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For America: The Lessons of the Crisis

By George W. Ball

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The agonizing ordeal of our captives in the Tehran embassy could mark a critical point in our national experience. It has—for the moment at least—renewed our unity of purpose; it may well have cured us of hang-ups left over from Vietnam and Watergate.

We can be proud that Americans have, almost without exception, supported a position based on the most elemental of humane principles—concern for the individual as against the compulsions of world politics. To be sure, the few who sedulously nourish the thesis of America's vanishing power and authority have asked derisively, "Can you imagine the Russians ever letting their embassies be held hostage?" They imply, of course, that the Soviets would react with military force, but what of it? Since the Kremlin's ideological values differ fundamentally from our own, no doubt Moscow would put the tactical interests of an abstraction—the state—above the lives of individuals, coolly sacrificing Soviet citizens to demonstrate the state's effective power.

That we have rejected such a course shows that we have got our priorities right. There is nothing more invigorating to a nation than to be true to itself. That is, it seems to me, why the American people have seemed so impressive during these recent painful days; only a few fringe voices called for us to send home the Shah or for military action that might endanger the hostages. Though some feared that our constraint might be interpreted as impotence, it is, instead, a brilliant demonstration of strength.

In many ways, the whole trying period has been a therapeutic experience that has taught us Americans a great deal about ourselves. Probably a crisis of some kind was necessary to sweep up the last leftover breakage from Vietnam and Watergate. After years of wran-

gling and self-doubt, we have learned, to our astonishment, that we as a people can unite when the issues are unambiguous and our national position accords with our national traditions. We know now that when the country is sufficiently aroused, Americans—almost to a man or woman—will be prepared to use their military power. Contrary to the mourners and lamenters, our national will is firm and intact.

Though our sustained policy of restraint may have puzzled other countries, Americans themselves have well understood it. We have found no contradiction in the fact that the strongest nation in the world is still willing to put the lives of its citizens ahead of the desire to indulge its anger or the urge to express its manhood. We have, in other words, behaved as a mature people and should not be too concerned about how others perceive us.

Let us hope that out of our current unifying experience America will emerge as a stronger, more confident country, better aware of its strengths and purpose than in recent dreary years. Let us also hope that we now have the wisdom to solve complex problems where the issues of right and wrong are not so clearly drawn as in the case of the hostages. Finally, let us hope that, rather than wringing our hands, as many were doing, we will take the actions necessary to assure our strength.

These are lessons we should now have learned:

First, we must improve our military capability to respond quickly to threatening situations any place in the world that could seriously jeopardize vital national interests. Our experience in Iran has demonstrated definitively that the Nixon Doctrine does not work. If, as that doctrine teaches, we try to secure our interests by anointing a developing country in a strategic region as the protector of our interests and then overload it with sophisticated arms, we shall only encourage the disintegration of a political structure too fragile to sustain such a burden. We must, therefore, face the unpleasant reality that regional surrogates offer no easy solution, and proceed promptly to expand our own airlift capabilities, extend our naval reach and earmark and train adequate units for emergency deployment. Such a capability is essential to enable us to help strategically important, friendly nations resist aggression from foreign enemies. The visible evidence of that capability is required to give those nations confidence that they can count on our protection and at the same time to deter others from attacking them.

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We must be able to react largely from American bases since, with the pervasive spread of nationalism, American installations on foreign soil are a vanishing species.

Second, we must stop talking about the need to reduce our dependence for energy on unstable producers in OPEC and act promptly to make that talk reality. We are living in a fool's world and we no longer dare temporize. At the same time, if we are not to face even more serious crises in the Middle East, we must concentrate on an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. We have spent 12 years living with the debris of the 1967 war and it is time we finally cleaned it up—a goal we can achieve only by reconciling a Palestinian national home with adequate arrangements for the security of Israel. In spite of obstructionism from both sides, such a reconciliation should not be impossible, if we only show enough resolution and stop being immobilized by frozen patterns of thought.

Third, we must frankly face the realities of today's world, where power is subject to increasing constraints. The crisis of the hostages shows how restricted are the options in dealing with cowardly regimes that sanctify kidnapping; the toppling of the Shah exposed the limits of our power to keep a hated ruler in place against the will of his people. Yet even though we equip ourselves to help friendly nations resist outside aggression, we will still be relatively powerless to deal with the internal revolutions that may now be set in motion not only by the crumbling of old cakes of custom but also by social and economic dislocations created as high oil prices make nations either too poor or too rich.

Some critics of current policy, notably Mr. Kissinger, have refused to acknowledge the practical limits of our power to restrain or manage great internal convulsions, darkly implying that the Carter administration let Iran slide into chaos by not giving greater support to the Shah—though just what form that greater support might have taken is not clear. That is dangerous talk. The last thing we need is an argument over who lost Iran that adopts the same keening theme song as the old who lost China argument. Our last awkward and brutal effort to interfere with internal political change, in Chile, is an episode few regard as a shining example of America's wisdom or skill.

Yet, though we cannot stop an aroused people from overthrowing a hated ruler, we dare not be the only major nation without an effective intelligence service. We must have the resources to gather information and, at the same time, the operational personnel to follow political trends in strategic coun-

tries, quietly keep in touch with opposition leaders, advise those leaders of American views and policies, and provide some continuity of contacts in sensitive areas where governments tend to change frequently. To avoid such indecencies as the Chilean adventure, we must obviously hold such operations under tight and responsible restraint; but we should promptly dismantle the present absurd requirements of scrutiny by multiple congressional committees that make a mockery of secrecy. Meanwhile, our vituperative post-mortem has left us with the worst of both worlds. It has reinforced the fantasy prevailing throughout the Third World that the CIA is cunning, pervasive and capable of unimaginable feats of interference, while almost totally destroying our intelligence instrument.

Fourth, we shall have to develop a thicker skin and lower our expectations of world sympathy. Though the United States has been the preeminent world power ever since the Second World War, we are still surprised and somewhat hurt when other nations, particularly our Western allies, do not always support our policies—or support them only halfheartedly. Sometimes our reaction reflects a failure of imagination; we are too self-centered to comprehend how a particular situation may appear from a foreign perspective. Although the powers of Europe have greatly enlarged their wealth and improved their standards of living, they still remain regional—indeed, parochial—in their outlook. Or, put another way, though there has been a vast redistribution of wealth and economic power since the Second World War, there has been no commensurate redistribution of political and military responsibility outside the European theater.

To be sure, European leaders clearly stated that the violation of our embassy in Tehran menaced the whole structure of world diplomacy, but they indicated little eagerness to participate in any economic measures against Iran or take or approve any action that might—to their detriment—reduce Iran's oil production. Indeed, several have seemed

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primarily concerned with the financial consequences of America's action in freezing Iranian bank accounts, even though that action was taken to forestall a wholesale Iranian withdrawal that would have deprived American banks of any security for their Iranian loans.

To justify their semidetached position toward America's predicament, the French sought to distinguish between the hostage problem, which they recognize as having universal implications, and our quarrel with Iran over the Shah's return, which they treat as a bilateral Iranian-American problem. But it is not clear what practical implications are to be drawn from such Cartesian logic-chopping.

Finally, history cannot be left out of the footnote that explains why Europeans regard Iran as primarily an American responsibility. The United States greatly expanded its relations with Iran in 1953, when we helped the Shah return to his throne after Prime Minister Mossadegh had nationalized British oil interests. In sorting out that problem, American oil companies were given a substantial share in Iranian production. We greatly increased our involvement with the Shah after 1968, when Britain began to withdraw from east of Suez. As a result, the British have tended to think of Iran as within an American sphere of interest, and, indeed, our identification with that country has been extraordinarily close. France, Italy and Germany have had little financial participation in Iranian oil production, even though they have depended on Iranian output for a significant part of their consumption needs. Such an imbalance was bound to produce quiet resentments, and

those resentments explain to some extent what has seemed a lackadaisical response on the part of Europe. Iran, they tell us, is America's problem.

Though we may feel let down by Europe's lack of vigorous assistance, the reluctant support of Third World countries is easier to understand. Since disparities in wealth and power breed resentment, it is not surprising that many Third World leaders automatically attribute their relative poverty to imperialism or colonial exploitation. That explanation is no doubt comforting; it need concern us only when it serves as an all-purpose excuse for obstructive action.

In essence, we should not be too sensitive to the opinions of other nations, nor should we judge the reactions of others solely in terms of good or evil. We can never be sure how we would behave if we viewed the world from the vantage point of any particular foreign government. The most we can do is try to understand why a government reacts as it does and factor that political datum into our calculations, recognizing that no matter how wisely or generously we may behave according to our own lights, we cannot please all peoples everywhere and we should never try. Once we have enlisted the help and counsel of friendly powers, we must at the end make our own decisions.

Only we Americans can take the final responsibility for our future, and we are now sufficiently grown-up to recognize that that future will never be free of dangers and disasters. The world's dark woods are filled not merely with elves and fairies but also with wolves and dragons and fanatical ayatullahs. ♣