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Did It Really Matter?

by

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On 4 November 1979 a group of Iranian militants and students stormed the walls of the American Embassy compound in Tehran, setting in motion a chain of events which led to the largest concentration of US naval power ever assembled in the Indian Ocean. By early December two carrier battle groups (CVBGs) were patrolling the northern reaches of the Arabian Sea. Apart from a peripheral role in the aborted rescue attempt, however, these forces were not used during the crisis. Ostensibly, their presence gave US policymakers a range of military options. For various reasons these options were not practicable, which tends to call into question the utility of the naval presence. Did it really matter?

It would be easy to say that the naval presence had an inhibiting effect on the Iranian militants which prevented them from harming the hostages. While very attractive, such a contention would be very difficult to prove. Further, this line of reasoning ignores a more fundamental question. Did the naval presence contribute to the attainment of the basic goal of US foreign policy? As will be shown below, it did not. For this reason, the use of force in the hostage crisis raises some basic questions regarding the appropriate use of force in crisis situations and has specific implications for the future employment of naval power.

The purpose of this article, then, is to examine the use of naval forces as instruments of US foreign policy, using the hostage crisis as a case study. In order to better appreciate the naval aspects of the crisis, it is first necessary to analyze the overall response of the Carter administration to the situation. Because there has been much public discussion of the administration's failure to take decisive action early in the crisis, the next section will focus on military options that were available, both of a direct and indirect nature. The final sections deal with the basic issue of the use for force without war and raises questions for further discussion.

The Carter Strategy

The strategy adopted by the administration was an ad hoc mixture of pressure and restraint. It reflected both realistic assessments of the limitation on US power in the situation and unrealistic expectations of the Iranian

response. Inherent in the strategy were fundamental misinterpretations of the Iranian revolution.

By constituting a special diplomatic delegation which was to travel to Iran to mediate the dispute, the administration was demonstrating its belief that at least the more moderate elements of the Iranian leadership would be willing to negotiate. This reflected a basic misunderstanding of the situation in Iran. The moderate government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan with which the United States attempted to negotiate was under severe pressure from more radical groups. When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, spiritual leader of the Islamic revolution and the prime force in Iranian politics, endorsed the takeover of the US Embassy, Bazargan was placed in an untenable position and resigned in protest. This action left the government of Iran in the hands of the Islamic fundamentalists who were vehemently anti-American in orientation. Although the Carter administration recognized that a shift had occurred, it apparently failed to grasp the full range of its implications.¹

The United States was faced with a most difficult situation. By condoning a terrorist action against diplomatic personnel, Iran violated the norms of international conduct and, in the US view, assumed responsibility for the resolution of the crisis. Apparently believing that Iran could be forced to acknowledge its international responsibilities, the administration adopted a strategy of gradually increasing pressures, a strategy designed to leave room for a peaceful solution of the dispute. The goal of the strategy was twofold: to secure the release of the hostages and to ensure their safety while they were held.

By mere chance, at the time the crisis erupted the Carter administration had a significant military capability at its disposal. Unlike previous crises in which a number of weeks were required for US policymakers to make a decision to establish and then to deploy a credible military presence to the region, a CVBG, comprised of the USS *Midway* (CV-41) and her escorts, was operating in the Western Indian Ocean. In a relatively short time the *Midway* group had established a patrol off the southeastern coast of Iran. Despite the quickness with which the Navy established the military presence and a 20 November White House statement warning Iran of possible military action if the hostages were put on trial,² it is clear that from the outset, the Carter administration ruled out the overt use of military force in its efforts to coerce Iran to release the hostages.³ Despite the 20 November statement, the administration's pressures were primarily diplomatic and economic. The naval presence was intended to demonstrate a restrained response to the Iranian provocations. Clearly, it was a show of force that threatened retribution if the hostages were harmed.⁴

A crucial factor in the Carter strategy was the mobilization of the international community against Iran. Since all nations maintained international diplomatic relations, the administration argued, all nations had an

important stake in the events in Tehran. This line of reasoning was persuasive, resulting in early and sustained efforts by a host of nations to exert diplomatic pressure on Iran. Iran rejected all such appeals as well as all efforts by the United Nations and other international bodies to mediate the dispute. Despite this continual rejection, the search for international diplomatic support remained a prime objective of the administration's effort.

The economic pressure orchestrated by the administration fared no better. Imports of Iranian oil were curtailed, the shipment of military spare parts was halted and Iranian monetary assets in US banks were frozen, but these actions did not achieve the desired immediate political result. Over the long term they would be important factors bearing on the Iranian decision to seek an end to the crisis, but at this stage they were ineffective. Concurrently with these actions, appeals were made to the Western allies for economic sanctions against Iran, but neither the Europeans nor the Japanese were eager to take such action. There was strong sentiment in these foreign governments that such measures would be counterproductive in the long run, perhaps going so far as to force Iran to turn to the Soviet Union for aid.

A fundamental flaw in the Carter strategy was the apparent misinterpretation of the depth of Khomeini's opposition to the United States and his goal of ridding Iran of American influence. A constant theme throughout the revolution had been Khomeini's characterization of the United States as the satanic force behind all of Iran's problems. Unable and unwilling to concede the possibility that US actions toward Iran had been made with good intentions, the clerics and fundamentalists consistently portrayed America as an evil force which had wantonly interfered in Iranian internal affairs for twenty-five years.⁵ Domination and humiliation of Iran by the United States was the theme which was expounded in the months following the overthrow of the Shah. Western influence was corrupting Iranian culture and dissolving the fabric of its social institutions. Attempts by the United States to normalize relations during this period were denounced as plots and conspiracies intended to undermine the Islamic revolution. In the Khomeini view, it was better to cut off all relations with the world rather than to allow such corruption to continue. As an outgrowth of this viewpoint, Khomeini rejected international diplomacy as unnecessary. Iran, he believed, had both the resources and the moral imperative which enabled it to dictate its position in the world. He stated his intention to keep all foreign power out of Iran in this way: "Let them erect a wall around Iran and confine us inside this wall. We prefer this to the doors being open and plunderers pouring into the country. Why should we want to achieve a civilization that is worse than savagery, a civilization which behaves worse than the way wild beasts behave toward one another?"⁶ Against this backdrop, there is ample reason to doubt that Khomeini would yield to gradually increasing diplomatic and economic pressures.

A second flaw in the Carter strategy was its failure to take into account the rapidly changing domestic political situation in Iran. There was a marked tendency in the West to view Ayatollah Khomeini as all powerful, the supreme authority who had total control of Iran. In fact, while Khomeini and his followers (primarily religious leaders, clerics, preachers and theological students) exerted great influence over events in Iran, they were by no means in complete control. Power in the Iranian context meant the ability of one group to control the actions of another group. By late 1979, no single person or group had been able to obtain enough power to control all of the other groups in existence. Therefore, each of the contending groups, some of them well armed, highly organized and hostile to the others, held a share of political power in Iran. Among the major power centers were: Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers, the Revolutionary Council, the Provisional Government of Iran, other less radical ayatollahs, political parties, the military, and various guerrilla organizations. Because of this diffusion of power, the groups were constantly jockeying for position among themselves. Quite naturally, the fate of the American hostages became something of a political football in this confused atmosphere. A hard line position became a test of loyalty to the revolution. No major group could advocate an end to the crisis without opening itself to attack from the other groups. This was especially true after the election of President Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr in January 1980, when the hostages became pawns in a bitter, prolonged power struggle between the hard line Islamic Republican Party and the president.

Ultimately, although American pressure did not directly end the hostage crisis, it did contribute to a series of other factors which convinced the Iranian leadership that the moment had passed. By the latter part of 1980, leaders of the hard line Islamic Republican Party had begun to support a negotiated settlement. Although the Islamic Republican Party had earlier used the hostages as pawns in the power struggle with Bani-Sadr, after the party gained control of the government through the election of their members to key positions in the Majlis (Parliament) and appointments to key judiciary posts, they could afford to release the hostages. When the war with Iraq broke out in late September, Iran was unable to obtain adequate supplies because of the international isolation it had engendered by the hostage crisis. Faced with mounting losses from the war, it became apparent that Iran needed to end the crisis in order to obtain reliable sources for many military supplies. The final factor in the Iranian decision to settle the dispute may have been uncertainty about future US action. From Iran's perspective, it was probably much better to negotiate with a known flexible quantity than to risk facing more rigid policies of a newly elected American president whose strong statements on Iran promised a much more inflexible US position.⁷ Although the Carter strategy was responsible for the economic sanctions which made it difficult for Iran to obtain military supplies, by itself the

strategy was not a decisive factor in the Iranian decision to release the hostages.

Military Options

Since the measures adopted by the administration did not work, it is reasonable to consider what additional measures might have. In this discussion it will be necessary to distinguish between those military options designed to rescue the hostages directly and those designed to gain release of the hostages by indirect means, i.e., by pressuring or punishing the Iranian government. The purpose of this distinction is to show that the Carter administration's use of military force in the aborted rescue attempt was a carefully controlled effort which attempted to limit the overt use of military power and minimize adverse side effects.

There is a substantial body of opinion which holds that, had President Carter ordered swift military action, direct or indirect, the hostages would have been released quickly. These proponents believe there were substantial similarities between the hostage incidents in Iran and the 1975 *Mayaguez* incident. In that incident, the limited application of force was at least in part responsible for the quick release of the crew of the ship, and was a strong signal to the world community that the United States was willing to take strong action to defend its interests. While having a certain appeal to the martial instincts, there are a number of persuasive reasons to reject this thesis.

To be effective, such action had to either rescue the hostages outright or raise the risks to Iran in order to convince its leaders that continued detention of the hostages was a mistake. At the time of the takeover, there were no US forces in the region capable of conducting a successful rescue operation. Conventional or unconventional warfare units could have been rapidly marshaled from military commands in Europe, the Pacific or the United States, but even if such a force had been assembled, it still would have faced major obstacles which made a quick *Mayaguez*-type operation infeasible.

Tehran is located deep in the interior of Iran. In order to reach it, any rescue force had to fly over several hundred miles of hostile territory. If the force had been able to reach Tehran, unless it had been embarked in helicopters (which were not available in the region), it would have been forced to land at an airport, the nearest being several miles from the embassy. Once on the ground, it still would have been faced with the formidable tasks of reaching and assaulting the embassy compound. The military planning to overcome these obstacles would take several months as evidenced by the rescue attempt in April 1980. A quick rescue operation, therefore, was impractical.

Since a quick rescue operation was infeasible, the only other possible alternative for swift military action was indirect, i.e., using available naval forces to raise the risks to Iran. With the proximity of the *Midway Battle Group*, this retribution option had been available from the earliest days of the

crisis. Punitive air strikes could have been conducted against a variety of military and economic targets throughout Iran which would have severely hurt Iran's already shaky economy. The question remains, though, would this have been effective in gaining the release of the hostages? As will be discussed below, it is fairly clear that such action would not have convinced Khomeini to order the release of the hostages.

A second body of opinion holds that President Carter unnecessarily prolonged the crisis by not exercising an indirect military option in conjunction with the effort in the diplomatic and economic spheres. In theory, a broad range of military options were available, but in reality the range was rather limited. Despite the near universal condemnation of Iran for its actions, most Persian Gulf states remained unwilling to accept the introduction of US air and ground forces into the region. For this reason, the only forces which could be brought to bear throughout the crisis were those which could operate largely independent of the local states, i.e., the navy and the marines. Although the naval presence was substantial, outside of its clear mandate for retribution if the hostages were harmed or put on trial, there was no clear operational concept for its eventual employment.⁸ An evaluation of some of the indirect military options provided by this force will give an indication of why this ambiguity existed. The options to be considered are punitive seizure of Iranian territory, maritime quarantine and blockade.

The punitive seizure of Iranian territory was an option likely to have surfaced very early in administration discussions. A prime target for such an operation would have been the oil loading facilities at Kharg Island. By seizing these facilities, the United States could have eliminated the primary source of Iran's foreign trade. From a military point of view, however, there were serious questions regarding the sustainability of such an operation. No matter how offensive the Islamic regime in Tehran may have been to the Arab Gulf states, it is likely they would not have supported a US invasion. Therefore, since Kharg Island is located in the northern quarter of the Persian Gulf, the marine forces involved would have been totally dependent upon the naval force for support. The requirement to provide effective air cover for the troops ashore would have tethered the battle groups to geographic positions, seriously degrading one of their primary assets, mobility, i.e., their capability to range over a broad area in support of their primary mission. This flexibility is a key advantage. In the restricted area of the Persian Gulf, this would have placed strategically important forces at serious risk for a tactical gain. Without maligning the defense capabilities of a battle group, it is clear that if in such an encounter the Iranian military had been able to give a credible performance, the prestige of the American military would have been severely damaged. Further, unless the United States was able to establish unquestioned air and sea superiority throughout the Gulf, the logistics effort would require continual escort, thereby significantly

increasing the force requirement for the operation. For these reasons, seizure of Iranian territory was not a viable option.

A second option provided by the naval presence, a maritime quarantine imposed by mining Iranian ports, was more effective in the military sense, but foundered on the political problems associated with it. When compared to the other options, mining had several distinct advantages: the mines could be planted quickly using aircraft already on station; the activation of the minefield could be delayed to allow neutral shipping to depart; it offered a lower risk of escalation; and was a less expensive, cumbersome, provocative and hazardous operation than a complete blockade of the Gulf. Although such an action could conceivably have the effect of drawing in Soviet naval forces on Iran's side, the major political liability with a mining operation was the expected international repercussion that would result if the United States moved unilaterally to cut off the flow of Iranian oil. Despite the effects of the revolution on the Iranian oil industry, by September 1979, Iran was exporting 3.3 million barrels per day, the majority of which was being sold to Europe and Japan.⁹ Therefore, any attempt to increase the pressure on Iran by quarantining oil would have had an undesired effect of denying oil to allies of the United States. For the administration, this liability apparently outweighed the military advantages. There was, however, public discussion of the option by administration officials immediately preceding and following the rescue attempt.¹⁰

A third option presented by the naval presence, a blockade, was technically feasible but much more risky than a mining operation. To impose a blockade the Navy had to establish a patrol which was capable of interrupting all of the ship traffic bound for Iranian ports. The most economical method of establishing that presence would have been to position the patrol in the Strait of Hormuz. The operation, however, would inevitably interfere with the ship traffic moving to and from the Arab states of the Gulf. Also, since the vast majority of Iran's commerce is carried on non-Iranian flag ships, it would be necessary to distinguish an Iranian cargo from an Arab cargo. This would necessitate stopping, boarding, and searching a great number of ships. The political problems which would arise from such an operation would be more serious than those associated with a mining operation. Apart from the political protests that could be expected from the Western allies and the Arab states, a more serious risk would develop if the Soviet Union chose to test the blockade. The risk for escalation hardly need be mentioned. Another factor which mitigated against a blockade was the expected drain such an operation would be on US naval assets. The task force in the northern Arabian Sea was drawn from the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean and the Seventh Fleet in the Western Pacific, which weakened the capability of those fleets to respond to contingencies in their areas. A blockade, which would be a lengthy and expensive operation,

would have placed an additional stress on resources which were already under great strain.¹¹

Of the military options detailed above, the one which was the most attractive, had the administration been willing to incur the political risks, was a maritime quarantine imposed by mining. Since the goal of the operation would have been to pressure the Iranians into releasing the hostages, however, the attitude of the Iranians must be examined in order to determine the probability for success of the operation.

There is reason to believe that Khomeini and others in Iran, rather than fearing US military action actually would have welcomed it. As mentioned above, a Khomeini theme repeated often in the months following the departure of the Shah was the existence of various conspiracies against the revolution supposedly directed by the United States. As public fervor for the revolutionary process began to wane, Khomeini intensified his diatribes against the "imperialist" conspiracy which was retarding the natural progress of the revolution. By October, dissatisfaction with the turmoil in Iran forced Khomeini to sharpen his attack. "All of our problems," he said in a 28 October speech, "come from America. All the problems of the Muslims stem from America"¹² Despite such pronouncements there was no specific symbol which Khomeini could use to galvanize public opinion. The seizure of the US Embassy seven days later by militants protesting the entry of the Shah into the United States for medical treatment provided the opportunity. By capitalizing on this humiliation of America, Khomeini could revitalize the revolution and reassert his control. Further, if America could be goaded into a military attack, the entire country could be unified under the banner of Iranian nationalism. This philosophy was best expressed by a Shiite cleric close to Khomeini after the aborted rescue attempt: "We wish and we welcome military aggression against us because it strengthens the revolution and rallies the masses around it. Many states, individuals, even friends—let alone the enemies—still fail to understand our aim in occupying the US embassy. It is a challenge to fake standards of dealings which hide behind the slogan of diplomatic immunity in order to oppress underdogs and conspire against states."¹³

By Western standards, this desire for a US attack is difficult to comprehend. It can best be explained as a mindset of martyrdom based on the tenets of Shia Islam. Shiites were historically a defeated, humiliated people whose rights and deepest convictions had been violated and trodden upon. The annual mass mourning during the month of Muharram when Shiites take to the streets flagellating themselves with whips and chains to commemorate the pain inflicted upon their martyrs is an expression of the Iranian psyche. In Shiite tradition martyrdom assures immediate entry into heaven. Among devout Shiite Iranians there is less than the normal fear of death because of this tradition. Because of this assurance of a favorable afterlife, Iranians tend

to view life as an uncertainty and treat it as a game of chance. This attitude fosters opportunism, i.e., a willingness to incur serious risk for a favorable opportunity.¹⁴ Against this background, it is relatively easy to understand how Khomeini and others could have welcomed American military action. Although such action would likely inflict serious damage, it would provide an opportunity as well. Ayatollah Khomeini expressed this mindset of martyrdom early in the crisis: "We are neither afraid of a military measure, nor an economic blockade. We are not afraid, for we are followers of those imams who welcomed martyrdom. Our nation welcomes martyrdom today. Suppose Mr. Carter managed to land troops here—although he cannot do that, he cannot intervene militarily—but suppose the superpowers reached an understanding to send troops to Iran. We have a population of 35 million, most of whom wish to be martyred. We will go to war with this 35 million. When all of us are martyred, then you can do whatever you want to with Iran."¹⁵ With such an attitude, it is fairly clear that Khomeini and his followers would not yield to indirect military pressures and release the hostages.

By late March 1980 the US military had created the capability that was lacking in the early days of the crisis. A plan had been developed which offered the opportunity to rescue the hostages directly. By directing military action toward freeing the hostages rather than punishing Iran, the administration could hope to minimize any adverse political reactions from the regional states which might arise from the overt use of force. By making this distinction clear, the administration could portray the action as a justifiable use of force, executed only as a last resort. After the breakdown of secret negotiations in early April, President Carter apparently felt he had few options left and ordered the plan executed.¹⁶ It is not the intent of this paper to discuss the Tabas Raid in detail other than to note the supporting, rather than central, role of the naval presence. The battle groups provided a launch platform and were to provide air cover in the later stages of the operation,¹⁷ but the essential point is that the administration was unable to take direct action to free the hostages using the naval assets alone.

After the failure of the raid the Carter administration took pains to pass the word to the Iranian government that the raid had not been a punitive measure directed against Iran; its sole purpose had been to free the hostages.¹⁸ Although the administration's spokesmen continued to speak of the possibility of military action, the effect of the raid was to make indirect military action less practical. The administration may not have been fully aware of the Iranian mindset of martyrdom, but there was no mistaking the reaction in Iran. Buoyed up as they were by the failure of the direct American military effort, it was clear the Iranians would be much less likely to yield to indirect military action. As a result, the administration relegated the naval presence to its previous retributive role in case the hostages were harmed

and continued its original strategy. "The whole process of economic and diplomatic pressure on Iran is a real, genuine and separate track that we intend to pursue."¹⁹

Did It Really Matter?

If military options were of dubious value, why was such a significant naval presence maintained in close proximity to Iran throughout the crisis? In some instances when military forces are used to influence a political situation, the deployment of military forces may demonstrate US concern, but it is not always necessary to communicate the relationship between the military presence and the desired behavior.²⁰ This was the case in the naval deployments responding in the hostage crisis. By maintaining two battle groups in the proximity of Iran and periodically deploying a Marine Amphibious Ready Group to the region, the administration was attempting to demonstrate both strength and restraint. The administration was well aware of the limitations on the use of force in the situation, but it was sending a signal to the Iranians. The presence was intended to be a warning that if the United States chose to do so it could exact a heavy price for the detention of the hostages. By not binding that presence to the ongoing diplomatic and economic effort, however, the administration was offering a peaceful solution, should Iran choose to accept it.

It is necessary to keep in mind that the basic character of the Carter strategy was coercive diplomacy. By its very presence, a battle group implies a level of commitment to the use of military force to influence a political situation. In this instance, however, the battle groups were not intended to be viewed in a directly coercive role, but rather as latent instruments of coercive diplomacy. An important factor in the latent use of armed force is uncertainty. To be successful in a latent role, the presence of the force should induce a degree of caution in the behavior of the target which is based on uncertainty as to the intent of the targeting government to escalate the military role from presence to intervention. In the hostage crisis this necessary factor was missing. Ayatollah Khomeini had no uncertainty about the intention of the United States to intervene militarily. Based on his personal experience and perception of the prior involvement of the US military in Iran, Khomeini felt certain that the United States would attack.²¹ Although the administration intended the naval presence to be a symbol of restraint, for Khomeini, it was a symbol of potential martyrdom. The longer they remained without attacking, the more they only hardened his position. The naval presence, therefore, was not coercive.

As pointed out above, because of the Shiite mindset of martyrdom, Khomeini might well have welcomed the attack in order to unify the country and strengthen the revolution. Therefore, it would be to his advantage to accelerate that attack. In this light, Khomeini's insulting and humiliating

diatribes take on a new meaning. "Our youth," Khomeini declared, "should be confident that America cannot do a damn thing. Talk about what will happen if America interferes in a military way is wrong. Can America interfere in this country? It is impossible. The whole world is fixing its gaze on Iran. Can America stand up to the whole world and interfere militarily? She doesn't have the temerity to do so."²²

Before the Carter administration became aware that the battle groups were having no positive effect on the hostage situation, the Soviet Union provided a second and important reason for the maintenance of the naval presence. The December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan provided the administration with a graphic example of the ability of the Soviet Union to bring significant force to bear in the Persian Gulf region. As regional states condemned the move and expressed fears about future Soviet action, the administration declared the naval presence to be permanent, recasting the battle groups in the Arabian Sea as symbols of US assurance that further Soviet moves would not go unchallenged.²³ As the crisis wore on, this role became more important than the capability to intervene militarily in Iran. From the administration's perspective it was vital to prove that the United States had the capability to deploy and maintain a large military presence. The commitment of the administration to this notion was clear when the battle group normally assigned to Northeast Asian waters for a Korean contingency was ordered into the Indian Ocean.²⁴ The decision to bear the risks of a reduced military commitment to an ally in order to maintain a high cost presence in the Arabian Sea is ample evidence of the importance attached to that presence by the administration.²⁵

In the final analysis, despite the overwhelming nature of the military capability deployed to the region, the naval presence served no useful role in the resolution of the hostage crisis. For the most part, the military options presented by the presence had military or political liabilities which reduced their political effectiveness. More importantly, even the most attractive option for indirect military action, a maritime quarantine imposed by mining, foundered on the basic point that due to the mindset of martyrdom, Iran would not have yielded to indirect military pressure. Therefore, the only military option which had a real chance of achieving the basic goal of the Carter foreign policy, i.e., the release of the hostages, was a direct rescue attempt. When that failed, there were no viable military options left other than the naval presence itself, which as has been shown, had no effect on the Iranians.

This experience in the employment of force without war has clear implications for the future. Whenever battle groups are to be used to influence a political situation, it must be recognized that at some point, if the presence has not induced the desired behavior, the continuation of that presence may produce negative results. What is intended to be a

demonstration of strength and resolve may be perceived as weakness and indecision. This may give rise to a dangerous view of an impotent America, unable or unwilling to incur political risks. However incorrect this position may be, it could seriously jeopardize US interests and limit its flexibility in future crises.

A more fundamental implication which can be drawn from the naval response to the hostage crisis is that in future crises the deployment of aircraft carrier battle groups might better be signals directed at the Soviet Union rather than at local states. Attempts to dampen or control indigenous forces in a region by a show of force may be inhibited by cultural filtration, as happened in Iran. Because of the mindset of martyrdom, the Iranian leadership expected to be attacked even though that was not the professed intent of the US Government. The result of this misperception was a long political impasse in which the naval presence could not and did not make a fundamental difference. Due to broad differences in perception between the United States and many third world nations resulting from cultural and historical perspectives, the effectiveness of a naval presence can be severely reduced and even counterproductive.

Another way of stating this implication would be that without war, force can be most effectively applied when both actors perceive the signal in the same manner. When the United States declared the naval presence to be permanent and shifted its emphasis from Iran to Afghanistan, the battle groups became a significant consideration for the Soviet Union. Although they have had no effect on Soviet actions in Afghanistan, since the battle groups have strategic, as well as tactical implications, Soviet planners cannot disregard them when evaluating the long-range impact of Afghanistan, especially since the United States declared their anti-Soviet purpose.

Questions for the Future

The manner in which naval forces were employed during the hostage crisis necessarily raises questions about the use of such force in future crises. In this instance, two battle groups were committed to a crisis before it was clear that their presence would have no effect on the basic foreign policy goal. Even if the administration had been aware of that fact, could the naval forces have been withdrawn? A show of force such as that displayed in the hostage crisis clearly implies a commitment to use that force if the presence alone does not bring about the desired results. The president may have been unwilling to use that force, but having made its presence highly public by threatening retribution if the hostages were harmed, he could not withdraw them without touching off a firestorm of domestic criticism. Internationally, such an action would likely have rekindled much speculation on the "impotence" of the United States or lack of national will. The appropriate question must be, therefore, should

significant US naval forces be committed to a crisis before there is a clear-cut role for them to play in the situation?

In many instances, a carrier battle group may be the only military force that can be brought to bear. If it is of limited or no use, should it be employed? Should a naval presence be deployed merely to provide a useful backdrop to a negotiating stance? It is necessary to keep in mind that the navy is an instrument of foreign policy. As such, each time it is ineffectively employed it loses some degree of credibility for similar situations in the future. One method to ensure such credibility would be to employ the navy only in situations where there is a clearly articulated foreign policy goal. From that basis a consistent policy can be executed. In the hostage crisis, the goal was the safe return of all the hostages. Was the preservation of 53 lives a goal superior to that of maintaining the nation's international credibility? Are the risks inherent in such a situation acceptable?

In summary, the naval presence was originally established to intimidate Iran into releasing the hostages. In the wake of Afghanistan, however, the battle groups became symbols of the administration's resolve to contest future Soviet moves in the region. This altered vision of the purpose of the naval presence may have reassured some concerned allies in the region, but it could not alter the fact that in terms of the basic objective of the Carter foreign policy, i.e., freeing the hostages, the naval presence really didn't matter.

Notes

1. It should be understood that there was not unanimity within or among the various Washington agencies as to the significance of domestic events in Iran or the appropriate course of action. What is being critiqued in this paper is the policy that was enacted, i.e., the policy chosen by President Carter and his principal advisers.

2. *The New York Times*, 21 November 1979, pp. A1, A12.

3. This was widely reported in the first weeks of the hostage crisis. See for example, *The New York Times*, 6 November 1979, p. A12, and 7 November 1979, p. A14; *Time*, 19 November 1979, pp. 15 and 18; *Newsweek*, 19 November 1979, p. 61, and *US News and World Report*, 19 November 1979, p. 23.

4. *Time*, 3 December 1979, p. 28. President Carter underscored this passive deterrent role for the battle groups shortly after the second battle group arrived in the Arabian Sea by informing the families of the hostages that he would not take military moves to free the hostages. (*The New York Times*, 9 December 1979, p. A12.)

5. This theme has been fully developed elsewhere. See, for example, Eric Roleau, "Khomeini's Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1980, and Barry Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions: The American Experience in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

6. Speech by Ayatollah Khomeini at the "Crimes of America" Conference held in Tehran, 4 June 1980. Reported in the *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)*, 5 June 1980, p. I-6.

7. See, for example, *US News and World Report*, 1 February 1981, p. 30.

8. See, for example, *Time*, 3 December 1979, p. 28.

9. *Middle East Economic Survey*, 3 September 1979, p. 3.

10. *The New York Times*, 17 April 1980, p. A12 and 27 April 1980, p. A15.

11. For a full discussion of the concepts of maritime quarantine and blockade, see Sally V. Mallison and W. Thomas Mallison, Jr., "A Survey of the International Law of Naval Blockade," *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, February 1976, and Bruce A. Clark, "Recent Evolutionary Trends Concerning Naval Interdiction of Seaborne Commerce as a Viable Sanctioning Device," *JAG Journal*, Spring 1973, pp. 160-178.

12. *FBIS*, 19 October 1979, p. R-3.
13. Interview with Dr. Wadi Modaressi by a representative of Ash-Sharq al-Awsat (London), 12 May 1980, reported in *FBIS*, 14 May 1980, p. I-6.
14. For a fundamental discussion of Persian psychology, see William Haas, *Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), pp. 116-136.
15. Message from Ayatollah Khomeini to the Pope's special envoy, 10 November 1979, quoted in *FBIS*, 13 November 1979, p. R-18.
16. For a full discussion of the secret negotiations in the hostage crisis, see Pierre Salinger, *America Held Hostage: The Secret Negotiations* (New York: Doubleday, 1981).
17. *Time*, 12 May 1980, p. 33.
18. Salinger, p. 239.
19. An administration official, quoted in *The New York Times*, 26 April 1980, p. A8.
20. Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force Without War*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1978).
21. In November 1964 Khomeini was exiled from Iran by the Shah for his adamant opposition to the extension of diplomatic immunity to American military advisors under the standard Status of Forces agreement which the United States desired to execute with the Shah's government. Since many Iranians fervently believe that US military and economic pressure was the sole reason for the Shah's ability to remain in power after 1953, this action was also viewed as the result of US pressure. From this experience Khomeini was able to conclude that the United States would again exert military pressure. For background on the 1964 events, see Roy Parviz Mottahedeh, "Iran's Foreign Devils," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1980, pp. 19-34.
22. Khomeini speech, 7 November 1979, reported in *FBIS*, 8 November 1979, p. R-1.
23. *The New York Times*, 5 January 1980, p. A3.
24. *The New York Times*, 20 January 1980, p. A12.
25. The cost of maintaining the naval presence in the region is significant. Estimates prepared by the staff of the Chief of Naval Operations for Congress indicate that the cost for one nonnuclear-powered battle group to transit to and operate in the Indian Ocean (including fuel, repairs, and incidental costs) would be \$142 million for Fiscal Year 1982. This would be the cost incurred over and above the normal costs which would have arisen from deploying the group to the Seventh or Sixth Fleets.

Formerly the Navy Fellow at the Brookings Institution and an action officer in Op-611, Lieutenant Commander Hickman is now the Executive Officer of the USS *Monongahela* (AO-178).



The American Gift

"We are known abroad, but don't seem to know it at home, for having the gift that Winston Churchill attributed to the first Labor prime minister of Great Britain: 'He has the gift, which nobody can deny, of compressing the smallest amount of thought into the largest possible number of words.' "

- Alistair Cooke.