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TO : The Secretary
FROM : S/P - Anthony Lake

Attached is the paper summarizing the views of eleven experts* on Iran serving either in the State Department or in the CIA. It also sets forth the basic options we believe flow from their analysis. The paper was put together by Stan Escudero (IO), Laurie Tracy (S/P), and Arnie Raphael.

It concludes that there is indeed a deep cultural gap between us and the Iranians which leads the Iranians to misread our signals:

- "-- When we sound reasonable to ourselves, we sound weak to them.
- When we expect credit for dealing in good faith, they look for hidden meanings.
- When we place trust in an impartial institution like the UN and the Commission, they perceive a target for manipulation to be used to one or the other, but not both, parties' advantage.
- When we take step by step approaches, they perceive a lack of resolve.
- When we make menacing statements, they look to our actions since words are not taken at face value.
- When we say we accept their revolution and wish to continue a productive relationship, they see a conspiracy in our efforts to rebuild an embassy that once dominated them.

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RDS 4/17/2000 (LAKE, Anthony)

-- When we shake an ominous fist at their refineries, ports, or cities, they seek refuge in moral righteousness and defiance because of their ambivalence about the value of such Western structures."

Three conclusions emerged from the views of the majority of the experts:

"In sum, in psychological terms, we should not approach the negotiations like a classic bargaining situation; we should not expect concessions for concessions; we should not expect graduated pressures to work with the Iranians any more than they worked with the Vietnamese. What we would do if we were in their shoes is irrelevant.

A second significant conclusion is that the future of the hostages depends primarily on the evolution of Iranian politics; the outlook points toward increasing strength by the hardliners, but a resolution of the issue by the hardliners is not excluded. Our ability to affect Iranian politics in a positive sense is limited; overt US pressures tend to undercut the moderates, whose role is already weak.

A third conclusion is that their one point of vulnerability is concern for the future of their revolution."

A word of caution. The views of these experts are interesting, in many ways surprising, and important. But their views, and particularly their prescriptions, also differed considerably. The memorandum and its analysis primarily reflect the views of a "majority" of these experts. On an issue so puzzling, a "majority" is not necessarily right. You will also wish to consider the views of the outside experts you will be seeing next week; they, being somewhat more distanced from the problem, may have a predominantly different view.

I did not attempt to shape the analysis and summary of the experts' views in the first half of the memorandum. I did ask its authors to put in the various options contained in the second half of the memorandum. These options were not proposed, per se, by the experts.

Option I is similar to the strategy we pursued during January and February. Option II is similar to our current course, which almost certainly leads in logic and in U.S. domestic political terms to military action. Option III

is a tough but non-military course. It is designed to reflect the "majority" views of the experts on Iranian psychology and politics. The primary problem with it is that it relies on secrecy, which would be hard to sustain in domestic political terms. We are not in a position to judge its practicality with regard to CIA capabilities. Option IV, a rescue attempt, was volunteered by a majority of the experts. I should emphasize that they volunteered it without having considered the third option, but in reaction to our current course.

I think there are two important points not covered in the memorandum.

1) It is not as easy as the memo implies to separate the question of our "larger interests" and the safe release of the hostages.

Military action may at first demonstrate American resolve, our willingness to use force, etc. But unless such action produces the safe release of the hostages, such measures will also -- at least over time -- become perceived as weakness or worse. It is the results achieved by American power, not the use of American power in itself, which matters in the long run. Indeed, attempts to use American military power which fail demonstrate greater weakness than any failure to use that power. Therefore, the burden of proof should be on those advocating military action, or a course leading to it. It should be shown how such a course will gain the release of the hostages. And most of the experts were dubious that graduated pressures/blockade/mining would produce their release.

This calculation holds true, of course, only so long as the hostages remain in reasonably good mental and physical health, and are not in imminent danger. Once they are at immediate risk in any case, the relative risk of military efforts is reduced.

So long as they are well, as is the case now, it will be hard to justify measures which imperiled them.

In short, I believe we would get little credit domestically or internationally for tough measures that fail even if they buy time or produce temporary applause. That is why I believe you should consider Option III or some variation of it, as an alternative to our current course or to the more passive Option I. Until the hostages are in clear danger, it is better to keep playing for a break in a situation which can always evolve in ways even the experts cannot predict.

2) Second, there is the question of how to deal with increasing U.S. public demands for action. In terms of U.S. public opinion, the course we are now embarked on -- graduated pressures -- has the effect of driving us toward increasingly severe actions and ultimately toward military ones. Each set of actions we take buys us some short-term relief from the mood of public impatience, but they also increase expectations that we can resolve the crisis through increasing pressures. Thus when they fail to work, impatience grows and the appetite for the "next step" is stronger.

If we conclude that the best hope for a satisfactory resolution lies in exploiting the revolution inside Iran over the next few months, it is important that we try to slow the momentum of public expectations. Option III would make it clear to the public that we have taken a series of actions that, each day, carry an increasingly heavy cost for Iran, and that we will be announcing no new actions until after the Parliament convenes. Clearly, it would draw an increasingly bitter reaction during this period, since it could be perceived as a passive position. But, in a sense, it reverses the trap we are now in: rather than buying progressively shorter periods of time by announcing increasingly tough measures, which most agree have little chance for success, it incurs higher short-term public costs for a course that may have a greater chance of success. And the final public judgment of our performance on this matter will be in the terms of a single, hard standard: was it a success in getting the hostages out, with honor?