt: No, his predecessor-- again was a very able guy, both in petroleum, and spoke Arabic, I believe, as well. Arabic besides Persian. And then John Washburn came along and he was a Persian language officer. And he was followed by David Patterson, who was another Persian language officer.

So that I thought at the time I was there in the Embassy that there were a number of other good Persian language officers.

[Michael] Michaud was one. John Stempel.

Q: He was there also?

Lehfeldt: Yes. Arnie Raphael was a Persian language officer.

There were a whole series of young officers who were very good in Persian, and so I thought we were well served. Stan Escudero.

There was a whole raft of kids. But by the time '78 came along, there was practically nobody there.

Q: Did you know what accounted for that?

Lehfeldt: Yes. Budgetary strictures more than anything else. The Carterian budget revolution. The Ford revolution. And so forth and so on.

Q: From your testimony, it sounds like you had fairly frequent contact with Iranian government officials. And this is when you were at the Embassy. How true is that of other officials in the Embassy? It's probably hard to generalize about it, but--

Lehfeldt: It was hard to generalize. You know, the Political Section had a lot to do with the Foreign Office, and certainly the Political Military Officer, whether he was John Rouse or Henry Precht or Martin, had a good deal to do with both the American military and some of the Iranians and General Toufanian's staff. Not beyond that, I don't believe.

The Military Attaches' offices had their counterparts. Probably the people who were approved by the Shah for dealing with them. But I don't get the impression that many of them had the breadth of associations across the government that I had. And I say that without any pride particularly, but that's just the way it was. I was there longer than most of them, to begin

with. I was there five years in the Embassy, after all.

Q: Now to what extent did your own contacts extend beyond the business community and government officials when you were at the Embassy?

Lehfeldt: On the Iranian side?

Q: Yes.

Lehfeldt: Well, there was considerable social intercourse outside the business side. My wife, of course, was busy in the International Women's Club, the Nurayin Society-- which supported the Blind School down in Isfahan. It was a very social organization in the sense that it was supported by some very high level, socially impeccable ladies, led by Sattareh Rastegar. She was a Farmanfarmaian princess, one of the direct descendants of one of the Qajar shahs.

Lehfeldt: But we had that sort of connection with a lot of Iranians who were not government, not official, not business. In the Samian family, Mrs. Samian was one of the earliest leaders for women's rights in Iran. The family was a close friend of ours. Of course, they were variously married into a number of other families. Abbas Fallah, Reza Fallah's brother, was married to one of the Samian sisters, and so on down the line.

Q: I read that somewhere around half of the Embassy employees were from local minority groups?

Lehfeldt: Yes, it was known as the Armenian Embassy.

Q: A very large component of Armenian Christians, I think?

Lehfeldt: Yes. And some Zoroastrians and some Jews and some Bah'ais. But we had a pretty good mixture of pukka Persians too. My chief local in the Economic Commercial Section was Ishmail Gohbadi. More socially acceptable he couldn't be. He was a very highly respected man.

Q: Now in his new book, James Bill suggests the existence of a fairly large component of Iranian minorities on the Embassy staff had adverse implications. One was that the Armenians-- a lot of them worked in the Consular Section apparently? His research suggests that they were often rude to local Iranians who were applying for passports. This had an impact on the way they perceived the United States. This was their first contact with American officials.

Lehfeldt: My friend, I don't care whether it's Iran or London or Paris or Karachi or where it is, locals are rude to their own people. And, yes, they can say that the Armenians may have been

rude to the Iranians, I would posit that that would have made no difference whatever.

Q: So it was a generic Embassy problem?

Lehfeltdt: Yes, a generic Embassy problem, right. You take on a little bit of power when you're with the American Embassy, whether you're Armenian or Zoroastrian or Muslim or whatever. And besides, I have to believe that at least some of those people in the consulate were SAVAK employees on the side as well.

Q: Was that-- ?

Lehfeltdt: Oh, sure. A common practice. They were sprinkled throughout. You could identify some of them very easily.

Q: Bill also suggests the existence of a fairly large minority component among the employees tended to insulate the Embassy from day-to-day contact with Muslim Iranians. Was this seen as an issue at that time?

Lehfeltdt: At least in the Economic Commercial Section not so. Not so. There were no one more Muslim than the Ladjevardis and the Khosrovanis and the Iravanis and the Barkhordars and so on. Yet we had very open, close relations with them and didn't depend on the locals for that sort of entree at all. The average

bazaari was a little more difficult, but as many of the bazaari-- for instance, the rug dealers were Jews or Armenians anyway. And so that was the extent of a lot of the Embassy employees' association with local business, the rug and curio dealers. And they were Armenians or Jews anyway.

Q: Now he also talks of the Embassy Social Secretary, who was Iranian.

Lehfeldt: Oh, Minou. Yes.

Q: Apparently she more or less determined who would be invited to Embassy functions?

Lehfeldt: Well, for some Ambassadors she did. But not for Dick Helms and not for Bill Sullivan. And that turned her into a real harridan.

Q: Yes, apparently, he says, some Ambassador tried to weaken her authority or influence--

Lehfeldt: Oh, yes. They not only weakened it, they just ignored her. Mrs. Helms couldn't stand her.

Q: What's her name?

Lehfeltdt: Minou Moshiri.

Q: Apparently when she had some authority in this issue, she tended to confine those she invited to the social, economic elite.

Lehfeltdt: Exactly.

Q: --other Iranians. More middle-class types?

Lehfeltdt: Yes. Well, you know-- yes, there's no question about it, but the invitation lists oftentimes, depending on what the invitations were for-- for instance, the Economic Commercial Section would submit its list of people and most often we would get them invited, if it was a big reception. Fourth of July was another bash that was a real enormous collection of people and didn't really matter. It's easy to criticize an Ambassador's entertainment lists. It's harder still to construct one that escapes criticism.

Q: Now this is another point that he raises in his book that's also been raised by other writers on the period. He argues that because of the strong pro-Shah views at the highest levels in Washington and the Embassy that independent, objective reports that might cast a bad light on the regime were either not written, because they could hurt career advancement in some

respects, or when they were written, they were sometimes suppressed or not sent to Washington. To what extent was that a problem when you were at the Embassy in the early seventies? Were there examples of that that come to mind?

Lehfeldt: I killed one report, because it was-- not because of any bias that it might reflect adversely on anybody. And certainly the officer in question has not suffered because I killed it. And I didn't suffer because I killed it. It was just a stupid report. But it was the only one that I can think of that I killed in the five years that I was there that would faintly fall into that category. Indeed, the reports that we sent in on such things as corruption-- and I believe you will find somewhere in the archives--

Q: We talked about that. In fact, he cites that as one that did get to Washington.

Lehfeldt: John Washburn's for one was-- we got criticized for dwelling on corruption, but there was a real problem. But again, there was never any stricture, any order out, no instructions not to send anything in. Now self-censorship, that may have taken place, I don't know.

Q: That's what he was implying, that that might have been a sort of an internal constraint, that people might have appeared

rocking the boat somewhat.

Lehfeldt: Well, it's kind of hard to demonstrate and it's hard to-- you know, when you are dealing with a one-party government and a one-dimensional government that is run by one man, and everybody depends on his whims and his judgments and his sources of information, it's hard to write sensible analyses of what's going on in the countryside when, you know, nobody's talking. The opposition didn't want to talk to us, to begin with. They didn't want to be seen with us. They knew we were followed, and so they had reasons for not talking to us. There was no way we could hide or disguise ourselves. We were so damn visible. And especially when we got tagged with bodyguards everywhere we went. What the heck were you supposed to do?

Q: I've also read--I think this was mentioned in Bill's book-- that by the mid-seventies, maybe this was after you left, but the number of political officers had declined and there was less reporting going on of internal political affairs than there had been in, say, the sixties to late sixties period. That might have been a budgetary problem, the decline of political officers? I don't know. Was that so, do you think?

Lehfeldt: No, I don't buy that particularly. There was never a big number of political officers anyway. There was a political counselor and the assistant political officer and a political

military officer and usually one other officer. And that was about it, four or five all told, and I don't know that it ever varied from that in all the time I knew the Embassy.

Q: I guess there may have been more than ten or fifteen in the early sixties. That's the figure he gives, I think. Something in that order, that there was a lot more.

Lehfeltdt: Dubious. Dubious. Highly dubious. No. If he's going on the Foreign Service lists record, some of those may have been station CIA people, who had other--

Q: Who were listed as political officers, but actually doing something else?

Lehfeltdt: Yes. Real State Department political reporting officers were never more than three or four. To my certain knowledge. In the ten years that I was associated.

Q: I have no further questions, unless you want to make a concluding statement.

Lehfeltdt: No, I don't have any peroration.

Q: We've covered all the issues, I think.

Lehfeltdt: I don't know that we've come to any final conclusion on wha' hopped, but it's been-- you know, it was in retrospect a traumatic experience and one that almost defies analysis to some degree, because if you talk to some of my Iranian friends, they are certain that the whole success of the Ayatollah was the result of British planning, assisted by American dupes, for the sole purpose of keeping oil prices up, so North Sea oil was profitable.

Now there's a certain mad logic to all of that, but somehow all the rest of the facts don't fit it. And yet the conspiratorial view of the world is so widespread in Iran that there are thousands and thousands of Iranians who are prepared to believe that or a variation of that theme. And it is extremely difficult for any of us to argue convincingly that such was not the case, because all we can argue is that the bits we saw don't fit that theory and the people we know certainly were not smart enough to plan it. And if the Brits and CIA were smart enough to plan all of this, why are we in such bad shape around the world. Now I think that's enough to say. [laughs]

Q: Thank you very much.

Lehfeltdt: Thank you.

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