

President and Shah

By Tom Wicker

The United States was not even out of Vietnam in May, 1972, when Richard Nixon made an offhand, unpublicized and undebated decision that tied the nation almost as inextricably to Iran. Mr. Nixon ordered the Defense and State Departments to let Iran buy any American weapon it wanted short of nuclear warheads.

In the mysterious ways of bureaucracy, that apparently precluded even the most cursory review or analysis of the Shah's military shopping list, with the result that, since 1972, American arms sales to Iran have totalled \$10.4 billion. The weapons sold are so sophisticated that large numbers of Americans are needed to help service and operate them; and at the present rate of expansion of the Shah's armed forces, the 24,000 Americans now in Iran may be more than doubled by 1980.

If the Shah wanted to start a war, moreover, or if someone started one with him, Iranian forces would be as dependent on their American advisers (does that word remind anyone of Vietnam?) as on their American weapons. Or if, in the event of war, Washington pulled the Americans out, the Shah's forces would be left all but helpless.

If it were not so dangerous, the Iranian snarl would be ludicrous. A study belatedly conducted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee not only details the Shah's purchases, such as four Spruance-class destroyers more sophisticated than those being built for American use, and 80 F-14 Grumman Tomcats, an aircraft so complex even the United States Navy is having trouble with it; the study also points out the diplomatic and strategic implications of Mr. Nixon's decision.

Suppose, for only one plausible example, Iranian forces were to be ordered into action by the Shah in some way dangerous to the survival of Israel, which is a major American commitment. Either his American weapons and his American technicians would have to be used despite that commitment and against Israel's interests, or the Americans would have to be withdrawn, crippling Iran's military capacity.

The latter course surely would not please the Shah, who just happens to control a lot of oil upon which the United States and the rest of the West are dependent.

Nor is there any quick way out of this box. Apparently if the United States stopped selling arms to Iran now—although the Shah is considering buying 250 to 300 more American fighter planes, plus more other equipment—it would be five years or more before Iran could have the necessary expertise to operate the weapons she already has. Like Br'er Rabbit stuck to the Tar Baby, Washington is thus to some extent hostage to the Shah for years to come, no matter who is President.

Aside from that fact—chilling as it is in the context of the Middle East—the Iranian arms mess raises

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larger questions, to which this year's Presidential candidates should address themselves. For example:

Does it make sense for the United States to have sold any country in the Middle East \$10.4 billion in arms since 1972? While it's argued that others would provide the weapons if Washington didn't, and in the case of Iran that it was expected to provide "regional security" as British forces were withdrawn from the area, pouring weapons into the Middle East on such a scale seems too reckless for any conceivable gain. In fact, Iran was not even the biggest weapons customer of the United States in fiscal 1976—Saudi Arabia was, with Iran second.

Is it really in the American interest for this nation to be the world's largest and most zealous arms merchant? Does either the domestic economy or an effective foreign policy require the sale of \$8.3 billion in arms to the world—the American total in fiscal 1976? Are Americans themselves safer from war and destruction because of these sales?

Perhaps the most important question is whether the President of the United States, no matter who he is, or of which party, should have the personal power to make far-reaching decisions as casually as Mr. Nixon appears to have done on arms sales to Iran. The executive necessarily has great latitude in the conduct of foreign policy and security affairs, but that latitude is supposed to be exercised within a system of checks and balances, and—save in emergency—by orderly process open to question and review.

The Iranian arms mess suggests once again that the powers of the Presidency can be as imperial as those of a Shah.