

Iran-Hostage Crisis

(November 1979 - January 1981)



Corbis

An American hostage

- 1 On November 4, 1979, an angry mob of young Islamic revolutionaries overran the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, taking more than 60 Americans hostage. "From the moment the hostages were seized until they were released minutes after Ronald Reagan took the oath of office as president 444 days later," wrote historian Gaddis Smith, "the crisis absorbed more concentrated effort by American officials and had more extensive coverage on television and in the press than any other event since World War II."

The Iranian Revolution

- 2 Fast forward to New Years Eve, 1977: President Carter toasted the Shah at a state dinner in Tehran, calling him "an island of stability" in the troubled Middle East. What the president also knew, but chose to ignore, was that the Shah was in serious trouble. As opposition to his government mounted, he had allowed his secret police, SAVAK, to crack down on dissenters, fueling still more resentment. Within weeks of Carter's visit, a series of protests broke out in the religious city of Qom, denouncing the Shah's regime as "anti-Islamic." The popular movement against the Shah grew until January 16, 1979, when he fled to Egypt. Two weeks later, thousands of Muslims cheered Khomeini's return to Iran after fourteen years in exile.

The Crisis

- 3 Even after it became known that the Shah was suffering from cancer, President Carter was reluctant to allow him entry to the United States, for fear of reprisal against Americans still in Iran. But in October, when the severity of the Shah's illness became known, Carter relented on humanitarian grounds. "He went around the room, and most of us said, 'Let him in.'" recalls Vice President Walter Mondale. "And he said, 'And if [the Iranians] take our employees in our embassy hostage, then what would be your advice?' And the room just fell dead. No one had an answer to that. Turns out, we never did." When students overran the embassy and seized more than sixty Americans on November 4, it was not at all clear who they represented or what they hoped to achieve. In fact, a similar mob had briefly done the same thing nine months earlier, holding the American ambassador hostage for a few hours before members of Khomeini's retinue ordered him released. But this time, Khomeini saw a chance to consolidate his power around a potent symbol, and issued a statement in support of the action against the American "den of

spies." The students vowed not to release the Americans until the U.S. returned the Shah for trial, along with billions of dollars they claimed he had stolen from the Iranian people.

Carter's Response

4 President Carter felt the plight of the hostages deeply, and considered their safe return his personal responsibility. On November 11, he embargoed Iranian oil. On the 17th, Khomeini announced that female, African American, and non-U.S. citizen hostages would be released, because women and minorities already suffered "the oppression of American society." Fifty-three Americans (including two women, Elizabeth Ann Swift and Kathryn Koob, and one African American, Charles Jones) remained as hostages. Deciding military action was too risky, Carter tried to build pressure on Iran through economic sanctions, and froze its assets in the U.S. While Secretary of State Cyrus Vance led the official diplomatic effort, Hamilton Jordan spent thousands of hours working secret channels. For the first few months, the American public rallied around Carter, who had clearly made freeing the hostages his number one priority. "Having a crisis, where you have to stay in Washington and deal with this crisis all the time, and be a statesman, can work to your advantage -- rally around the president in a crisis," says political scientist Betty Glad. "What Carter didn't foresee is, this enormous investment means you have to have a resolution to the issue."

5 As winter turned to spring, and negotiations failed to produce a deal, frustrated Americans demanded stronger action. "No one can know how much pressure there was on Jimmy to do something," Rosalynn Carter recalled. "I would go out and campaign and come back and say, 'Why don't you do something?' And he said, 'What would you want me to do?' I said, 'Mine the harbors.' He said, 'Okay, suppose I mine the harbors, and they decide to take one hostage out every day and kill him. What am I going to do then?'"

Desert One



Corbis

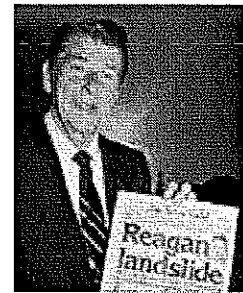
Desert One helicopter

6 Finally, with the Iranians showing no signs of releasing the hostages, Carter decided to take a risk. On April 11, 1980 he approved a high-risk rescue operation, called "Desert One," that had been in the works for months. Though the odds were against its success, the president was devastated when he had to abort the mission due to three malfunctioning helicopters. When another helicopter crashed into a C-130 transport plane while taking off, eight servicemen were killed and three more were injured. The next

morning, gleeful Iranians broadcast footage of the smoking remains of the rescue attempt, a stark symbol of American impotence.

The Hostages' Release

7 Relatively little happened during the summer, as Iranian internal politics took its course. In early July, the Iranians released hostage Richard Queen, who had developed multiple sclerosis. In the States, constant media coverage -- yellow ribbons, footage of chanting Iranian mobs, even a whole new television news program, ABC's *Nightline* -- provided a dispiriting backdrop to the presidential election season. As Carter advisor and biographer Peter Bourne put it, "Because people felt that Carter had not been tough enough in foreign policy, this kind of symbolized for them that some bunch of students could seize American diplomatic officials and hold them prisoner and thumb their nose at the United States."



Corbis

Reagan after his victory

8 Finally, in September, Khomeini's government decided it was time to end the matter. There was little more advantage to be gained from further anti-American, anti-Shah propaganda, and the ongoing sanctions were making it harder to straighten out an already chaotic economy. Despite rumors that Carter might pull out an "October Surprise" and get the hostages home before the election, negotiations dragged on for months, even after Republican Ronald Reagan's landslide victory in November. Carter's all-night effort to bring the 52 hostages home before the end of his term, documented by an ABC television crew in the Oval Office, fell short; the Iranians released them minutes after Reagan was inaugurated.

9 On January 21, 1981, now-former President Carter went to Germany to meet the freed hostages on behalf of the new president. It was a difficult moment, fraught with emotion. Hamilton Jordan recalled that Carter "looked as old and tired as I had ever seen him."