All that Glitters is Not Gold: The 1953 Coup against Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran

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ABSTRACT The coup against Mossadegh has often been described as the beginning of the ‘Golden Age’ of the CIA. The article argues that, while the coup was successful in getting rid of Mossadegh, its negative short-term and long-term consequences in Iran but also for the United States weigh heavily. Without thorough analysis why it nearly failed, the coup became a fatal catalyst for other interventions of the CIA that led to the Bay of Pigs disaster. If intelligence activities lose their moral dimension and if success is exclusively measured by ‘mission accomplished’, in the end more will be lost than gained.

Introduction

In March 2000, American Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright acknowledged before the Conference on American-Iranian Relations that ‘the United States played a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran’s popular Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh’. The coup on 19 August 1953 (28 Mordad 1332 according to the Persian calendar) brought Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to power. ‘The coup was clearly a setback for Iran’s political development’, Albright admitted, referring to the Shah’s regime which ‘brutally repressed political dissent’.

There is much debate to what degree the coup – jointly planned by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British MI6, but executed by the CIA – can help explain later and current difficulties between Iran and the United States. There can be no doubt that it changed American-Iranian relations in significant ways and helped to establish the United States as a major power in the Middle East. Equally importantly, it inaugurated what has been called the ‘Golden Age’ of the CIA. The ‘spectacular success’ in Iran, together with the CIA-orchestrated overthrow of the left-wing government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in Guatemala in 1954, turned the
CIA into a highly regarded instrument of foreign policy, to be used when traditional diplomacy appeared unable to do the job. ‘There was an assumption in governing circles that no matter what happened anywhere in the world, the CIA would be ready and able to deal with it at a moment’s notice’, John Ranelagh wrote. Richard Helms, CIA director from 1966–1973, later described the years following those coups as the ‘the high tide of covert action’.

The fact that there was an organization like the CIA, and that it acted the way it did, was a new development in the United States and was part of a major shift in comparison to American foreign policy before the two World Wars. It meant rejection of an old strategic culture that was partly based on isolationism and at the same time it constituted the acceptance of a new international role of the United States, something that Henry R. Luce had demanded several months before America’s entry in World War II. In his famous article ‘The American Century’ Luce had bemoaned that:

the fundamental trouble with America has been, and is, that whereas their nation became in the 20th Century the most powerful and the most vital nation in the world, nevertheless Americans were unable to accommodate themselves spiritually and practically to that fact. Hence they have failed to play their part as a world power – a failure which has had disastrous consequences for themselves and for all mankind. And the cure is this: to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in

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3 Helms and Hood, A Look Over my Shoulder, p.106.

consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.5

The ‘duty’ and ‘opportunity’ were not welcomed by all Americans, and the Truman administration still faced skepticism and opposition at home regarding its foreign policy. But the experiences of World War II and the failure of appeasement constituted the catalysts to change America’s strategic culture. There soon emerged a Cold War consensus shared widely that also accepted policies that went beyondcontainment. To be sure, the United States had not fully isolated itself even during the nineteenth century. The most recent study on ‘Instances of Use of United States Forces Abroad’ since 1798 which excludes covert operations like those in Iran in 1953, lists dozens of ‘instances in which the United States has utilized military forces abroad in situations of military conflict or potential conflict to protect U.S. citizens or promote U.S. interests’ even before 1900.6 These were often only brief actions involving the Marine or Navy, but they constituted an important ideological and military tradition that has lasted to this day.

This article will first give a brief overview of the events in Iran until after the coup. Next it will discuss why the United States decided to support the British. Finally, it will analyze the consequences of Operation TPAJAX, as the Americans called the coup. It seems to be a clear-cut intelligence success: Mossadegh fell, and with the Shah a pro-Western and anti-communist government was installed. However, ‘all that glitters is not gold’. The coup nearly failed. And while it was successful in getting rid of Mossadegh, its negative short-term and long-term consequences weigh heavily. In that sense, toppling the Iranian prime minister should rather be considered the beginning of the ‘gilded age’ of the CIA.

Mohammed Mossadegh and the Nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co.

At the center of the dispute was the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. (AIOC), until 1935 the Anglo-Persian Oil Co., which basically had the exclusive rights to Iranian oil. In 1914 the British government had become the major shareholder, controlling 51% of shares in this company. The Anglo-Persian Oil Corporation was of crucial importance to British national security after the navy had converted its ships from coal to oil before World War I. In addition, the company’s immense profits helped to offset Britain’s deficit. While a new agreement in 1949 gave the Iranians a higher share of the profits, the distribution was still strongly favorable to the British. In 1950, the Iranian government received less money from the AIOC than the

company paid in taxes at home. Not surprisingly, Persian demands for a higher share grew louder. The agreement signed by the Arabian American Oil Co. (Aramco) with the government of Saudi Arabia in December 1950 after threats to nationalize the oil facilities served as a model. While Iran received less than 20% of the profits, Aramco now gave half to Saudi Arabia.

When Ali Razmara, a former chief of staff of the army, became Iran’s new prime minister in June 1950, one of his priorities was to get a better oil deal. He was assassinated on 7 March 1951, however, before a new agreement was reached. Razmara had been opposed to demands for nationalization. Only about a week after his death, the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, followed by the Senate, voted in favor of nationalizing Iran’s oil industry. The law was signed by Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi on 1 May 1951.

Mohammed Mossadegh, who in late April became the new prime minister, had played a key role in this decision. Mossadegh who ‘fused the constitutional movement with that of anti-imperialism’ had been a leading politician in Iran for decades. In 1949, the former law professor had been among the founders of the National Front, an umbrella party of different political groups, one of whose main goals was to end the British domination of Iranian oil. He now began to enforce the new law, which increased his popularity, because, as Richard Funkhauser, a petroleum expert in the State Department had argued in a background paper on 10 September 1950: ‘AIOC and the British are genuinely hated in Iran’.

Attempts to get both sides back to the negotiation table, including one by US diplomat W. Averell Harriman, failed during the summer of 1951. A major obstacle was the stubborn rejection of AIOC executives to give Iran a fairer share of the oil profits. Since by its actions the Iranian government had violated official contracts, the British government ordered sanctions against Iran. It also tried to get support in the United Nations and sued the government of Iran in the International Court of Justice. At the same time, the AIOC basically closed down the refineries at Abadan, and the British navy blockaded access via water.

In the United States, where Time Magazine declared Mossadegh ‘man of the year’ in January 1952, the Truman administration criticized Iran’s unilateral actions. But it also put some of the blame for the Iranian decision

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8Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, p.61.
11Quoted in Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, p.63.
to nationalize its oil industry on the British side. The official position of the State Department was declared on 18 May 1951: ‘Arrangements should be worked out with the Iranians which give recognition to Iran’s expressed desire for greater control over its petroleum resources. . . . We . . . sympathize with Iran’s desire that increased benefits accrue to that country from the development of its petroleum.’

Repeatedly, Assistant Secretary of State George McGhee and Mossadegh discussed possible solutions along the line of the Aramco agreement. When both, AIOC chairman Sir William Fraser and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden rejected such ideas, the Iranian position also hardened. American hopes for a peaceful solution seem to have waned after Loy W. Henderson, US Ambassador to Iran, failed in another attempt to negotiate a compromise in early 1953.

Operation Boot/TPAJAX

Documents from the British Secret Intelligence Service on Iran are still classified. Since the alleged destruction or loss of important CIA documents, it might be impossible to ever know the full story of the coup. Nevertheless, we now have a pretty good picture of what happened in August 1953. Among the most interesting accounts are those by several American and British agents who were involved in the coup. Kermit Roosevelt’s book Countercoup was published in 1979. The grandson of Theodore Roosevelt had been chief of the Near East and Africa Division of the CIA, and in 1953 was in charge on the ground in Iran. C.M. Woodhouse, who had been head of the British MI6 in Iran in 1951–1952, published his version of the story in 1982. In addition, there are two CIA histories of the coup. One was written a year after the events by Donald N. Wilber who had been in charge of planning the coup for the CIA. This document, which includes detailed plans for Operation Boot (British) and Operation TPAJAX (American), has now been published. A later account, written in 1998 by Scott A. Koch of the CIA’s History Staff, is still classified in most parts.

Each account has its problems, but in different ways they add to our knowledge.\footnote{Cf. M.J. Gasiorowski ‘The CIA Looks Back at the 1953 Coup in Iran’, \textit{Middle East Report} 216 (2000), pp.4–5; N.E. Gallagher and D.S. Wilson, ‘Suppression of Information or Publisher’s Error?: Kermit Roosevelt’s Memoir of the 1953 Iranian Countercoup’, \textit{Middle East Studies Association Bulletin} 15/1 (July 1981), plus Addendum by Nikki K. Keddie.}

Already in 1951, soon after Iran’s decision to nationalize its oil production, plans were drawn up in the UK to occupy the oil refineries in Abadan. The fact that the Truman administration rejected British plans to intervene militarily did not inhibit London in its attempt to destabilize the Iranian government in a semi-covert campaign.\footnote{Malcolm Byrne, ‘Introduction’ in Byrne and Gasiorowski, \textit{Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran}, pp.xiii–xxi, xiv.} With Winston Churchill’s return as Prime Minister to 10 Downing Street after the election of 26 October 1951, the British position became firmer. When Mossadegh ended diplomatic relations with Britain in October 1952, this only increased the British determination to get rid of him.

Seeing no alternative to Mossadegh, President Truman vetoed British plans to intervene in Iran. The United States even granted military and economic aid to Iran in order to prevent what it feared most: that Communists would gain power in the country.\footnote{Bill, \textit{The Eagle and the Lion}, pp.72–77; Gasiorowski, \textit{U.S. Foreign Policy}, pp.55f., 64, 67; M.J. Gasiorowski, ‘Security Relations between the United States and Iran, 1953–1978’ in M.J. Gasiorowski and N.R. Keddie (eds.) \textit{Neither East nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1990) pp.145–65, 146f.; Malcolm Byrne, ‘The Road to Intervention: Factors Influencing U.S. Policy Toward Iran, 1945–1953’ in Byrne and Gasiorowski, \textit{Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran}, pp.201–26, 223.} ‘Only on invitation of the Iranian Government, or Soviet military intervention, or a Communist coup d’état in Teheran, or to evacuate British nationals in danger of attack could we support the use of military force’, Secretary of State Dean Acheson declared.\footnote{Quoted in Bill, \textit{The Eagle and the Lion}, p.75.} A declassified internal study about the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Iran written in 1980 shows that internally it was also discussed to act independently of the British, should that keep Iran pro-Western.\footnote{The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Development of U.S. Policy toward Iran, 1946–1978, 31 March 1980, pp.18–33, <http://www.dod.gov/pubs/foi/reading_room/471.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2010).}

With the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower on 4 November 1952, the British hoped for more support from Washington. MI6 officer C.M. Woodhouse came to Washington in the interim period between Eisenhower’s election on 4 November 1952 and inauguration on 20 January 1953 to convince the future US government of the need for a coup in Iran. In mid-November 1952 he played a card that ultimately trumped: ‘Not wishing to be accused of trying to use the Americans to pull British chestnuts out of the fire, I decided to emphasize the Communist threat to Iran rather than the...
need to recover control of the oil industry. Serious consultations between British and American officials began in early February 1953. The fact that the brothers John Foster and Allen Dulles served Eisenhower as Secretary of State and Director of Central Intelligence respectively, was helpful in convincing both the State Department and the CIA to support the decision to topple Mossadegh. On 4 April 1953, the CIA budgeted $1 million for the mission, and it was decided to execute it jointly with the British.

In June and July, plans were approved in London and Washington. The idea was to get the Shah to sign two royal decrees, so called ‘firmans’: the first to dismiss Mossadegh and the second to install General Fazlollah Zahedi as the new prime minister. This, Wilber judged, would give the operation that status of ‘legal or quasi-legal, instead of an outright coup’. Meanwhile, a power struggle inside Iran had weakened Mossadegh’s position. Having stepped down when the Shah refused to grant him more powers in July 1952, he was soon reinstalled due to public pressure. His reinstatement was short-lived, however, because, with his National Front coalition becoming increasingly fragile, Mossadegh was forced to rely increasingly on the support of the communist-leaning Tudeh Party. Founded in 1941, the Tudeh movement had been declared illegal after a failed attempt to assassinate the Shah in 1949. But it was able to work publicly again a couple of years later. In 1953 it had an estimated 20,000 members and maybe 300,000 sympathizers. Especially during Mossadegh’s second term, again under moderate leadership, the Tudeh Party was one of his most reliable political allies.

The story has been told in much detail elsewhere, and requires only a brief summary here. Kermit Roosevelt, the CIA agent selected to organize the coup on the ground, entered Iran from Iraq in June 1953 using the name of James F. Lochridge to hide his true identity. Since the British could not operate directly in Iran, Woodhouse and his team were stationed on Cyprus. Roosevelt and other CIA agents used money and resources to gain support from parts of the army, from prominent religious leaders like Ayatollah Kashani, and they also bribed members of parliament and Iranian journalists. On 13 August, the Shah finally signed the royal decrees which made General Zahedi prime minister and dismissed Mossadegh. But the first coup attempt failed on 15–16 August 1953. Mossadegh had been informed about the plan to arrest him. The Shah fled the country. General Zahedi was

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21Woodhouse, *Something Ventured*, p.117; similar, p.110.
hidden by the CIA. Against orders from Washington, Roosevelt decided against giving up. In the next few days the CIA men inside Tehran and their Iranian allies orchestrated a number of ‘measures’ including an organized demonstration against Mossadegh in Tehran with paid crowds that pretended to be Tudeh members and supporters. Even more important was the success in publicizing the Shah’s firmans. The American press directly and indirectly supported the CIA in these efforts. *New York Times* correspondent Kennett Love continued writing biased articles whose content was also picked up in the paper’s editorials. To discredit Mossadegh’s legitimacy, Iran’s prime minister was described as a ‘power-hungry, personally ambitious, ruthless demagogue who is trampling upon the liberties of his own people’ which made him ‘virtually a dictator’.28 Love also helped to make the firmans known both in Tehran and in the United States.

On 19 August, large crowds, including members of a well-known wrestling club, supported by parts of the police force and the armed forces, rose against Mossadegh and attacked government buildings. After many hours of fighting, leaving 300 people dead, Mossadegh was defeated and arrested. General Zahedi, whom the Shah had appointed to succeed him, came out of his hiding place. On 22 August, the Shah himself returned to Iran. The next day he supposedly told Kermit Roosevelt: ‘I owe my throne to God, my people, my army – and to you!’29

American-Iranian relations quickly improved.30 A few days after the coup, American military and economic aid poured into the country again. In October 1953, Herbert Hoover, Jr. was sent to Iran to negotiate a new oil agreement. American pressure made Great Britain and the AIOC, which changed its name to British Petroleum (BP), accept lesser roles. A consortium now guaranteed Iran 50% of the profits. BP owned 40% of the shares, as did American oil companies. The remaining shares were owned by Royal Dutch-Shell and the French Compagnie française des pétroles (Total).

**Why did the United States Support the Coup?**

The British motivation to support the coup against Mossadegh is clear. Britain depended heavily on Persian oil in both economic and national security terms. In addition, the nationalization of the Iranian oil had damaged the British prestige and its imperial status. There were worries that this might encourage anti-British forces elsewhere to act in similar ways, e.g. in Egypt where there were demands to seize control of the Suez Canal.

With regard to the new oil consortium which gave a large share to American oil companies, one might regard ‘oil’ as [a crucial factor] in [US]

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decision-making. No doubt Iranian oil did play a role in American thinking. It was important for ‘Western’ stability, especially for Great Britain. In addition there were worries about a possible control of Iranian oil by the Soviets. But National Security Council documents as well as other evidence suggest a primacy of Cold War concerns among decision-makers in the United States. For them it was mostly about fighting communism.31

Francis J. Gavin disputes that there was a major shift between Truman and Eisenhower. He argues instead that a gradual change had begun during Truman’s presidency and that there was more continuity than often assumed.32 Gavin is certainly right that Truman in late 1952 took a tougher position towards Iran. Paragraph five of the National Security Council paper 136/1, approved on 20 November 1952, refers to preparations for ‘the implementation of special political operations’ in and around Iran in cooperation with the British.33 Representatives of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA as well as the Departments of State and Defense set up a Working Group to draw up plans in case of an attempted or successful communist seizure of power in Iran.34 However, Kermit Roosevelt and others have emphasized the differences between the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. Regarding a coup against Mossadegh, Roosevelt saw ‘no chance to win approval from the outgoing administration of Truman and Acheson.’ The British felt that the election of Eisenhower made planning and implementing it much easier. And the fact that the Working Group in March 1953, warning that a communist seizure of power might happen slowly but steadily, suggested to use some measures in a pre-emptive way, clearly went a step further than what had been discussed during the Truman administration.35 After the so-called ‘loss of China’ in 1949, the Korean War without an American victory, and during the height of McCarthyism, the Eisenhower administration was under pressure to show toughness against the Communist threat. At the same time it showed less sympathy for nationalist movements and regarded them as communist inspired or controlled.

The fear of Iran becoming part of the Soviet sphere was crucial for the decision-making process in Washington. ‘We were not concerned with that [oil] but with the obvious threat of Russian takeover’, Kermit Roosevelt

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33 NSC 136/1: The Present Situation in Iraq, 20 November 1952.


wrote in his account of the coup. He described a meeting at the State Department on 25 June 1953 where John Foster Dulles and others discussed Operation TPAJAX. In that meeting Roosevelt argued that ‘the Soviet threat is indeed genuine, dangerous, and imminent’. According to him, Henderson in the same meeting called Mossadegh ‘a madman who would align himself with the Russians’. How ‘obvious’ and ‘imminent’ the communist threat actually was, remains open to debate, though. Roosevelt argued that Mossadegh ‘had formed an alliance of his own with the Soviet Union to achieve the result he wanted’. The Russians supposedly were more and more in control of his movement. Wilber concurs. In late 1952 ‘it was estimated that Iran was in real danger of falling behind the Iron Curtain’. Woodhouse writes that in July 1953 a ‘revolutionary situation in Iran was dangerously near’. But how real was the danger of a communist takeover in Iran in 1953? For Ambassador Henderson, ‘Mossadegh was not a Communist, and I was convinced that he was opposed to communism as an ideology. Nevertheless, he was willing to accept Communists and their fellow-travellers as allies.’ The Americans were especially worried about the Tudeh Party. Mossadegh himself played the Communist card, warning the United States that without its support there would be the threat of a Communist takeover in Iran. This was most likely a tactical move, but one that backfired, because it confirmed American fears. But although Mossadegh increasingly relied on the support of the Tudeh, a Communist takeover was no realistic scenario. Even the New York Times agreed: ‘There is no immediate danger of a Communist or Russian intervention.’ But, following its own mantra of the growing communist influence on Mossadegh, an editorial on 15 August warned: ‘He is a sorcerer’s apprentice, calling up forces, he will not be able to control.’ There is additional evidence to doubt Roosevelt’s claim. After Stalin’s death in March 1953, the Soviet Union was acting less aggressively. While it knew about the planned coup in advance, it took no actions against it except for protests and also gave no special support to the Tudeh Party. Some in the Soviet leadership had even regarded Mossadegh as someone who cooperated with the United States and who wanted to remove the British from Iran for the benefit of American oil companies. This was also incorrect.

36Roosevelt, Countercoup, pp.2–3.
37Ibid., pp.11, 18.
38Ibid., pp.2–3; Wilber, Regime Change, p.13; Woodhouse, Something Ventured, p.125.
40Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, p.83.
Mossadegh’s position grew weaker in 1953, but it is doubtful whether he would have fallen without CIA involvement. ‘No Iranian political group or figure appears to have been capable of ousting Mossadegh in the summer of 1953 without substantial foreign assistance’, Mark Gasiorowski wrote, and Scott A. Koch agrees in his CIA history.43

Consequences

The Iranian Revolution in 1978–1979 led to the fall of the Shah who fled the country and to the founding of an Islamic republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. During the revolution, the United States Embassy in Tehran became the center of anti-American demonstrations and attacks, culminating on 4 November 1979, when more than 60 American citizens were seized by militant Iranian groups of which 52 were held as hostages for 444 days. The events in 1953 did not predetermine what happened since 1978 in Iran. But there can be no doubt that the coup did have an impact, in some ways a long-term impact in Iran and beyond.44 The coup against Mossadegh, as James A. Bill rightly argued, ‘represented an end to the American honeymoon with the Iranian people’.45 The Shah as well as General Zahedi and later prime ministers depended on American support, making Iran, as Mark Gasiorowski has argued, ‘a client state’ of the United States. This included covert operations against oppositional groups and the training of a new intelligence unit which later became the infamous SAVAK, making the United States an accomplice of the Shah’s repressive regime.46 The coup also had negative effects on how the United States was seen in other countries with nationalist movements. In the Middle East, the USA replaced Great Britain as the most visible ‘imperial’ power. American support of Israel only enhanced this role. Even some CIA agents inside Iran had been worried about such developments in 1953, and had therefore opposed the coup. Roger Goiran left his post as CIA chief of station in Tehran a few weeks before the coup, partly because he feared the long-term consequences of the United States supporting ‘Anglo-French colonialism’.47 A State Department memorandum about ‘Measures which the United States Government Might Take in Support of a Successor

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44Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, p.97.
Government to Mossadeq’ in March 1953 had rightly warned that ‘it would be literally fatal to any non-communist successor to Mossadeq if the Iranian public gained an impression that the new premier was a “foreign tool”’.  

Many Americans in 1979 were not aware of what had happened in 1953 and the role their country had played in the events that led to the fall of Mossadegh. Major newspapers in the United States in their reports about events in Iran in August 1953 only mentioned accusations raised in Moscow and elsewhere, that the United States had orchestrated the coup. The Washington Post even quoted a spokesman for the State Department’s Iran Desk, who on 17 August 1953 talked about a confusing situation in Iran and obviously did not speak the truth: ‘I think it’s certainly not a Communist coup and it’s definitely nothing we had anything to do with.’ There had been an early acknowledgment of CIA involvement in one of two articles about the agency published in the Saturday Evening Post in 1954. Glorifying the work of ‘the supersecret Central Intelligence Agency, our first line of defense in today’s underground war with Russia’, Richard and Gladys Harkness mentioned a number of spectacular successes, among them the coup in Iran a year before, that required only ‘a little doing’ by the CIA. But this article remained an exception. Twenty years later, Ambassador Henderson, who had had participated in some of the crucial meetings in Washington, still claimed ignorance: ‘I am not prepared, however, to say that the CIA had nothing to do with some of these developments. It has been charged that the CIA inspired the uprising that started with the march of the members of the athletic club in Tehran. Whether it did or did not, I honestly don’t know.’

Beginning in 1979, some of those involved, notably Kermit Roosevelt, began to publish their accounts. The CIA’s role became an open secret. Yet for many years the State Department continued to pretend otherwise. This caused a small scandal in 1989, when a new volume of the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), covering Iran policy from 1951–1954 was published. The ‘official documentary historical record of major US foreign policy decisions and significant diplomatic activity’ did not mention the

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CIA involvement in the coup, only rumors about it as well as discussions whether, and if so, how the State Department should react to them. This problematic omission and a comparable one with regard to covert activities in Guatemala in a previous volume caused a lot of criticism and in 1991 led to new statutes regarding the publication of the FRUS volumes, now to be monitored by a Historical Advisory Committee. It took another ten years, until a senior American official – Secretary of State Madeleine Albright – officially acknowledged the US role in the overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh.

Officially denying American involvement meant refusing any responsibility for the political situation in Iran after the Shah’s return in 1953. But in some ways the fact that the Operation TPAJAX had been successful in toppling Mossadegh was the biggest problem. Roosevelt and others became heroes. They had done a ‘superb job’ and ‘the high caliber of the agents was reflected in their performances’, Wilber praised. He listed a number of lessons in his report, but mistakes were not thoroughly analyzed, even though there were plenty, as Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former Middle Eastern specialist in the Central Intelligence Agency wrote in 2000 in the New York Times: ‘Virtually every detail of their plan went awry.’ He is convinced that ‘the coup succeeded only because Iranians who were neither on the American or British payrolls nor under foreign control or guidance seized the initiative to topple Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh’. Wilber blamed the initial failure in Iran on the Persians. This seemed to confirm early British skepticism about the reliability of ‘orientals’ to execute ‘a western-type plan’ and ‘security breaches’ as a ‘serious weakness inherent in the Persian character’. The authors of the British plan claimed to have drafted it ‘with an intensive knowledge of the country and its people’ and to have considered ‘all the details from the Iranian point of view’, being aware of the ‘recognized incapacity of the Iranians to plan or act in a thoroughly logical manner’. These statements rather seem to indicate a lack of cultural knowledge and sensitivity on the side of the British authors and an overconfidence in ‘western’ planning, combined with a blindness to one’s own limitations.

Iran became a fatal catalyst for other interventions of the CIA. With the next successful and again seemingly easy coup in Guatemala in 1954, the CIA’s standing increased further. ‘All those successes just had to lead to a

56 Wilber, Regime Change, pp.65–66.
failure eventually’, David Atlee Phillips quotes ‘Abe’, an aide to Richard Bissell, the man who had been in charge of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion.\(^59\)

In his memoirs, Roosevelt claims that he had also harbored concerns when reporting back to Washington. He supposedly told John Foster Dulles: ‘If we, the CIA, are ever going to try something like this again, we must absolutely be sure that people and army want what we want. If not, you had better give the job to the Marines!’ Foster Dulles, according to Roosevelt, was uninterested in this warning. Roosevelt later rejected the offer to be in charge of the intervention in Guatemala and he left the CIA in 1958 ‘before the Bay of Pigs disaster underlined the validity of my warning’.\(^60\) ‘Operation Success’ in Guatemala had nearly failed, and should also have sent warning signals about the potential dangers of covert political action.\(^61\)

The ‘Golden Age’ of the CIA, which looked so successful, carried from the outset the seeds of larger failure. Measuring success purely in terms of ‘mission accomplished’, without regard to means used and without consideration of possible longer-term consequences, can have problematic consequences later. A report of the so called Doolittle Commission ‘on the Covert Activities of the Central Intelligence Agency’ only a few months after the coup in Guatemala declared that in the Cold War against the communists ‘hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply. If the United States is to survive, long-standing American concepts of “fair play” must be reconsidered. We must ... learn to subvert, sabotage and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated, and more effective methods than those used against us. It may become necessary that the American people be made acquainted with, understand and support this fundamentally repugnant philosophy.’\(^62\)

There are indications that some American governments and the CIA followed this suggestion. But while a ‘repugnant philosophy’ might lead to quick successes, in the end more could be lost than gained. This is the lesson we should learn from the past – including, we could argue, the recent past.

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\(^{61}\)In this instance the CIA deliberately lied to Eisenhower and others about the things that went wrong, as Nicholas Cullather has shown in a CIA history of the events which was released in parts in 1997. ‘Operation PBSUCCESS: The United States and Guatemala, 1952–1954’, CIA History Staff document by Nicholas Cullather, 1994. The text can be found here: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB4/cia-guatemala5_a.html> (accessed 10 November 2010).
