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Prospect Theory in International Relations: The Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission

Rose McDermott¹

This article uses prospect theory, a descriptive theory of decision-making under risk, to examine the failed rescue mission of the American hostages in Iran in April 1980. The argument is that President Carter was in a domain of losses both internationally and domestically at the time of the crisis. In this context, loss aversion predisposed him to take military risks to secure the release of the hostages that he would not ordinarily have been willing to pursue. This article also discusses the relationship between political and military risk in the options that were considered at the time.

KEY WORDS: risk; loss aversion; domain of gains/losses; decision-making; prospect theory; President Carter; Iranian hostage crisis.

INTRODUCTION

The renewed controversy surrounding the involvement of the Reagan campaign in the Iranian hostage crisis fuels new interest in the activities of the Carter administration to secure the hostages' release. After exhausting all diplomatic channels for achieving this goal for over six months, President Carter undertook a dramatic military rescue attempt in April of 1980. Carter's action was not only completely contrary to his humanitarian emphasis in world politics but was a highly risky prospect from a military standpoint as well.

How can Carter's actions be explained in light of his predilection for the peaceful resolution of conflict? 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? This article argues that prospect

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theory provides the best way to understand these seemingly anomalous and incomprehensible events in the Carter administration.

Prospect theory encompasses two elements. The first is a framing phase, during which information is received and processed in a way that places emphasis on particular aspects of a problem, such as whether or not it takes place in a situation of gains or losses. Gains or losses are judged relative to the reference point. In most cases, this is the status quo. However, in many important circumstances, a leader will refuse to accept a new status quo as the reference point and thus will cling to the old status quo as the "appropriate" reference point. The second evaluative segment argues, in short, that people tend to be risk-seeking in the domain of losses and risk-averse in the domain of gains (Tversky & Kahneman, 1984).

The application of prospect theory to any case in the international environment thus necessitates a two-stage analysis. The beginning stage corresponds to the first, editing, phase of the theory. In this part, the particular framing of the relevant issues and questions are investigated at a substantive level in order to discern differences in the political emphases and goals of various players. The second phase consists of the evaluation phase, whereby the specific domain of gains or losses, and relative risk propensity, either acceptant or averse, is discussed and analyzed.

This process allows for a comparison between the predictions of the theory and the outcomes of actual events. The critical variable here is the subjective assessments of domain and risk. While these are clearly tied to, and often derivative of, objective assessments, they are not always, or necessarily, totally analogous.

The framing and evaluation of President Jimmy Carter's decision to undertake a rescue mission of the American hostages in Iran in April of 1980 is investigated here. The hope is to use the flashlight of prospect theory to help illuminate a case that might otherwise prove inexplicable using more dominant paradigms in political science.

The failed rescue mission of the hostages is inexplicable from the perspective of a structuralist paradigm. Structuralism would suggest that it is highly unlikely for a superpower like the United States to get caught in a hostage relationship with a small power like Iran. But once engaged, structuralism would predict that the power discrepancy in the international system would play to the advantage of the United States. The United States should have been able to find a way to use its power to coerce the Iranians into returning the hostages. However, the United States did not go into Iran with a large show of force; indeed, Carter was widely criticized in the press at the time for rendering America impotent in the face of the Islamic students. Why didn't the Carter administration respond to Iran with more direct force from the outset? Structuralism provides no adequate response.

The rescue attempt took place at the very nadir of the crisis, following the collapse of negotiations with Iranian moderates like Bani-Sadr through French legal intermediaries (Sick, 1986). As a result, it offers a superb case for investigation from the perspective of prospect theory because it takes place exclusively in the domain of losses. Prospect theory can offer both explanation and analysis for an action that is seemingly incomprehensible from a more structural perspective. Indeed, no other theory would predict this behavior as accurately as prospect theory.

DOMAIN

One of the most dramatic events that occurred during Carter's tenure as president was the Iranian hostage crisis. 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 quite surprised when they received the vociferous blessings and benedictions of the Imam and proceeded to settle in for a longer episode than originally anticipated (Sick, 1986). Thirteen of the hostages, all either black or female, were subsequently released on November 18 and 19 (Sick, 1986). The remaining 53² were kept for 444 days until their negotiated release on January 20, 1980, about two minutes into the Reagan presidency.³

The Carter administration consistently sought to negotiate diplomatically for the release of the hostages, although they simultaneously developed contingency plans for military action (Brzezinski, 1985). The actual rescue mission itself took place on April 24, 1980. This mission resulted in the deaths of eight American soldiers, with four additional American injuries, and failed to bring about the release of any of the hostages.

²One of the hostages, Richard Queen, was released on July 11, 1980, for medical reasons that were later diagnosed as multiple sclerosis.

³Gary Sick has recently claimed that the Reagan campaign was independently negotiating with the Iranian Revolutionary Council over the timing of the hostages' release. He argues that the Carter administration was unaware of these illicit negotiations involving the exchange of hostages for arms through Israeli intermediaries. See Gary Sick, "The Election Story of the Decade," *New York Times*, April 15, 1991. ABC News *Nightline*, in collaboration with the *Financial Times* of London, has conducted a series of investigations on these allegations. Although much of the evidence in support of Sick's claims is circumstantial, there are many indications that the basis of his argument may be correct. In a classic case of underestimating the base rate, much of the discussion has focused on the whereabouts of William Casey, Reagan's campaign chief, and later head of the CIA. The problem with this focus is that it fails to investigate how frequently Casey's location was unknown; there is no base rate information on his absence from the public eye. To the extent that having an unknown location was a rare event for Casey, it becomes more diagnostic information.

In applying prospect theory to any case in the international arena, it is crucial to first establish the operative domain as one of either gains or losses. While it may be impossible to actually get inside the head of the relevant decision-maker to assess his subjective perspective, it is possible to use other indicators to determine the most likely domain of action. To take a simple example, if an investigator wanted to know whether a decision-maker felt hot or cold and wasn't able to ask directly, he could look at a thermometer to make a best guess. If the temperature was 100 degrees, chances are the decision-maker felt hot. If the thermometer read 32 degrees, chances are the person felt cold. In a similar way, it is possible to use external indicators to determine, in general, how a president assessed his domain of action.

Carter was clearly operating in a domain of losses at the time of the decision to go ahead with the rescue mission, confronting a situation where things were bad and clearly continuing to get worse with the passage of time. This is obvious from every indicator: Carter faced a revolutionary Islamic power that refused to negotiate directly with him, an increasingly frustrated and hostile American public, a growing sense of desperation among numerous members of Congress and other governmental officials about the safety and release of the hostages, and declining international prestige and credibility. 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. One poll from June 1979, even before the hostage crisis began, reported that only 20% of the population approved of Carter's foreign policy (*New York Times*, June 25, 1979). More to the point, according to a *Time* poll conducted during the last two weeks of March, 60% of the American public felt that Carter was too soft on Iran.

Moreover, Carter's reelection campaign was going badly. During the last week of March, just prior to the rescue mission, Carter had sustained two large losses in the New York and Connecticut primaries to Senator Edward Kennedy. Although he won the Wisconsin primary on April 1, there were press reports that he used the hostage crisis to manipulate that victory by prematurely announcing good news about their impending release. According to both Hamilton Jordan's and Jody Powell's reports, the president's statement on April 1 had been prompted by what was viewed as a genuine breakthrough in the negotiations and was not related to the primaries in Wisconsin and Kansas that day. Indeed, the polls prior to April 1 showed the president with a solid 15-point lead in Wisconsin even before the announcement was made concerning the hostages.

In addition, it was the first time that Carter had slipped below Reagan in the election polls; Carter had held a 2 to 1 lead over Reagan in December. By March, however, almost half of the people who supported Carter did so "without enthusiasm." Moreover, 81% of the population said they felt that America was in

serious trouble, and about 70% said they thought it was time for a change in the presidency (*Time*, April 14, 1980).

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% (Ornstein, 1984).

Pierre Salinger, who covered the hostage crisis for ABC News from Paris, 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. (Salinger, 1981)

It is significant that Salinger notes here that a military option that freed the hostages could 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 was actively done to rectify the situation.

The view from inside the administration was equally bleak, as National Security Advisor 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. (Sick, 1986)

As Sick mentions, the international impact of the hostage crisis was as problematic for Carter as were the domestic pressures. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance had had great difficulty in trying to get the allies to cooperate with the United States in joining and enforcing economic sanctions against Iran. For example, a U.N. Security Council resolution against Iran had been vetoed by the Soviets earlier in the year. Grievances brought against Iran by the U.S. in the World Court were slow to reach fruition. Even after the Iranians were convicted in this Court, there was no real mechanism to enforce the penalties imposed. Moreover, Carter had been warned by President Anwar Sadat of Egypt that America's "international standing" was being damaged by "excessive passivity" (Brzezinski, 1985).

Thus, Carter was man who had sustained tremendous losses to personal popularity, national honor, and international interests when the hostages were taken. By the time of the rescue mission, Carter was a leader ready to take a

gamble to return things to the status quo, with the hostages safely at home, national pride and international honor restored, and his political fortunes turned upward. He was not willing to define the new status quo as an acceptable reference point because that concession might cost him his reelection, among other calamities. In terms of prospect theory, he was a man operating in the domain of losses.

THE FRAMING OF OPTIONS

In seeking to apply prospect theory to the Iranian hostage crisis, it is necessary to analyze the options that were considered by the relevant players, in order to determine the perceived relative riskiness of each. Assessments of risk can involve either calculations of the probability of success for a particular choice and/or the utility of each option.

The way these options were framed for President Carter by his advisors is an important element. According to Gary Sick, there was a consensus within the administration on the hierarchy of risk presented by the various options. Risk here meant both the likelihood of success as well as the costs and benefits involved. The main disagreement among advisors and decision-makers surrounded which level of risk was an acceptable one for the United States to take. In the end, the choice that was made was the highest level of risk that President Carter himself was willing to accept (Sick, personal communication).

From the outset, five basic options were considered for bringing about the release of the hostages and ending the diplomatic stalemate. From the lowest to the highest level of risk, these options were to do nothing; engage in minimal political and diplomatic sanctions; undertake a rescue mission; mine the harbors; and engage in an all-out military strike.

The relative benefits and risks involved in each option will be discussed in turn. As National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (1990) comments, it is crucial to keep in mind the distinction between military and political risks throughout this analysis. In many cases, these risks are inversely related. Moreover, there is often a trade-off between domestic and international costs and benefits as well.

The first option was to do nothing and wait for the internal situation in Iran to stabilize and resolve the crisis by itself. This was the option that Vance supported. The strategy here was to continue with political and military pressure but not to offer any new initiatives until after the Iranians had formulated their new political system into a coherent 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.

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. More importantly, the personal sense of anger at the Iranians in the administration was running very high at the time. 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. Deep anger and frustration added to the belief that there was no strategic or political reason why the United States should allow itself to be pushed around by a third-rate fanatical religious state in the Middle East. Thus, while the military risks of doing nothing were relatively low, the domestic political risks were high.

The second option was to up the ante slightly but only through diplomatic means. This meant breaking political and economic relations with the Iranians, placing an embargo on shipments of military sales, expelling Iranian citizens from the United States and so on. Everyone assumed that these things would be done, as they all were eventually, and they were not regarded as particularly risky from either a political or a military standpoint. In fact, these actions amounted to more show than substance. The real goal in undertaking these actions was to bring pressure on the Europeans to join in the sanctions against Iran.

This policy amounted to a balancing act between American interests in Iran and U.S. relationships with reluctant European allies. The diplomatic measures were somewhat successful in gaining European cooperation. However, European accommodation to the American position was more a result of the implicit threat of the use of U.S. military force than of genuine interest in sanctioning the Iranians. After the rescue mission took place, the Europeans felt betrayed, although these diplomatic initiatives did serve as a good cover for the rescue mission preparations.

The third option that was seriously considered was the rescue mission itself. This was really an intermediate option in terms of political riskiness, but 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, and the goal was to minimize casualties and bring about the release of the hostages. 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, consider the plan to have been subtle, sophisticated, and likely to have succeeded.

According to Sick, all the decision-makers understood the serious military risks involved in undertaking the mission, but it still offered the only real possibility of rescuing most of the hostages alive. The planners knew that the possibility of success was not 100%, but they believed that the risks were

manageable. In other words, the risks here were seen as being more about the probability of military success than about the political costs and benefits of undertaking the mission, which seemed more acceptable.

The key factor here is that the rescue mission was the best balance of political and military risk. If it worked, the hostages would be free, Carter would be a hero, and America's international credibility would be salvaged. Theoretically, a success would have amounted to a return to the old status quo as the reference point. However, everyone agreed that the military risks were admittedly high, and the probability of complete success relatively low.

However, military planning was designed to minimize these military risks as much as 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 itself is 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, and they expected the students to be unprepared and unskilled in combat. Although no one discussed Iranian losses openly, there was every expectation that large numbers of Iranian students would be killed in the course of the mission. However, the risks to American soldiers and hostages were more specific, and every effort was made to minimize these losses. Thus, 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 or to go to all-out war.

The fourth option was to mine the harbors or to otherwise interrupt commerce. This was seen to be politically quite risky because it was the equivalent of an act of war. The United States had no intention of declaring war but wanted to prevent ships from going into Iran without having to physically stop them. Mining would constitute a passive sea blockade, and if well publicized, most ships wouldn't try to run the risk of entering the mined area. The goal was to have a significant negative impact on Iran's exports and imports.

Mining the harbors was viewed as a sharp escalation. The fear was that the Iranians would invite the Soviets into the region to help with mine-sweeping and that this offer would provide the Soviets with an opening in the region that the United States wanted to prevent. Thus, mining was seen as a significant, but not an overwhelming, international risk. This option was certainly viewed as manageable from a military perspective. 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 planes and ships in such an action, and the other political risks involved by inflaming the region were seen to be quite high as well. Most importantly, this option would do nothing directly to further the primary goal of releasing the hostages.

The last option available was an all-out military attack. This was extremely

risky from both a political and a military standpoint and was never seriously considered. As with the previous option, the main reason this option was abandoned was because it did nothing to get the hostages back. It would inflame the entire region and escalate the crisis without doing anything directly to bring about the release of the hostages. Basically, this option was rejected every step of the way because the adverse consequences were too great, and the risks were too high both politically and militarily, domestically and internationally.

The most important point regarding the options that were politically more risky than the rescue mission is that neither one offered the chance to return the situation to the former status quo by brining about the release of the hostages. Thus, while the military risks of the rescue mission might have been greater than mining the harbor, and the domestic political risks of a punitive strike might have been less risky, neither option offered an immediate solution to the central issue of contention.

As mentioned, the principal decision-makers agreed on the options that were available and their relative levels of military and political risk. However, it is also true that each advisor possessed a different threshold, or tolerance level, for what was acceptable. As a result, each framed his arguments to Carter in quite different ways. These perspectives are addressed below.

Framing

It was the collapse of the administration's negotiations with Prime Minister Bani-Sadr on April 1 that led to Carter's subsequent decision to undertake the rescue mission (Jordan, 1982; Powell, 1984). The possibility of undertaking a military option in response to the hostage crisis was raised a couple of days after the embassy was taken in November of 1979. Under the instigation of Brzezinski, through Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) put together a Joint Task Force and began planning for a rescue attempt at that time. It was not seriously considered as an option, however, until the following April, after the collapse of direct negotiations with the Iranians.

Because of the number of memoirs and official documents that are available, it is possible to examine a number of different arguments that were presented to President Carter prior to his decision to go ahead with the rescue mission. The main perspectives that will be examined are those espoused by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, and presidential assistant Hamilton Jordan. In the end, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance resigned over this episode, because he believed that the mission could not work and should be pursued because it was too dangerous.

Prospect theory argues that choice can often be substantively affected by relatively trivial manipulations in the framing and construction of available op-

tions. For example, coding helps define the reference point, and the presentation of options defines the universe of contingencies that are considered.

One notable aspect of the Iranian rescue mission case is that each advisor drew on different historical analogies to make his point and press his position. These analogies offered a frame for defining the reference point, as well as instructing individual advisors about appropriate courses of action in a given situation. Such historical analogies can be quite influential, as Jervis suggests:

What one learns from key events in international history is an important factor in determining the images that shape the interpretation of incoming information. . . . Previous international events provide a statesman with a range of imaginable situations and allow him to detect patterns and causal links that can help him understand his world. (Jervis, 1976)

In this case, each advisor, working from a different script, foresaw a different probable outcome based on his chosen historical analogy. In some sense, these analogies offered predictions about the most likely outcome of events for each advocate. Conclusions reached and the policies promoted varied according to the similarities that each advisor saw between present and past events. Therefore, it is important to examine these analogies and their proponent's advice to Carter.

One advisor whose analogies affected his advice to President Carter was Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Vance was adamantly opposed to the rescue mission, seeing it as too risky from both a military and a political standpoint. The final decision to attempt the rescue mission was made by Carter and his principal advisors on April 11 in a meeting that took place without Vance (Brzezinski, 1985; Vance, 1982; Carter, 1983). 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:

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 inflamed by our action. Finally, I said there was a real chance that we would force the Iranians into the arms of the Soviets. (Vance, 1983)

In spite of Vance's objections, the decision to go ahead with the mission was reaffirmed. At this time, Secretary Vance tendered his resignation to President

Carter, who waited to announce Vance's decision until after the rescue mission had taken place. Vance explains his decision to resign as a matter of principle:

I had disagreed with policy decision in the past, but accepting that men of forceful views would inevitably disagree from time to time, had acquiesced out of loyalty to the President knowing I could not win every battle. The decision to extract the hostages by force from the center of a city of over five million, more than six thousand miles from the United States, which could be reached only by flying over difficult terrain was different: I was convinced that the decision was wrong and that it carried great risks for the hostages and for our national interests . . .

[I] knew that I could not honorably remain as Secretary of State when I so strongly disagreed with a Presidential decision that went against my judgment as to what was best for the country and for the hostages. Even if the mission worked perfectly, and I did not believe it would, I would have to say afterward that I had opposed it, give my reason for opposing it, and publicly criticize the President. That would be intolerable for the President and me. That day, I told Carter I would have to resign if the mission went forward. (Vance, 1983)

Of all his advisors, Secretary Vance was closest to President Carter, both personally and ideologically (Sick, 1986; Carter, 1982). Indeed, both Vance's and Carter's accounts of the interaction surrounding Vance's resignation are quite moving and almost reminiscent of the kind of tragedy associated with a failed love affair. It is thus particularly significant that President Carter decided to override Vance's arguments and pursue the military option when he knew that Vance objected strongly enough to resign over it.

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. His overriding concern was the lives and safety of the hostages and, in the event 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 other advisors.

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. He believed that once this happened, the Iranians would no longer have use for the American hostages and would release them voluntarily without additional pressure from the U.S. 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 and thus risk the ultimate safety of the hostages. He also thought that military action would alienate the European allies he had worked so hard to reassure. He thus saw a rescue mission as unacceptably risky from both a political and military standpoint.

It is significant to note that the Agnus Ward incident was the historical analogy from which Vance operated. As Vance recalls:

I also believed that the hostages would be released safely once they had served their political purpose in Iran. I found support for this conclusion in what had happened in two similar cases where Americans were held hostage. They were the Agnus Ward incident, involving the seizure of our consular staff in Mukden at the end of World War II, and the case of the USS *Pueblo*. The Ward case had many similarities to the seizure in Iran, as is clear from the memorandum of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to President Truman recommending against the use of military force. I had sent a copy of this memorandum to the President shortly after the hostages were taken. I was convinced as time passed the chances of physical harm to the hostages diminished. (Vance, 1983)

Thus, Vance used the Ward and *Pueblo* analogies to support his view 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. In other words, Vance thought that the new status quo, while not optimal, was nonetheless acceptable as long as no one was killed. He feared that American action would lead to the loss of life and thus was not an advisable course of action. So, for Vance, any action that the United States took would be to make a gain and not to prevent a loss.

Vance believed any rescue mission was doomed to military, and thus political, failure from the outset because of the high risk of deaths, yet he refused to gloat when his predictions came true. Rather, he was the first to offer Carter the most heartfelt condolences following the announcement of the failed mission (Jordan, 1982).

Vance had held sway in most of the early foreign policy decisions of the Carter administration. However, he was not the only senior member of the decision-making team; Brzezinski was equally important politically. 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 compelling 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 that he accepted, he obviously valued the irreverent inventiveness that Brzezinski brought to any subject. (Sick, 1986)

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 after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that Vance announced that he would not stay in office beyond the election. It was following this event that Carter's policy changed from an emphasis on patience and negotiation to one based more on confrontation and competition. Indeed, a change in frame at this time from gains to losses regard-

ing U.S.-Soviet relations resulted in a noticeable change in policy from appeasement to deterrence. It was within this context that the decision about the rescue mission was made (Sick, 1986).

Brzezinski was a powerful force in the decision to proceed with the mission. However, Brzezinski had quite a different agenda than Vance. His frame encompassed national power and prestige as well as the hostages' welfare. 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 humane values" (Saunders, 1985). In short, Vance was the idealist to Brzezinski's more classical realist position.

Brzezinski favored some kind of military rescue mission from the outset, even though, like Vance, he knew 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. (Brzezinski, 1982)

The difference was that Brzezinski was more willing to accept these risks than Vance and saw them as more unavoidable (Brzezinski, 1985). His threshold of 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. Brzezinski was also the one who began to plan for a second rescue mission, two days after the first failure (Brzezinski, 1985). As noted, Brzezinski's interest was broader than the lives and safety of the hostages:

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. (Brzezinski, 1985)

Indeed, it was Brzezinski who phoned Brown on November 6 to get the JCS to work on a rescue mission. Brzezinski was the one who questioned whether or not the mission should go ahead with five helicopters after the hydraulic leak was discovered in the crucial sixth during the course of the rescue mission itself. Indeed, his commentary on this event provides singular insight into the conscious use of framing to influence 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 into 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. (Brzezinski, 1985)

In this sequence, Brzezinski demonstrates a conscious awareness of an advisor's ability to persuade and manipulate a decision-maker, even one so powerful as the president, through the framing of options.

The evidence suggests that 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, after demonstrating much reluctance earlier, 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. (Brzezinski, 1985)

Thus, it is evident that Brzezinski started from a different set of assumptions than Vance. Brzezinski believed that things would get worse without drastic American action, while Vance believed exactly the opposite. At the meeting the following day, 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. (Brzezinski, 1985)

It is interesting to note that Brzezinski was influenced by a quite different historical analogy than Vance. Brzezinski's model for the rescue mission was the Israeli raid on Entebbe. One of the reasons he supported a smaller American helicopter force grew out of this experience:

Some have argued subsequently that the mission should have been composed of, say, twice as many helicopters; but if the Iranians had discovered the mission as a result of the size of the air armada penetrating their airspace, we all would have doubtless been charged with typically excessive American redundancy, with unwillingness to go in hard and lean—the way, for example, the Israelis did at Entebbe. (Brzezinski, 1985)

Indeed, during the operational aspects of the planning, Brzezinski was quite aware of a second powerful analogy with the Bay of Pigs. He was careful to steer Carter clear of the mistakes that Kennedy had made at that time. As Brzezinski describes it:

He and I had earlier discussed John Kennedy's interference with the military planning for the Bay of Pigs operation, and Carter was clearly determined to make certain that his personal concerns did not interfere with the mission's chances of success. (Brzezinski, 1985)

The Bay of Pigs analogy indeed became quite a salient analogy for Carter. According to Sick,

John F. Kennedy was widely criticized, especially within military circles, for insisting on civilian control over military operations in the Cuban Missile Crisis down to the most minute detail. [Later Sick notes: "presumably it was due to his disastrous experience at the Bay of Pigs that led President Kennedy to insist on civilian control of every detail during the Cuban Missile crisis."] Lyndon Johnson was similarly criticized for asserting Presidential control down to the unit level during operations in Vietnam. Jimmy Carter consciously attempted to avoid these extremes. (Sick, 1985)

Brzezinski's historical analogies may have contributed to Carter's conscious decision to give control of the operational plans for the rescue mission over to the military. This strategy may have hurt chances for the success of the mission because problems with the chain of command that might have emerged earlier with stricter civilian control didn't become salient until the execution of the mission itself. (This analogy is particularly ironic given that Carter requested a copy of Kennedy's speech following the Bay of Pigs debacle from Cody Powell after the failure of the rescue mission, in order to help him prepare his own speech for the public. See Jordan, 1982.)

A third important advisor to Carter during the hostage rescue mission, at least partly because of his emphasis on domestic political considerations, was Hamilton Jordan, the presidential advisor. His memoirs seem to be the most psychologically candid of the plethora of books written by Carter administration officials. For example, Jordan wrote of Brzezinski's comments, following the April 15 meeting during which Vance raised his objections, that "Cy is the ultimate example of a good man who has been traumatized by his Vietnam experience" (Jordan, 1982). This comment was obviously made in reference to Vance's service both as secretary of the army and deputy secretary of defense during the Vietnam war.

In fact, Jordan is quite open about his anger at Vance for not believing early that the rescue would succeed, and also for abandoning Carter in his time of greatest need after it had failed. His book seems less affected by hindsight, in this way, than the others.

Jordan tended to frame things in terms of its 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 especially in light of Brzezinski's claims that domestic considerations were irrelevant to Carter during this time:

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. (Brzezinski, 1985)

This recollection lacks self-awareness in the way best exemplified by the story of the man who didn't like parties because he had never been to one where he wasn't in attendance. In other words, it is difficult for someone to discount sufficiently for the impact of his own presence on a situation. No one may have talked about domestic politics around Brzezinski perhaps because they knew he wasn't concerned about the subject. Nonetheless, it is clear from Jordan's memoirs that the reelection campaign was far from an insignificant concern during this period, particularly given Carter's pledge not to campaign on the road because of the crisis.

Jordan presents his own 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 had 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. (Jordan, 1982)

Jordan's sentiments are particularly notable for their emphasis on righting a wrong, or somehow trying to get back to normal, or restore the former status quo as the appropriate reference point. Once again, the goal of recouping all of the personal, national, and international losses in one great daring gamble emerges as highly appealing, from both a political as well as a psychological standpoint. This is exactly what prospect theory would predict in such a situation.

THE DECISION

The most important decision-maker, of course, was President Carter himself. Carter's memoirs, although containing diary entries, are not notable 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. He emerges as a sincerely moral, genuinely kind and caring man whose leadership abilities were seriously challenged by the enormity of the crises he faced. Given the complexity of the problem, and the diversity of opinions that Carter received, it is challenging to understand how he reached the decision that he made concerning the rescue mission.

A framing analysis allows an examination into how all the information and options were assimilated by President Carter. Carter faced a situation that clearly militated against the impact of a deleterious groupthink-type effect;⁴ the president's mindset can be examined in light of the different frames that his advisors presented. His mindset is assumed to include his own perception of broader domestic and geopolitical considerations.

Prospect Theory would predict that, in the domain of losses, Carter would opt for a risky gamble that might return the situation to the former status quo.

⁴For more on the Groupthink effect, see Irving Janis (1982), who describes the phenomenon of groupthink as a "quick and easy way to refer to a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive ingroup, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative course of action" (p. 9). This clearly *didn't* happen in the Carter administration, as evidenced by the drastic differences in opinions espoused by Vance and Brzezinski, among others. The reasons for this are no doubt many but are certainly due in part to deeply held personal animosities between these participants, as well as the personal styles of some participants, such as Brzezinski, who did not shy away from confrontation.

Such a risky gamble is characterized by a situation where the probability of success is lower than that offered by other options, but the utility of the outcome is higher. If the rescue mission had been a success, Carter would have 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.

What is surprising, however, given the debate among his advisors, was Carter's confidence in the likelihood of the 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. (Carter, 1982)

Carter's retrospective 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. At this point, however, Carter's confidence is a central issue because it clearly helped to promote his decision to go ahead with the mission.

There are several possible reasons, both cognitive and motivational, for this confidence. From the cognitive point of view, it could have been a classic case of the conjunctive fallacy, which demonstrates that people think the probability of total success for an event that requires the combination of a number of smaller events is greater than the likelihood that any one of those events alone will succeed. This notion is psychologically appealing because people think the possibility of any one of a number of different things happening is greater than the chance of only one of those things occurring; they fail to realize that all the events in the cumulative sequence must occur for the larger event to succeed. In events requiring such a combination, complete success is only as likely as the least likely event. That is because if one link fails, the entire chain fails as well.

The conjunctive fallacy provides a compelling explanation for the overconfidence that led to the failure of the space shuttle Challenger in January of 1986, for example. In the Iranian situation, Carter may have thought that the number of contingency plans and back-up supplies ensured a higher probability of success than was realistic, especially given the sheer number of contingencies that had to succeed in order for the entire plan to work.

This type of confidence is also reminiscent of Jervis's argument that an irrational pursuit of consistency often leads to the avoidance of value trade-offs. As Jervis notes,

[P]eople who favor a policy usually believe that it is supported by many logically independent reasons. When a person believes a policy contributes to one value, he is likely to believe that it also contributes to several other values, even though there is no reason why the world should be constructed in such a neat and helpful manner. This would not be irrational if in order to agree with a proposition a person had to affirm a number of

necessary conditions. But often the person holds a number of beliefs, each of which would be sufficient to justify his policy preference. (Jervis, 1976)

This avoidance of value trade-offs characterized the positions of both Brzezinski and Vance as well as Carter in the case of the rescue mission in Iran. Vance believed the mission was likely to fail, would alienate European allies, inflame the Islamic world, result in more American hostages being taken, and throw the Iranians into the Soviet camp, although these views were not logically related. Brzezinski and Carter believed the mission would succeed, engender the gratitude, however subdued, of allied and Arab leaders, would not lead to Soviet infiltration of the area, and not harm other Americans in the region.

Other possible explanations for Carter's confidence are more motivational in nature. One might be simple wishful thinking. Carter may have believed that the mission would succeed because he wanted it to succeed. However, there is evidence to refute this view. Carter was aware of the military risks involved in attempting to rescue the hostages because Vance had objected to the mission precisely on the grounds of the high probability of failure and lost lives. Given Carter's awareness of the risks involved, it is difficult to sustain an argument that he believed it would succeed solely because he wanted it to work.

Another explanation for confidence in the plan after the decision was made may have had to do with justification. This is similar to the phenomenon that occurs in dissonance experiments, when the "spreading apart" of the alternatives makes the chosen option much more attractive than the rejected one, no matter how close in value they were evaluated prior to actual choice (Festinger, 1957; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). In this way, dissonance reduction works to justify the superiority of the chosen option after the decision. This helps to reduce regret, even long after the decision has proved to be suboptimal.

Carter's belief perseverance in the likelihood of the mission's success, even after its failure, is also highly reminiscent of the findings of Festinger, Riecken, and Schacter (Festinger et al., 1956). They tell the story of a religious cult led by a woman who preached and prepared all her followers for the imminent end of the world. Proselytizing for the group took place only *after* the original predictions had failed to come true. Festinger, et al. suggested that such post-failure belief is generated to justify all the costs incurred in espousing the original belief system. Moreover, proselytizing provides consensual reality testing for such beliefs. It is plausible to argue that Carter was affectively motivated to believe in the likelihood of the mission's success, even after its failure, in order to justify the lives lost in its pursuit.

Carter's confidence in the probability of success is important because it flies in the face of the estimated risk, both in terms of lives and material lost, as well as estimates of the likelihood that the hostages would be released. This is impor-

tant because it is precisely this confidence, which was greater than more objective estimates of the likelihood of success, that allowed Carter to decide to go ahead with a mission he knew to be risky. He understood the risk, but had confidence that it was worth taking because of the possibility of restoring the former status quo as reference point.

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 the way in which their assessments of the operative domain differed from his own.

In terms of prospect theory, Vance did not see himself as being so obviously in the domain of losses. As is clear from his statements, he did not think that things would get drastically worse unless America took positive steps to prevent that happening. As his earlier quotes indicate, he believed that as long as the United States was patient and did not use force, things would resolve themselves in America's best interest over time. Moreover, Vance did not see the entire political situation as deteriorating in quite the same way as Brzezinski did. Thus, while Vance knew things were worse than they had been before the hostages were taken, he seemed to have accepted and indeed "renormalized" the hostage situation as a new status quo "reference point" in a way that Brzezinski, Jordan, and Carter did not. This may have been because he thought of 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 relatively neutral. Thus he was not prepared to take risks, because he did not see himself as acting in the domain of losses.

Brzezinski perceived himself as confronting an entirely different situation. He clearly viewed himself and the country to be in the realm of serious losses. Again, this may be because he framed things in terms of threats to national prestige and honor, rather than in terms of lives lost. The United States was certainly in a worse situation according to these values than it had been before the hostages were taken. Thus, in a classic case of loss aversion, he did not assimilate his losses quickly or easily. Rather, Brzezinski was prepared to take great risks to return to the former status quo and to increase America's 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 predictions. Moreover, Brzezinski believed the mission would 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. . . . (Brzezinski, 1982)

By and large, Carter agreed with Brzezinski and took issue with almost all of Vance's concerns. 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. (Jordan, 1982)

Carter was also in the realm of losses, although not to the same extent as Brzezinski. Carter's primary concern was really the safety of the hostages, more than the international prestige of America. Indeed, Carter described this goal 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. (Carter, 1982)

Carter kept these as his basic goals throughout the crisis, and, in fact, the rescue mission came closer to meeting these specific goals than any of the other options. It is clear from his comments that Carter's explicit goal was to bring the hostages home, not to punish the Iranians. This is at least part of the reason why the rescue mission, even though more risky in terms of probability of success, was chosen over the other military options, such as mining the harbor or launching a punitive strike. In fact, Carter's threshold of risk on the earlier list of options *was* at the level of the rescue mission itself. He was a man who found the use of force repugnant. He felt pressure to do something to free the hostages. However, he could not bring himself to engage in an act of war such as mining the harbors, especially if it would do little to directly bring about the release of the hostages.

Thus, Carter made a decision on April 11, following the final collapse of negotiations on April 1, 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 taking of additional American hostages. In other words, he took a gamble he understood to be militarily risky in order to grab a chance at recouping previous losses and re-establishing the earlier status quo.

Riskiness of Chosen Option

The relative riskiness of undertaking the rescue mission is best evaluated relative to the other options considered at the time. These include the diplomatic and military options discussed above. By April, almost all political, economic and diplomatic sanctions possible had been unilaterally imposed on the Iranian

government by the U.S. These included expelling Iranian diplomats and students from the U.S.; breaking diplomatic relations; imposing an embargo on all exported material, including weapons paid for by the shah but never delivered; freezing Iranian assets in the U.S.; and making financial transactions in Iran illegal in order to prevent U.S. citizens, including the press, from traveling there.

From the start, Carter believed that military options should only be pursued 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 negotiations is in fact what occurred in April of 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. It was understood that the political risks of undertaking a rescue mission were high, especially if it failed. However, as mentioned, Brzezinski and Carter felt that doing nothing was even more risky politically, especially given the widespread criticisms of presidential incompetence that were floating around the press at the time. Everyone believed that a successful mission could redeem all losses. However, the political risk of a failed mission was difficult to assess in advance. Unfortunately, the outcome of events proved just how politically risky a failed mission could be: Carter lost the election; the hostages were dispersed all over Iran and not released for another nine months; and America's international stature diminished even further.

From a military perspective, it is clear from the principals' memoirs that the rescue mission was understood to be the riskiest option that was seriously considered, both in terms of likelihood of success, as well as in terms of lives and material that could be lost.

The military itself knew of the high risks it was undertaking in planning the 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" (U.S. Defense Dept., 1980). Indeed, Admiral Holloway judged the likelihood of success to have been about 60% to 70% (Ryan, 1985).

Hamilton Jordan tells a story about a query from the JCS's General Jones to Charles Beckwith, the man who eventually led the mission, at the outset of planning. Beckwith was asked the probability of success and the risks involved; he responded, " 'Sir,' I said, 'the probability of success is zero and the risks are high.' " (Jordan, 1982).

However, as mentioned earlier, the confidence of the principals in the success of the rescue mission increased after the decision was made. Even after the mission failed, Secretary Brown rates the probability of success as high as 70%, arguing that the mission was well-planned (Jordan, 1982).

It is interesting to note, however, that the intelligence estimates of success may have been lower than understood by the military planners. Salinger describes an alleged CIA report given to Stansfield Turner on March 16 that evaluated the prospects for rescue mission success as follows:

6. The estimated percent of loss among the Amembassy hostages during each of the five major phases was:

- (a) Entry/Staging : 0%
Assumes no loss of cover
- (b) Initial assault :20%
Assumes . . . immediate loss of those under State FSR and FSS cover and others
- (c) Location/Identification :25%
Loss of State personnel before full suppression of resistance Problem accentuated since Amembassy hostage not collocated
- (d) Evacuation to RH-53D's :15%
Assumes loss from snipers, inside and outside Amembassy compound, and from AT and Apers mines.
- (e) Transfer-RH-53s to C-130s : 0%
Assume maintenance of site security

7. The estimate of loss rate of 60% for the Amembassy hostages represents the best estimate of CA and M & P staff.

8. It is presumed to be equally likely that the Amembassy rescue attempt would be a complete success (100% of the Amembassy hostages rescued), as it would be a complete failure (0% 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 (Salinger, 1981).

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 (Powell, 1984).

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

Pentagon officials have adamantly denied reports in Washington of a CIA estimate that 60% 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. (*Time*, May 12, 1980)

Whether or not the CIA document was a forgery, the question of historical analogy is again highlighted, albeit in a slightly different context. The fact of the matter is that rescue raids have a high historical (base rate) failure rate; the Iran

rescue mission may offer an almost classical example of the representativeness heuristic in foreign policy, where base rates were underestimated in light of a salient successful case. In this instance that notable case was Entebbe, a rescue raid which was successful, although it took place in quite a different terrain.

In the case of American rescue attempts, the historical track record is dismal at best. The Son Toy raid on a Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp, which included soldiers who later participated in the Iran mission, failed because the prisoners had been moved to another location prior to the arrival of the rescue team. The raid on the Palestinians who took nine Israeli athletes hostages during the 1972 Munich Olympics resulted in the deaths of all the hostages and five of the right-wing terrorists. The 39 hostages in the Mayaguez incident were indeed freed, but it appears that their release was underway *prior* to the rescue mission.⁵ Even so, that mission cost the lives of 41 American soldiers, and wounded another 50. Another relatively similar case, that of the Hammelburg raid to release prisoners of war in Germany during World War II was only partly successful as well because fighting with German forces subsequent to the raid was heavy.

In fact, Entebbe and Mogadishu stand as relative anomalies in the history of these kinds of missions, both for their success and their lack of casualties: three hostages and one Israeli officer were killed at Entebbe; and three terrorists were killed by the West Germans in Somalia. The key to both these successful raids was total surprise combined with a relatively isolated area of attack. In spite of the critical geographical differences, Entebbe was the operative analogy for most of the principals involved in the Iranian rescue mission (Christopher et al., 1953; *Time*, May 5, 1980; Ryan, 1985).

THE IRANIAN RESCUE MISSION

The actual outcome of the decision to rescue the hostages in Iran highlights the reality of the huge military risk that was involved in the undertaking. Indeed, the overwhelming complexity of the plan is a critical part of any assessment of the risk involved in the decision to undertake the rescue mission.

The rescue attempt, codenamed Operation Eagle Claw (the planning phase was called Rice Bowl), was a highly complex undertaking (Ryan, 1985; U.S. Defense Dept., 1980). The plan was for eight RH-53D helicopters to be launched off the aircraft carrier Nimitz from the Arabian sea and fly 600 miles to a landing field 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 limited inertial guidance. At the designated site, the helicopters were to meet with six C-130 transport planes that were

⁵I am grateful to Robert Jervis for clarification on the specifics of this mission.

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 the helicopters, transfer the special operations men to them, 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 the surprise attack on the embassy, which was planned for the following night. Local sympathizers had arranged ground transportation to the embassy. 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 the probability of success, as well as the likelihood of lives and material lost. The initial phase of inserting the aircraft into the country without detection was considered by members of the rescue team to be the most difficult aspect of the plan (Jordan, 1982). The advanced stages of the plan never came to fruition because the mission was aborted at Desert One because there were too few helicopters to carry out the rest of the mission. Planners judged that the mission required a minimum of six helicopters in order to complete the task; eight helicopters were considered by all to be sufficiently redundant for the success of the mission. However, this number proved to be inadequate and the mission was aborted because only five operational helicopters reached Desert One.

Following the decision to abort the mission, the accident that resulted in the American casualties occurred. A helicopter was refueling for the return flight, kicked up a blinding amount of sand, and accidentally flew into the nose of a C-130 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. The Iranian police later bombed these helicopters and took pictures of them for propaganda purposes. Evidence suggests, however, that the Iranians were not aware of the attempted mission, or of its failure, until informed of it by the Carter administration at 1 a.m. Washington time on April 26 (Carter, 1982).

CONCLUSIONS

The failure of the rescue mission in Iran in April of 1980 was a tragedy whose failure weighed heavily on the principle decision-makers involved in its planning and execution. While Carter may not have believed that the costs associated with the mission were high, he was wrong objectively. The failure of the rescue mission did make things worse for him. From a political standpoint,

the failure cost Carter valuable political capital. 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 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 particularly difficult for President Carter. In a statement issued on April 26, President Carter accepted full responsibility for the episode:

Our rescue team knew, and I knew, that the operation was certain to be dangerous. We were all convinced that if and when the rescue phase of the operation had been commenced, it had an excellent chance of success. They were all volunteers; they were all highly trained. . . . (Carter and Trimble, 1989)

The decision to undertake the rescue mission in Iran was made during a time of extreme difficulty for the Carter administration. Indeed, 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 and 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 U.N. support for sanctions was considered an insult. Moreover, Carter was facing an increasingly arduous reelection campaign at home. In a classic example of operating in the domain of losses, it seemed that he had little to lose in launching the rescue mission and everything to gain should it succeed. 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 military option seriously considered. This is true both in terms of likelihood of success as well as in terms of personnel and material costs. Other military options were unequivocally rejected by Carter because they offered little probability of success for releasing the hostages and involved overt acts of war. Nevertheless, Carter felt that he had to do something to return the hostages home.

Ex post facto, an analyst can see that the best option had been offered by Secretary Vance. The hostages were released essentially unharmed by the Iranians when they no longer served any function. Once the revolutionary government was secure, the hostages were allowed to leave, although there may have been some other factors involved in releasing them only a few minutes after Carter was no longer officially the president. However, Carter was clearly unaware of these other factors. In some sense, Carter received the "right" advice—to do nothing—from Vance; he chose to ignore it, however, and take the more risky military option. Even if he didn't think of the rescue mission as risky, he knew that objectively it was *more* risky than other options that were available to him. He knew the mission carried greater potential costs than the other options; it

also promised greater benefits. In this sense, he took the gamble in an attempt to win the prize.

Throughout the crisis, it was difficult for any of the participants to assess the balance of political and military risks. This was especially the case because national and international political risks were often as inversely related as were political and military risks. Nonetheless, it is clear that Carter made a 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 to regain the former status quo. Had he succeeded, the payoff would certainly have been great. However, the probability of success was low, and the mission failed. While other options, such as negotiating, may not have offered the same potential payoff, they proved more likely, and more profitable, in the end.

This finding is perfectly consistent with, and even predictable, based on prospect theory. Moreover, prospect theory provides insight which makes little sense from a structural perspective. Indeed, no other theory would predict such risky behavior in a bad situation. Contrary to his inclinations against the use of force, Carter ordered a military mission to rescue the hostages. He saw himself confronting a bad situation and took a seemingly irrational gamble in order to recoup his losses and regain the previous status quo. Thus the failed rescue of the hostages in Iran provides a superb illustration of the operation of prospect theory in the international realm.

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