

The Structure of Decision-Making in the Iranian Hostage Rescue Attempt and its Implications for Conflict Management

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INTRODUCTION

On 4 November 1979, fifty-two American diplomats, military personnel, and others were seized in the American Embassy and other sites in Tehran and held until their release on 20 January 1981, 444 days after the event began. The weight of international law, American military threats, and humanitarian appeals were insufficient to secure the release of the hostages. The event became theater. The Iranian students holding the Embassy used the media attention to embarrass the U.S. for its support of the Shah and its alleged complicity in the terroristic operations of SAVAK, the Shah's internal security police. The Iranian government used the event to seek the return of the Shah to Tehran for trial, Iranian funds held in foreign banks, and the wealth removed from Iran by the Shah and his family, as well as to exact revenge on the U.S. for its support of the Pahlavi regime. In the U.S., the event became a symbol of the changing American role in world affairs, a possibly critical variable in the presidential election of 1980, and a very traumatic lesson in the realities of international politics.

There have been few events in American history that have had such a profound impact on the American psyche as the Iranian hostage crisis¹ of 1979-1981. This frustrating event has also left a lasting impression on American foreign policy in terms of raising questions about relations with regimes with poor human rights records and little popular support, and involvement of the U.S. military in distant parts of the world. The ill-fated rescue attempt six months into the hostage-taking has led to a fundamental reappraisal of the effectiveness of American military forces and the decision-making process within the military establishment. The structure and effectiveness of decision-making prior to and during the rescue attempt will be the focus of the analysis here, although the political environment within which that decision-making took place will also require scrutiny. The decision processes will be examined in terms of competing theoretical explanations to determine whether the pathologies of "groupthink",² faulty organizational design, or misplaced incrementalism may account for the outcome or whether the failure of the mission can be attributed simply to what Charles Perrow calls a "normal accident."³ The implications of each explanation for the failure for conflict management will also be assessed in terms of how such failures can be avoided in future conflicts.

In many respects the American involvement in Iran was similar to being in close proximity to a natural hazard. The regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi was quickly losing control in Iran and the increasing risk of being caught in the political upheaval should have been apparent to the Shah's supporters and

allies. Although the danger to American personnel and interests was mounting daily, the American intelligence community apparently did not provide an accurate assessment of the risk. While nonessential personnel were being removed from the Embassy, the hostage-taking was not anticipated fully enough to minimize the threat to personnel and to prevent the loss of sensitive diplomatic materials. In a larger sense, the U.S. failed to distance itself from the Shah's regime to minimize the political losses from a popular uprising.

The discussion that follows will focus on the nature of the Iranian hostage crisis and on both how it challenged the capacity of the American government to respond to threats beyond its jurisdiction, as exemplified by the failed rescue mission, and how such events can be avoided. The lessons of 1979-1981 have some currency today given the prolonged conflict over hostages taken in Beirut; the Reagan Administration's trading of weapons for hostages exposed during Congressional hearings in 1986-1988 and reexamined minutely during the subsequent criminal investigations of the principals; and the atmosphere of uncertainty in the Persian Gulf area following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. Administratively, the crisis has had a positive effect in that it has precipitated an intensive examination of the organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the apparatus for advising the president on national security affairs. Reforms are still being implemented in those areas in response to the aborted rescue mission in 1980 and the evident excesses of National Security Council personnel later in the decade.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE HOSTAGE-TAKING

The seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran on 4 November 1979, concluded an era of American influence in Iran that began with CIA involvement in the overthrow of the Mossadegh regime by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1953. During the next two decades strong ties developed between the Shah and an influential group of American leaders, including President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Those close personal ties and the importance of Iran to the U.S.'s strategic interests, as well as the tremendous wealth generated by the Iranian oil fields, resulted in a strong U.S. commitment to the Shah's regime and rapidly expanding military sales. Economic growth and increased Westernization of Iranian society created internal conflicts that eventually led to an "Islamic revolution" headed by the religious leadership. As supporters of the Shah, Americans were principal targets of the violent revolution.

By late 1978 it was apparent that the Shah's hold on the Peacock Throne was tenuous, although U.S. intelligence agencies apparently underestimated the strength of popular opposition. The Shah met increasing anti-regime violence with tentative reform efforts. Whether the intent to establish democratic reforms was real or not, the regime eventually fell victim to its own cultural underpinnings.

The Shah was a very important U.S. ally, but the oppressive nature of his regime was something of an embarrassment. Repeated assurances that the activities of SAVAK were being brought under control generally served to allay those concerns. It was only in the late 1970's that American officials raised questions concerning the tremendous amount of military hardware being purchased and the relatively small expenditures being made for social and economic development.⁴

The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, one of the two highest leaders among the Shi'ites, was arrested several times in 1963 for opposing the "White Revolution" reforms. In 1964, he was exiled to Turkey, and later moved to Iraq and then Paris. His return to Iran after fourteen years of exile was timed to coincide with the religious holidays in the month of Moharram, first month in the Islamic calendar in which, in 680 AD, Husayn, the grandson of Mohammad, was martyred while attempting to depose a tyrant. The symbolism of that holiday was not lost on any of the major actors in Tehran, Washington, or Paris.

As the level of violence against the regime increased through 1977 and 1978, it became evident that the regime had little support among either the general populace or even the middle class. Nonetheless, the U.S. State Department and intelligence agencies were slow to inform the White House of the extent of the problem and the likelihood that the Shah would be forced to abdicate. By the fall of 1978, the situation was deteriorating rapidly and American officials began seriously to question whether the regime could be saved. A Special Coordinating Committee (SCC) of the National Security Council met to discuss the options and SCC senior staff continued to hold meetings to follow the events in Iran. The options ranged from reaffirming U.S. support for the Shah's regime and "suggesting" major changes in leadership to making overtures to the Ayatollah concerning the establishment of a coalition government with more moderate leaders in key positions. A military takeover was considered a possibility, but only as a last resort.⁵

In terms of conflict management, the developments in Iran revealed a major American intelligence failure, including problems in gathering basic information on the events in Iran, and considerable interagency competition that affected the capacities of the State Department and intelligence agencies to provide complete and reliable information to the White House.⁶ State Department officials, who were aware of the extent of the crisis and vocal about its implications, were not included in the decision-making process, and the organizational capacities and political strength of the Ayatollah's supporters were underestimated. Many of the "old hands" in the White House, moreover, were conditioned to expect Soviet involvement in the anti-Shah violence, although there was little or no evidence of such.⁷

It was in this political context that the hostage-taking took place. The U.S. government began evacuating nonessential personnel and dependents from Iran in January 1979 as the tensions mounted; and, on 4 February Iranian students attacked and briefly held the Embassy. On 4 November Iranians again seized the Embassy and the hostage "crisis" began. Fifty-two

Americans were captured in or near the Embassy, at the Iranian foreign ministry, and at the Iran-America Society offices. Despite U.S. threats, the Iranian government appeared unwilling or unable to end the crisis. For the next 444 days, the U.S., Iran, and a variety of other actors exchanged threats, negotiated, and renegotiated the terms for the release of the hostages and the return of the Shah and Iranian assets.

Because of the chaotic state of affairs in Iran during the hostage-taking, it was not always clear whether the revolutionary government was in control of events. The hostages became pawns in the internal struggle for influence. The period was also one of intense frustration in the U.S. as negotiations failed repeatedly. The 1980 presidential campaign was underway and the inability of the Carter Administration to resolve the problem became a major issue.

The rescue attempt occurred in late April 1980, several weeks after President Carter had severed diplomatic relations with Iran and imposed a trade embargo, and after American allies were beginning to cooperate with that action. On the 25th, the Administration announced the cancellation of a rescue mission due to equipment failure. It was revealed that eight American military personnel had been killed in an accident in the Iranian desert when a helicopter collided with a transport plane. The bodies of the American crewmen were displayed on Iranian television before being returned to the U.S.

The immense frustration of the American public perhaps was best illustrated by the large number who expressed some satisfaction that “something had been done” even if it had failed. The nations that had joined the U.S. trade embargo of Iran were not apprised of the rescue mission and generally expressed surprise and irritation that the mission was attempted while they were led to believe that the U.S. was committed to nonmilitary options.

After the rescue attempt, the hostages were moved to locations outside of the American Embassy to discourage further attempts. U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance who had opposed the mission resigned and Senator Edmund Muskie was named as his successor.

The remainder of the year was filled with negotiations (principally through Algeria), political machinations in Iran as moderate and radical elements sought advantage (complicated by the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war), and intensifying frustration in the U.S. as the deadlock continued. Resolution of the dilemma appeared imminent several times during the fall, but it finally became clear that the crisis would not end before the November election. Deputy Undersecretary of State Warren Christopher concluded final negotiations in Algeria in January and the hostages were flown to Weisbaden, West Germany, via Algiers, on President Reagan’s inaugural day.

THE MANAGEMENT OF THE IRANIAN HOSTAGE CRISIS

The events of November 1979 and the following fourteen months presented a number of difficulties for the U.S. government. The seizure of the embassy was a gross violation of international law and the U.S. had the support of the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, and other international agencies.

The Carter Administration had very little leverage within the Iranian government. The more radical religious elements effectively inhibited negotiations with moderate leaders. Indeed, the political situation was such that the moderate Iranian leaders could not appear overly sensitive to the U.S. position without jeopardizing their own standing. The Revolutionary Council viewed the hostage-taking as an opportunity to expand its own influence and to embarrass the U.S. by attracting international attention to American complicity in the Shah's oppressive regime.

In administrative terms, the affair proved a challenge to the crisis decision-making apparatus in the U.S. The State Department activated its operation center with an Iran Working Group providing coordination of the multi-agency response and managing the operations in general, as well as maintaining contact with the families of the hostages. Secretary of State Vance and Deputy Secretary Christopher, along with the Undersecretary for Political Affairs, provided policy guidance, with Assistant Secretary Harold Saunders acting as liaison between the two groups.⁸ The Special Coordinating Committee of the National Security Council, chaired by National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, handled the development of policy within the White House. At least initially, information was collected directly from Iran via telephone by simply calling public officials and even persons within the U.S. embassy.⁹

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff represented the Department of Defense in the National Security Council. The Joint Chiefs presented military options to the SCC two days after the hostage crisis began. These options included a rescue attempt and retaliatory strikes and President Carter asked the JCS to develop both plans. A military blockade and other options were also considered seriously, and the Navy moved two naval battle groups into the Arabian Sea outside of the Persian Gulf.¹⁰ However, because there were several major problems with choosing military options, including the likelihood that reprisals would be directed against other Americans in Iran as well as against the hostages themselves, the use of military force was generally considered as a last resort — if the hostages were harmed or put on trial.

Congress was generally involved in the negotiation process and in the development of military plans. Restrictions on executive freedom of action implemented after the resignation of President Nixon, such as the War Powers Act of 1973, the National Emergency Act of 1976, and the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977, required consultation with Congress before actions could be taken.¹¹

The Carter Administration generally pursued a two-pronged strategy in dealing with Iran: maintaining open communications focusing on the condition of the hostages and on negotiation; and, increasing the costs to Iran for holding the hostages.¹² The freezing of Iranian assets in the U.S., the trade embargo, export controls, and tightening the control of immigration from Iran were examples of the latter. The declaration of a national emergency on 14 November 1979 increased presidential power to follow through with the trade embargo and travel ban, as well as to comply with many of the conditions in the final settlement with Iran.¹³ The Administration's policy of encouraging other nations to impose economic sanctions on Iran was not very successful, as the willingness of the Allies to maintain the sanctions waned very quickly.

The negotiations stopped and started depending upon the fortunes of the more moderate leaders in Tehran, and generally were impeded by the Ayatollah's insistence that a newly elected Parliament participate in the negotiations. When the negotiations broke down in March 1980 the Carter Administration decided to attempt the rescue of the hostages proposed earlier by the JCS. The likelihood of success was considered slight given the history of such efforts and the problems unique to the Iranian situation.

THE ABORTED RESCUE MISSION

In very brief terms, the plan for the rescue mission required that helicopters and aircraft be moved close to Tehran so that a small team could be flown into the city and driven by convoy to the Embassy compound to extract the hostages. The expectation ostensibly was that the force could enter the city, rescue the hostages, and retreat with a minimum of fighting. Security at the Embassy, it was felt, had become very lax in the months since the hostage-taking began, probably because the students believed that a rescue was not a feasible option for the U.S.

The possibility of a military rescue operation had been raised within days of the seizure of the Embassy. On 6 November National Security Advisor Brzezinski had asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to develop a rescue plan. Brzezinski indicated that the operation was a "matter of honor" for the nation as well as an obligation to the hostages. Brzezinski's own preferences included a broader military response involving an air strike on the oil refineries and/or other strategic targets. The plan was described to President Carter and his staff on 22 March. At that time, Secretary Vance voiced strong objections to the operation. Vance, however, was not present at the meeting on 11 April when the decision was taken to go with the rescue.¹⁴

Army Major General James B. Vaught commanded the rescue operation. He designated his own intelligence officer and established liaisons with the intelligence agencies, rather than use the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency and an interagency intelligence task force to coordinate information gathering. He also did not use the Joint Chiefs of Staff crisis response procedures or the contingency plans already drawn up. Concerns about security resulted in strict limits being placed on the number of participants in the operation.

Air Force Major General Philip G. Gast was brought in first as a “special consultant” in charge of aircraft pilot training, and twelve days before the operation was formally designated as the deputy task force commander — despite his outranking Vaught. Similarly, U.S. Marine Colonel Charles H. Pitman was an unofficial participant in the operation, but became the *de facto* commander of helicopter training — most of the pilots were Marines — and flew one of the helicopters involved in the operation. Marine Lieutenant Colonel Edward R. Seiffert was ostensibly assigned as the helicopter flight leader, although that status was unclear with Col. Pitman involved in the operation. Again, the chain of command lacked coherence.¹⁵

Finally, Army Colonel Charlie A. Beckwith was commander of the Delta Force team that was to enter the Embassy and free the hostages. Air Force Colonel James Kyle was in charge of the C-130 transport aircraft and the “Desert One” base fifty miles from Tehran, where the aircraft were to drop off the Army’s Delta Force team and supporting Ranger troops and wait for their return with the hostages.¹⁶

Troops were moved into the area through Egypt and Oman, without apprising those nations of the mission. Vaught established his base at Qena, Egypt, to oversee the operation. He maintained contact with the JCS and the President, through the Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown.¹⁷

On 24 April the rescue force departed the U.S.S. *Nimitz*. It was expected that six helicopters were the minimum needed to accomplish the mission. Eight left for Tehran. One was abandoned in the desert when a warning light indicated mechanical problems. Another, flown by Col. Pitman, developed problems and returned to the *Nimitz*. An unanticipated dust cloud (“haboob”) delayed arrival at the first desert landing site by fifty to eighty-five minutes, throwing off the timing of the mission. A third helicopter developed hydraulic problems, leaving only five. The mission was aborted but, as the aircraft prepared to leave the air strip, one of the helicopters crashed into the refueling plane. Eight crewmen died and five were injured.¹⁸ In the confusion and haste of the departure, the bodies were left at the crash site along with classified materials on board the abandoned helicopters. The public display of the bodies and materials by Iranian authorities later intensified American frustration with the hostage-taking.

THE STRUCTURE OF DECISION-MAKING

The failed rescue has been examined from a variety of perspectives since 1980. Some part of the failure can be explained by examining the events within common theories of decision-making. They include, firstly, Irving Janis’ concept of “groupthink,” which suggests that the decision-making processes leading up to the rescue attempt may have been flawed and the rescue should not have been attempted at all; and that processes within the operation itself may have contributed to the failure of the mission.¹⁹ Secondly, the organization of the rescue force violated basic tenets of organizational design, including: diverse military participants causing communications problems and the failure to choose the most appropriate

personnel and equipment for the operation; and the structure of the decision-making process that permitted policymakers in Washington to participate in operational decisions, encouraging them to second-guess the field commanders and confusing the command structure. Thirdly, the use of incremental decision processes did not encourage a broad search for options, did not provide adequate review of the operational plans, and predisposed the policy and operations groups to pursue the military rescue option. Finally, according to Charles Perrow's concept of "normal accidents," the operation may simply have suffered the kind of failure that can occur in any complex system. These four explanations for the failure are not mutually exclusive.

Two of the more comprehensive reviews of the rescue mission's decision-making processes are the U.S. Department of Defense analysis issued very soon after the event, and a more recent scholarly analysis. The Rescue Mission Report prepared for the JCS by Admiral James L. Holloway and his panel, indicated that there were twenty-three areas of concern. The most notable were: excessive compartmentalization of the planning function limiting participation by experts in such rescues; a lack of comprehensive review of the plans by other experts; too little information exchange among agencies; and, the lack of a full rehearsal of the mission. In other words, the preoccupation with secrecy effectively excluded persons who might have identified the problems that arose.²⁰ At best the mission was a risky operation, but the failure to use all available resources doomed it to failure.

The Holloway Report however, focused on the military lessons to be learned rather than on the overall implications of the aborted mission. By and large, the panel agreed that the mission involved serious risks but that these were manageable, and generally found that Vaught and his team did an excellent job in designing and implementing the rescue. They accepted bad luck as one of the principal reasons for the failure.²¹

The Holloway Report generally supports the groupthink explanation in the sense that the operation was insulated for security reasons and all effective dissent and independent review was precluded. To a lesser extent, the report also supports the idea that the operational group was excessively compartmentalized, lessening lateral communication, and that the principle of unity of command may have been compromised. The closed group and limited review also would support the incrementalism explanation in that a wide variety of options were not considered. The conclusion of the JCS review, however, was that the failed rescue was due to "bad luck" — or a "normal accident."

The panel did not focus on the broader political aspects of the mission, including President Carter's concerns about possible civilian casualties, which were aggravated by the seizure of a bus carrying approximately forty Iranian civilians during the rescue attempt, and Brzezinski's apparent willingness to broaden the scope of the military operation. Other political incongruities included the fact that U.S. allies in Western Europe and Japan had decided only three days before to join the U.S. in imposing sanctions on Iran, a decision that was based on the assumption that there would be no military operation. It was assumed by many in the U.S. and abroad that a

rescue mission would result in a large number of casualties on both sides. The U.S. military estimates included as many as thirty deaths among the rescuers, fifteen among the hostages, and possibly hundreds of Iranian civilians.²² All four military branches raised questions about political pressure to use force. Others, including Brzezinski and many Congressional leaders, viewed the aborted mission as a technological failure, possibly indicating a more fundamental flaw in American military preparedness.²³

The largest question avoided in the Holloway review may concern the administrative problems caused by the operation being coordinated by a commander in Egypt and monitored closely, even directed, by political leaders in Washington. When the rescue operation was taking place in Iran, it was mid-afternoon in Washington. Secretary Brown and General David Jones, JSC Chairman, were monitoring the progress of the mission. When Colonel Beckwith made the decision to abort the mission, approval was forthcoming from the President, but not before Brzezinski asked whether the mission could continue with five helicopters and that question was relayed from Vaught to Beckwith. Administration participation in operational decision-making raised more questions concerning the management of the rescue. The involvement of political leaders in Washington, as well as the evident lack of clarity in command responsibility on the mission, conflicts with the principle of unity of command.

Steve Smith's 1984 analysis²⁴ focused on the utility of groupthink as an explanation, suggesting that the failure to provide for adequate critical review prevented the identification of weaknesses in the operational plans. Moreover, there were no written plans covering the entire operation and no rehearsals to assure that the pieces fit together. The lack of an overall commander of the ground operation was also noted. Smith, however, broadens his application of the "groupthink" model to note that dissenters were effectively excluded from the original decision on 11 April to attempt the rescue. Brzezinski, who had endorsed the rescue early on and continued to suggest the use of military threats to bring Iran to the bargaining table, was permitted to dominate that crucial meeting. Hamilton Jordan's account of those meetings also noted that the President was made aware that the helicopters were the weak link in the operation, but that Carter and the other decision-makers chose to go ahead with the plan because of the pressure to act in some manner.²⁵ Another contributing factor to the tendency to overlook the weaknesses in the plan, according to Smith, was the failure of CIA director Stansfield Turner to release the Agency's estimate that a "successful" operation might involve a 60% casualty rate among the hostages,²⁶ which was much higher than the military estimates. When the President's advisors met to discuss the rescue, momentum for a decision to approve the mission was building and the advisors were lead to believe that the President had already decided to attempt the rescue.

An analysis of the Entebbe rescue provides other clues to the faulty decision-making on the Iran rescue. Zeev Moaz' review²⁷ of the Entebbe decision-making applied rational comprehensive or analytical (rational) and cybernetic/cognitive models to the events leading up to that raid. He found

that, to some extent, there was a search for alternative actions, but that political factors had a significant impact on the range of choices. The identification of the problem and the determination of the imperative to act were characterized by “analogizing”,²⁸ essentially interpreting the situation to be the same or very nearly the same as another more familiar situation. Faulty analogizing, it is suggested, can affect decision-making when the unique characteristics of a situation or event are overlooked because decision-makers choose to respond in the same way as they did to a prior situation. In this case, the principals in the decision to attempt the Entebbe rescue tended to relate the event to another recent dramatic event²⁹ with little real attention given to the fit. The search for alternatives was then curtailed when an option was arrived at that matched the predisposition of the group.³⁰ In short, the Israeli leadership was predisposed toward a military operation and massaged the rescue plans until the probability of success reached an acceptable level, according to Moaz. Some adjustments were made in the plan as circumstances changed, but only minor ones. The personalities involved, particularly Defense Minister Peres and Prime Minister Rabin, also contributed to the decision to attempt the rescue, despite Rabin’s initial preference for negotiation.

The decision to attempt the rescue in Tehran was arrived at in a very similar manner. There was tremendous political pressure to act and there were few options available except for diplomatic and military actions. The effects of economic sanctions were questionable. Because of the hostages and other Americans in Iran, other, broader military actions were not viable options. The “analogizing” may well have been in terms of interpreting the U.S. situation in Iran as comparable to the Israeli situation in Entebbe, although the situations were only superficially similar. American policy on terrorism, as well as broader Middle Eastern policies, had tended to be similar to the Israelis’, despite the dissimilarities in the types of violence they were designed to address and the level of threat that the violence presented to each society.³¹ The successful West German rescue of hostages at the Mogadishu airport in Somalia might also have contributed to the tendency to “analogize,” despite the more recent failed attempts by Egypt to use military forces to rescue hostages. Concerns have been expressed about the inappropriate application of the Israeli rescue model in subsequent hostage-takings.³²

This analysis certainly does not exhaust the possible explanations, but it does explicate some of the more plausible ones.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Realistically, the Carter Administration had very few options. The imposition of economic sanctions was impeded by the sheer difficulty of severing economic ties and enlisting the support of allies in such efforts. The military options were constrained by the realization that other Americans, including journalists, were in Iran and could be taken hostage if those in the Embassy were rescued, violence against Iranians civilians might precipitate

violence elsewhere, and a strong military response might force Iran into an alliance with the Soviet Union. Recourse through international law was not promising because Iran simply refused to accept United Nations and International Court of Justice condemnations of the hostage-taking.

The lack of a unified military force to deal with hostage situations outside of U.S. borders turned out to be a significant problem, although there is no assurance that the rescue would have been effective under the best of circumstances.³³ Since the hostage crisis such a unit has been created by the JCS, along with policy review mechanisms to oversee future rescue efforts.³⁴ The fact of the matter is that diplomatic personnel and facilities are vulnerable to attacks as subsequent assaults on U.S. facilities in Lebanon and elsewhere have demonstrated, despite increased embassy security worldwide and international conventions against such actions.

Many analysts and commentators indicate that the decisive factor in the negotiations was the fear by the Iranian government that newly elected President Reagan would use military force without regard for the costs to the U.S. in lives and strategic considerations. Certainly the rhetoric of the 1980 campaign would suggest such an inclination.

It must also be noted that the election campaign intensified the pressure on President Carter to act decisively, both to improve his own prospects for reelection and to enhance the prospects for other Democratic candidates. The President's "rose garden" strategy, in which he declined to campaign actively for reelection while the hostages were held, was intended to impress the public with Carter's attention to the business of the presidency, including the hostage crisis. The strategy, in fact, may have attracted greater attention to the hostage crisis and increased the President's political investment in its resolution. When the rescue failed, Carter — hoping to minimize the political damage — reviewed tapes and followed the example provided by President John Kennedy's explanation of the Bay of Pigs fiasco to the American people in 1961. Notwithstanding those concerns, many commentators and several of the hostages commended the President for attempting the rescue.³⁵

The pathology of "groupthink" both among the President's advisors — which was complicated by the conflict between his two principal foreign policy advisors, Vance and Brzezinski — and among the rescue team members provides a compelling explanation of the decision to attempt a rescue and perhaps for its failure. It is uncertain that the rescue would have been a success under any but the most 'ideal' — and unlikely — circumstances. Organizational flaws and the tendency toward misplaced incrementalism and faulty "analogizing" also explain many of the problems that arose during the mission. The notion that the failure was due to a "normal accident" raises the question of whether the mission could have succeeded if the requisite number of helicopters had been available to take the rescue team into Tehran. This is the question that is the most problematic. Was the failure simply one of those inexplicable and unpredictable accidents that occur in complex systems, as the Holloway Report concludes? Given the minimal redundancy built into the system itself, that is not the best answer.

Perrow's concept of "normal accident" is generally applied to complex systems in which error and accident have been anticipated and prepared for. Such was not the case with the rescue attempt.

How, then, can conflict management processes be designed to minimize the likelihood of a similar failure? Certainly the creation of crisis management structures that encourage critical evaluation of policy options and permit critical review of operational plans is necessary. In this case, such structures were in existence but were not used. Mechanisms designed to inhibit the development of "groupthink," such as setting up review agencies to assess plans, are common in the decision-making literature.

The organizational design problem can also be alleviated by the creation of permanent response units under a unified command, with clear lines of authority and the delegation of operational decision-making responsibility to a commander close to the operation. Ad hoc units will simply not have the level of coordination and cooperation necessary for the most complex operations.

The excessive concern for security that evidently encouraged the creation of an overly compartmentalized organization and limited the attention given to the available military resources, has been called into question by more recent experience. The Grenada and Panama invasions have demonstrated that security can be maintained without eliminating mission review and simulation processes.

Faulty "analogizing" may be a continuing problem. Just as Carter Administration policymakers in many ways saw the Tehran hostage situation as similar to the Israeli experience in Entebbe, it is likely that current policymakers will see the latest hostage situation in Beirut as similar to both of those cases. Realistically, however, the number of hostage-holding groups, the uncertain political climate in Lebanon, and the difficulty of locating scattered prisoners in the labyrinth of Beirut strongly suggests that rescue would be a virtual impossibility. The U.S. government cannot put American civilian hostages at even greater risk without very high political costs. In short, we simply cannot pursue the kind of policy that the Israeli government does in rescuing its citizens.

The problem of incrementalism may be more fundamental. The decision to launch a military rescue operation in Iran was ill-considered from several standpoints and was likely influenced by the perceived need to assuage the national honor. Because the crisis was defined as a national security or international conflict, the hostages became something more and something less than human beings. That is, in international relations the units of analysis are nations rather than people.³⁶ In that sense, the hostages were of less concern than they would be in, say, a law enforcement-defined event. In another sense, the hostages became very important symbols of the United States. This is all to say, that the issue of hostage safety was lost in the search for alternatives, and the Carter Administration chose to adopt an option that would have seemed to be antithetical to the hoped-for conclusion. The "best case scenarios" provided by both the Department of Defense and the CIA

predicted significant casualties among the hostages. That choice may have been made with complete awareness of the implications, although there is little to suggest that this was the case in the White House. In large measure, the incrementalism reflected in the limited range of options considered and the design of the organization set up to implement the operation are a reflection of the agencies involved in the decision-making.³⁷ A decision-making process that includes officials and experts from outside of the National Security Council and the defense and intelligence communities would likely broaden the range of options considered, assure a wider assessment of the implications of actions, and reaffirm the value of the lives threatened.

What has been suggested is that the U.S. develop a permanent mechanism for responding to crises outside of U.S. boundaries and that this group include agencies outside of the national security establishment to minimize the tendencies toward "groupthink" and incrementalism. The next task will be to avoid faulty "analogizing", i.e. assuming that future incidents are the same as the Iran hostage crisis. With luck, a "normal accident" will not prove fatal to the resulting operations.

Finally, the tendency to micromanage — to attempt to direct or, at minimum, second-guess operations occurring thousands of miles away — will have to be resisted by political leaders and Pentagon commanders. While communication technologies permit leaders in Washington to participate in operational decision-making all over the world, the technologies do not yet give them sufficient information to justify overruling onsite commanders. Contingency planning should guide operational decision-making.

Endnotes

1. The term "crisis" is used here in its broadest sense, rather than in the sense of an unexpected event presenting a high level of threat and requiring quick action. The hostage-taking in Tehran is generally referred to as a crisis in the U.S., and to refer to it in other terms would be confusing. For an explanation of the conceptual confusion, see: Ole R. Holsti, "Historians, Social Scientists, and Crisis Management," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24 (December 1980), p. 667.
2. Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink*, 2nd Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), especially see pp. 174-75.
3. Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 5.
4. Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter With Iran* (New York: Random House, 1985), pp. 9-25, especially. General information concerning the hostage crisis and rescue attempt was also obtained from: Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983); Robert D. McFadden, Joseph B. Treaster, and Maurice Carroll, *No Hiding Place* (New York: Times Books, 1981); and Oscar Schachter, "International Law in the Hostage Crisis: Implications for Future Cases," in *American Hostages in Iran*, ed. Warren Christopher (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), pp. 325-73.

5. Sick, *All Fall Down*, pp. 34-77, 139; and, Sick, "Military Options and Constraints," in *American Hostages in Iran*, pp. 144-72.
6. Sick, *All Fall Down*, pp. 77-101.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.
8. Harold H. Saunders, "The Crisis Begins," in *American Hostages in Iran*, pp. 35-71.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.
10. Sick, "Military Options and Constraints," pp. 144-72.
11. Abraham A. Ribicoff, "Lessons and Conclusions," in *American Hostages in Iran*, pp. 382-95.
12. Harold H. Saunders, "Diplomacy and Pressure, November 1979 - May 1980," in *American Hostages in Iran*, pp. 72-75.
13. Ribicoff, "Lessons and Conclusions," pp. 382-85.
14. Steve Smith, "Groupthink and the Hostage Rescue Mission," *British Journal of Political Science* 15 (1984), p. 121.
15. Paul B. Ryan, *The Iranian Hostage Mission: Why It Failed* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), pp. 17-18, 21-25, 27, 31.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 63.
18. Sick, "Military Options and Constraints," pp. 168-70; and Ryan, *The Iranian Hostage Mission*, pp. 67-75, 83-85, 87-90.
19. "Groupthink," as conceptualized by Janis, suggests that group decision-making frequently is flawed because of the dynamics of group interaction. He categorizes the common flaws as: overestimations of the group itself in terms of its power and morality; close mindedness in terms of dismissing any challenges to the assumptions of the group, and of stereotyping and underestimating the capabilities of the opposing decision-makers; and pressure for uniformity among the group members in terms of self-censorship, the "illusion of unanimity," stifling of dissent, and the "emergence of self-appointed mindguards . . . who protect the group from adverse information." More specifically, Janis suggests that "groupthink" (and the resultant flawed decision-making) may manifest itself as: incomplete assessments of alternative policies and the objectives themselves; failures to assess risks and to reexamine options once rejected; inadequate information searches; "selective bias" in assessing information gathered; and inattention to contingency plans. In essence, the group becomes predisposed toward a course of action and begins to reject any information that or persons who challenge that predisposition. Janis suggests that the potential for "groupthink" should be recognized in closed and relatively homogeneous groups and that processes should be designed to provide and support challenging points of view. *Groupthink*, especially pp. 174-75. Groupthink as a phenomenon and as a theory is common to the policymaking and decision-making literature; see, for example: Graham T. Allison, *The Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971); and Thomas R. Hensley and Glen W. Griffin, "Victims of Groupthink: The Kent State University Board of Trustees and the 1977 Gymnasium Controversy," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 30 (September 1986), pp. 497-531.
20. Ribicoff, "Lessons and Conclusions," pp. 388-92.
21. Ryan, *The Iranian Hostage Mission*, pp. 110-11.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-99.
24. Smith, "Groupthink and the Hostage Rescue Mission," pp. 117-23.
25. Hamilton Jordan, *The Last Year of the Carter Presidency* (New York: Putnam, 1982), p. 257.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
27. Zeev Moaz, "The Decision to Raid Entebbe: Decision Analysis Applied to Crisis Behavior," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 25 (December 1981), pp. 677-707.

28. A. Tversky and D. Kahneman, "Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," *Science* 185 (1974), pp. 1124-1130.
29. J. G. Stein and Richard Tanter, *Rational Decision Making: Israel's Security Choices, 1967* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980).
30. Herbert Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), especially see pp. 66-72 on the "satisficing" nature of searches for alternatives and the tendency to assign values to broad policies prematurely, without adequate assessment of the details of their implementation.
31. William L. Waugh, Jr. "Informing Policy and Administration: A Comparative Perspective on Terrorism," *International Journal of Public Administration* 12, no. 3 (1989), pp. 477-499; and Waugh, *Terrorism and Emergency Management: Policy and Administration* (New York and Basel: Marcel Dekker, 1990), chapters 3 and 5.
32. William L. Waugh, Jr., *International Terrorism: How Nations Respond to Terrorists* (Chapel Hill, NC: Documentary Publications, 1982), pp. 173-75, 240; and Waugh, "The Values in Violence: Organizational and Political Objectives of Terrorist Groups," *Conflict Quarterly* 3 (Summer 1983), p. 17.
33. The perceptions of "success" as expressed by the CIA, Pentagon, and other actors, including President Carter, were significantly different. Jordan, *The Last Year of the Carter Presidency*, p. 122.
34. Ribicoff, "Lessons and Conclusions," pp. 390-393.
35. Ryan, *The Iranian Hostage Mission*, pp. 97-98, 126-27.
36. Waugh, "Informing Policy and Administration," p. 491.
37. David Dery, *Problem Definition in Policy Analysis*, with an introduction by Aaron Wildavsky (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1984), see Chapter 1 especially. Also, see: B. Hindess, "'Interests' in Political Analysis," in *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); D. Torgerson, "Between Knowledge and Politics: Three Faces of Policy Analysis," *Policy Sciences* 19 (1986), pp. 33-59; Branden B. Johnson, "Political Interests in Risk Assessment," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 3-6, 1987; and W. W. Lowrance, *Modern Science and Human Values* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).