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CHARLES NAAS & HENRY PRECHT

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INTERVIEW

For one year from June 1978 to June 1979, six months before and six months after the triumph of Khomeini forces, Charles Naas, No. 2 and later in charge of our Embassy in Tehran, and Henry Precht, Director of Iranian Affairs in Washington, were the two working level professionals in the State Department managing the Iranian Revolution's massive challenge to American interests. Ten years later, as the possibility opens of improved US relations with Iran, they reflect on their experience and on what we might learn from it.

Every day during that year, Naas and Precht talked on the telephone. There were seven and a half hours difference between the early morning in Washington and late afternoon in Teheran. They agreed on some analysis, some policy directions; they disagreed on others, but they maintained the cordial relationship despite the high tensions generated by the crisis.

NAAS: Henry, on looking back, I' m struck by the fact that you and I and most liberally educated Americans were ill prepared for analysis of the revolution. You and I share, in part, a number of largely implicit but very Western assumptions which I'm afraid misled

us at times. The two decades of forced pace modernization, the economic and industrial expansion in Iran, the organization, vastly expanded educational opportunities, the emancipation of women, land reform, etc. had, many of us thought, incorrectly as it turned out, put Iran firmly into the 20th century. As you can see, almost all of the above are viewed by Americans instinctively as good, because they imply the demise of traditional forces; and our educational system has generally taught us that the traditional forces are a drag on the move towards secularism and modernization in a country.

PRECHT: When I arrived in Iran, 1972-76, Charlie, we didn't think a lot about traditional forces. The dilemma that I saw posed for the regime and for American interests was how can a country develop, as the Shah was developing Iran, with the production of classes, modern social classes of 1awyers, engineers, professional people of all kinds, who had absolutely no political rights. They had ample economic rights, but they couldn't say how much taxes they were going to pay, they couldn't read anything in the local press – how was a society like that to proceed without any kind of political expression? I think the judgment we carne to was that Iranians were making it economically. For the first time in their history a deprived country was suddenly succeeding, and political rights were put behind them.

NAAS: That's a good point, and I think I shared that assumption. You know, conditions in south Teheran were pretty abysmal by almost any living standards and its equivalents in the other major cities. There had been a mass urbanization in the country – a movement of the peasants into the city. Inflation was hurting some of the people, particularly the middle class. But I think many of us felt that despite the terrible conditions in Teheran, most people economically and materially were better off than they had been before. If you went to south Teheran, you saw antennas, you saw automobiles, you saw motorcycles, and I think we failed to perceive that a major dissatisfaction was developing, and that in fact, these people, while enjoying a little bit the fruits of development, were finding themselves becoming more and more alienated from their own society.

PRECHT: The assumption was that Iran was really two countries: one country was the northern suburbs of Teheran; the other country was everywhere else. The northern suburbs house in sumptuous villas the westernized class of developers of the country. The assumption was that that small enclave would in time, perhaps not a very long time, spread throughout the country and come to erase the traditional sector.

NAAS: Mr. Brzezinski and other have written about the failure of intelligence. He is right in the broadest sense, but was quite wrong during 1978. The problem that you and I faced in analysis long preceded our respective tenures on the desk or as DCM in Teheran. We simply, after 1965, when Khomeini was exiled, paid practically no attention whatsoever to the religious movement, the strength of the religious leaders. Part of this was due to the fact that we simply did not have people in government who were deeply steeped in Iranian culture. Brzezinski and others looked upon Iran, as we just mentioned as a nation essentially modern – large army, an imperial Shah, a country that the Shah hoped would by the 1990's be one of the major industrial nations of the world. We missed the fact, as I

mentioned before, in the late sixties and early seventies, there was a tremendous boom as we know now, in religious societies, religious leadership, of moving to the religious leaders, mosque attendance, all of these things. We simply did not see them because we weren't looking for them, and we were sort of dazzled a little bit, I'm afraid by the imperial successes.

PRECHT: I think there were two basic problems in our reporting and analysis of the situation in Iran. One was, the Shah didn't want us to know about the weaknesses his regime faced. I remember he vetoed the meeting of one of our political officers with a mullah in the mid 70's, and we never pursued that again until the revolution was going full swing. Secondly, Iran was a success for American policy and we didn't want to know. Henry Kissinger and Company in Washington didn't want to know that there were cracks in that successful edifice. So there was never any demand that we report on unpleasantness in Iran nor any response to any reporting that we might occasionally send back. It was recognized I think that we didn't know the country. When Dick Helms arrived as ambassador in 1973, after a few months he called us all into the conference room and said to all the political and economic officers, "This is a black hole. We don't know the society. We have no appreciation for what's going on beyond the Embassy walls." And he said, I remember with particular point because my job was to follow the Iranian military, "The darkest corner of that black hole is the military." He had us give him a memorandum every week listing the Iranians we talked to and the subjects that we covered. That was hard work. Pretty soon we were down to listing our barbers, our language teachers, and shopkeepers that we met. We just didn't know Iranians in any number, particularly those who were less than happy with the regime.

NAAS: It's interesting that you mention that, because when Bill Sullivan, several years later was being briefed in Washington before he went out to assume charge, I told him that never had I worked on a country in which I know so little, and that I felt very uneasy about this lack of knowledge.

PRECHT: But Iran is also a country very difficult to understand. The reality of Iran is those garden walls. Within those walls live the family and extend hospitality and meet the friends of the family. It's very difficult for an outsider, particularly an American diplomat, and one who doesn't have the language to penetrate into the confidence of Iranian society.

NAAS: I think: much has been made of our lack of knowledge of the religious leaders. Of course by the mid '70s they, certainly the more extreme of the people who were followers of Khomeini, were viewing us as part of the problem, if not the real problem, that they faced, so there was little willingness or desire on their part as well, at that time, to get to know Americans. And on our part, it would have been a very difficult thing to do, and we made very little effort to do so.

PRECHT: It's not easy to get to know people who are shooting at you. In the four years of my service in Iran, six Americans were gunned down on the street, and there were attacks on others. You don't talk to those kinds of people in coffee shops.

NAAS: One of the real intellectual problems we face is that we've used those very same people as terrorists. That has a meaning that sort of flubs the mind and stops people thinking -- quite understandably, your own survival is most important, but it should have sent a major signal to us that something was dreadfully wrong in the society when young people, almost all educated, were willing to die for their beliefs, that's a strong indicator that something, as I said, is seriously wrong with the society. Yet we continued basically to liaison with Savak and others about the threat to us without intellectually taking the leap forward of why they were ready to die for their cause.

PRECHT: I remember after one of the assassinations, our public affairs officer reported at a staff meeting that his contacts in the universities approved of the assassinations. Our reaction was one of shock and disgust, but not one of curiosity as to what was going on within Iranian society.

NAAS: I've drawn up a maxim, which is when any number of bright young people are willing to die then one had better look pretty hard at that society. It does not mean that that government is going to be overthrown, it does not mean there is going to be a revolution, and it does not mean there is going to be a coup d'etat, but it does mean that serious issues are beneath the surface and that we ignore them at our own peril.

PRECHT: My maxim from those days, Charlie, is that any government that has to rely heavily on torture to maintain itself in office is of questionable stability and a government that ought to be examined very carefully by ours in its relationships.

NAAS: Henry, would you carry that thought over to the current regime in Iran?

PRECHT: If we were contemplating a relationship at the moment, yes.

NAAS: I think another thing that misled us intellectually is the historical precedence. We do look sufficiently far back into Iranian history, say into the early part of this century, we're very much aware that in the 60's Shah had successfully coped with Khomeini when he led demonstrations. We look back now, '63 appeared to be a major turning point. And so at least I felt throughout much of 1978 that the Shah had handled previous crises and that there was reason to assume that at a critical point in the development, as the demonstrations and the political turmoil continued, would be able to find a way to end that particular turmoil. I was misled by my own limited knowledge of postwar Iranian history.

PRECHT: When I went out to Teheran in 1972, I asked our desk officer during the four days that I had in Washington for consultations, to recommend books on modern political history in Iran that I could read for background. His answer was, "There are none." There were, of course a few, but they were critical of the regime, and they were not being recommended by the State Department. But there were not many at that time. The basic question that I had throughout the revolution and I still wrestle with is "What was different about Iran of 1978, and the Iran of '53 and '63'? How was it possible for the

Shah to put down those uprisings and not put down the later revolution?" It seems to me that during those times--this is the best answer that I can come up with—is that Iranian society changed. Iranians became, in large numbers, a more literate people. They traveled overseas in greater number. They became much more aware of the way that other societies operated. Their expectations had been raised by the boom of the '60s and '70s that began to crumble in the later '70s, and so you had quite a different kind of Iranian in the streets in ‘78 from 1963. An Iranian in '78 wouldn't easily go home when a gun was pointed at him.

NAAS: Well, one reason of course is that in the city you had so many more people because of the mass migration from the cities. (?) In that fifteen years from 1963 to 1978 also, Iran became much more open to the American public. We became much more aware of what was going on and because of what one might call the globalization or internationalization of whatever happens in a particular country, the Shah and those around him were probably less able, less willing to use force had they wished to, simply because they could not do so without mass world attention to what they were doing.

PRECHT: That's right, but I think as well as misunderstanding that nature of Iranian society and the forces that were at work in the revolution, we didn't understand the Shah himself. In my time in Iran, I met with the Shah as an escort far other groups perhaps half a dozen times over four years. He was without doubt the most impressive world figure that I have ever met. He could speak with authority on any number of international problems, ranging from drought conditions in the Sahel to the economic prospects of the ASEAN (?) countries. He was not only beautifully informed, but his opinions were judicious. He could have been foreign minister of any country on the globe with distinction. But the question that he never was able to answer successfully for any group was the nature of his opposition in Iran. He simply fell back on platitudes and simplifications. As a personality, I think he fooled our leadership. He seemed to be so well informed, so much a master of his own country that they forgot the kind of person he really was in the '50s. When he dealt with Loy Henderson at the Mossadegh crisis, he didn't count. He was a weak, vacillating, unimportant figure on that scene. That was the real Shah. We confused Iran with the Shah, the Shah of the '70s who had power. We forgot that he was a weak personality.

NAAS: And also, of course, none of us knew that by the '70s he was seriously ill. He knew it, and he knew that he had very little time to bring Iran firmly into the 20th Century. You'll recall conversations that others had with him in which he said that if he did not succeed in making Iran an industrialized, urbanized, essentially secular nation, then before he died, then there was serious danger that Iran would in a sense fall backwards from what he thought was into the 19th Century.

PRECHT: On the first day of my duty as your successor on the Iran desk, I got word that a recent visitor to the Shah reported that he thought the United States had turned against him--that it was the CIA that was promoting the demonstrations, and that we had decided as in the days of the British and the Russians to divide Iran with the Soviet Union. Or that we were going to put religious leadership in charge to resist communist penetration. It

wasn't clear what his rationale was even in his own mind. But it occurred to me at that time that if this man had so little trust in us, when we had such great reliance on him, that our fortunes in Iran were in pretty fragile condition.

NAAS: In that summer of '78, as you know, I was Chargé, and the Chargé of another government came to me and said that recently three visitors, very important people from his country had had audiences with the Shah, separately, and that in each one of them he raised this very issue. Why the Shah came to that view is hard to believe except we all know, many Iranians, certainly including the Shah, held firmly onto conspiracy theory, that somehow the United States had much more power within the country than in fact we really had. And many Iranians tended to see a conspiratorial hand from outside whenever domestic problems arose. This is in line of course with much of Iranian history, as a matter of fact. So it's understandable in part, but how the Shah could come to that position in the summer of 1978 is still hard to perceive.

PRECHT: I think we contributed to that conspiratorial frame of mind by our inconsistent actions in Washington. When we delayed on the Shah's orders for tear gas, when we compromised on arms sales, when we issued statements that were loss than forthright behind him, what we were doing was reflecting a bureaucracy in Washington that was fragmented and unable to come to any kind of unified judgment as to how we should conduct our policy towards Iran. Iranians were obviously confused—it would have been strange had they not been--and their weak and vacillating reaction on the part of the government and the encouragement on the part of the opposition is a natural consequence, in part. It's not a total explanation but a partial explanation of how the revolution proceeded.

NAAS: Well, as you know, the Shah was always very concerned when the Democratic Party came to power. He had less understanding and sort of compatibility with the general liberal approach of the Democratic Party. I think there's no doubt that, quite innocently, the heavy emphasis on human rights, the heavy emphasis on arms control, setting limitations on the export of arms, was seen in quite a different light in Iran than they were seen here. In the United States, these were laudable, highly moral objectives. In Iran they were seen as the Americans turning their back against heir allies. One of the later leaders in Iran after the revolution told me personally that he was much encouraged and much misled by the heavy emphasis on human rights. He looked upon it as a signal that in fact we were lessening our support for the Shah. This is not what we intended by any means, but if there's a lesson here, I suppose it's that whatever actions we take in response to our own political, cultural, moral precepts, may be seen quite differently than we expect in other societies.

PRECHT: The Ayatollah Montazeri, when I met with him on October of 1979, told me that he was in prison when Carter was elected in 1976, and that his heart leapt up with the hope that America would change its policy towards Iran. Subsequently, however, I don't think that policy really changed. There was talk about human rights, but there was no specific demarche, no consistent pressure, no real change from the policy that had

preceded except in the perceptions of Iranians – the hopes of some and the fears of others.

NAAS: In speaking of the hopes and fears, the Shah himself, of course, shared fears when the Carter administration came into power. He had been expecting Carter's victory on the basis of reporting that he had received from Washington and seeing other Americans in Teheran, so I think the first time that he came to the United States, he was quite nervous, apprehensive of what he would find. As you well pointed out, in fact policies, in fact, did not take major changes or certainly sharp divergences from policies that had been largely followed since really World War II. The President recognized the geopolitical importance of Iran, the economic importance of Iran, the importance of Iran as a reliable petroleum supplier, etc. And I saw the Shah that evening at the White House, briefly, after his conversations with the President. And he was quite elated by the meeting. He told me that things had gone extremely well. What I think occurred as time went on was again what we were talking about earlier, is that he saw mixed signals coming out of the American government and the American society. As you well know, since you were the action officer on trying to bring about a new arms export policy, he caw this as potentially an attack on him. So he always felt uncertain of whose voice in the American government, whose voice in the United States should he listen to.

PRECHT: As you well know, within the government, life is a constant struggle between the various departments and personalities. For example, on the question of arms export control that Carter was determined to exert a policy change, I was drafting officer. I tried to draft a document that would give some flexibility to later implementers of the policy. But the White House, basically distrusting the readiness of the bureaucracy to follow the President's determination to limit arms sale, imposed an annual ceiling on the amount of sales, without regard to its impact on a country like Iran. The divergence between agencies and between personalities became sharper of course, as the revolution intensified. I recall when I met Ambassador Sullivan after his August 1978 meeting with Brzezinski, his saying to me that Brzezinski is determined that we will support and stand by the Shah until the bitter end, that the Shah is so important to us in resisting the communist threat in that region that there is no alternative but our support for him.

NAAS: One can understand in part Brzezinski’s view on this because over the years every administration, certainly from the '60's on, had considered Iran to be of extreme importance to us. The Nixon Doctrine of course, in a sense, put that into the Bible for future foreign policy practitioners. What strikes me, looking back on that period, is the weight of our policy, our geopolitical approach to Iran, our reliance on the Shah, so that it affected, I think, even how we looked at that country, how we analyzed that country. At no time, except of course in the summer of ‘78 when it was too late, was there ever a really hard, fundamental review of policy, a hard look at the fragility of the society. In other words, we had put all our eggs in the Shah basket. Many Iranians, of course, see the evil hand of the United States in everything – we've mentioned this before – in everything that happens in Iran. In fact, as you well know, we were much more at the end of the Shah's leash than he was at the end of ours, because he had become, in our geopolitical

approach to things, so important we really could not imagine his disappearance from the scene.

PRECHT: After the summer, as the revolution began to heat up in August and then in early September with the massive demonstrations at the end of Ramadan of that year, a fundamental change occurred, at least in my mind. I remember coming to a conclusion during my shower the Saturday morning after the Jaleh Square massacres on September the 8th, and I decided in my own mind that the Shah wasn't going to make it, that sometime in the not too distant future he was no longer going to be a factor on the Iranian scene. And accordingly we ought to begin to prepare ourselves to deal with a future that we could not yet describe but was clearly not going to include the Shah as a major player. At the same time, it seemed to me, if a transition was to be orderly and protective of our interests, the Shah had to play a part in it. The last thing we wanted to see was for him to pack up and head f or the south of France, leaving the country in the hands of the mobs on the street. What we needed was some kind of transference of power to groups that we could hope to deal with as we began to repair the relationship.

NAAS: I still believed, even after Jaleh Square, that the Shah had room for maneuver. He had one of the world's finest military establishments, he had a strong bureaucratic government, but he was never able to bring himself to use the forces at hand. Tony Parsons, the British Ambassador at the time had said that this was one of the great things that the Shah, in a sense, didn't do. He should be thanked by all that he did not use the awesome power at hand to try to subjugate his people. That may well be true, but once the Shah decided not to use his power effectively, the events escaped any control by him. As I said earlier, I thought that at some particular moment he would do so, but he didn't. Speaking to your problem, the Embassy itself and Ambassador Sullivan in early November, a few days after a military government had been installed, also admittedly six weeks or two months after you had become concerned about the Shah's long-term status, and we wrote a telegram on thinking the unthinkable, indirectly trying in a sense to come, to where you were, of trying to get the American government to face up to the fact that there was a major crisis on us.

PRECHT: I guess I differed with many analysts in Washington at the time on my assessment of the Iranian military. After all, that had been my job for four years, to try to understand that group of officers and men, and the conclusion that I had reached then was that this military establishment was not comparable to those in South America, a country like Pakistan or Egypt, but was very much an Iranian sui generis model. That is, it was erected on the principle of loyalty to the Shah. There were many fine officers that I knew in the upper ranks of the military, but general1y speaking I didn't think they were distinguished for their imagination, competence, or initiative, and I could not believe that they would be able to sustain a defense of the Shah. Also I believed that the character of the army had changed in recent years. Whereas it had been recruited from the aristocracy of the country, with its expansion and reliance on technical skills, it came to be recruited from the lower middle class for its officers and from the lower classes for its troops. Whether those people would stand up to their brothers across the barricades seemed to me to be exceedingly unlikely. And I think that in the event, in the end I was proved

correct, that the erosion of all of their morale through the continued fighting in the streets proved to be fatal to the Shah. I agree with you, however, that the Shah simply lacked the will to use that army against people in the streets. Perhaps he understood their weaknesses better than we did.

NAAS: Frequently, Henry, you and I were on different wavelengths, or when we were on the same wave length, it was at different times. As you know, you asked the question in late October '78 about the reliability of the military, and as you know the Embassy views, after considerable thought given to it by people involved, were pretty much the same as yours. Again, we arrived at the same point, but in different time sequences. Maybe that was one of the problems in being able to handle this out of Washington, that you, and we in the field, had different priorities, and often were not able to sit down and really chat with each other about the process. The telegram is, unfortunately, not the best means of communications at times, and also, the way the Department works, one feared very definitely that a very frank exchange of views, the idea of probing together for answers, would be leaked by people, or seen by partisans of one side or the other and taken advantage of.

PRECHT: There was a breakdown in communication between us, Charlie, and a lot of it derived from the fact that we just didn't sit down across the table and talk through these problems. Sullivan and you had to be on the spot in Teheran, and we didn't want to send a wrong signal to Iran by sending out senior people that would make us appear to be nervous about their fate. But there was another problem in the breakdown in communications. I had my differences with the NSC staff which intensified day by day. I was exceedingly upset by their insistence upon issuing statements of support for the Shah when I thought those were making it more difficult for us to develop a relationship that we lacked with the opposition, a relationship that would lead us to understand them better than we did. And secondly, such statements reflected poorly on the Shah, making him appear dependent on our continued good will. At any rate, things reached such a pass between Gary Sick and myself that he ceased telephoning me – we ceased our previous almost daily consultations. That was a great loss to the government – that kind of ill feeling between us.

NAAS: I think the point that you make is that while it is useful at times to send out very high level dignitaries in a moment of crisis to assess the situation, because they have ready access to the decision makers, it's equally important, if not really more important, that at the bureaucratic level a very frank: and open exchange of views takes place, eye to eye across from the same table. I think it would have been very useful had you been able to come out in that period. Whether we could have come to agreement is hard to say. But what we did lack was that free give and take. You had it in Washington – we were aware of it in the field because of various conflicting statements that were being made or leaked to the press. I think this gets back to the point that we were making before that the overwhelming weight of past policy led to a refusal, really, on the part of Brzezinski and others to think of alternatives. That's, what we tried to do in the Embassy in that one brief period, and of course nobody responded, whatsoever. In retrospect, I understand why you

and others could not respond to our messages, simply because it was too awesome to think of the impact on our affairs if the Shah went.

PRECHT: It was awesome to think, in large part, because of the constant – by that time, by November of '78 – the constant presence of the press at our elbows. The administration had a strong interest in appearing not to be weak, not to vacillate and not to be responsible for evils to come in Iran, a regime that would be unfriendly or hostile to us. The press was, from mid-November on, all over us and they found willing cooperators within the government. Not only did this make it very difficult to conduct the day-to-day business of the government, it bred distrust among the various parties. I recall, in February, a week before the revolution being called over to the White House and in the company of everyone senior to me in the Sate Department, being chewed out by the President of the United States for something that I didn't say, to Marvin Kalb. It was that kind of ill will that made it impossible for good policy to be constructed.

NAAS: If was difficult for you in Washington, you can imagine how difficult it was for us in the field to see in successive days in late December practically the full text of very sensitive telegrams that we had submitted and which were leaked to the New York Times. One develops a sense of paranoia and total distrust of one's colleagues in Washington when that kind of thing occurs. As you know that in itself led to further misunderstanding between you and the NSC and between us at the Embassy and the NSC, since we became so distrustful of messages being leaked that we turned to a more secret and limited made of communications with each other.

PRECHT: You know, Charlie, we bureaucrats in Washington suffer from a bad dream – that is, the dream that we can somehow control, influence and shape what the press writes. We imagine that we can best foreign governments, that we can best the press in its contest with us. That is, we can, without leaking information we can shape what they present to the American public in ways that will be useful to us. And I guess I suffered from that as much as anyone. The press is a terrible instrument when it is used to defeat policy, and many bureaucrats have the feeling that they can somehow use that instrument for themselves and their own purposes. But I admit that I was inept at that. I deny that I made leaks to the press, and I tried to be as honest as I could without undermining policy, but I also tried to shape their perception of events. That was a mistake.

NAAS: I couldn't agree with you more, Henry. The free press is an institution that you and I if we had to even in our late age would fight for, but it does severely complicate the day-to-day operation of foreign policy during a crisis. In fact I have often said that the carrying out of a foreign policy in the United States – it's probably more difficult in the United States than in any other country. A number of reasons for this of course is our separation of powers. Congress, at many times, through good intent, and sometimes mal intent made life fairly complicated for you and for me. Later on in the revolution, the courts got heavily involved when they put a lien or a hold on a shipment of goods that Iran owned until American businessmen had the opportunity to get compensation for their losses. You had the experience when the Justice Department was investigating the a11eged misuse of Iranian money in the demonstrations that occurred in Washington

when the Shah visited us in November 1978. Human rights organizations, every single issue organization gets involved, so that the carrying out of policy during a crisis is not just a question of the bureaucrats getting along with the policy makers, but all these other influences come to bear, which complicate the task domestically. But what's of even more importance, leads to total misunderstanding and apprehension abroad.

PRECHT: The Iranian revolutionaries, after they took power, never believed that the American press which became shortly after the revolution's success, very critical of everything the revolution did – executions, limitations on women's rights, authoritarian expressions of one kind or another, all worthy of criticism to be sure. But in the eyes of the Iranians, it was the attitude of the American government conveyed through our puppets, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal and so forth. It wasn't a new attitude in Iran. The Shah himself had had the same reaction to criticism, slightly different in its conspiratorial analysis. I recall after a spate of articles critical of the way the oil boom was being handled in Iran, that the Shah sent word through an envoy to Jerusalem, because he felt that it was in Israel that power over the American press resided.

NAAS: It's interesting you point that out because on my first visits to a number of ministers when I was Chargé in April and May of 1979, every single one of them, very quickly in the conversation, became very critical of American press coverage. I found I had no particular answer to that except to point out, or at least to state, that the American press was totally independent, etc., but as with the Shah, they didn't really believe it. In desperation I finally said that the American press must be doing something right because the Iranian government is criticizing the press in almost precisely the same terms that the Shah had.

PRECHT: The Iranian revolutionaries, even those who had spent long years in the United States never seemed to grasp the working of our institutions, particularly the Congress. They didn't understand that the Congress is not beholden to the executive branch and frequently strays far from executive branch policy. If you recall, I think it was May of 1979, after we had appointed Walt Cutler as Ambassador and he had been approved by the Senate and accepted by the Iranians, a meeting had been arranged for him to see Khomeini after he arrived in Iran, the Senate passed a resolution criticizing the Iranian regime for its policy of executing the Shah's supporters – a proper subject for criticism. But the resolution was prepared, drafted, and voted without any consultation with the Department of State, and it completely went against our plan for dealing with Iran at that time. You suffered more than anyone else from those effects.

NAAS: As you know personally, Henry, I considered that a major, set-back to the efforts that we had been making as a government and the I had been making personally – a major set-back to everything that you and I were trying to do. In retrospect – and I'll get back to this later – was there any likelihood that we would be able to establish a reasonable relationship with the new government? I think that is questionable. The revolution had its own momentum, but the chances that we had, whatever slim chances we had were severely undercut by that resolution. The resolution was seen as a return to

major United States interference in their domestic affairs. We had major, and I mean major demonstrations outside the Embassy every day after that. Some of them were extremely large, and of course the government had no choice but to accept Khomeini's demand that Cutler not be accepted. I was later told by people that Khomeini in fact, on hearing about the Javits resolution wanted immediately to end all diplomatic relations with the United States and that the government prevailed upon him to settle for the denial of Walt Cutler's arrival.

PRECHT: That illustrates how an inconsequential action in the United States, one that few senators probably spent more than fifteen minutes thinking about, had such an enormous impact on the conduct of our diplomacy overseas. You know, on the question, Charlie, of could we have developed some kind of better relationship with Iran, could we have avoided the hostage crisis, there are some observers who believe that it was all inevitable, that after the revolution we were inevitably headed for the kind of complete break that occurred through the hostage crisis. I recall myself, in February of that year being told by Hal Saunders, immediately after the revolution that a White House meeting had decided on the option of going for a new relationship with Iran. I thought it was going to be an extremely difficult venture given the history of our relationship with the Shah and especially of our ambivalent actions during the period of the revolution. But it seemed to me to be a worthy challenge. It turned out in retrospect to have been a mistake. It would have been better if we had pulled out of Iran, obviously, and let the place simmer down and seethe for a few years, and then move to come back in. But we didn't feel at the time that we could walk away from a country that had been so important to our national interest for so many years. There was not only the probably false specter of a Russian advantage there, but there were the minorities in the country there that needed our protection. And there was the potential for renewed commercial interest in a very important oil-rich country. So we set about trying to reconstruct something new with Iran. We foundered, I think, on the divisions of opinion within the American government.

NAAS: Henry, I disagree in part with what you said there. I think it would have been quite impossible, in view of our long-term policy, to have withdrawn at the time. I was in favor of making the effort to establish a new relationship and as you know that was my charge after I went back to Iran. I was never optimistic that this could be a successful effort, but I do think we probably had to make that effort. You may well be right. I know that the people who were in government at the time were delighted that in fact we had not left Iran and that we were trying to work out a relationship with them. The problem with – you said that a decision was made to try to forge ahead new ties with the government, that even at that date, within the top policy-making departments of our government, there was still a real lack of comprehension of what had really happened in Iran. I can remember when I came home in April and talked with a high State Department official, and other officers who came back and talked with high government officials at the policy-making level were always taken aback by the fact that people hadn't understood the total, what had really happened in Iran. Not perhaps so much that they didn't understand, but that they didn't wish to understand what had happened to us.

PRECHT: I would agree with you, Charlie. One of the fundamental crucial points that wasn't understood about Iran was the question of the Shah. It seemed to me that we had to make a basic decision after February '79, whether we were going to reconstruct a new relationship or honor an old relationship. One, the latter, had the compelling human factor to recommend it. The other had the geopolitical consideration. It always seemed strange to me that master geopoliticians like Kissinger and Brzezinski opted for the human values in that equation. I felt that, cold-hearted as it would appear, that we had to treat the Shah in a very unkind way and keep him out of the United States until we had constructed a more stable basis for our ties with the Iranian government. That policy prevailed under the constant pressure of people like Brzezinski and Kissinger for some months, ultimately failed, and I think helped to precipitate the hostage crisis.

NAAS: I agree with you completely on that. I had great admiration for the Shah and his family, great admiration for him. So it was with considerable personal pain that when I came back to the States in March of 1979 that I carried out my Ambassador's instructions to make that very point that the Shah should not be permitted into the United States until, I suppose we could say, the dust had settled. I felt badly about my efforts at that time, but I think that was the only way that we could at least keep the door ajar for the possibility of some kind of a new relationship with the new Iranian authorities.

PRECHT: We were confronted with this intense suspicion by the revolutionaries – ignorance of us and suspicion of us. It was not a happy environment for forging a new relationship. We contributed to that in other ways as you've mentioned. Our firms who had been doing business in Iran wanted their money, even when their claims were questionable. Our military establishment wanted to make sure that they knew what they were dealing with in Iran before they allowed delivery of military supplies. The Iranians never understood, or never appeared to understand, the inability or reluctance or refusal of American firms to honor contracts. They never understood, in any way, the complicated business of buying through the Department of Defense military equipment. That distrust and ignorance made our efforts increasingly difficult. But I must say I think we were making some slow progress during those months, perhaps misleading ourselves with the amount of that progress.

NAAS: If one talked to the people who were in government at that time, yes we were making small progress. But we were also, I think, deluding ourselves that the people in government in effect, really had much power. Unfortunately it was well after I left Iran and well after you left Iranian affairs that translations were made of Khomeini's writings, that we started to comprehend the full scope of his plans or his thoughts for Iran. Getting back to the point – nothing is probably inevitable – but I think U.S. actions., U.S. misperceptions and on the flip side the Iranian misperceptions, lack of understanding of the United States, and Khomeini's absolute driven aim of creating an Islamic state, probably doomed the efforts that we made in 1979.

PRECHT: I wouldn't place as much emphasis as you do on Khomeini's pre-ordained plan. It seems to me that he is the man of big decisions. To be sure, his over-riding goal was the construction of an Islamic state, guided by the principles he set forth including

the jurisprudent to be spelled in. But I think, as important as his own vision, almost as important was the pressure put on him by the religious leadership. It seems to me that those senior religious leaders around Khomeini exercised great influence over him in 1) pushing aside the secularists, and 2) his presumed attitude towards the United States. We fed those attitudes to a certain extent, but I believe they were strongly entrenched and perhaps impossible to defeat. Certainly they have prevailed although I believe in the last three or four years they have been mellowing. And so you get a much more pragmatic Iran than you had at the initial stages of the revolution.

NAAS: Out of all of this experience, Henry, what are some of the more general lessons, if you will, conclusions one should draw about the experience we shared together"

PRECHT: Charlie, I think we can draw some conclusions about Iran and also about the conduct of American diplomacy in difficult circumstances, largely in the third world. The first is, what I would suggest is, we need to be alert to the changes that occur in a society and in a government. We tend to take a fix on a society or government and use that as a point of reference until there is a crisis or revolution that forces us to change our view. For example, we didn't adjust our view of Iranian society between 1963 and 1978. We didn't adjust our attitude, our perception of the Iranian regime between 1981 and 1988. So that when Iran agreed to a ceasefire with Iraq we were as unprepared for it as we were for the revolution that occurred in '78. It seems to me that changes take place in institutions and in societies that are very subtle, that you have to work at the study of those institutions and societies if you're going to keep abreast of their new developments.

NAAS: I'm greatly concerned in fact, that as a bureaucracy and perhaps as a people, we're ill equipped to be able to make those kinds of changes. The current Foreign Service of course in not encouraging area specialization; it is not encouraging a young man to spend a good part of his career learning deeply a culture and a language. I'm afraid that with a Presidential term of four or eight years, it is extraordinarily difficult to get any administration, Republican or Democrat, to take a hard look at policies once they have been accepted within the time period of that administration. Only massive outside events which jar a people are going to bring about much rethinking. A good example of course, was that huge demonstrations in Manila did bring about a change of thinking in Washington. Maybe we did learn something from the Iranian experience, it's hard to know.

PRECHT: I think the successful handling of the Philippine turmoil by the Reagan administration derived in large part from the fact that they had gone to school on the mistakes of the Iranian revolution. But we shouldn't be exclusively hard on the Foreign Service and the foreign policy apparatus in the government. It seems to me that attitudes in the United States are shaped more prominently by what the press reports and how the press analyses the situation. And with a few excellent exceptions, it seems to me that our press, our international press, is ill equipped to handle the job of explaining to the American public the kinds of challenges we face in the world. How many journalists dealing with international affairs speak hard languages? How many of them spend extensive periods in the countries that they cover? It seems to me that if diplomats fall

short of the goal of understanding the countries to which they are accredited, so do journalists, and that has perhaps a more profound and damaging effect on the formulation of American policy.

NAAS: As you know, a leading journalist did a survey after the Iranian revolution, and, on looking at press reporting at the times and from the vantage point of having read a substantial number of telegrams that came out of the Embassy and out of Washington, made the same conclusion that the bureaucracy was far better, if still not sufficiently informed than the press. But the point you make, I think is the key one. It's the press, it's the fifteen second byte, it's the two minute discussion at night on TV, it's the article that is in the front page of the paper that has more impact on the American people than any pronouncement by a Secretary of State or the President.

PRECHT: You know, Charlie, we value, we cherish the pluralistic nature of our society, but as we move into an era of much more complicated economic and political confrontation around the world, can we continue to afford that kind of luxury? Can our competition with countries like Japan and in Western Europe when we are so vulnerable ourselves, continue to tolerate the sporadic actions of our Congress, of the other agencies of the executive branch, of private groups here and there? When the Japanese, the Europeans, the Soviets are so much more thoroughly coordinated, so much more thoroughly unified in their purposes than we are, can we hope to prevail in those circumstances? I suppose the answer is that our free institutions and the free functioning of a pluralistic society will give us a unique strength. I think we have to wonder about that, however.

NAAS: I think that if one looks at the long term, the kind of society that we have will give us great strength. In the short term, and certainly in handling crises, it puts the practitioner at a severe disadvantage. Even if you and I did conclude that we were at a major disadvantage even in the long term, there’s not much that's likely to be done about it. This is that task that a President must face. He and the people around him, and the leaders of Congress have to have the wisdom and the leadership and bring the American people along with him – the press along with him – the key congressmen along with him, by working out together sensible policies.

PRECHT: You know, as the new administration, just established in Washington, looks at Iran, I suppose we can say that they will look through the wrong end of a telescope. No administration is going to want to make any gestures towards Iran until the public attitude is changed very drastically. My own hunch is that until the Ayatollah Khomeini passes from the scene it will be impossible for any administration to lead the American public down the way of refashioning some kind of more normal relationship with the people and government in Teheran.

NAAS: The last few years have perhaps blinded too many people to what remains a terribly important country to us in the short and the long term. We both share a number of very important interests. We both share the fact that we would like Iran to be independent. We both share the desire that the Soviet Union or others not have an undue

influence in Iran. We both share the view that Iraq not become the dominant power in the area. We share the view that there be a rough balance of forces within the area. We both want freedom of navigation, safe navigation, of the Persian Gulf. In our own ways we share the fact that we want religious freedom within our own respective countries. We share the values of our respective cultures, the importance of religion and history in our two cultures, quite different as they are. There is a basis there for dialogue with the Iranians in the future as that becomes possible. As an aside, we both share the desire that the Soviet Union get out of Afghanistan. So there's much with which we can work in the future.

PRECHT: A while back I asked the Chinese Ambassador how our two countries which had been so much at each others' throats for decades had managed to turn that completely around and become close friends. His answer was, "mutual respect." There was understanding and respect on both sides, and that is the crucial element in fashioning a new relationship, he said. The question is, are there elements of respect in the United States for Iran and its way of life, and Iran for the United States. I think there are such bases, but we will have to work at developing them further. In Iran, I think there's respect for our technology, our educational processes, and despite policy differences, the basic goodness and generosity of the American people. In the United States I think there is respect for the history, the suffering, the traditions, the skill of Iranians and what they've been able to achieve. And there is a desire to see Iranians stand on their own feet and produce a society of their own devising as long as it is based on humane principles.

NAAS: The perceptions, of course, in the United States – at least look at it from a new President's point of view – about Iran is very very difficult, will pose a very difficult burden. Iran has been attempting to export its revolution sometimes not in its best guise but in the terrorism that has occurred in Lebanon, the blowing up of the Marine barracks, and our Embassy on two different occasions, and the seizure of hostages. These issues certainly have to be resolved before any American President will be able step forward at all. From the Iranian point of view of course, they have somewhat similar problems. For their own political purposes as well as deeply felt belief, we are the great Satan. How is the new leadership there going to be able to get out of that box which they have created for themselves?

PRECHT: You know, even if we were able to reopen an Embassy in Teheran and to find officers courageous enough to staff it, it is going to be a long, long time before the United States is able to exercise any influence directly over the policy decisions that Iran makes. It's a process that we should begin to work at however, in my view. Iran is simply, as it was in 1979, too important a country to be ignored. We can't, as I once suggested to my wife, draw a curtain around the country and every six months or so, peek under it to see if things have settled down. We simply have to begin the process of trying to resume a normal relationship. More than that, it seems to me that it should be the goal of this administration and future administrations to have relations with all countries, regardless of their political differences with us We should have an Embassy in North Korea as well as in Angola. Everywhere on the globe, it seems to me, we should make the effort to have

people whose job it is to understand and communicate with people who are very different from us in their political beliefs.

NAAS: I agree with you completely on that, Henry, and I would take the one more unspeakable political statement if I feel that we should be willing to talk to the Palestinians at this point, because if you can't talk to the people most prominently engaged in a struggle, then obviously you're at serious disadvantage. But if we saw Iran in the ‘70s and on into the ‘80s through an opaque prism, I think we have to admit that the prism is almost as opaque as we look to the future of that country. When Khomeini goes, one will really see whether the revolution in fact has deep and lasting roots within Iran. How the new leadership without the charisma of Khomeini will be able, or will they even try to integrate the different strains of thinking within Iran, and I include the many millions of Iranians in exile. How does one make that integration of essentially secular minded experts, businessmen, with the demands, if you will, of the religious leaders to have the major voice, if not the dominant voice in government? And the Iranian revolution is not yet over. It has done far better than any of us expected in running the government, in institutionalizing itself within the country. But I think many questions still remain open. And in that process, as you said, the maintenance of a diplomatic relationship is going to be extraordinarily delicate and difficult.

PRECHT: Charlie, I confess to being one of those who didn't believe that a religious led government could last more than six months. I failed to foresee that there would be Iranians willing to do a job no matter who was governing the country, and other Iranians who preferred a religious led government and who were technically competent to run an oil industry or a foreign ministry or a Central Bank. It seems to me that in the future we're inevitably headed towards a synthesis of major strands in Iranian life.

One of the Shah's failings was his desire to exclude the Islamic element from the society that he was creating. That can't be done and I don't believe that an Iranian future political society, will be without an Islamic cast of some depth. But at the same time, a country that I knew, that listened to the great medieval poets Hafez and Saadi at prime time on the radio, that treasured classical Iranian music, that delighted in having a bottle of vodka under the table at its meals, is going to survive as well. The elements of secularism and religion will somehow find a meeting ground in an Iran of the future.

End of interview