

activity. Their goal was to train and our goal was to understand what was going on in the country, and they just couldn't see that we could cooperate.

And of course if we met with Iranian military officers, we could learn something about them just from talking with them, but there were so few who were allowed to come to functions that you never could really get below a certain high level, because they were the only ones who were on the Iranian list of who's allowed to go to these parties. Because they too felt that if we started meeting some of their people at a cocktail party, we might cultivate them and learn more about them, and they just wanted to keep at arm's length from that.

Q: That's interesting. James Bill also suggested the CIA tended to keep its information away from the Embassy and this created some problems at times. How true is that from your experience in the seventies?

Bolster: Well, that's much less true. We had quite a cooperative relationship. On a personal basis we interacted constantly. We knew each other and we shared information, even if maybe the institutions that we worked for didn't always directly share, we shared on a personal basis. I would say that it was fairly cooperative. There were, of course, times when there were differences of view about certain things, and you might get one slant from Embassy reporting and another slant

maybe from Agency reporting, but that was, I think, fairly rare.

Now again often it's the question of resources. Jim Bill mentions Ernie Oney as one of the analysts from the CIA. I met Ernie many times and was always very much impressed with his depth of knowledge about Iran, and, you know, we debated back and forth about various things and had good conversations. But the Agency was generally able to put so much more money into whatever study they wanted to do than we were that-- I mean, Ernie Oney and another fellow-- what was his name? Chandler or something-- in this book, they worked on Iranian affairs over a period of decades. The State Department people were always coming and going. I mean, I was unusual, because I served there earlier and then came back. But many people just had a two-year tour in Iran and then off and never came back. So the degree of specialization that they had was greater than ours, because of the resources, and they could afford to have-- I mean not only in the field, but our people in INR, who had usually one guy analyzing Iranian affairs, and he would be there for two years and then gone and never come back.

So here's Ernie Oney and this other fellow, who were over all those years working on Iran. So they should have done a better job over all than they did, because they had people who concentrated for a long period of time on Iran. But in an operational sense, at the Embassy I think we had quite a cooperative relationship. So his characterization there I think is a little off base.

Q: What about the relationship between the Embassy and the USIA?  
How would you describe that?

Bolster: Well, I think that again the question of objectives comes in. The main objective of USIA is to publicize and inform people about American life in all facets of it, and that can be obviously done in so many different ways, and at various times in their history they've emphasized more one method or another. In earlier days in Iran, it was the film show. They would send mobile teams out into tiny little villages. They'd whip in and set up a screen and send around by word of mouth and by notes the fact that there would be a film showing that evening, and the villagers would crowd around and they'd see two or three films, and, oh, isn't this wonderful, the American technology is right here in our little village. And that was a big deal.

By the time I came back there in the seventies, that approach had been pretty much put aside and we were dealing with both the Iran-American Society as an institution, with all kinds of visiting Americans, who came and gave speeches and talks about various things, and a whole range of publications that were dedicated toward different groups in society.

We had one sort of picture book, with limited captions and short articles, that we'd put out. "Marzha-yi Naw". "New Frontiers" or "New Horizons", something like that is the translation. "Marzha" are borders, so it's "New Borders", but

the further idea was "New Frontiers" or whatever. And that was a very nice publication, done up with a lot of pictures and short text and so on for sort of general distribution.

Then we had some more intellectual magazines, with long articles, just a few pictures. We had really something for everybody. We had, of course, our daily-- our wireless bulletin that we sent out. We had Farsi texts of any declaration that was made that was felt worthy of further distribution. We'd have that out in Farsi within a day or less. Tremendous activity on publications.

I think there was a sense in the Embassy, at least in my view there was a feeling that USIA was too concerned about mechanical activities, the mechanistic approach. In fact, you would see it in USIA reports. You'd say, we have placed twenty-five thousand column inches of stories in this month's publications and we have distributed this many thousands of that publication and so on, as if just the fact of sending out all these things had accomplished a goal in itself. And we told some of our friends in USIA that we would buy a little bag of nuts in the bazaar and it would be made from pages of an American magazine, and you could read it. Of course, you could also buy nuts in a cone made of some Embassy report, some unclassified report that had been thrown out, and they saved these things and they made a little cone-shaped device to hold peanuts or whatever. But USIA publications often showed up in bazaar merchants' stores as wrapping paper. And we said, you know, you have this down as if it's been

accomplished, sending it out to people who are going to read it. Maybe they just throw it away and it's used to wrap packages. There was a little bit too much emphasis on that.

Another project I remember was one to keep track of all our contacts with Iranians. That is, which Iranians get which publications, and do we send this kind of publication to these people and are there more people we should send it to. We had these lists of people who were getting it and then we could add to it. We could say, now I've got a friend, Mr. So-and-So, who would be just right for this intellectual magazine that you've got. Let's put him on the mailing list. You know, that was good, in the sense that you could follow up with a contact and maybe expose him to something that would be very worthwhile reading. So we tried that.

But some of it again was-- you know, the system took up so much time, to keep this big project of who gets what and analyzing it and going over the mailing list and finding out who'd moved and whether it was going to the right address. You know, just the mechanistic problems overwhelmed some of these projects, as good as they might have been in the abstract.

So I felt that they tried a lot of things and some of them were very good and some were a waste of money, and, you know, it was all just pursued hell bent for leather, as if it was all equally important. And I'm sure they felt, as came across in the book-- Jim Bill mentioned some feelings on the part of the USIA people that they didn't get enough support from the Embassy.

Well, as one who's taken part in a number of things that they put on, I agree. I mean, it was hard to get Embassy officers to come and take part in after-work affairs. You've got a busy social schedule, all kinds of things you're supposed to go to, and cultural events you want to attend, and you're supposed to be seeing some Iranians at various times and getting together for dinner with them or whatever. I mean, you've got a very full schedule. So to block out another two or three hours to go and hear a lecture and take part in a discussion afterwards, a lot of people just passed it up.

But I've been to many of these lectures that were put on by USIA. They got some very good speakers to come out and some of them sparked a real interest on the part of the audience. There were lots of good questions. But then some others were just-- you know, they just sort of fell on deaf ears. You get an expert in some field who'd give a talk and there'd be two or three questions from the audience and that was the end of it.

Q: Now during the mid-seventies the question of human rights in countries like Iran was becoming a major controversy in Congress and the press and elsewhere. Now what kind of an impact did Congressional and other American criticisms of human rights-- of the Shah rather, criticisms of the Shah have on the Embassy? How was this question handled?

Bolster: Well, it had a lot of influence, because we kept

getting not only the generalized articles, where people brought up criticisms of the Iranian government, which were appearing in more and more publications in the States, but we started getting a flow of very specific requests. People writing letters or contacting the State Department, and they would forward it on to us, about "I want to know where Mr. So-and-So is, because I met him at so-and-so conference and I understand he's been picked up by SAVAK, and a friend of mine told me he's being tortured. I want to know. Please find out. Let me know."

And we did. We followed up on all these requests. We would go into the Ministry of Justice or we'd use other contacts and try to find out and get the word back to people. People that came out to look into human rights affairs, we gave extensive help to them. [William] Butler, who came out and looked into human rights, I met with him both before, during and after his approaches to the Iranian government. Sort of debrief him and find out what he learned.

I was the officer who was mainly responsible for human rights reporting and contacts in the Embassy in this period. So I wrote up analyses of what these various missions accomplished when they were there, and I wrote up detailed studies of how the Iranians carried out their judicial proceedings, and the changes that the Shah gradually implemented to satisfy some of the complaints. He actually did make some changes in his procedures in the government to meet some of the criticisms.

Of course, somewhere between the extremes of lurid tales of

tens of thousands of people being tortured to death and the Shah's statement that, well, there are only a few people in prison and they're all terrorists-- "They don't deserve anything, because they're terrorists"-- in between these two poles there's obviously some area of truth there in the middle. Clearly the Shah either directly ordered or tolerated a lot of hideous torture by some very sadistic people in his government.

But then you put that against what Khomeini did when he came into power and the people that were killed with no semblance of a fair trial. I mean a lot of the trials that were put on in the time when I was there, they weren't fair by our standards, but they were trials. There were defense counsels, there were juries. You know, there were some procedures. And you can attack the procedures, and people did. Jurists would attack the fact that the accused was not given a bill of particulars in advance to prepare his case or that he wasn't given enough time or that his defense counsel wasn't well prepared-- you know, all kinds of things you could criticize, but there was at least a certain set of procedures.

When Khomeini came into power, tens of thousands of people were just killed with the bare trappings of a trial. Just people yelling and screaming as to what they did in there. "What do you think? Guilty! Kill him!"

So I think it has to be taken in context. There were some liberal magazines in the States who wrote lurid tales of torture, and I'm sure they were based on fact. I know they were, because

you have people who have written first person accounts of how they were tortured. I mean, you've read some of those and I've read some of them and they're cited in Bill's book. But the extent, the number of people who were tortured I think was overdone. And there were all kinds of things in between of people who were just picked up in sweeps through areas where they had had some kind of a problem. They picked up a lot of people just on suspicion and sometimes they'd be held for months. Just inefficiency. They didn't really know who they had or why they had them, and finally when they realized they had the wrong people, they let them go. But they were, of course, embittered by that time, because they'd been held maybe for months or even-- I don't know, maybe even years, on charges that were not true, and then eventually released. But, of course, they were so embittered by that time that they joined against the regime too.

So there were a lot of very sadistic procedures used on Iranians, but the number has been over-stressed, and the consistency has been over-stressed. There was an awful lot of inconsistency and just pure inefficiency, where they didn't know who they had and why, and they tortured some people when they shouldn't have, and they let other people go who were probably guilty. There was just a lot of inefficiency in their system. Surely there was enough grounds for complaint, but it is true that the Shah made some changes to accommodate some of the views of these groups who came in and made quite thoughtful studies of the Iranian judicial system and how it worked.

Q: I guess this is more towards the end of your stay? '76?  
After '76?

Bolster: Yes. Right.

Q: Was there much of an effort made by higher level officials at the Embassy to try to deflect American criticisms of the Shah?

Bolster: No, because the things we got were generally, as I mentioned, some very specific questions. About Mr. X, who hasn't been seen, and his family says he's been picked up and So-and-So wants to know and please find out. So we'd find out and we'd send the word back, either directly to the person or through State Department channels. We did a lot of just fact-finding, looking into the situation and trying to tell people back home just what the situation was.

Q: How many in terms of like delegations who came to visit the country to observe the situation generally and they might have raised human rights issues in passing, whether briefing officials would try to find ways to minimize the criticisms or correct the criticisms--

Bolster: Well, I'm sure that depended on what level you're talking about, yes. I know I talked to people very frankly when

I was the briefing officer. I'd tell them very frankly what kinds of things were going on. But I'm sure that Miklos, when he briefed people-- like, you know, a World Affairs Council group breezes in, and here's the Deputy Chief of Mission to talk to you, I'm sure he wouldn't even bring it up in a long briefing session, and if somebody asked him, he'd probably minimize it, saying, well, yes, there are some people who engage in terrorism and so on. But he'd probably say something like, well, Iran does it, but it's no different from any other country in this area. You can't apply the same standards that we have to this part of the world. And, you know, there's some truth to that too. I mean, Turkish jails are no picnics either. They're really tough places, as you saw in that movie that was made about an American in prison in Turkey. "Midnight Express".

Q: Now in 1975 I guess a national .....  
was prepared, by George Harris, who was in INR that year, and the report discussed at some length the opposition to the Shah, among other issues. Did you see the draft report when it was circulated? Do you recall seeing this report? Bill talks about it a little bit in his book.

Bolster: I'm pretty sure I would have seen it, because generally papers that were written back in the Department were sent out to us for comment, and I think we probably read that and made our comments on it, yes.

Q: He suggests that it caused quite a lot of controversy in Washington, and I guess in the Embassy. There was some criticism in the Embassy, because the report dealt pretty frankly with the opposition to the Shah. Do you recall anything about that controversy?

Bolster: Frankly, I don't. Not that particular report, no.

Q: Okay. How long did you stay in Iran in your second stay?

Bolster: Just two years. '74 to '76.

Q: And you left when in '76?

Bolster: July. That's why this report was my last major ~~written~~ report.

Q: The one on decision-making?

Bolster: Yes. It's dated the 18th of July. That's probably just days before I left.

Q: What was your next assignment at State?

Bolster: Well, I came back and went to an energy related job in

the Department of Commerce. We had an exchange agreement between State and Commerce. And I was in that for a little over a year. Then I went to the Department of Energy, because the office that I was in in Commerce was made a part of the new Department of Energy. Which, as you recall, gathered together all parts of the government that were dealing with energy and put them under one head, under [James] Schlesinger. So I went with that group and finished up my two-year detail with DOE.

And then at that point they offered to send me to Antwerp, Belgium as Consul-General. So I went there for three years, '78 to '81. So I was in Belgium when--

Q: During the revolution?

Bolster: When the revolution occurred, yes. But I should say that before I went off to Belgium, I still kept up with some Iranian events, because I knew the desk officers working in Iran. I'd met some people. I'd met Sullivan when he was in on consultation, and I heard several of the presentations, including [James] Bill and Zonis and others that were financed by INR.

Q: In '78?

Bolster: Right. When they wanted to get an assessment of where Iran was heading, and they brought these people in, and I attended some in the summer of '78. Early summer or spring of

'78, before I went out.

I remember particularly going by the desk and reading a report that talked about various demonstrations that had occurred in widespread parts of Iran, where people had sacked railway stations and attacked SAVAK posts and Gendarmarie posts and so on. And at the end of this long litany of all these various attacks, the Embassy said that it had been unable to establish any pattern that coordinated all of these attacks. So apparently there wasn't any organized activity to direct this. And I said to the people on the desk, I said, that's exactly the wrong conclusion, because the fact is that if all of these separate activities are taking place against the regime and they're not coordinated, that shows that it's really serious, because it shows that it's widespread among the populace, that they're unhappy and even angry at the government and that's why they're taking out their frustrations on these government offices. But the Embassy, I thought, had sort of missed the point on the whole thing.

Q: This is the Embassy perspective you're talking about?

Bolster: Yes. The Embassy's perspective in this reporting that I was reading. So I thought they were misconstruing the importance of these wide-ranging and uncoordinated attacks.

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Q: That's very interesting. During the period of the revolution

itself or as the revolution deepened in mid-'78 and continued into early '79, were you contacted by anybody at the State Department or were you in touch with anybody?

Bolster: Well, I was in Belgium, as I say. Of course I started to learn some of the details of what life was like in Iran after the revolution from some of the Iranians who applied for visas, because they were coming to Europe any way they could, getting out of the country, and then a lot of them were trying to get to the States, so they'd come in and apply for an American visa. And generally I interviewed them then. In addition to the question of the visa, I asked them some general questions about life in Iran. So I learned a lot of details there.

Also I learned something about the revolution and the aftermath from Mogaddam, who fled to Paris after he got out of Iran. He came to visit me in Antwerp for a couple of days and we had long talks, and I reported some of the things that I was hearing from him back to the Department.

So I was aware through the information copy phenomenon of various things that were happening, and I was seeing some of the reporting from Iran. Even in my post in Antwerp there were info copies being sent to Brussels and I would get a copy of those. So I was keeping up in general terms.

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Q: From your perspective in Antwerp, what did you think of the way that the Carter administration approached the revolution?

Bolster: Well, of course I was seeing everything after the fact. That is, I wasn't seeing anything that was sort of in the way of a think piece or how should we proceed, what should we do. All I was seeing was the reporting of things as they transpired. I felt that the Carter administration started out on a reasonable footing with the new government. That is, once Khomeini had taken over. This is the import of your question, once it had taken over or-- ?

Q: Well, actually the development up to that point also. The policy towards the Shah and--

Bolster: Well, I was appalled by the fulsome praise that was being given to the Shah, in toasts and so on by Kissinger and Carter, when Carter visited there and made these very effusive toasts about this wonderful world leader. And Kissinger was saying, "We've come to learn from this experienced world leader, share views with him and learn his insights into the world to help us." I mean, to me it was just so far overblown that it was ridiculous.

Again, as I say, I never was one to say that we should have just in some way got rid of the Shah, but by the same token I think we made a tremendous mistake putting him up on a pedestal and forgetting about his problems. You know, we had to see this man, warts and all. We had to know what we were dealing with.

And we deluded ourselves, and those toasts that I read of Carter and Kissinger at various times just praising the Shah to the skies, as if he was a paragon of international knowledge. And he wasn't. He made some very clever moves in some ways internationally, but as a leader of his own country, he made a lot of terrible mistakes. And he's the one that suffered for them. And as Bill says, the Shah started lashing out at everyone. Once he left the country, it was everybody's fault. It was the United States's fault and it was other countries who undermined him. It was the Congress's fault. It was everybody but himself. I mean, he never felt that he'd made any mistakes.

It was always other people who had undermined his authority. He had all those years to do something with his country and he made a lot of foolish mistakes and in the end he paid for it. That's my view.

Now, as I say, once-- I think relations with Iran were totally mishandled in those last days of the Shah's regime, because-- and I mean by the government in Washington. I think credit must be given to the people at the Embassy, that they were finally convinced that the Shah was on shaky ground and that we had to make a move to pick up some pieces and start getting to know who Khomeini was and making contact with him. Even the Shah admitted that. But Brzezinski had this idea that somehow we could save the Shah if we just gave him a stiff backbone, you know. "Tell him we're behind him. We're behind you a hundred per cent." And this was not going to save the situation.

There was a lot of debate as to the time frame-- September, October, November of '78-- whether the Shah could have been saved or not. And I've heard pros and cons. My conviction-- and I've talked to some British diplomats who were there at that time, who share this, and it's my impression that if the Shah had cracked down firmly on any signs of dissent as late as October of '78, he could have saved the situation.

Now Bill-- this is where I part company with Jim Bill, because he feels that the revolution was so-- had so much momentum by that time that no matter what the Shah did, he was already losing by that time and that he couldn't have damped things down. I think that's wrong. I think even with the ferment that was going on at that time, if the Shah had been firm and consistent in applying force, that the Iranians would have grumbled, but everything would have settled down again. I think he could have saved the situation. But when it went beyond that, then you had the 40 day phenomenon, as you know, where, you know, on Day X students were killed.

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

Bolster: When I say the 40 day phenomenon, I mean on Day X two students were killed, and then there's one mourning period, I think seven days afterwards, but then the big one comes forty days after the deaths. And then there are more demonstrations

and then more people are killed, and then forty days from that there's another demonstration. So you began to have these affairs getting cumulative and getting bigger in terms of their impact on the society.

If he had still stopped that in October, I think he could have saved the situation. But when he showed inconsistency in his policy and showed that he wasn't sure what he wanted to do-- he first sort of said, well, I'll loosen up a bit, because that's what the U.S. wants me to do, so I'll let a thousand flowers bloom and let some new parties come along and so on. And then there were problems and then he cracked down.

And then in Tabriz, Governor General Azmoudeh was under orders to control the bazaar, so he acted tough and some people were killed. Then the Shah dismissed him and it appeared that he felt that had gone too far. You know, it was inconsistent the way he handled affairs from one day to the next, and I think that's when people sort of sensed that he wasn't able to consistently follow any particular line and that his hold was weakening on the country.

Had he been consistent in October and said, now a little bit of dissent is all right, if it's just oral and ideas fermenting, but I am not going to allow any demonstrations, and had put several down even with some force, I think he could have saved the situation. But once he got beyond that time, then no.

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Q: Although he had in September those so-called Black Friday

incidents at the square in Tehran. I mean, that's one example where extreme force was applied.

Bolster: Yes, that's right.

Q: It exacerbated the situation, I think, didn't it? Increased tensions, it seems.

Bolster: Was it in the Huyser book, when he talks about that? I think it was.

Q: Jalah Square I'm talking about, in September.

Bolster: Yes. After that incident there was a period of calm for a number of days, while people sort of looked around and were wondering, is this the new tough policy? And then when no further direction was given, no further indication of policy, then people started scurrying around again. There was a whole period of indecision there, I think, which people sensed during all that time, that he wasn't really sure whether to be tough or to be lenient. And I believe that people would have complained bitterly, but they would have knuckled under and gone back to their old ways of just talking their discontent among each other, but not doing anything about it.

But, you know, it's academic in a sense, because let's face it, the man by then was suffering the effects of cancer. And

people talk about the personality changes that cancer brings on. You know, people are up one day and down the next. And I think he was suffering from that problem right at this time. One day he wanted to be tough, the next day he said he couldn't remain as Shah if it meant doing so at the expense of thousands of lost lives and so on. I think he just was in his own mind unclear of what he should do.

And he couldn't get advice. See, that was the thing. The whole way he'd operated before was always that he was the ultimate authority, and if he asked one of his subordinates, should I do this or that, they would always just defer to whatever way they thought he wanted to go. You know, they just never wanted to give him any-- with one or two exceptions, but almost everybody just said, "Oh, you're wise, Your Majesty is so wise, what you decide is the best thing you could possibly have done." You know, he couldn't turn to anyone and say, "Now what do I really do to get myself out of this jam," and get clear advice. There was no one to do that.

Q: One final question. This is by way of conclusion. In his book, James Bill concludes in part that Iran-American relations represented both a failure of policy and a failure of intelligence. A failure of intelligence in the sense that he says Americans never really understood properly Iranian political culture. And a failure of policy in the sense that policy-makers refused to recognize the Shah's vulnerabilities.

To some extent you've already answered that question, but you want to give a little bit more time to that question?

Bolster: Well, I guess, in a sense, my position's already known, because Jim Bill mentions in one of his footnotes there, referring to me, that an Embassy officer who's too protective of his own Embassy says that reports did go in and there was a failure on the Washington end to act on them.

I still have to feel that way, and I can point to these reports. You know, I can say the White Revolution in Iran, this report on decision-making in Iran, the report on the Rastakhiz Party, the political dynamics paper of much earlier-- I can cite instance after instance where we reported the facts as they were clear to us, and the trends and what they meant.

But what happened to those reports? They just were read by a few people back in Washington and signed off and put them in the Out Box and someone put them in their files and that's all that was done.

Policy often was made by some junior officer on the desk writing a toast. I mean, this is a typical activity for an officer on the desk. Carter's going to visit Tehran, so maybe three months in advance some guy is sitting down preparing a briefing book, among which is a toast that the President's going to read at the night of the banquet given by the Shah for the visiting American President. And some junior officer sits down and writes out what he thinks the President ought to say. And

then maybe he writes something that's fairly full of praise, but maybe a little bit balanced. Then maybe his country director adds to that flowery language.[laughs] You know, make it sound more effusive to pay homage to his host. In the end the toast that comes out is just so flowery that it's embarrassing.

And that makes policy, because people who hear that say, well, that's American policy, that toast has just expressed American policy. So maybe two hundred times as many words have been sent in to Washington, telling them exactly what's happening in the country, but they're all ignored, because this one toast becomes policy. When the American President says this to the Shah at a big banquet, it's reported all over the world and all over Iran, this is American policy. The Americans are totally backing the Shah. And they see nothing else in the country besides the Shah, the man who's accomplished so much and led his country into democracy. You know, talking of everything as if it's all done. It's all an accomplished fact that Iran is now run by a benevolent dictator, who has brought democracy and the White Revolution to Iran.

I wouldn't be able to say that we sent in the reports if I couldn't show you, but I can show you not only the ones we discussed here, but more in my file upstairs and more that other colleagues have sent in over the years. It's there. But it was over-ruled many times or just ignored, put aside, and policy was made by so many other people sitting in Washington, who did not draw on all this information. And the reason is because at the

time when something comes up, all they have to go on is what's available right at that moment. No one's going to take the time to go back in the files and dig out five airgrams that really give the whole factual picture. They're just going to talk to somebody and they'll make a quick policy statement or toast or whatever and that becomes policy at that time.

So that's why I say it's a failure not of intelligence, not of reporting from the field, but a failure of policy in Washington.

Q: Thanks very much for your time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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