

# Downfall of the House of Pahlavi

by Theodore Dalrymple



**When, as a callow and unobservant** young man, I visited Iran just over half a century ago, I was much impressed by the White Revolution. There were serious traffic jams in Teheran, evidence – I thought – of both modernity and mass prosperity. The city, at least in its northern part, seemed of European aspect. The women were emancipated, if anything more elegantly dressed than in the west, and appeared to suffer no

restrictions in their day to day lives. Of course, the countryside, through which I had journeyed to reach Teheran, was different; but modernization and secularization had to start somewhere and, so I thought, would spread inexorably throughout the whole of society. They were, in my own esteemed opinion, irreversible processes which it was futile to resist; anyone who did so was likely to be as successful as was Canute in bidding the waves to retreat.

His Imperial Majesty, the Shahanshah (King of Kings) still sat firmly on his throne – as did that other King of Kings, His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie. I witnessed the arrival of the imperial elite for a glittering palace garden party, and what I saw was an impressive number of evidently very rich people in the pride of their wealth. What I did not see was that the tiny proportion of the population that they represented, or how they had come by their wealth. As Bastiat long ago pointed out, there is always the seen and the unseen; I was not clever enough to realise that the latter was at least as important as the former, still believing that the evidence that presented itself at hazard before my very eyes was all the evidence that there was, and not being curious to seek out any other.

I was not, however, any part of an intelligence organization, so my misapprehensions did not matter in the least. But it is sometimes alleged against the American intelligence agencies that they suffered from similar misapprehensions to mine, which they communicated to the highest levels of American policy-makers, thereby ensuring the 'errors' of American policy that led to a failure of preventive action against the emergence of a hostile, dangerous and aggressive regime possessed of a deeply retrogressive ideology.

The author of this book, a scholar of Iranian origin, does not agree with this view in his account of the downfall of the house of the Pahlavi, concentrating more on internal developments in Iran and according them more responsibility

for the denouement (if any historical process can truly be said to have a final denouement) than American policy. The Americans could *affect* what happened in Iran, but not *control* it. Because human beings are incalculable, the powerful are rarely as powerful as they think.

The Shah that emerges from these pages would be almost a tragic figure, if they gave us a better feel for him as a person, that is to say as a living being rather than a mere policy-maker. He was by nature a vacillator, thrust by inheritance and a destiny beyond his control into a position in which vacillation would eventually prove fatal. In addition to self-doubt, however, he was also inclined to vainglory, oscillating between the two, retreating from crises and ostentatiously parading himself, and boasting, when things seemed to be going well. He thought that he had both the right and the duty, genuinely for the sake of his country, to rule rather than reign, but while he had the ideas of an autocrat, he also had those of an ordinary decent person who baulked at the shedding of much blood, the only way, in the end, that he could have preserved his throne (and possibly not even then).

He was intelligent and wily, and his achievements were not negligible. He managed to wrest control of Iran's oil first from the British and then from the international oil consortium that succeeded them. He played the oil market with great skill. He instituted an important land reform that genuinely benefitted the peasantry, expanded education, and had a full understanding of the importance of technology in the modernization of Iran necessary if it were to be anything other than a dependent state. His foreign policy was flexible, pragmatic, and shrewd. He needed the Americans but did not trust them (or anybody else, for that matter), realising that in politics there were no friendships, only common interests. This was to be borne out in the most terrible and tragic way during his last few years of exile, with which this book does not deal. Where there is no friendship, there is no gratitude

for services rendered.

His failures were at least as great as his successes, and in the end more important from the point of view of his personal destiny. He so hollowed out political life in Iran, in order to exercise power as a true autocrat, that it came to have two poles: sycophancy and plotting against him. Sycophancy is a terribly addictive drug, no doubt a permanent temptation of the powerful (and therefore a good reason to restrict political terms of office); you can never have enough of it, nor can it ever be outrageous enough.

Unfortunately for the Shah, no one is sycophantic from principle, indeed sycophants tend (rightly) to despise themselves, fully aware that they are acting from the most naked of self-interest. There is no rat that leaves a sinking ship faster than a sycophant deserting a lost cause. A sycophant will take a risk to preserve his skin, but not to preserve his master.

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One constant in the Shah's policy was to increase the size and power of his armed forces, upon whom he thought he could rely to maintain his regime, which in his own eyes was benevolent. He constantly sought American arms, which the Americans (contrary to what many people suppose) were always reluctant to provide, realising that they were unnecessary for the external defence of the country and useless for the maintenance of order within it. They therefore considered them a waste of money which should have been expended on social development, on the equally mistaken assumption – of which a reading of Tocqueville rather than of, say, Walter W. Rostow, might have disabused them – that social development would of

itself reduce opposition to the Shah's rule. Quite the contrary: reactionaries probably last longer than reformers, though they too often come to sticky ends.

Nevertheless, the Shah succeeded in his aim of building up his armed forces, though – as the Americans had foreseen – they proved useless in the end. Because the Shah wanted them to be his own personal instrument, he divided and ruled his generals, whom in any case he had selected much as King Lear selected Goneril and Regan, and with the same ultimate result. His armed forces defended his regime much as a child's toy soldiers defend a house against burglars, which is to say not at all. Awarding positions and turning a blind eye to the subsequent corruption of those who hold them is not the way to create lasting loyalty.

The Shah imagined that the Iranian population would be grateful for the undoubted progress that his regime brought, at least for a time. But people are not like that. They take progress for granted the moment it occurs; old problems, soon forgotten, are immediately replaced by new. A man in a traffic jam does not think that half a generation ago he was riding a donkey; he thinks 'This is hell, why can't they build proper roads?' Moreover, the inevitably uneven distribution of the benefits of any progress is bound to create resentments, and if there was once thing that the Shah's regime was good at, it was the stoking of resentment. For example, one might have supposed that the regime, in the aftermath of the bombing of the Rex cinema in Abadan by terrorists who sympathised with the Ayatollah Khomeini (then still in exile), and which killed more than 400 people, could have scored a propaganda victory. Instead, by persisting in holding a glittering party to celebrate the anniversary of the coup in 1953 that overthrew the Mossadeq government, the regime managed to make itself appear responsible for this terrible terrorist attack instead of the cruel and vicious Khomeini.

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repeating, in form if not in content, the mistakes of the Shah: namely, that of establishing an authoritarian regime with a very slender social base of beneficiaries. Its main advantage over the Shah's regime is that it has some kind of ideology, albeit a primitive and stupid one, but at least with a cadre of true believers to defend it, which the Shah never had. One day, though, the forces of modernization and secularization will take their revenge upon it: so perhaps my fundamental belief of more than half a century ago was misplaced only in time!

There is merely a brief, but succinct and suggestive, description of the aftermath of the revolution in Iran. The moral qualities of the Ayatollah Khomeini can be grasped by the fact that, though the armed forces were assured of immunity from punishment by the revolution that they failed to impede, hundreds were summarily executed with Khomeini's approval (and, one suspects, to his delectation). Asked to define what the charge of 'spreading corruption on earth' meant, the judge in the case, another psychopathic cleric, Sadegh Khalkali, chief justice of the revolutionary courts selected by Khomeini, replied 'What you are guilty of.'

Let us not be too complacent. One is rather reminded of the slogan of the supporters of Black Lives Matter that silence is violence. There are charges against the commission of which some in our society would like there to be no defence.