

Research Forum**DISCURSIVE SUBVERSIONS:
TIME MAGAZINE, THE CIA OVERTHROW OF MUSSADIQ, AND
THE INSTALLATION OF THE SHAH¹**

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After two decades of looking at social change in Iran in terms of its causes, internal and external, primarily through the lens of political economy, I have recently embarked on a study of the U.S. side of this equation from a cultural studies perspective. This project explores the thesis that *Time* magazine's reporting and editorializing on Iran in the Mussadiq period had a material effect on U.S. foreign policy.

From the media studies and the sociology of culture work of Dorman and Farhang I take the notion that there exists a complex relation between cultural constructions and the world.² I am also much in agreement with the cultural studies and feminist analysis of Mary Ann Heiss that both policy makers and the press (and the public) drew on a single source, which we may term Orientalism.³ The question is who influenced whom? I shall argue that the popular press had more influence over the policy makers than most people think. The influences worked in various directions, and were cumulatively quite important in what happened. That is, *Time* influenced U.S. foreign policy; both drew on and contributed to Orientalist discourses; Mussadiq and other actors tried to combat these influences; and the coup was a product of this struggle for discursive hegemony, further shaped, to be sure, by the political economy of oil and geostrategic power.

I term my own perspective Third World cultural studies. Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Stuart Hall, and Aijaz Ahmad, among others, Third World cultural studies represents an approach to culture that insists on a critical perspective on First World cultural practices, further focusing on how political cultures and discourses circulate and compete. I am interested in this project in tracking the meaning and possible impact of U.S. discourses on Iran in hopes of suggesting the existence of a circuit between cultural "knowledges" of the other and foreign policy.

The general findings of Dorman and Farhang on the U.S. press and Iran during the Mussadiq period are that "the press went along with what would prove to be the U.S. State

Department's self-fulfilling prophecy that the shah was the only source of stability and continuity in Iran."⁴ My own reading of *Time* magazine suggests that the press played a more significant role in the construction of foreign policy. Under Henry Robinson Luce, *Time's* orientation to the world was Republican, pro-business, and intensely committed to bringing the "serious" issues of world politics to an American audience. By the 1950s, *Time* had arguably attained the stature of the most influential shaper of opinion in the United States, particularly in Republican and centrist circles. In Halberstam's view, Luce "was, in those grand years of the forties and fifties and early sixties, the most powerful conservative publisher in America, and in the fifties at least as influential as the Secretary of State."⁵ Luce's obsession with the "loss" of China to communist revolution in 1949 would be relayed to the American public in manifold opinions on international and domestic affairs expressed in the pages of his publications as journalistic reporting of fact.

In this context, *Time's* reporting of events in Iran would go far beyond following the lead of the Washington foreign policy establishment, particularly under a Democratic administration that had held the reins of power since 1933. This critique was articulated forcefully in the pages of Luce's other glossy "news" publication, *Life*, in a piece titled "Our Government's Deplorable Performance in Iran has Contributed to a Great Disaster":

The truth is that the State Department has no policy for Iran and no policy for the Middle East.... It may be too late for Iran. It is certainly very late. But it is not too late to appraise the U.S. State Department in the bleak light of Iran, and to bring Secretary of State Dean Acheson to book for a record of neglect and failure which alone is sufficient to justify his dismissal.⁶

Calls for the arraignment and dismissal of a secretary of state do not seem to be following the lead of the foreign policy establishment, and indicate that *Time*, at least, stood outside the Washington foreign policy consensus.

This general discursive orientation may be brought to life with a look at the treatments of the two main protagonists in the Iranian political arena, Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and Prime Minister Muhammad Mussadiq. *Time's* representation of the shah is noteworthy in that it is generally positive, though not without critical and negative overtones. In a telling phrase, he is "reasonable but ineffectual."⁷ On the one hand, he is beloved and serious, "Western" in his tastes and outlooks, wealthy and urbane, capable of standing up to the Soviet Union.⁸ On the other, he is fickle and opportunistic in his dealings with the superpowers, and patriarchal within his family.⁹ In sum, the shah both does and doesn't fit the stereotype of the Middle Eastern ruler-politician; his class and Western orientation earn him respect in the pages of *Time*, but his youth and lack of decisiveness make him vulnerable to the criticisms of the U.S. media in a major cold war struggle.

The shah's nemesis, Mussadiq, receives a decidedly different treatment in the U.S. press. Mussadiq was *Time's* "Man of the Year" for 1951. The cover story opens:

Once upon a time, in a mountainous land between Baghdad and the Sea of Caviar, there lived a nobleman. This nobleman, after a lifetime of carping

at the way the kingdom was run, became Chief Minister of the realm. In a few months he had the whole world hanging on his words and deeds, his jokes, his tears, his tantrums. Behind his grotesque antics lay great issues of peace or war, progress or decline, which would affect many lands far beyond his mountains.

His methods of government were peculiar. For example, when he decided to shift his governors, he dropped into a bowl slips of paper with the names of the provinces; each governor stepped forward and drew a new province....

His weapon was the threat of his own political suicide, as a wilful little boy might say, "If you don't give me what I want I'll hold my breath until I'm blue in the face. Then you'll be sorry."

In this way, the old nobleman became the most world-renowned man his ancient race had produced for centuries. In this way, too, he increased the danger of a general war among nations, impoverished his country and brought it and some neighboring lands to the very brink of disaster.

Yet his people loved all that he did, and cheered him to the echo whenever he appeared in the streets.¹⁰

Mussadiq's name (which does not appear on the cover either; instead we have only the caption "Man of the Year: He Oiled the Wheels of Chaos") is not uttered until the seventh paragraph of the article. More signifiers in this article for Mussadiq include "dizzy old wizard" (this will reappear throughout the year), "fanatical state of mind," "weeping, fainting leader of a helpless country": "Mossadegh, by Western standards an appalling caricature of a statesman, was a fair sample of what the West would have to work with in the Middle East," of a piece with other leaders who "would rather see their own nations fall apart than continue their present relations with the West."

Mussadiq is repeatedly described in *Time* as "frail" or "fragile;" "faint-prone;" "prone to weeping."¹¹ He is, contradictorily, at the same time, a strong man; this is part of what makes him such a threat to the West. By 1953, when he asked for and was granted extra powers by the Majlis, and as the West's fear that Iran would fall to communism reached a crescendo, he was routinely described in the *New York Times* as a dictator; and *Time* sees him already in mid-1952 as "the undisputed strong man of Iran," running the headline "Call Me Dictator."¹²

In the U.S., meanwhile, Dwight D. Eisenhower would win the 1952 presidential elections, heavily sponsored by Henry Luce, who took credit for getting Eisenhower the nomination over his old conservative friend Robert Taft by issuing a special issue of *Time* during the Republican convention showing the arithmetic of defeat with Taft versus victory with Eisenhower.¹³ In 1953, as U.S. plans for intervention in Iran shifted from blueprint to reality, the press also prepared the ground for a coup, building on the calls for U.S. intervention of the previous two years. *Newsweek* anticipated the domino theory in March, with

Iran — not Vietnam — as the first domino:

The situation is such that the West may at any instant face the choice of occupying south Iran or watching the entire country go Communist by default. If Iran goes, then Pakistan — where the Reds have done a remarkable job of infiltration — would probably be next. This would isolate India, probably topple the rest of the Middle East within months, and would mean that the West would have to make the terrible decision whether to begin a fighting war or accept the loss of the cold war.¹⁴

Again, *Time* drew the conclusions as to cold war means, quoting approvingly the words of retiring U.S. diplomat J. Rives Childs to the State Department:

To prate of democracy to the Persians is like advocating prohibition to the denizens of hell.... The U.S. should be prepared, if necessary, to occupy southern Persia and regain possession of [the Abadan oil refinery], preferably at the request of ... a Persian government sympathetic to the Western world.¹⁵

Time adds: “if Britain does not back the U.S., Childs says that the U.S. should act alone.”

What impact did all of this have in preparing the coup? Mark Gasiorowski, who has studied the secret side of the coup in most detail, concludes his assessment of the motives for U.S. action against Mussadiq on August 19, 1953 as primarily the fear of a communist take-over of Iran, rather than the oft-argued desire to gain a share of Iran’s oil production. These concerns emanated from “the highest levels of the CIA and the State Department, and were not shared by lower-level Iran specialists.”¹⁶ That the most knowledgeable U.S. officials in the State Department and in Iran were overruled by their superiors and the CIA, and that the chief concern was the communist threat to Iran if Mussadiq remained, is at least prima facie evidence that the discourses circulating in the media, led by *Time*’s cold war view of the world, played their role in the construction of the coup.

The events of the coup itself, barely well known even today, leaked out only very slowly. More to the point, they left the American public and most of the world with a misrepresentation: that the affair had been internal in origin, and widely popular. The “true” story, which had some currency inside Iran as a kind of underground counter-hegemonic current, found few tellers in the West, journalistic or scholarly, right through the Iranian Revolution that was its indirect legacy a quarter century later.

Viewed in retrospect, Muhammad Mussadiq can be seen as a non-communist advocate of democracy who sought to break with a history of dependency and Western influence in his country’s economy and political affairs. Like Arbenz and Arevalo in Guatemala, and later Allende in Chile, his nationalism and democratic aims were fatefully misrepresented in the West. Dominant U.S. constructions of Mussadiq were based on Orientalist and cold war discourses, and served to further solidify such discourses. I am arguing that this contributed directly to the atmosphere in which a coup was conceived and made. While the

New York Times studiously avoided mention of U.S. actions in Iran, Luce's publications *Time* and *Life* were instrumental in castigating the Truman administration's indecisiveness in the region, and contributed to the election of a Republican administration that was more willing to intervene in Iran's internal affairs. The covert policies that produced the coup were in their turn produced by a cold war discourse that *Time* shaped decisively, and the "success" of the coup forged a precedent that led to further interventions in Guatemala and Cuba in the decade that followed.

In the end, all the causal links in the chain that produced the coup may never be identified, but I hope that a Third World cultural studies perspective on the events might suggest the plausibility of such a chain, and illuminate the events in a new light. The discursive subversion of the Mussadiq administration practiced by the U.S. media played a material role on the history of the cold war, most fatefully in Iran itself.

Notes

1. This is a much shortened version of some of the arguments developed in a chapter written for a book in preparation: Christian G. Appy, editor, *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of American Imperialism During the Early Cold War, 1945-1963*. I would welcome feedback in any form from readers, as this is work in progress. I can be contacted by mail (Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106) or e-mail (foran@sscf.ucsb.edu).
2. William A. Dorman and Mansour Farhang, *The U.S. Press and Iran: Foreign Policy and the Journalism of Deference* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
3. Mary Ann Heiss, "Culture, National Identity, and Oil in the Early 1950s: The United States and Mohammad Mossadeq," paper presented at the Organization of American Historians, Chicago (March 1996).
4. Dorman and Farhang, *The U.S. Press and Iran*, 36.
5. David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 58.
6. *Life* (May 21, 1951), 38.
7. *Time* (August 27, 1951), 30.
8. *Time* (January 9, 1950); (July 31, 1950), 25; (February 19, 1951), 80.
9. *Time* (November 27, 1950), 33; (April 24, 1950); (February 5, 1951).
10. *Time* (January 7, 1952), 18.
11. Examples are found in *Time* (June 11, 1951), 32; (November 26, 1951), 38; (June 25, 1951), 33. This last reference has the wonderful anecdote: "[U.S. Ambassador Henry Grady] sent a go-between to the bedside of frail, faint-prone Premier Mohammed Mossadeq, who was so weak that the doctors gave him a transfusion (seeing that it was American plasma, Mossadeq cracked: "Do you think it will make me more reasonable?")."
12. *Time* (August 4, 1952), 27; (August 11, 1952), 32. On the *New York Times*, see Dorman and Farhang, *The U.S. Press and Iran*, 41-44.
13. Halberstam, *The Powers That Be*, 90-92.
14. Dorman and Farhang, *The U.S. Press and Iran*, 45, quoting *Newsweek* (March 9, 1953), 27.
15. *Time* (February 16, 1953), 32.
16. Gasiorowski, "The 1953 Coup d'Etat in Iran," 276, 275.