

Iran: Intelligence and Policy

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THE REPORT on the performance of American intelligence in Iran, by the staff of a House Intelligence subcommittee, is as useful on one level as it is superficial on a second.

On the first it is an insider's study of what is assuredly an intelligence failure. There was not a full and timely warning of the crisis. Whether, if it had been alert, American intelligence might have picked up the signals is more evident to the writers of the report than to us. There is a certain arrogance in assuming that American agents and analysts should be able to know more about the most intimate social and political facts of a country than people in that country themselves. Nonetheless, the report contributes to the continuing inquiry into how to get good intelligence out of the intelligence community. That the Iran intelligence failure occurred on President Carter's watch should add a certain urgency to the quest.

On the second level, however, the report is an outsider's comment on what is only allegedly a political failure. Warning against a "simplistic" blaming of the intelligence community, the report declares that "long-standing U. S. attitudes toward the shah inhibited intelligence collection, dampened policy-makers' appetite for analysis of the shah's position, and deafened policy-makers to the warning implicit in available current intelligence."

The authors based their report on interviews with "analysts and managers" at the intelligence agencies. What might they have found had they interviewed the "users" whose "attitudes" they indict? They might have developed a somewhat more sophisticated understanding of some of those attitudes. They might also have discovered a considerable and painful awareness of the trouble the United States was getting into by sticking close by an exceptionally helpful friend and ally during difficult times over a period of many years, and of the further trouble it would get into by seeming to abandon him in mid-ordeal. The House report indicates, with an indifference to the difficulties of the interventionist policy they commend, that with an early warning the United States might have gotten the shah to tuck the opposition into his government. It seems to us at least as likely that an early warning would only have sharpened the dilemma of what to do.

The country has still to square away its intelligence. The House report helps there. But the report also feeds what would surely be, if it got up speed, a misguided and distracting debate on "who lost Iran" -- misguided in its premise that the United States rather than the shah "lost" Iran (if, in fact, it has been lost), distracting in its effect of drawing attention away from the question of what to do now.