

The Iran rescue caper

The wreckage of the Carter administration

by Robert Dreyfuss

The resignation of Cyrus Vance in public disagreement with the White House, an almost unprecedented occurrence in U.S. history, has knocked the remaining props out from under American foreign policy and sent U.S. allies and friends scurrying to duck the debris. Domestically, the resignation of the Episcopalian aristocrat has once and for all shattered the illusion of national unity that had been carefully cultivated since the start of the Iran crisis last November.

The news of the Vance resignation hit the summit meeting of the European Economic Community like a bombshell. For weeks, especially since the April 8 Carter announcement of economic sanctions against Iran and the U.S. break in diplomatic relations, America's NATO allies and Japan had been caught in an increasingly uncomfortable squeeze. Knowing that the proposed U.S. measures against Iran would be counterproductive and dangerous, they were also aware that Washington was making their acceptance of such measures a litmus test of their loyalty to the Atlantic Alliance. With Vance's resignation, which reportedly stunned the European leaders only just recovering from the shock of the failed U.S. rescue action, the Europeans felt relieved of any responsibility for what many French and West German leaders considered to be knee-jerk solidarity with the Carter administration. *Le Figaro*, the conservative French daily which often reflects the views of the Giscard

government, said bluntly that the Vance departure proves that not only Europe "but even the American secretary of state" disagrees with Carter policy.

The impetus behind the Vance departure, according to insiders, was the fact that Vance seriously believed that the Carter-Brzezinski policy would lead to World War III. Just before his resignation, Vance reportedly told a friend, "We haven't begun just an attack on Iran. We may have started World War III." Together with a particular Anglo-American faction associated with former New York Governor Averill Harriman and former U.S. Undersecretary of State George Ball, Vance ditched the Carter administration in the belief that the regime was heading over the brink.

In this sense, the Iran crisis and the rescue action were mere ephemerals in a much broader strategy leading to what Ball described this week as a "pattern of escalation." The *New York Times*, in an editorial on Vance's resignation, said what many others were thinking, that much more than Iran *per se* was involved in Vance's decision. "Duty will not be done until Mr. Vance tells the nation what he finds so reprehensible about . . . rescuing hostages," wrote the *Times*. "If Vance so feared the failure of the rescue mission—and perhaps even more the success—it must be because he knows more than the rest of the country about the President's mood and the drift of his policy in these days of frustration."



Iranian soldiers look over the wreckage of a U.S. helicopter in the Iranian desert.

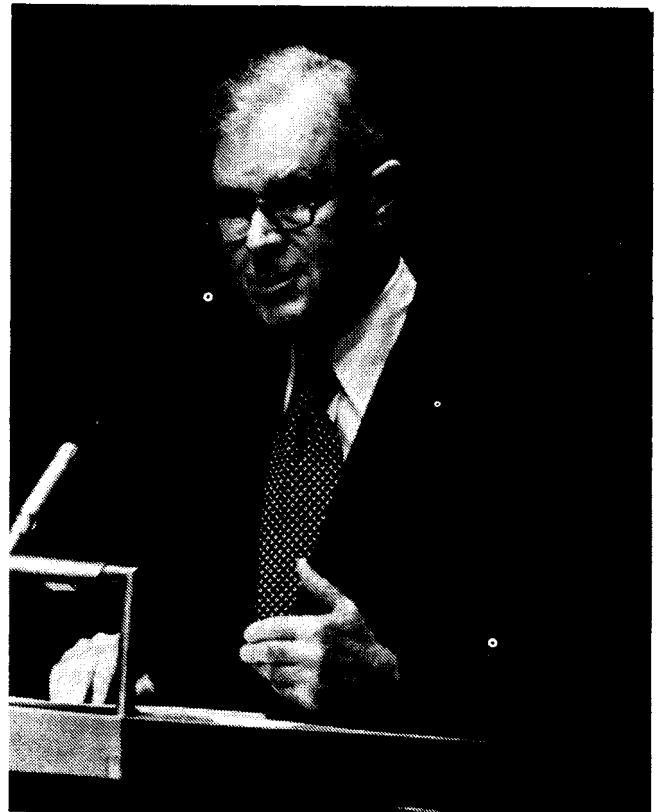
Photo: Sygma

New York Times columnist James Reston, close to Vance ever since the secretary served on the board of the Times company, reported that what Vance sought was the dismantling of the powerful National Security Council and its downgrading from a policymaking to a simple coordinating body.

What is certain is that the failed raid on Iran and the Vance resignation have plunged the country into the most profound foreign policy crisis in this century, coupled with a complete fragmentation and disintegration of political leadership. What is much less certain is the actual course of events in and around the attack on Iran itself.

At this point, what can be said with some assurance, according to *EIR's* sources, is the following:

First, the mission was not aborted because of the failure of three helicopters. Informed military experts assert that the chances of those helicopters failing simultaneously was approximately 1 in 10,000. Further, according to reliable reports, the Soviet Union was involved in direct military action against the U.S. raiding party. During the operation, CIA sources report, a Soviet Mig jet fighter was shot down by U.S. forces. According to other information, the Soviet air force carried out a limited air strike against the exposed U.S. force on the Iranian desert, while one source asserts that the Soviets did not actually attack the U.S. party but simply sent



Cyrus Vance: What does he know?

Photo: U.N.

several Mig-25s over the landing area "and someone in the field command panicked," thus aborting the mission.

Second, several sources, including published reports in the Kuwaiti *Al-Qabas*, claimed that the Kremlin got on the "hot line" with the White House to warn against continuing the attack on Iran. Despite Pentagon denials of such reports, U.S. assertions that the Soviet Union did not know about the raid until the U.S. told them 30 minutes beforehand are not credible, and intelligence specialists agree that Soviet intelligence would have detected the raid even while it was in the planning stage.

Israeli intelligence leaks that appeared one day before the raid, concerning U.S. air activity from bases in Egypt, indicates that the raid itself was no secret to insiders.

Third, it is certain that the U.S. government and Iranian authorities, including Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh and President Bani-Sadr, acted in full collusion with the United States, as the report below makes clear. Thus, the action could not have been designed in order to overthrow the Khomeini regime—since, in fact, the impact of the U.S. action would have been to

strengthen the grip of the clerical regime by providing a rallying point for them against their growing opposition, much of which is getting powerful backing from Iraq.

To the extent that the operation was a rescue action, it could only have succeeded with the collaboration of the Iranian leadership, many of whose leading figures would like to be rid of the hostages in a manner that will not open them to criticism for having made a compromise with "the Great Satan."

Policy vacuum

The wake of the attack on Iran, has created a policy vacuum in Anglo-American circles. While key forces in New York and London have realized that the Brzezinski White House is heading for war, in both the rest of Western Europe and for the Soviet Union the scenery is dominated by the common understanding that the situation is out of all control. In fact, at this writing, reports continue to come in with evidence that Brzezinski is still building up forces in the area and keeping options open for more military action in the immediate period ahead.

U.S. - Soviet hotline invoked during Iran crisis?

Five top-level European sources reported to *EIR* this week that President Carter and Soviet President Brezhnev were on the "hotline" between Washington and Moscow during last week's Iran "rescue operation" crisis.

This report was propelled into the international press as well by an account in Kuwait's *Al-Qabas*, datelined Paris, that the two leaders had been in "hotline" communication during the peak of the crisis.

The consensus among these sources is that something "much bigger" than a rescue operation was going on last week. While the conventional wisdom from these circles is that the Soviets were irate over the massive dimensions of the U.S. operation being launched, another school of strategic thinking surmises that the Soviets would not "go to the brink" in this way unless they were responding to some kind of

general U.S. strategic alert called during the operation.

While there has been, as of this writing, no *confirmation* of this last hypothesis, reports *have* begun to surface in the international press that the U.S. and the Soviets were very close to World War III last week. According to an account in the May 1 *Al-Qabas*, "When Cyrus Vance was shown the range of options involved in the action, he told Carter, 'Mr. President, you are not carrying out a rescue mission. You are firing the first shot in World War III.' It was at that moment that Vance tendered his resignation."

What aborted the 'rescue mission'?

Three high-level U.S. policymaking sources independently reported their assessments May 1 that the reason that last week's Iran "rescue mission" had been aborted by President Carter and/or the on-site commanders was that the Soviet Air Force moved in force against the planes at their staging-ground, either attacking them or threatening to mount an attack. Once the Soviets made their move, these sources concur, the

From this standpoint, the British intend to take advantage of the very fact of the appearance of a crazed White House in order to attempt to strengthen their own influence in continental Europe. Essentially, the British argument is that the "special relationship" between London and Washington will allow the British—whose Lord Carrington arrives in Washington this week—to represent the interests of all Europe in taming the American monster.

Thus, within the councils of the EEC the British have been arguing, albeit with questionable success, that they be allowed to become the arbiter and spokesman for Europe.

But along with the wreckage of American helicopters and C-130s on the Iranian desert is the wreckage of the painstakingly cultivated U.S.-British strategy for putting cumulative pressure on Western Europe. Whereas only last week the Europeans were caught up in a process of step-by-step capitulation to NATO, since the Iran events, the entire geometry of European politics has shifted. Which direction Paris and Bonn will now take is an open question.

U.S. command panicked and the escapade was called off.

According to one leading New York-based foreign policy adviser to several presidential administrations, "the only information that I have seen that makes any sense at all is that the mission was aborted because of an actual Soviet attack or because of the threat of such an attack."

A Washington-based expert on Iranian affairs provided the following account of the chain of events: "Once the Soviets got wind of the dimensions of the operation being launched inside Iran, they immediately began overflights into Iranian territory in the vicinity of the staging-ground. They sent MIG-25s up there as a warning. When our people realized what was going on, they panicked, they lost their nerve and called a retreat."

One well-informed oil industry source added an important twist to these accounts: "My information is that the Russians probably just blew the planes up. There was a Soviet air strike that wrecked the mission, that caused panic in the command. The Soviet action was not based on hostility to our getting the hostages out; that they can go along with. What they can't stomach is the dimensions of the operation that we mounted—especially with Zbigniew Brzezinski at the helm of American policy."

THE RESCUE RAID

Will Brzezinski try it once more?

The Carter administration's aborted raid into Iran last week has set the stage for gradually escalating, low-intensity operations in Iran and throughout the region, leading inexorably to a follow-up U.S. military adventure that could well trigger a cutoff of oil supplies and a full-blown military confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The first in this series of escalating incidents occurred early April 29, when U.S. Air Force fighter planes attacked an Iranian reconnaissance jet over the Gulf of Oman. Although the Pentagon denied the affair stating that the incident involved only a routine "shadowing" of the Iranian plane, the Iranians claimed that an altercation took place, with their air force successfully repulsing the U.S. jets.

National Security Council chief Zbigniew Brzezinski, the loose nut of the Carter administration, is the architect of Washington's suicidal policy to go to the brink—and beyond—in Iran in the interest of taking on the Soviets "once and for all." In a nationwide television interview April 27, Brzezinski made this all but official by announcing that an aggressive "long reach" policy would henceforth characterize America's posture abroad.

Brzezinski's Operation Long Reach is taking the dimension of the largest military buildup ever by the U.S. in the Indian Ocean-Arabian Sea theater. The U.S. aircraft carrier Forrester has entered the Indian Ocean area and, later in the week, the nuclear-powered carrier Eisenhower will also join the deployment, as the fourth aircraft carrier poised for action in the strategic Persian Gulf. A total of 44 warships are now positioned at the entrance to the Gulf and are reportedly assuming battle formations. In addition, U.S. Airborne troops are being airlifted into Bahrain and other "suitable areas."

In short, everything is primed for a showdown.

The Soviet armed forces newspaper *Red Star* has charged that the United States may try military actions in Iran again. Such actions "will inevitably lead to a further heightening of the danger of hostilities in the Middle East and a further aggravation of the international situation," the paper warned.