

Iranian Hostage Crisis: The U.S. Presidential Cabinet (1979-1981)

Welcome

Dear Delegates,

Get ready to head back in time! Our destination: 1979. A time filled with bell-bottoms and political strife, where Jimmy Carter holds the Oval Office but the Iranians hold the keys. Our task over the course of three days will be to relive the fateful days surrounding the capture, negotiations, rescue attempts, and eventual release of the 53 Americans taken hostage by the Iranian government on 4 November 1979 as members of President Carter's Cabinet. Faced with the same critical decisions, you will decide if the outcome remains the same. But first, a little about myself, the committee, and your role.

WHO AM I?

My name is Kevin O'Brien and I am a sophomore here at Brown. I plan on concentrating in Public Policy and Economics. BUSUN was actually the reason I became interested in Brown, as a delegate in high school, so this means a lot to me. This is my fourth conference in total, my second as a chairperson. Last year I helped put on an amazing crisis situation involving the Balkans, an epidemic, and of course nuclear weapons. This smaller and more focused crisis is my attempt to really capture the psychology of the decision-making process involved during a crisis, to give you the delegate the power and perspective of world leaders when the unexpected strikes.

For our expedition into the past, I will be playing the role of our thirty-ninth president, Jimmy Carter, famed peanut farmer and later Nobel Peace laureate. While most famous as a peacemaker in the Middle East for his role in brokering the Camp David Accords, a long-

awaited peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, President Carter is also famous for nearly inciting his own war in the Middle East with Iran. The hostage situation and Carter's failure to negotiate or force a release would come to define his presidency, consuming his last two years in office, and eventually costing him reelection.

WHO ARE YOU?

Your role in this historical exploration will be as advisors to the president, members of President Carter's Cabinet. While not a complete cadre of advisors, the members that have been selected can be considered the most important, the most powerful, and of course the most interesting. They represent a diverse range of political and strategic perspectives, creating a dynamic group that will hopefully allow for strong discussions. In total, there will be seven members that are listed below:

~WALTER MONDALE: Vice President

Second in command and trusted friend. Established the concept of "activist Vice President," traveled widely to advocate Carter's foreign policy. True presidential advisor and troubleshooter.

~HAROLD BROWN: Secretary of Defense

In charge of military decisions, recommendations for use of force. Involved in all areas of defense. Key planner in the failed rescue mission.

~CYRUS VANCE: Secretary of State

Chief diplomat, emphasized diplomacy over force. Resigned in April 1980 in protest of the failed rescue mission. He was replaced by Edmund Muskie. Clashed with war hawk NSA Brzezinski.

~ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI: National Security Advisor

Major influence on Carter, shaped foreign policy, against Nixon-Kissinger's détente policy. Major hand in planning Operation Eagle Claw which led to his unpopularity.

~WARREN CHRISTOPHER: Deputy Secretary of State

In charge of direct negotiations with Iran, more hands on than Vance.

~STANSFIELD TURNER: Director of Central Intelligence

In charge of intelligence gathering. While supported at the White House, was seen unfavorably within the CIA.

~HAMILTON JORDAN: White House Chief of Staff

Trusted friend, advisor, and strategist. In charge of campaigning. His youth and antics garnered serious media attention during Carter's later days in office.

Unlike a typical committee assignment, I am not looking for your detailed positions on the situation exactly as it happened (See bottom for ***Note on Position Papers). The point of this crisis is not necessarily to make the same historical decisions but to explore why they were made, the factors behind them. Therefore, what you should focus on is the personality of your assigned person, understand where they are coming from and why they felt and acted as they did. If and when events begin to unfold differently, you will thus be prepared and able to maintain your assignment.

Committee Structure/Format

Discussion in this committee will be informal, a perpetual moderated caucus similar to standard Model UN debate. The goal is to be able to converse openly and at will. My job will be only to moderate the discussion and to direct the flow of things if necessary. While no formal resolution writing/passing will be necessary, written communication is encouraged in the form of:

1.) public statements/press releases

2.) directives/action memos to Senate, Defense Dept., State Dept., etc.

3.) diplomatic communiqués

3.) requests for information

All Cabinet members will be able to send and receive requests for information in note form that will be processed by me. Heads of certain departments (State, Defense, CIA) will be allowed to issue directives concerning only their departments without formal voting by the committee (or in secret) in note form to the President for approval. Members may also request to meet with other people not in committee (senators, diplomats, etc.) upon approval. In addition, all Cabinet members will receive intelligence briefings at the start of each day. It will be up to each person to decide what information or intelligence he or she wishes to share. Essentially, you will possess the same power of information as real world leaders.

In the spirit of crisis, the committee will be receiving a stream of news updates. These will reflect the results of your actions or inactions, indicating public and international opinion. They will also display domestic political issues such as the 1980 election that require the Cabinet's attention. To gauge the committee's actions, we will have a public opinion poll displayed. If the poll numbers are allowed to drop too low, more problems will arise. It is always important to remember that in our democracy, power remains in the hands of the people.

The Situation

In early 1979, the US lost one of its strongest allies in the Middle East as Iran fell into civil war and its pro-America dictator Reza Shah Pahlevi (the Shah or king of Iran) ousted. Replacing this administration was a conservative clerical

body headed by the exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a respected Muslim religious figure. What he and his conservative followers soon established was an Islamic Republic based on strict religious Sharia law. More importantly, they reversed the Westernization efforts of the Shah.

What followed were months of tension as the US waited to see where it now stood with this new Iran. During this time, however, the ailing Shah became increasingly sick, affected by cancer only treatable in the US. This left the US in a tough position of having to choose to help their former ally, surely igniting Iranian resentment, or closer relations with this new regime at the expense of a friend. Taking the risk, in early November the Shah was granted entrance and Iran erupted.

On 4 November 1979, hundreds of students stormed the US embassy in Tehran, accused by the Ayatollah of being a “den of spies.” Sixty-six Americans were taken hostage, as the Iranians demanded the return of the Shah to face trial in exchange for their lives. Of the 66, 14 were released over the ensuing months (mostly women, African Americans, or ill) but the remaining 52 would be held for 444 days. They were finally released on 20 January 1981; the day Jimmy Carter left office.

TIMELINE

- 1953: Shah returns to power in Iran with the help of British and American intelligence, ousting popularly elected PM Mohammed Mossadeq.
- NOVEMBER 1964: Khomeini is exiled due to his outspoken opposition.
- 1978: Riots, violence, and arrests erupt in Iran. Marches set the stage for Khomeini's return.
- 16 JANUARY 1979: The Shah and his wife leave Iran.
- 1 FEBRUARY 1979: Khomeini returns from exile to a massive homecoming.
- 11 FEBRUARY 1979: The Shah's royal prime minister ousted. Revolution victorious.

Consolidation of power begins.

- 22 OCTOBER 1979: Shah allowed into the US for medical treatment. Revolution denounces America as the Great Satan.
- 4 NOVEMBER 1979: Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line take over US embassy in Tehran. Sixty-six hostages taken.
- 12-14 NOVEMBER 1979: Iranian oil imports to US stopped; over \$8 billion in assets frozen.
- 19-20 NOVEMBER 1979: Thirteen hostages released. These were women and blacks, leaving only two women and one black.
- 19 FEBRUARY 1980: VP Mondale declares crisis nearing the end.
- 21 MARCH 1980: Khomeini declares a cultural revolution to rid Iran of the imperialist West. Negotiations break down.
- 7 APRIL 1980: US breaks diplomatic relations.
- 25 APRIL 1980: Operation Eagle Claw fails due to sandstorm, 8 US soldiers killed. Iran incensed.
- 11 JULY 1980: Captive Richard Queen released after becoming seriously ill.
- 27 JULY 1980: The Shah dies of cancer in Egypt.
- 4 NOVEMBER 1980: Carter loses presidency to Ronald Reagan as Carter is blamed for mishandling the hostage situation as well as economic problems at home.
- 22 SEPTEMBER 1980: Iraq invades Iran over border disputes.
- 19 JANUARY 1981: Algiers Accords signed. US unfreezes Iranian assets in exchange for hostages' release.
- 20 JANUARY 1981: Hostages released as Reagan is sworn in as president.

Points to Consider

The first thing to consider is where we will begin our discussion: the decision to let the Shah into the US in the first place. Where do

you think your Cabinet member stood? Did the US make the rational decision? Should we have expected Iran's response? We will open debate with this issue.

Also consider the efforts at securing the hostages' release. Why did negotiation fail? Where there other options besides the helicopter rescue that was attempted on 25 April 1980? How did the administration react to such failure?

Keep in mind that in September 1980 Iraq attacked Iran, starting a war that would last until 1988. What were the repercussions of this and how did it affect the hostage situation?

Lastly, at all times keep in mind the poll number. Amidst all this strife overseas, President Carter faced a grueling reelection campaign. Every decision became fodder for the opposition, a second front for the administration that would be its downfall. How could President Carter have maintained his office? What went wrong? What was Reagan's position on the situation?

These are just some things to keep in mind and focus on as you do your research. Remember that everything is linked and that actions in one area have effects in others. You need to have an understanding of the entire political and international environment; this is why I ask that you understand not just how your Cabinet member reacted but why.

And as always, remember that this is a crisis. Things may not end up as you planned. Be prepared to think and react as the situation calls for.

Last but not least...

My suggestion would be to start first by gaining

some background on the hostage situation, the Iranian Revolution, the 1980 presidential election. Listed below are some helpful links besides Wikipedia, though Wikipedia is a great place to start. After that you can begin researching your specific Cabinet member. This may not be easy as many of these people are rather obscure. If you are really having difficulties finding information, email me and I will try to help you.

If you have any questions about your Cabinet member, the committee, Brown University, or anything else, feel free to contact me at iran.hostage@busun.net. Good luck and see you in November!

Sincerely,
Kevin O'Brien
President Jimmy Carter, Leader of the Cabinet
iran.hostage@busun.net

***Note on Position Papers: I will not be requiring formal position papers. Once assigned to this committee, email me and I will send a short set of questions for delegates to respond to.

HELPFUL SITES

Timeline and exhibits about the Crisis

<http://www.presidentialtimeline.org/timeline/bin/>

Timeline of US-Iranian relations, including present-day

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3362443.stm

PBS Special on the Crisis, many excerpts from newspapers

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/carter/sfeature/sf_hostage.html#

Well-done history of Iranian Revolution, good background

<http://novaonline.nvcc.edu/eli/evans/his135/Events/Iran79.htm>