**Resource Sheet #01 Iran Hostage Crisis – Student Background Essay**

Iran is an oil rich country in the Middle East that was occupied by Britain and the Soviet Union during WWII in order to prevent Germany from capturing or controlling the region. A king, called the Shah, Reza Shah Pahlevi (pah-luh-vee) was in power in Iran from 1941-1979. As WWII came to an end, the Shah requested that both nations remove their troops, which occurred by the end of 1946. After the war, the United States took interest in Iran, and continued to support the Shah’s government. At the height of the Cold War, the U.S. wanted both to prevent the Soviet Union from spreading its influence in the region and to have access to Iran’s oil.

During the 1960s, the Shah became increasingly authoritarian. He dissolved parliament and increased his powers in 1961. Additionally, he pursued ambitious plans for economic and agricultural modernization, both of which disrupted traditional Iranian society and made life more difficult for the poor and ordinary citizens. As opposition to the Shah’s policies grew, his government became brutally repressive. His security service suppressed, imprisoned, and tortured Iranians who dared to challenge or resist the Shah. American support, both diplomatic and military, emboldened the Shah, but also linked the US with his oppressive regime in the eyes of his domestic opponents. Many in the opposition were liberals or Marxists, but many others wanted the nation to be governed by Islamic law. However, shared dislike of the Shah united the opposition behind one prominent leader, Ayatollah (A-yat-ol-LAH)Ruhollah (ROOH-olLAH) Khomeini (ko-MAY-nee), a leading Muslim clergyman. He had begun to speak out against the Shah and his policies in 1960, and had been forced into exile [to leave the country] in 1963.

By 1978, the oppositon began to organize mass demonstrations in Tehran, the capital of Iran, and other major cities. The following year, the growing agitation forced the Shah to flee the country. Khomeini returned in triumph as the leader of a new revolutionary regime. At this point, the modernization that had occurred under the Shah was reversed, and several of his former officials were jailed or executed. On November 4, 1979, the Shah received permission to come to the US for medical treatment. This led to angry demonstrations in Tehran, as Iranians were outraged by what they viewed as continued American support for the hated dictator. The protesters demanded that the Shah be returned to Iran, so he could be tried for crimes committed against the country and its citizens. During one violent riot, a group of Iranian student revolutionaries stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran. They were able to breach its walls and to capture the Americans inside. The revolutionaries released all women and African Americans, as well as one diplomat who became ill, but 52 Americans were to be held as hostages for the next 444 days. Six Americans escaped this fate by hiding in the homes of Canadian diplomats in Tehran. They were later smuggled out in a joint Canadian-CIA mission that was depicted in the 2012 American film, Argo.

Both the public and government officials in the United States were shocked by this breach of diplomatic immunity. President Jimmy Carter tried to negotiate the release of the hostages but his efforts were unsuccessful, mainly because the new Iranian regime clearly enjoyed embarrassing the hated U.S. by holding its embassy staff captive. In April of 1980, Carter enacted operation Eagle Claw, a military rescue mission by the recently created Delta Force army unit. Unfortunately, the mission was aborted [called off] as a result of a sandstorm and mechanical problems. During the withdrawal, one of the helicopters crashed, killing eight servicemen. President Carter assumed responsibility for the failed rescue mission. Though Carter continued diplomatic efforts to secure the release of the hostages right to the end of his presidency, American public opinion increasingly came to blame him for the prolonged crisis. The failure to free the imprisoned Americans was seen as a product of his weakness and indecision.

As a result of both diplomatic and military failures, the American hostages continued to be held by the student revolutionaries in Iran as the election of 1980 approached. Carter lost the election to Ronald Reagan, his Republican opponent, by the biggest margin of any defeated presidential incumbent [sitting president] in U.S, history. It was not until January 20, 1981, the day Reagan was sworn into office that the hostages were released after being held captive for 444 days. The two countries approved the Algiers Accords, whose central stipulations were that the U.S. would agree to stay out of Iranian internal affairs and remove economic sanctions against them, while Iran would release the hostages and pay its debts to U.S. institutions.

**Iran Hostage Crisis – Documents (Excerpts)**

**Document A: Letter to the Editor. Denver Post, November 4, 1979.**

“Carter's predecessor [earlier Democratic president] Harry Truman, whom he says he emulates, would have landed the Marines and offered to cripple Iran's economic base. These Iranians have committed an act of war against the United States and all Carter wants to do at the moment is talk. It is time to speak with the power and the might of a first rate country instead of the wishy-washy language of diplomatic compromise.”

**Document B: “Survey Finds Carter’s Popularity has Risen Sharply in Iran Crisis.” New York Times, December 10, 1979.**

“Public approval of President Carter’s performance in office has increased dramatically in the month since the United States Embassy in Tehran was seized and hostages held by militant students, according to a poll by the Gallup Organization.

The percentage of people who approved of Mr. Carter's handling of the Presidency jumped from 32 [percent], in a Gallup survey taken Nov. 2 to Nov. 5 to 61 [percent] in the latest poll, which was taken by telephone last Wednesday and Thursday. The Tehran embassy was seized Nov. 4...

On the basis of the sample size, the margin of error results is plus or minus five percentage points, said Mr. Kohut, who directed the poll. “What’s really amazing about the results,” said Mr. Kohut, “is that in the first week of the crisis Carter’s popularity stayed at about 30 percent, then moved up to about 38 in the second week; then rose up to 44 and then to 60. It slowly built up, and in the last week it just took off.”

Summing up the response to other questions concerning attitudes, he said “It’s not just a case of a the public rallying around the President. It’s a growing admiration and respect. The public approves of all the basic elements of the Carter handling of the crisis...

“Most people were critical of the Shah’s past rule in Iran, felt we had a moral commitment [promise] to let him in our country and had a restrained [reserved] attitude toward how to deal with the crisis.”

Seventy-seven percent in the survey specifically approved of Mr. Carter’s handling of the Iranian situation. [49] percent favored diplomatic and economic sanctions against Iran, and 41 percent favored using military force, even if some of the remaining hostages were harmed as a result...”

*Source: "Survey Finds Carter's Popularity Has Risen Sharply in Iran Crisis." New York Times, 10 Dec. 1979, sec. A: 22. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.*

**Document C: Letter to the Editor on the failed effort to rescue the hostages. Denver Post, April 25, 1980 (Day 174).**

“It turned out unfortunately sad and tragic, but I am proud that it was at least attempted. All those politicians and news reporters who are trying to make President Carter out to be a fool because of its tragic failure would have been the first to jump on the bandwagon and called him a hero if it had turned out to be a success.”

*Source: Lee Schweighart. “Letter to the Editor,” Denver Post, April 25, 1980. "American Experience: Reactions to the Hostage Crisis." PBS. WGBH Educational Foundation, 1996-2012.*

**Document D: Stuart L. Koehl and Stephen P. Glick “Why the Rescue Failed.” American Spectator (July 1980).**

“The Carter Administration and the Pentagon have both tried to excuse this fiasco by referring its failures to ‘equipment failure,’ but the conception and execution of the mission were so deficient and amateurish that it was probably doomed to failure from the start, especially when judged by the rules of warfare generally and of commando warfare in particular. … Were the bungling and ineptness of Eagle Claw an anomaly, the raid would have no more significance than any other isolated incident of military stupidity. Instead, it is indicative of a decline in American military competence first noticed by some observers during the Vietnam war. … A plan made by confident men would have been bold, risky, and successful. … Much of the timidity of American foreign policy can be traced to a lack of confidence in our military forces to carry out the missions assigned to them…”

*Source: Stuart L. Koehl and Stephen P. Glick “Why the rescue failed: There was more to Operation Eagle Claw's failure in the desert of Iran than Jimmy told us.” American Spectator (July 1980)*

**Document E: “Approval of Carter’s Foreign Policy Drops in Poll to Pre-Hostage Level.” New York Times, June 25, 1980.**

“Increasing unhappiness over policy toward Iran and foreign policy in general has eroded President Carter’s public standing back to the level it had before the hostages were seized at the United States Embassy in Tehran, according to the latest New York Times/ CBS News Poll.

Only 20 percent of the public, the smallest in his presidency, now approves of Mr. Carter’s conduct of foreign policy, and the 30 percent who say they approve of his handling of the Presidency generally equals the percentage that backed him just before the embassy was seized last Nov. 4. His overall approval rating rose to 53 percent last February; it was 40 percent two months ago...

The President’s rating on his handling of the hostage situation declined to 29 percent approval. There appeared to be a strong correlation between growing unhappiness on that issue, on foreign policy in general and on the public’s view on how Mr. Carter has handled his job.

Only 30 percent of those polled, down from a high of 53 percent in February... said they approved of Mr. Carter’s handling of his job as President.

*Source: Clymer, Adam. "Approval of Carter's Foreign Policy Drops in Poll to Pre-Hostage Level." New York Times, 25 June 1980, A1: n. pag. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.*