

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #15

The United States had long counted Iran as a faithful ally, a bulwark against Soviet expansion into the Middle East and a steady source of oil. Since the 1940s, Iran had been ruled by Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi. Ousted by a democratically elected parliament early in the 1950s, the shah, or king, sought and received the assistance of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which helped him reclaim power in 1953. As a result, American intervention soured Iranian views of the United States for decades.

President Jimmy Carter had an idealistic vision of American leadership in world affairs. He presented himself as the anti-Nixon, a world leader who rejected Henry Kissinger's "realism" in favor of human rights and peacemaking. Carter asserted: "Human rights is the soul of our foreign policy, because human rights is the very soul of our sense of nationhood." He established the Office of Human Rights in the State Department.

Despite his fine words, however, Carter followed the same path in relations with Iran as his Cold War predecessors had – overlooking the crimes of Iran's CIA-trained secret police and ignoring mounting popular enmity toward the United States inside Iran. Then came the Iran crisis. Early in 1979 a revolution drove the shah into exile and brought a fundamentalist Shiite cleric, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, to power. Shiites represented one branch of Islam and opposed the other – the Sunnis. The ayatollah symbolized the Islamic values that the shah had tried to replace with Western ways. Khomeini's hatred of the United States dated back to the CIA-sponsored overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh's government in Iran in 1953. Nor did it help the American image that the CIA had trained SAVAK, the shah's ruthless secret police force.

Late in 1979 the exiled shah was allowed to enter the United States in order to undergo treatment for cancer. A few days later, on November 4, a frenzied mob of Iranian students stormed the American embassy in Tehran and seized the diplomats and staff inside. Altogether the hostages numbered sixty-six. Khomeini endorsed the mob action and demanded the return of the shah to Iran for trial along with all his wealth in exchange for the release of the American prisoners. Carter refused. Instead, he suspended arms sales to Iran.

In the meantime the Iranian militants staged daily demonstrations for the benefit of worldwide news and television coverage in which the American flag and effigies of the American president were burned and otherwise desecrated. This triggered the most profound crisis of the Carter administration. For the next 444 days the hostage crisis paralyzed Carter's presidency. Night after night, humiliating pictures of blindfolded American hostages appeared on television newscasts. Indignant Americans demanded a military response to such outrages, but Carter's range of options was limited. He appealed to the United Nations, protesting what was a clear violation of diplomatic immunity and international law. Khomeini scoffed at UN requests for the release of hostages.

**Carter then froze all Iranian assets in American banks and appealed to American allies for a trade embargo against Iran. The trade restrictions were only partially effective – even America’s most loyal European allies did not want to lose their access to Iranian oil. So a frustrated and besieged Carter authorized a risky rescue attempt by American commandos in 1980. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance resigned in protest against this decision and against the President’s sharp turn toward a more hawkish foreign policy. The commando raid was aborted because of helicopter failures and ended with eight fatalities when another helicopter collided with a transport plane in the desert.**

**Nightly television coverage of the taunting Iranian rebels generated widespread popular craving for further action – including some calls for a nuclear attack – and a near obsession with the falling fortunes of the United States and the fate of the hostages. The end came after fourteen months of captivity when a stunning development changed the thinking on both sides. Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, invaded Iran, officially because of a dispute over deep-water ports, but also to prevent the Shiite-led Iranian revolution from spreading across the border into Sunni-run Iraq. Desperate to focus his nation’s attention on Iraq’s invasion, Khomeini began to talk with the United States about releasing the hostages. Difficult negotiations dragged on past the American presidential election in November, 1980. Carter, in his final act as president, released several billion dollars of Iranian assets to ransom the kidnapped Americans.**

**On January 20, 1981, in a final indignity endured by a well-intentioned but ineffectual President Carter, a plane carrying the hostages left Tehran for Algiers moments after Ronald Reagan finished his inaugural address. Carter then flew to Wiesbaden, West Germany, as the new president’s envoy to greet the released hostages at an American base. The hostage crisis, however, had not only destroyed Carter’s chances for reelection. It also had severely damaged the prestige of the United States in the Middle East and around the world.**