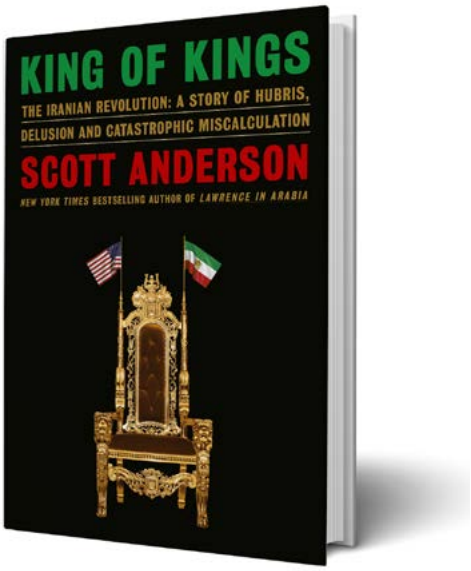
intelligence in public media

King of Kings
The Iranian Revolution: A Story of Hubris, Delusion and Catastrophic Miscalculation



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Editor's note: In this review, two longtime Iran watchers offer complementary perspectives on an important contribution to Iranian studies.

Scott Anderson has the formula for producing successful histories: writing with a journalist's engaging style, building on scholars' earlier works, and exploiting declassified government documents and other previously unavailable resources. He uses this approach for his *Kings of Kings*, a study of Iran's Islamic Revolution that doubles as an examination of United States-Iran relations. He previously used this approach for his well-regarded book on the Western role in creating the modern Middle East, *Lawrence in Arabia* (2014).

The layperson could do much worse than reading *Kings of Kings* to understand the fall of the US-allied monarchy, a development that continues to affect US regional policy and developments elsewhere, according to Anderson. (xviii) The book details a US policy failure, as the White House became dependent on Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi from the late 1960s onward and policy formulation became paralyzed as the revolution loomed. The State Department's country director for Iran decided in September 1978 that the shah's days were numbered, but at a congressional briefing two weeks later he echoed a colleague's assertion that the shah would remain in control. When he finally spoke out at a meeting with UK counterparts in October, State Department colleagues denounced him, and he recanted. (219, 234) By that time, furthermore, the Carter administration had competing priorities, senior officials advocated very different approaches to Iran, and leaks were persistent. (343)

Anderson's use of newly available resources effectively makes *King of Kings* an update to James Bill's 1988 work on Iran-United States relations, *The Eagle and the Lion*. A notable shortcoming of Anderson's book, however, is the apparent failure to use Persian-language archives or scholarship on the revolution or to interview any of the Iranian revolutionaries. This is ironic because the book repeatedly contrasts one American diplomat's fluency with other

diplomats' lack of language skills and suggests that this was a major reason for the lack of insight into Iranian popular attitudes toward the monarchy. However, even the most expert collectors would have found it difficult to overcome Iranians' fear that the shah's intelligence and security organization, SAVAK, was omnipresent.

Anderson highlights how the shah's opponents shaped public opinion against him as the revolution progressed: "mythology and falsehoods and propaganda took over." (214) Iranians were very susceptible to influence initiatives, believing rumors about elites exfiltrating their wealth and SAVAK being responsible for the death of Ayatollah Khomeini's gluttonous son. International organizations exaggerated claims about human rights abuses and political prisoners, while Western media readily accepted claims about dead demonstrators: "History has shown this was almost always wrong." (416–17) On what would become known as Black Friday, the opposition claimed that thousands died when soldiers fired on demonstrators in Tehran's Jaleh Square, though the number was almost certainly far lower. (214–15) The regime was blamed for the Cinema Rex fire in August 1978 that reportedly killed hundreds, but religious zealots later admitted to setting the fire. (195, 199)

While this is a good book for the general reader, others are better sources for specialized knowledge. Charles Kurzman's *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (2004) provides greater insight into how the Iranian revolution occurred and provides a useful a guide to evaluating the stability of other authoritarian regimes. Robert Jervis' *Why Intelligence Fails* (2011) remains the best publicly available work about the US Intelligence Community's shortcomings with respect to pre-revolutionary Iran.

The reviewer: Dr. William Samii, is the senior intelligence officer for Iran in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State. ■

For many years, I studied and wrote professionally about Iran, from its history to its culture and politics. In so doing, I read a great many books about its Islamic revolution of 1979 and, quite frankly, was not exactly eager to read another and doubted that there was really a need for one. Which is to say, I was a bit skeptical as I began reviewing Scott Anderson's latest book, *King of Kings*, thinking he would be forced to rehash old stories rather than tell new ones. I could not have been more wrong.

Anderson, an accomplished journalist and writer, has a knack for telling sweeping stories through the personal experiences of key figures. One of his earlier books, *The Quiet Americans*, was a compelling history of early CIA operations that focused on the trials and tribulations of four agency officers who participated in them. *King of Kings* is quite similar, though this time Anderson spreads his attention across a wider field of players encompassing Iranians, Americans, and others. Through a combination of solid research—including interviews with survivors—keen insights, and riveting prose, he once again has produced a book worthy of close examination by intelligence professionals, national security decisionmakers, and other students of history.

Anderson's key argument, as revealed in his subtitle, is that hubris, delusion, and miscalculation all contributed to the collapse of the US-aligned Pahlavi monarchy and its replacement by a virulently anti-American regime. Bouncing between Tehran and Washington—with occasional forays to Langley, the Paris suburbs, and Iran's provinces—Anderson details the ways in which everyone from senior figures to ostensibly minor players laid the groundwork for the revolution.

A particularly noteworthy accomplishment is the author's description of how the relationship between the United States and Iran evolved, particularly in the 1970s. He argues convincingly that during a decade that saw several "oil shocks" resulting in economic turmoil and long lines at US gas stations, successive US administrations sought to mollify the shah to use his influence to keep oil supplies high and prices low. Coming shortly after the Nixon administration's decision to grant him virtually unlimited access to US arms, the massive influx of oil wealth Iran experienced during the decade made the shah one of the world's most profligate purchasers of advanced weaponry, mostly US-made. These two factors—the shah's vital role in manipulating oil prices and in purchasing US arms—made many US officials and business leaders dependent on the Iranian king. Anderson estimated

that by 1975, some 50,000 Americans lived and worked in Iran. "In this relationship," Anderson wrote, the shah was "no longer the nervous schoolboy sharing a couch with Franklin Roosevelt; he was the King of Kings. And Iran was no longer the client state. That status belonged to the United States." (96)

Because of this newfound dependency on the shah's regime, Anderson argues, the US government sought to accommodate him in ways that effectively blinded Washington to his personal faults—especially his paranoia and inability to make hard decisions—as well as his standing with the Iranian people. For example, he writes how both foreign journalists and diplomats suffered immediate consequences from a vindictive shah for even a hint of criticism of him or his rule. US diplomat and later hostage Michael Metrinko, for example, made valiant efforts in the first half of 1978 to report from Iran's provinces the rise in violent anti-shah protests but was effectively silenced by senior figures at the US Embassy in Tehran—under pressure from both Washington and the palace—who were committed to a narrative that the shah was both popular and strong. Similarly, at the State Department, Iran desk officer Henry Precht feared that the shah's regime was losing its grip months earlier than others in the Carter administration did, but he largely self-censored his opinion because of the prevailing belief—and necessity, in the eyes of many—that the shah's rule would last for years to come. Precht later admitted to Anderson that he lied on national television when he said in late 1978, just weeks before the collapse, that the shah was firmly in control, mostly out of a fear for professional self-preservation. (268)

In addition, the US Intelligence Community—along with the rest of the US government, academia, and foreign liaison services—simply miscalculated in assessing the shah's grip on power. Anderson is not the first to make this argument, but he adds insightful anecdotes to explain how it happened. For example, in 1977, Anderson writes, CIA officers in Iran asked Metrinko if he could assist them by expediting US visa applications for some of their most valuable Iranian assets. "Excuse me, Mr. Intelligence Officer," he jokingly recalled, "but what does it tell you when your most important sources are trying to get the hell out of the country?" (111) Anderson also recounts that although CIA had one of its largest overseas contingents in Iran at the time, the agency was focused almost entirely on the Soviet target to its north, not on domestic Iranian affairs. (93) In fairness, he also allows that even though a CIA assessment from 1977 wrongly concluded that the shah would rule for years to come, because of his powerful security services and massive military, "at that time it would have seemed the height of foolishness to suggest otherwise." (*xix*)

Another strength of *King of Kings* is the author's depiction of the shah and his inner circle in the years before the revolution. Through interviews with his widow, Empress Farah—now living in the United States—as well as extensive secondary research, Anderson explores the Iranian king's hold on power and his dependence on key advisers, especially longtime friend and confidant Asadollah Alam. Within a sycophantic palace culture that grew only worse with time, Alam was one of the few people who could speak somewhat bluntly to the shah and influence his thinking. It was Alam whom many argued had made difficult decisions in the shah's name in previous crises, helping him maintain his throne. After Alam's death from cancer in early 1978, Anderson argues, virtually no one could break through the shah's paranoia and self-delusions or spur him to effective action in the face of a growing popular revolution.

One of Anderson's most compelling characters is Ibrahim Yazdi, an Iranian-American doctor who joined Khomeini's staff and served as one of his key spokesmen while the cleric lived in the outskirts of Paris in the final months of his exile. Anderson relays in vivid detail how Yazdi and his moderate, pro-democracy cohorts convinced themselves that working with Khomeini—of whom they knew little and understood less—was a risk worth taking if they could remove the shah from power. When first informed of Khomeini's statements from years before that the only legitimate government is a Muslim theocracy led by senior clerics, they called them fabrications created by the shah's regime. (345) Only after Khomeini centralized power around himself, disparaged the concept of democracy as "Western" and thereby "false," and authorized show trials and mass executions of the shah's lieutenants did Yazdi begin to see how mistaken he had been. He would spend much of his remaining

years in Iranian prisons for opposing the clerical dictatorship's policies, regretting his role in helping Khomeini's rise to power. (421)

Colin Powell's famous Pottery Barn analogy from the days before the 2003 US invasion of Iraq—"If you break it, you buy it"—also applied to Iran, at least for those who opposed the shah. After CIA and British intelligence worked together to engineer the shah's return to power in 1953 and with each passing year of Western support for his rule, in the eyes of his opponents, the West—especially the United States—effectively "owned" whatever mistakes the Iranian leader made. George Braswell, an American missionary to Iran in the late 1960s, recalled, "I didn't know anything about our role in that coup, and I don't think most Americans did. But, boy, the Iranians sure did. They all talked about it and I think it was the source of a lot of resentment." (94) This is not a new assertion; entire books have been written recounting the ways that Iranians felt betrayed by the United States because of 1953. But Anderson's contribution here is Braswell's recollection that Americans—even those thousands working in Iran as late as the 1970s—were largely ignorant of the dominant US role in Iran's politics and the animosity it inspired among many Iranians. More broadly, Anderson reminds readers that covert actions, even from those early days when practitioners and policymakers expected the "covert" part to hold for years to come, do not stay secret forever.

By now it's evident that Anderson spends a great deal of time rehashing aspects of the Iranian revolution that have been covered elsewhere. This is only a mild critique, however, because the main strength of *King of Kings* is that he has successfully synthesized others' arguments into one sweeping narrative that he combines with his own, fresh observations and should make his book required reading on the subject for years to come.

The reviewer: Dr. Brent Geary is a CIA historian.■