American Foreign Policy in Iran: Development, Strategy, and the Rise of Anti-Americanism

Introduction:

Diplomatic history has always been a subject surrounded by a great deal of debate. A problem to both contemporary critics as well as historians has been how to interpret both the causes and effects of American actions abroad. Often, many of these works take the form of exceptional observations,[1] with rationalizations given to the darker aspects of American policy by stating objectives were “generally good” and “representative of the common interest.”[2] By rationalizing American foreign policy as a force for good within the world, both contemporary critics and historians give tacit recognition of an ideological motivation within American foreign policy. The existence of an ideological motivation within foreign policy opens up a number of tensions, foremost being how such good intentioned ideas justify themselves against the negative aspects of American history?[3]

This tension was first observed by William Appleman Williams in his examination of American foreign policy towards Cuba. In his analysis, Williams illustrated how the initial humanitarian objectives of American foreign policy towards Cuba were undermined by the rise of subsequent strategic and economic interests.[4] The result was revolution, followed by a history of political tensions that have persisted into the present. The issues and processes that characterized the American experience in Cuba bear a striking similarity to those experienced within Iran. As with Cuba, the American policy in Iran is a story of humanitarian and internationalist principles undermined by conflicting interests and concerns arising from a larger foreign policy context. While American foreign policy may be good intentioned, the contradictory beliefs and commitments behind the foreign policy ultimately undermine its humanitarian aspirations. By stating that it supported self-determination, while in turn extending American power through strategic, economic and cultural dimensions, the United States served to compromise and attack Iranian culture. The result was a parallel development of American expansion and Iranian retraction, a phenomenon which compromised both America’s image and its position, and created the conditions for future revolution.[5]

American Foreign Policy up to 1953

When compared to other Western powers, the history of the American policy in Iran is brief. The United States became formally involved in Iran
following the Second World War. Before that, Western presence within the region was dominated by the British and the Russians, both of whom maintained military and covert influence within the country. During the pre-war period, American presence within Iran was minute, consisting mainly of missionaries and other charity groups. When the United States became politically involved in Iran, American policy inherited a legacy of good will from the altruistic works of private American citizens and a pre World War II foreign policy that had been scrupulously non-interventionist. As a result, Iranians commonly believed that the U.S. would be both a neutralizing third force and a defender against the predatory ambitions of Russian and British imperialism. American policy during this time was in a period of flux, as the American presence within Iran was changing from one that was predominantly private to one that was more and more controlled by the government. American officials found themselves in a situation where they were faced with the task of pursuing their own country’s national interest, while adhering to the hopes and principles which they associated with America.

Iranian hopes of a beneficial American-Iranian relationship increased during the Azerbaijan crisis of 1946. This crisis came about when, following the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union refused to withdraw its troops from northern Iran. Seeking to gain a share of Iran’s oil wealth, Soviet troops remained in the north and supported local Azerbaijani’s seeking independence. The Soviet Union eventually withdrew their troops following American naval deployment to the Persian Gulf as well as successful negotiations with the Iranians.[6] However, as far as the Iranians were concerned, it was the United States that got the Russians out of the country.

Throughout the remainder of the 1940s, American presence in the region steadily increased. American strategy during this period was primarily devoted to economic and political development. The objectives of this development were to create a stable political and economic system within the region that would ensure the uninterrupted exports of oil, as well as its denial to the Soviets.[7] Although the United States expanded its diplomatic presence during this period, Iran still was not recognized as a vital national interest. Despite the relative lack of official presence, America had a large cultural following within the country. The Iranian public viewed America quite favourably and American culture was beginning to be embraced by the Iranians. American films and music appealed to growing audiences, including those in the villages, where mobile audio visual units became a feature of life and a welcome diversion from everyday affairs. Many of the Hollywood film stars became household names and several popular magazines offering stories and pictures of the celebrity world of cinema were launched. This growing interest was evident in the popularity of the Voice of
America radio programs. VOA programs enjoyed a high amount of reception within Iran, with radio call in shows and trivia games being especially popular.\[8\] The cultural attraction of the United States also manifested within politics. Many Iranians supported pro-American policies and desired a closer relationship between the two countries.

The decisions undertaken during this early period illustrates a growing strain within American foreign policy. The humanitarian ideas of internationalism which had characterized the private expansion of the early half of the century were starting to clash with strategic and economic concerns regarding Iran’s position in the post-Second World War international system. Official American interests within Iran had developed out of the need to maintain allied support during the Second World War, and during the post-war period the United States had begun to pursue strategic and economic interests of its own.\[9\] Other factors increased the difficulties concerning American policy within Iran. Growing uncertainty concerning Soviet intentions, combined with increasing difficulties in supporting the new and unstable monarchy, and the popular expression of Iranian nationalism increased concerns regarding American policy within the region. It is during this period that the United States embarked upon its policy of supporting Mohammed Reza Shah and his followers. By supporting a conservative political order, American officials rationalized that they could guarantee their strategic and economic interest and maintain Iran’s journey to modernity within the international capitalist system.

The emerging nationalist movement within Iran had found its expression through the charismatic personality of Mohammed Mossadeq. Mossadeq had been a prominent figure in Iranian politics for many years, being politically active in the Reza Khan and post-war periods. An ardent nationalist, Mossadeq had made a career of campaigning for nationalist causes within the Majles.\[10\] In particular, Mossadeq worked towards nationalizing the Iranian oil industry. Following World War II, Iran’s oil industry had been controlled by the British owned Anglo–Iranian Oil Company. The AIOC’s monopoly over Iranian oil gave it a tremendous amount of wealth and influences both within Iran and internationally, while the profits received by the Iranians were minute. Consequently, oil nationalization was a powerful issue that attracted support throughout the political spectrum. In campaigning for nationalization, Mossadeq developed a large political movement which was able to dominate the Majles. When Prime Minister Hossein Ala was assassinated in 1951, Mossadeq was elected Prime minister.

Immediately Mossadeq proceeded to nationalize Iran’s oil assets, to which the British responded by organizing an international oil embargo on Iran. In
order to succeed in his nationalization effort, Mossadeq counted on support from the United States. Initially, the Truman administration lent moral support to the nationalists with American officials offering to mediate the legal dispute between the British and the Iranians. While committed to the principles of the Atlantic charter and peaceful development, American concerns regarding Mossadeq’s nationalization policy were deepened by the strategic and economic position of Iran compared to the Soviet Union, as well as the geopolitical stake held by the British. Well aware of the potential benefits of having Iran as an ally, the U.S. maintained a nuanced policy towards Iran.[11] Officially, the US sought to foster non-communist nationalist, liberal, and democratic movements with the intention that political reform and economic development would undermine the appeal of Soviet communism. Truman remained convinced that Mossadeq was a genuinely popular nationalist with strong anti-communist credentials whose views accurately reflected those of a large segment of Iranian society.

This approach was to change during the Eisenhower administration. Viewing economic and political reform movements as disruptive, Eisenhower foreign policy focused upon supporting stronger, right wing governments, which he saw as being more resistant to communist subversion. This view was reinforced by Mossadeq’s political actions, which Eisenhower considered to be reckless.[12] Following nationalization, Mossadeq’s fortunes began to decline. Two years later, Iran still suffered from a devastating western boycott of its oil, while at home Mossadeq’s political front began to fracture. [13] Despite a tumultuous domestic situation, Mossadeq’s undoing came from abroad. Motivated by fears of a communist takeover as well as economic concerns regarding the future flow of oil, and alliance politics regarding the reconstruction in Western Europe, the United States opted for a coup d’état to replace Mossadeq with a more reliable regime.[14] Code-named operation Ajax, the CIA implemented a plan devised by MI-6 which used corrupt military officials to depose Mossadegh and place the Shah back in power.

The overthrow of Mossadeq was representative of the new shape American foreign policy would have under the Eisenhower administration. Unlike the Truman administration, Eisenhower was not prepared to tolerate instability or dissention from the international political and economic order and had no qualms about aiding conservative and despotic regimes. While the strategic, geopolitical and economic concerns which motivated the coup have been well documented, there is an open question regarding the ideological aspects of the coup. While the common assertion is that the coup was deemed necessary in the face of Iran being ‘lost’ to the communists, deeper insights into the event casts doubt to such a simple assertion. It is clearly evident that Mossadeq was not a communist, and was not favour of the communist Tudeh
party. Furthermore, despite a crippling oil embargo and several coup attempts, Mossadeq’s government had managed to maintain itself for three years. Given the hollow nature of the standard explanations of the coup, attention should be given to how the Eisenhower administration perceived the situation. Inherent within both the strategic and economic justifications given for the coup[15] was a fear of potential political and economic instability. This fear bears a relation to broader concepts of American ideology going back to the principles of liberal developmentalism and American fear of revolutions abroad. By taking these perspectives into account it is clear that the Eisenhower administration saw that a successful nationalization policy within Iran would have disruptive effects throughout the international economic system and could potentially threaten the existing status quo. Another indicator of the ideological aspects behind the coup that was no consideration was given to how the action would be received in Iran. Although they had no conception of it, by allying with the British and effectively destroying Iranian democracy, the US destroyed the image of goodwill it had gained by the previous 50 years of private activity within the country.

The Eisenhower Administration and the Policy of Regime Re-Enforcement

Following the coup, American foreign policy became more intertwined with Iranian politics. American strategy during the 1950s sought to construct a balance of power in the region which would be more favourable to Western strategic and economic interests. In terms of Iran, the United States committed itself to developing the country to become its premier ally in the region. Central to this strategy was America’s grateful new ally, the Shah. By 1954, the Shah was in a position to consolidate his power over the whole of the Iranian society. With himself as the head of state, combined with General Zahedi as Prime Minister, the Shah was able to commence a strategy to consolidate his power over the various arms of the government. At the outset, the Shah solidified his position by suppressing his potential opponents. The first group to be targeted were the old members of the National Front who had supported Mossadeq and oil nationalization. Mossadeq himself was imprisoned, while many of his high level supporters were either shot or exiled. Lower ranking members of the national front received lighter treatment, and were either given light prison sentences or were banned from political office. The harshest repression was reserved for the Tudeh party, which saw many of its members shot or imprisoned. The Shah’s suppression of the Tudeh was so severe that a huge proportion of the party fled the country, which effectively destroyed communism as a political force within Iran. American support for the Shah’s consolidation efforts came in the form of
technical assistance in Iran’s domestic policing system. Under the organization of American general Norman Schwarzkopf, Iran’s police apparatus was modernized with the latest technical and managerial techniques.[16]

In conjunction with the suppression of potential opponents, the Shah created a new political alliance of groups loyal to him. These supporters consisted of members from the wealthy landed aristocracy, the bureaucratic middle class, and the traditional bazaar merchants. [17] All groups who had been opposed to Mossadeq and the National Front in 1953. After securing his domestic power base, the Shah focused on resolving the oil dispute. In doing so, Iran once again turned to the United States for assistance. The United States granted $45 million in emergency financial assistance to Zahedi, while in return, Iran signed a 25 year oil agreement, which gave an American dominated oil consortium access to Iran’s oil resources.[18]

Throughout the rest of the 1950’s, the Shah carefully managed his power base, and expanded his authority and control over the rest of Iranian society. Despite his monopoly on power, the Shah vividly recalled his exile during the Mossadeq period and sought to maintain a semblance of public participation in government. The Shah realized that the greatest threat to his position was the possibility of another Mossadeq-like figure gaining national prominence. To insulate himself against such a possibility, the Shah still maintained the parliamentary system and the position of the Prime Minister, although only candidates selected by him could assume the title. To maintain parliamentary control, the Shah expanded the term of the Majles from two to four years. This act gave the Shah time to compel more politicians to support his ambitions, and allowed him to construct a two party system in which both parties were loyal to him.[19]

The next step in the Shah’s assertion of power was to construct an effective internal security apparatus. As with previous political initiatives, the Shah enjoyed substantial American support in this effort. In 1957, with generous support and training from the CIA, the Shah created the Information and Security Organization of the Nation, or SAVAK. Ostensibly, SAVAK’s purpose was to gain intelligence on dissident and subversive movements within Iran, however, in practice they were little more than an oppressive secret police. Despite its notoriety, SAVAK was not the only secret intelligence service created. In conjunction with SAVAK, the Shah also created the Second Bureau to monitor the armed forces and the Royal Inspection Office to supervise all activities of the government. All three of these agencies were accountable only to the Shah. Following its creation, SAVAK began its repressive function by dismantling the remaining Tudeh and nationalist networks in the country.[20]
Throughout his reassertion of power, the Shah enjoyed tacit American support. Viewing Iran as an important ally in a region vital in both strategic and economic terms, the Eisenhower administration embarked on a policy of reinforcement to Iran. Between 1953 and 1956 the United States pumped more than 400 million dollars worth of aid into Iran— a figure that exceeded the total Iranian revenue from exports of crude oil in that period. By the end of the 1950s, the United States had provided Iran with more than 1 trillion dollars in aid. While that figure was lower than those for neighbouring Turkey and even communist Yugoslavia, it was large enough to give Iran’s moribund economy a new lease on life until growing oil revenues made US assistance unnecessary. Because nearly half the aid given by the United States was spent on the military, Washington was inevitably suspected of aiming at strengthening the Shah’s personal power base. Often, this aid was given as a reward for Iran’s adoption of policies that had Washington’s approval. Following the restoration of the Shah in 1953, the United States immediately provided several million dollars in economic aid to resolve the oil dispute; a donation which was petitioned for by the Mossadeq government, but was never finalized. Similar concessions occurred throughout the decade. The United States rewarded Iran for joining the Baghdad pact in 1955, and for staying with the alliance when it was altered and renamed CENTO in 1958. This development did not go unnoticed by the Iranian public. While Iranian politicians praised the strengthening of their country, it was commonly known that Iran’s armed forces were not prepared to face an external threat, and that their main function was the suppression of internal dissent.

It is during this period that the effect of the American presence within Iran, particularly on Iranian political culture, can be appreciated. American presence in Iran now manifested itself in dominant power structures which effected the working order of the country. These structures had their place in the military sphere through technical assistance programs, economics with development aid, and culture through media outlets such as the Voice of America. While reports from the economic and military dimension were encouraging, there was a profound gap in knowledge regarding the cultural disposition of the Iranian public. By this point, many Iranians had come to see America as the new colonialists, replacing the British and the Russians as the new foreign power intervening in Iranian affairs. While the government remained aloof of this development, the domestic retraction from American policy did not go unnoticed by private groups and individuals. One notable observer was Harvard professor C. Cuyler Young, who remarked that the rural Iranian population were extremely resentful of American foreign policy and presence within their country.
The ultimate failure of American policy under Eisenhower was its focus on military and economic support for the Shah. By emphasizing the expansion and modernization of the Shah’s armed forces, American foreign policy simply served to expand his power over a resentful Iranian public. Conceptually, Eisenhower’s aid policy contained several faults, which perpetuated the deteriorating economic and social situation within Iran. Eisenhower’s aid policy was designed to empower the government to maintain stability in the course of a changing society. Similar to the “gap theory” of the 1960s, the objective of this policy was to maintain stability by increasing the institution-building initiatives of the government to match the increase in socio-economic development.[24] With political stability preserved, Iran would be better able to integrate itself into the wider world of free market capitalism. Unfortunately, the new institutions created, such as SAVAK were designed purely for oppression, rather than advancing any form of political progress. Furthermore, by pumping vast amounts of money into Iran, American aid overexerted the smaller and less efficient Iranian state bureaucracy, a process which resulted in even more corruption within the government.

The failure of American policy during this period was also present at a bureaucratic level as American and Iranian officials clashed over different concepts of ‘development.’ These clashes between ideas were most evident in the process of implementation. In order for American companies to conduct any sort of project, both official and private networks had to work through the official Iranian state bureaucracies. This was difficult for many parties, as very few Americans had any sort of training or experience in the Iranian political and bureaucratic system. A disagreement between American and Iranian sides centred on how economic aid was to be structured and administered. Iranian officials wanted funds to be directed towards improving heavy industry and infrastructure, while American officials pushed for economic and educational reform. As a result, development was administered in a disorganized and ineffective manner.

Kennedy Foreign Policy and the Politics of Reform

By 1960, the Shah had moved a long way from the powerless monarch of the late 1940s. Unfortunately for him, the political structure that had been created in the 7 years since Mossadeq was about to backfire. By the early 1960s, the Shah’s system of guided democracy had become unstable. Over the course of the 1950s, concern regarding the political direction of their country prompted many Iranians to take the elections seriously, and many independent parties and politicians entered public life with reformist ambitions. When it became evident
that any attempt at real public participation would be futile, there was a massive public outcry as Iranians demanded legitimacy within their government. Perceptions of the potential threats posed by this domestic discontent were made worse by recent events in Iran’s neighbours. In 1958, Iraq endured a nationalist revolution, and in 1960 a military coup in Turkey seized power from a corrupt civilian government. The revolutionary spectre raised by these events was enhanced by Iran’s own domestic conditions. By 1960 Iran was facing an economic crisis as a downturn in oil prices had sent the country into a crippling recession.[25] Concerned about the threat of another revolution, the Shah dissolved parliament and dismissed two subsequent Prime Ministers.

American foreign policy towards Iran was to change during the Kennedy administration. Prior to his election, Kennedy had been a vocal critic of Eisenhower’s foreign policy. Kennedy accused the Eisenhower administration of “grave errors” in the Middle East, where he said the United States had given its support to “regimes instead of to people” and had too often tied its future “to the fortunes of the unpopular and ultimately overthrown governments and rulers.” Americans mistakenly believed, wrote Kennedy, that governments that were “friendly” to the United States and “hostile” to the communists were therefore good governments.[26] As he stated in his inauguration speech, Kennedy supported a foreign policy which emphasized political reform and economic development in the third world. He emphasized cutbacks to military support, instead channelling those funds into programs designed for economic and social development. Despite its altruistic appearance, Kennedy’s focus on economic and social development had other objectives in mind. Kennedy’s approach to foreign policy was designed to enhance American influence abroad while decreasing the appeal of Soviet communism. In addition, there was also a second track to this policy, as Kennedy’s economic reforms were also designed to reduce military sizes and reorganize them according to the new principles of counter-insurgency warfare. In essence, Kennedy foreign policy was designed to enact reform from above while forestalling revolution from below. Should economic and social development fail to prevent revolution, the US would support counterinsurgency operations against popular uprisings to maintain the status quo.

This complacency, however, was to change in the opening months of the Kennedy administration. Iran came to the forefront of American policy following Kennedy’s meeting with Khrushchev at his Black Sea villa on April 10, 1961. [27] During their discussion, Khrushchev informed Kennedy that, due to the corruption of the government and poverty of the general population, Iran was a perfect case of a revolution waiting to happen. Concerned about possible Soviet intentions within the Persian Gulf, Kennedy immediately asked the State
Department to prepare a detailed critique of US policy in Iran and present suggestions for future action. The paper that resulted was almost a rewrite of the policy that had been followed under the Eisenhower administration. Iran, it suggested, should cut its military expenditure and devote significantly more resources to economic management.[28] The Shah was informed of the plan both through US officials in Tehran and during talks with Kennedy himself in Washington. While far from pleased with the idea, he was persuaded that any reticence on his part might mean a withdrawal of US support at a time when profits from oil exports were not sufficient enough to let Iran stand on its own feet. The persistent American calls for reform worried the Shah, who suspected the United States might be planning a coup against him. This process of distrust continued with the US, continually pressing for economic and social reform and the Shah reiterating his need for further military aid.[29] American concerns deepened in May 1961, when thousands of teachers demonstrated in Tehran against pay cutbacks and poor working conditions.

While negotiations were conducted at the top levels of government, the political situation within Iran slowly began to spiral out of control. Between 1961 and 1963, over a dozen serious protests against the government took place in Tehran’s streets. In 1962, the National Front tried to resurrect itself following the publishing of a picture of Mossadeq by the national media (the first of its kind since 1953), and the ensuing government crackdown that led to widespread rioting in Tehran. A growing feature of the popular outrage exhibited by the Iranians was the popular resentment of American policy within Iran. Newspapers criticized American diplomats for snubbing ordinary Iranians, while maintaining ties and support with only the Shah and the wealthy elite; all of which was rationalized in the name of anti-communism. One editor charged that “the Americans have in practice done much damage to freedom in our country.”[30]

Fearing widespread revolution in Iran, the United States increased their pressure on the Shah to enact some measure of reform. In order to maintain a semblance of popular support and appease American pressure, the Shah appointed a new Prime Minister, Ali Amini, to the cabinet and dismissed the head of SAVAK, Gen Bakhtiar. A further change was the appointment of Hassan Arsanjani, a prominent reformer, to the head of agriculture. During his tenure, Arsanjani initiated a widespread land reform program (a policy which had been delayed by the Shah). While Arsanjani’s program failed to radically advance the economic situation, it succeeded in politicizing the peasantry, who began demanding changes in their own self-interest.[31] Both Arsanjani and Amini were halted in their efforts by the Shah and his supporters in the traditional classes. Amini was labelled a traitor to his class by traditional landlords and the
bureaucratic elite who saw their positions threatened by the reform programs and anti-corruption drives. The middle-class intelligentsia became opposed to Amini when he failed to call elections and form a Majles. As popular opposition grew, Amini, under pressure from the Shah, was forced to take more authoritarian measures to maintain order. The Shah used Amini as a shield to avoid criticism and eventually dismissed him. The American position following Amini’s dismissal is evidence of the continued tension within American foreign policy. Despite its rhetoric and the attempts to repair the damage done during the 1950s, Kennedy foreign policy ultimately succumbed to the same reasoning which characterized American foreign policy during the Eisenhower administration; supporting a conservative and dictatorial regime to maintain the political and economic status quo. Support which was rationalized by fears that should the Shah be forced from power, Iran could potentially shift to a neutralist foreign policy and leave itself open to Soviet influence and absorption.[32]

Economic Stagnation and Ideological Retraction

Despite its original intentions, the United States’ policy of economic and military aid towards Iran maintained an unequal, oppressive and ultimately self-destructive political and economic system. After ten years worth of financial support, by 1960, Iran had become a “Rentier state.”[33] After years of income from aid and oil money, the Iranian economy was inextricably linked to exports within the global oil economy. This situation was further compounded by the corrupt spending habits of the Shah’s regime. Rather than spending in ways to strengthen the Iranian economy, these funds were consumed in military, bureaucratic and infrastructural expenditures. Inflated by this combination of petrodollars and aid money, the Iranian government had distanced itself from the lives of the Iranian people. What little interaction occurred between the Iranian government and public was reactionary, and took the form of oppression, coercion, or simple interference with their day-to-day affairs. The distance between the government and the public was further exacerbated by the popular realization of the fraudulent nature of the political system. As long as the Shah possessed a monopoly of power within the country, any attempt at representative government was futile. Despite the extraordinary efforts of individuals such as Amini and Arsanjani, any and all attempts to reform the status quo were doomed to fail.

These misconceptions were not just a characteristic of American economic aid; they were inherent within the entire American policy for the region. American officials assumed that local peoples and regions were passive, and not pursuant of their own objectives, ideologies and interests. For instance, when organizing and maintaining the Baghdad pact and CENTO, the United States
was not cognizant of the regional and cultural differences between the Persian Gulf states. This fact was reiterated to American officials on numerous occasions by the Shah, who remarked that he viewed Iraq and Afghanistan as threats, and that they possessed equipment not included within the Iranian inventory.[34] Predictably, the response to this was for more aid, thus allowing the Shah and other regional leaders to play off the Americans against the Soviets to advance their own agendas.

American aid during this period was thus undermined by a critical flaw. By conceiving and structuring their foreign policy around seemingly compelling strategic, political and economic factors, American officials failed to take into account another vital variable: culture. By maintaining a policy influenced by self-centred ideas of their own national purpose, which in turn led the United States to support the Shah’s autocracy, new expressions of outrage resonated through Iranian political culture. As ideology is a system of symbols and metaphors communicating cultural moods and experiences, the Iranian reactions to American foreign policy are, in turn, representative of the genesis of a new ideology. The consequences of this reaction was that the United States came to be viewed as a new enemy, the Shah its puppet, and ‘America’ became synonymous with despotism.

The Iranian cultural reaction against American presence is evident in the events of 1963. On January 9th, 1963, The Shah outlined his six point reform program, dubbing it the ‘White Revolution.’ The White Revolution originally included six provisions: land reform, nationalization of forests, sale of state-owned enterprises to the public, establishment of a workers profit-sharing plan, women’s suffrage, and creation of a literacy corps. Despite the fanfare and propaganda which surrounded it, the ‘White Revolution’ was greeted sceptically by opposition forces and other political groups. The aristocracy opposed it as a threat to their status, the lower middle class saw it as a threat to their power base, and the intelligentsia criticized it for not dealing with the problems of political participation and social justice. However, in an unprecedented development the most ardent opposition came from the religious sections of Iranian society.[35]

While no single development had antagonized the clergy, recent actions by the government had signalled the adoption of unacceptable trends. While clerical criticism against the government had been growing for quite some time, it was the death of Ayatollah Borujerdi in 1960, which gave younger clerics the opportunity to speak out against the government. While specific contentions varied, with some clerics opposing the decision to reform lands belonging to religious foundations, and other opposed to allowing women to vote and
campaign for office, all agreed that the shah had gone too far in westernizing Iranian society. Amongst the new wave of radical clerics, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to national attention. In popular sermons, he stressed concerns that raised widespread indignation, such as the autocratic methods of the Shah, the pervasive foreign influence (especially American and Israeli) in Iran, widespread corruption and the muzzling of the press.[36]

Khomeini’s stance earned him a great deal of popularity throughout Iran, as many disaffected Iranians flocked behind the new revolutionary. Events came to a boiling point on June 5th, 1963, when thousands of people gathered in Tehran for an anti-government protest. Large crowds adorned in traditional Islamic dress carried Khomeini’s portrait through the streets and chanted anti-government slogans. The mob eventually became violent, damaging several buildings and making a failed attempt to take over a radio station. In response, the Shah ordered a military crackdown and declared martial law. Thousands died in the suppression, and thousands more were imprisoned.[37] Ayatollah Khomeini, along with several other clerics, was arrested and detained for several months. Despite the dramatic shift in Iranian politics, the significance of the riots of 1963 escaped American officials. President Kennedy summarized the American reaction to the demonstrations when he wrote to the shah: “I share the regret you must feel over the loss of life connected with the recent unfortunate attempts to block your reform programs. I am confident however, that such manifestations will gradually disappear as your people realize the importance of the measures you are taking to establish social justice and equal opportunity for all Iranians.”[38] This misconception was also endemic throughout the bureaucracy, as official analyses predicted that religion would cease to be an active political force in Iran.[39]

The June uprising had a profound impact both on Iranian politics and on the ulama[40] community in particular. In the literature of most oppositional groups, the June uprising symbolized the end of any hope for peaceful coexistence with the Shah and justified the start of armed revolutionary struggle.[41] For Khomeini, it was the start of a long revolutionary career. Khomeini’s daring in confronting the Shah politicized a whole generation of ulama and left a legacy in mosques throughout the country. Khomeini’s themes of anti-Americanism, opposition to Zionism and the Shah’s autocracy within an Islamic context attracted a large audience which cut across class and ideological distinctions, as what was once a latent bitterness expanded into a distinct political ideology.[42]
Conclusion

Ultimately, American reform policy in Iran was a failure as it preserved an unequal economic and political system rather than transforming it into a model for liberal-democracy. The white revolution was symptomatic of many failed programs in that it contained a fatal defect. By attempting to reform from an entire society from above, the program did nothing more than to inflate the power of local elites and bureaucrats within an already corrupt system, thus detaching them that much more from the population. Not only did it maintain an unequal economic and class system, it further motivated and sustained a brutal, dictatorial regime. Despite the intimate relationship between and the United States and Iran, the shah was in no way bound by American policies or objectives. Throughout his reign, he pursued his own policies and was able to use his alliance with the United States to advance his own purposes.[43] In his book, William Appleman Williams describes American foreign policy as a tragedy, with the definition of tragedy being: “greatness undone by an internal flaw.”[44] In the case of American foreign policy, the tragedy perpetuates itself as the United States tries to help other cultures, but undermines its intentions in the very way it goes about helping them. The situation is then compounded when, in the pursuit of these interests, American policy creates its own self-fulfilling prophecy. In seeking to prevent the rise of a communist “Khrushchev” or an anti-American revolutionary, such as Cuban Dictator “Fidel Castro,” American policy created a whole new breed of revolutionary, Ayatollah Khomeini.

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Throughout this paper, reference will be made towards both ‘ideology,’ and ‘culture.’ As both are terms that lack a concise definition, the operating definition for these both is as follows. Ideology is an integrated and coherent system of symbols, values, and beliefs, which arise from socially established structures of meaning. Culture in turn, is the combined traditions, processes, habits, actions and structures that are characteristic of a social group. For more insight into these two concepts, see Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in *Ideology and Discontent* ed D. Apter, (London: The Free Press, 1964). Robert Scalapino, “Ideology and Modernization: The Japanese Case,” in *Ideology and Discontent* ed D. Apter, (London: The Free Press, 1964).

American foreign policy originally focused on Cuba during the Spanish-American War, where American forces intervened in the island to liberate Cuba from Spanish oppression. Despite those original intentions, subsequent strategic and economic interests compelled the United States to maintain an equally unequal political and economic system, thus sowing the seeds for revolution sixty years later. See William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1972), 3.

The ideological dimension within American foreign policy is centred on the images and ideas which were fostered by a broad historical experience. Essential to this outlook is the place occupied by the United States within human history and world affairs. It is in this facet of American ideology that two active sets of ideas can be perceived, one being America’s vision of its own national greatness, while the other being an expansion of the ideas of liberal development. When applied within an official foreign policy, both the vision of national greatness as well as the beliefs of liberal internationalism merged to create a concept of universalism, where there was no conflict between national advancement and global progress. See Michael. Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987). Emily. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang Publishing, 1982).
Although they thought it initially successful, events immediately following Iran’s reassertion of power over its northern provinces showed the Soviets that they had in fact been deceived and outmanoeuvred by the Iranians. James. Bill, the Eagle and the Lion: the Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations, (London: Yale University Press, 1989), 43.

Yonah Alexander, Allan Nanes, the United States and Iran: A Documentary History (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1980), 189-191.


These interests included: protection for Saudi Arabia, stability and access to Saudi oil, growing interest within Iranian oil. James. Bill, the Eagle and the Lion, 49.

The Majles refers to the Iranian parliament.

The United States signed a mutual defence agreement with Tehran in May, approved a $25 million Export-Import Bank loan, began a programme of military assistance that would provide an average of $23 million per year in military aid though 1956 and supported an Iranian application for a $10 million loan from the World Bank. Washington also began to press the British harder to compromise with Iran on an oil concession, suggesting that a fifty-fifty split would be appropriate. See Barry. Rubin, Paved with Good Intentions, the American experience in Iran (New York: Oxford University, 1981), 23, 46-47.


Iranian oil production had fallen from 660,000 barrels pre day in 1950 to just 20,000 in 1952. Tens of thousands of oil industry workers had lost their jobs, and numerous other Iranians who depended on the oil workers as customers and the industry for business were feeling the effects as well. Stephen. Kinzer, All the Shah’s Men, An American Coup and the Roots of MidEast Terror (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000), 136

The strategic justifications involved the prevention of Iran being subverted by the communists, as well as the maintenance of the Anglo-American alliance within the Middle-East. Economic concerns involved sustaining the British oil industry, preserving international oil prices and gaining access to Iranian oil resources for American businesses.


Clerical support for the Shah existed amongst certain right wing and pro-monarchy clerics. These mullahs worked with the government and used religious networks and institutions to spread messages supportive of the Shah or the government in general. Most notable amongst these was Ayatollah Borujerdi, who had covert contact with the government and influenced clerics surrounding him to support the Shah in their sermons. James. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, 107.


Iran’s location made a friendly relationship with the country a vital interest to American geo-political strategy. Many of the interventionist activities of the United States in Iran were triggered by its desire to strengthen the Pahlavi regime against potential encroachment by the Soviet Union. Economically, Iran was vital in its large oil reserves and potential for profits and investment by members of the American led oil consortium. See Barry Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions*, 23.


Amir. Taheri, *Nest of Spies, America’s Journey to Disaster in Iran*, 44.


[28] In observing the Iranian situation, American officials outlined a detailed recovery plan, with financial incentives from aid money provided to the more buoyant sections of the economy. See Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, 125

[29] These points were hammered home by both sides in the numerous state visits which occurred during this Period. See Memorandum of Conversation, United States-Iran Relations, April 12, 1962. Foreign Relations of the United States, Near East 1961-1962.


[31] Although both men were officially were used as scapegoats by the Shah, Arsanjani’s successes increased his popularity among the populace, and he resigned his position in 1963. See Nikkie. Keddie, Roots of Revolution: an Interpretive History of Modern Iran (London: Yale University Press, 1981).


[35] Milani, the Making of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, 98.

[36] Goode, “Reforming Iran in the Kennedy years,” 26


[38] Goode, “Reforming Iran during the Kennedy years,” 32.
Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs to Secretary of State Rusk, Washington, June 6, 1963. FRUS, Near East 1962-1963, 571.

‘Ulama’ is the Iranian term for the religious caste of society.

Abrahamian, Radical Islam, 82.


This relationship was aptly referred to by Gary Sick, who said “Iran was the regional tail wagging the superpower dog.” Gary. Sick, All Fall Down: America's Fateful Encounter with Iran (New York: Random House, 1985).

Williams, Tragedy of American Diplomacy, 204.