

## CHAPTER 3

### **The Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission**

After exhausting all diplomatic channels to achieve the release of 53 Americans held hostage in Iran for over six months, President Carter undertook a dramatic military rescue attempt in April 1980. Carter's action was not only completely contrary to his explicit commitment to human rights and to seeking nonmilitary solutions to foreign policy crises in world politics, but it was a highly risky prospect from a military standpoint as well.

How is it possible to understand the nature of the risks Carter was willing to run, both militarily and politically, in order to force the release of the hostages from Iranian control? The flashlight of prospect theory illuminates a case that might otherwise prove inexplicable.

#### **Background**

The most dramatic events of the Carter administration revolved around the Iranian hostage crisis. The November hostage crisis had been foreshadowed by an earlier seizure of the U.S. Embassy by militant students in February 1979. At that earlier time, the Iranian government stepped in and served as a successful intermediary in facilitating the release of the hostages. In 1979, there were about 70,000 Americans in Iran.<sup>1</sup> After the hostage seizure in February, the United States took many precautions to secure personal safety for the embassy personnel and to encourage other Americans to leave Iran. In a memo explaining these precautions, National Security Council Staff Advisor for Iran, Gary Sick, wrote:

Our thinking on protection took off from the fact that, during the February 14 takeover, the Foreign Minister himself came to the Embassy compound to take charge of American personnel and to clear the compound. At that time, assurances of protection for our remaining people were given . . .

On the security side, we proceeded on the basis of the following strategy: Since our protection ultimately depends on the willingness of the host government to provide protection, we would harden the

Embassy to enable our people to take refuge safely for a period of time until help could come . . .

There were approximately 15 police on duty when the Embassy was attacked on November 4 and they were unable to resist the large crowd which invaded the Embassy.

When we learned of the Shah's medical condition and decided to admit him to the U.S., we informed the Foreign Minister and in the same meeting asked for his assurance that our Embassy people would be protected. He provided that assurance then and on two following occasions.

When we learned of the massive demonstrations scheduled for Thursday, November 1, our Chargé again approached the Iranian authorities and received a further reconfirmation that the embassy would be protected.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly before the hostages were taken prisoner at the American Embassy, the U.S. government showed increased concern about the security of American civilians in Iran, as noted in this internal memo to the president: "The security of the building has been greatly reinforced since February and is nearly impregnable short of a heavy weapons attack. The Iranian police have promised to provide security for the compound."<sup>3</sup>

Because of these extensive precautions and the assurances provided by Iranian governmental officials, few in the American government anticipated that the embassy and its personnel would be so seriously threatened in the November demonstrations.

The events that followed were quite a surprise to the Carter administration. On November 4, 1979, in the context of a broader Islamic revolution, as many as 3,000 Iranian students seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran, taking 66 Americans hostage in the process. The students themselves undertook this attack as a symbolic gesture and expected the takeover to last only a matter of days; they were almost as surprised as the Carter administration when they received the vociferous blessings and benedictions of the Imam, Khomeini, and thus they proceeded to settle in for a longer episode than originally anticipated.<sup>4</sup> Fifty-three<sup>5</sup> hostages were kept for 444 days, until their negotiated release was completed on January 20, 1981, about two minutes into the Reagan presidency.<sup>6</sup>

The Carter administration consistently sought to negotiate diplomatically for the release of the hostages, although they simultaneously developed contingency plans for military action beginning on November 4.<sup>7</sup> The rescue attempt took place at the very nadir of the crisis, following the collapse of negotiations with Western-educated Iranian revolutionaries, such as President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, through French legal intermedi-

aries. The actual rescue mission attempt took place on April 24, 1980. This mission resulted in the deaths of eight American soldiers, caused four additional American injuries, and failed to bring about the release of any of the hostages.

## **Domain**

Carter was clearly operating in a domain of losses at the time of his decision to proceed with the rescue mission. Carter confronted a situation where things were bad, and they were clearly continuing to get worse as time went by and the hostages remained in captivity. This is obvious from every external indicator Carter confronted: a revolutionary Islamic power held 53 Americans hostage and refused to negotiate directly with him; a tough reelection campaign in the face of an increasingly frustrated and hostile American public; a growing sense of desperation about the safety and a clamoring for the release of the hostages among numerous members of Congress, other governmental officials, and the American public; and declining international prestige and credibility for the U.S. government in the wake of the hostage crisis. Carter could only have seen himself operating in a domain of losses, both domestically and internationally.

On the domestic front, Carter's popularity was declining rapidly. Even before the hostage crisis began, one poll taken in June 1979 reported that only 20 percent of the population approved of Carter's foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> Immediately following the seizing of the hostages by the Iranian militants, public reaction followed the standard rally-round-the-flag phenomenon. Public opinion was strongly supportive of Carter, but also strongly hostile to Iran. As one indicator, 97 percent of telephone calls to the White House supported imposing economic sanctions on Iran, pursuing action against Iranian nationals in the United States, and taking military action in Iran. Moreover, 89 percent of the calls supported cutting off oil imports from Iran and 51 percent advocated deporting the Shah in order to end the crisis. More to the point, 421 calls in a six-hour period on November 21 responded positively to a White House hint of military action against Iran.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the vocal public strongly supported strident action against the Iranians. Carter's failure to take such action over the subsequent five months cost him greatly in public opinion polls over that time and pushed Congress to place greater pressure on the administration to do something to resolve the hostage crisis.

Immediately after the hostages were taken captive, Congress, while supporting the president's policy broadly, consistently agitated for more action by the U.S. government against the Iranian militants. On November 8, Advisor Bob Beckel told White House Chief of Staff Hamilton Jor-

dan that “there is an extraordinary amount of hostility running through the Congress toward the Iranian students in the United States . . . There is a demand that we do *something* about the students.”<sup>10</sup> Congressional aggravation continued to mount against the Iranians throughout the following month. By December, a memo on foreign policy issues commented to the president:

In the most troubling move, Representative Stratton introduced a resolution which calls upon you to set a deadline for the release of the hostages. If the deadline is not met, ‘selective military action’ is recommended. As of mid-day November 29, the Stratton resolution had over sixty co-sponsors.<sup>11</sup>

The public polls in early December reflected the administration’s ambivalence toward resorting to military action to resolve the crisis. A Roper poll conducted between December 1 and 8, 1979, summarized U.S. public opinion concerning this issue as follows:

By a two to one margin the public rejects a military raid into Tehran to free the hostages—at present at least. Three out of four feel such a raid would fail which may—or may not—be the reason for their opposition to such a raid.<sup>12</sup>

However, as the hostage drama dragged on without any prospect of negotiated resolution, the American public grew increasingly impatient with Carter and his diplomacy-based foreign policy toward Iran. By the end of January, the popular sentiment began to show increasing frustration with the hostage stalemate. According to a Louis Harris poll conducted in January,

A 53–27 percent majority now feels that if ‘in three weeks, the hostages are still held by Iran and it does not appear that any real progress has been made in getting the release,’ then President Carter’s policy on the Iran crisis has been a failure. If the statement continues on for another three months, then an even higher 74–12 percent majority would then view the President’s efforts as a failure . . . It is now clear from these ABC-Harris Survey results that . . . people have simply run out of patience and will accept nearly any condition in order to get the hostages back alive.<sup>13</sup>

The results of these polls demonstrate that not only was Carter in a negative position in terms of public opinion and popularity, but his status was

decreasing with every passing day that the hostages remained in captivity. In other words, President Carter was in a bad place, and things were clearly getting worse. An additional irony of the Harris poll is that the rescue mission was conducted just about three months after the poll was taken, by which point the poll indicated that tolerance for a strategy of extended patience would have retained the support of less than 12 percent of the public.

By the time that the military preparations and weather conditions were conducive to the execution of the rescue mission, Carter's support had declined substantially from what it had been in January. According to a *Time* poll conducted during the last two weeks of March, 60 percent of the American public felt that Carter was too soft on Iran.<sup>14</sup>

Carter's reelection campaign, moreover, was going badly. During the last week of March, a month prior to the rescue mission, Carter had sustained two large losses in the New York and Connecticut Democratic primaries to Senator Edward Kennedy. Although he won the Wisconsin primary on April 1, there were widespread press reports that he used the hostage crisis to manipulate that victory by prematurely announcing false good news about their impending release.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, just prior to the decision to proceed with the rescue mission attempt, Carter slipped below his Republican opponent, Ronald Reagan, in the election polls for the first time; Carter had held a two to one lead over Reagan in December 1979. By March, however, almost half of the people who supported Carter did so "without enthusiasm." Moreover, 81 percent of the population said they felt that America was in serious trouble, and about 70 percent said they thought it was time for a change in the presidency.<sup>16</sup>

Carter's relationship with Congress was deteriorating as well. Presidential victories on votes in Congress declined from 81.4 to 73.3 percent in the Senate alone between 1979 and 1980. Moreover, Republican support in the Senate for Carter's positions fell below 50 percent.<sup>17</sup>

Pierre Salinger, who covered the hostage crisis for ABC News, provides a good summary of the situation:

Other factors were weighing on the President. Better than anyone, Carter knew how the hostage crisis had paralyzed his administration's efforts in other fields, if only because it diverted his own attention and energies so greatly. Politically, therefore, he was twice wounded—first by the crisis, and again by its impact on his programs. His campaign for reelection registered the frustrations of the American public. While his political fortunes had risen after the taking of the hostages, he was beginning to slip in the polls and had lost a key

primary in New York to Senator Edward Kennedy. Jimmy Carter was now in the midst of a fight for his life, and it looked as if he was losing. A military option that freed the hostages would dramatically alter the odds.<sup>18</sup>

It is significant that Salinger notes here that a military option that freed the hostages might somehow rectify all the losses and perhaps even restore or improve the previous status quo. In other words, it appeared that things would continue to get worse unless something dramatic, such as the rescue mission, was attempted proactively in order to rectify the situation.

The view from inside the administration was equally bleak, as White House aide for Iran Gary Sick commented:

The image of U.S. weakness generated by months of humiliating setbacks and frustrations was not healthy for relations with allies or adversaries. In domestic politics, continued passivity not only condemned the President to self-immolation in the polls but it risked generating a popular backlash in favor of forces who opposed everything Vance and Carter represented.<sup>19</sup>

The relationship between the international and domestic political pressures were interactive; as the international situation worsened, domestic tension increased. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance had had great difficulty encouraging the allies to cooperate with the United States by joining with America in enforcing economic sanctions against Iran.<sup>20</sup> In a State Department telegram sent to Canada and Italy on March 26, allies were warned that “without . . . support from our close friends, the U.S. will have little choice but to undertake further and more severe unilateral actions.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, in spite of allied fears of American military action against Iran, and the possibility that such action might endanger critical oil shipments, allied response was moderate at best. In the month before the rescue mission attempt,

U.S. allies in Europe, in a move given lukewarm approval by U.S. officials who wanted stronger action, decided to reduce their diplomatic staffs in Iran and promise to impose economic sanctions if no ‘decisive progress’ is made in the hostage crisis by May 17.<sup>22</sup>

International channels of conflict negotiation proved no more useful to the United States in fighting Iranian actions against America than the allies were individually. A United Nations Security Council measure

against Iran had been vetoed by the Soviet government earlier in the year.<sup>23</sup> Grievances brought against Iran by the U.S. in the World Court were slow to reach fruition and lacking in any enforcement mechanism upon conviction.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Carter had been warned by President Anwar Sadat of Egypt that America's "international standing" was being damaged by "excessive passivity."<sup>25</sup>

Thus, Carter was a man who had sustained tremendous losses to personal popularity, national honor, and international prestige when the hostages were taken. By the time of the rescue mission, Carter was desperate to redress his losses. If the hostages could be released, Carter could have reasonably expected that national pride and international honor would be restored, and his political fortune might turn upward. Carter was not willing to accept the new status quo, one that absorbed the loss associated with the hostages having been taken captive. The new status quo was not an acceptable reference point for Carter. In terms of prospect theory, Carter was a man operating in the domain of losses because he had not renormalized to a new status quo that incorporated a serious loss. Carter's operative reference point throughout the crisis remained one that refused to recognize the seizure of the hostages as an acceptable loss.

### **The Options Considered**

Prospect theory suggests that relatively subtle manipulations in coding and framing can have a profound influence on choice. In this way, the presentation of the status quo and the options available can impact heavily on the judgments and decisions that are made.

Each central decision maker held a unique perspective concerning the situation that he was confronting. Prospect theory tells us little about how individuals construct the frames that they espouse.<sup>26</sup> However, once these frames are developed and expressed, prospect theory can predict and explain risk propensity based on the subjective structuring of domain. The following discussion is designed to help establish the relevant frames within which specific decision makers saw themselves acting. In this case, as in others, it is clear that historical analogies were very powerful forces in establishing relevant frames for central decision makers. For example, throughout the crisis, Vance invoked two previous World War II hostage crises involving Agnus Ward and the USS *Pueblo* as relevant analogies, where American hostages were released safely in the absence of American military action.<sup>27</sup> Brzezinski, on the other hand, was working off the Bay of Pigs analogy and saw the rescue mission as the American equivalent of the successful Israeli raid at Entebbe.<sup>28</sup> Carter shared Brzezinski's Bay of Pigs analogy, as ironically demonstrated by his request for Kennedy's

speech following the Bay of Pigs debacle to prepare his own speech after the rescue mission failed.<sup>29</sup> In this way, historical analogies can provide powerful references for the development of frames that can then help explain the relative domains in which each actor perceived himself to be operating.

According to Gary Sick, there was a consensus within the administration on the hierarchy of risk presented by the various available options. The main disagreement among advisors and decision makers surrounded which level of risk was the optimal one for the United States to take. In terms of decision analysis, the question is which option holds the greatest chance of achieving the most positive outcome. The problem, of course, is when the most desirable outcome is offered by an option that also possesses a high probability of failure. Recall that for purposes of this study risk is assessed in terms of variance in outcome. The option that presents the greatest variance in outcome is considered the most risky.

From the outset, there were five basic options that were seriously considered to bring about the release of the hostages.<sup>30</sup> From the lowest to the highest level of subjective risk assessment, these options were: to do nothing; to engage in minimal political and diplomatic sanctions; to undertake a rescue mission; to mine the harbors; and to engage in an all-out military strike.<sup>31</sup>

The first option was to do nothing and wait for the internal situation in Iran to stabilize and hope that the crisis would resolve by itself over time. This was the option that Vance supported.<sup>32</sup> The strategy here was to continue with political pressure, but not to offer new initiatives until after the Iranians had formulated their political system into a coherent new structure. The benefit of this strategy was that it did not risk antagonizing the Iranians any further. In Vance's view, this approach was most likely to protect the hostages from further harm.<sup>33</sup>

As might be obvious, the variance in potential outcomes with this option is low. While doing nothing would certainly be unlikely to provoke a bad response from the Iranians, neither was it likely to precipitate the release of the hostages. However, doing nothing carried with it some domestic political risks given the public demand for action to be taken. The political risk was not greater with this option, however, than the political risk of triggering broader armed conflict with Iran as might result from either mining the harbors or engaging in an all-out military strike. In this way, the variance in outcome from doing nothing was actually less than with other options, which offered greater risk of conflict but also offered greater potential for resolution.

The political risks of this policy from a domestic perspective are obvious. Carter would be charged with ineffectiveness and be accused of being pushed around by the Ayatollah. Within the administration, the personal



sense of anger at the Iranians was running very high at this time.<sup>34</sup> Thus, while the military risks of doing nothing were relatively low, the domestic political risks were high. From the perspective of central decision makers, it was virtually impossible to conceive of accepting deliberate international humiliation in the face of such abominable Iranian action without doing something in response. In short, there was a universal sense that the situation was intolerable and doing nothing about it was unacceptable. Emotional motivations like deep anger and frustration added to the cognitive belief that there was no strategic or political reason why the United States should allow itself to be pushed around by a lesser power in the Middle East.<sup>35</sup>

The second option was to up the ante slightly, but only through diplomatic means. In practical terms, this meant breaking political and economic relations with Iran, placing an embargo on shipments of military and other sales, expelling Iranian citizens from the United States and so on. Everyone assumed that these things would be done, and all of these options were eventually executed.<sup>36</sup>

These economic and political sanctions were both serious and extensive. Beginning on November 12, 1979, the president placed an embargo on all Iranian oil products; at the time, this amounted to imports of 750,000 barrels a day, which represented about 4 percent of the American daily supply.<sup>37</sup> On November 14, the president declared a State of National Emergency in order to invoke various powers under the Internal Emergency Economic Powers Act that allowed the U.S. government to freeze Iranian assets held in the United States.<sup>38</sup> This act was renewed one year later, as required by law, to prevent automatic expiration.<sup>39</sup> On April 7, 1980, the United States broke diplomatic relations with Iran.<sup>40</sup> On April 17, 1980, five more serious financial and travel restrictions were imposed against Iran by the U.S. government.<sup>41</sup> Additional punitive, though non-military, measures were taken by the U.S. government against Iran throughout the crisis. These sanctions included: expelling Iranian diplomats and students from the United States; embargoing all imports, amounting to about \$1,000,000 a month; prohibiting all exports, including food and medicine and weapons paid for by the Shah; prohibiting travel; freezing all Iranian assets and prohibiting any financial transactions; blocking telecommunications; and closing Iranian air, travel, and financial institutions in the United States.<sup>42</sup>

These sanctions were not regarded as particularly risky from either a political or a military standpoint. In other words, these options possessed a low *variance* in outcome value. Although sanctions were not likely to produce a worse outcome for the hostages, neither were they terribly likely to produce an optimal one either, at least not immediately.

This is where the notion of weighting comes into play. Recall that when probabilities are estimated to be low, they are overweighted in terms of their impact on decision making. In other words, when an outcome is judged to be of low probability, that outcome receives more consideration than it might normatively deserve. In this case, because the likelihood of the success of sanctions was assumed to be so low, that option may have been given too much weight, and thus more emphasis may have been placed on sanctions in American decision-making strategy about the crisis than was normatively warranted given the psychological overweighting of its low probability of success.

One important goal in pursuing these political and economic actions was to bring pressure on the Europeans to join in the sanctions against Iran. This policy amounted to a balancing act between pursuing American interests in Iran and protecting U.S. relationships with reluctant European allies. Political and economic measures were undertaken and were somewhat successful in gaining European cooperation, but only because of the implicit threat of U.S. military force if such endorsement was not forthcoming.<sup>43</sup> Soviet bloc countries were advocating caution as well. East German leader Erich Honecker wrote to President Carter on December 31, expressing his hope that “all parties will exercise extreme restraint and will do nothing that might lead to an aggravation of the situation. A peaceful resolution of the conflict will be in the interest of all people.”<sup>44</sup> After the rescue mission took place, the Europeans felt betrayed by the action, especially in light of their earlier begrudging cooperation. In fact, diplomatic initiatives did serve as a good cover for the rescue mission preparations, as the Europeans charged.

The third option that was seriously considered was the rescue mission itself. This was really an intermediate option in terms of *political* riskiness. However, it was the riskiest option that could be taken militarily without engaging in an outright act of war. The mission was intended to work by stealth. The goal was to minimize casualties and bring about the release of the hostages directly. Everyone involved in the planning considered it to be a clever and carefully thought out plan. Even those who now have the benefit of hindsight, such as Sick and Brzezinski,<sup>45</sup> consider the plan to have been subtle, sophisticated, and likely to have succeeded if so many of the helicopters had not malfunctioned.

According to Sick, all the decision makers understood the serious military risks involved in undertaking the mission, but believed it still offered the only real possibility of rescuing most of the hostages alive. The planners knew that the possibility of success was not certain. The risks here were seen as being more about the probability of *military* success, rather

than the amorphous *political* costs associated with doing nothing or failing at such an endeavor.<sup>46</sup>

The key factor here is that the rescue mission was perceived by the Carter administration as the best balance of political and military risk. If the mission succeeded, the hostages would be freed, Carter would be a hero, and America's international credibility would be salvaged. Theoretically, a success would have amounted not only to a return to the status quo ante as the reference point, but an additional advance into a domain of gains as well if America effectively demonstrated its unparalleled military prowess before the world.

In the Carter administration almost all attention was placed on the return of the hostages rather than on punitive action for its own sake.<sup>47</sup> Everyone agreed that the military risks of a rescue mission were admittedly high, and the probability of complete success relatively low. But any possibility of retrieving the hostages directly was considered paramount for personal, political, and international reasons.

Because the mission was known to be risky from the outset, the planning was designed to minimize the military risks to the greatest extent possible. The strategy was to enter Iran on a holiday weekend; the rescuers were to hit hard and quickly, under cover of darkness. The American Embassy in Tehran was surrounded by large grounds, and no one expected enough noise would travel outside the compound to arouse suspicion, especially with the use of silencers on all weapons. The rescuers knew where the hostages were being held within the building in advance, and they expected the captors to be unprepared and unskilled for combat.<sup>48</sup> There was every expectation, however dismissed, that large numbers of Iranian captors would be killed in the course of the mission. However unrealistic the assessment, the risks to American soldiers and hostages were expected to be more limited and designed to be minimized. In light of such careful planning, the rescue mission seemed to be a particularly attractive option when the alternatives were perceived to amount to either letting the situation continue to fester without resolution or proceed to all-out war.

The fourth option was to mine Iranian harbors or to otherwise interrupt commerce. This was seen to be quite politically risky because it constituted the equivalent of an act of war. The United States had no intention of declaring war, but wanted to have a significant negative effect on Iran's ability to export and import goods without having to set up a blockade.<sup>49</sup> Mines would constitute a passive sea blockade, and if it was well publicized, most ships would not try to run the risk of entering the mined area.

Mining the harbors was viewed as a sharp escalation. Mining was seen as a significant, but not an overwhelming, international risk. Using mines with automatic self-destruct mechanisms would allow some flexibility, and this option was seriously considered. However, there was a military risk of repeatedly losing non-Iranian planes and ships in such an action. Political risks caused by inflaming the region were seen to be quite high. The fear was that the Iranians would invite the Soviet Union into the region to help with minesweeping and that this offer would provide the Soviet government with a political and military opening in the region that the United States wanted to prevent.

From the administration's perspective, the problem with the mining option was that it would do nothing directly to further the primary goal of releasing the hostages.<sup>50</sup> If the hostages were judged to be important as symbols, punitive military action designed to demonstrate the credibility of American deterrence would appear to be a reasonable response, particularly if the goal was to show the world in general, and Iran in particular, that the United States could not and would not be manipulated by a lesser power. But if they were viewed to be important as individuals, as in fact they were, then the goal became to rescue them and return them to their families for personal as well as political reasons. A mining strategy might have threatened the lives of the hostages, and the Carter administration was never seriously willing to entertain any option that threatened to antagonize the hostages' captors.<sup>51</sup>

The last available option was an all-out military attack. This was judged to be extremely risky from both political and military standpoints and was never seriously considered. As with the previous option, the main reason this option was abandoned was because it did nothing to guarantee the release of the hostages. War would have inflamed the entire Islamic region and escalated the crisis without doing anything directly to bring about the return of the hostages. Basically, this option was rejected all along because the potential adverse consequences were judged to be too great, and the risks were too high, both politically and militarily, domestically and internationally. Everyone in the administration felt that war would come at too high a cost to justify any conceivable benefit.<sup>52</sup>

In testimony before Congress in December, Carter explained his reasoning as follows:

[What is] crucial to us, is for us to be right and for our actions to be defensible, and I believe that if we took preemptory action that would cause bloodshed that we would lose the support of the world and we would lose the lives of our hostages, although that is my natural inclination is to strike back, but I get absolutely furious.<sup>53</sup>

Despite Carter's personal frustrations with the situation, options that were perceived to be riskier than the rescue mission, but did not offer the chance of returning the situation to the status quo ante by bringing about the release of the hostages, were not seriously considered. In other words, war may have been militarily more risky than the rescue mission, just as limiting the response to economic sanctions would have politically riskier than the rescue mission. However, neither option directly promoted the primary goal of freeing the hostages.

The collapse of the administration's only chance for negotiations through Bani-Sadr on April 1 led to Carter's actual decision to undertake the rescue mission.<sup>54</sup> The administration had been involved in complex and sophisticated negotiations with the Iranians through the United Nations to bring about the release of the hostages. Iranian leaders indicated to UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim that the hostages would be transferred to Iranian government control and then released, in exchange for certain public statements on the part of the Carter administration and the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry into the crimes of the former Shah. The timing of the transfer and release was supposed to occur in concert with Waldheim's previously scheduled visit to Iran. The early stages proceeded without incident, but, at the last minute, the Iranians reneged on their promise, and the deal failed to go through as planned.<sup>55</sup>

At this point, after numerous, varied, and extended attempts at negotiating release of the hostages, the administration reached the limits of its patience with the Iranian government. Originally, the possibility of undertaking a military option in response to the hostage crisis had been raised a couple of days after the embassy was taken in November 1979. At that time, under the instigation of National Security Advisor Brzezinski, through Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, the Joint Chiefs of Staff put together a Joint Task Force and began planning for a rescue attempt. The timing of the mission in April was closely related to weather conditions. There was only a brief period of time when the weather remained cool enough and the nights long enough to provide maximum security and efficiency.<sup>56</sup> This military window of opportunity happened to coincide well with the failure of negotiations.

## Framing

Prospect theory argues that choice can often be substantively affected by seemingly trivial manipulations in the framing and construction of available options. For example, the status quo helps define the reference point, and the presentation and construction of options defines the universe of contingencies that are considered.

As mentioned, the main decision makers agreed on the choices that were available and the relative levels of military and political risk that each option posed. However, each advisor operated from a different worldview, and each of these perspectives differentially affected how he formulated issues for the president to address. As a result, each advisor framed his arguments to Carter in quite different ways.

The main perspectives that will be examined here are those of the advisors whose opinions most strongly influenced President Carter, namely Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, and White House Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan.<sup>57</sup>

From the beginning, Secretary of State Vance was stridently opposed to the rescue mission and saw it as being too risky from both military and political standpoints. In the end, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance resigned over this episode, because he believed that the mission could not work and should not be pursued because it was too dangerous. The final decision to attempt the rescue mission was made by Carter on April 11 in a meeting that took place without Secretary Vance's presence.<sup>58</sup> Upon his return from what everyone involved described as a "well-earned" vacation, Vance expressed shock and concern that such a momentous decision had been made without his input. As a result, another meeting of the principals was called on April 15, at which time Secretary Vance outlined his objections. At that meeting, Vance argued:

I pointed out that we had made substantial progress in gaining allied support for effective sanctions . . . [I] pointed out further that the formation of the Majlis, to which Khomeini had given jurisdiction over the hostage crisis, could be a major step toward a functioning government with whom we could negotiate in Iran . . . Even if the raid were technically successful, the mission was almost certain to lead to a number of deaths among the hostages, not to mention the Iranians. The only justification in my mind for a rescue attempt was that the danger to the hostages was so great that it outweighed the risks of a military option. I did not believe that to be the case.

I reminded the group that even if the rescue mission did free some of the embassy staff, the Iranians could simply take more hostages from among the American journalists still in Tehran. We would then be worse off than before, and the whole region would be severely inflamed by our action. Our national interests in the whole region would be severely injured, and we might face an Islamic–Western war. Finally, I said there was a real chance that we would force the Iranians into the arms of the Soviets.<sup>59</sup>

In spite of Vance's objections, the decision to go ahead with the mission was reaffirmed. At that time, Secretary Vance tendered his resignation to President Carter. Vance justified his action to the president by reference to his opposition to the rescue mission:

I know how deeply you have pondered your decision on Iran. I wish I could support you in it. But for the reasons we have discussed I cannot.

You would not be well served in the coming weeks and months by a Secretary of State who could not offer you the public backing you need on an issue and decision of such extraordinary importance.<sup>60</sup>

Carter waited to announce Vance's decision until after the rescue mission had taken place so as not to arouse the suspicions of the Iranians.

Secretary Vance argued throughout the hostage crisis that the United States should use patience and negotiation in order to gain the release of the hostages safely. As noted, the historical analogies that he most closely identified with this crisis were peacefully and successfully resolved without the use of force. His overriding concern was the lives and safety of the hostages, and in the contemplation of the rescue mission, the lives of the American soldiers as well. He framed options in terms of mortality, and everything was evaluated in terms of the likelihood that a particular action would lead to the death of a human being. He also appeared to be more concerned about gaining and keeping the support of the European allies than were the other advisors.<sup>61</sup>

In terms of the options presented earlier, Vance's threshold for risk was really at the first stage. More specifically, he wanted to do nothing and wait for the internal situation in Iran to settle down.<sup>62</sup> He believed that once this happened, the Iranians would no longer have use for the American hostages and would release them of their own accord, without requiring additional pressure from the United States. From Vance's perspective, anything that America might do to bring about the hostages' release in the meantime could only serve to further antagonize the Iranians, thus risking the ultimate safety of the hostages. He also thought that military action would alienate the European allies he had worked so hard to assure. He thus saw a rescue mission as unacceptably risky from both a political as well as a military standpoint.

Vance believed that the hostages would remain safe and be released unharmed as long as the United States was patient, restrained in action, and willing to negotiate.<sup>63</sup> In other words, Vance thought that the new status quo, while not optimal, was nonetheless acceptable as long as no one

was killed. Death was the one loss he was not willing to consider tolerating. He feared that American military action would lead to the loss of life, and thus it was not an advisable course of action.

In terms of prospect theory, Vance did not see himself as being so obviously in the domain of losses as Carter. Vance did not think that things would get drastically worse unless America took positive steps that might cause additional problems. He believed that as long as the United States was patient and did not use force, things would resolve themselves over time in America's best interest. Vance did not see the international political situation as rapidly deteriorating. Thus, while Vance knew things were worse than they had been before the hostages were taken, he seemed to have accepted, indeed "renormalized," the hostage situation as a new status quo "reference point" in a way that Brzezinski, Jordan, and Carter were not so readily able to accommodate. This may have been because Vance framed things in terms of lives lost, and since no lives had been lost prior to the rescue mission, he saw the situation as still being in a domain of gains.

President Carter's override of Secretary Vance's objections to launching the rescue mission was rendered all the more significant by the fact that Secretary Vance had traditionally been the advisor closest to President Carter, both personally and ideologically.<sup>64</sup>

Vance held sway in most of the early foreign policy decisions of the Carter administration. However, Vance was not the only senior member of the decision-making team; Brzezinski was equally important. There is little doubt that Brzezinski's opinion was taken quite seriously by Carter. Indeed, Gary Sick characterizes his importance to the president in quite a fascinating fashion:

Brzezinski was the very antithesis of Cyrus Vance . . .

This restless energy and persistent pursuit of fresh approaches made Brzezinski a natural alter ego to Jimmy Carter's activism. Although the two men were psychologically very different and never really became personally close, they complemented each other in very special ways. Carter was dissatisfied with things as they were and was determined to use his Presidency to generate change. Brzezinski sparked new ideas at a dazzling rate and refused to be constrained by the status quo in devising his strategies. Although Carter probably rejected more of Brzezinski's ideas than he accepted, he obviously valued the irreverent inventiveness that Brzezinski brought to any subject.<sup>65</sup>

According to Gary Sick, the real shift in Carter's policy allegiance from Vance to Brzezinski came after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late



1979. It is clear from Carter's much-publicized statements that he was deeply shocked and personally offended by the Soviet action. Indeed, it was only after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that Vance announced that he would not stay in office beyond the 1980 election. It was following this event that Carter's policy changed from one emphasizing patience and negotiation to one based more on confrontation and competition. Indeed, a change in frame at this time from gains to losses resulted in a noticeable change in general foreign policy preference from negotiation to deterrence. This shift was mirrored by a change in the relative power positions held by Vance and Brzezinski within the White House policy advising circles.<sup>66</sup> It was within this context that the decision about the rescue mission was made.<sup>67</sup>

Brzezinski was a powerful force in the decision to proceed with the mission. Brzezinski promoted quite a different agenda than Vance. Brzezinski's frame encompassed national power and prestige as well as the hostages' welfare. Brzezinski's operative analogy was the failed Bay of Pigs incident, where he believed that America had been humiliated by a lesser power. The difference between the two advisors was that Brzezinski was more willing to accept mortality risks than Vance and saw them as more unavoidable.<sup>68</sup> As Brzezinski wrote:

In effect, I felt that the question of the lives of the hostages should not be our only focus but that we should examine as well what needed to be done to protect our vital interests. I was painfully aware that at some point perhaps a choice between the two might even have to be made.<sup>69</sup>

Brzezinski's threshold of acceptable risk on the list of options was the highest of the central decision makers. Indeed, he went so far as to support a punitive military raid against Iran, in the face of universal opposition. As Harold Saunders, Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asia, notes, "Zbig Brzezinski was more concerned with national interest and honor, while Cy Vance emphasized human values."<sup>70</sup> In ideological terms, Vance was an idealist, Brzezinski, a realist.

Brzezinski favored some kind of military rescue mission from the very outset. Brzezinski wanted to accomplish what the Israelis had achieved at Entebbe. Not surprisingly, it was Brzezinski who phoned Brown on November 6 to get the JCS to begin work on a rescue mission. Brzezinski, like Vance, recognized that military risks were involved in the rescue mission: "My view was that casualties in the rescue mission would be unavoidable; but we also had to face the possibility that the attempt might fail altogether."<sup>71</sup>

Brzezinski was the one who questioned whether the mission should not go ahead with five helicopters after the crucial sixth malfunctioned during the course of the rescue mission itself. Indeed, his commentary on this event provides singular insight into the conscious manipulation of framing to persuade a decision maker:

I stood in front to his desk with my mind racing: Should I press the president to go ahead with only five helicopters? Here I was, alone with the President. Perhaps I could convince him to abandon military prudence, to go in a daring single stroke for the big prize, to take the historic chance. And at the same time, a contrary thought flashed through my mind: Would I not be abusing my office by pressing this man into such a quick decision after months of meticulous planning? Would I not be giving in to a romantic idea?

I had decided to urge going ahead with five only if Colonel Beckwith was prepared to do it, but not to press for it without the field commander's concurrence.<sup>72</sup>

Brzezinski was also the one who began to plan for a second rescue mission, two days after the first mission failed.<sup>73</sup> In fact, Brzezinski had a great impact on Carter's thinking with regard to the hostage rescue mission. In the memo he wrote to the president the day before Carter approved the mission, Brzezinski argued:

In short, unless something is done to change the nature of the game, we must resign ourselves to the continued imprisonment of the hostages throughout the summer or even later. However, we have to think beyond the fate of the fifty Americans and consider the deleterious effects of a protracted stalemate, growing public frustration, and international humiliation of the U.S.<sup>74</sup>

Brzezinski started from a set of assumptions that prioritized America's international credibility. It is not that Brzezinski was not exposed to respected alternative perspectives on the matter. Vance provided such a function within the administration. From Harvard, Brzezinski's highly esteemed and respected colleague, John Kenneth Galbraith, wrote to express his opposition to invasion late in November:

I write to urge the absolute disaster for our interests that would follow any military action or reprisal, however seemingly justified or pressed by our own policies. The Islamic world is not strong or even emotionally secure. But its pride, sense of assailed dignity, sense of com-

munity and tendency to fierce, unfeeling reaction—death in Islam as the Prophet urged is not the occasion for tears—are both powerful and universal. Military action against Iran, however our own people and others attempt to vindicate it, would and literally [*sic*] lose us all this world . . . And the explosion that it would precipitate would easily cost us the lives of hundreds of thousands of our people. The economic (and military) consequences I need not stress. And I promise that this is not an alarmist estimate.<sup>75</sup>

In spite of such a thoughtful and heartfelt analysis, Brzezinski believed that things would get worse in Iran unless America took drastic action. At the meeting to decide about the mission, Brzezinski argued that:

We ought to attempt the rescue as early as possible because the nights are getting shorter; that we should consider taking prisoners back with us, so that we would have bargaining leverage in the event that the Iranians seized other Americans as hostages; and that we should consider a simultaneous retaliatory strike in the event the rescue failed.<sup>76</sup>

Brzezinski saw an entirely different situation than Vance. He clearly saw himself in the realm of serious losses. He framed things in terms of threats to national prestige and honor, rather than in terms of lives lost. From the perspective of international stature, the United States was certainly in a worse situation than it had been before the hostages were taken captive.

In a classic case of loss aversion, Brzezinski did not assimilate his losses quickly or easily. Rather, he was prepared to take great risks in order to return to the status quo ante and to increase America's international standing by bringing about the release of the hostages. He believed that the situation was bound to get significantly worse unless America took drastic action to prevent further deterioration right away. As a result, Brzezinski argued against Vance's preferences. Brzezinski argued that the mission was likely to succeed, albeit with casualties:

A very comprehensive review of the rescue plan by Brown, Jones, and myself in mid-March led me to the conclusions that the plan had a reasonably good chance of success, though there would probably be casualties . . .

[W]e could undertake the admittedly risky but increasingly feasible rescue mission . . .

With the passage of time, we were all becoming more confident that

possible kinks were being worked out of the rescue plan and that the probability of success was increasing . . .<sup>77</sup>

White House Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan provided a third influence upon Carter's decision-making process concerning the hostage rescue mission, at least partly because of his emphasis on domestic political considerations.<sup>78</sup>

Jordan tended to frame options in terms of their impact on the reelection campaign. He made arguments based on how particular actions would affect the president's domestic appeal and popularity. Jordan's perspective is interesting in light of Brzezinski's argument that domestic considerations were irrelevant to Carter during this time. Brzezinski argued:

Perhaps surprisingly, there was never any explicit discussion of the relationship between what we might do in Iran and domestic politics: neither the President nor his political advisor ever discussed with me the question of whether one or another of our Iranian options would have a better or worse domestic political effect.<sup>79</sup>

Nonetheless, in spite of Brzezinski's claim, it is clear from Jordan's memoirs and Carter's comments at the time that the reelection campaign was a far from insignificant concern during this time period, particularly given Carter's pledge not to campaign on the road during the crisis.<sup>80</sup>

Jordan presents his political hopes concerning the rescue mission as follows:

As I listened to General Pustay's presentation [on March 24, 1980], I began to be convinced that maybe it would work. After months of waiting and hoping, negotiating and failing, here was a way to go in and snatch our people up and have the whole damned thing over! Not to mention what it would do for the President and the nation. It would prove to the columnists and our political opponents that Carter was not an indecisive Chief Executive who failed to act. It would bolster a world community that was increasingly skeptical about American power. A daring mission would right the great wrong done to our country and its citizens.<sup>81</sup>

Jordan's sentiments are particularly notable for their emphasis on righting a wrong, returning to normal, or otherwise restoring the status quo ante as the appropriate reference point. Once again, the prospect of recouping all of the personal, national, and international losses in one great daring gamble emerges as a highly appealing option, from both a

political as well as a psychological standpoint. This is exactly what prospect theory would predict in a domain of loss.

### Riskiness of Chosen Option

The variance in outcome values across options indicates the relative riskiness of the various choices available. The first option, to do nothing, had a very low variance; it was unlikely either to accelerate the release of the hostages or to increase the likelihood of the hostages being tried or killed by their Iranian captors. This option presented very low utility, but it also offered the lowest risk.

The second option, using economic and political sanctions, poses a somewhat wider variance in outcome values. The positive outcomes are more attractive and more likely to succeed than doing nothing, but the likelihood remained that sanctions would take a long time to produce a positive effect, if they ever worked at all. Negative outcomes were unlikely, but not impossible, if the Iranians decided to retaliate by harming the hostages. Thus, the second option was riskier than the first.

The third option, the rescue mission, was the riskiest combination of military and political options, since the variance in possible outcome was widest. More specifically, a successful payoff from this option would present the most positive outcome offered by *any* of the choices considered: the hostages would be released, American military prowess would be demonstrated, American credibility and prestige would be restored in the international community, and Carter's popularity would increase. The reason that this option does not present the highest expected value, in spite of possessing such high utility, is because the probability of actually achieving such a positive outcome was very low. In addition, the negative outcome, which was much more likely, could result in quite negative payoffs: the Iranians might harm the hostages in retaliation; America would appear militarily impotent before the world; Islamic fundamentalists in the region might be inflamed by American "imperialism"; the Soviet Union might be encouraged to intervene; and Carter might look foolish and possibly even lose the election. Although not all these negative outcomes took place, many of them occurred in the wake of the failed rescue mission. Thus, this option was riskiest because its variance in outcome was widest. That is, this gamble presented the most extreme positive as well as the most extreme negative payoff possibilities of the options considered.

The fourth option, mining or blockading the seas, offered positive payoffs similar to those offered by sanctions: mining might facilitate the release of the hostages, but it would take time. However, the possible negative outcomes would be much worse than those presented by sanctions:

an act of war might necessitate diplomatic, political, and military escalation. Such action might also inflame the fundamentalists in the region and risk Soviet involvement. In addition, it was unlikely to offer a more positive outcome than sanctions. Because the variance in outcome was greater, mining was a riskier strategy than sanctions. Mining offered no superior outcomes, yet presented worse negative ones. However, mining was not as risky as the rescue mission because it did not advance as positive an outcome, by not being able to force the release of the hostages directly, although the negative possibilities were roughly equivalent to those that could result from the rescue mission. Thus, again, the risk of blockade was not as great as the rescue mission because the variance in outcome possibilities was smaller, even if only in the positive region.

The final option, an all-out punitive military strike, again offered some positive outcome possibilities. More than any other option, it responded appropriately to the emotional anger and frustration felt by Americans against the Iranians. However, this was rarely considered to be a justifiable reason for military action. War posed the same negative risks as installing a blockade, but offered fewer positive outcomes than sanctions.<sup>82</sup> In addition, the probability of the negative outcomes was much higher than the likelihood of positive results.

Thus, the rescue mission was the riskiest choice because it presented the widest variance in possible outcomes. However, the rescue mission did *not* offer the greatest expected value because the probability of positive outcome was lower with the rescue mission than with sanctions, for example. The problem with sanctions, again, was that it was estimated to take a long time to produce an uncertain positive effect and was not directly related to securing the release of the hostages.

What factors led to Carter's decision to take a chance on the rescue mission succeeding? By April, almost all political, economic, and diplomatic sanctions possible had been unilaterally imposed on the Iranian government by the U.S. government.

From the start, Carter believed that military options should be pursued only if there was an immediate threat to the hostages' lives: if, for example, the Iranians put them on trial and condemned them, as threatened, or if all negotiating channels failed. This failure of negotiation is in fact what occurred in April 1980.

At that time, the rescue mission was the option that offered the greatest prospect of recouping all previous losses and returning to the status quo that existed before the hostages had been taken in November. Everyone believed that a successful mission could redeem all losses. Moreover, the political risk of a failed mission was difficult to assess in advance, especially when no one wanted to believe that the mission would fail. Unfortu-

nately, the outcome of events proved just how politically risky a failed mission could be: the hostages were dispersed all over Iran and not released for another nine months; America's international stature diminished even further; and Carter eventually lost his bid for reelection.

### **The Decision**

The most important decision maker throughout the crisis was President Carter himself. Carter's memoirs are not remarkable for their level of cognitive or emotional introspection. It is painfully evident throughout, however, that Carter was a man who deeply experienced the personal burden of his global responsibilities. Carter spoke movingly of his experience of these obligations in his testimony to Congress:

It is a constantly—it is constantly a burden on my mind, no matter what I am thinking about. If I am worrying about an announcement that I am going to be a candidate for president or if I am worrying about the windfall profits tax or if I am worrying about anything else, I am always concerned about the hostages.

It is just as though my wife was in the hospital on the point of death and I had my duties to carry out and I didn't know whether she was going to live or die. I worry just as much about those hostages, and I feel like they are all my own family.<sup>83</sup>

In reading through the documents of the time, Carter emerges as a sincerely moral, genuinely kind and caring man whose leadership abilities were seriously challenged by the enormity of the crises he faced; this is not surprising, given the complexity and seriousness of the problems he confronted.

Given the challenge Carter faced and the diversity of the opinions that he was presented, it may appear somewhat difficult to determine exactly how he weighed the options he considered. In making his decision, Carter attempted to assimilate and integrate the opinions that had been offered to him by his advisors. He may not have been aware, however, of the way in which this advice was skewed by each advisor's different framing of the appropriate choice set and perceived domain of action.

This situation offers a nice opportunity to see one of the subtle and less obvious predictions of prospect theory in action. Ordinarily, an observer would expect Carter to be more closely in line with Vance than Brzezinski in making decisions; they were closer both personally and ideologically. There would be no reason to expect or predict a different alignment in this case, and yet Carter sided with Brzezinski at the cost of his

professional relationship with Vance. Why? In this instance, Carter sided with Brzezinski because they shared the same domain, one of losses, which differed from Vance's domain, based at least partly on the invocation of differing historical frames. With the insight of prospect theory, Carter's alignment is not only explicable, but predictable as well.

Following a framing analysis it is possible to take a brief look at how options were assimilated by Carter. Carter faced a situation that clearly augured against the impact of a deleterious groupthink-type effect;<sup>84</sup> the president's mindset can be examined in light of the different frames that his advisors presented. His perspective is assumed to include his own perception of broader domestic and geopolitical considerations as well.

Prospect theory would predict that, in the domain of losses, Carter would opt for a risky gamble that might return the situation to the status quo ante if it worked. Once again, the notion of variance may be helpful. The rescue mission may have had the highest outcome value if it succeeded, but it also had one of the lowest outcome values if it failed. Relative risk is demonstrated in this situation because the probability of success is lower than that offered by other options, but the utility of a successful outcome is higher.

On the one hand, if the rescue mission had been a success, Carter would have presumably gained the release of the hostages, the respect of his allies and adversaries, and the votes of his constituency. In other words, he could have recouped all his losses and made some gains as well. *No other option available offered this possibility.* On the other hand, if the mission failed, it promised to confirm Carter's domestic image as incompetent and ineffective, and add foolish and reckless to the equation; enrage the Iranians, possibly leading to a humiliating trial or even murder of the hostages; possibly prompt the instigation of guerrilla retribution or war in the region; entice the Soviets into the region under the ostensible justification of trying to ensure peace in the area; and render the ongoing negotiations with the Europeans about sanctions moot.

What is curious, given the lively debate among his advisors, was Carter's confidence in the likelihood of the rescue plan's success. Even after the mission failed, he insisted on its viability in the April 24–25 diary entry:

The cancellation of our mission was caused by a strange series of mishaps—almost completely unpredictable. The operation itself was well planned. The men were well trained. We had every possibility of success, because no Iranian alarm was raised until two or three hours after our people left Iran.<sup>85</sup>



Carter's confidence is surprising because of the complexity and enormity of the task as well as the low estimates of success offered by the JCS and others prior to the mission. Carter's confidence is a central issue because it clearly helped to promote his decision to go ahead with the mission.<sup>86</sup> He understood the risk, but, possibly as a result of wishful thinking, had confidence that the risk was worth taking because of the possibility, however small, that this prospect might restore status quo ante.

The military fully acknowledged the high risks involved in planning such a rescue mission. Indeed, the JCS report on the mission states explicitly that "the rescue mission was a high risk operation. People and equipment were called on to perform at the upper limits of human capacity and equipment capability."<sup>87</sup>

General Jones of the Joint Chiefs of Staff queried Charles Beckwith, the man who eventually led the mission, at the outset of planning concerning the associated risks. Upon being asked the probability of success and the risks involved, Beckwith responded, "'Sir,' I said, 'the probability of success is zero and the risks are high.'"<sup>88</sup>

Intelligence estimates of success were lower than may have been appreciated by the military planners. Pierre Salinger describes an alleged CIA report given to Stansfield Turner on March 16 that evaluated the prospects for the success of the rescue mission as follows:

6. The estimated percent of loss among the Amembassy hostages during each of the five major phases was:
  - (a) Entry/Staging: 0 percent  
Assumes no loss of cover
  - (b) Initial assault: 20 percent  
Assumes . . . immediate loss of those under State FSR and FSS cover and others
  - (c) Location/Identification: 25 percent  
Loss of State personnel before full suppression of resistance  
Problem accentuated since Amembassy hostage not collocated
  - (d) Evacuation to RH-53D's: 15 percent  
Assumes loss from snipers, inside and outside Amembassy compound, and from AT and Apers mines.
  - (e) Transfer-RH-53s to C-130s: 0 percent  
Assumes maintenance of site security
7. The estimate of loss rate of 60 percent for the Amembassy hostages represents the best estimate.
8. It is presumed to be equally likely that the Amembassy rescue

attempt would be a complete success (100 percent of the Amembassy hostages rescued), as it would be a complete failure (0 percent of the Amembassy hostages rescued)

9. Of special note is the fact that no analogous large-scale rescue attempts have been mounted in heavily populated urban areas within hostile territory during the past 15 years. The only roughly similar attempts (Son Toy-Nov. 1970; Mayaguez-May 1975; Entebbe-July 1976) were all made in lightly populated rural areas of hostile territory.<sup>89</sup>

The story of this supposedly secret report was originally leaked to George Wilson at the *Washington Post* in August 1980 but was denied by Frank Carlucci, then Deputy Director of the CIA. According to Jody Powell, Carlucci's response to Wilson was as follows: "I have been unable to find anything in the alleged CIA document that is either accurate or which approximates any memorandum we prepared." Wilson refused to print the story, but a similar one was published by Jack Anderson several months later.<sup>90</sup>

However, a *Time* report the week after the rescue mission stated:

Pentagon officials have adamantly denied reports in Washington of a CIA estimate that 60 percent of the 53 hostages would probably have been killed in the rescue attempt. But *Time* has learned that initial casualty estimates once ran as high as 200 fatalities, including both hostages and rescuers. The final plan did, indeed, envision the possibility of losing from 15 to 20 hostages.<sup>91</sup>

Whether or not Carter was aware of such dismal estimates of success, he ultimately decided that the mission was worth the risk of failure. Indeed, in response to Vance's objections on April 15, Carter replied:

I understand and am not unconcerned about their welfare. But my obligation is to those hostages, who represent me, you, and our country! . . .

I disagree with your assessment of the reaction to the rescue mission. If it works, our friends all over the world will breathe a sigh of relief that it's over and that they won't have to impose further sanctions. The Moslem countries may make a few public statements for the sake of Islamic unity, but you know as well as I do that they despise and fear Khomeini and will be snickering at him behind his back.<sup>92</sup>

Carter described his goal for the rescue mission in a diary entry of November 10:

We want it to be quick, incisive, surgical, no loss of American lives, not involve any other country, minimal suffering of the Iranian people themselves, to increase their reliance on imports, sure of success and unpredictable.<sup>93</sup>

Carter kept these as his basic goals throughout the crisis. Carter's explicit goal was to bring the hostages home, not to punish the Iranians. The possibility of catalyzing the release of the hostages is at least part of the reason why the rescue mission, even though more risky in terms of its variance in outcome and probability of success, was chosen over the other militarily risky options, such as mining the harbor or launching a punitive strike. Carter felt tremendous personal and political pressure to do something to free the hostages. Yet he could not bring himself to engage in an act of war such as mining the harbors, especially if it would do little directly to bring about his primary goal of releasing the hostages.

So, on April 11, Carter decided to proceed with a rescue mission he believed would succeed in releasing the hostages without alienating allies, inflaming the Islamic world, pushing Iran into the Soviet camp, or resulting in the seizure of additional American hostages. In other words, Carter took a gamble he understood to be militarily risky in order to seize a chance at recouping previous losses and reestablishing the earlier status quo. He took this risk over the option of pursuing sanctions, which represented as close to a sure thing as the real world offered.

### **The Iranian Rescue Mission**

The actual outcome of the decision to attempt a rescue of the hostages in Iran highlights the *reality*, as opposed to the feasibility, of the military risk that was involved in the undertaking. Indeed, the overwhelming complexity of such a plan is a critical part of any assessment of the risk involved prior to making the decision to proceed.

The rescue attempt, code-named Operation Eagle Claw (the planning phase was called Rice Bowl), was a highly complex undertaking.<sup>94</sup> The plan was for eight RH-53D helicopters to be launched off the aircraft carrier Nimitz, stationed in the Arabian sea, and fly 600 miles to a landing field within Iran, designated as Desert One, near a town called Tabas. These helicopters had to fly under total radio silence at a low altitude to avoid Iranian radar detection, using only visual navigation and very lim-

ited inertial guidance. At the designated site, the helicopters were to meet with six C-130 transport planes that were to fly in from Masirah Island, off the coast of Oman. Three C-130s carried the assault force of about 120 men; the other three carried fuel for the helicopters.

After meeting, the C-130s were to refuel and transfer their special operations men to the helicopters and return to base. The helicopters were then to fly on to another location in the hills about 100 miles southeast of Tehran, called Desert Two, where the men were going to hide out during the day until they attacked the embassy by surprise as planned the following night. Local sympathizers had arranged ground transportation to the embassy at that time. After the ground attack on the embassy, the helicopters were going to pick up the soldiers and the hostages at a stadium across the street from the embassy compound, fly them to a nearby abandoned airfield at Manzariyeh, and fly them out of the country on C-141s that were to meet them there. Each phase was timed to coincide.

Every stage of the plan was acknowledged to be risky, both in terms of its low probability of success as well as its high likelihood of lives and material lost. The initial phase of inserting the aircraft into the country without detection was considered to be the most difficult aspect of the plan by the members of the rescue team.<sup>95</sup> However, the subsequent stages of the plan never came to fruition because the mission was aborted at Desert One due to an insufficient number of operational helicopters required. Planners judged that the mission required a minimum of six helicopters in order to complete the task; eight helicopters were considered by all planners to be sufficiently redundant for the success of the mission. However, the mission was aborted because only five operational helicopters reached Desert One.<sup>96</sup>

Following the decision to abort the mission, the accident that resulted in the American casualties occurred. A helicopter that was refueling for the return flight kicked up a blinding amount of sand, accidentally flew into the nose of a transport plane, and instantly exploded. Eight men were killed, four were badly burned, and the rest were quickly evacuated, leaving six helicopters, three with sensitive classified material, on the ground for the Iranians to find.<sup>97</sup>

Even in the wake of the rescue mission debacle, administration officials continued to defend the decision in the press conferences that followed. National Security Advisor Brzezinski was willing to openly acknowledge, and justify, the risks that were taken in pursuit of liberating the hostages by force in a television appearance with correspondent Sam Donaldson:

We undertook the rescue mission, knowing full well that it was risky.

We calculated very precisely its chances of success. We felt they were sufficiently high to warrant this activity, because we had a moral obligation to help our people. We have a political obligation to try to bring this problem to an end, if the Iranians, themselves, are not capable of reaching the requisite decision . . .

Everyone recognized that the operation was risky. We also know from history that there are moments in which a certain amount of risk has to be taken. We calculated very closely what the risks were. We knew that we were undertaking something which involved risk.

We also knew that the stakes were very high. After the full weighting of this . . . in which all the President's advisors took part, the President took the right decision, took the courageous decision.<sup>98</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The failure of the rescue mission in Iran in April 1980 was a tragedy whose failure weighed heavily on the principal decision makers involved in its planning and execution. On April 25, 1980, the president issued a statement that read, in part, "The President accepts full responsibility for the decision to attempt the rescue."<sup>99</sup> In a statement made to the American people later in the day, Carter elaborated on this explanation in a statement that read:

Our rescue team knew, and I knew, that the operation was certain to be difficult and it was certain to be dangerous. We were all convinced that if and when the rescue operation had been commenced that it had an excellent chance of success . . . They knew then what hopes of mine and of all Americans they carried with them.<sup>100</sup>

In a separate statement made to Congress, Carter once again focused on the primary importance that he attached to the release of the individual hostages:

The sole objective of the operation that actually occurred was to position the rescue team for the subsequent effort to withdraw the American hostages. The rescue team was under my overall command and control and required my approval before executing the subsequent phases of the operation designed to effect the rescue itself. No such approval was requested or given because . . . the mission was aborted.<sup>101</sup>

The failure of the rescue mission made things even worse for Carter. Aside from some initial rally-round-the-flag support, the failure cost Carter valuable political capital.<sup>102</sup> He was criticized in the press for inadequate planning, as well as for not making a stronger military move from the start. Moreover, the failure of the mission made any subsequent attempt to facilitate the hostages' release even more difficult. In short, Carter's plan failed to release the hostages and reaffirmed his growing domestic image of impotence. From a more personal perspective, the death of the eight American soldiers was especially difficult for President Carter.

The decision to undertake the rescue mission in Iran was made during a time of extreme difficulty for the Carter administration. There is no question that it took place during a domain of loss for the administration in general and for Carter in particular. This was true on both a domestic as well as on an international level. The taking of the hostages was a severe blow to American power, prestige, and credibility on the international scene. The lack of allied and UN support for sanctions was considered an insult. Moreover, Carter was facing an increasingly arduous reelection campaign at home. In fact, had the mission succeeded, history might look quite different, because it is easily conceivable that Carter could have won reelection on the crest of popularity that would certainly have followed such a courageous rescue, successfully completed.

The choice of the rescue mission was indeed the riskiest option considered in terms of the potential variance in outcome values. Other military options were unequivocally rejected by Carter because they offered little probability of securing the release of the hostages. In spite of these military limitations, Carter felt that he had to facilitate the release of the hostages.

In retrospect, an analyst can see that the option that eventually led to the release of the hostages was offered early in the crisis by Secretary Vance. The hostages were released essentially unharmed by the Iranians when they no longer served any internal political function. Once the Iranian revolutionary government had stabilized, the hostages were allowed to leave, although there may have been some other political factors involved in releasing them only a few minutes after Carter was no longer officially the president of the United States.<sup>103</sup> In some sense, Carter received the "right" advice, to do nothing, from Vance; he chose to ignore it, however, and took the more risky military option, which offered the chance, however small, of recouping all his previous losses. Carter chose the military gamble over the slow-but-sure option offered by political and economic sanctions.

Throughout the crisis, it was difficult for many participants to assess

the balance of political and military risks. This was especially true because national and international political risks were often as inversely related as were political and military risks. Nonetheless, Carter made a relatively risk-seeking choice. He had other choices that were both militarily less risky, like mining the harbors, or politically less risky, like seeking additional indirect diplomatic negotiating channels. However, he took the one gamble that offered a chance of recouping all the losses he had previously sustained in order to regain the status quo ante. Had he succeeded, the payoff would certainly have been great. But the probability of success was low, and the mission failed. While other options may not have offered the same potential for immediate positive payoff that the rescue mission promised, less risky options, such as imposing sanctions, proved more likely and more effective in the end.

To reiterate, the rescue mission option did not possess the highest expected value. The highest expected value was the option that offered the lower variance in outcome value as well as the higher probability of success. This option was the one that pursued economic and political sanctions as well as negotiations. This strategy did bring about the eventual release of the hostages.<sup>104</sup>

This outcome is perfectly consistent with, and even predictable from, prospect theory. Carter saw himself in a domain of losses. He took a seemingly irrational gamble over the real world equivalent of a sure thing, as represented by continued sanctions. In order to recoup his losses and regain the previous status quo, Carter engaged in risk-seeking decision making. Thus, the failed rescue mission of the hostages in Iran provides a superb illustration of risk-seeking behavior in the domain of losses and the operation of prospect theory in international politics.

