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# Mr. Ford's Secret Sellout

## ESSAY

By William Safire

### What happened when 'our Shah-forsaken clients, the Kurds,' turned to the U.S.

WASHINGTON, Feb. 4—One section of the still-secret Pike committee report especially troubling to the White House is the revelation of a shameful action for which President Ford must be held responsible: the betrayal of the Kurdish people.

The two million Kurds are a distinct ethnic group, Moslem but not Arab, most living in Iraq, who have been fighting for self-determination for forty years. When President Nixon visited the Shah of Iran after his Moscow summit conference in 1972, the Shah asked the United States to help him help the Kurds make life difficult for his enemy and neighbor, Communist-dominated Iraq.

The Shah was quite capable of helping the Kurds by himself, but the Kurds did not trust him; they did trust the word of the United States, however, and as the unexpurgated Pike report says: "... the U.S. acted in effect as a guarantor that the insurgent group" [the Kurds] "would not be summarily dropped by the foreign head of state" [the Shah].

The United States agreed, with Treasury Secretary John Connally carrying the word to the Shah in utmost secrecy. Israel too, was delighted; the separatist Kurds could tie down the Iraqi Army. But when the Yom Kippur surprise attack on Israel took place in October, 1973, and the Kurds were willing to launch an attack of their own that would have won their freedom as well as taken some heat off the Israelis, Secretary Kissinger refused to let his Kurdish pawns move. On Oct. 16, he ordered intelligence chief William Colby to send this message to the Kurds: "We do not repeat not consider it advisable for you to undertake the offensive military action that [another government, says the Pike committee, meaning Israel] has suggested to you."

The Kurds obeyed: The United States was the ally they trusted. They (and we) did not know that at that moment in 1973, the Shah was putting together OPEC, the oil cartel—and a crucial part of the inducement to Iraq and other Arab neighbors was Iran's willingness to doublecross the nettlesome Kurds.

Iran and its neighbor, Iraq, emboldened, and OPEC price rises stunned the Western world. Through 1974, the Shah of Iran kept the Kurds in Iraq fairly quiet, but still kept them well enough supplied to be "a card to play," as a C.I.A. memo characterizes his views. The C.I.A. then viewed the low-key support of the Kurds as "a uniquely useful tool for weakening [our ally's enemy's, says the report, meaning Iran's enemy, Iraq] potential for international adventurism."

Then the Shah, having played Mr. Nixon for a sucker on oil, played Mr. Ford for a doublecrosser on the Kurds: In March 1975, with President Ford hopelessly dependent on Henry Kissinger, the Persian rug was jerked. "The extent of our ally's leverage over U.S. policy," continues the suppressed Pike report, "was such that he apparently made no effort to notify his junior American partners that the program's end was near."

"The insurgents were clearly taken by surprise as well. Their adversaries [the report is referring to the Communist-dominated Iraqis], knowing of the impending aid cut-off, launched an all-out search and destroy campaign the day after the agreement was signed. The autonomy movement was over. . . ."

Our Shah-forsaken clients, the Kurds, turned to the United States. The C.I.A. chief of station in Teheran felt guilty and cabled Director Colby on March 10, 1975: "Iran's action has not only shattered their political hopes;

it endangers lives of thousands"; he made some suggestions for amelioration and concluded "it would be the decent thing for U.S.G. to do."

The Kurdish leader, Gen. Mustafa Barzani, sent a plea to Mr. Kissinger on that same day: "Our movement and people are being destroyed in an unbelievable way with silence from everyone." But on Henry Kissinger's advice, President Ford maintained that silence. Two-hundred thousand Kurdish refugees fled to Iran, and 40,000 of the most vulnerable were forced back to Iraq.

This unconscionable sellout took place without a peep out of us, public or private; no U.S. pressure on the Shah to make a decent deal for Kurdish autonomy in Iraq; not even a dime proposed for humanitarian aid. Gerald Ford was the first U.S. President in such a circumstance to look the other way.

A "high U.S. official," who is trying to keep secret his remark to the Pike committee staff, dismissed this betrayal of an ethnic group that placed its trust in the secret assurances of the United States in these words:

"Covert action should not be confused with missionary work."

That's a tough guy talking. But since when is it United States policy to be tough on the weak and weak on the tough? When did U.S. Presidents get in the habit of encouraging people to fight for their freedom, giving them guns, and then cravenly walking away from the consequences?

The callous, amoral voice may be Henry Kissinger's, but that decision of only eleven months ago is the direct responsibility of Gerald Ford. If the President wants to defend this sellout of the Kurds at the command of the Shah, let him do so; if he wants to disavow this act of American dishonor, let him fire the adviser who urged the dishonorable decision upon him.

Would such a dramatic dropping of the pilot be lacking in compassion to Mr. Kissinger, that selfless aide who longs to become an Oxford don at a time of his own choosing? Perhaps. But Presidential action should not be confused with missionary work.

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