

UNDER COVER

Muskie, the Allies, and Iran

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At the NATO meetings Edmund Muskie began his new duties with a difficult task. These are not easy times in which to inveigle our allies. The news media emphasize their failure to support us in a time of trouble. Our allies, by contrast, are likely to feel that they have given us more than we deserve. And they may be right.

We do not, in the first place, consult our allies very often. We generally give them advance notice of our intentions (in the case of the rescue mission they did not even get that), but we rarely ask their advice and listen less frequently still. In the years immediately after the Second World War we did better. Since then a habit of imperiousness has grown on us, while our power has declined relative to Europe's. European dignity, always bristly, is bound to be less compliant now. Muskie, a master politician, is an expert at respecting dignities, and he may do better than his immediate predecessors. Even so, his task is formidable.

For our allies, sanctions are *serious*. They depend on Iranian oil as we do not, and we are asking them to risk major economic disorder. If Secretary Muskie pledges our allies that we will try to make good their losses, will they trust him? Congress shudders at a ten cents per gallon fee on gasoline; rationing gives the president the vapors; the government did not even require Chrysler, as a condition of its loan, to ease itself out of the big-car business. So far few Americans have done more than point to the other fellow's ox, and our allies are bound to suspect that *they* are the beast we intend for the Iranian sacrifice. There is little reason to believe that the administration can deliver, in an election year, on promises that entail even mild austerity at home.

Moreover, if we do make sacrifices, are we willing to persevere? It is hardly worth great costs if, in the end, America will knuckle under, with appropriate face-saving, to the Iranian regime. Any concession to the Iranians encourages the seizure of embassies at a time when terror and kidnapping bid to become routine techniques of international politics.

Doubting our resolution is obviously sensible enough. Any reader of Anthony Lewis, for example, may come away with a new appreciation of Lord Haw-Haw; and Frank Church, as a defender of national honor, is less credible than a weathervane vowing fidelity to the north wind. Even responsible officials say, with dangerous hyperbole, that the "safety of the hostages is our paramount concern." It is not. We sacrificed the lives of eight Americans, after all, trying to rescue them. As military and diplomatic personnel, the hostages must surely understand that risking their lives goes with the territory. Unless we are prepared, if necessary, to ask them to die rather than concede on a point

of principle, we had better give up the game now.

The Europeans suspect, with reason, that we never really understood Khomeini. We seem to have proceeded on the basis of an almost rosy rationalism. Politically, the Soviet Union is a greater threat to Iranian independence than the United States at its worst. Economically, Iran's customers for oil will remain the West and Japan. Consequently, we seem to have felt, anti-Western policies are an aberration. Violence and risk are unnecessary and dangerous, since Iran might be so offended as to ignore its interests in the short run. Patiently relying on the good sense of Iran's moderates seemed the road to a solution.

In the first place, this understanding diplomacy misunderstands the moderates. Domestically, Bani Sadr and his allies argue that it is dangerous to offend a great power, especially one willing to be sympathetic. Every act of conciliation, however, proves that we are not dangerous, that our menaces are "all words," as Khomeini has said. Not that being tough is any better. When Bani Sadr and his friends are unable to deal with us successfully, the Iranian hardliners can argue—like their counterparts here—that more militant leadership is needed. If we are tough, Bani Sadr is forced to be tougher; if we are conciliatory, he is not allowed to conciliate. There is no solution so long as the Iranian regime retains its present character.

The problem with the position attributed to Cyrus Vance is clear enough: It applies secular standards to a militantly unsecular regime. The ayatollah is no crazed fanatic; he reasons shrewdly, but on different premises. To Khomeini, the U.S. is a greater enemy than the USSR because it is more beguiling. American liberty and abundance enchant; Soviet bleakness repels. America is more likely to lead Iran into modern secularism and degeneracy, hence Khomeini's otherwise peculiar assertion that the expulsion of Iran's diplomats from Washington was a "liberation."

Khomeini aims to discredit the U.S. morally in American eyes. He judges that we are an abandoned country, concerned only with material well-being and self-interest, and so corrupted as to demand immediate gratification. America will talk menacingly, but it will fail any test of honor because Americans hold honor in slight esteem. The moral authority of modernity will be dispelled when America, its great exemplar, is revealed to be hollow. This may be a distorted view, but it is no caricature.

Secretary Muskie will have to do more than show the Europeans that we respect their dignity. He will have to assure them that we respect our own. That task may prove too great for even his formidable powers of statecraft.

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