

BRIEFING

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How the CIA Carried Out the 1953 Iran Coup

By Robert Scheer

The Eisenhower White House in 1953 planned, directed and financed the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, according to the agent of the Central Intelligence Agency who coordinated and carried out the top-secret mission in that country.

In an exclusive interview with the Los Angeles Times, Kermit Roosevelt, former CIA bureau chief in the Mideast, detailed for the first time the role of the CIA in the coup that led to the return of the pro-Western Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to power.

Roosevelt said that the success of the operation in Iran — called Project Ajax by the CIA — so inspired then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles that Dulles wanted to duplicate it in the Congo, Guatemala, Indonesia and Egypt, where he wanted to overthrow then President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Roosevelt said that he resisted these efforts and finally resigned from the CIA because of them.

Roosevelt said he spent three weeks

in Iran in August, 1953, surreptitiously directing the coup. He said he had access to \$1 million in secret U.S. funds to finance street riots, but he said that he spent only about \$75,000 and organized just one demonstration. Riots during the coup left 300 dead and led to the dismantling of the nationalist Mossadegh's government.

Roosevelt said that Eisenhower was briefed on the CIA mission before and after it occurred and that the operation was authorized by Dulles, his brother, then-CIA Director Allen Dulles, and former CIA Director and Undersecretary of State Walter Bedell Smith.

"I had the most explicit instructions" from the three, he said, adding that he was chosen for the mission because "I had been their (the CIA's) top Middle Eastern guy for some time."

Roosevelt, a grandson of former President Theodore Roosevelt, said the three aides to the President convinced Eisenhower of the necessity of the mis-

SION.

The CIA's involvement in the Iranian coup has been charged for years by Mossadegh supporters, many of whom are now in the new government in Iran, including Prime Minister Mehdi Bazar-gan. However, the American government has never admitted it.

Roosevelt said that the CIA began to consider the overthrow of Mossadegh after a "suggestion" by the British. Roosevelt recalled:

"We were studying the situation at the British suggestion from 1952 ... the British had already approached us with a suggestion ..." when the British embassy was expelled from Iran in 1952.

Mossadegh had been prime minister for two years. During that time he had consolidated his hold on the country's parliament and gradually had reduced the power of the Shah. Mossadegh had incurred the ire of the Western powers by nationalizing the billion-dollar oil holdings of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co., a British consortium later renamed British Petroleum.

The British and American governments joined forces to impose a blockade of Iranian oil exports that effectively denied tankers, refineries and foreign outlets for Iranian oil.

According to Roosevelt, the plans for the coup began when "the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. came to us with British authorization. They stopped me in London and put it to me there. I said, 'Look guys, I can't talk about this kind of thing now, I've got no authorization.' They spelled out their whole plan, which incidentally was a waste of time ... Oh hell, they had pinpointed different individuals, different military units — all sorts of things — they had a schedule, it was like a military plan, and in clandestine operations you just don't have that kind of plan — it's not possible ..."

Roosevelt said he returned to Washington and conferred with Allen Dulles, then CIA deputy director. It was December, 1952. Eisenhower had won election but a lame duck Democratic administration would be in office until January, 1953. Dulles and Roosevelt began planning the coup against Mossadegh but, as Roosevelt recalled, Dulles insisted on

keeping their plans a secret from President Truman and his Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, who was thought to be sympathetic to Mossadegh. Roosevelt stated:

"Acheson was absolutely fascinated by Dr. Mossadegh. He was in fact sympathetic to him; I didn't feel like raising the matter with him; neither did Allen Dulles, because we knew that Foster Dulles was going to be taking Acheson's place. We saw no point in getting the outgoing administration involved in something we thought they might be less enthusiastic about than the Republicans ... Allen Dulles said, 'Let's not get this thing evolved until the Republicans and my brother Foster take over.'"

Before Eisenhower took office, he received a lengthy letter from Mossadegh asking for support from the new administration and requesting that it end the boycott by purchasing Iranian oil. Roosevelt reports that John Foster Dulles was already planning the coup, and that as a result Eisenhower responded to Mossadegh with what Roosevelt termed "a guarded no."

Roosevelt said that when the Eisenhower administration took office in January, 1953, Foster Dulles — fearing Mossadegh would become a Soviet puppet — ordered Roosevelt to implement the plans for the coup in an apparent departure from the Truman administration policy.

A State Department intelligence report prepared in January, 1963, by the outgoing Truman administration and declassified six months ago indicated that Mossadegh's nationalization of the oil industry had "almost universal Iranian support." It also pictured Mossadegh as strongly anti-Communist, and noted that the Communist Tudeh party was at odds with Mossadegh and deemed his overthrow a high priority.

Asked about the Truman administration's evaluation, Roosevelt answered: "I don't know what to make of that. All I know is what we (the CIA) were reporting what Loy Henderson (U.S. ambassador to Iran) thought and what Foster Dulles decided. Loy Henderson thought that there was a serious danger that Mossad-

ugh was going to, in effect, place Iran under Soviet domination."

Roosevelt added, however, that originally "Mossadegh was not pro-Communist. He did not become pro-Communist until he figured he was driven to it by the desertion of his allies, and he felt that he had no one else to turn to."

Roosevelt agreed with the Truman administration that Mossadegh had popular support because of the oil nationalization but believed he "was losing it rapidly" because of the Western powers' boycott of Iranian oil.

He stated that his task in Iran was clearly one of speeding up events by organizing anti-Mossadegh forces into a more potent threat. He said that the CIA was needed to effect the coup because "someone had to organize it" and the pro-Shah Iranians were "not terribly good at organizing." He said the British would have preferred to organize the coup, but Mossadegh already had expelled them from Iran.

Roosevelt began organizing the coup during a secret trip to Iran in March, 1953. He said he returned to Iran at the end of July, 1953, when he slipped into the country in an American car, driven by a friend from Baghdad, Iraq, to Tehran, Iran. He said he presented a false passport to a border guard.

Roosevelt said that after his arrival in Iran, "I went up to a house on the mountainside and stayed out of people's way and made my arrangements... We had \$1 million there, of which we only

used less than \$75,000, and that was just to organize one demonstration." He said the rest of the money "sat and sat" in a large closet-sized safe in the American embassy and later was given to the Shah.

Roosevelt said that the \$75,000 was paid to a network of three American and five Iranian agents to organize the demonstration. The Iranian agents were the center of a ring of hundreds of local contacts, he said. "They had an organized group, and they just gave them money to raise a crowd."

Roosevelt added that he was in the country under an assumed name, that of a Mr. Lockridge, and there were only three Iranians who knew his real identity.

One of those was the Shah. Roosevelt said he went to the Shah to tell him to fire Mossadegh and install pro-Shah General Fazollah Zahedi as prime minister. Roosevelt said the Shah "was perfectly agreeable to that. He just wanted to be sure that he was going to have some backing. He had the impression obtained from the reception given (in the United States) to Mossadegh by Acheson and Truman that the United States was behind Mossadegh,



Kermit Roosevelt says he spent three weeks in Iran in 1953 surreptitiously directing the coup

and what one had to do was convince him that it wasn't true...

"The minute that I got to him, he accepted that, because we had made arrangements for this (U.S. and British support for the coup) to be confirmed by clandestine statements by both Churchill and Eisenhower. Churchill's signal was a change in the BBC broadcast signal, and Eisenhower was going to include a statement in his speech (on the West Coast) expressing support for the Shah."

Roosevelt said that knowledge of American involvement in the coup was kept secret except to "some army people we dealt with who knew," but "the bulk of the army and the populace in Tehran didn't know, they had no idea that the United States was in any way involved."

In fact, he said, it was agreed that American Ambassador Loy Henderson would stay out of Iran during this period because "it was felt that it would be better that the ambassador not be present."

From his mountainside hiding place, Roosevelt began fusing the pro-Shah military officers into a force that would first back the CIA-financed mobs in Tehran and then seize power.

Two weeks after Roosevelt arrived in Iran, the Shah moved to replace Mossadegh with Zahedi, as suggested by Roosevelt. Mossadegh refused to resign and instead turned on the Shah and his supporters. But Roosevelt had prepared for this contingency. He said a number of the pro-Shah officers were given refuge in the CIA compound adjoining the U.S.



(Clockwise at top left) John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower, Allen Dulles and Walter Bedell Smith decided that Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh (foreground) had to be overthrown, returning the Shah (center) to power

embassy, and the Shah was sent off into exile.

"We said, 'OK, if something goes wrong, you hop in your plane and fly to Baghdad.' But the ambassador there was pro-Mossadegh, so the Shah kept on going into Rome."

At that point, the pro-Shah street mobs went into action, backed by the military and led by Zahedi.

Zahedi was one of the army officers with whom Roosevelt said he was in constant contact during his three weeks in Iran, and Zahedi's son Ardeshir, the future Iranian ambassador to the United States, was one of Roosevelt's local contacts.

After the street demonstrations and takeover of the government by the military, the Shah returned to Tehran, having received a telegram from Roosevelt and Zahedi "telling him to come home," Roosevelt said. Mossadegh went into hiding, gave himself up days later, was arrested and tried. He served three years in prison.

When the Shah returned to Iran and resumed power, he accepted a deal with the Western countries that allowed American oil firms to assume 40 percent of Iranian oil production. The British consortium was also permitted to return and assume a major interest.

Roosevelt said that the planning and implementation of the coup took only three weeks, after which he left the country.

When he returned to the United States, Roosevelt said, President Eisenhower had been briefed on the mission, and he praised Roosevelt.

"As a matter of fact, he pinned a medal on me ... the National Security Medal," Roosevelt said, adding that only one person before him — FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover — had been so honored. Roosevelt said he also received a scroll, "engraved and filled in and signed and so forth."

He said John Foster Dulles "was so pleased and sort of licking his chops with the success of this thing that he decided that that was the way to deal with any difficult foreign situation."

Roosevelt said he tried to convince Secretary of State Dulles that the mission in Iran could not serve as a model, "but Foster Dulles didn't really believe me and he tried to get me involved in, I can't remember, I think it was Guatemala."

Roosevelt said he investigated that

situation, and "I decided it was a situation where you would have to use overt American force, which is not what the CIA was set up to do. So I said no. And they went ahead."

He said Foster Dulles had concluded that "by giving clandestine support to a group of your choice, you could accomplish whatever you wanted to in a country, which was in my mind totally ridiculous ... you get carried away by one operation and that makes you think you can do that same kind of thing wherever you want. And you forget to analyze carefully why the first one succeeded."

He said that he had further disagreement with Foster Dulles over Egypt. Roosevelt said he was convinced that Nasser would enter into an arms deal with Russia, and Foster Dulles did not believe him. "He had just been to the Geneva

conference and the Russians had assured him they wouldn't do anything of this sort."

When the Secretary of State learned of the Soviet-Egyptian arms pact, he wanted Roosevelt to go into Egypt and duplicate the Iranian mission: overthrowing Nasser, Roosevelt said.

"He asked me to do it, and I told him it was just absolutely impossible ... He couldn't find anyone else who thought it could be done, so I guess he gave up ..."

For four years after Iran, he said, Foster Dulles kept proposing countries in which the United States might intervene, and Roosevelt kept turning him down. Finally, because of Dulles' persistence, Roosevelt said he resigned in 1953 from the CIA.

Roosevelt went to work for Gulf Oil as vice president in charge of governmental relations, where "I was in charge of their governmental relations with the U.S. government and with foreign governments."

He said he had some dealings with the Shah in that position "but not very much." Gulf was one of the oil companies that gained an interest in Iranian oil production after the Shah was returned to power by the CIA-led coup.

Roosevelt denied that he facilitated Gulf's acquisition of Iranian oil rights while he was in the CIA. Nor would he discuss any of the specific tasks he performed for Gulf during the time he served as a company vice president, other than that he aided in communications

between the Shah and Galt.

In June, 1975, the Senate subcommittee on multinational corporations released documents indicating that Roosevelt had also been on the payroll of the Northrop Corp., a Los Angeles-based aerospace company that does a high volume of business with Mideastern countries. The subcommittee, then headed by Senator Frank Church, D-Ida., stated that Roosevelt was paid \$75,000 a year to aid in Northrop's sales to Iran, Saudi Arabia and other countries. Northrop was one of the company's clients.

In 1964, Roosevelt registered with the Department of Justice as a foreign agent of the Shah's government. Iran at that time was a client of the United States.

His registration was a public statement indicating that he helped coordinate arrangements and publicity for the Shah's trip to the United States and for U.S. journalists and businessmen to travel to Iran. He consulted with the Iranian ambassador to the United States, Ardeshtir Zahedi, and between 1967 and 1970, Roosevelt's company, Downs and Roosevelt, received \$116,000 a year above expenses for its efforts on behalf of the Iranian government.

Roosevelt said he decided to end his 25-year silence on his role in the Iranian coup and write about it after consultation three years ago with the Shah in Tehran.

After receiving the Shah's approval for the project and clearing it with the CIA, Roosevelt began writing a book on this period in his life. It will be published in September.