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- rescue
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MEMORANDUM

~~TOP SECRET~~ THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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April 10, 1980

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT
FROM: ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI
SUBJECT: Getting the Hostages Free

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Authority: EO 13526
Chief, Records & Declass Div, WHS
Date: DEC 09 2015

The steps announced on Monday bought us some time and set a new process in motion. We need to think now about what we will do with the time we have gained and how we manage the coercive process. (S)

Having taken these initial steps, we must be prepared to back them up or else risk a further loss of credibility. Iran does not believe that we will use force. The measures announced Monday have raised some doubts in their mind, but those doubts will soon be put to rest unless followed by additional measures. (S)

Gradual escalation makes sense only if it is part of a strategy which has some promise of freeing the hostages. In my view there are two strategies available to us which could succeed:

1. A graduated application of force designed to persuade the Ayatollah and his followers that the continued holding of the hostages is self-defeating because it endangers Iran's wellbeing.
2. A rescue operation which deprives the Ayatollah of his bargaining leverage and punctures his aura of invincibility. (TS)

Both strategies entail significant risks and both are clouded by uncertainties. The following is an effort to examine systematically the risks and prospects. (U)

Graduated Pressure

It is now clear that the diplomatic option is closed. The hostages are going to be held at least until the Majlis convenes in June, and the prospects that a new Parliament dominated by the clerics will vote to release them on terms even marginally acceptable to us are very remote. In short, unless something is done to change the nature of the game, we must resign ourselves to the continued imprisonment of the hostages through the summer or even later. (S)

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~~Review on April 10, 2000~~
~~Extended by Z. Brzezinski~~
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Accordingly, a sharp increase in the pressures on Iran is one way of changing the environment. For example, we could undertake a deliberate program of increasingly severe steps every week or two weeks until the hostages are delivered. We might wish to inform the Iranians in advance of the schedule, or we could simply proceed step by step and let them draw their own conclusions. The following steps represent an illustrative program:

1. Sharply increased surveillance of shipping enroute to and from Iranian ports, combined with some overflights.
2. Declaration of a state of belligerency with Iran, coupled with a screening program of Iranian nationals in this country.
3. Technical interruption of power at a key point, e.g. the refinery complex in Abadan or cities such as Tehran or Qom.
4. Mining of harbors, leaving the Kharg Island facility untouched.
5. Closure of Kharg Island and/or occupation of the Tunbs and Aub Musa at the mouth of the Persian Gulf.
6. Selective air strikes on economic targets. *(PST)*

The objective of undertaking such a program would be to free the hostages before the program had to be carried to its logical conclusion of outright hostilities. However, once embarked, we would have to be prepared to persevere or else be perceived as paper tigers. *(ET)*

There are several difficulties with this strategy in terms of getting the hostages released. First, the deliberate progression of actions, even if fairly rapid in succession, will encourage the Iranians to seek some counterpressure to force us to stop. The recent threat by the militants to kill the hostages in the event of U.S. military action represents the kind of pressure tactics we can expect to encounter. *(ET)*

The second problem is the uncertainty of the political reaction inside Iran. The Ayatollah would attempt to use this program to arouse public opinion and to unite the nation against the common enemy. He might succeed, at least initially, but over time, as it became clear that the Ayatollah was unable to prevent the disruption of the internal economy and as the citizens begin to bear increasingly heavy penalties because of his obstinacy, the mood might begin to shift from defiance of the U.S. to discontent with the irresponsibility of their own leaders. *(ET)*

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A third, very serious problem is the danger that our actions will inspire the tribal elements and other opposition forces to rise up against the clerical regime, with a complete breakdown of public order or even civil war. Not only would this situation endanger the hostages, but it would sorely tempt the Soviets to move across the border. The Soviets might cite our military actions as armed intervention, permitting them to invoke the 1921 Treaty. They might also be able to assemble a Tudeh-dominated government in Azerbaijan or even in Tehran in the name of protecting the Islamic Revolution. The Soviets have steadily been building their military capability near the Iranian border, and they have been accumulating political support by their support of Khomeini against the U.S. A small, disciplined group with outside resources can be very effective in conditions of anarchy and political collapse. (S)

Finally, even if we succeed in pressuring Khomeini to strike a deal, we will have a problem in extricating ourselves from the confrontation. In short, though superficially cautious and controlled, it is a high-risk strategy which sets in motion forces that are dangerous and beyond our power to control. (S)

Rescue Operation

The alternative is to force the issue to a resolution by unilaterally seizing the hostages away from the Iranians. From a political point of view, this course of action has enormous appeal. It is quick and almost totally under our control. A sudden strike with the sole objective of rescuing our people would be understood -- and perhaps applauded -- by regional states and allies alike. It would provide almost no opportunity or excuse for the Soviets to intervene. And it would embarrass the Ayatollah and show him and his regime to be inept. (TS)

The difficulties of making a decision turn almost entirely on questions of capability and risk. Can we get in and out before the Iranians can react militarily? Can we get all the hostages? Do we believe that we could act swiftly enough to avoid having many of the hostages executed? Can we avoid losing many of our own military people? (S)

I am struck by the evaluation of some of those closest to the situation. My staff assistant, Gary Sick, who has been living with this issue day and night for the past five months, has personally and privately urged me in the strongest terms to adopt this course of action, and has proposed this memo. He has also informed me that the three best Persian-speaking officers in the Foreign Service have recently gone to Cy with the same recommendation. They all believe that the risks of continued incarceration or of military escalation are far greater than a surprise rescue

operation. They are convinced that true surprise is possible and that penetration of the Embassy is a realistic prospect. (TS)

I find this argument persuasive. There may never be a better moment to undertake such an operation than the next few weeks. The security at the Embassy must have settled into a routine by now, and the Iranians are almost contemptuous in their certainty that rescue is not a feasible option. Even the U.S. press has totally accepted our explanations that such an operation is impossible. The Iranian military is in nearly total disarray and preoccupied with the Iraqi threat. The chance of maintaining true surprise is good, and with true surprise, our chances of a successful operation grow. (TS)

We have no risk-free options. Even the risks of inaction are considerable. No other option offers as many potential benefits or gives us as many opportunities to keep the timing and control in our own hands. We could even build in a little protection for any hostages who might not be freed by "arresting" some of the militants and bringing them back under kidnapping and even murder charges. (TS)

In my view, a ~~carefully planned and boldly executed rescue operation represents the only realistic prospect that the hostages -- any of them -- will be freed in the foreseeable future.~~ Our policy of restraint has won us well-deserved understanding throughout the world, but it has run out. This is the painful conclusion we must now face. (TS)

I understand that your preference is not to undertake a rescue except as a reaction to the killing of our hostages. But that is really tantamount to dismissing the rescue option altogether. Please consider the following: the lead time on any rescue operation is a minimum of eight days. If a hostage is killed, there will be an immediate outcry for retaliation; there will be mass hysteria; there will also be a heightened state of alert in Tehran and perhaps even additional killings. I very much doubt that we could afford to wait for days to undertake a rescue operation, and could be thus forced to retaliate, which would then further reduce the element of surprise which is so crucial to a successful rescue. (TS)

Post-Rescue

It is essential that we be ready to react to any post-rescue consequences. These would include threats to the lives of any hostages left behind, or to any prisoners taken in the operation, or to any Americans available in Tehran. In addition, we have to consider the need to react to any large-scale failure that could occur, and which could maximize the foregoing complications.

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Accordingly, in addition to the rescue operation, we should be prepared to initiate almost immediately large-scale retaliatory strikes against key Iranian facilities. Upon the completion of the rescue operation, the Iranian government should be informed, and we could also make it known publicly, that the U.S. will initiate large-scale retaliatory action if any reprisals follow the rescue. If the rescue operation itself fails, we might want to initiate such retaliation in any case in order to reduce the negative consequences of the aborted undertaking. I believe that the U.S. public will be with us whatever happens.

~~(TS)~~

Procedure

I would recommend that at some point soon you consult with your advisers on the above. If you decide to undertake the rescue, I would suggest that you inform your advisers that you have decided against it. Afterwards, a much smaller group could meet with you to initiate the actual plans and to monitor their execution through completion. I would think that such a small group would be confined to the Vice President, Vance, Brown, Jones, Turner, and myself, as well as perhaps Ham and Jody. At the very last minute, additional advisers could be brought in, but it would be essential to enforce iron discipline and minimum participation (on a need-to-know basis). ~~(TS)~~

Conclusion

The above recommendation is not easy to make. It is even more difficult for you to consider and accept. However, we have to think beyond the fate of the 50 Americans (and also some Iranians) and consider the deleterious effects of a protracted stalemate, growing public frustration, and international humiliation of the United States. ~~(S)~~

5 U.S.C. § 552

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