

America the Gulliver Mired in

By Haynes Johnson

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What hurt most about the debacle in the desert was not the failure, or even the deaths. What hurt most is that it seemed so frustratingly familiar.

In the end, all our might and all our proud tradition of daring resulted only in reinforcing our growing feeling of impotence. Once again America, the Gulliver of the age, was stuck in the sand. We couldn't even get the bodies out.

Americans have become accustomed to witnessing grave events played out before them, live and in color over television, for years now. They have also become accustomed, sadly, not to expect the happy endings most of us had come to believe was an American's birthright. What they awoke to yesterday morning was the latest act in a succession of events that leaves more a feeling of depression than rage.

Outside the White House, after the somber news from Iran had been given to the people by the president, the usual lines of tourists formed. In other times of crisis—the death of a president, the impending resignation of one, the sudden attack that means war—the crowds around the Executive Mansion become a mirror of the nation, whether tense, angry, or sorrowful.

But yesterday, among the tourists, that

sense of something extraordinary was missing.

No tight little knots of people stood gazing through the iron White House fence, riveted on our symbol of government; and the national will as in the past. No radios blossomed mysteriously, holding people rigid while the serious news came forth.

All appeared normal: groups of children shouted political slogans—"Go, Carter," and "Go Reagan"—at each other while the White House flag starred at full mast in an April breeze. Conversation was muted; no strain was evident.

That absence of emotion seemed to fit the occasion too, for what people quietly had to say added to the feeling of experiencing something all too familiar. Another painful, humiliating episode had occurred.

Joan Finch, a teacher from Bedford Hills, N.Y., spoke for more than herself when she said:

"We heard the news this morning at the campsite Penn on Route 1 in Maryland. We couldn't believe it. We were shocked. Surprised. It wasn't his failure. It was circumstances. We have too much ability and haven't been able to get it together.

"All this machinery—it's like a giant with his hands tied behind his back, standing in front of a pipsqueak mouse. A crazy pipsqueak mouse."

It was an apt metaphor—the modern-day

equivalent of the tiny Lilliputians snarling the mighty giant with their tangle of threads. We felt the same way during the long years of Vietnam when all our modern power and vaunted military technology couldn't blast away the tenacious peasants burrowed in their tunnels and hiding in the jungles.

Expressions of humiliation, depression, remorse were commonplace across America yesterday. Joan Finch, the teacher, put it simply: "We just feel very badly."

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Calls around the country brought these reactions:

"I heard it this morning," said Fred Sherman, 56, manager of a furniture store in Reading, Pa., who had organized a support-the-hostage-march there last Christmas. "I felt very sick. I felt washed out."

Sherman said "It's inconceivable that we'd use a term like 'mechanical problems.' It's inconceivable that we'll allow 'em to get

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away with it. I totally support the president. I feel very badly, but we're not gonna break up and bust apart at the seams."

In Panhandle, Tex., George and Lottie Eller, like their fellow citizens, had barely begun another day when their routine was shattered.

"I had just got out of bed when I heard it on TV," she recalled. "I woke George up and said: 'I can't believe my eyes, George. You look.'"

Her husband, a wheat farmer, said:

"I think if you're gonna pull a raid you could do it a lot better. If you're gonna use your elite capability, do it, do it right, and get it over with.

The Ellers, typically, engaged in some preliminary post-mortems.

Lottie: "We made our mistake in the beginning by not going in. It's not 50 hostages. It's the whole U.S."

George: "It's our whole country and our whole image that's being held hostage."

But, as always in the immediate first wave of reaction to a crisis, there was no scapegoating. Americans rallied behind their president and struck a stance of national unity.

Within 10 hours after the president went on national TV, the White House had received 3,210 calls and 1,739 telegrams. They

were overwhelmingly supportive—84 percent of the callers made positive remarks, and so did 73 percent of those sending telegrams.

That is the traditional pattern.

Some senators, though, reported a more mixed reaction from their constituents. "Word is that our calls are running against," said a spokesman for New York's Sen. Jacob Javits, a Republican. Expressions of strong support there were balanced by people who deplored the use of force.

Ohio Sen. John Glenn's offices showed a 50-50 split. Reactions ran from "what a bumbling fool he had to be to try" to "we should support him."

Probably a more telling indication of the national mood came from Sen. John Tower (R-Tex.). He found the volume of response to this latest dramatic news from Iran not as heavy as when the hostages were taken nearly six months ago.

Most Americans would not be surprised at that report. It's not that they care less. They've learned, painfully, that their surges of hope seem destined to be followed by heartbreaking setbacks.

That charred American wreckage and those burned American bodies lying now on the Mid-east sands are another monument to another disappointment.

Staff writer Nicholas Lemann contributed to this report.)