

NWC
Seminar
ESSAY
92-57

Desert One: The Hostage Rescue Mission

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20 December 1991

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 20 DEC 1991		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 20-12-1991 to 20-12-1991	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Desert One: The Hostage Rescue Mission				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 19	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

The choice of Ministers is a matter of no small moment to a Prince. Whether they shall be good or not depends on his prudence, so that the readiest conjecture we can form of the character and sagacity of a Prince is from seeing what sort of men he has about him. When they are at once capable and faithful, we may always account him wise But if they be otherwise, we must pronounce unfavorably of him, since he has committed a first fault in making this selection. Machiavelli¹

INTRODUCTION

I'll never forget that momentous morning 25 April, 1980, when I picked up the newspaper and found headlines about the failed mission to rescue American hostages Iran was holding. I'll never forget my feelings of remorse over the loss of lives, embarrassment over the failure of the mission, and outrage over our national humiliation. I wondered at length about the decision-making and planning processes that led to execution of such a difficult mission. I also wondered why the mission failed.

History isn't kind to failure. If the raid had succeeded, Jimmy Carter probably would have been reelected, and he would have been hailed as a great decision-maker. Instead, critics have castigated him for designing a flawed plan and making a poor decision.

The reasons for the President's decision to execute the hostage rescue operation were extraordinarily complex. President Carter made this decision with a multitude of diverse and strong pressures bearing heavily on him. The environment in which Carter made the decision was volatile and shifting, domestically, internationally, politically, and personally. Also, some participants within his decision-making group had strong differences of opinion, which contributed to pressure on the President.

We can understand President Carter's decision to execute the hostage rescue operation by using an analytical collage. A collage makes sense because this, and

other crisis decisions, are very complex. My collage consists of key aspects of the decision-maker's environment, aspects of Allison's bureaucratic model of analysis, backgrounds and mind-sets of principal participants, and a multitude of influences emanating from the nature of the crisis. Other approaches could easily include Allison's rational actor and organizational models; however, owing to space constraints, I chose to limit discussion to my collage.

THE PRINCE'S OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

President Carter came to power without any experience in Washington, but with strong biases. He was, for example, biased against the large bureaucracies that held so much power in the government. Because of this bias, he decided to make his own foreign-policy decisions instead of concentrating foreign-policy power in the State Department. This decision eventually led to animosity between Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Initially, President Carter maintained an even hand between Secretary of State Vance and National Security Adviser Brzezinski, more often than not tilting toward Vance's points of view. Over time, however, Carter began to lean toward Brzezinski's viewpoints. By the second month of the Iranian crisis, and after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter had tilted toward Brzezinski's foreign policy views and had entrusted tremendous power to him.

Before he took the Presidential oath, President Carter decided to make decisions collegially,² to encourage an environment of warmth, friendship, and open dissent without competitiveness. In a collegial decision-making environment, the President would make decisions after listening to debate and dissenting points of view. In such a decision-making environment, participants would be more likely to see the big picture and Presidential perspectives than being strong

competitors, captive to self-interests and those of their bureaucracies. To operate a collegial system, the President needed a knowledgeable coordinator who would provide impartial, objective analyses to aid in decision-making.

Theoretically, the National Security Adviser would fulfill such a role. But, to be an impartial observer, the National Security Adviser couldn't attempt to advocate his views and have his own agenda. This wasn't the case in the months preceding the fateful decision to execute the hostage rescue attempt. President Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski was a strong advocate of his own world-view, and he was in a good position to influence the President's thinking. He was intellectually close to the President, worked in close proximity to the Oval Office, established agendas for NSC meetings, and easily formed alliances with other powerful men to help advocate his positions.

Very early in the crisis, Carter authorized Brzezinski to tell the Pentagon to begin planning for military action to free the hostages. U.S. military forces would need to rescue the hostages either if the Iranians commenced executing them or if all diplomatic efforts failed. To this end, the Pentagon started planning the hostage rescue attempt in early November, 1979. To retain White House control, Carter tasked Brzezinski to be overseer and coordinator for the military operation. As an aside, it seems odd that Brzezinski, lacking military experience, would oversee the Secretary of Defense in a risky military operation.

THE PRINCE AND HIS COUNSELLORS

Jimmy Carter's subordinates believed he was intelligent, intense, moral, well-meaning, and flexible.³ He had a strong personal commitment to resurrect Presidential prestige lost during the Nixon era. Carter was deeply committed to

doing what he thought was right, despite political consequences. Most probably though, he maintained a perspective of his place in history.

Jimmy Carter had the pride, conviction, and self-confidence he believed necessary to make difficult decisions, but his self-confidence gave him an aura of arrogance. Also, he was a born-again Christian, which he believed gave him faith and confidence to make correct decisions. Carter's *Weltanschauung* initially coincided with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's.

When the Americans in the U.S. Embassy were incarcerated, President Carter immediately became deeply involved. He became emotionally attached to the plight of the hostages and their families.⁴ Carter devoted himself to the captive's release and subordinated many of his activities to that end. He tried approaching the problem rationally and grew increasingly frustrated that the Iranians wouldn't respond similarly. In the end, his emotional involvement probably influenced his decision-making. Because of his emotional involvement and personal make-up, his policies were a curious mix of real and surreal, controlled thinking and anger, hope and depression, action and passivity, and rational and irrational thought processes.

Zbigniew Brzezinski was a highly intelligent and aggressive National Security Adviser, who learned quickly that he was in a position of powerful influence. He was a tough, resourceful, and vicious infighter. But he was an alliance and coalition builder too, as his relationships with Secretary of Defense Brown and White House Staff attest to. Brzezinski was the principal advocate of military action to release the hostages. He wanted more than a hostage rescue -- he also wanted to capture some Iranian militants and conduct retaliatory bombing if the rescue mission failed.

Cyrus Vance was a moralistic, intelligent, articulate, and well-respected Secretary of State. Vance was against using force from the beginning of the

hostage crisis, and he made his views known to Carter and the rest of the NSC. Since Vance opposed and Brzezinski advocated the use of force to resolve the crisis, these two powerful men contested for position primacy. But Cyrus Vance was no match for Brzezinski. He had neither the degree of articulation to define foreign policy problems nor the aggressiveness of Brzezinski to fight for policy positions. Moreover, Vance didn't seem to have the bureaucratic savvy to counter his antagonist in providing cogent alternatives, building coalitions to support his views or in the infighting that occurred throughout the crisis and during the final decision process. Vance's ineptitude in bureaucratic infighting, forming alliances and coalitions, and articulating cogent arguments and alternatives proved to be fatal flaws in his efforts to stop the hostage rescue attempt.

Harold Brown was an experienced, intelligent, and non-controversial Secretary of Defense. He remains an enigma in the decision process to use military force to rescue the hostages. In all the memoirs I reviewed, few, other than Brzezinski, say much about Brown. Brzezinski believed Brown was subservient to the President, over-analyzed problems to the point of indecisiveness, yet admirably controlled the strong-willed services in the Pentagon.⁵ Brown was a strong supporter of Brzezinski's position to use force to rescue the hostages.

Other participants played important but subordinate roles. Rosalynn Carter advised her husband on all important matters, as did Press Secretary Jody Powell and Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan. Vice President Mondale also advised the President, particularly on domestic politics and relations with Congress -- the decision to execute the hostage rescue attempt was no exception. Admiral Stansfield Turner provided intelligence and supported the hostage rescue almost from the start of the planning. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, David Jones, supported the rescue attempt and believed, with the passage of time, that the

mission had a good chance to succeed despite the constraints, frictions, and risks involved.

THE BUREAUCRATIC MODEL'S APPLICABILITY TO THE DECISION

Graham Allison's book, Essence of Decision, particularly his discussion of bureaucratic analysis, provides insight for understanding the decision to execute the hostage rescue attempt. Allison tells us that the analyst who uses the bureaucratic analytical model,

". . . has explained this event when he has discovered who did what to whom that yielded the action in question. Predictions are generated by identifying the game in which an issue will arise, the relevant players, and their relative power and skill."⁶

Analysts can understand the decision to execute the hostage rescue attempt by using parts of Allison's bureaucratic model for analysis. Other parts of his model are less applicable.

The bureaucratic model is useful in several ways for analyzing the decision to launch the hostage rescue mission. According to Allison, describing the nature of the game is an important step in gaining understanding. The decision to execute the rescue mission, or in Allison's term the game, involved significant consequences for the country, organizations, and individual participants and their professional reputations and political futures. The outcome was so important that potential consequences and attendant stress seriously affected player decision-making, particularly in achieving consensus and designing alternatives.

The decision was momentous for all participants and the nation. It influenced the reputations of those involved, affected the prestige of the country and the institution of the presidency, tarnished the reputation of the U.S. military, and affected relationships among the individuals involved. It's peculiar though, that such an important decision didn't warrant more acrimony and derision. Instead, a

curious lack of dissent prevailed except that voiced by Vance. There are indications, however, others harbored doubts about the efficacy of the mission, but for reasons unknown they didn't voice their dissenting opinions in the critical meetings of 11 and 15 April.⁷

The bureaucratic model posits the importance of men sharing power. In the hostage crisis, the circle of players involved powerful men who shared power. Sharing power, though, didn't mean they lacked conflicting thoughts. On the contrary, Vance and Brzezinski had strong opinions and fought to advocate their positions. They fought to win because they thought their positions were correct and would be for the betterment of the country. In this situation, the power and skill of the antagonists mattered a great deal. Although both men were powerful, Vance was less powerful because Carter's philosophy had drifted toward Brzezinski's. Also, Vance proved no match for Brzezinski's skill in manipulating information and views, influencing the President, building coalitions of support, and infighting.

Along with having great influence on President Carter, Brzezinski, beginning in early November 1979, appears to have built coalitions, particularly with Secretary of Defense Brown and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Jones. Brzezinski also appears to have built coalitions with Jody Powell and Hamilton Jordan after he fully appraised them of detailed aspects of the mission in February and March, 1980. He reinforced bonds of his coalition with the Pentagon by hosting secret mission-planning sessions in his White House office with Secretary Brown and JCS chairman General Jones and providing continuous supervision and guidance to Pentagon planners. The strength of Brzezinski's coalitions proved important. All the President's advisers, except Vance, recommended mission execution in fateful NSC meetings of 11 and 15 April, 1980.

The bureaucratic model offers two additional points that help explain the decision to execute the hostage rescue operation. First, the environment is important; in the hostage crisis, the environment was stressful and uncertain. Participants didn't know if the rescue mission was the best course of action. They believed something had to be done because of domestic and international political pressures, fear for the well-being of the hostages, and external perceptions of national impotence. As Allison states, "... the environment forces responsible men to become active players."⁸ But participants in the decision were uneasy about the outcome.

Second, the structure of the decision's final act is appropriate for helping us understand the decision. Allison's thoughts are again apropos. Allison maintains that the structure of a bureaucratic game is such that participants believe others don't fully see the issue from their vantage point. Since players often must argue forcefully for others to accept their views,⁹ it's remarkable that Secretary Vance was on vacation during the critical 11 April NSC meeting. Personal advocacy is recognizably critical in a crisis, particularly for a player with strong opposing views. Thus, because of Brzezinski's personal make-up, aggressiveness, and savvy, he could have structured the hastily called meeting to coincide with Vance's absence to weaken alternative arguments and Vance's position when he returned. When Vance returned, he had a chance to argue against the mission, but he didn't receive any support.¹⁰

Some aspects of Allison's bureaucratic model are notable for not helping us understand what affected the hostage rescue decision. President Carter apparently kept political considerations, a primary aspect of Allison's model, to a minimum in this crisis. His idealism apparently caused subordination of political pragmatism to exigencies stemming from the crisis.¹¹ President Carter seemed to understand the

risks and did what he believed to be right, despite political consequence. In this difficult decision, I couldn't discern that any participants either overtly played politics or took a particular side solely because it was in their self-interest, as suggested in the Allison model. Perhaps self-aggrandizing behavior and superficial political gains tend to recede when a crisis exists. I'm certain, however, the participants, particularly Carter, were feeling enormous pressure to do something about the plight of the hostages. Thus, one could argue that some political considerations occurred, at least among Carter's subordinates.¹²

This decision didn't come from bargaining, a key aspect of Allison's bureaucratic model. Instead, Carter made the decision from two opposing alternatives: do something or do nothing. Brzezinski represented the "do something" side and Vance represented the "do nothing" side. Evidence doesn't suggest either accommodation or give and take, both typical of Allison's bureaucratic analysis model, by either side in the basic decision to rescue the hostages -- just two men struggling for triumph of their opposing views.

Two other differences exist between aspects of Allison's model and what transpired in the decision. First, although time was important, the pace of the game was more deliberate than usual in a crisis situation. Allison's model discusses how pressed for time busy decision-makers are and how the rapid pace of a crisis prevents them from making informed decisions and exploring alternatives. This crisis lasted several months, so decision makers weren't unduly pressured by requirements for quick decisions so common to frenzied, quick-paced environments of many past crises. Instead, their pressure came from environmental constraints, such as shortening nights in Iran and prolonged psychological stress from worry about the hostages and prestige of the United States. Second, operations security limited numbers of action channels. Because of

operations security requirements, Allison's typical "Indian" bureaucratic infighting wasn't significant.

From this analysis, I've drawn several conclusions. The bureaucratic model is useful; yet, it's not universally applicable in toto. I don't believe Allison meant it to be. Also, the model could suggest that Presidents are weak, non-players in the national security process. Such suggestion wasn't correct in the Desert One decision. Carter's influence was decisive in exploring and exhausting non-military means for resolving the crisis. He made the final decision to execute. President Carter, like most modern Presidents, was the preeminent force in making foreign policy and national security decisions. I also discovered that mind-sets¹³ of participants are more important than any other variable in attempting to understand this decision. Last, the bureaucratic model needs many qualifiers to be effective,

"... we begin to see in microcosm one of the central difficulties with the bureaucratic politics paradigm: we must qualify it with so many amendments before it begins to work that when it does, we may not be left with a bureaucratic paradigm, but may in reality be using another one quite different."¹⁴

THE PRINCE'S DECISION

High-level decision makers don't make decisions in isolation. Many forces, inside and outside the decision-making environment, combine to influence the decision. What were some influences on Carter in this decision?

President Carter's emotional ties with the hostages and their families influenced his decision. Because he empathized and sympathized with their plight,¹⁵ President Carter felt enormous pressure to secure the hostages' freedom and to do it quickly. One writer believes Carter became so emotionally involved that he considered the hostages and their families to be part of his family.¹⁶

Carter also felt the pressure of public opinion and political pressure to take action. Initial public and Congressional approval for the mature way he handled the crisis had evaporated; intense public and congressional pressure to act replaced approval.¹⁷ While not an overpowering force, Carter and his political aides also felt the political pressure of Ronald Reagan and Senator Kennedy in the approaching Presidential election. Above all, Carter had a good perspective of the American people's impatience with prolonged crises.

All Presidents and their counsellors worry about the President's "place in the sun." The President worries because of immediacy. People in the United States and abroad judge a President's actions. Therefore, in this crisis, people judged Presidential competency on criteria of decisive action and satisfactory outcome. Presidents also worry about their "place in the sun" from a long-term perspective. Historians, for example, review every Presidential judgment *ad infinitum*, particularly in a crisis, and decide how successful a President was in relation to past President's decisions. In this situation, Presidential counsellors weren't very forthcoming about why they worried about the President's reputation, but at least part of the reason, with loyalty, lies in worrying about their reputations through association with the President and the advice they provided. At the beginning of the hostage crisis, for whatever reasons, Vance and Brzezinski seemed to have the President's reputation in their minds.¹⁸

As another important influence, the President and his counsellors were concerned about Presidential and national prestige, and honor of the United States. Prestige and honor are abstract -- they are subjective values. But in a crisis, the abstract becomes concrete because national leaders know they are the custodians of national honor and prestige. The prestige of the institution of the Presidency closely relates to national honor and prestige. There is evidence that Carter

believed the Iranians were attacking him personally,¹⁹ and they were attacking the office of the President of the United States. Brzezinski, in particular, believed the honor of the United States revolved around a satisfactory outcome.²⁰ A combative feeling one develops when attacked, a high feeling of outrage at besmirched honor, and a strong sense of duty inherent in the perceived responsibilities of custodians of national honor and prestige influenced Brzezinski's advocacy, Vance's opposition, and Carter's receptivity to military action.

Time also pressured President Carter. First and foremost, President Carter feared for the hostage's lives. The more time they spent incarcerated in an environment characterized by anarchy and rapid change, the greater their personal danger. Second, as winter turned into spring, Carter's advisers, particularly the military, pressured Carter to act because the long nights needed to conduct the operation successfully were growing shorter. Third, time was working for Carter's political enemies. The longer it took him to resolve the crisis, the more Carter looked weak, indecisive, and helpless. Fourth, an extended crisis causes decision-makers to start wearing out physically and emotionally. As time progresses and a crisis continues, they start seeking quick-fix solutions that will solve the immediate problem and possibly turn the situation to their favor.²¹ Even with great uncertainty and at best a superficial understanding of the risks involved, time militates for action, any action. With the relentless pressure and passage of time, rational thinking, dissention, and search for viable alternatives start to recede in importance. Because of the intangible effects of the phenomenon of time, much talk occurred about potential benefits, but little realistic thinking seemed to occur about potential costs, particularly long-term costs.

From our vantage point today, we can form some tentative conclusions about what went wrong with the decision. As a significant problem, Brzezinski's great

influence and effective coalition building prevented the sole dissenter from having a chance either to persuade the group or Carter. Jordan described Vance's fateful 15 April attempt to sway the group to his position on by saying that Vance argued eloquently about the reasons why the rescue shouldn't go but he didn't gain even one convert -- his words fell on deaf ears.²² Everybody in the group knew Vance's position and his arguments and had already decided against accepting them.

Probably the most important reasons Vance couldn't convince the group to change lie in the thinking processes, emotional status, and psychological make-up of President Jimmy Carter. Vance had lost credibility with the President during the months preceding and during the hostage crisis. Accentuating Vance's loss of credibility, Carter was under intense personal and external pressure to free the hostages -- Vance neither understood the intensity of Carter's desire nor realized that strong pressures to take action had backed the President into a corner, imprisoned by the bonds of perceived requirements to act. Last, Vance didn't provide reasonable alternatives other than one unacceptable to the President and his key advisers -- diplomacy.

The decision-making group reached consensus early and it didn't falter. In Carter's chosen style of decision-making though, dissention is crucial. Yet this decision yielded little dissention, except from Vance. Without dissention, the group didn't either search for or explore alternatives to any meaningful extent. Without the creative thinking and debate inherent in alternative seeking, the group settled on one option. With one option, the group couldn't provide a range of alternatives for the President's consideration. With a single option, cost/benefit analyses were limited. Thus, Carter had only one option, one dissenter, no alternatives, and questionable depth in cost/benefit analyses.

From paradoxical, swirling forces and energies manifested in the President, his counsellors, pressures and influences of the environment, a seemingly rational decision emerged. It held steadfast even in the face of great risk, uncertainty, and disadvantageous probabilities of success presented by the Pentagon. Overall, it's impossible to judge whether the decision was good or bad. The President and his counsellors attempted to use rational measures to end the crisis. Unfortunately, they weren't dealing with either a rational leader or government. Thus, enormous pressures pushed the President into action that was antithetical to his previous mind-set and way of doing business. The President and his counsellors didn't have the luxury of contemplating metaphysical notions of good and evil, right and wrong -- they had to choose what they considered the lesser of two evils.²³ From President Carter's perspective, he made what Alexander George calls a high-quality decision:

"... one in which the President correctly weighs the national interest in a particular situation and chooses a policy of an option that is most likely to achieve national interest at acceptable cost and risk."²⁴

Using this definition, the positive attitude of General Jones and the rescue organization, the pressures of the moment, particularly that of time, and divorcing ourselves from the eventual outcome of the hostage rescue attempt, Carter seems to have made a high-quality decision.

CONCLUSION

We can draw four conclusions about high-level crisis decision-making from this fascinating experience. First, and foremost, humans remain preeminent in making foreign policy decisions.²⁵ Decisions aren't totally objective -- flawless objectivity only lies in nonhuman things. Instead, decisions are subjective in that people have opinions, thoughts, backgrounds, and psychological make-ups that

influence their thinking, advice, and decisions. To understand decisions, we must strive to understand the people involved.

Second, the President's psychological make-up is also critical. Is he confident in himself? Does he have an overly inflated ego? Is the President emotionally involved with the crisis? How does the President cope with stress and fatigue? Will the President consider his reputation preeminent or will he select a decision because it's the right thing to do? Does the President have high morals and integrity? Is the President a hypocrite? These aspects of being human influence decision-making.

Third, we can start to understand Carter's decision by using a hybrid model composed of aspects of the decision-making environment, backgrounds and psychological make-ups of the President and his counsellors, aspects of Allison's bureaucratic analytical model, and influences on the decision-maker and his counsellors. Such a collage enables analysts to gain at least a rudimentary understanding of the complexities and interrelationships involved in difficult decisions, and leads to understanding partially the emotional, cognitive, and systemic influences on the people involved. In this situation, aspects of the decision were rational, others were irrational. Some aspects were cognitive, others were emotional. Personal likes and dislikes and strong differences of opinion, personal and institutional, influenced stances and approaches to gaining coalitions and support in the fight to influence the final decision maker -- the President.

Becoming tied to a single approach or model inhibits the quest to understand decisions. A singular approach causes over-simplification and presupposes men are mindless, lack ideals, and have no morality -- simple automatons subservient to the cultural vagaries of their bureaucracies. Emotional, intellectual, and moral

variables are more important than bureaucracies and organizations, particularly in a crisis.

The decision to execute the hostage rescue attempt provides a fourth conclusion. We need dissent. If dissent doesn't exist, the decision-maker needs either to create it or unlock the barriers confining it in the minds of men. We can't, as decision makers, ever be comfortable with consensus until we explore degrees of unanimity, discover dissent, and identify alternatives. If dissent is minimal and few options surface, we need to discern predispositions of the men providing advice to understand why dissent doesn't exist and why more options aren't forthcoming.²⁶ Without dissent, alternatives won't surface. Without alternatives and corollary cost/benefit analyses, particularly long-term effects, we won't be creative. Without creativity, Presidents may be stuck with moribund solutions to problems, even those of great significance.

NOTES

- ¹ Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince, ed. Charles W. Eliot, (Danbury: Grolier Enterprises Corporation, 1981) 77.
- ² Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith, (New York: Bantam Books, 1982) 59.
- ³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, Power and Principle (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983) 23.
- ⁴ Hamilton Jordan, Crisis, (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1982) 54.
- ⁵ Brzezinski, 45-47.
- ⁶ Graham Allison, Essence of Decision, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1971) 7.
- ⁷ Irving L. Janis, Groupthink, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982) 182.
- ⁸ Allison, 171.
- ⁹ Allison, 171.
- ¹⁰ Jordan, 253.
- ¹¹ Erwin C. Hargrove, Jimmy Carter as President, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988) 169.
- ¹² Jordan, 229.
- ¹³ Robert J. Art, "Bureaucratic Politics and American Foreign Policy: A Critique," Policy Sciences 4 (1973): 470.
- ¹⁴ Art, 473.
- ¹⁵ Hargrove, 181.
- ¹⁶ Paul B. Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why It Failed, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985) 10.
- ¹⁷ Brzezinski, p.489.
- ¹⁸ Jordan, 52-53.
- ¹⁹ Jordan, 66.
- ²⁰ Ryan, 13.
- ²¹ Jordan, 229.
- ²² Jordan, 253.

²³ Sam C. Sarkesian, U.S. National Security, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989) 69.

²⁴ Alexander L. George, Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Affairs: The Effective Use of Information and Advice, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980) 3

²⁵ Bryce Harlow quoted in Emmet John Hughes, The Living Presidency: The Resources and Dilemmas of the American Presidential Office, (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973) 345.

²⁶ Alexander Moens, Foreign Policy Under Carter, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990) 22.