

A black and white photograph showing two men in suits shaking hands. The man on the left is Jimmy Carter, smiling. The man on the right is seen in profile, looking towards Carter. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS

Analyzing the US Foreign Policy Approach to Islamic Fundamentalism from 1979-1981

Alexander Smith – 1001196528

Supervisor: Prof. Timothy Sayle

September 2017 – April 2018

University of Toronto

Background:

- Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Carter Administration distanced itself from Ayatollah's Khomeini's Islamic revolutionaries.
- This approach directly contrasts with the American support of the Afghan Mujahideen in response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

Research Questions:

- 1) Why did the US support Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan while opposing them in Iran?
- 2) How did Cold War geopolitics and the desire to solidify spheres of influence shape the US approach?
- 3) In what ways did the perception of these groups to the American public and American policy makers influence the American approach? How did the Islamic fundamentalists view of the US affect their willingness to conduct diplomacy?

Thesis and Arguments:

Thesis: “Carter’s policy of supporting Islamic fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan clearly contrasts with the US opposition to Khomeini’s Islamic government. Primary source documents from the Carter and Reagan administrations make clear that this inconsistency was motivated by two main factors: the severity of the threat of Soviet expansionism and the American perception of and relationship with each state’s Islamic fundamentalists.”



Primary Sources:

This research process used a variety of primary source databases including:

- 1) The Foreign Relations of the United States
- 2) The Carter Presidential Library
- 3) The Reagan Presidential Library
- 4) The National Security Archive
- 5) The Central Intelligence Agency Digital Collection
- 6) The American Presidency Project

Dear, Mr. President

Susan
Prepar. ans. LMS
US grain shipments
already down without
direct order from me
J

Hello my name is Robert Perea. I am thirteen years old. You may think I am too young to understand the problem of Iran, but I just want to tell you, I think that speech you made on Wednesday was great. I think you are a good president. Your ideas are real good, but I have an idea of my own! Why don't you cut off some, not all but some of the grain. I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job but I just think it's a good idea, and a lot of other people also think it is a good idea. I realize that the Iranians may get mad, but they are cutting off our oil supply. I really feel for those people being held in Iran. I know I wouldn't want it to be me being held.

Letter from Robert Perea (13 years old) to President Jimmy Carter advocating for Grain sanctions to be placed on Iran. [Source: Carter Presidential Library]

Conclusions:

1) The Severity of the Threat:

- “The reality of Afghanistan becoming a Soviet satellite forced the US to compromise its political and cultural values to support Islamic fundamentalist groups, whereas attempts to curtail Soviet influence in Iran were largely pre-cautionary and the threat of an Iran-USSR alliance never materialized.”

2) The American Perception of and Relationship with each Islamic Fundamentalist Group:

- “America’s willingness to compromise with the Afghan mujahideen was also due to their shared goal of repelling the Soviets. This goal also pushed the mujahideen to ignore their disapproval of Western culture and work with the Americans, which they regarded as the “lesser of two evils.” This contrasts with the Iranian revolutionaries, which saw the US as the “Great Satan” and planned to “resist America until [their] last breath,” thus limiting the chance of rapprochement.”