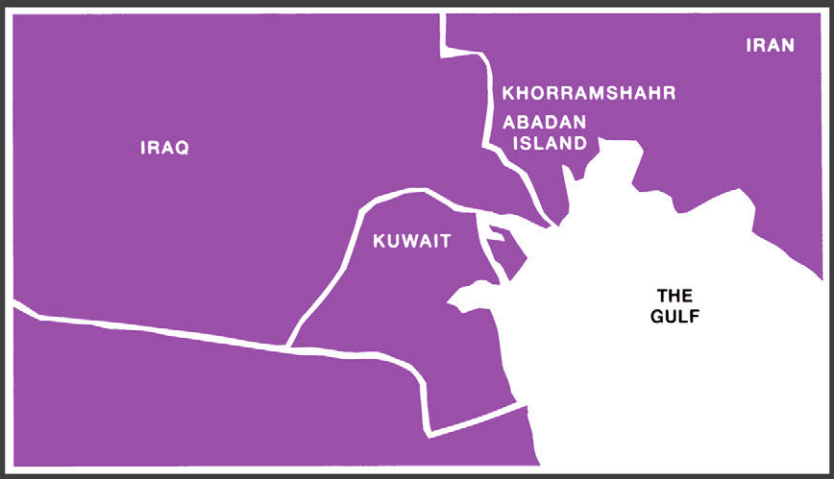
James Cable

Intervention at Abadan

Plan Buccaneer



INTERVENTION AT ABADAN

Also by James Cable

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Intervention at Abadan

Plan Buccaneer

James Cable

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For Viveca, as always

Contents

Preface

Coercive diplomacy is a resort to specific threats or to injurious actions, otherwise than as an act of war, in order to secure advantage or to avert loss . . .

James Cable
Diplomacy at Sea

This book relates how, in 1951, Britain planned to use force in order to retain control of the world's largest oil refinery at Abadan. Units of the British navy, army and air force were deployed, given their preparatory orders and, at one point, brought to three hours' notice. After many months and under strong pressure from the President of the United States, British forces were stood down, British subjects withdrawn from Abadan and oil-wells, pipelines and refinery abandoned. It is a story, not previously told in any detail, of international poker for high stakes.

It is also a case history of coercive diplomacy, a field in which the analysis of failure is no less instructive than the sparse record of success. This analysis will not be ethical or legal or ideological. The focus is on technique: political, diplomatic and military. The treatment aspires to be historical, issues being presented as they were seen at the time.

Inevitably the story is told from a British perspective, the main source being the British documents in the Public Record Office at Kew. Transcripts of Crown copyright records in the Public Record Office appear by permission of the Controller of HM Stationery Office and all otherwise unidentified references in the notes are to the files in which such documents are classified in the Public Record Office.

Various participants in the events of 1951 have been kind enough to assist the author with information and advice, particularly on those human factors that are often inadequately reflected in official reports. The author would like to renew his thanks to Captain A.V.M. Diamond, Mr C.T. Gandy, Mr J. Homersham Golds, Commander G. Harris, Rear-Admiral R. Hill, Mr N. Hillier-Fry, Rear-Admiral H. Hollins, Group-Captain K.G. Hubbard, Admiral Sir Rae McKaig, Sir George Middleton, Group-Captain R. Morris, Captain

A.J. Oglesby, Mr L. Pyman, the Hon. Sir Peter Ramsbotham, Lieutenant-Commander D. Randall and the late Captain A.H. Wallis for allowing him to draw on their recollections. Unless directly quoted none of them bears any responsibility for opinions or statements of fact in this book.

The author's debt to writers of works previously published is acknowledged in the notes and bibliography, but is throughout great.

Thanks thus too concisely concluded, a word of explanation is needed about proper names and spelling. When documents are quoted, as with books, their words and spelling are reproduced. Officially Persia was already called Iran in 1951, but most Britons continued to use the name Persia. The practice had political overtones. Nor was there much uniformity in the transliteration of proper names. Writers in European languages spelled the name of Mossadegh, the Persian Prime Minister, in many different ways.

James Cable

1 Verdict in Dispute

I cannot recall any large matter of policy which has been so mishandled as this dispute with Persia.

Winston Churchill[1]

Censure was understandable. The 1951 dispute had cost Britain a rich oilfield, the world's largest refinery and a major source of much-needed dollars. Historians have mostly agreed with Churchill in blaming the British Government led by Attlee,[2] but for different reasons. They believed Ministers could and should have resolved the crisis by forcing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company[3] to make large and early concessions to Persian nationalism. Churchill's complaint was that the Government 'had scuttled and run from Abadan when a splutter of musketry would have settled the matter'.[4]

That was a picturesque exaggeration. The military operation considered at the time by Ministers was Plan Buccaneer. This would have committed many warships and aircraft, as well as two or three brigades, to the task of seizing and holding the refinery island of Abadan at the head of the Persian Gulf. The forces needed were deployed in the Middle East, kept at short notice for many weeks and not stood down until 4 October. Who was right – Attlee, who eventually insisted on cancelling the project, or his Foreign Secretary, who predicted that the spectacle of a 'feeble and ineffective' British government would only encourage Egypt to follow the Persian lead?[5] Could Buccaneer have regained the oil for Britain and averted the consequences of capitulation?

For thirty years such questions were seldom asked. Armed intervention overseas was out of fashion. Plan Buccaneer was dismissed, by the few historians who had any inkling of its existence, as an aberration doomed to failure. The success of Operation Corporate for the liberation of the Falkland Islands in 1982 was not the first incident to cast doubt on the conventional wisdom, but it provided a particularly striking exception to the supposed rule. Corporate suggests the need for a fresh look at Buccaneer in an altered perspective. Did Attlee prudently avoid a damaging fiasco in 1951 or did he let opportunity slip and set an unfortunate example?

These are not easy questions and they cannot be answered without

a conscious effort to see the issues as they were seen in 1951. There was a different world then and Britain was another kind of country. So was Persia, nowadays called Iran. The Second World War had shaken up the nations and undermined many ideas long received. The established patterns of political conduct – among different states and between rulers and ruled – had been challenged, but had yet to be replaced by new conventions commanding any wide measure of acceptance.

For most of the first half of the twentieth century, for instance, Anglo-Persian relations had been determined by wider issues. As a state Persia was older than any of the Great Powers, but was seldom treated by any of them as equally sovereign. Yet Persia was not needed, or even wanted, by Britain as a colony, but as a buffer-state to shield British India from Russia. Even in this role Persia was no more than a pawn in the game. When Britain wanted Russian help in Europe, Persia might be divided between a Russian sphere of influence in the north and a British in the south: before the First World War or during the Second. Persian views on the subject were not of great significance and only limited force was needed to overcome any local objections: an infantry brigade occupied the Abadan refinery in 1941.

As a rule, however, British influence in Persia was more discreetly employed to minimise that of Russia. In London it was long believed that Russian rulers regarded Persia as a stepping-stone to India, or to the Gulf or the Middle East. When Russian influence showed signs of dangerous growth or some indigenous threat developed to British interests, the arguments of British diplomats in Tehran were occasionally reinforced by the deployment in southern Persia or to neighbouring Iraq of troops from India. In 1947 Indian independence deprived Britain of that expedient (last exercised in 1946), but also reduced the importance, in British eyes, of excluding the Russians. Gaitskell, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Labour government, and Harold Macmillan, one of the leading figures in the Conservative opposition, both recorded at the time their readiness, if this was the only way to keep Persian oil in British ownership, to accept another partition of Persia between Britain and Russia.[6] Keeping the Russians out remained a desirable objective, but it was continued British ability to exploit Persian oil that now enjoyed the first priority.

Oil produced by a British company was important to the ailing British economy because it could earn dollars as well as saving them. Even George McGhee, the Assistant Secretary dealing with Near

Eastern and North African Affairs in the US State Department and a constant critic of British policy, told his American colleagues: 'We have to remember that we are dealing with Britain's most important economic asset abroad.'[7]

Strang,[8] the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office in London, sharpened, in a letter to the British Ambassador in Washington, the contrast between British and American attitudes: 'to the Americans, in the fight against Communism in Persia, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company is expendable. It is not possible for us to start from this premise'.[9]

It was no longer a question of Britain being, as Napoleon had complained, a nation of shopkeepers. Britain was in a bad way. Six years after the end of the Second World War tea, eggs, sugar, fats, butter, cheese, meat and bacon were all rationed, meat and cheese more severely than in 1945. Coal, the island's foundation, could be hard to get. Electricity cuts plunged the British into darkness and reductions in the train service forced many of them to travel standing in the crowded corridors of cold carriages. February brought dock strikes and the first three months of 1951 were the wettest since 1870. Economic recovery from the Second World War was an objective that still eluded Britain.

Part of the trouble stemmed from the outbreak of the Korean war in 1950. That raised the price and reduced the supply of the raw materials Britain needed to import. But the Government made matters worse by sending forces to support the Americans in Korea (Churchill was critical of the time it took to get them there – only five days for the navy, but, when the Americans wanted troops as well, two months for the army). What cost much more was a massive programme of rearmament: £4700 million over three years was the figure announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 15 February 1951. This entailed the diversion of industrial capacity from exports and soon led to a sterling crisis. The burden had to be lightened by Gaitskell's Conservative successor. Nor was Britain's military contribution insignificant. In 1951 Britain had more soldiers in Korea than any of the allies except the United States and South Korea.

In 1951 the British Government wanted Britain to remain a world power and to become a fairer society. Both objectives depended on, yet operated against, a third: the restoration of the war-crippled British economy. We can now clearly see that three horses were too many to ride at once. It was less obvious then.

The British people and their rulers were still feeling the strain of

their wartime exertions, but they were also still a little dazzled by their own wartime achievements. It seemed quite natural to retain responsibility for the defence of two dozen colonies and protectorates east of Suez while deploying important forces in Germany and detachments in the Caribbean and Mediterranean. In Korea and Malaya British forces were actually fighting. To support this remarkable over-extension, taxation took 38 per cent of the gross national product, nearly twice as much as in 1938. The standard rate of income tax was nine shillings and sixpence in the pound: 47 per cent. Conscription, once anathema in peacetime, imposed two years' service on the young and furnished half the strength of the British Army, which had more soldiers in 1951 than the total manpower of the British armed forces in 1988.

The price of all these commitments and men at arms, no less than the new social services and the National Health Service, was paid in the austerity of ordinary existence. Six years after the end of the Second World War the victorious British trudged home to their rationed meals through the unrepaired ruins of German bombing. John Montgomery called them a 'tired, war-weary population which still looked back at the 1939–45 years.'[10] Only 5 per cent of them could even watch television (750 000 licence-holders).

Their leaders, too, were a little tired. The average age of the Cabinet was 60; some were in poor health and the initial zest had gone. The era of reform launched by the 1945 Labour Government had petered out even before the General Election of 1950, which cut the government's once-handsome majority to single figures. Now their uncongenial task was the administration of austerity and rearmament, a policy that prompted the resignation, in April 1951, of Aneurin Bevan,[11] the hero of the Left, together with that of Harold Wilson,[12] a future Prime Minister and already an obviously coming man. Of the older generation Ernest Bevin died in April 1951[13] and ill-health had driven Stafford Cripps into premature retirement.[14] The Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, was in hospital. Herbert Morrison, the newly-appointed Foreign Secretary, was one of those who had spent a decade in office and experienced serious illness. In Attlee's absence, Morrison had to preside over Cabinet meetings, but his biographers would later comment: 'his appetite for work was declining and he was simply getting more and more exhausted . . .'.[15]

Britain's rulers might be tired and their economic problems daunting, but the people were remarkably docile. They accepted conscription and put up with austerity. Six years after the war had ended they

continued to queue for all their needs and to carry identity cards. Terrorism was unknown, Ulster quiet, the pound worth twelve times its present value, the crime figures a fifth of those for 1987 and unemployment a tenth. The experience of war might have made the British socially less deferential, but it had increased their cohesion and their sense of duty. What a government could demand of them in 1951 should not be judged by later standards, when shared austerity had been replaced by an affluence so uneven that it was divisive, when discipline had yielded to laissez faire and disorder.

Persia, too, would greatly change in the four decades after 1951, but in an opposite sense. The fanatical theocracy instituted in 1979 and the sacrificial obedience of the people in war against Iraq had no counterparts in 1951. Instead there was a turbulent nationalism which successive Prime Ministers tried to exploit but soon failed to control. Authority was supposed to emanate from the Majlis or parliament, but the squabbling parties and their riotous supporters in the street found it easier to coalesce in obstruction than in support of any constructive programme. The Shah, later so energetic and domineering, was described in a State Department memorandum of 1950 as 'an earnest young man full of good intentions [who] cannot make up his mind whether he should reign or rule and consequently does neither'.[16]

In April 1951 the Shah reluctantly reached a decision he would subsequently regret. He appointed as Prime Minister the major Persian actor in the ensuing drama, Dr Mohammad Mossadegh,[17] an elderly and eccentric invalid long active in Persian politics. According to the British Ambassador,

> He is obsessed by a single idea, the nationalization of oil and the elimination of what he considers the maleficent influence of the Oil Company from Persia.[18]

The Shah was later even more critical:

> You will seldom come across a more quixotic, whimsical and diabolical character in the history, not only of Iran, but of the world than Mossadeq, a man who nearly made my country bankrupt and almost ended the dynasty founded by my father.[19]

In the early seventies, when they were spoken, the words 'the dynasty founded by my father' had a touch of tinsel grandeur soon to be shrivelled by the Islamic Revolution.

Nationalism was the motive force on most sides of the ensuing

dispute, even if Britons and Persians differed among themselves as well as with each other on the choice of policies to promote their respective national interests or aspirations. In the background there moved actors with wider ambitions. Ever since 1946, when the Soviet Union had aroused anxiety in Washington by apparent reluctance to end their wartime occupation of the Persian province of Azerbaijan and by their support for the Communist-inclined Tudeh party, the United States Government had tended to regard Persia as a bone of cold war contention. Britain was safely in the American camp: Persia had to be wooed. To Mossadegh the Americans reacted as they would later react to President Sukarno of Indonesia.

> America at first thought that Mossadegh was anti-Communist. Mossadegh used to boast that the US supported his régime. He used to warn the US that unless it aided and supported him, Iran might fall to the Communists.

The Shah did not like Mossadegh, but, when he expressed that opinion, the Shah was a valued ally of the United States and could, in any case, claim to know what he was talking about.[20]

The overriding preoccupation of the United States with their cold war against Communism was a relatively new phenomenon in 1951 and it would attain greater intensity in later years. Nevertheless, Sanghvi, a particularly eulogistic biographer of the Shah, hit one nail firmly on the head: 'Throughout this period the Truman Administration was more concerned with the rise of communism in Iran than with British interests.'[21]

The signature of the North Atlantic Treaty on 4 April 1949 might have inaugurated a new era in the foreign policy of the United States, but Americans had not forgotten the warnings of their founding fathers against 'entangling alliances'. The treaty itself only obliged the United States to assist an ally suffering armed attack in the treaty area (which did *not* extend to Persia) but a further restriction was silently understood in Washington. Allies could expect assistance only against attack by Communists. In any other contingency American statesmen were free to prefer the role of arbiter.

On 16 March 1951, for instance, what worried the Central Intelligence Agency was that 'the situation may be aggravated and the crisis prolonged by an unyielding attitude on the part of the British'.[22] On 14 May McGhee told representatives of American oil companies (whom he had invited to a meeting in the State Department):

> 'our objectives in order of importance were to maintain peace, to keep Iran on the side of the West, to maintain the flow of oil, and to protect concession rights in Iran and other parts of the world. Threatening Iran', he explained, 'could result in a break with the West.'[23]

Britain, in other words, was on her own. In 1940 isolation had been a challenge, almost a tonic. In 1951, after ten years of Anglo-American partnership, the wind that blew from Washington was felt as chilling. Disappointment, even surprise, could still be aroused in London when the 'special relationship' came under strain, but it had happened more than once since 1945. There had been the abrupt ending of Lend-Lease, the crippling conditions of the American loan, the severance of nuclear relations, the bitter dispute over Palestine and the birth of Israel. Gratitude for past American help made the British slow to realise that it would only continue if British policy commanded American approval.

In the Persian oil dispute the different interests and priorities of the United States were not the only obstacles British Ministers had to overcome in their efforts to enlist American sympathy and support. There were also American prejudices. In Washington the Attlee Government were doubly suspect: as imperialists and as socialists. In London ideology clashed with perceptions of the national interest. Years later, Attlee, remembering 'with advantages' the time of his premiership, declared: 'It was impossible for us as a Labour Government to say that you couldn't nationalise the oil industry.'

Perhaps it was difficult, but words were found at the time, whether for the Americans or the Persians, for Parliament or for the International Court of Justice.

And Attlee's memory betrayed him when he added:

> it was quite out of the question to think you could revert to the old form and act as a big nation throwing in its force to defend its commercial interests.[24]

In historical fact Ministers began thinking the unthinkable in April and did not order the dispersal of the forces assembled for Buccaneer until 4 October 1951. They were not, as Churchill charged at the time, 'only bluffing'. The charitably disposed might argue that they were keeping their options open. Harsher critics might conclude that Ministers could not make up their minds. Nothing in the records of

ministerial meetings suggests a deliberate, conscious bluff. Why they deployed, in Churchill's words: 'all their cruisers, frigates, destroyers, tank-landing craft, troops and paratroops'[25] is something we must examine. In doing so we shall unfortunately encounter little evidence that the conduct of Attlee's Ministers exemplified his admirable precept:

> It is essential for the Cabinet to move on, leaving in its wake a trail of clear, crisp, uncompromising decisions.[26]

Naturally Persia was neither the only preoccupation of Ministers nor usually their first priority. Their party's precarious ascendancy in the House of Commons; the fighting in Korea, where the Chinese launched a major offensive on 22 April; the growing strains on the British economy: these were only a few of the problems crowding the agenda. And the Foreign Secretary's attention, so his critics argued, was unduly pre-empted by the Festival of Britain, a splendid and spectacular echo of the Great Exhibition of 1851. King George VI opened it on 3 May 1951, when Herbert Morrison, who had been much involved in the preparations before he succeeded Bevin as Foreign Secretary on 9 March, listened to 'Land of Hope and Glory' in the new Festival Hall.[27] His fascination with this phoenix rising from the rubble, which 'entranced' Harold Nicolson,[28] as well as other diarists, and, before it closed in October, had attracted $8\frac{1}{2}$ million visitors, was understandable. 'For two or three evenings the police had to close the streets round the Embankment to traffic' because of the crowds that gathered to gaze across the river at the glittering pavilions on the South Bank.[29]

It was Attlee (now out of hospital) who decided, on that same third of May, to appoint a small group of Ministers – himself, the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Fuel and Power – to watch the situation in Persia and, when necessary, to authorise urgent action.[30] He was specifically responding to the appointment of Mohammad Mossadegh as Persian Prime Minister and to the passage by the Majlis of a bill to nationalise the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, but challenge and response were only the latest fruits of a crisis that had been ripening for years and erupting for weeks.

2 Oil

All through 1912 and 1913 our efforts were unceasing . . . finally we found our way to the Anglo-Persian Oil agreement and contract, which for an initial investment of two millions of public money . . . has not only secured to the Navy a very substantial proportion of its oil, but . . . very considerable economies . . . in the purchase price of Admiralty oil.

Winston Churchill[1]

Military intervention is our theme, but the oil dispute was the trigger and must be briefly explained. A concession to drill for oil in Persia was granted in 1901 to William Knox d'Arcy, an Englishman who had made a fortune in Australia. In 1905, when the drillers he sent to Persia had spent much of his money and found little oil, he joined forces with a British concern, the Burmah Oil Company. They were already supplying some oil to the British navy, then mainly coal-burning. In 1908 serious oil was struck and in 1909 the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was founded. By 1913 a pipeline carried some 30 000 gallons a day to the small refinery that had just been built on the hitherto desert island of Abadan. The wells were in the hills of south-western Persia and the island of Abadan lay on the Persian side of the estuary dividing Persia from Iraq: the Shatt al Arab.

It was in 1912 that Persian oil began to acquire for Britain an importance that was more than commercial. Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, was presiding over the construction of fast new warships: battleships, cruisers, destroyers and submarines, all of them oil-burning. The House of Commons approved in May 1914 the bill he introduced to sanction the acquisition by the British Government of a majority shareholding in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company: a position of even greater dominance than Disraeli had achieved in 1875 by his famous purchase of the Egyptian stake in the Suez Canal Company. Both these investments were undertaken for strategic reasons, both proved commercially most remunerative and both engendered, long afterwards, a deplorable crisis.

Some problems were foreseeable. The exploitation by one country of the natural resources of another tends to create a conflict, not only of interest, but of sentiment. It had happened with gold in South

Africa, fruit in Central America, fish in a dozen seas. But oil was particularly troublesome. In the early part of the century oil became unexpectedly important to the industrialised countries, who alone had the advanced technology needed to find, extract, refine and market petroleum. Few of these countries (the United States and Russia being notable exceptions) had then discovered any oil within their own borders. Most deposits seemed to be located in countries lacking either the skills or the resources to exploit them. So Europeans and Americans prospected overseas for oil and, if they found it, sought the consent of the local ruler for its extraction.

In the early years such consent was often freely and even cheaply granted. As the oil industry grew and landlords realised what vast profits were being made from the oil beneath their land, they came to regret the naivety of their original bargain and asked for more. By and large they got it, though seldom as soon or as much as they wanted. In 1933, for instance, the then Shah of Iran denounced the existing oil concession in order to extract better terms from the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

Repeated calls for the renegotiation of oil concessions tended to make both parties feel unfairly exploited and other factors sharpened their resentment. Oil was often found in wild country and in South West Persia the largely desert terrain could be as harshly uncongenial as the climate. When Harold Macmillan, who was to become British Prime Minister ten years later, visited Abadan in 1947, he described it as:

> a bit of Hell pushed up . . . no vegetation of any kind, no greenery, no water, nothing – but these eternal hills . . . one horrid desert knoll after another. . . .[2]

And that was after nearly forty years of expensive development by the Company: roads, houses, tank farms, schools, clubs and hospitals. In 1909, when the pioneers arrived, 'there was not a stone the size of a man's hand' and Abadan was a flat desert island of 'sunshine, mud and flies'.[3] The Company believed they had made this desert 'rejoice and blossom as the rose' and were now entitled to the fruits of their labours. The Iranians remembered that the desert was theirs.

More personal feelings were no less important. Men able and willing to work in such conditions – the mean daily temperature from May to September was over 35° C – had to be a tough lot and, if they had the special skills required, to be rewarded accordingly. Initially it

was inevitable that the skilled jobs, the high salaries and – once they could be provided – such amenities as air-conditioned accommodation went to the imported British, European and American oilmen. They had the scarce talents and it was they who had to be specially tempted to do their often hazardous work in a strange country and a harsh, unhealthy environment.

Labourers, servants, guards and other subordinate staff could be, and usually were, recruited locally. Their pay and working conditions were better than they would have been in Persian employment, but did not bear comparison with those of the imported oilmen. The Company saw themselves as paying the rate appropriate to the job and to the skills needed by the worker who did it. To the Persians it often seemed that the rewarding jobs were reserved for the foreigners. The first strikes came as early as 1920.[4] Wages and other conditions were improved, but Persians continued to complain of discrimination, not only in recruitment to the better-paid jobs, but also in access to the wide range of amenities provided at Abadan. In 1951 the Company had 70 000 Persian employees and only 4500 British.[5] Unfortunately the more equal treatment sought by the former would have been most unwelcome to the latter. In those days expatriate Britons expected, and usually got, privileged treatment from British employers.

Resentment is easily aroused in any organisation which draws its officers from one nation or race and its other ranks from another. This was nevertheless a familiar pattern throughout what was not then called the Third World and in many different occupations. The old British-officered Indian Army, profiting by the bitter experience of the Mutiny, worked hard and on the whole successfully to overcome any sense of alienation by the deliberate creation of a climate of paternalism. Many factors made this a difficult expedient for a commercial concern to adopt. Other Western employers had different methods – purchasing the goodwill of local leaders, for instance, or opening up career opportunities for local talent. Sometimes no cosmetic could disguise the open wound of racial inequality or withstand the emotional force of indigenous nationalism. Then, as occurred in several continents during the late forties and early fifties, there was trouble.

This book is about Plan Buccaneer, but the degree of competence and judgement displayed by the Oil Company in the conduct of their relations with Persians, whether these were influential politicians and officials or the Company's own employees, was a factor most material

in the origins of the crisis to which Buccaneer was a potential response. On the whole the Company has been sternly judged. One of their critics accused them of providing 'a lesson in how not to conduct one's dealings with people of other lands, different backgrounds, strange cultures'.[6] Acheson, the US Secretary of State at the time, complained of 'the unusual and persistent stupidity of the company'.[7]

The Company faced two distinct problems on the human, as opposed to the technical, level. They needed the obedience and willing cooperation of their own Persian work force, which had been disturbed since the war by agitation not merely from nationalists, but also from Communist sympathisers in the Tudeh party. This ferment only heightened the importance of the Company's second requirement: the understanding and support of the Persian authorities. On both fronts it sometimes seemed that the Company responded to pressure without trying to anticipate it by initiatives of their own.

Their critics also argued that the Company did not realise how greatly Persian expectations had been increased by the general upsurge of nationalism in the aftermath of the Second World War. One American writer complained of 'their antiquarian conviction that the Iran of 1951 differed little from the Iran of 1901'.[8] That was an exaggeration, even if the cantonment life led by most of the expatriate staff at Abadan did rather insulate them from the pulsating currents of Persian politics. What could be said was that the Company had yet to pick up the faster rhythms of the postwar years. They responded too slowly and offered, as did so many others – the French in Indochina, for instance, or the Dutch in Indonesia – too little, too late.[9]

That was especially true of the Supplemental Oil Agreement they and the Persians signed in the summer of 1949. If the Company had not haggled so long, there might have been time to get the agreement ratified before the dissolution, ten days later, of the Majlis. If the concessions the Agreement embodied had been more generous, the Persian Government might have been quicker to submit it to the next Majlis. As it was, the news that the American oil company Aramco were negotiating an agreement with Saudi Arabia for a fifty/fifty split of profits leaked out before the Oil Committee of the Majlis had completed their report. The Supplemental Agreement, its lesser concessions a little obscured by the thickets of legal jargon, ceased to be politically viable.

One explanation was that offered at the time by Sir Francis

Shepherd, the British Ambassador at Tehran in his annual report for 1950.

> Persian dissatisfaction with the provisions of the Supplemental Agreement, which very few of them understood, was concentrated on the large amounts of income tax paid by the Company to the British Government and partly on a suspicion that large quantities of oil were sold to the British Admiralty at unremunerative prices, thus diminishing the sums due to Persia from the Company's profits.[10]

There was some truth in the Persian complaint. Scholars have argued that, from 1932 to 1950, British governments received twice as much from the Company as did the Persian. For this the British Treasury were partly to blame. They had refused (in spite of representations to the Chancellor, Sir Stafford Cripps, in 1948 both by the Company and by Anthony Eden on his return from a visit to Persia) to exempt the Persian Government from the impact of British restrictions on the dividends the Company could pay. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company[11] was thus much less favourably placed than Aramco.

> American tax laws made it relatively painless for American companies to come to an agreement – it cost them nothing. British tax law had no such provision and any settlement would have had to come out of company profits.[12]

Perhaps the root of the trouble lay in the Company's failure to realise that timing was critical: the agreement reached in 1949 had to be ratified promptly if it was to be ratified at all. There was a precedent. In August 1919 an Anglo-Persian Treaty had been signed. If it had at once been presented for ratification, the Majlis would probably have accepted it. Unfortunately this was not stipulated by the British; the months passed, the political balance altered and, in 1921, the still-unratified agreement was annulled.[13]

If the lesson had not been learned, if later experience in other countries had not been assimilated, part of the blame must rest with the reluctance of the British Government to interfere in what was considered the Company's business. This disinclination, which had become traditional among British officials, even survived the advent of a Labour government committed to the nationalisation of important British industries. The majority shareholding acquired by Churchill 37 years earlier was not employed to influence or modify the

policy of the Oil Company. Even the two seats at the Government's disposal on the Company's board of directors continued to be treated as honourable sinecures with which to reward past service of distinction. In 1951 the government directors were Field-Marshal Lord Alanbrooke and Sir Thomas Gardiner (formerly of the Post Office).

This was a curious abdication, by a socialist government, of an authority which, legally, they already possessed. Even in Washington, that shrine of capitalism, the State Department deplored British laissez faire. Rountree (Director of the Office of Greek, Turkish and Iranian Affairs) wrote on 20 December 1950:

> the AIOC dominates British policy in Iran and anything we can do to induce the British Government to escape from its bondage is worth trying.[14]

There were also other causes of conflict. Perhaps the most important was the choice made by the new Majlis, when this assembled in 1950, of the leader of the National Front, Mohammad Mossadegh, as Chairman of its Oil Committee. He was at the time and, for students of the period, he still remains a controversial figure. In 1950 he was 68 years old,

> a rich, reactionary, feudal-minded Persian inspired by a fanatical hatred of the British and a desire to expel them and all their works from the country regardless of the cost.[15]

His career had been turbulent. Though first elected to the Majlis in 1915, he had incurred the displeasure of the previous Shah in 1928 and had been compelled to retire to private life. After the Shah, who had offended British and Russians alike by his refusal to expel the many well-placed Germans in Iran, had been persuaded to abdicate when British and Russian forces invaded Persia in 1941, Mossadegh returned to the Majlis in 1944 and soon established himself as the leading representative of Persian nationalism.

His American admirer, Richard Cottam, pitched his claims high:

> for the first time in Iran's very long history a national leader had appeared who enjoyed the respect, devotion and loyalty of the vast majority of politically aware Iranians.[16]

At the time he evoked, even in Iran but especially abroad, conflicting reactions. In the State Department, Charles Bohlen thought only Mossadegh could save Persia from Communism.[17] In Tehran the British Ambassador described him as 'cunning and slippery and

completely unscrupulous . . . impervious to argument'.[18] The press emphasised his tendency to burst into conspicuous tears, to faint in public and to give interviews in his pyjamas. In his memoirs Acheson called him 'a great actor and a great gambler'. McGhee praised him as 'honest' and, synonymously, 'anti-Russian'.[19] The new Shah considered him 'a completely irrational being'[20] and, with some outside assistance, managed to dismiss and imprison him in 1953. Mossadegh died in 1967, and in 1979, when the Shah's reign had crumbled, a million people are said to have visited his grave, but

> since the rise to total power of the religious hierarchy in Iran, Mossadegh has yet again been presented in a harsh and unsympathetic light.[21]

Nobody who met him doubted that Mohammad Mossadegh was a fervent nationalist. But was he open to rational argument, influenced by economic considerations, willing to consider any kind of compromise? In 1951 the Americans thought he was and blamed the British for failing to reach an agreement. In 1953, when Eisenhower had replaced Truman and Dulles had succeeded Acheson, the Americans took a different view and helped to organise the overthrow of Mossadegh.

Two scholarly judgements, both American, are worth bearing in mind when considering later aspects of the oily background to Buccaneer. William Roger Louis, though shaky on military matters, is the best diplomatic historian attracted by the events of 1951. He quotes a minute by Leslie Fry, then Assistant in the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office:

> In Persia we face an emotional nationalism which is not primarily interested in the financial aspects of the 'nationalisation' that is sought.

Louis thought 'it would be difficult to find a statement that more succinctly or accurately expressed the British perception of the problem'.[22]

Perhaps his praise was over-qualified. Neither Fry nor the British were alone in this particular perception. Another American writer, and one very sympathetic towards Mossadegh, echoed and amplified Fry.

> 'Mossadeq and his advisors were overwhelmingly preoccupied in the negative battle against Britain . . . economic aspects were not

> of prime importance. Their overriding objective was to make sure that Iran's oil industry could never be used as a weapon to maintain political control in the hands of the British-backed oligarchy.

Homa Katouzian, the editor of Mossadegh's memoirs, confirms this interpretation of the essentially political purpose of his campaign for nationalisation: as long as foreign concessions existed, Iranian independence was incomplete.[23]

Mossadegh endorsed this view of his priorities in the statement he made at his trial:

> the government was able to survive without any income from oil. I do not want to say that the oil revenues will not considerably change the economic situation of the Iranian people, but that these revenues are only useful to us if we do not have to give up our struggle for freedom. We cannot trade this freedom against oil revenues.

His biographer, Farhad Diba, uses similar language about the negotiations attempted by the Company in June 1951.

> the result of the mission was not only complete failure, but an affront to the Iranians, who were seeking a recognition of their sovereignty and a reaffirmation of their self-respect, whereas they received an offer of money.[24]

To be dogmatic about the intentions of Mohammad Mossadegh would naturally be absurd. Even his fellow-countryman, the Shah, found him 'difficult to judge as a politician because of the perpetual contradictions between his words and his acts'.[25] But the British Embassy did have better grounds than the Americans would then admit for regarding Mossadegh as averse to compromise. The view put forward in the spring of 1951 by Norman Hillier-Fry, then acting as Oriental Counsellor in the British Embassy at Tehran, would be tacitly adopted by both governments two years later: 'we should never reach agreement with Musaddiq since his mind worked in a completely different way . . . we should therefore work to replace him.'[26]

If the British always blamed Mossadegh for the intractability of the oil dispute, the American view in 1951 was different. Leaving to a later chapter the role of ministers, officials and tycoons in London – who also figured in the American demonology – the preferred scapegoat was the British Ambassador in Tehran, Sir Francis Shepherd. A

member of the old General Consular Service (a background then deplored by snobs and specialists) he had been posted to many countries and various continents before making the break through to higher responsibilities in his fifties: Political Representative to Finland after that country had agreed an armistice with the Soviet Union in 1944; Consul General in Batavia (now Djakarta) while the Dutch were still struggling to retain their grasp on Indonesia; promoted to Ambassador at Tehran in 1950. He was then 57 years old.

Shepherd was very much of the old school: drily intelligent, disciplined and diligent. He was unmarried and his sister acted as his hostess, as she had in Batavia. There they had kept cats, but in Tehran dachshunds. Christopher Gandy, his First Secretary, described him as 'admirably unflappable with a good sense of humour'[27] and the otherwise critical Louis concedes that

> During the crisis of evacuation Sir Francis Shepherd demonstrated great personal courage by having his chauffeur drive him through the streets of Tehran in an open car flying the Union Jack.[28]

Americans were usually less flattering. Acheson (who never met him) called Shepherd an 'unimaginative disciple of the "whiff of grapeshot" school of diplomacy'.[29] Acheson may have derived this impression from McGhee, though it is not to be found in the published memoirs of McGhee, which were written after he had consulted the British records. On the other hand, in the words of his official biographer, 'Acheson's confidence in the accuracy of his own view of the world was so supreme that he could dismiss alternative views as naive or irresponsible'.[30]

Dean Acheson (1893–1971) was the son of a bishop and by profession a lawyer. He first joined the State Department (as a political appointee) in 1941 and became Secretary of State in 1948. He had many friends and admirers but, in the United States, even more enemies.

Richard Stokes, the Cabinet Minister whom Attlee later sent to Tehran and who got nowhere with Mossadegh, reported sourly 'I have no respect for Shepherd's judgment'. Lance Pyman, his Oriental Counsellor, was more charitable:

> I think Shepherd's basic attitude was that he had to carry out his instructions to the best of his understanding of them and that he had to operate strictly within the limits of his instructions.[32]

Pyman agreed that Shepherd was unimaginative, but so, he believed, were all the British participants.

It is a pity that Diba, in his biography of the Persian statesman, was unable to quote any direct comment by Mossadegh on Shepherd. Nor is Shepherd mentioned in the admittedly rather fragmentary memoirs of Mossadegh himself.[33] It would have made an interesting pendant to the various portraits which Shepherd, who had a sharp pen, etched into his reports. On 6 May 1951, for instance, having called Mossadegh 'cunning and slippery and completely unscrupulous', Shepherd continued:

> He is rather tall but has short and bandy legs, so that he shambles like a bear, a trait which is generally associated with considerable physical strength. He looks rather like a cab horse and is slightly deaf so that he listens with a strained but otherwise expressionless look on his face. He conducts the conversation at a distance of about six inches at which range he diffuses a slight reek of opium.[34]

Shepherd has been much criticised for his assessment of Mossadegh. The American historian, William Roger Louis, for instance, complains that Shepherd misled the British Government by describing Mossadegh as a 'lunatic'. Such an opinion would not have been entirely surprising. Loy Henderson, the US Ambassador in Tehran in 1953, called Mossadegh 'a madman who would ally himself with the Russians'.[35] What is odd is that Louis, though bringing this accusation against Shepherd eight times in 40 pages, nowhere quotes any document in which Shepherd expressed this view. The nearest he gets is a letter in which Shepherd wrote 'the *situation in Persia* . . . has been on the whole a good deal more lunatic than ever'.[36] This is not merely quite different from calling Mossadegh a lunatic, but is a comment easily matched elsewhere. Richard W. Cottam, for instance, an American admirer of Mossadegh, remarked:

> A foreign visitor viewing Iran for the first time and attempting to understand its politics would have been astonished to learn in the press of 1951–52 that all Iran's politicians, without exception, were British agents.[37]

Whether or not Shepherd actually described Mossadegh as a lunatic, the idea was certainly current at the time. On 25 June 1951, for instance, Kit Steel, Minister and at the time Chargé d'Affaires at Washington, referred to Mossadegh as 'an elderly lunatic' when making representations to the US Secretary of State. Neither Ache-

son nor McGhee, who was also present, seem to have demurred, though Acheson later became quite an admirer of the eccentric Persian.

The main confrontation occurred when Mossadegh was Prime Minister, a period reserved for a later chapter, but the foundation was laid in December 1950. On the 12th the Oil Committee of which Mossadegh was the Chairman reported to the Majlis that the Supplemental Agreement signed on 17 July 1949 was unacceptable because it did not safeguard Persian rights and interests. In the streets the supporters of Mossadegh organised demonstrations in his support. On the 26th the Persian Government withdrew their proposal for ratification and, so Shepherd reported:

> the month thus closed on a very confused situation with the National Front in a dominant position in the Majlis and the Government undecided.[38]

For Mossadegh opportunity had knocked. Other Persians – the Shah, for instance, or his Prime Minister, General Razmara – might want to squeeze more money out of the Company for the Seven Year Plan or simply to match the terms Saudi Arabia had secured from Aramco. Mossadegh was not interested in half-measures. As he later wrote:

> the struggle of the Iranian people was not for money, but for the acquisition of total freedom and independence.[39]

When the Majlis approved, on 11 January 1951, the report of the Oil Committee and called for the study and submission of alternative proposals, Mossadegh already knew what he would recommend.

3 Thunder in the Air

There is so much dynamite in this.
Ernest Bevin

With those words the British Foreign Secretary approved, on 19 January 1951, a submission from the Head of the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office. Furlonge had recommended that the Permanent Under-Secretary, Sir William Strang, should discuss with the Chairman of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, Sir William Fraser, the ominous implications of the decision by the Persian Prime Minister, General Razmara, to withdraw from the Majlis the still-unratified Supplemental Oil Agreement. Bevin added that a paper on the dispute should be prepared for the Cabinet.[1]

If Bevin had been fitter, he might himself have tackled Fraser, a formidable Scot who seldom concealed his contempt for officials. Unfortunately Bevin's minute was almost his last word in the Persian oil dispute. For years his health had been precarious – in 1943 his doctor said Bevin did not have 'a sound organ in his body, apart from his feet'[2] – and now it was collapsing. On 22 January 1951 he went down with pneumonia.[3] In the next six weeks he was mostly away and it was the Minister of State, Kenneth Younger, who had to head the Foreign Office and who circulated to the Cabinet, on 22 January and on 8 February, memoranda about the Persian oil dispute.[4] The official machinery continued to revolve, but there was no longer a powerful Secretary of State to give it the impetus needed to overcome the instinctive caution of the Treasury, Ministry of Fuel and Power and Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. It was Shepherd who tried to communicate a sense of urgency in his telegrams from Tehran.

On 31 December 1950, for instance, he pronounced the Supplemental Agreement to be dead and suggested the Company should, as the Shah and his Prime Minister had urged, offer to pay the royalties due under that agreement pending the discussion of a new one. On 11 January 1951 he recommended payment of the money which would have been due to the Persian Government but for the limitation on dividends introduced by the British Chancellor of the Exchequer. On 16 January he telegraphed that time was running out

and recommended the application of very strong pressure, at the highest level, on the Company.[5]

Strang to Fraser was almost the highest level, but the Foreign Office were not yet convinced of the need for 'very strong pressure'. The Company's labour adviser, Sir Frederick Leggett, wanted to go even further than Shepherd. On 6 February he insisted to Fry, the Assistant in Eastern Department, that more money would not be enough. He told Fry:

> What was required was a fresh start, on the basis of equal partnership. Unless the Company realised that . . . they might sooner or later find themselves without any installations in Persia.[6]

If Leggettt had been able to put these arguments to Bevin, who knew him well, they might have made more impression than they did on the various under-secretaries who saw them. The lesson of Indian independence – the importance in Asia of the big emotional gesture – had yet to be absorbed in London, where ministers and officials preferred to split legal hairs. The idea of nationalisation stuck in their throats, even though 15 February 1951 was the vesting date for the nationalisation of iron and steel in Britain, the latest and most controversial stage of a wide-ranging programme of nationalisation begun in 1945.

Shepherd's representations did evoke some response. On 1 February he reported that Northcroft, the AIOC representative in Tehran, had pleased Razmara (the Prime Minister) by promising advances of £25 million by instalments. The first payment of £5 million was actually made on 8 February.[7] Shepherd too realised that money alone would not quieten the Persian clamour for nationalisation and even suggested a compromise formula for use with the Persians, but on 1 March the Foreign Office insisted that any formula must declare nationalisation to be illegal. This was also the view of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, who wrote to the Foreign Office on the following day declaring 'there could be no compromise' on nationalisation 'without endangering the industry itself'.[8]

Even the Persian Prime Minister, General Razmara, told the Majlis on 3 March that the panel of experts he had appointed to study the question believed that the nationalisation of the Company's operations in Persia would be impracticable. On 5 March he went even further, telling a press conference that it would actually be treasonable to ignore the views of the panel of experts by taking

precipitate action. On 7 March Razmara was murdered on his way to the mosque, apparently by a religious fanatic. Shepherd thought the crime had been prompted by the dead man's opposition to the 'growing movement in favour of nationalisation of oil'.[9]

The death of Razmara, of whom the Foreign Office had said on 22 January, 'no better Prime Minister than Razmara is in view and . . . he should therefore be supported'[10] was generally regarded as the turning point of the crisis. No other Prime Minister had been prepared even to submit the Supplemental Agreement to the Majlis. Any successor would be less able or willing to assist the Company. The Central Intelligence Agency were over-optimistic in expecting, on 16 March, responsible government officials, led by the Shah . . . to make a real effort to find a face-saving settlement with the AIOC.[11]

Two days later McGhee, then visiting Tehran, was received by the Shah and found him to be 'a dejected, almost a broken man . . . in shock from the assassination of his Prime Minister, and the rise to power of the National Front'.[12]

No responsible or imperial advice was forthcoming to dissuade the Oil Committee from adopting on 8 March a resolution advocating the principle of nationalising the oil industry. Worse still, as Shepherd reported, his own note of the 14th deprecating nationalisation and confirming the Company's readiness to negotiate a fifty-fifty profit-sharing agreement was overtaken on the 15th, when the full Majlis endorsed the views of their Oil Committee 'in an atmosphere of terror and hysteria'.[13]

On the same day, in London, a note on current developments in the Persian oil crisis was submitted to the new Foreign Secretary, Herbert Morrison. Most historians accept Friday 9 March, the date officially announced at the time, as inaugurating Morrison's term of office. In fact, Bevin was still in his room at the Foreign Office on Saturday 10 March,[14] although Attlee had indeed telephoned him the day before, in the middle of his 70th birthday party, to tell him he would have to go. The *New Statesman*, always the gadfly of Labour Ministers, chose the same day to declare 'that Britain should have no active Foreign Secretary in this crisis is a scandal'.

Herbert Morrison had been expected to arrive on Monday morning, 12 March, but caused some inconvenience by deciding at the last minute to come on the Sunday afternoon. He had the bad luck to succeed Ernest Bevin, who had been a popular and widely respected Foreign Secretary. Morrison was neither, but this might have been

less obvious if he had followed someone else: George Brown, for instance. Attlee, who reluctantly chose him for the job, later admitted:

> I think it was a bad mistake allowing Herbert to be Foreign Secretary. I didn't know he knew so little. I had no idea he was so ignorant.[15]

Ignorance was a surprising diagnosis. Other Foreign Secretaries have known little about foreign affairs when they first took office, but they soon learned. Dalton, who had vainly tried to dissuade Attlee from appointing Morrison, thought:

> He showed no aptitude at all for handling foreigners, or for showing conventional civilities or performing simple functions such as fall to all political leaders.[16]

Nevertheless, this was a job Morrison had wanted as early as 1945, had even intrigued to get. When he did, it turned out to be too demanding. His Private Secretary described him as 'appalled by the amount of work he was expected to do'.[17]

A different man might have been able to shed some of the load on to his officials, who had become thoroughly accustomed to lightening the burdens of his predecessor as Bevin's health went from bad to worse. Unfortunately Morrison, who had none of Bevin's warmth and self-confidence, never managed to show his staff a human face. He was as little disposed to rely on his subordinates as he was to admit his own failings. He preferred to depreciate the importance of tasks he was reluctant to perform. His nightly boxes were perfunctorily treated and his diplomatic invitations shirked.

There may even have been more cause for this neglect than his declining appetite for work. Morrison surprised the Swedish Ambassador by saying he would not attend a Four Power Foreign Ministers' meeting in Washington if this were to clash with the opening day of the Festival of Britain.[18] He shocked some members of the House of Commons by leaving Foreign Office questions to a junior minister while himself answering those concerned with the Festival of Britain. This had been his responsibility as Lord President of the Council, but should have been handed over when he became Foreign Secretary. That it was not, that Morrison could petulantly tell the House of Commons than he did not share Eden's 'superior view' of the Foreign Office, illustrates Morrison's personal priorities and helps to explain his failure to command the respect of his staff.[19]

Of course, he was 63, his wife was dying of cancer, he himself had

suffered a serious thrombosis in 1947 and neither his energy nor his enthusiasm were at their peak. Instead, his biographers tell us, he had become somewhat self-indulgent.

> The black Homburg hat, the developing taste for whisky, the fragrant cigar, meals at high quality restaurants, with the Caprice, the Ivy, Mon Plaisir and the Café Bleu among his favourites, all added a new flavour of the successful political tycoon.[20]

It is scarcely surprising that he wanted the swagger of being Foreign Secretary without the work. That was an understandable, even a natural preference, but Morrison had overlooked one serious snag. Ministers in charge of agriculture or labour or fuel and power seldom suffer from backseat driving unless something goes seriously wrong. But half of any Cabinet have views of their own on foreign affairs. Among Morrison's own colleagues, Dalton had once wanted the job and Bevan still did; James Griffiths, Shawcross and McNeil had been considered for it. To get his way a Foreign Secretary must be the master of his subject and enjoy the support of the Prime Minister. Morrison's lack of application deprived him of the first advantage and his past disloyalty to Attlee impaired the second. His proposals were sometimes overridden and the papers he had circulated sent back for revision or further explanation.

Even a popular Minister will suffer in the eyes of his officials if he cannot carry the Cabinet. But Morrison, who must once have had the successful politician's ability to attract sympathy and respect, could no longer, it seemed, be bothered to employ that talent outside the Labour Party and the little circle of his cronies. Acheson, acid as always, summed him up: 'There was nothing buoyant about Morrison. He could be counted on to deepen the gloom . . .'.[21]

Another unexpected aspect of Morrison's approach to his new duties was his apparent inclination to take as his model the most self-confident of his predecessors: Palmerston. Hägglöf says that Morrison, who was not a great reader, began by borrowing (to the grief of writers, Ministers seldom *buy* books) Guedalla's biography of Palmerston from the Foreign Office Library. Others prefer the story (also told of George Brown) that he wanted Palmerston's portrait in his room at the Foreign Office. He himself recorded in his memoirs: 'My own view was that there was much to be said in favour of sharp and forceful action.'[22] His colleague Dalton uncharitably explained that Morrison was over-compensating for his First World War record as a conscientious objector to military service.[23]

Be that as it may, Morrison declared his attitude as early as 15 March 1951, when he minuted the memorandum submitted to him on the Persian oil dispute:

> Continue to *consider* possible courses of action if necessary, not excluding military & naval protective movements, though this would need careful thought & Cab authority.[24]

This was a routine response. In 1946 Bevin had obtained Cabinet approval for sending an Indian brigade to Basra and a cruiser to Abadan, when a general strike paralysed oil production and threatened the safety of the Company's staff.[25]

On 18 March Shepherd – many writers have unfairly followed Acheson in choosing *him* as their scapegoat – told the Foreign Office that no agreement, even if with a well-disposed Persian Prime Minister, would be possible without conceding the principle of nationalisation. On 19 March another minute from Morrison remarked: 'A ship might be useful. I don't want a retreat.' The next day Strang held a large inter-departmental meeting attended by three senior officers from the Ministry of Defence.[26] It was Bowker, the Assistant Under-Secretary, who then approved, though Furlonge signed, the written request from the Foreign Office for the Chiefs of Staff to 'consider the use of actual force to prevent the Persian Government from seizing the oil installations' or to deal with local disturbances.[27]

It was in this frame of mind and against a background of discreet official discussion of a possible need to resort to force that Morrison took the chair at the regular weekly meeting of the Cabinet on 22 March. In the absence of Attlee, who had entered hospital the day before to have his duodenal ulcer treated, Morrison was the senior member of the government. Persia was not on the agenda.

The clouds were darkening and not only in Downing Street. On 17 March the illustrated magazine *Sphere* published photographs of the funeral of General Razmara and commented: 'with his death anything can happen in Persia'. The *New Statesman* suggested that 'Tehran might be the Sarajevo of the Third World War.' *Pravda* accused the United States of having instigated the murder of Razmara. Rioting in Tehran led to the proclamation of martial law on the 20th by the Persian Government. On the 26th this was extended, and Persian military reinforcements sent, to the oilfields, where a strike had begun on 21 March. The Company had ineptly chosen this moment of political tension to reduce the accommodation allowances paid to some of their Persian staff. At Abadan the refinery was

scarcely affected and, after a few arrests and a little shooting, the month ended in comparative, but illusory calm.[28]

Nevertheless, the alarming impact of Persian clamour for the nationalisation of a major British commercial enterprise had been aggravated by the emergence of at least a potential threat to British subjects. It was natural for Morrison to think of the Navy. British warships had patrolled the waters of the Persian Gulf for nearly two centuries. They had intercepted slavers, suppressed pirates, come to the aid of British ships and subjects, occasionally lent forcible support to the advice tendered by British political officers to the Arab rulers of the British Protected States of the Persian Gulf. HMS FLAMINGO even spent some time in 1950 visiting uninhabited islets and blowing up the concrete pylons on which brass plaques (obligingly fabricated by the American oil company Aramco in their workshops at Ras Tanura) asserted the disputed territorial claims of the King of Saudi Arabia.[29]

In 1951 the regular Gulf Squadron comprised three frigates and sometimes a couple of survey vessels. When the Commander-in-Chief East Indies paid his annual visit to the Gulf, he flew his flag in the cruiser MAURITIUS, but it was not normal practice to keep a cruiser in the Gulf, least of all during the hot weather from May to September. In April, when the situation at Abadan began to cause anxiety, there had to be a change of policy and this in turn led to the appointment as Commodore Second Class of the existing Senior Naval Officer Persian Gulf (SNOPG), Captain Arthur Hammond Wallis (1903–89).

In the early months of 1951, however, peace still prevailed at sea and His Majesty's ships continued their placid routine of showing a friendly flag. The captain of the frigate FLAMINGO exchanged official calls on 19 February with the commanding officer of the USS DUXBURY BAY. On 1 March he took FLAMINGO's football team to Shiraz to play a Persian team, while Persian visitors were welcomed on board at Bushire. On the 23rd it was the turn of the ship's hockey team to compete with the Iraqui army at Basra. Much fishing was done and a few ducks shot in the Shatt al Arab. Because the frigates had the Gulf as their regular station, they enjoyed more air-conditioning than was then available to most British warships and the health of officers and men did not suffer unduly from their prolonged exposure to the humid heat of the Gulf.[30]

If ships were required for more than simple policing, the Mediterranean Fleet still had cruisers, destroyers, and occasionally, in spite

of the demands of the Korean campaign, an aircraft carrier. The Fleet also had what was then a politically secure, user-friendly base at Malta, still a British colony. In Egypt the British army and air force were not so fortunate. Riots in 1946 had prompted a British withdrawal from Cairo and Alexandria to the Canal Zone, but had not appeased the smouldering resentment of Egyptian nationalists. As the Egyptian Prime Minister, Nokrashy Pasha, had explained in December 1945:

> the presence of foreign troops on our soil, even if stationed in a distant area, is wounding to the national dignity.[31]

The British had intended to withdraw even further, but their first choice – the British mandated territory of Palestine – was soon abandoned. The fire of Jewish terrorism would have been worse than the frying-pan of Egyptian riots. While considering all through 1951 such alternatives as Cyprus, Libya and Malta, the British remained in Egypt for the time being. GHQ Middle East Land Forces was established in a new base built by prisoners of war at Fayid on the western shore of the Great Bitter Lakes. The RAF Middle East HQ was some 20 miles north at Ismailia and the neighbouring airfield of Abu Sueir. There were guards for the two headquarters, for the many installations and for the stores accumulated in the Canal Zone for use in the event of a Russian invasion of the Middle East. All told, the soldiers and airmen under British command in Egypt amounted to some 38 000.[32] But these were more tail than teeth: the field force available in Egypt usually comprised only two depleted brigades. Optimistically regarded as a regional reserve, these troops had themselves to be reinforced from Britain, Cyprus and Libya when renewed rioting erupted in Egypt during the second half of October 1951.

In Aden, Cyprus, Iraq and Libya were other British bases and forces, usually of brigade strength, in Cyprus and Libya. Sometimes there was a battalion in Akaba (which was considered for use in Buccaneer) at the southernmost tip of Jordan. Even if these soldiers could be spared from their local tasks or their potential duties in hypothetical war, there might be political objections – from the rulers of Iraq and Libya, for instance – to using them against Persia. As a skeleton deployment that could be reinforced to defend the Middle East in general war, the stationing of British forces made sense of a kind. Individual units or formations could also be said to have a potential part to play in the maintenance of internal security in the

country where they were based. But it was becoming harder to muster enough political sympathy to allow British forces stationed in one country of the region to intervene in support of British interests in another country. Unlike the navy, the British army in the Middle East could not sally out across seas or frontiers with complete confidence that they would have a secure base to return to.

Nor were growing nationalism and an emerging sense of solidarity among Arabs or Moslems the only constraints on the deployment of British forces from their Middle Eastern bases. Group-Captain Morris, then a junior officer, visited almost every RAF station in the Middle East during the period 1947–51 and remembers the 'very run-down state of the RAF'. Korea and Malaya had drained away many aircraft and there was a distinct shortage of troop carriers.[33] The massive programme of rearmament begun in 1950 had not yet had time to refresh British military resources in the Middle East. Even an official history of this period contains the revealing remark:

> In view of the absence of any operational aircraft, the plans for reinforcing Iraq in an emergency were overhauled . . .[34]

That was in the critical year of 1951, when aircraft from Aden, the Canal Zone and Malta were redeployed to the airfields of Shaibah and Habbaniya in Iraq, both within easy range of Abadan.

Naturally there were reserves of men, ships and aircraft in Britain itself. With conscripts accounting for half the army, many of the soldiers were only starting their training, but the 3rd Division was reconstituted in April 1951 as the major component of a strategic reserve. When serious trouble erupted in Egypt during the second half of October, a brigade from this division was flown out to the Middle East and another sent by sea in two aircraft carriers: to reinforce or replace the brigade that came to Egypt from Libya and the two that came from Cyprus.[35] In March 1951, when the Chiefs of Staff were asked to 'consider the use of actual force to prevent the Persian Government from seizing the oil installations', there was no absolute dearth of military resources to inhibit the making of plans.

Nor was there much to stop British forces from reaching Abadan. The Persian Navy (which also had some smaller craft) were still learning how to operate their two newly-acquired, though second-hand, frigates: BABR (ex HMS DERBY HAVEN) and PALANG (ex HMS FLY). In 1950 FLAMINGO had come across BABR drifting powerless in mid-Gulf, the Persian stokers having depleted the distilled pure boiler water feed for their own ablutions.[36] The Air Force (which

formed part of the Persian Army) had recently given its 'regiments' the new name of 'brigades', but both titles rather exaggerated the strength of this still-embryo force.

The Persian Army was a more serious proposition. The previous Shah had risen from its ranks and had always taken a personal interest in the training and equipment of his army. So had his successor. Persian soldiers might lack experience of fighting a modern war, but they were quite familiar with 'operations in aid of the civil power'. Among their own people, in the built-up island of Abadan, they might enjoy some advantages not available to British troops unfamiliar with the terrain, unused to the climate and, above all, under orders to avoid killing the Company's workers or damaging the Company's property.

When considering the use of limited force to achieve some political purpose, it is important to remember that the simple equations of outright war are irrelevant. The object of the exercise is not to defeat an enemy, but to convince the government of a potentially friendly country of the need to change their policy or else to make way for other leaders more disposed to compromise. Success depends on finding a suitable pressure point at which the application of force will be persuasive without provoking the victim into escalation or even war. This is seldom possible and never easy.

In 1951 the Foreign Office may have thought they had stated a politically defensible and straightforward requirement: 'to prevent the Persian Government from seizing the oil installations'. A glance at the map was enough to reveal the difficulty. The Company's installations were widely dispersed and not just in the island of Abadan. There were the oil-wells in the distant hills and the long pipelines linking them to the refinery. These scattered resources produced a perimeter that was hundreds of miles too long to defend. The Chiefs of Staff would have to adopt a less straightforward approach, find an objective that was militarily attainable yet politically adequate, and plan within their means.

4 Uncertain April

Our difficulty has of course been to find any concession to the principle of 'nationalisation' which does not involve some degree of Persian ownership and therefore control.

Furlonge[1]

April was a confusing month: random violence in Persia; cross-purposes in London; tension rising, but some major actors still in the wings.

On 26 March, when Shepherd reported the deployment of additional Persian troops to enforce martial law in the area of the oil-fields, he did not yet regard British lives or property as seriously threatened by the rash of strikes among the Persian employees of the AIOC. On the 31st, however, Capper, the Consul-General at Khorramshahr, telegraphed a warning: in his opinion (and Abadan was in his consular district) there were not enough Persian troops to cope with any serious trouble.[2]

Nobody, however, wanted to precipitate British intervention if this could be avoided and the Persians did seem to be aware of their responsibilities. On 2 April the Foreign Ministry told Shepherd that a group of officials from Tehran was being sent to Abadan to facilitate a settlement of the strikes.[3] As the Persian Prime Minister, Hussein Ala,[4] later explained to Shepherd: 'the Communists were the moving spirit in these strikes and disorders'.[5]

The Communists (from the Persian Tudeh party) did not enjoy mass support – Capper thought there were only 1000 strikers out of 26 000 at Abadan – but they had recruited enough for a riot, which erupted in Abadan on 12 April. It was not well handled by the Persian troops and the angry mob attacked such British subjects as they encountered, sometimes in their cars and also in a cinema audience that was unlucky enough to emerge just as the mob was passing. Three British subjects were killed and six injured.

This spurt of violence (there had also been trouble in the oilfields) caught everyone's attention and gave the oil dispute an emotional edge. The widely different reactions it provoked were often illuminating. Capper, for instance, notified the Senior Naval Officer Persian Gulf on the 13th and suggested that those concerned should be

ready to implement JOI 7 (one of the many plans for British military intervention) as Persian troops had proved totally inadequate to control a worsening situation.[6] Captain Wallis (SNOPG) wanted to send the frigate FLAMINGO to Abadan, but was overruled by the Admiralty,[7] and the Chiefs of Staff decided to order the cruiser GAMBIA (which had sailed from Malta, originally for Berbera, on 28 March) to Bahrain and to keep the two frigates (FLAMINGO and WREN) at Kuwait. The Chiefs of Staff also asked the Foreign Office (Fry attended their meeting on 13 April) to approach the Government of Iraq about British use of their bases. It might, they considered, prove necessary to concentrate Hastings troop-carrying aircraft in the Canal Zone and to move a battalion to Shaiba in Iraq.[8]

Shepherd, however, did not live up to the fire-eating reputation he enjoys among American writers. In his telegram of 13 April he saw no need for British military intervention. The Persian Prime Minister, who had expressed his deep regret at the loss of British lives, had promised to increase the number of Persian troops deployed in the area to 20 000.[9] Some Persian reinforcements did arrive – on 23 April Capper reported 3000 Persian troops in Abadan with a few tanks and armoured cars – but clandestine intimidation still delayed a full return to work in the refinery.[10]

The official British response – Morrison told the House of Commons on 13 April that His Majesty's Government were 'watching the situation closely' and reserved the right 'to act as we see fit to protect British lives and property'[11] – drew fire from both flanks. The naval Commander-in-Chief East Indies (who was administratively responsible for the British frigates in the Persian Gulf) telegraphed to the Admiralty on 15 April to protest against their decision to keep His Majesty's ships at Kuwait while British lives were endangered at Abadan.[12] The Foreign Office complained that they had not been consulted before, crisis or no crisis, the frigate WILD GOOSE, hitherto the flagship of the Senior Naval Officer Persian Gulf, was sent to Gibraltar for docking and relief of crew.[13] And Mountbatten (then the Fourth Sea Lord responsible *inter alia* for naval fuel) had earlier decided the time had come for him to resume the role of statesman he had exercised as the last Viceroy of India.

Mountbatten's own account was that, in the last days of March and on 2 April, he told the First Lord of the Admiralty (Lord Hall) and then Morrison 'that the nation's oil supply was in danger', that 'pressure would only drive Mossadeq into the hands of the Communists' and that 'a diplomatic initiative . . . could still change the

course of events'. The rest of Mountbatten's surprising version of his talk with Morrison (which includes an implausible dialogue)[14] is not confirmed by Strang's record. This has Mountbatten suggesting that Callaghan (then Parliamentary and Financial Secretary to the Admiralty)[15] should be sent to Tehran to talk to the Oil Committee of the Majlis. Mountbatten himself – he had not told the First Sea Lord what he was up to – would be content with membership of a London committee to supervise the negotiations.

Shepherd was consulted and replied that the visit of a junior minister would be useful if he had something new to say, but anyone from the Admiralty would be exposed to awkward questions about the price they paid the AIOC for oil.[16] Nothing seems to have come of Mountbatten's notion, unless the suggestion in the *New Statesman* of 19 May that he should be sent to Tehran was a later offshoot.

All this was petty friction by comparison with the reaction of the United States Government. On 12 April, when only the first reports of British casualties at Abadan were available, George McGhee, who had been an oilman himself before he joined the State Department and later became Assistant Secretary, told the British Ambassador at Washington he hoped any military measures the British might regard as necessary would only be taken in agreement with the Persian Government.[17] He had earlier provoked Morrison, whom he visited on 3 April, into a telegram (initialled by the Secretary of State himself) to the British Ambassador in Washington complaining that 'Mr. McGhee's approach to some of our Middle East problems struck me as being a little light-hearted.'

On 7 April articles inspired – so the Embassy believed, though the State Department denied it – by McGhee were published in the press in the United States.[18] On 8 April he appeared on an American television programme to discuss the Persian oil crisis.[19] On 16 April, according to the British Embassy, the State Department started leaking to the press their disapproval of British policy.[20] On 19 April, having heard that HMS FLAMINGO (a rebuilt prewar frigate with a cruising speed of 10 knots) would cruise slowly past Abadan, they expressed concern that 'this may further inflame the situation'. Morrison minuted: 'We have to react sharply against US interference.'[21]

If the British were concerned by the influence the State Department were supposedly exerting on the American media, this was partly because the Anglo-Persian dispute might otherwise have attracted less American attention. If we compare *The Times* of London with the *New York Times*, for instance, there is a marked difference

in the relative prominence the newspapers gave to the war in Korea and the Persian oil dispute. In London the two stories usually ran neck and neck but, as the summer progressed, it was often Abadan that prevailed. The *New York Times*, on the other hand, devoted many whole pages to Korea and, in mid-April, still more to the recall of General MacArthur and its repercussions. Abadan usually got about half a column and seldom qualified for even a couple of paragraphs on the front page. Without the exertions of the State Department Americans might not have understood the need to quarrel with their British allies.

In British eyes the author and expositor of American policy towards the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute was George C. McGhee, since 1949 Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East, South Asia and Africa. His superiors – Under-Secretary James E. Webb and the Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, to say nothing of President Truman – were preoccupied during 1951 by the war in Korea and the turmoil this had brought to American domestic politics. 'One result was that George McGhee had substantial delegated authority.'[22] This he exercised with energy and enthusiasm (he was 39 years old), as buoyant in 1951 as on his first entry to the State Department five years earlier. In the furtherance of American interests he showed intelligence and good judgement as well as zest. He enjoyed Acheson's friendship and support and the early appointment as Assistant Secretary was only the prelude to a long and distinguished career.

If, in 1951, his incisive exposition of a necessarily unwelcome American policy excited rather more irritation than was inevitable among British ministers and officials, part of the cause must be sought in the age-gap between McGhee and the Britons he sought to persuade: in most cases nearly twenty years. Herbert Morrison would not have relished anyone telling him that the British Government had 'failed to exercise sufficient control' over the policy of the AIOC,[23] but the words sounded worse in the mouth of the 'infant prodigy' as HM Minister at Beirut later described McGhee.[24] The charge of being anti-British McGhee denied at the time and in his memoirs (he had enjoyed Oxford as a Rhodes scholar) and it was seldom made by those who met him regularly. 'Indiscreet and tactless' were the adjectives then employed to describe conduct which caused Bowker, his opposite number as Assistant Under-Secretary in the Foreign Office, to groan 'Mr. McGhee is becoming one of our heavier crosses.'[25]

Nevertheless, when the Foreign Office, on the express instructions

of the Secretary of State, told HM Ambassador at Washington to complain to Acheson about the hectoring attitude of McGhee, the Minister (the Ambassador being away) declared himself 'perturbed' and remonstrated that such a protest would do more harm than good. In the end Morrison made a personal protest to Gifford, the US Ambassador in London on 5 May.[26]

Naturally Anglo-American friction had deeper roots than the personal prickliness which so often develops when policymakers descend into the dust of the diplomatic arena and try to put their own policies across to foreigners. Most Americans involved believed, with some justification, that the British were mishandling the dispute over Persian oil. The State Department had also had to endure (as the British Embassy reminded the Foreign Office) much cautionary British advice about American conduct of the war in Korea, now in a critical phase. On 11 April President Truman took the difficult decision to sack General MacArthur and on the 22nd the Chinese launched a major offensive. This was when the Gloucestershire Regiment so distinguished itself in the rearguard of the Allied retreat.

American opposition to British policy in Persia was such that Strang told the Embassy in Washington on 16 April not to disclose to the State Department the nature of British discussions with the Government of Iraq.[27] These had begun on 14 April, when the British Ambassador, Sir John Troutbeck, asked the Deputy Prime Minister for Iraqui consent to British forces using the Shaiba base if the need arose for a rescue operation at Abadan.

Shaiba (sometimes transliterated as Shaibah) was a permanent RAF station established well before the Second World War in near-desert territory about 15 miles south-west of Basra. Earlier still, in April 1915, when neither aircraft, nor airfields nor independence existed in Iraq, the British General Nixon had defeated Turkish forces in a long-forgotten battle at Shaiba. During the Second World War a large transit camp (mostly Nissen huts) had been built to turn Shaiba into a major staging-point for the movement of troops by air to and from the Middle and Far East. After the war, when this traffic had greatly diminished, the transit camp was closed and the RAF groundstaff so reduced that the station was under the command of a Flight-Lieutenant until Squadron-Leader Hubbard became Station Commander on 4 April 1951. Nevertheless Shaiba had the necessary buildings and equipment and could quickly be restored to operational standards. If its use by troops bound for Abadan could no longer be taken for granted, the obstacles were political rather than practical.

That was why the Ambassador had been instructed to approach the Government of Iraq. His request elicited, once the Regent and the Prime Minister were available for consultation, the bland reply that Shaiba might certainly be used for any British operations at Abadan to which the Persian Government had consented.

In further meetings the Ambassador, pursuant to his instructions, explained that a crisis could develop so swiftly at Abadan that British forces might have to intervene before Persian consent could be obtained. The Iraqui Prime Minister did not much like this idea, but his objections were less than adamant. On the 18th Troutbeck told the Foreign Office that, if British troops did have to be sent to Shaiba and thence to Abadan, it would be important to emphasise the essentially humanitarian character of an operation intended to save British lives.[28] Meanwhile the Persian Prime Minister had told the French newspaper *Le Monde* that the landing of British troops at Abadan or any interference in Persian affairs would be 'a grave mistake.'[29]

At Abadan tension was easing, though 20 American employees of the AIOC had requested evacuation on the 14th and were flown out by the Company. Capper, who had obtained tear gas bombs for use by the Persian troops from the RAF in Iraq, was able to report the sailing of four loaded tankers on 18 April and a slow drift back to work in spite of continuing intimidation. What disturbed him was that General Shahbakti, the new Persian commander sent from Tehran to restore order in Khuzistan, had never come to Abadan to see for himself what the problem was. Capper suspected the General of playing a double game and of avoiding any personal involvement that might subsequently be interpreted to his disadvantage.[30]

Nobody supposed that the crisis was over. In London the illustrated magazine *Sphere* published a picture captioned 'Tanks Patrol in Abadan'. The *New Statesman*, pleased that the oil workers' strike seemed to be ending, recommended a compromise: the Persians to own the oil wells, but to leave refining and marketing to the AIOC.

A preference for compromise is an English characteristic and the *New Statesman's* suggestion, though probably unattainable, was more realistic than Furlonge's dream, quoted at the head of this chapter, of finding a form of nationalisation not involving even 'some degree of Persian ownership and therefore control'. How he expected to reconcile this objective with his long submission of 26 April advising against the use of force remains a puzzle.[31]

The British Cabinet, which had discussed Persia for the first time in

1951 on 16 April, did so again on 23 April. Ministers wondered whether and, if so, how negotiations might be opened with Persia to devise some replacement for the now-discredited Supplemental Oil Agreement. But the 23rd was a day when Ministers were probably more concerned by the pointed resignation from the Cabinet of Aneurin Bevan, the flamboyant Welsh leader of the Labour Left. Even before Bevan actually walked out, Dalton had recorded in his diary on the 20th that 'it is becoming impossible to concentrate one's mind on anything except this odious war of nerves'.[32] It is just as well that soldiers and sailors and others in exposed positions seldom have any idea of the priorities of their political masters.

The fissure Bevan had opened in the Labour Party was one of the problems Attlee thought had been mishandled during his absence in hospital for surgical treatment of his ulcer. In Tehran health problems also worried the Shah. When Shepherd lunched with him on 4 April, His Imperial Majesty looked far from well and told the Ambassador he was suffering from appendicitis. When, he asked his guest, would be the best time – from a strictly political standpoint – to have an operation that would temporarily put him out of action? Shepherd suggested the sooner the better – the political situation was unlikely to improve.[33]

That was also the view in the Foreign Office, where much of April was spent in the consideration of suitable courses of action in the event of an emergency endangering British nationals in Persia. After discussion with others concerned, a draft memorandum was produced listing four possible expedients in ascending order of awkwardness. An appeal to the United Nations was dismissed as unlikely to bear practical fruit in time to be of any use. If, therefore, Britain had to take protective action on her own, this might be attempted at various levels. A mere show of force – stationing warships off Abadan and assembling troops at Shaiba – was not recommended. On the other hand, if the Persian authorities seemed disposed to cooperate, a cruiser might be sent to Abadan to evacuate British subjects who, so it was hoped, would be protected by Persian troops on their way to the point of embarkation. If no Persian cooperation could be expected, it might be necessary to send more ships and to land British troops to cover the evacuation.

None of these options – all concerned with rescuing British subjects rather than protecting British property – aroused much enthusiasm, but the draft suggested that a prior approach to the Persian Government might soften the hostility that could otherwise be ex-

pected from Persian troops to British intervention. Even this would clearly be awkward and on 23 April, when the situation at Abadan and in the oilfields had shown some improvement, Furlonge was able to suggest that further action should be suspended, a proposal which Strang approved on the 25th.[34]

Other ways of coping with trouble at Abadan were also being considered. The Foreign Office were still waiting for an answer to their request of 20 March that the Ministry of Defence should examine how 'actual force' might be used to prevent the Persian Government from seizing the oil installations.[35] On the other hand, if the threat to British subjects proved to be less acute and imminent, then, so it seemed to the Foreign Office, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company should be responsible for evacuating British staff and their dependents. This the Company accepted and on the 28th the Foreign Office were able to telegraph (to the Ambassador at Tehran and the Consul-General at Khorramshahr) that the Company planned to charter Viking aircraft from the British firm Airwork in order to fly women and children to Shaiba.[36] Meanwhile the cruiser GAMBIA and the frigates FLAMINGO and WREN were waiting – on the 28th all three of them were at Kuwait.[37] By then Capper was able to report that the situation in all areas of concern to the Company was back to normal.

Unfortunately this was also the day that Hussein Ala, frustrated by his inability to control the Majlis, to rely on support from the Shah or to extract concessions from the British, resigned his post as Prime Minister. Shepherd, who guessed what was in the wind, conveyed to the Shah his view that it would be disastrous if the Shah appointed Mossadegh as Ala's successor. Nevertheless that was what the Shah, partly rattled, partly trying to be too clever, did on 29 April. In reporting this news to the Foreign Office Shepherd added a shrewd comment of his own: 'I rather think the Persians may believe they have found the strong man they have been looking for so long.'[38]

5 Seconds Out of the Ring

We on the spot were exasperated by the apparent lack of dash in the military planning, controlled as it was by the overstaffed HQ in the Canal Zone ('Red Flannel Alley').

McKaig[1]

Monday 30 April was a day that imparted an altered tone to the direction of national policy in both London and Tehran. For the first time in 1951 the British Cabinet's discussion of Persia was conducted under the brisk chairmanship of the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, who had just emerged from hospital. And Mohammad Mossadegh made his first broadcast, evocative rather than informative, to the Persian people as their new Prime Minister. In neither capital was the change of course immediate or complete. Even in a hospital bed Attlee had been a politician to reckon with and Mossadegh, as nationalist leader and chairman of the Majlis oil committee, had fascinated not merely his predecessor, but also the Shah into apprehensive regard for his views.

Morrison was the first victim of the change. He had prepared – a little hastily, for Mossadegh had been appointed on a Sunday, 29 April – a draft of the statement he proposed to make to the House of Commons on 1 May. This was sharply criticised by the Cabinet on 30 April as likely to give needless offence to the Persians, Mossadegh not least. Moreover, the Cabinet were 'not opposed in principle to Persia's nationalisation of her oil resources',[2] for which the Majlis had just voted.

Morrison had to have another draft prepared, though he minuted that he was 'not happy' about the revised statement. 'It's weak. We're in danger of becoming the "poor whites".'[3] Nevertheless he sent it to the Prime Minister on the morning of 1 May,[4] explaining in another minute that he himself was against a show of force, but feared criticism from Eden for 'weakness'.[5] Indeed, Eden's first reaction to the Abadan rioting of 12 April had been to ask whether British warships were available or on the way.[6] Later on 1 May, however, Morrison was able to tell the small meeting of Ministers Attlee had convened for further discussion of Persia that Eden had promised the support of the Opposition for appropriate action to

safeguard the position of the AIOC and of British nationals in Persia.[7]

In the House of Commons Morrison had been more discreet than he had originally intended:

> We are still most anxious to settle this matter by negotiation, but we cannot negotiate under duress . . . we cannot accept that the Company's whole position in Persia should be radically altered by unilateral action.[8]

In the House of Lords Conservative disquiet was voiced by Lord Salisbury:

> it is vital that His Majesty's Government should show that they are entirely determined to protect British interests in this important area.[9]

He might have been less anxious if he had known of the request telegraphed that day by the British Chiefs of Staff to the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East 'for an estimate of the forces required to secure Abadan and south west Persian oil in the face of a hostile Persia'.[10]

The reader, remembering that it was on 20 March that the Foreign Office asked the Ministry of Defence to 'consider the use of actual force to prevent the Persian Government from seizing the oil installations', may feel some surprise that such basic information was still not available six weeks later.

One of the difficulties was that there were so many different plans. On 2 and 3 May an exchange of telegrams with the Middle East was needed to elucidate for the benefit of the Chiefs of Staff the difference between Plan Bracket and Plan Accleton. It turned out that the former envisaged only a protected evacuation of AIOC personnel from the oil-fields, but that the latter also included safeguarding the refinery and other installations at Abadan. When the Chiefs of Staff (a term here employed to include those who deputised for an absent Chief) met on 4 May, it was pointed out that both plans were only intended to cope with local internal security problems, not organised Persian military opposition. The latter, so the Commanders-in-Chief suggested in reply to the enquiry of 1 May, would demand:

1 infantry division
1 infantry brigade
1 armoured car regiment

1 squadron of tanks
1 cruiser and 3 frigates
2 fighter/ground attack squadrons
1 fighter/ reconnaissance squadron.[11]

It was scarcely surprising that Furlonge, who submitted on 4 May a summary of action in progress, should comment that 'military action, though still under examination by the Ministry of Defence, is likely to prove impracticable'.[12]

The Foreign Office accordingly concentrated on working out, in conjunction with the Service and other Departments, evacuation plans either for 900 women and children or for 4200 British personnel and dependents plus a further 2400 Indians and Pakistanis. They hoped to charter ships to run a shuttle service to Basra, which might perhaps be operated in conjunction with either Plan Accleton or Plan Bracket. Doubtless the Foreign Office were now envisaging a degree of insecurity too acute for evacuation to be undertaken by chartered aircraft flying in and out of the airfield on Abadan island. For the benefit of Capper, who was getting a little confused by these new names, they explained that Accleton was substantially the same as JOI7.[13]

On 2 May Shepherd reported from Tehran that Mossadegh (whose first diplomatic visitor on 1 May seems to have been the Soviet Ambassador) was 'an extremely difficult person to negotiate with'. Although partly educated in France, his French was rusty, he was deaf and he was inclined to make speeches even in conversation. He 'relies on a limited number of ideas and on their constant reiteration'. As for the Shah, he was 'very depressed and considerably bewildered'. Even when he received the US Ambassador on 7 May, the Shah, so Grady reported,

> feels quite unhappy about oil legislation and selection Mosadeq, but on basis past procedure, he had no alternative but to accept both.

Shepherd did not allow these difficulties to deter him from continuing his quest for a possible compromise. On 2 May he asked the Foreign Office whether

> an arrangement which would enable the Company to buy oil at a fair market price from a nationalised Persian Company would in the last resort be an acceptable solution.

On 5 May the Foreign Office, perhaps predictably, said it would not be acceptable.[14] On the same day HMS GAMBIA was relieved in the Persian Gulf by HMS EURYALUS.[15]

There were now three British warships in the Gulf: the cruiser EURYALUS and the frigates FLAMINGO and WREN. There were also American ships. The USS DUXBURY BAY arrived at Bahrain on 5 May and on 9 May the American admiral returned the call paid by the Captain of EURYALUS. On 12 May FLAMINGO joined EURYALUS at Bahrain, where the cruiser fired a salute to celebrate Coronation Day. On the 16th there arrived the USS GREENWICH BAY, followed the next day by WREN. Although the British ships went as far north as Kuwait and south to Qatar, where more calls were paid and returned, Bahrain was the base. It was there that five Persian midshipmen joined EURYALUS on 22 May for training. For all the plans of Persian politicians and British staff officers, peace still brooded, soporific as the mounting heat, over the unrefreshing waters of the Gulf.

EURYALUS was a smaller cruiser (5770 tons compared with the 8000 ton GAMBIA) and neither ship had air-conditioning. Admiral Sir Rae McKaig, then a Lieutenant-Commander, relieved Diamond as staff officer to SNOPG at the end of May. In describing EURYALUS he later wrote:

> her wireless office, in particular, in which I spent many hours, offered lamentable working conditions for the telegraphists, on whom so much depended.[16]

The admirals commanding in the East Indies and the Mediterranean realised the health hazards, particularly during the hottest period – June to September – and argued on 7 and 12 May in favour of keeping a cruiser in more salubrious waters – four days' steaming away.[17] But the Chiefs of Staff in London decided on 25 May that for the time being a cruiser must be kept at Bahrain, unpleasant as were the climatic conditions.[18] The temperature that month was always in the eighties and the heat had a humidity that made it harder to bear.

All this time Attlee was shepherding the Cabinet and the smaller group of Ministers he had set up (himself, the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Fuel and Power) towards the evolution of a policy. Morrison had early declared himself and could count on support from Shinwell (Defence) for what Morrison later called 'sharp and forceful action'.[19] Gaitskell, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who had argued on 30 April that the Cabinet should decide what military

action they were prepared to authorise, had become more of a floating voter, as was Noel-Baker, Minister of Fuel and Power. As Prime Minister, Attlee never enjoyed an ascendancy as complete as that achieved thirty years later by Margaret Thatcher. But, with Fabian caution, he was often able to win support for the policy he preferred.

His had been a remarkable career. Born to a middle-class family in 1883, he had received a thoroughly middle-class education at Haileybury, a public school of the second rank to which Attlee remained remarkably loyal. He went on to Oxford and social science at the London School of Economics, but interrupted his academic career for front-line service in the First World War. He emerged with the rank of major, a title he long retained, as was the fashion in the twenties and thirties. Experience of the East End of London (he was Mayor of Stepney before becoming its MP in 1922) reinforced his socialism, but his emergence as leader of the Labour Party in 1935 was an unexpected result of the political crisis of 1931 and the party split this produced. Years in the wartime coalition government under Churchill enabled him to bring to the job of Prime Minister considerable political and administrative experience. The severely practical approach, patriotism, his own brand of idealism and a remarkable taciturnity were ingrained characteristics. Churchill, who was always catty about Attlee, said of him: 'He is an admirable character, but not a man with whom it is agreeable to dine.'

Although conscientious in the discharge of his duties, he did not allow the burdens of office to oppress him and managed to read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* while Prime Minister.[20]

It was under his chairmanship that plans for military intervention were first considered by the small group of Ministers he had set up. Their meeting on 9 May was also attended by the Chiefs of Staff, who explained:

> The initial plans, [doubtless Accleton and Bracket] which were already completed for military action in the oilfield area, had as their objective the protection of British lives and property, and assumed that the Persian forces would take no hostile action. Further plans, now in course of preparation, were designed to meet Persian hostility, but would involve the deployment of much larger forces.
>
> Further discussion suggested two tentative conclusions.

> It was unreal to suppose that the Persian Government would acquiesce . . . military action, therefore, must be taken on a large scale if at all.

And, as such action might give rise to the possibility of Soviet intervention and result in the partition of Persia, there was an obvious need for prior discussion with the United States Government.[21]

At their meeting on the following day the views of the full Cabinet on the expediency of military action were divided, but they did agree that

> Military intervention for the protection of British lives would not be difficult, militarily or politically. But intervention for the protection of property would involve the deployment of much larger numbers of troops and might have serious political repercussions.

The Cabinet also decided to consult the United States Government, to inform Old Commonwealth Governments and to invite the Government of Pakistan to exert their influence on Persia.[22]

The approach to the Americans bore little fruit. Acheson told the British Ambassador on 11 May that, in the event of a revolutionary coup by the Tudeh Party,

> 'the Americans would fully support the use of force in relation to our responsibilities and installations in Persia' *but* 'they would find it very difficult to support the use of force' against unilateral action by the existing Persian Government 'to take physical possession of the installations of the oil company.'

Even this was more encouraging than the American version of Acheson's statement.

> US would recognize right of Brit (*sic*) to evacuate Brit citizens whose lives were in danger. Open Soviet intervention in Iran or seizure of power by Communist Govt would, of course, also create situation where use of force must be considered.

Whenever two separate accounts of the same conversation are available, such discrepancies are often found. If something of particular importance is to be said – a warning, for instance, or a promise – a professional diplomat anxious to avoid any risk of misunderstanding will read out his message from a text prepared in advance and hand over a piece of paper recording this in written form. If there is no

such *aide mémoire*, the listener may scribble down what he has heard and, before the interview ends, seek confirmation by reading it aloud.

Unfortunately neither Acheson nor the British Ambassador, Sir Oliver Franks, was a professional diplomat and there was thus a misunderstanding.

On 16 May the US Embassy in London sent a telegram to the State Department expressing concern at increasing press speculation that Britain was preparing to use force in Iran. The Embassy thought

> ultimate UK decision whether or not to use force will be in last analysis determined by extent to which US prepared to support.

Unfortunately, the Embassy added, it was apparent from conversations at the Foreign Office on 15 May that members of the Eastern Department 'seem to have impression that differences between us re use of force are not very large and can probably be overcome.'

As we shall see, the point was taken in Washington and both Acheson and McGhee exerted themselves to dissipate the misunderstanding which an informal approach had permitted. It was for a few days only that the Foreign Office could hope that the Americans might be persuaded to accept 'the use of military force' to resist the seizure of the Company's installations by the existing Persian Government.[23]

Once again it was the much maligned Shepherd who continued to prefer the way of compromise. On 9 May he had suggested that he should visit London, together with Pyman, his Oriental Counsellor, to try and work something out. On 14 May he went even further:

> If the Persians were to take physical possession of the installations, I personally would not recommend the use of force, which would be too late to be preventive and would involve attacks on the Persians to turn them out.

He added, perhaps as an afterthought, that removing the skilled British work force might provide a better means of putting pressure on the Persians.[24] On the same day Attlee, whose instincts were closer to Shepherd's than either would have cared to admit, telephoned to the Resident Clerk at the Foreign Office, presumably after office hours, to say 'we must . . . agree to accept the principle of nationalisation'.[25] The Prime Minister's subsequent failure to see that his revelation was translated into effective action is one of several puzzling features of his conduct in this crisis.

Meanwhile the machinery of military planning ground ponderously on. On 11 May the Commanders-in-Chief told the Chiefs of Staff that, if Persian military resistance to Accleton had to be assumed, then even at Abadan alone two infantry brigades would be required with supporting arms. They would have to come by sea, which would take 11 days. Moreover, because this force would be insufficient to occupy the six oil-fields inland, such an operation would not guarantee the continued flow of oil, but the absence from their usual stations of the forces deployed would undermine the military security of the whole British position in the Middle East.[26] One begins to have an inkling of what Admiral McKaig meant by 'lack of dash in the military planning'.

On 18 May, incidentally, Sir Pierson Dixon submitted the opinion expressed by the Russia Committee that intervention by British troops to protect oil installations would not increase the risk of war with the Soviet Union and might even lessen it. Morrison was pleased,[27] but others, considering the emphasis earlier accorded to this contingency, were surprisingly little influenced. Perhaps this was the result of a general recognition that no Russian intervention meant no American support.

We need not examine all the variant plans telegraphed to and fro as the Chiefs of Staff constantly modified their objectives and their assumptions, to say nothing of the code names: Accleton and Bracket being overtaken by Jagged, Midget, Companion and Plan Y. It is scarcely surprising that, on 25 May, the Chiefs of Staff thought it might be helpful to send out a small planning team[28] to join the impressive array (itself a reflection of the organisation in Whitehall) at Fayid serving the Commanders-in-Chief. This was headed by a Joint Planning Committee, a Joint Administrative Planning Committee and a Joint Intelligence Committee. Each included representatives of all three Services, as did the three subordinate Staffs that served them and also the Joint Secretariat.[29]

Two aspects of these military preparations do merit a word. The decision (taken on 11 May but not then announced) to bring 16 Independent Parachute Brigade Group to 14 days notice and, on 22 May, to authorise its despatch to the Middle East,[30] attracted attention at the time and has received even more from later writers, most of whom have misunderstood its significance. This formation was only intended as a replacement in the Middle East for such troops as might have to be deployed to the Persian Gulf. Most of the Brigade's soldiers, the Chiefs of Staff explained to the Commanders-in-Chief,

were not yet fit for airborne operations. At most one or two companies could be used to seize Abadan airfield[31] (a project later rejected for Midget because prior naval bombardment, which would be needed, would cause great damage and probably kill some British civilians).[32]

Nevertheless, when the Brigade sailed for Cyprus on 4 June in the aircraft carriers WARRIOR and TRIUMPH, together with the troopship DEVONSHIRE, a considerable impression was created. The *Sphere* had already published, on 26 May, pictures of some of the Brigade's soldiers as recalled from leave to stand by for 'an undisclosed destination'. Even Ministers believed the Brigade was moving in case it was needed for Persia.[33]

More significant, to anyone attempting to understand the erratic evolution of British ideas about the use of force in the Persian oil dispute, was the meeting of the Chiefs of Staff on 23 May. This was attended by Sir William Fraser, Chairman of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Questioned at length, he explained that the Company had a British staff in Persia of 2500, their numbers swollen by a further 1500 wives and children (not the same figures as those considered by the Foreign Office on 3 May – every meeting produced a different total, a characteristic feature of most evacuation planning). Two-thirds of them were in the Abadan area, the rest in the oil-fields inland. It would, Sir William contended, be desirable to withdraw them before military operations began.

If such operations were undertaken, he believed a fair proportion of the lower grades of the Company's Persian employees would be willing to go on working under British military protection. This would probably not be true of the higher grades. In his view military operations would have to be on a considerable scale if they were to be undertaken at all. He hoped this would only happen after the Company's British personnel had been withdrawn.

When Fraser had finished his evidence and left the meeting, Field-Marshal Slim, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was the first to speak. In 1941, as a divisional commander, he had been involved in the Anglo-Russian occupation of Persia, when no significant resistance had been offered by Persian forces. On 20 May Slim had advocated taking a strong line with the Persians. Now, he said, they were all agreed that a quickly-mounted, small-scale operation would be militarily unsound. A full-scale operation, on the other hand, could only be mounted at six weeks' notice. The troops involved would come from the Middle East, but they would have to be

replaced from the United Kingdom, where further mobilisation would be needed.

Admiral Sir George Creasy (representing the First Sea Lord) did not dissent, but remarked that sending a cruiser to Abadan two months ago 'might well have calmed the whole situation'.[34] It will be remembered that Captain Wallis would have sent FLAMINGO after the riots of 12 April if he had not been overruled by the Admiralty. Perhaps these naval views underrated the strength of Persian feelings even in March, but delay had allowed popular excitement and, paradoxically at British prompting, locally-deployed Persian forces to grow significantly stronger.

Nevertheless Shinwell, the Minister of Defence, ended the discussion on a resolute note. 'We must in no circumstances throw up the sponge.' If they did, the next thing to go would be the Suez Canal.[35]

In London and at Fayid this intensive planning took place during a relative lull in Persia itself. Mossadegh got a vote of confidence (99 out of 102) on 6 May.[36] The next day Shepherd had a 'friendly' interview with him.[37] On the 8th the curfew was lifted in Abadan and most tanks and 455 soldiers were withdrawn (leaving about 1000).[38] The Persian Government were making legal and administrative preparations to give effect to the resolutions on nationalisation the Majlis had passed. The AIOC were demanding arbitration and the British Government were getting ready to go to the International Court of Justice at The Hague. As early as 1 May the Company had instructed their Field Manager to submit, if the Persians tried to take over, but to make a written protest.[39]

In Washington developments were more significant. On 10 May the State Department issued a press statement advocating a negotiated settlement between Britain and Iran.[40] On the 11th, as earlier related, the British Ambassador saw Acheson and on the 14th McGhee invited representatives of American oil companies to discuss with him the dispute between Iran and the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. McGhee then complained that

> The UK press had accused the Department of not supporting the UK position, of forcing them to accept nationalization which we ourselves do not favor, of permitting the development of a situation out of which US companies would profit, which was the Commie line.

The oil company representatives nevertheless declared themselves

against involvement in Iran on the grounds that this would constitute 'concession jumping'.[41]

On the 16th McGhee complained to Kit Steel, Minister at the British Embassy, of press reports from London hinting that the US Government might support British use of force. The *aide-mémoire* he handed over declared:

> The US is strongly opposed however to the use of force or the threat of the use of force on the part of the British Government.

He also complained of the publicity given to the state of readiness of 16 Independent Parachute Brigade Group. The Foreign Office later disclaimed responsibility for any of these reports. Meanwhile they were still trying to persuade the US Government that there did exist certain contingencies in which the Americans ought to agree to British use of force.[42]

These efforts made little headway against the adverse winds of American policy. On 17 May Acheson sent for the British Ambassador, Sir Oliver Franks, to say that he and the President were both concerned that the British might resort to the use of force in Persia. Franks argued that 'we might feel compelled to use force for the protection' of British lives. Acheson replied that the 'President felt most strongly that no situation should be allowed to develop into an armed conflict between a body of British troops and the Persian forces of the existing administration'.

This was a harsher inhibition than the elegant formula composed by Acheson for his memoirs:

> only on invitation of the Iranian Government or Soviet military intervention, or a Communist coup d'etat in Tehran or to evacuate British nationals in danger of attack could we support the use of military force.[43]

But the British would at least have no cause to complain – as they did of Dulles in 1956 – that Acheson had misleadingly softened the sharpness of American opposition to what they feared might become British policy.

On the 18th the United States Government issued a public statement:

> We have stressed to the Governments of both countries the need to solve the dispute in a friendly way through negotiations and have urged them to avoid intimidation and threats of unilateral action.[44]

This declaration of high-minded neutrality did not go down well in London. Even Harold Macmillan, always pro-American and himself very critical of the conduct of British foreign policy by Herbert Morrison, commented in his diary: 'As if we were two Balkan countries being lectured in 1911 by Sir Edward Grey.'[45]

Nor was it popular even in Tehran, where the US Ambassador complained that 'statement of 18 May has been misconstrued by the Iranian Government as intervention in the internal affairs of Iran'.[46]

The impression of evenly-weighted American heavy-handedness was reinforced when a message of 31 May from President Truman urging Attlee to negotiate was, by mistake, delivered to Mossadegh as well.[47]

Nevertheless all this pressure was beginning to have some effect. Morrison might tell the US Ambassador in London on 1 June that

> US Government were drawing an unreal distinction when they said they would support us in any such action [use of force] against a Communist coup in Persia, but not while there was any other form of Persian Government.[48]

But that was also the day when Attlee's ministerial group, which Furlonge attended, noted that 'The Americans were still concerned as to the possibility of our use of force.' Ministers then launched into a delicious daydream in which, once the Persians realised they would have no customers for their oil and no tankers to transport it, 'the Government might fall without any overt intervention on our part'.[49]

Afterwards Furlonge wrote (first getting Strang to approve the draft) to posts saying there had been no ministerial decision about the use of force, but the Chiefs of Staff had two plans. One of them, Midget, was only meant to rescue endangered British subjects in the face of probable military opposition, but the other was a big operation to occupy and hold the oil-fields, including the pipelines linking them to Abadan.

In saying that the Chiefs of Staff had two plans, Furlonge may have suggested to some of his readers that these plans now required only the seal of political approval. This was not so. The Chiefs of Staff, Slim in particular, thought Midget would be a hazardous operation and had ordered the Joint Planners to redraft their report. And Plan Y, which the Chiefs of Staff had discussed on 30 May, lacked political credibility. Seizing and holding a sizeable area of the Persian mainland could only be an act of war. It would also require six weeks' notice, would take five months to put into effect and would need

70 000 men. To replace them reinforcements would have to be sent to the Middle East and reservists recalled to the colours in Britain.

What the Chiefs of Staff rejected, however, was not Plan Y, but the less ambitious Plan X. This would have used two brigades to seize and hold only the island of Abadan. The Chiefs of Staff turned it down because they saw no point in protecting the refinery if the Persians could cut off the flow of crude oil from the fields inland.[50]

This was an argument which would later be contested, but the Chiefs of Staff were still struggling to find a military solution to an improperly formulated problem. The Foreign Office version of 20 March 'to prevent the Persian Government from seizing the oil installations' was an inadequate statement of the British objective. As Shepherd pointed out on 14 May 'the use of force . . . would be too late to be preventive'. What was needed was a precise description of the terminal situation which the use of force was intended to achieve. Only then would sensible planning be possible.[51]

6 Buccaneer is Conceived

The United Kingdom has no right at all independently of any United Nations recommendation to intervene by force in Persia to prevent a wrong being committed against one of its nationals.

Frank Soskice[1]

His Majesty's Government are not prepared to stand by idle if the lives of British nationals are in jeopardy. . . . It is the responsibility of the Persian Government . . . if, however, that responsibility were not met, it would equally be the right and duty of His Majesty's Government to extend protection to their own nationals.

Herbert Morrison[2]

May had been a month for plans and preparations, for arguments and manoeuvres behind the scenes. June brought more visible activity. Persia was on the middle page of *The Times* – in those decorous days the front page was reserved for classified advertisements and the agony column hallowed by Sherlock Holmes – every weekday of the month. Nor was this for want of other news. The sensation caused by the announcement on 7 June that the traitors Burgess and Maclean had fled to Russia on 25 May would outlast not merely the month but the year. It was the main topic for parliamentary questions to Herbert Morrison on 11 June. Because of the King's illness, Princess Elizabeth took the salute at the ceremony of Trooping the Colour on the King's Birthday. In the Gulf, FLAMINGO 'dressed overall' on that same 7 June and fired a 21-gun salute. In Britain there was again a dock strike and, at the end of the month, General Ridgway, now commanding the UN forces in Korea, sent a message to the C.-in-C. of the 'Communist forces' proposing armistice talks. The ground lost by General MacArthur's rashness had been recovered.

On the first day of the month *The Times* reported that two British journalists had been expelled from Persia and that the tank landing ship MESSINA was on her way to the Gulf. On 4 June 16 Independent Parachute Brigade Group left for Cyprus and on the 7th HMS MAURITIUS relieved EURYALUS at Bahrain. This cruiser (of the same class as GAMBIA) had been earmarked for a supporting role in case it proved necessary to implement Plan Midget. Fortunately the evacuation

from Abadan of women and children, which began on the same day, could still be effected by civil aircraft. The process was completed, according to *The Times*, by the 28th.

Nor were the Persian Government, who had already appointed a commission to carry out the process of nationalisation, weakening in their determination. On 10 June there arrived in Abadan the board of management of the new National Iranian Oil Company together with representatives of the joint parliamentary committee responsible for liquidating the AIOC. The leader of the second group was Hosein Makki, who represented Abadan in the Majlis, where he was a member of the oil committee and a fervent supporter of Mossadegh. An indefatigable orator with a gift for the dramatisation of politics, Makki soon made himself unpopular with the British, but he enjoyed great influence among the Persian inhabitants of Abadan.

The Persian Government had also replaced General Shahbakti by General Djalali as the commander of Persian forces in Khuzistan, the province that included both Khorramshahr and Abadan. It was a time of popular excitement. There had earlier been demonstrations in Tehran. The *Sphere* published photographs of them on 9 June, together with one of Mossadegh, swaying on his feet and supported by an assistant, at a press conference. On 11 June Makki took care to be present (some accounts even depict him as the principal actor) when the Persian flag was hoisted over the offices of the AIOC at Khorramshahr by the Governor-General of Khuzistan, who also sacrificed a sheep to mark the occasion. On the 12th Drake, the AIOC General Manager, had a stormy meeting at Abadan with the newly-appointed Persian Oil Board.[3]

Only the British Government seemed to be no nearer to deciding their policy. On 6 June the Chiefs of Staff informed the Commanders in Chief in the Middle East that:

> The Government has decided that it is inconceivable that we should carry out Plan Y against the existing Persian Government.

That was understandable. Plan Y, the reader may remember, envisaged a British force of 70 000 men taking five months to seize and hold the large tract of Persian territory containing all the oil-fields together with the pipelines linking them to Abadan. Even the strictly military problems would have been formidable. The Chiefs of Staff directed, however, that planning should continue – just in case a Communist government came to power in Persia.[4]

On 8 June the Foreign Office noted that Ministers were against

military operations unless these were essential to save British lives.[5] That was also the day when the British Embassy in Washington declared that saving British lives was the only excuse the US Government would accept for the use of force.[6] If Acheson did not himself reiterate his earlier warnings, this may have been because his time and attention had been pre-empted by his gruelling cross-examination in a joint session of the Senate committees on the armed forces and foreign relations. On 1 and 2 June and again from the 4th to the 9th, for a total of 40 hours, they harassed him with hostile questions about American policy in the Far East and the Korean war.

It is important to remember that, ever since the dismissal of General MacArthur in April, President Truman, Acheson and the State Department had been denounced, mainly by members of the Republican Party, as Communist sympathisers unfit for public office. The virulence of this campaign, in which Senator Joseph McCarthy was prominent (though the President's impeachment was first suggested by Senator Taft), recalls the witch-hunt conducted during the reign of King Charles II by Titus Oates against various Englishmen, including Samuel Pepys, whom he accused of being secret Catholics. In 1951 Truman was a beleaguered president for whom British problems in Iran were a tiresome and potentially dangerous distraction.

Whitehall might doubt and Washington disapprove, but at Fayid it was still thought prudent to continue the process of contingency planning. On 11 June, while on passage up the Shatt al Arab to Basra, FLAMINGO had on board two staff officers (one sapper, one marine) engaged on reconnaissance. They took 300 photographs.[7] Time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted, but one wonders, given the longstanding British interest in Abadan, the actual intervention in 1941 and the active preparations in 1946, why all relevant information had not been collected and kept up to date in more tranquil years. Captain (then Lieutenant-Commander) Diamond, who visited Fayid at the beginning of June after completing his tour of duty as staff officer to SNOPG, was equally surprised when the Intelligence Staff asked him the height of the jetty at Abadan above the high- and low-water marks.

On 12 June some of the surviving plans were discussed in a conference held aboard FLAMINGO at Basra and attended by the Air Officer Commanding in Iraq, the Commercial Manager of the AIOC, the Basra Port Director (who was British), Capper, the Consul-General at Khorramshahr, and Commodore Wallis, the Senior Naval Officer, Persian Gulf.[8] Plan Midget was accorded particular attention.

The Ambassador at Bagdad had just expressed the view that 'Iraquis would be unlikely actually to resist our use of Shaiba' for this operation. It would naturally not be welcome, but the worst risk he foresaw was that popular agitation might lead to the fall of the government of Iraq. 'The longer the notice I can have the less would be the chance of trouble.' The Ministry of Defence, for their part, promised to supply the Commanders-in-Chief with 55 000 leaflets in Persian explaining the innocent motive and temporary character of any British military intervention at Abadan. The reply from Fayid said these would be dropped over Abadan one hour before the landing of Midget forces.[9]

The Times was able to report some more public developments. On 12 June HMS WARRIOR and HMS TRIUMPH reached Cyprus with the first contingent of 16 Independent Parachute Brigade Group. The next day Shepherd, as instructed, told a press conference:

> We are prepared to accept the principle of nationalization, but not the Persian nationalization law, which is a unilateral breach of the international agreement [of 1933].

On the 15th a leading article in *The Times* complained that Mossadegh was allowing inflammatory anti-British propaganda and warned that, if this led to serious rioting 'Britain would be bound to employ the measures open to her to protect British lives and property.'

Shepherd had made no such threat on the 9th, when he complained about this propaganda to Mossadegh, who professed ignorance.

A news item, also in *The Times* of 15 June, concerned the recall from the Mediterranean Fleet's summer cruise of its Commander, Admiral Sir John Edelsten, to attend a meeting of the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East. After this had taken place on 17 June *The Times* reported:

> It is understood that among the subjects discussed were measures to be taken in case of a threat to British lives and property in the Persian oilfields.

Only Shepherd did not seem in tune with the martial mood. On 14 June he recommended to the Foreign Office continued efforts to reach an agreement with Mossadegh, whom he had twice visited during the first half of June, finding him in bed on the first occasion. There was, Shepherd suggested, little chance of finding any successor

to Mossadegh who would be strong enough to get an agreement ratified.[10] On the 15th Morrison sent Shepherd a personal telegram (at Strang's instigation) approving his conduct of relations with the Persian Government during the oil dispute as 'judicious and robust'.[11]

Ministers and their military advisers were particularly concerned with what was robust. So, it seemed, were some of the AIOC families. Sir William Fraser told the Chiefs of Staff on 18 June there were still 60 British women and children in the oil-fields and 180 at Abadan who would not leave unless they were ordered to.[12] Yet on the 19th FLAMINGO (still at Basra) was at two hours' notice because of the risk of riots at Abadan. Shepherd, for his part, was also worried about similar risks in the oil-fields. Keeping cool was not easy. At Basra the temperature was never below 100° F in the middle of the day and occasionally reached 120° in the shade. Fortunately Basra was far enough from the sea for the heat to be a little drier.[13]

Meanwhile the tank landing ship HMS MESSINA had reached the Gulf and the Commanders-in-Chief decided to station her at Mina al Ahmedi in Kuwait from 21 June. If Midget had to be implemented, MESSINA would carry one of the two battalions to be employed from either Basra or Kuwait to Abadan. Twelve further Hastings troop-carrying aircraft were ordered to the Middle East and on the 20th the Chiefs of Staff told Ministers that Midget could now be carried out at 36 hours' notice. SNOPG reported that, if Capper asked for help, he proposed to send FLAMINGO and WREN to Abadan, while keeping MAURITIUS and MESSINA at the Outer Bar of the Shatt al Arab in readiness for Midget. The Foreign Office told Shepherd that women and children should now be withdrawn both from the oil-fields and from Abadan.[14]

Military planning and preparation had thus acquired some momentum by the time the British Cabinet again discussed Persia at their meeting on 21 June. Ministers then heard that the efforts made by the AIOC to negotiate with the Persian Government had come to nothing. The Company had accordingly been told by the British Government not to pay the Persians (who had hoisted their flag over the refinery building at Abadan on 20 June) for oil delivered to their tankers and, if such demands were made, to withdraw their tankers from Abadan.

Ministers were also assured that the necessary military preparations (Midget) had been made for the evacuation of British nationals.

> A much larger operation would, however, be required if the refinery at Abadan was to be held against active military opposition by the Persians; and it would be some little time before the forces necessary for this larger operation could be assembled.

Here in embryo, though not called by that name, was Plan Buccaneer. With it were sounded two significant themes that would recur in later discussions: holding Abadan only (a reversion to the discarded Plan X) and the time needed to assemble the necessary forces. Ministers do not seem to have registered more than the usual military emphasis on difficulty and delay. One Minister, who can surely not have been following very closely the events of the last few weeks, asked whether 'a show of force' might not do the trick and suggested that it would be desirable to have stronger naval forces in the vicinity of Abadan.

The Cabinet took note of what they had heard, but reached no decision.[15] Perhaps Ministers were awaiting the outcome of the debate in the House of Commons that began that afternoon.

It did not go well for the Government. Eden declared 'evacuation would be disastrous. It would be an abject surrender to the threat of force.' Duncan Sandys, who was Churchill's son-in-law and had already held office, went even further:

> if the only alternative is scuttle, with all the grave consequences which that would have both now and in the future, then I certainly think we should not hesitate to use troops or any other appropriate measures that may be necessary. . . .

Morrison, whose winding-up speech was widely criticised as unimpressive,[16] insisted that the era of imperialism was over, but asserted, rather misleadingly: 'we are certainly not seeking to evacuate the oilfields'. He got nearer the mark later on:

> I have said that we are prepared and we have given an undertaking that we would do everything we can to protect British lives.

Naturally he was asked whether his undertaking also applied to British property and he could only dodge the questions. Harold Macmillan's diary spluttered with fury:

> In all the years I have been in the House, I have heard nothing like it from a Foreign Secretary at such a moment.

Morrison had shown himself to be 'a third-rate Tammany boss'.[17]

The Times, which always had one ear close to the official ground, published a leader that day about Persia. The tone had changed significantly since the article of 15 June about protecting British lives and property. Now the editor was sitting on the fence, but with a perceptible bias against the use of force. Two days later, on the 23rd, *The Times* criticised the Government, opposed the use of force and reached the remarkable conclusion:

> there is still a chance that a continued display of firmness, patience and restraint by the British Government might reduce the fever which now inflames the Persians.

For all their other errors, no Minister, no official or officer, was quite so optimistic.

In Tehran Mossadegh was more fortunate. The 21st of June, when the House of Commons gave Morrison a hard time, brought Mossadegh an unanimous vote of confidence from the Majlis. Shepherd attributed the result to skilful intimidation.[18] There were also noisy demonstrations against the AIOC.[19]

Beneath the turbulent surface of political froth there had meanwhile begun a significant shift in the character of military planning. It had started on 18 June, at a meeting of Attlee's small group of Ministers, when the Minister of Fuel and Power was asked to investigate the possibility of refining crude oil from Kuwait at Abadan, if that island were to remain in British hands, but no crude could be got from the Persian oilfields.[20] On 23 June the Planning Staff in the Ministry of Defence submitted a draft plan for seizing Abadan island and holding it for an indefinite period, so that the Abadan refinery could be operated with Kuwaiti crude. Sir Donald Fergusson, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Fuel and Power, had previously explained that Kuwait could supply five million tons per annum, rising to 10 million. This was not much compared to the 54 million tons of Persian oil exported in 1950, but it was a lot better than the 132 000 tons eventually exported in 1952. Moreover, so Fergusson argued, the AIOC could carry out the necessary refining with only 7500 of their present labour force of 30 000 at Abadan. Finding enough workers willing to operate the refinery under military protection should thus not be too difficult.[21]

Perhaps Fergusson should be regarded as the true progenitor of Plan Buccaneer, for he had shown how holding Abadan island could serve a useful purpose even if the oil-fields had to be abandoned. It was the apparent absence of a rational objective that had earlier

caused the Chiefs of Staff to reject Plan X. Naturally it could still be argued that refining five million tons of Kuwaiti crude at Abadan would do little, at considerable political cost, to reduce the damage that the loss of Persian oil would do to the Company and to the British economy. But it would keep the refinery in operation, preserve the installations at Abadan and prevent the Persians from enjoying even the appearance of a successful act of nationalisation. Such a setback might even lead to the fall of Mossadegh and the emergence of a successor disposed to compromise.

On the face of it there was now a case for examining the feasibility of Buccaneer, though it is by no means certain that the plan was so called as early as 23 June. Indeed, it nearly failed to win that fitting name. At Fayid the Secretary of the Joint Intelligence Committee (Middle East) kept a list of unused code names for issue as required. The next on the list and the one initially notified to all commands – until the Army Commander insisted on its replacement – was Dandruff.[22] Obviously Churchill's wartime directive concerning names for operations in which men might lose their lives – 'they ought not to be names of a frivolous character' – had been forgotten.[23]

For the moment, however, it was still Midget that preoccupied the Chiefs of Staff and even Ministers. This was scarcely surprising. As Morrison told the Cabinet on 25 June, a bill had been presented to the Persian Majlis providing for the death penalty as a punishment for interference with the running of the nationalised oil industry. The Cabinet agreed that the Foreign Secretary should 'give clear warning to the Persian Government that HMG would take a serious view'. This was a considerable understatement. In 1951 British public opinion still expected British governments to prevent or punish the maltreatment of their countrymen by foreigners. The Conservative opposition would have exploited any failure and, as Attlee had earlier told Morrison, he intended to call a General Election in October.[24]

More to the point, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Sir William Slim) told Ministers that 'full preparations had been made for the operation (Midget) for the evacuation of the British staff of the AIOC from Abadan'. The Iraqui Government had reluctantly agreed that Shaiba could be used, but only for 'protection of British lives'. Using Shaiba, Furlonge had explained to Morrison on 23 June, would make it possible to carry out Midget at 24 hours' notice.[25]

The Royal Air Force had not been idle during all those weeks of

argument about one plan or another. In May the Air Officer Commanding in Iraq, Air Vice-Marshal George Beamish, whose headquarters was at Habbaniya, had visited Shaiba to explain to the Station Commander that Shaiba would be reactivated to cope with the potential needs of crisis at Abadan, whether these turned out to be for intervention or for evacuation. Vampires, Meteors and Brigands from the Canal Zone and from Aden would be based at Shaiba. The old transit camp was to be refurbished (fortunately the Air Ministry Works Department maintained a team of civilians at Shaiba) and reopened. A party of soldiers would fly in to supplement the Nissen huts of the transit camp by erecting tents. And this late blossoming of Shaiba would be crowned by the appointment of Group-Captain Thompson as the new Station Commander. Squadron-Leader Hubbard's supersession was smoothed by his promotion to Wing-Commander – one of the two demanded by the new operational status of Shaiba.

The Navy had maintained their forward deployment, even if some Ministers hankered after allied reinforcement. On the afternoon of 25 June, at the meeting of the smaller group of Ministers, Rear-Admiral Clifford, Assistant Chief of Naval Staff, explained that a cruiser and a frigate were at Kuwait and another frigate at Basra. Then somebody who cannot have read many telegrams from Washington asked the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of Defence to suggest that the US Navy should make their presence felt near Abadan.[26] The next day Morrison did indeed ask the US Ambassador whether the Americans had any naval forces in the area. If so, he hoped they might show the flag more often and manifest their readiness to protect American tankers. It is perhaps to Morrison's credit that, in the Ambassador's words, he did not 'indicate that he expected any answer'.[27]

Meanwhile in the Gulf, on 25 June, Commodore Wallis had held another conference on board FLAMINGO, 'at which the various plans in existence were discussed'. Afterwards the Kuwait Oil Company gave an evening cocktail party ashore for the officers of FLAMINGO, MAURITIUS and MESSINA. Captain Wallis then spent the night in FLAMINGO in order to obtain the benefit of an air-conditioned cabin.[28]

On the 26th Morrison told the House of Commons that the Persian anti-sabotage bill would place the staff of the AIOC in an 'intolerable position'. The cruiser MAURITIUS had accordingly been ordered to proceed forthwith to the vicinity of Abadan.[29] *The Times* added that

MESSINA had arrived at Basra. Acheson, perhaps understandably from his point of view, told the Foreign Affairs Committee of the American House of Representatives (also on 26 June) that the situation in Iran was 'rapidly moving along the road to disaster'.[30]

When Attlee's small group of Ministers met on the same day, they agreed to instruct the AIOC to withdraw their tankers from Abadan and their staff from the oil-fields *to* Abadan. *The Times* had earlier reported Persian threats against the tanker DOLABELLA, which had sailed from Abadan without Persian clearance. Slim told Ministers that Midget could now be carried out at 21 hours' notice, but that a larger operation would still require six weeks' notice. Ministers authorised the taking-up of shipping from trade, if this was needed to accelerate readiness.[31]

By 27 June there were 25 British and some other tankers awaiting orders at the Outer Bar of the Shatt al Arab. Capper, the Consul-General at Khorramshahr, had reported Persian threats to use Persian warships to prevent tankers from leaving Abadan and SNOPG was authorised by the Admiralty to stop such interference once the tanker had left the quayside and was under way. MAURITIUS improved the occasion by holding an At Home for British officers before sailing for Abadan. This she did in spite of a protest from Capper that her voyage would be needless as well as provocative. The Foreign Office told him that, in view of Morrison's announcement in the House of Commons, MAURITIUS must proceed.[32] FLAMINGO remained to continue liaison with the merchant ships at the Outer Bar of the Shatt al Arab. This location was described by one naval officer as 'the sea equivalent of the centre of the Sahara desert'. On the 28th MAURITIUS took up moorings at buoys on the Iraqi side of the Shatt al Arab, opposite the Abadan refinery and about 200 yards away. FLAMINGO stayed where she was – to offer her protection to ships coming down the Shatt from Abadan and to prevent any Persian interference.[33]

These dispositions drew protests from the Persian Government, who also complained to the Iraqi Chargé d'Affaires on 28 June about the reinforcement of British troops at Habbaniya and Shaiba as well as about the presence of British warships in the Shatt al Arab. To lend emphasis to the last of these complaints the Persian frigate PALANG shifted her berth closer to MAURITIUS, whose crew were neither allowed to land at Abadan nor to obtain delivery of the fresh food, water and ice they wanted. The Regent of Iraq, however, told the Persian Ambassador in Bagdad that there were no British troops

at Shaiba.[34] The presence of No. 6 Squadron of Vampire aircraft, which had arrived at Shaiba, together with 6 Brigands from No. 8 Squadron, by the beginning of the month,[35] does not seem to have attracted attention, though they too were earmarked for possible use at Abadan.

The Times must by now have been given some hint of the ministerial decision – conveyed to the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East on 6 June – to dismiss Plan Y. The leading article of 28 June declared:

> to use force to protect the oil fields and, if necessary, to occupy South Persia until a new settlement can be obtained – has rightly been rejected.

That was the day when Drake, the AIOC general manager in Persia, who had been secretly flown from Basra to Ismailia, discussed the oil dispute with the British Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East. He was more categorical than his superior, Sir William Fraser, expressing the firm view that the British Government had only two options:

(1) to withdraw and abandon British assets to certain destruction;
(2) forcibly to intervene in order to hold and preserve these assets.[36]

Drake's prediction that destruction of British assets (presumably he was thinking of the oil wells in the hills, together with the Abadan refinery-complex and the linking pipelines) would be the *certain* result of British withdrawal represented an extreme view. He did not repeat it to the Cabinet in London, when he attended their meeting on 2 July.[37] Nor was it borne out by events. Once Mossadegh had been removed from office and a fresh oil agreement could be negotiated with a more reasonable Iranian government, the newly-formed consortium of oil companies sent a group of experts to Persia in February 1954 to conduct a survey: 'they found Abadan and the oilfields on the whole in good condition'.[38] When production was resumed in 1955, it almost reached the 1951 level and in later years greatly surpassed it. In June 1951, however, such a dire prediction from the responsible expert on the spot must have impressed the Commanders-in-Chief and probably strengthened their commitment to Plan Buccaneer.

The concept this plan embodied also had its supporters in London. On 28 June Morrison told the US Ambassador that Ministers had considered, so far without reaching any conclusion, the possibility of holding Abadan island and running the refinery on crude from

Kuwait.[39] In 1951 the Truman Administration could not complain, as would Eisenhower in 1956, of being kept in the dark about British intentions. On 29 June Churchill, who had (together with Eden) visited the Prime Minister on 27 June to discuss the Persian oil crisis, sent a personal message to President Truman:

> I feel it my duty to add to the representations His Majesty's Government are making to you about Persia my own strong appeal for your help.

Churchill, who told Attlee he was shocked by the attitude of the US Government, had hoped that Britain's active support for the Americans in Korea would be reciprocated by them in the Middle East. He also said that the arguments (with which he agreed) against trying to hold the oil-fields by force did not apply to Abadan itself. On receiving a copy of Churchill's message, Morrison expressed his appreciation by letter on 3 July, but the message elicited only a non-committal acknowledgment from Truman.[40]

The President's attitude reflected the discussion, on 27 June, of the Persian dispute by the United States National Security Council. The overriding preoccupation of those attending that meeting had been the supposed danger of Communism triumphing in Persia if Mossadegh did not get his way and maintain his authority:

> the United States should continue to urge the United Kingdom to avoid the use of military force in settling the oil controversy.[41]

Fortunately the US Ambassador in Tehran was more helpful, extracting from Mossadegh on 29 June a promise to withdraw the anti-sabotage bill from the Majlis. This assistance was doubly welcome from a diplomat often exposed to British criticism for talking more freely to the press than was congenial to the Foreign Office. As Shepherd had earlier reported, Henry F. Grady

> is intelligent and by no means unfriendly to us. But he is a vain man, he is desperately anxious to be the saviour of Persia in the same way that he believes himself to have been the saviour of Greece and, to a lesser extent, India.[42]

As June dragged to an end, the only good news was that King George VI was now convalescent. The *Sphere* struck a note of ambiguous optimism by publishing pictures of oil installations at Kuwait and a short text headed 'The Alternative to Abadan'. The *New Statesman* was predictably critical of government policy and

Morrison exposed himself to another dose by a message urging AIOC staff to remain at their posts. Although his message promised 'all practicable measures to protect you', it aroused little enthusiasm among the oilmen. The dangers that surrounded them had lasted too long. Drake himself, on Shepherd's advice, had left Persia on 25 June after receiving a letter from the Persian Oil Board accusing him of sabotage (at that date a potentially capital offence). Makki, the principal Persian delegate in Abadan and main scourge of the AIOC, had to be content with seizing Drake's car for his own use.[43] Production and the work to be done had sharply declined, the future of British staff in Persia seemed increasingly dubious and their daily lives were vexed by Persian pinpricks. Departing British subjects were harassed by Persian customs officers. The mails were liable to interference and delay. Morale, whatever the Company might say in London, was sinking – particularly in the oil-fields inland.[44]

It might have been lower still if they had known what was happening at Fayid. 'The most unkindest cut of all' came from the Commanders-in-Chief, who now declared themselves opposed to any assault-landing at Abadan. Tides, currents and beaches all presented awkward problems. The Commanders-in-Chief would accordingly prefer an overland advance by troops from Shaiba. It would thus be necessary to obtain unrestricted rights of passage for British troops through Iraqui territory.[45] That was on 30 June, 16 weeks after the original request from the Foreign Office that the Chiefs of Staff should 'consider the use of actual force'.[46]

7 Decisions, Decisions

If the worst came to the worst, the Government should not exclude the possibility of a forcible occupation of Abadan.

Winston Churchill[1]

Accuracy and precision are hard to achieve when writing about Plan Buccaneer. So much is still concealed from the inquisitive reader. The plan itself was set out in an explanatory memorandum (CP(51) 172) considered by the Cabinet on 2 July 1951, but closed to historians until the year 2002. So are the two PREM files containing Attlee's papers about the Persian oil crisis. The minutes of the Defence Committee for 1951 have been diligently weeded and there are gaps even in the files of the more liberal Foreign Office. Strangest of all, some DEFE 4 files recording the meetings of the Chiefs of Staff were released by the Public Record Office in 1982 only to be withdrawn by the Ministry of Defence in 1989.

Just what is being camouflaged and why remains uncertain. Forty years of drastic change in the disposition, equipment and tactics of the British armed forces have drained the secrets of 1951 of any remaining military importance. Politically, more than enough documents have been left intact to refute the afterthoughts of Attlee's reminiscences, to give offence to Iranian patriots and to cast serious doubt on the competence of British military planning and staff work in 1951. Naturally there may be revelations in the year 2002. The record in DEFE 4 45 of the meeting of the Chiefs of Staff on 11 July 1951, for instance, contains an intriguing reference to Lethal as a plan (not otherwise described) to be put into effect only if the forces implementing Midget suffered a complete reverse. On the whole, however, we already know enough to expect fuller particulars and altered shades of emphasis rather than anything calling for fundamental reappraisal. The canvas may be tattered – by documents lost (ships' logs, for instance) as well as by documents withheld – but the picture has survived.

The gaps in our knowledge are still irksome, not least when we come to July, that month of conflicting decisions. For the 2nd, for instance, we have a fairly full account of the conclusions reached by the Cabinet, but not the text of the plan they were discussing.

Ministers had begun by hearing what Drake,[2] the AIOC General Manager in Persia, had to say. He surprised them by declaring, 'it would be mistaken to follow a policy of gradually withdrawing the Company's British staff from the oilfields into Abadan.'

Not only had Attlee's small group of Ministers decided on 26 June to instruct the Company to follow this policy, but it reflected Sir William Fraser's preference for getting his staff out of harm's way before any military operations were attempted. Shepherd had even suggested that the withdrawal of British oil-workers might be a better way of putting pressure on the Persian Government than any resort to force.

Morrison countered Drake by quoting the opinion of the Acting British Consul at Ahwaz that 'the morale of the British staff at the oilfields was far from high'. This Drake denied, though he would clearly have liked British military protection of the oilfields, which the Chiefs of Staff pronounced to be impracticable, even if British staff were to be concentrated at only two or three of them. Even so, Drake argued, operations at Abadan could still continue, if military support was available there. Drake must have been persuasive, for Ministers agreed to advise the AIOC to discontinue the gradual evacuation of their staff from the oilfields and to ask the Chiefs of Staff to consider protecting a later evacuation.

Then Ministers turned their attention to what must have been Plan Buccaneer – a large-scale military operation to seize and hold Abadan island. The First Sea Lord, Admiral Lord Fraser of North Cape,[3] spoke for the Chiefs of Staff.

> If preparatory action were authorised forthwith, the leading elements of the force could reach Abadan about 19th August . . . Much of the planning work had been done, and most of the remaining preparations would involve overt action, such as the commissioning of a number of amphibious warfare craft and the passage of legislation authorising the selective retention of national servicemen. A number of other difficulties had still to be resolved, including the choice of an assembly area for the ships. . . .

Ministers cannot have been enchanted to hear, over a hundred days after the first request for a plan, that action could only start after another fifty days devoted to public and politically embarrassing preparations. Their decision – that the Chiefs of Staff should continue discreet preparatory planning while Ministers gave further consideration to the political implications – was a milder response than the Chiefs of Staff deserved.[4]

That Ministers should feel the need to consider further the political implications of forcible intervention at Abadan seems, at first sight, to require explanation. After all, Morrison had begun to think about the use of force in March. The Americans had been advising against it since April. Attlee's small group of ministers had been watching the situation, ready to authorise urgent action, since the beginning of May. The Cabinet had concluded on 10 May that 'intervention for the protection of property . . . might have serious political repercussions'. The House of Commons had touched on the issue in their debate of 21 June and there had been a private and franker discussion on 27 June between Attlee and Morrison, for the Government, and Churchill and Eden for the Opposition. How could the Cabinet, on 2 July, require more time to ponder the political implications?

The main reason, of course, was that most British Ministers, whatever their party, dislike taking difficult decisions before they have to. Moreover, even at the beginning of July, the use of force to defend commercial interests was clearly not seen, as Attlee later insisted, as 'quite out of the question'. Admittedly the crisis with which Ministers were confronted had been remarkably volatile. In April, when British subjects had been killed in rioting at Abadan, and towards the end of June, when the Persian anti-sabotage bill seemed to threaten British employees of the AIOC with the death penalty, the issues had been more clear-cut than in the weeks of quibbling over the nature of nationalisation. It may have occurred to at least some Ministers that further Persian violence might yet justify a British use of force to save lives and, coincidentally, to protect property.

This was a thought that did not escape the Chiefs of Staff. The elaboration of Plan Buccaneer had not prevented further refinement of Plan Midget for the protection of British lives. On 3 July the Defence Committee of the Cabinet discussed the proposal the Chiefs had made to strengthen the forces allotted to this operation by adding the Guards Brigade (3rd Grenadiers, 3rd Coldstream and 1st Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders) who were then in Libya.[5] Two tank landing ships with tanks and heavy equipment would be sent from Suez to Bahrain. Later on three ships with motor transport and stores would join them. Small advance parties of soldiers would also take some stores to Shaiba.

Bahrain, halfway down the Gulf, was some 300 miles from Abadan. Even Mina al Ahmadi in Kuwait, though much nearer than Bahrain, was further from Abadan than was Basra. As a base for

British forces, however, the advantages of Basra's proximity had to be balanced against the much greater political independence of Iraq. In 1951 both Bahrain and Kuwait were British-protected states. Their external relations were conducted by Britain and their small populations gave little trouble to the ruling Amirs, who paid more attention to the advice of the British Political Agent. Oil had yet to create the wealth and influence which Kuwait, even more than Bahrain, now enjoys.

Iraq too had oil, but she had more than ten times the population of Kuwait and a turbulent political history: seven *coups d'état* since independence in 1930 and a series of riots since the one that destroyed the Treaty of Portsmouth Bevin had negotiated in 1948. Bonds of mutual interest linked the Iraqui royal family and their conservative supporters to Britain, but it was not in the interests of either party to strain those links – which included British control of two Iraqui airfields – to breaking point.

Nevertheless, hopefully from Shaiba, perhaps from Kuwait, the first wave of the Midget force would be launched: now with three battalions instead of two. The Defence Committee, of which Morrison was naturally a member, agreed.[6] When he got back to the Foreign Office, he reminded his staff that the Cabinet had taken no decision about the use of force, but added 'C. of S. must be lively'. Probably he already knew he would receive a minute the following day from Attlee, asking for a paper setting out the arguments for and against undertaking a military operation to protect British *property*.[7]

As Ministers moved with due deliberation towards a decision, there was no slackening in the pace of events elsewhere. In the Shatt al Arab, as *The Times* reported, the crew of MAURITIUS began the month on half-rations while they waited for victualling barges to arrive from Basra and Capper tried to persuade the Persian authorities to lift their embargo on supplies from Abadan. It was a minor incident, a fly imprisoned in amber, that illustrated the difference between that era and our own. A British cruiser, despatched to show an unfriendly flag, nevertheless expected to purchase whatever she needed from the very people she was sent to overawe. Later on, of course, the RAF arranged a regular airlift of fruit and vegetables from the Levant[8] and landing craft of the Royal Navy operated a weekly delivery service. The Persians, true trailblazers in their refusal to permit any contact between the ship and the Persian shore, nevertheless allowed almost daily visits to the cruiser by the British Consul-General, even though the Persian Government would later,

at the instance of their representatives in Abadan, declare Capper *persona non grata*.

On many of these visits Capper met Drake, whose base was now at Basra, on board MAURITIUS. Officially, Mason, who had stayed at Abadan, was in charge of the Company's affairs in Persia, but Drake remained actively involved, exchanging messages with London through HM ships after the Company's cyphers had been compromised in a Persian raid on their Tehran office. Drake himself continued to favour 'strong British action' and on 20 July asked if he could be given a temporary commission, preferably naval, so that he could himself take part in any protective measures.[9]

Abadan itself was visited by a team from the British Embassy. The Counsellor, George Middleton, had been accompanied by the two Service Attachés and reported his impressions on 4 July. All the women and children had now left and the remaining British staff were under great tension in what was virtually a state of siege. The British staff remained loyal to the AIOC, but were thoroughly fed up and determined never to return to Persia once they were allowed to leave. They were critical of the policy pursued by the British Government and, still more so, by the US Government. The only people, Persians included, in Abadan who did not realise that the withdrawal of the British staff was now inevitable were the team from Tehran, led by the detested Makki, who were supposed to be taking control of the AIOC installations. They thought the British were bluffing.[10]

If they could not visit Abadan, only swelter in the damp heat offshore, the crew of MAURITIUS did at least enjoy a commanding view of the objective. Behind the island's curving waterfront, with its many jetties, there stretched the metallic jumble of a refinery that had been built and extended, piecemeal and over many years, until it was the world's largest: a forest of tall chimneys; huge clusters of oil tanks; a catalytic cracker resembling, in photographs at least and to the untutored eye, a space rocket launcher; uncounted miles of pipe snaking this way and that. Around the installations and even mingling with them, the Company had built enough housing for a small town, together with schools, hospitals, clubs, hostels; an airfield and a cricket field; clinics and all the apparatus needed for the provision of water, electricity and drainage. There was also, regrettably inaccessible from MAURITIUS, a much-needed ice factory.

Many of the services provided by the Company had been extended to the more populous residential districts inhabited by most of its Persian employees. Unfortunately the paternalism of the AIOC,

partly as a consequence of wartime difficulties and the hectic pace of the refinery's expansion, had not stretched as far as the provision of housing for most of their Persian workers. Leaving this task to Persian private enterprise had regrettable consequences. Much of the accommodation thus generated was ramshackle and nearly all of it was overcrowded. On the fringes were real slums. Even if all these districts were properly the responsibility of the Persian municipal council, the contrast with the European quarters the Company had built offered an easy target for nationalist propaganda and was regularly demonstrated to foreign journalists by conducted tours. In July 1951 this mattered more than in previous years.

The Egyptian Navy, chose the first of that month to signal that things were no longer what they used to be by stopping and searching the British freighter EMPIRE ROACH: as odd a name for a ship as Dandruff for a military operation. In itself it was a trifling incident, but it fuelled the indignation which the Persian oil dispute had excited on the right wing of the British Conservative Party. On 2 July, for instance, their most influential organ, the *Daily Telegraph*, published an indignant letter from Duff Cooper, once First Lord of the Admiralty in the Chamberlain government, again a wartime minister under Churchill and, from 1944 to 1947, Ambassador in Paris. Having denounced the handling of the Persian dispute by the Labour government, Duff Cooper declared, with a pompous absurdity probably unrecognised by many of his readers:

> We have only for one moment to 'stretch out a terrible right arm' and we should hear no more from Persia but a scampering of timid feet.

Other letters in favour of forcible action were published on subsequent days and reinforced by leading articles on 8 and 9 July. The latter trumpeted: 'The refinery is ours. The Persians have no more right to it than they have to the Albert Memorial.'

Even Conservative leaders 'with the exception of Lord Salisbury' were censured for seeming 'to acquiesce in this display of impotence in Persia'. The *Daily Telegraph*, it should be noted, had a larger circulation than the milder *Times*.

Before this article appeared, Attlee, supported by Morrison and Shinwell, received Churchill, Eden and Salisbury for another confidential discussion of the Persian oil crisis on 4 July. Eden suggested that, once the International Court of Justice had delivered their judgement (as they did on the following day), a military move might

be in order.[11] In Tehran on 2 July, Shepherd spent nearly two hours with the Shah, now expecting to have his appendix out, an operation for which the State Department had provided three American doctors and three nurses, in a few days' time. The Shah thought the situation produced by the oil dispute was dangerous, but did not believe he could get rid of Mossadegh until the latter's policy was seen to have failed. He warned Shepherd that, if Britain took military action, the Persians would be unable to refrain from resisting.[12]

This was not what was worrying Acheson in Washington. He feared that 'armed intervention by Britain at Abadan would, in all probability, lead to armed intervention by the Soviet Union in Azerbaijan'. Because it was now the Fourth of July, he complained of 'a British declaration of independence'.[13] Perhaps he had been irritated by Churchill's message to Truman, which Churchill showed on the 5th to General Eisenhower (then Supreme Allied Commander in Europe), asking for his support with the President.[14] As it happened, that was also the date when an interim order by the International Court of Justice (promptly rejected by the Iranians) called on both parties to do nothing to aggravate the dispute.

Application to the International Court and military planning were not the only arrows in the British quiver. The AIOC had already, before the end of June, met the Government's wishes by instructing tanker masters not to sign the receipts demanded by the Persians. These embodied a written acknowledgement that all oil taken aboard belonged to the new National Iranian Oil Company. Instead masters were ordered to pump any oil already loaded back into the tanks on shore and to sail empty. Thereafter the British technical staff still in control at Abadan progressively reduced the output of the refinery.

These measures did not impress Grady, the US Ambassador in Tehran. On the first of July he told the State Department:

> If the British think they can, as some directors [presumably of the AIOC] have said, bring the Iranians to their senses by having the plant closed down, they are making a tragic mistake.[15]

Some Britons did say this was what they believed, but the military continued their planning. On 7 July SNOPG was told that three battalions would be employed if Plan Midget had to be implemented in order to rescue British subjects. If it were then decided to hold Abadan, a further three battalions would be needed and could presumably be flown in, as the first wave would have secured the island's airfield.[16] On the 9th Captain Hetherington, RN, a senior

staff officer at Middle East HQ, flew to Shaiba in a Meteor 7 fighter, attended a conference in MAURITIUS and sensibly spent the night in FLAMINGO.[17] The latter was then off Abadan, having relieved MAURITIUS, so that the cruiser could spend a few days at Basra and give her crew a run ashore.

In London Sir John Slessor, Chief of Air Staff, told the Defence Committee on 10 July that, by sending all available transport aircraft and certain chartered aircraft to the Middle East, it had now been possible to enlarge the size and the objective of Operation Midget. Three battalions would arrive on D-Day, two more on D+4, another on D+6. By 20 July a tank landing ship carrying guns and tanks would be available. The Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East now thought that, if this force succeeded in occupying Abadan, then it could also hold the island. The Army Commander, General Robertson, was at present in Bagdad discussing the use of Iraqi facilities with the Prime Minister of Iraq.[18]

The Chiefs of Staff had thus overtaken the Foreign Office, who were still plodding, a little hesitantly, towards a similar, but more distant objective. On that same 10th of July a working party considered a paper submitted by Leslie Fry – until independence a member of that *corps d'élite*, the Indian Political Service, later to be Minister at Budapest during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, in 1951 Assistant in the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office. His suggestions comprised an announcement of the withdrawal of the British staff of the AIOC from the oilfields; a request that the Security Council of the United Nations should endorse the judgement of the Hague Court; an early approach to Bahrain, Kuwait and Iraq for permission to deploy British troops in their territory. The working party recommended only the first two ideas and General Robertson was already in Bagdad.[19]

If Fry's proposals did not look further ahead than the approach to Iraq, Sir John Slessor's statement, while implying that the first three battalions would be flown to Shaiba, did not specify how they would continue their journey to Abadan. Was General Robertson now attempting to obtain Iraqi permission for British troops landed at Shaiba to advance through Iraqi territory overland – to the extent that such a course was geographically possible – to Abadan? If so, there could have been logistical snags as well as political obstacles. The RAF had made sure there was enough accommodation at Shaiba for three battalions, but motor transport was inadequate. For the 16-mile journey to embarkation at Basra a shuttle service might have

been acceptable or extra transport could have been borrowed from British companies in the area. The much longer journey, over roads that were little more than desert tracks, to the point on Iraqi territory that was nearest to Abadan might have made it necessary to ship in extra vehicles beforehand. The need for such preparations would have made both quick action and surprise harder to achieve.

Planning, however, remained flexible. When the Chiefs of Staff discussed Midget on 11 July, they decided that the possibility of flying troops straight in to the airfield of Abadan needed to be reconsidered. Capper had reported that the airfield was not guarded. Indeed, the nearest Persian soldiers were a mile away and spent all their time gazing across the Shatt al Arab.[20]

Whatever their intentions on this point, the Chiefs of Staff seemed to have waited too long before disclosing their plan. On 11 July Morrison circulated a memorandum to the Cabinet explaining that Attlee and he had considered the question of the use of force to protect the Company's property as distinct from the lives of their British employees. 'Our conclusion . . . was that force had better be ruled out.' There was too much risk of alienating American public opinion, indeed world public opinion. Such an operation might even put British nationals in jeopardy, cause damage to the Company's installations and permanently prejudice the Persians against the AIOC. Instead, so Morrison proposed, there should be an announcement of the phased withdrawal of AIOC personnel. This would bring 'Persians in general to their senses' and hasten a change of government.[21]

The risk of alienating American opinion was real enough, but it would be interesting to know whether Morrison sincerely believed that withdrawing the British staff of the AIOC would bring the Persians to their senses or whether he was simply yielding to pressure from Attlee to devise a face-saving formula for the Cabinet. Shepherd had suggested, as early as 14 May, that withdrawing British staff would be preferable to the use of force (an expedient he always opposed), but he had latterly laid rather more emphasis on the need for Mossadegh to be replaced before agreement would be possible. The Americans disliked both notions. Acheson, who suggested to Franks on 5 July that the President might send Averell Harriman to Persia as his personal representative and mediator, had then argued that, if the British left Persia, they were unlikely ever to get back.[22]

The Shah, who sent for Shepherd on 12 July, a week after his operation, again insisted that Mossadegh would have to be got rid of

– if only he knew how to do it. Events would justify Shepherd's acceptance of this *sine qua non*, but his unwelcome pessimism may explain why Morrison had to defend Shepherd, in a minute of 4 July, against Attlee's criticism.[23]

Morrison's memorandum on the use of force was discussed by the Cabinet on 12 July. Some Ministers (probably Shinwell was one of them) thought that:

> 'evacuation would be regarded throughout the Middle East, as well as in the United States, as a capitulation to Persian pressure.'

The Cabinet nevertheless agreed that they must decline to contemplate 'military action in Persia, on a larger scale than that necessary for the protection of British lives'. Ministers also agreed to defer any announcement of their decision on phased withdrawal.[24]

It was a curious formula. Whether inadvertently or by design, the criterion adopted by the Cabinet for judging the political acceptability of military operations in Persia was no longer the distinction between saving lives and preserving property rights. The touchstone was now the 'scale' of the operation. Did it occur to any of the consenting ministers that Midget, as redefined by Sir John Slessor on 10 July, might pass their test?

8 Second Thoughts

In view of the Persian Government's confiscation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's property, the 1st Loyals were kept standing by to move to Persia if required; and on several occasions, jeeps, support weapons, ammunition and stores were loaded on to aircraft.
Dean[1]

In his interesting account of the Persian oil crisis Louis treats the negative conclusion reached by the Cabinet in their meeting of 12 July as a decisive turning point.[2] No doubt this was what Attlee intended, but the course of military movements and the evolution of military planning during the rest of July reflected little perception of any fundamental change in British policy. On the contrary it was then that Buccaneer almost came to the boil.

When FLAMINGO relieved MAURITIUS off Abadan on 11 July, so that the crew of the latter ship might be given shore leave at Basra, the situation was regarded as tense. The Persians probably thought so too. On 10 July they had imposed a curfew: between midnight and 0400 on Abadan island; from 1900 to 0600 on river traffic in Persian waters. The Shatt al Arab is a broad estuary, uniting the waters of both the Tigris and the Euphrates, but only a few hundred yards from FLAMINGO the Persian frigate PALANG was moored. On the Persian shore were Persian soldiers and guns, as well as a greater number of excited and unfriendly Persian civilians. Bold men, under cover of the dark, might attempt a surprise. So the Captain wrote in his Night Order Book that the Officer of the Watch must maintain 'constant vigilance' and had 'full permission to take whatever immediate action is necessary.' 'When the circumstances permit' the Captain should be consulted 'before fire is opened or grenades dropped', but WHEN IN DOUBT GO TO ACTION STATIONS':[3] Did Ministers, one wonders, realise just how alert British outposts were?

While Morrison, on 16 July, was coming under fire in the House of Commons – 'every successive statement he makes to the House reeks of weakness'[4] – the Chiefs of Staff decided that the leaflets intended for Midget should also be employed in Buccaneer. The Foreign Office had produced a revised version omitting the original under-

taking that British forces would be withdrawn with the British subjects they had come to rescue.[5]

Nor were the continuing military preparations confined to planning or conducted only behind closed doors in Whitehall. From Malta, the main base of what was still a substantial Mediterranean Fleet, reliefs and reinforcements were despatched to the Persian Gulf. *The Times* reported on 17 July the sailing of four destroyers – ostensibly for Akaba, the Jordanian port on the eastern horn of the Red Sea where the Lancashire Fusiliers had been stationed. Another departure noted in the same issue was that of the tank landing ship DIEPPE, bound for the Gulf to relieve her sister, HMS MESSINA. DIEPPE carried six assault landing craft, each capable of transporting 30 fully-equipped infantrymen. One of the midshipmen seconded from other ships to DIEPPE to take charge of these craft was David Randall, who had previously gone to much trouble to be able to do his National Service afloat, for the Navy accepted few conscripts. With a nice touch of salty irony these privileged conscripts were then mustered as members of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve.[6]

In London 16 July brought a telegram from the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East strongly recommending the early implementation of Buccaneer. Not only were they worried about the likely impact on British prestige throughout the Middle East of any capitulation at Abadan, but they did not want to impair the morale of British forces earmarked for Buccaneer by keeping them for ever at short notice. On 18 July Field Marshal Sir William Slim told Attlee's ministerial group that Buccaneer could be carried out on 27 July. The tank landing craft should be moved to Basra and, if the operation was needed, three battalions would be flown to Shaiba 48 hours in advance.[7] This remarkable curtailment of the notice required (nine days instead of seven weeks) naturally prompts the question: was this still the same plan as that discussed by the Cabinet on 2 July?

Until the files now closed are opened next century, we cannot be sure, but it does seem likely that what the Commanders-in-Chief and the Chiefs of Staff were now recommending bore some resemblance to the expanded Midget: three battalions on D-Day, two more on D+4 and one more on D+6. This total of six battalions (together with a few tanks, guns and sappers) was also the same as that contemplated on 17 May for Plan X. It had then been suggested that less notice would be needed if the troops were drawn from Tripoli rather than the Canal Zone[8] and, on 3 July, the Defence Committee

of the Cabinet had been told that the extra three battalions an expanded Midget would need might be furnished by the Guards Brigade at Tripoli.[9] What made the difference was the tense political situation in Egypt. British troops withdrawn from that country – as some of them would still have to be – would need almost immediate replacement. Libya, then still ruled by King Mohammed Idris Al-Senussi, basked in relative tranquillity, eighteen years before the eruption of Gadaffi.

It was not only ministerial readiness to listen to new ideas from the Chiefs of Staff that suggested the opposition the Cabinet had expressed on 12 July to the use of force had sensibly diminished by 18 July. On the afternoon of that day Churchill, Eden and Salisbury again called on Attlee, who was supported by Morrison and Gaitskell, in the Prime Minister's room at the House of Commons. The discussion was summarised in a handwritten minute by Strang, but he does not say whether he was present or merely recording what he had heard from Morrison. The visitors were first told what Morrison had suggested to his colleagues that morning: that the time had come to withdraw the British staff of the AIOC from the oilfields inland to the island of Abadan.

Choosing the right moment to begin an evacuation is always a tricky problem, but Morrison's proposal was only the latest wobble in a saga of ministerial indecision and confusion. On 21 June Morrison had told the House of Commons: 'we are certainly not seeking to evacuate the oilfields'.[10] On 26 June Ministers agreed to instruct the AIOC to withdraw their staff from the oil-fields to Abadan.[11] On 30 June *The Times* reported Morrison, in a message to AIOC staff, as urging them to remain and promising protection. On 2 July Drake persuaded the Cabinet that gradual evacuation from the oilfields should be suspended.[12] By this time, of course, a good many had already gone. On 23 May Sir William Fraser had estimated the British staff in the oil-fields at over 800, but on 6 July the *Daily Telegraph* reported there were only 620 left there and a further 1283 at Abadan out of Fraser's figure of nearly 1700.[13] This rate of decrease did not satisfy the General Manager of the Abadan refinery, who was quoted in *The Times* of 13 July as declaring that evacuation was being speeded up.

Meanwhile Morrison had proposed to his colleagues on 11 July that he should announce a phased withdrawal of AIOC personnel. On the following day the Cabinet decided that the announcement should be deferred, only to learn from Morrison on the 16th that,

even in the absence of any announcement, the AIOC were withdrawing substantial numbers of their staff from the oil-fields.[14] Naturally evacuation was an issue on which even the Company's senior executives had different views, but they did not change their minds as often as did Ministers.

On the afternoon of 18 July Churchill tried to persuade them to make one more change. He began by saying that he would not object to staff being withdrawn from the oil-fields, provided a nucleus could be kept at Abadan. Withdrawal from Abadan, on the other hand, would make it more difficult to justify a decision to send in British troops – an interesting contrast with Fraser's preference for getting his staff out of the way *before* any military intervention. Churchill went on to ask whether even the withdrawal from the oil-fields could not be postponed until the three British battalions were in position at Shaiba. In answer to a question from Eden, Morrison admitted that sending these battalions to Shaiba would be 'stretching the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty'.[15]

Whether or not Morrison remembered that the Regent of Iraq had told the British Ambassador on 1 July that the British would be fully justified morally in asking to use Shaiba, he is not recorded as mentioning it on this occasion.[16]

At the Cabinet of 19 July the Prime Minister proceeded to rationalise this process of procrastination. He explained that the withdrawal of British staff from the oil-fields could no longer be delayed. Indeed, as Morrison had told the Cabinet on 16 July, it was already happening. Actually to announce withdrawal, however, might cause disturbances, so preparations were now being made to provide, at short notice, military protection for British lives at Abadan.

> The force available was now sufficiently large to hold the island for a time, even against Persian opposition and . . . would thus be able, if desired, to protect the continuing operation of the refinery.

Further Cabinet consideration would, however, be needed 'before sanctioning military action for any purpose other than the protection of British lives'.[17]

The next day Morrison spelled it out in a memorandum he circulated to the Cabinet:

> The Chiefs of Staff have now come to the conclusion . . . that, once the measures now being taken in preparation for Operation Buccaneer, including the flying-in of three battalions of troops to

> Shaiba, have been completed, it would be feasible at short notice to occupy and hold Abadan against any opposition which the Persians unaided would be likely to be able to mount.

His memorandum set out the arguments for and against this course of action and envisaged running the Abadan refinery with Kuwaiti crude. When the Cabinet had considered this, they agreed on 23 July to defer their decision 'whether military force should be used to hold and operate the AIOC refinery at Abadan'.[18]

If one were to credit, as some historians have, the afterthoughts of Attlee,

> It was impossible for us as a Labour Government to say you couldn't nationalise the oil industry . . . to think you could revert to old form and act as a big nation throwing in its force to defend its commercial interests,

then, ever since 12 July, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet had been engaging in meaningless ritual whenever they discussed military options with the Chiefs of Staff or approved the preparatory deployment of British forces.

The minds of dead politicians are hard to read, but this is not the impression left by a perusal of the documents. Nor do these support Churchill's charge that Ministers were only bluffing. It is easier to believe that, having at last been offered a military plan that began to make some kind of sense, Ministers had decided to keep their options open. If the Persians had been sufficiently provocative to provide a passable excuse, the decisions later taken by Ministers might have been rather different. What Attlee remembered in his old age – that the use of force to defend commercial interests was 'quite out of the question' – cannot be reconciled with the record made at the time of what Ministers said, of the instructions they issued and of the actions they authorised.[19]

On 18 July, for instance, a telegram from the Foreign Office to Shepherd at Tehran gave a clear account of ministerial intentions at that moment. The withdrawal of British staff from the oil-fields inland, where conditions were becoming unbearable, would begin on 23 July. As these British subjects would have to pass through Abadan, even to stop a day or two, on their way out of the country, it would be obvious to the Persians what was happening. The policy of withdrawal would, moreover, be announced to the House of Com-

mons on 20 July. The sight of the British refugees and the realisation of their purpose in leaving might result in serious disturbances in Abadan. The Commanders in Chief had accordingly been authorised to make the necessary preparations to implement Plan Buccaneer (the new name, the telegram explained, for the revised Plan Midget). These preparations would include flying three battalions into Shaiba on 26 July.

This was arguably the moment at which Plan Buccaneer most nearly approached implementation. If three battalions had gone to Shaiba, that would have been a forward deployment which could scarcely be concealed or denied: a commitment and a challenge. When the Chiefs of Staff discussed the plan on 16 July, they expressed concern lest sending troops to Shaiba might actually stir up trouble at Abadan.[20] No harm had resulted from a similar move in 1946, but the circumstances were rather different in 1951 and the political repercussions would have been hard to predict.

Fortunately or unfortunately, Ministers had decided that the move to Shaiba should follow, rather than precede, the announcement of withdrawal from the fields and the actual initiation of that process. Churchill had suggested on the 18th that it would be militarily sounder to have the troops at Shaiba before the withdrawal began. On the other hand, the only chance of escaping American censure was for the movement of British troops to take place *after* the eruption of trouble in Abadan. That might mean putting the safety of British subjects at risk.

The timetable envisaged by Ministers was a compromise intended to minimise the risks at either extreme: American displeasure or British civilian casualties. It hung rather precariously together and it was vulnerable to unforeseen delays. When the Chiefs of Staff considered Buccaneer on 17 July, Slessor said the troops could reach Abadan in 24 hours, but it would be better to await the arrival in the Persian Gulf of the landing ships with guns and tanks (expected on 20 July). Ideally 26 or 27 July would be the earliest dates for Buccaneer, but evacuation of the fields could still be ordered on 21 July. All the Chiefs of Staff favoured fixing a definite date for Buccaneer without waiting to see what would happen in the talks which Harriman, the American mediator, had begun in Tehran.

Shepherd was the first to suggest a snag. It would, he argued, be needlessly provocative to choose a Friday (20 July) for announcing withdrawal from the oil-fields. This was, rather surprisingly, ac-

cepted: Monday 23 July became the new starting date and the other dates were adjusted accordingly. When the Chiefs of Staff were told, they decided it would be undesirable to send three battalions to Shaiba before it was clear that Buccaneer would be sanctioned.[21] By the 23rd, however, the American mediator, Harriman, who had arrived in Tehran on 15 July, had asked for a further postponement of the planned withdrawal of British staff from the oil-fields, because he believed he was making progress in his talks with the Persians. Neither he nor Acheson (who had earlier advised against the withdrawal of British staff) had been told about Buccaneer.[22]

This seems (the surviving documents are not explicit) to have been the straw that broke Buccaneer's back. Initially only a 24-hour postponement was conceded and the Chiefs of Staff responded by putting Buccaneer units on 24 hours' notice. They had previously been at *three hours'* notice. The Chiefs still took Buccaneer very seriously, telling the Commanders-in-Chief that, if circumstances forced them to deploy troops to Shaiba at short notice, they should tell HM Ambassador at Bagdad as soon as they reached their decision.

It is not clear how this 24-hour postponement became an indefinite delay, but on 25 July Morrison unctuously informed the House of Commons that the AIOC staff were making a valuable contribution by staying at their posts and supporting with such fortitude the indignities and hardships of their present situation.[23] The staff had been expecting a different announcement and the delay, so Capper reported, had a very lowering effect on their morale.[24] On the 26th the Cabinet welcomed the Persian offer, which Harriman had extracted, to resume negotiations and agreed to send a Minister provided that the Persians ceased their interference with the staff of the AIOC.[25] Once these negotiations had begun it is readily understandable that a preparatory deployment of Buccaneer forces could no longer be contemplated.

These forces, so the Chiefs of Staff had agreed on 20 July, were to be launched in three phases or waves. Each would comprise three battalions. The first would be provided by 3 Infantry Brigade (less one battalion, but plus one battalion from the 1st Guards Brigade). The second wave would be the remainder of the Guards Brigade, plus most of the battalion then at Akaba. The third wave (a relatively new component of Buccaneer) would comprise 2 Infantry Brigade from Cyprus (less one battalion, but plus a battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment from the Canal Zone).[26]

There was reason enough to postpone the execution of this ambitious project. What is surprising is that Ministers should have taken such a bold decision in the first place. Perhaps they had expected Harriman to fail or, at the very least, that the outcome of his talks would be apparent well before 26 July. When that assumption was disproved a change of plan became inevitable. Furlonge had also prepared the ground with his submission of 22 July reporting that Franks, the Ambassador in Washington, Gladwyn Jebb, the United Kingdom Representative to the United Nations in New York and Shepherd had all advised against the use of force to protect British oil interests.[27] This had, of course, been Shepherd's consistent view, even after British subjects had been killed in the Abadan riots of 12 April. It may well have been Shepherd's personality – stiff, reserved, formal – rather than his views which irritated Americans, just as the exuberant self-confidence of McGhee sometimes grated on the British.

Shepherd still had a last surprise in store for writers intent on depicting him as a conventional stereotype. Seven years after he had retired (his final post was Ambassador to Poland) his elder sister and constant companion, Mrs Campbell-Schneider, died in 1960 at the age of 84. Shepherd, 67 years old and a confirmed bachelor, promptly got married. He deserves a biographer who would show us the man behind the official mask.

Ministers, of course, had only deferred (on 23 July) their consideration of the question: 'whether military force should be used to hold and operate the AIOC refinery at Abadan'.[28] Those nearer the scene resigned themselves to further suspense and continued their plans and preparations. On 21 July HMS MAURITIUS had been relieved off Abadan by the smaller cruiser EURYALUS, to which Commodore Wallis and his small staff now transferred. The Persian frigate PALANG piped as EURYALUS passed her and the salute was returned. EURYALUS had spent much of the previous month at Malta, where she had disembarked her Persian midshipmen. A token attempt had also been made to improve the cruiser's ventilation, but Captain Oglesby, then a midshipman in EURYALUS, remembers air-conditioning as confined to the sickbay. Extra stores and equipment were embarked, including a number of camp beds. These were presumably intended for the strong detachment (two officers and 40 other ranks) from the 1st Battalion, The Lancashire Fusiliers, who joined EURYALUS at Bahrain on 20 July. Even the latest improvements to the timing of Midget or Buccaneer might leave an awkward

interval between the emergence of a serious threat to the lives of British subjects in Abadan and the arrival of the first three British battalions. If ships' landing parties were to fill the gap, they needed strengthening. This decision had to be personally approved by Attlee – an instance of the tight control he was now maintaining.[29] But neither sailors nor soldiers can have been at all comfortable off Abadan when the thermometer reached 123° in the shade that July.

At the War Office in London a conscientious civil servant did his best to protect other soldiers against a different form of discomfort. Having first obtained Treasury sanction, he asked the Foreign Office on 23 July to arrange for substantial funds to be avaiiable in both Basra and Kuwait in case they might be needed by Buccaneer forces.[30]

The 23rd, which had seen the War Office actually taking thought for the future needs of soldiers, proved a less auspicious day for Capper, the Consul-General at Khorramshahr. His launch (then conveying his Vice-Consul) was boarded by Persian officials, who seized a trunk containing personal effects which Capper was sending to Basra en route for England.[31] The incident was reported by the *Daily Telegraph*, which also carried, on the 25th, the news that MAURITIUS, though relieved off Abadan, was staying in the Gulf, at Mina al Ahmadi in Kuwait. The frigate WILD GOOSE, having completed her refit at Gibraltar, returned to the Gulf on 30 July, when she had a rendezvous with the newly-arrived EURYALUS before proceeding to Basra.[32]

In London, as *The Times* had reported on the 19th, the Prime Minister was contemplating a little trip to more civilised foreign parts. He had accepted an invitation from the Norwegian Government to visit their country. He would be away from the 2nd to the 14th of August and would make the outward journey, together with his wife, in the frigate WEYMOUTH BAY. Attlee was a hard-working prime minister, but not obsessively so.

On the last day of July there arrived in the Shatt al Arab a British destroyer squadron (a description that had replaced the older 'flotilla' and applied to fewer ships): CHEQUERS, CHEVRON, CHIEFTAIN and CHIVALROUS. These were the ships which had left Malta on the 17th, ostensibly for the Red Sea. Rear Admiral Hill, then CHEVRON's navigating officer, described the previous night, spent anchored at the mouth of the Shatt, as 'perhaps the most uncomfortable night of

my life: the temperature was 96°F, the humidity 96 per cent'. Only the cypher office was air-conditioned.[33]

There were various reasons for the arrival of the destroyers (absurdly described by the Admiralty as a 'normal naval movement'). FLAMINGO had left the Gulf on 17 July to refit at Colombo.[34] The destroyer opposite Abadan (a position they took it in turns to occupy) was allotted the task, if action had to be taken, of securing the Persian frigate PALANG. But their main role seems to have been that of ferrying the battalions flown into Shaiba down the Shatt al Arab to their landing on Abadan island.

As Admiral McKaig points out, the destroyers might have been exposed, during their passage down the Shatt, to fire from Persian guns. There were some in position at the north end of Abadan island.[35] Making the three-hour journey while it was dark might have reduced this risk. If the presence of soldiers on board was concealed from watchers on shore, the Persians might also have hesitated to open fire. Even so, the Commanders-in-Chief had some cause for the reluctance they had expressed at the end of June.[36] Descending the Shatt to an assault-landing at Abadan did have its snags. Only two years had passed since Chinese artillery trapped HMS AMETHYST in the Yangtse. Presumably General Robertson[37] had been unable to persuade the Iraqi Government that British troops should be allowed to make their approach overland, across Iraqi territory.

Meanwhile one, sometimes two, of the British destroyers kept EURYALUS company in the sweltering heat off Abadan. The others went to Basra and took it in turn to relieve the watch over Abadan.

As the build-up of British forces continued – tank landing ships and transports, as well as MAURITIUS, at Mina al Ahmadi in Kuwait; other warships at Basra and off Abadan – the Persians displayed their defensive readiness. Tanks and artillery were deployed behind the waterfront at Abadan, where PALANG remained at her moorings. Ashore order was maintained by Persian troops, although Elwell-Sutton, in his somewhat idiosyncratic account of the crisis, prefers to give the credit to the calming influence exerted by Makki in his daily speeches to the people of Abadan. Whether helped or hindered by oratory, Persian soldiers did succeed in preventing further rioting even if their first priority seemed to be stopping and searching British vehicles. No British lives were lost. Property was another matter. As Morrison had earlier complained in a letter to the Persian Minister for Foreign Affairs:

> The Company's offices in Tehran have been occupied by the Iranian authorities, the Company's manager at Khermanshah has been forcibly restrained from carrying out his functions, and in Khuzistan interference of all kinds with the Company's operations has been made and is continuing.[38]

Naturally the Persian Government now regarded themselves as the rightful owners of the Company's property and expected the servants of the Company to obey the orders of their new masters. Mossadegh had earlier declared: 'The Company can do nothing else but return its property to the rightful owners.'[39] In the confusion of this period of unrecognised transition many Persians made the most of their individual opportunities. In Abadan pilfering from Company stores continued to be rife and houses vacated by the departing employees of the Company to be looted.

By the end of July the oil tanks at Abadan were full and no ships came to empty them. All the oilfields inland, except for a trickle from Agha Jari, had been closed down earlier in the month. Now the refinery itself ceased operating. Many of the skilled workers who ran it had already left Abadan and those who remained had little that was useful to do.

In Tehran, the scene of serious rioting on 15 July, the American mediator, Harriman, had come and gone. When he left, after nearly a fortnight of talks about talks, it was for London and he was accompanied by Shepherd. This was a last-minute impulse on Harriman's part and produced a flurry of telegrams on 27 July: Shepherd reporting Harriman's intention; the Foreign Office replying that they would rather Harriman went to Abadan to see conditions there for himself; Shepherd explaining that the US Embassy had already told the press Harriman was leaving for London that very night. Morrison was no better pleased by this initiative than he had been by the latitude Harriman had allowed himself with the Persians: discussing which British Minister, for instance, might be sent out for further talks.[40]

As the wartime intimate of Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, Harriman was a grandee in his own right and not the kind of mediator Morrison could hope to manipulate. Harriman's background in diplomacy – mainly at the summit – was also very different from Shepherd's. 'Throughout his career' *The Times* obituarist would later say of Shepherd 'he had repeated experience of service in trouble spots', often of a rather jungly kind. That the two did not get on well

was partly Shepherd's fault. After British and American journalists had nearly come to blows in the bar of the Tehran Ritz over the first news of Harriman's mediatory mission, Shepherd had indiscreetly remarked – and been quoted as saying – that the visit was unlikely to achieve much.[41] As Harriman had, in the words of a Foreign Office telegram to Tehran, 'a strong streak of personal vanity',[42] Shepherd's lapse may have contributed to Harriman's much later verdict that Shepherd was 'a very poor ambassador . . . who did a lot of harm'.[43]

In London the Cabinet had already discussed, on 26 July, the reports received from Tehran of Harriman's talks. They hoped the American might have made enough impression on the Persians for it to be worth resuming negotiations, provided that the Persians first ceased their interference with the staff of the AIOC.[44] If that condition were met, the Cabinet decided, they would send out a Cabinet Minister to talk to the Persians. Shepherd had suggested this course of action as early as 27 June. The choice was expected to fall on Richard Stokes, who had been appointed Lord Privy Seal on 26 April and who had once been a member of a parliamentary delegation to Persia. A wealthy man (managing director of the family firm), he had rather surprisingly joined the Labour Party and became MP for Ipswich in 1938. Attlee had at first thought him too erratic for office and, according to the obituary of Stokes in *The Times*, made him Minister of Works in 1950 as a bid for Roman Catholic support. Now both Hector McNeil, who had been Minister of State at the Foreign Office before his promotion to the Cabinet as Secretary of State for Scotland, and Strang (who described Stokes as 'impulsive and at times indiscreet') advised Morrison against the appointment.[45]

Stokes was not a typical Labour politician. *The Times*, remarking that 'his political opinions were always of a highly personal nature', added that he was a popular member of White's. This agreeable club kept a good table even in the difficult years of the late forties and early fifties. The price ceiling on restaurant meals of five shillings (over £3 in the depreciated currency of 1990) was not abolished until May 1950, but the better establishments were allowed to make an extra cover charge and to supplement the main dish of rationed food with such separately priced delicacies as smoked salmon, game or asparagus. The total could be substantial, but White's drew its members from among the well-born and the well-heeled. It was an odd stamping ground for a socialist. Although it was immortalised in the works of Evelyn Waugh as 'Bellamy's', many members of the

Labour government must have known White's only as the club where Aneurin Bevan, having lunched as the guest of the Chief of Air Staff, was kicked while descending the front steps by a member who had not forgotten Bevan's earlier description of Tories as 'lower than vermin'.[46]

Perhaps Attlee thought that the eccentric Mossadegh, so impervious to diplomatic argument, might respond better to a less conventional approach. This is a common error. The vocabulary of diplomacy may be stilted and bloodless, but it is more cosmopolitan, less easily misunderstood than the bluff pose of frankness and the colourful dialect of the tycoon or the demagogue.

Nevertheless the Cabinet maintained their choice and, when they met again on 30 July, refused to be daunted by the news that their message to the Persian Government (sent through Harriman) had elicited a reply so unsatisfactory that Harriman had declined to transmit it. Shepherd, who attended this Cabinet, probably won no friends by his comment that Harriman's visit had encouraged the Persians to expect even greater concessions.[47]

Before the Cabinet were ready to take the final decision, there was a parliamentary ordeal to be endured. The debate that began that afternoon in the House of Commons rambled over the Middle East and Persia was only one of the topics discussed, but Ministers were given little encouragement even by their own backbenchers. Richard Crossman, a clever but disgruntled Oxford don who had long been a thorn in Bevin's side, showed no inclination to spare his successor. Naturally he denounced the Conservatives for their reckless belligerence, but he devoted more time to attacking the misconceived Middle Eastern policy of the Government.[48] Another Labour member, T. Reid, was also critical, but ended on a patriotic note:

> I sincerely hope that, whatever happens about the negotiations [Morrison had told the House of the projected Stokes Mission] and the risks that have to be taken, we will not surrender the oil company or Abadan.

And Paget, who was opposed to military intervention, optimistically believed Mossadegh would not survive the loss of oil revenue for more than a couple of months, whereupon agreement could be reached with the Shah and his generals. No Labour speaker went as far as Stanley Evans, also a Labour MP, who had been reported, in the *Daily Telegraph* of 15 July, as advocating the use of force in

Persia, but Morrison's preference for a strong line had some supporters in the Party.

Churchill maintained his cautious abstention from public advocacy of the use of force, but launched a violent attack on Morrison (whose recent speech at Durham about 'the semi-hysteria of backbench Tory MPs' had annoyed him). Morrison, so Churchill declared, had shown 'all the world that his main thought in life is to be a caucus boss'. He had a 'distorted, twisted, malevolent mind'. Churchill promised the House that 'the Conservative Party will oppose and censure by every means in their power the total evacuation of Abadan'.

As for the danger to which the British staff of the AIOC were exposed:

> If violence is offered to them, we must not hesitate to intervene, if necessary by force, and give all the necessary protection to our fellow subjects.

Another leading Conservative, Julian Amery, went further: 'we must never abandon British lives or British installations in Abadan'.

But it was Attlee who made the most surprising contribution to the debate. After a non-committal and studiously low-key speech, he had already sat down when Harold Macmillan asked him a question. In an apparently impromptu response Attlee said:

> there may have to be a withdrawal from the oil wells and there may have to be a withdrawal from some part of Abadan, but our intention is not to evacuate entirely.[49]

The Prime Minister must have been taken by surprise, for the idea of remaining in only part of Abadan island would have been unacceptable to Mossadegh and probably to the Company as well. Such an enclave would also have been harder for British forces to protect. Sensibly the point was fudged in the House of Lords on 31 July. There the Lord Chancellor said, purporting to repeat

> what the Prime Minister had said yesterday that we should stay in Abadan. In saying that the Government accepted all the implications that followed from that decision.[50]

That removed the nonsensical element from the Prime Minister's reply, but only at the cost of reinforcing the Government's commitment. Both statements would later expose Ministers to harsh criticism when the last Britons left Abadan in October.

It must have been a relief to Ministers, particularly to Morrison (again denounced on 31 July by the *Daily Telegraph*) that the parliamentary session would end so soon – on 2 August, the day when Attlee's Norwegian jaunt would begin.

9 Holidays For Some

Having mortgaged her future to pay for the war, Britain was on the edge of bankruptcy. 'England is so weak she must follow our leadership' Harriman said to his staff.

Averell Harriman[1]

'August for the people and their favourite islands' was what Auden had written,[2] but in 1951 the British people did not have a wide choice of islands. Foreign currency for holidays abroad was a rationed luxury in 1951, each adult being allowed to spend in a year only £100 of his own money, with £70 for each child. That was more than in 1950, but the ration would be halved in November 1951 as Britain's balance of payments crumbled beneath the burdens of rearmament. This was before the age of mass migration to the Mediterranean and of those package holidays by chartered aircraft which so reduced the tourist's need to spend foreign currency. In 1951 the great majority, when they relaxed away from home, went to the British seaside.

Curiously enough, travel to Scandinavia was more liberally treated and the *Annual Register* recorded 'any reasonable amount of exchange' as being conceded to the occasional tourists bound for those bracing shores. Perhaps this consideration influenced Morrison in his decision to follow Attlee's example and choose first Norway, then Sweden, for what he told reporters was 'the best holiday I have ever had'.[3]

He was not the only ministerial traveller that August. On the 2nd, when Attlee left for Norway, the *Daily Telegraph* recorded a little censoriously that Morrison was attending the Council of Europe in Strasbourg; his deputy, Younger, was in Geneva and Shinwell, the Minister of Defence, in Washington. Morrison was back on the 4th, when he became Deputy Prime Minister in Attlee's absence. The Stokes mission – the Lord Privy Seal took ten people with him, including officials from the Foreign Office, Treasury and Ministry of Fuel and Power – had set off for Tehran on 3 August.[4] Before he left for Strasbourg, Morrison had told the Cabinet on 1 August that Harriman had been unable to extract from the Persians the concession sought by the Cabinet on 26 July: ceasing interference with

the staff of the AIOC. Nevertheless, the Cabinet decided, the Stokes mission would have to go ahead.[5]

The details of these unsuccessful negotiations need not detain us. Both sides wanted to control oil production in Persia and were only willing to offer such concessions as did not detract from the core objective. While the talks lasted, however, a degree of relaxation was permitted to some of the Buccaneer forces. On 8 August the Chiefs of Staff thought they need no longer be kept at 24 hours' notice and on the 10th they accepted a recommendation by the Commanders-in-Chief to extend the period of notice to 72 hours. This, the Chiefs of Staff emphasised, was the time in which the operation could be mounted, not the time in which troops could actually reach Persia. On 13 August, however, the Chiefs of Staff rejected (with the support of others concerned) a proposal by Stokes that HM ships should be withdrawn from Abadan and on the 15th they decided that Buccaneer forces should revert to 24 hours' notice on the 18th, when Stokes was expected to leave Persia.[6] The soldiers did not, therefore, get much of a break (though the Fusiliers on board EURYALUS had celebrated Minden Day on 1 August) and most of the sailors got even less. MAURITIUS, however, was allowed to leave the Gulf on 3 August and reached Ceylon on the 8th.[7]

Meanwhile Capper, the Consul-General at Khorramshahr, had annoyed the Persians by telling journalists, accurately enough, that the British staff of the AIOC at Abadan wanted an end to Persian interference and the recall to Tehran of the obnoxious Makki. That was on the 3rd and, when Stokes and Harriman, together with their entourage, visited Khorramshahr and Abadan on the 7th, there was open competition between Capper and the Persians for control over the programme. When Capper tried to join, as would be the normal practice, the Persian cortege taking the distinguished visitors on a guided tour of Abadan, his car was obstructed by the police and his launch harassed by the Persian Navy.[8] His complaints only exposed the unfortunate Capper to further criticism, not all of it Persian, but his predicament was one that frequently arises and which deserves understanding and sympathy. When a Cabinet Minister or other dignitary visits a foreign country, he will usually want to please his foreign hosts and to fall in with any arrangements they care to make. If anything goes wrong, however, and he suffers discomfort or inconvenience, it is the local British representative who will be the target of his wrath. British diplomats and consuls, particularly in erratically administered countries, do therefore exert themselves to

minimise those foreign errors for which they will have to take the blame. Some, admittedly, bring more tact than others to the discharge of this difficult task.

On 10 August Makki, the British *bête noire*, publicly denounced Capper as a 'cowboy'. Stokes thereupon complained to Morrison that Capper had been 'maddeningly indiscreet'. Morrison – and it was not the only instance in this affair of loyalty to his staff – replied that Makki was enough to madden anyone. Stokes did manage (it was one of his few achievements) to get Makki summoned to Tehran and, on his return to Abadan, Capper thought him a reformed character – for a day or two. Mossadegh countered by asking Stokes for the recall of Capper, and Stokes recommended compliance. The Foreign Office, however, disagreed and Capper hung on to the bitter end, nearly two months later.[9]

The significance of this affair, and the reason for its detailed description, is that it illustrates the cautious policy pursued by the Persians as long as they believed the British capable of resorting to force if unduly provoked. Otherwise the Persian Government, and many other governments for that matter, would merely have given Capper a week to get out of the country. Unlike the Persians, incidentally, the British staff of the AIOC liked Capper. Mason, who was in charge at Abadan, told Shepherd his staff would be 'outraged and upset' if Capper was withdrawn. And the Foreign Office doubtless appreciated his energy and efficiency. He even managed to visit the oil-fields on 1 August, when he found staff morale better than he had expected.[10]

Meanwhile, ministerial indecision notwithstanding, the withdrawal of AIOC staff was continuing and even accelerating. On 10 August there were only 356 Britons and 223 Indians or Pakistanis left in the oil-fields. In Abadan and Khorramshahr 657 Britons and 905 Indians or Pakistanis remained.[11] On 18 August Capper reported: 'general withdrawal from the field area began yesterday'. The Company intended to leave a hard core of 231 Britons and 64 Indians or Pakistanis in the fields. In Abadan the target figures were 500 and 300 respectively.[12] A message from Attlee of the 23rd (the day Stokes left Tehran after the failure of his mission), which was published in *The Times* on the 24th, went even further, saying the Government had decided on a complete withdrawal from the oil-fields and reduction of the staff at Abadan to a hard core. A final cricket match between Fields and Abadan had been played on the 23rd in a temperature of 115° F.

Makki rose to the occasion by telling a large crowd of Persians that the withdrawal of the British staff might be the prelude to a British military invasion.[13] The reasoning of the Chiefs of Staff was different. At their meeting of 31 August Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Sanders expressed the view that, now that there were only 350 British subjects left – all at Abadan – Buccaneer was most unlikely to be authorised.[14] Ministers had agreed on 22 August that Buccaneer should be put into effect only if the lives of British staff at Abadan were clearly in danger.[15] Planning had nevertheless continued. On 2 August, the Chiefs of Staff dropped the idea of using leaflets before the arrival of Buccaneer forces. They thought the Persians were bound to resist, so there was no point in doing anything that would impair the chance of achieving surprise. On 22 August they deprecated a proposal by GHQ Middle East Land Forces that Buccaneer should include the occupation of enough of the mainland to prevent artillery fire against Abadan. They conceded, however, that patrolling might be necessary.[16]

Makki, of course, was thinking, logically enough, that military operations would be easier for the British once they no longer had to worry about the risk of casualties among their civilian countrymen. Moreover, the Persians could see for themselves that EURYALUS had been reinforced. On 24 August *The Times* reported the cruiser together with the destroyer CHEVRON off Abadan. At Basra there were the destroyers CHEQUERS, CHIEFTAIN and CHIVALROUS, the frigate WILD GOOSE and the landing ship DIEPPE. The frigate WREN was at the Kuwaiti port of Mina al Ahmadi. MAURITIUS, however, was enjoying a spell away from the Gulf.

Two landing craft from DIEPPE made a weekly trip from Basra with provisions for the ships off Abadan[17] and the RAF, keeping carefully within Iraqui air space, maintained their reconnaissance. It was hardly necessary for the Royal Navy spokesman at Basra to tell journalists that HM ships 'were ready to meet any and all demands that may be made on them'. If he included the assault landing craft victualling the ships at Abadan, he may nevertheless have exaggerated. Lieutenant-Commander Randall remembers that the only armament of the landing craft – which had to pass the Persian naval headquarters and the warships at Khorramshahr on every trip – was grenades and a Bren light machine gun. Of course, neither they nor the ships anchored off Abadan were in Persian waters, but today's naval officers might feel less confident that International Law provided a sure shield.

To the Persians observing all this flaunting of the White Ensign

there must have been some relief for indignation, when one of their aircraft did a 'beat-up' of EURYALUS four days running in the middle of August.[18] They were not to know that the British threat was actually diminishing. On 29 August Shinwell and the Chiefs of Staff, in view of the 'decreased likelihood of military operations', would recommend relaxing the readiness of Buccaneer forces in the Canal Zone from 24 to 72 hours' notice.[19] The Persian Embassy in London would, however, have reported another *Daily Telegraph* leader (on 23 August) calling for armed intervention at Abadan.

It is interesting to note that the withdrawal of most of the expatriate staff of the AIOC, though fully reported in the press, provoked none of the disturbances in Abadan which had been forecast in July and for which Buccaneer was envisaged as the necessary remedy. Indeed, on 25 August Capper told GHQ Middle East that he considered serious disturbances in Abadan unlikely.[20] The departing oilmen had to endure much vexation at the hands of Persian officials, but they did not become the victims of violence.

In the taxing conditions of a London August the imperative demands of the holiday season could not be disregarded, but the thinning-out of the official and ministerial ranks had little impact on policy. This is not always so. There have been occasions when the departure with bucket and spade of the fat cats has given the signal for the Whitehall mice to come out to play. If Morrison was tempted, he took no liberties. He called on Attlee when the Prime Minister returned from Norway on 15 August and himself set out for the fjords the following day. The memoirs of his Private Secretary do not explain why Morrison was asked, at the end of August, to interrupt his holiday: they merely refer to the situation in the Middle East as 'acute' and emphasise his refusal.[21] Attlee, once back from Norway, spent most of his time at Chequers, but *The Times* recorded his visit to the Battersea Fun Fair (part of the Festival of Britain) on 23 August, the day when Stokes admitted defeat and left Tehran for London,[22] where storm clouds of a different kind were massing on the horizon.

It was towards the end of August that Gaitskell, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, realised that Britain, whose economic performance had improved after the devaluation of September 1949, was now in for another sterling crisis. That was the name then given to buying more from abroad, particularly in dollars, than could be earned from exports. Today the figures sound ridiculous – an expected deficit of one billion dollars compared with twenty billion *pounds* in 1990 – but

the trade gap and current account deficit in the second half of 1951 reached what were then record levels. There were various causes: the cost of replacing Iranian oil; a much greater increase in import than in export prices; heavy dollar expenditure by the rest of the sterling area; and, of course, the British rearmament programme. In the short term there seemed to be only one remedy and on 4 September Gaitskell flew off to Washington to seek American help. The cost of defying President Truman's objections to the use of force in Persia had become prohibitive.[23]

10 Final Spasm

We should not threaten to use force, because we do NOT mean to.
Attlee to Strang[1]

Herbert Morrison, who returned from his holiday on 3 September, managed to attend the Cabinet meeting of the 4th before leaving again for San Francisco, where he was to sign the treaty of peace with Japan on the 8th. He told his colleagues of Shepherd's belief that the Persians were determined to ensure the protection of British personnel at Abadan, so as to give no excuse for the intervention of British forces.[2] As a prediction it proved to be accurate and it reflected Shepherd's consistent opposition to British military involvement, but it was a view that was bound to erode the political basis of Buccaneer: exploiting the threat to British lives in order to preserve the British stake in Persian oil. It was also, particularly in the earlier stages of the dispute, a very risky prediction. If it was accepted, but proved to be mistaken, British subjects might be killed because British forces were not ready to rescue them. This was a risk Ministers were not prepared to run.

Their dilemma was given an extra twist by a threat from Mossadegh that the residence permits of British staff still at Abadan would be cancelled. The Foreign Office working party – so said Furlonge's submission of 5 September – thought this would make it impossible to keep British staff at Abadan without a full-scale use of British force. If force had to be ruled out, then it would be better if the British Government themselves took the decision to withdraw the AIOC staff, rather than waiting for them to be expelled.

For once, Strang's minute went off at a tangent ('We must do our utmost to get Mossadegh out') and attracted a tart comment from the Minister of State, Kenneth Younger, who was himself inclined to favour the use of force.[3] There was nevertheless some basis for what seemed Strang's wishful thinking. On 30 August Shepherd – acting on his own initiative and in anticipation of the telegram from the Foreign Office that reached him later that day – had approached the Shah. Shepherd told His Imperial Majesty that there seemed to be no possibility of agreement with Mossadegh, whose own political support seemed to be weakening. Might the Shah not dismiss Mossadegh?

The monarch seemed receptive and he and Shepherd embarked on a discussion of possible successors to Mossadegh.

When Shepherd learned from the Foreign Office telegram that similar ideas were current in London, he suggested that he should be authorised to strengthen his earlier communication to the Shah by mentioning some of the disagreeable alternatives that would have to be considered if Mossadegh remained in power.[4] It was that telegram, and perhaps also the view expressed by Younger, that prompted Attlee's inhibition (quoted at the head of this chapter) against the threat of force and led to another telegram from the Foreign Office telling Shepherd not to mention to the Shah the possibility of a resort to force.

This was nevertheless an idea that remained in the air, insidiously propagated from a variety of sources. Before Morrison left San Francisco for Washington he sent Attlee a telegram on 7 September arguing that the use of force was a political rather than a legal issue.[6] On the 6th Fergusson, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Fuel and Power, told Strang he still favoured using force to keep the AIOC in Abadan and to operate the refinery with Kuwaiti crude. He was not alone in this view. Attlee contented himself with authorising the Foreign Office to issue a public statement proclaiming that the oil negotiations with Persia had been broken off, not just suspended.[7]

If negotiations and a resort to force were excluded, there remained other expedients. On 11 September Shepherd warned the Shah, who had enjoyed a few days' holiday, that Britain would be taking various economic reprisals against Persia.[8] These would prove less important than the earlier announcement by the AIOC of their intention of suing anyone who bought Persian oil, but none of these measures could be expected to make much immediate impact.[9] Of equal significance, though not a direct response to the Persian oil crisis, was the construction by the AIOC of a new refinery on the Isle of Grain in the Thames Estuary and the opening, on 14 September, by ESSO of the largest refinery in Europe at Fawley, near Southampton. The growing reluctance of oil companies to keep more eggs than they could help in the politically fragile Middle Eastern basket would eventually lead to the British Isles having five times the refinery capacity of Iran.

No economic pressure could take effect soon enough to prevent the expulsion of the remaining AIOC staff at what was likely to be a particularly awkward moment. On 5 September Attlee had told the King he intended to ask for a dissolution of Parliament during the

first week in October.[10] This did not leave much time for persuading the Shah to replace Mossadegh. Shepherd tried again on 15 September, but found His Imperial Majesty still afraid of the risk any attempt to dismiss Mossadegh would entail.[11] On 20 September – the day after Attlee announced that the British general election would be held on 25 October – Shepherd found the Shah and his advisers defeatist and still frightened of opposing Mossadegh.[12] He told Shepherd he would like to get rid of Mossadegh, but did not know how he could manage it. On 25 September, when Mossadegh told the AIOC their staff must leave within a week, Ministers in London reluctantly agreed that Mossadegh was unlikely to be overthrown in that brief interval.[13] Shepherd tried again on 29 September, but found the Shah unable to make up his mind.[14]

All this time Buccaneer forces, though no longer at 24 hours' notice, had been ready and waiting, in case Ministers had to fall back on the hard option. On 9 September, so *The Times* reported, the destroyers SAINTES, ARMADA, VIGO and GRAVELINES passed through the Suez Canal on their way to relieve the First Destroyer Squadron in the upper Gulf. On 15 September HMS MAURITIUS embarked from Kuwait 39 men of D Company of the 1st Battalion The Loyal Regiment under Captain G.W. Croker MC, before relieving EURYALUS off Abadan:

> the Loyals' detachment kept watches, scrubbed down decks, acted as the ship's baggage party in evacuating the oil company's employees and was also held in readiness to reinforce the Royal Marines in the event of landing parties being required.[15]

Attlee might tell Dalton (whose knife was always at a colleague's back) on 16 September: 'I am handling Persia; I've made it quite clear that troops are to go in only to save lives.'[16] Other people were not so sure. Acheson had thought it necessary to remind Morrison, when the Foreign Secretary was in Washington on 13 September, that the United States were against the use of force.[17] On 25 September the Foreign Office took 'strong exception to being given a message (that the US Government "expected to be consulted" before any decision to use force) in such terms by a junior State Department official (Rountree)'.[18] The next day the US Chargé d'Affaires in London telegraphed home that, in his view, the British Government were still considering the use of force as a possible option.[19] The new US Ambassador (Loy Henderson) in Tehran reported that the Shah and Ala, his Minister of Court, were deeply

worried about British intentions and believed a renewed partition of Iran had been discussed in secret Anglo-Russian talks.[20] And the dependably unreliable *New Statesman* thought on 29 September that Attlee and Churchill (with the support of Washington) 'are now in agreement on sending troops to Abadan'. These speculations were erroneous, but only the last was entirely devoid of any foundation.

On 26 September, when Attlee's small group of Ministers considered the ultimatum from Mossadegh, they agreed that Buccaneer forces should be brought to the shortest possible notice. They do not seem to have flinched when the CIGS told them that these forces, if launched, would have to be reinforced by a further brigade. Perhaps this was the brigade from Cyprus which, it had been envisaged in July, would be needed for Buccaneer Phase III. Slim went on to say that the Parachute Brigade would have to be moved from Cyprus to Egypt and a third brigade deployed from the United Kingdom to the Middle East. One of the reasons for the complex pattern of these moves was the undesirability of sending troops from Britain straight into the damp heat of the Persian Gulf.[21] Morrison circulated a neutral memorandum, in preparation for the Cabinet next day, summarising previous agreements and negotiations.[22]

The Cabinet meeting of 27 September was the last to be held by Attlee. It went on for two hours and forty-five minutes. The Prime Minister explained that, when the Persian Government had given the remaining staff of the AIOC a week to leave Abadan, he himself had sent a personal message to President Truman. The President's reply stated flatly that the 'US Govt would be unable to support any action involving the use of force to maintain the British staff in Abadan'. In view of the attitude of the US Government, Attlee did not think it would be expedient to use force.

In a last effort Morrison expressed himself, not very vigorously, in favour of the use of force. He warned the Cabinet that, if they submitted to expulsion from Abadan, His Majesty's Government would appear feeble and ineffective.

> Egypt might be emboldened to take drastic action to end the military treaty and possibly to bring the Suez Canal under Egyptian control.

The Cabinet were told (though not by the Chiefs of Staff, who had not been invited) that all preparations had been made for a military operation to seize Abadan island and that this could be mounted in

12 hours. But 'we could not afford to break with the United States on an issue of this kind'.

The Cabinet accepted this argument and decided to refer the issue to the Security Council.[23] Most of them probably did not know that a prolonged exchange of telegrams between the Foreign Office and the United Kingdom Delegation to the United Nations in New York had already established – as events proved, quite correctly – that no joy and precious little American support could be expected in New York.

There is no reason to suppose that the Cabinet would have decided differently if Attlee had received Churchill's offer before instead of after their meeting. It was from Truman, not from Churchill, that Attlee needed to hear:

> if he chose to resist the expulsion of our personnel by force, he would have our support in this matter.[24]

Mossadegh had triumphed, but not all his countrymen manifested much gratitude. When he went to the Majlis on 27 September, there was no quorum and he had to make his speech, in tears, to the crowd outside. He told them the absent deputies were all in the pay of the AIOC and the crowd obligingly offered to go and kill them.[25]

The sorry story was dragging to a close. On the South Bank, where they had danced all summer in the open air, sometimes even in the rain, the Festival of Britain ended on 30 September. The police had been struck – today they would have been flabbergasted – by the absence of hooliganism and other crime both on the South Bank and at the Battersea Fun Fair. The ending was less ceremonious than the inauguration. The King was gravely ill and Ministers preoccupied. Even Morrison was not present to see the flag hauled down and to listen to the bands of the Brigade of Guards beating the retreat.[26]

That process began as early as 14 September 1951, when the AIOC in London telegraphed, via the Royal Navy, to Mason in Persia that it was 'very important that all sea-going tugs should be prevented from falling into Persian hands'. Mossadegh had to be denied both British tankers and the tugs that might assist foreign tankers to export the Company's oil. Commodore Wallis thereupon told the Admiralty that, unless otherwise instructed, he proposed to protect only those tugs that flew the Red Ensign.[27] Attlee had previously agreed that tugs and other British ships might be defended unless moored alongside the Persian shore.[28] On 26 September *The Times* reported that the British frigate LOCH QUOICH had escorted some of them to Basra.

That was also the day when Capper reported the Persian Chief of Police in Abadan as expecting riots there on 3 October.[29] Both sides might have reasons of their own for avoiding violence, but neither wished the other to feel too safe. On 29 September Capper's *exequatur* – the document whereby the Persian Government recognised his consular status – was withdrawn. He would have to leave with the remaining staff of the AIOC.[30] On 1 October he visited MAURITIUS together with Mason of the AIOC and three journalists to discuss final arrangements.[31] The Persians had decided, whether as a mark of their displeasure or as a prudent precaution, that MAURITIUS would not be allowed alongside to embark her passengers. Nor, to the indignation of Midshipman Randall, would the British landing craft be permitted to ferry them out to the cruiser. This would have to be done by Persian naval launches.[32]

In New York the British application to the Security Council, where only the French representative proved helpful, produced nothing but a ten-day adjournment to allow Mossadegh to appear in person. On 2 October the Foreign Office announced 'arrangements are being made to withdraw British staff at short notice' and Churchill, so *The Times* reported, was unkind enough to recall Attlee's July undertaking not to evacuate Abadan entirely.

The withdrawal took place on 3 October and not, as stated by Louis and Longhurst, on 4 October. Perhaps they were misled by the fact that it was reported in *The Times* of 4 October.[33] But the log of HMS MAURITIUS for 3 October must be regarded as conclusive:

0915 Persian launch with AIOC personnel comes alongside MAURITIUS.
1100 LCAs leave for Basra.
1232 MAURITIUS sails for Basra.[34]

Date apart, the accounts of *The Times* correspondent and of Longhurst agree well enough. After passing through Persian Customs (who made fewer difficulties than usual) 280 British staff boarded MAURITIUS and another 40 left by air. The Indians and Pakistanis, who were returning to the subcontinent, travelled by the SS DARESSA.[35] A photograph shows the British staff smartly, if tropically, dressed (the temperature was still in the high seventies), with many of the coatless wearing ties. Embarkation was watched from Number One Jetty by Capper (he left the following day) and Colonel Dunn, the Military Attaché from Tehran. On board MAURITIUS the band played, the AIOC staff lined the rails, roared out 'the

less printable version of "Colonel Bogey"' and cheered when the ship passed the house of the General Manager. Midshipman Randall, however, had earlier seen that some of them were in tears.[36] It was a sad ending to a long endeavour and an awkward opening to the British General Election of 1951.

It is again indicative of how the world has changed that British warships, one relieving another, had spent 14 continuous weeks moored a few hundred yards off an armed and unfriendly shore without suffering any kind of attack. Of course it was in time of peace, diplomatic relations existed and the ships stayed in Iraqui waters. None of these considerations could today be reliably expected to deter most governments, to say nothing of the terrorist organisations some of them are able to influence, from giving violent expression to their resentment of what nobody pretended was an innocent naval intrusion.

On 4 October Ministers agreed to disperse the Buccaneer forces and let them resume normal training.[37] The Ministry of Defence withdrew the loaded tank landing ships and the ships carrying motor transport and stores from the Gulf. At Shaiba there were only, apart from the RAF, maintenance personnel.[38] The long-awaited three battalions had never come. In Korea British troops were still supporting the American cause, joined in a new United Nations offensive and were soon involved in bitter fighting. And *The Times* reported that nearly $600 million had been lost from the British financial reserves in the third quarter of 1951, leaving only $3269 million.

On 5 October HMS VIGO was still off Abadan and the destroyers SAINTES and ARMADA were escorting more tugs to Kuwait. The presence of ARMADA prompted one of those humorous signals which are such a feature of naval traditions: 'Drake has left but ARMADA is here.'[39]

There was little to warm the cockles of British voters' hearts, but the loss of Abadan had less impact on the campaign than the Conservatives had expected. This was not for want of effort. Thirty-one per cent of Conservative candidates mentioned the subject in their election addresses.[40] Churchill discharged the first of many salvoes on the eve of the evacuation: 'We have fled from the field even before the parleys were completed.'[41] Morrison did not help himself by trying, in his speech to the Labour Party Conference on 3 October, to shuffle off some of the responsibility: 'having regard to the feeling among the staff themselves . . . we have decided that . . . they must come out

rather than that we should keep them there by force'.[42] This aroused indignation among the evacuees, who insisted they had been ready to stay as long as the Government wanted. They had already expressed their dissatisfaction with the arrangements made for their departure.[43]

Churchill kept up the attack:

> It is simply a case of Ministers drifting from day to day and week to week, unable to make up their minds, until now we have been confronted with a major loss and disaster.[44]

When Attlee and Morrison tried to deal with Churchill's specific charges – for instance, that Attlee had departed from his undertaking of 30 July not to evacuate Abadan entirely – they were often ineffective. It was not plausible to argue that Attlee had never envisaged the use of force, for the Lord Chancellor, when repeating Attlee's pledge to the House of Lords on 31 July, had added: 'the Government accepted all the implications that followed from that decision.'[45]

Sensibly they shifted the ground of debate by asking Churchill whether he thought 'we should have gone to war with Persia'. This tactic dovetailed neatly with the Labour Party's strategy – exemplified by the famous question on the front page of the *Daily Mirror* 'Whose Finger on the Trigger?' – of depicting the Conservatives in general, and Churchill in particular, as warmongers. This approach reached its peak in Morrison's broadcast of 17 October:

> If we'd sent troops in, it might have meant war. That really was the issue. Do we have peace or do we have war? Only one thing would have justified the use of force in Persia: to save British lives. To send in troops for any other purpose would have led us into new dangers; the world would have seen us as the aggressor; the sins of the Persians would have been forgotten. Even our friends and allies would have been against us. And if fighting had started, who knows where it would have stopped.[46]

It was an effective argument even if it misrepresented Morrison's own attitude during the dispute and the reproaches he had since addressed to the US Ambassador.

> What I objected to was that the US Government were continually putting the brakes on us and withholding full support.[47]

It is important to remember that in 1951 Stalin was still alive and the danger of war with the Soviet Union, whose strength was rather overestimated, seemed much more real and even imminent to public

opinion than was the case thirty or forty years later. Morrison had also been so much away from the Foreign Office that he was probably not aware of the article – it attracted some attention in the Department – in the Cominform newspaper *For a Lasting Peace, For a People's Democracy* of 17 August 1951 about oil nationalisation in Persia. What made this remarkable was its strong attack on the policy and leadership of Mossadegh.[48]

The Labour Government also benefited, as Butler points out, from the strong stand they had, as described in the next chapter, adopted in Egypt.

If Labour lost the election, it was not because they had also lost Abadan, nor was the result – 321 Conservative members compared to 295 Labour – as resounding as the Conservatives had hoped. But they were in. On 26 October Churchill became Prime Minister, formed a government and resumed the task interrupted in 1945 of presiding over meetings of the Cabinet. There was much to be done and the year reached its end with never a chink in the Cabinet's agenda for the problems, so recently and so hotly debated, so quickly pigeonholed, of Abadan.

11 Aftermath in Retrospect

The evacuation of the British management and staff from Abadan and the loss of the refinery had its immediate consequence.
Anthony Eden[1]

It was on 3 October 1951 that Britain abandoned Abadan. On the 8th Nahas Pasha, the Egyptian Prime Minister, denounced the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, the agreement providing a legal basis for the British military presence in Egypt. The correspondent in Cairo of *The Times* reported:

> Events in Persia have been a godsend for the extreme nationalists and the xenophobes who have come to the conclusion that Britain no longer needs to be reckoned with seriously in Middle East politics.

The Egyptian Government proclaimed 15 October as Abrogation Day and on the 16th anti-British rioting began in Ismailia, Port Said and Suez. All leave for British troops in Egypt was cancelled. Some of the soldiers then deployed to protect British women and children from the mob were drawn from the 1st Lancashire Fusiliers and the 1st Loyals, two of the battalions stationed in the Canal Zone, but previously earmarked for intervention at Abadan.

These events seemed to provide prompt and striking confirmation of the correctness of the prediction Morrison had made on 27 September, when he had warned the Cabinet that, if Britain submitted to expulsion from Abadan, 'Egypt might be emboldened to take drastic action to end the military treaty.'[2] He may even have relished the chance to make a speech on 12 October (the day after a meeting of ministers he had held at the Foreign Office) declaring: 'we shall stand absolutely firm in Egypt'. He confirmed, in answer to questions, that force would be used if it was needed and provided an interesting justification of his attitude. 'Egypt was a totally different case from Persia. In the first place, there were substantial forces there.'[3]

It was a candid comment and probably a truer reflection of ministerial thinking than the comparison they preferred: between saving British lives and preserving British property. Even Morrison reverted

to that syllogism in his electioneering broadcast of 17 October: 'Only one thing would have justified the use of force in Persia: to save British lives.'[4] By that date, as it happened, no British lives had been lost in this latest phase of the Egyptian dispute, but *The Times* of the 17th recorded support for the firm British reaction from an unexpected quarter: Dean Acheson, the United States Secretary of State. As Louis shrewdly remarks:

> When all was said the Americans as well as the British believed that there was no substitute for the Suez base.[5]

It was this shared delusion which encouraged the same British Government that had just abandoned Britain's most valuable asset overseas to mobilise in defence of a mirage. The timing was awkward. Parliament had been dissolved and Ministers had scattered to contest the British General Election as the men of peace who had successfully avoided war over Persia. Now it fell to Attlee to sanction the immediate reinforcement of Egypt by the 2nd Infantry Brigade and the 16th Independent Parachute Brigade, both from Cyprus. They arrived before 25 October, the day the Labour Party lost the election, and the task had to be continued and extended by the Conservative Government under Winston Churchill, who took office on the 26th. By the end of the year 'the swiftest build-up ever achieved by the British Army in peacetime' had brought 'the British garrison to a total of sixteen infantry battalions, two and a half regiments of armour and seven of artillery'.[6]

This is not the place to rehearse the sad story of the struggle that followed to keep these troops in Egypt: how they had to act as dockers when 66 000 Egyptians were induced by their government to stop working for the British; how pioneers had then to be brought from Mauritius, labourers from Cyprus and Malta, 5000 RAF technicians from England to operate the power stations, the water filtration plants and the sewage farms that British troops had to protect from sabotage.[7] These British troops – sometimes even more of them – hung on during nearly five years of intermittent rioting and low-level guerrilla activity, before completing a negotiated withdrawal in the summer of 1956. The base they protected was never seriously damaged, but nor was it ever any use. By the end of 1952 even the British Government were beginning to wonder whether a military base in Egypt was essential.[8] The whole episode was one more chapter in the continuing saga of the British Overseas Base. This Eldorado of the

strategy of nostalgia was not sought in Egypt alone, but in Palestine, the Gaza Strip, Libya, Cyprus and Kenya. Not till 1967 did the quest reach its sombre conclusion with British withdrawal from Aden.

The affair at Abadan may have put an extra edge on Egyptian impatience in the autumn of 1951. Even in Iraq it was followed by a public request for revision of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, although the reliably pro-British Prime Minister, Nuri Pasha, assured the Ambassador that he did not really mean it.[9] In the longer run these events should arguably be seen as no more than eddies in the floodtide of Middle Eastern nationalism. Even if the British had stayed in Abadan, it is implausible to suppose that the march of events in so many other countries could have been arrested by a single determined gesture. Too many retreats had already eroded British prestige, that once invaluable

> reputation for successful persistence in the enforcement of demands, in the implementation of threats and in the fulfilment of undertakings.[10]

Egyptian nationalism thrived with British troops in Egypt and would have been undaunted by British troops at Abadan.

If we are to play the game of 'might have been', Persia is the place to do it. There at least later history offers just enough factual basis to support a structure of retrospective speculation. In 1953 Mossadegh really was overthrown in a *coup d'état* conceived in 1951[11] and prepared by the British Secret Service. In late 1954 the export of oil from Abadan was resumed by an international consortium in which British companies played a major role.[12] It is not unreasonable to wonder whether Mossadegh might have fallen sooner, the oil flowed earlier and the consortium had a more predominantly British character if, in 1951, the AIOC had stayed in Abadan under the protection of British troops. Without resort to extravagant hypothesis, merely by improving on actual events, there are questions one could legitimately ask.

There is, for instance, the question of reaction times. Egypt denounced the Treaty on 8 October and British reinforcements (two brigades less one battalion) were in Egypt by 22 October. As a staff problem, of course, Egypt was easier than Persia. The plans had been elaborated long before they were needed, disembarkation points in the Canal Zone were already held by British troops, there was less political objection to the reinforcement of a long-established garri-

son. Persia, it must be conceded, presented greater difficulties. Did these excuse such protracted delay?

It was, we may recall, on 20 March 1951 – a week after the new Foreign Secretary had first been briefed on the threat to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company – that the Foreign Office asked the Chiefs of Staff to 'consider the use of actual force to prevent the Persian Government from seizing the oil installations' or to deal with local disturbances. The unanimous support accorded that day by the Persian Senate to the Majlis resolution in favour of nationalisation did not suggest that the Foreign Office had been unduly precipitate.[13] As for British lives, Capper, the Consul-General at Khorramshahr, had emphasised as early as 31 March that there were too few Persian troops to cope with serious trouble.[14] On 12 April he was proved right when the Abadan mob lynched three British subjects and injured six more.

On 13 April the Chiefs of Staff addressed themselves to the problem, ordering ships to Persian Gulf ports, asking the Foreign Office to approach the Government of Iraq, deciding to concentrate Hastings aircraft in the Canal Zone and to consider moving a battalion to Shaiba. Finally, on 1 May 1951 – two days after the appointment as Persian Prime Minister of Mohammad Mossadegh – the Chiefs of Staff telegraphed to the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East to ask 'for an estimate of the forces required to secure Abadan and SW Persian oil in the face of a hostile Persia.'[15]

Just six weeks had elapsed since the Chiefs of Staff were asked for a plan. As a yardstick for comparison, when six weeks had passed since the surprise invasion of the Falklands by Argentina in 1982, the British Task Force had sailed 8000 miles (doing their planning at sea), had recaptured South Georgia, instituted a blockade, bombarded Argentinian forces from air and sea and sunk the cruiser BELGRANO. Whatever else had gone downhill in Britain since 1951, there had been a notable improvement in the efficiency of the armed forces.

The starting point for the achievements of 1982 was the decision by the First Sea Lord, Sir Henry Leach, to take the initiative on 31 March – while the Argentine invasion force was still on its way – by proposing to the Prime Minister, who promptly agreed, an outline plan for recapturing the Falkland Islands.[16]

Such decisiveness could scarcely be expected of Ministers in the opening phase of the Anglo-Persian oil dispute. There was no

permissive treaty (as in the case of Egypt), no clear *casus belli* (as in the Falklands), the resources of diplomacy had not been exhausted, the Prime Minister was in hospital and his deputy, the newly-appointed Foreign Secretary, was still out of his depth in international waters. Nor do his officials seem to have followed up their original request for a military plan by pressing the Ministry of Defence for an early response. The Chiefs of Staff may have sensed a lack of urgency in the request they had received, may even have suspected some flabbiness in the political muscle behind it. Certainly they took their time: preoccupied by the difficulties, concerned by the unhealthy climate of the Persian Gulf, preferring meticulous preparation to any attempt at surprise and speed.

For being diligent rather than dashing, the Chiefs of Staff can scarcely be blamed. What is nevertheless hard to understand is their failure to have a plan ready for presentation to the Prime Minister when he emerged from hospital and presided at the Cabinet meeting of 30 April. Instead – obviously as a result of the new impetus given to the governmental machine by Attlee's return – they asked the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East for information they should have acquired at least a month earlier.

Missing an opportunity sometimes has worse results in peace than it does in war. Such irretrievable failures as Jellicoe letting the High Seas Fleet escape in the night after the battle of Jutland in 1916 or Hitler allowing the British Expeditionary Force to get away from Dunkirk in 1940 are rare. If the will to fight survives there is often another chance. In peace there is such a natural reluctance to resort to violent measures that it takes more than a favourable tactical situation to create a window of opportunity for coercive diplomacy. There must usually be an obvious objective, a politically persuasive argument, an appeal to emotion and a leader able to make it. These must coexist with the availability of adjacent forces expected to achieve rapid success. It was this rare planetary conjunction that ensured the triumph – after two years of waiting for the ripe and fleeting moment – of the American operation Urgent Fury against Grenada in 1983.

In 1951, on the other hand, the Abadan crisis was a case of

> Never the time and the place
> And the loved one all together.[17]

On 1 May, when the advent to power of Mahommed Mossadegh had confirmed the threat and the Cabinet, now led by Attlee, had

addressed themselves to the Persian problem, the Chiefs of Staff still had no plan although the cruiser GAMBIA had reached Bahrein. Thereafter the slowly-growing readiness of the British armed forces and the increasing intransigence of the Persian Government had to be balanced against mounting American opposition, Persian military deployment at Abadan and the accumulating doubts of British Ministers. By the time the Chiefs of Staff were ready, in July, the window of opportunity had politically almost closed. Prised momentarily open on 18 July, it snapped shut again before the opening gambit – the announcement of withdrawal from the oil-fields – could be played.

As Gerald Ford (President of the United States 1974–77) remarked in 1980, when commenting on the failure of his successor's attempt at the military rescue of American hostages in Iran:

> Time is not on your side . . . time dictates the decision to move . . . time does not give you more opportunities, but less.[18]

It is difficult to defend the British Chiefs of Staff of 1951 against the charge of being dilatory. Were they also unduly discouraging? In 1982 Admiral Sir Henry Leach, criticising the assessment of the Falklands crisis which had been prepared, before his own return to London, by the Ministry of Defence for presentation to Ministers, argued:

> it was the wrong naval attitude to tell ministers what we couldn't do; we should at least say what was possible.[19]

The outcome justified his more robust approach, but this accentuation of the positive was lacking in the spring of 1951. For many weeks, indeed for months, the deliberations of the Chiefs of Staff recalled Churchill's complaint:

> You may take the most gallant sailor, the most intrepid airman, or the most audacious soldier, put them at a table together – what do you get? The sum of their fears.[20]

Perhaps the Chiefs of Staff in 1951 approached their task with the same caution that had been essential to their wartime predecessors when dealing with the impetuous Churchill. There was little risk that Churchill's eagerness for action would evaporate while his military advisers were making up their minds that action was feasible. Nor would his impatience allow them to waste any time in reaching a conclusion one way or the other. In 1951 there is little to suggest that the Attlee Government seriously attempted to hasten the leisurely

deliberations of the Chiefs of Staff. And the rather small dose of belligerent indignation Morrison and Shinwell had initially injected did not stand up well to the steady drizzle of doubt, delay and difficulty that for weeks emanated from the Chiefs of Staff. If we are to imagine a different outcome to the 1951 oil crisis flowing from a ministerial decision to sanction the use of force, then we need an earlier date than 18 July for our moment of truth.

The first to spring to mind is 1 May: the British casualties of 12 April at Abadan still fresh in the memory; the Persian nationalisation measure just passed; Attlee back from hospital and the Conservative leaders promising support for 'appropriate action'; Mossadegh appointed Prime Minister but still forming his government; British talks with Iraqui leaders making progress; Persian troops in Abadan still insufficient to mount an effective defence. If the Chiefs of Staff had then produced the plan for which they had been asked six weeks earlier, would Morrison and Shinwell have been the only ministers to welcome it?

If the Chiefs of Staff had thus accelerated the planning process, we may plausibly assume that they would have imposed a matching tempo on the actual preparations: bringing selected units to short notice, deploying ships, reactivating Shaiba. Perhaps these preparations would still have been less complete on 1 May than later, though the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East, in their telegram of 16 July advocating the early launch of Buccaneer, said that the forces to be employed had been at readiness for two months. Yet any British deficiencies on that account would surely have been reflected among the Persians as well. The premiership of Mossadegh could then still be measured in hours and he would hardly have had time to issue fresh instructions to the generals or to inspire them with his own fervour. On 1 May, moreover, the worst of the hot weather had not yet begun in the Gulf, nor had the US Government formally, indeed publicly, opposed any resort to force by their British allies. Politically there would not again be such a promising opportunity for British intervention and it is not obvious that, by 1 May, British forces could not have been made ready.

Players who take their bridge at all seriously are familiar with the concept of 'tempo', whereby the value of a card, indeed the outcome of the game, may depend on choosing the right moment to play it. In the Abadan crisis of 1951 that moment never came, because the briefly-opened window of political opportunity had closed before the soldiers were ready. But how good were the military chances, even

supposing the warrior chieftains of 1951 could have reacted with the speed of their successors in 1982?

That is a question to which even hindsight offers no certain answer. The use of limited force for political purposes in a peacetime application of coercive diplomacy is governed by equations more complex than the simple comparisons of numbers, weapons, training and morale that can be employed in war. Suppose, for instance, that intensive effort by the planners, military and civilian, working together under pressure, had produced in early April the concept that actually emerged in late June (Fergusson, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Fuel and Power, had suggested it as early as 18 June):[21] seizing and holding the island of Abadan in order to operate the refinery with Kuwaiti crude until Mossadegh fell from power or proved willing to negotiate.

If such an operation were to succeed, then overcoming any military resistance offered by the Iranians would be only the first and easiest requirement. The fighting would have to be over quickly and with little loss of life, particularly civilian life. The refinery would have to escape significant damage. There could be no question of preparing for the British landing by a week of air-strikes followed by a naval bombardment – the pattern adopted at Port Said in 1956. And – a condition the British could only indirectly and partially influence – it would be essential to avoid arousing such Iranian resentment that the conflict would escalate into war or inspire a campaign of resistance and sabotage among Iranian civilians, particularly those working for the AIOC.

In 1991 such requirements seem ludicrously unattainable. But the four decades since 1951 have transformed Iran. The national unity, the discipline, the religious fervour, the fanatical courage that were displayed in war with Iraq and defiance of the United States in the eighties were not apparent in 1951. The Shah had not yet begun to rule and to modernise, while the ascendancy of Mossadegh, as the events of 1953 would demonstrate, was vulnerable, particularly to perceived failure. Buccaneer or the expanded Midget could have worked in 1951: seizing and holding the island of Abadan was a lesser military problem than defending the Canal Zone in Egypt. What was harder to predict was how soon the refinery could start processing Kuwaiti crude and how the politicians in Tehran would then react. It was the political impact that mattered, and only swift success could have justified the operation to American opinion and even to British supporters of the Labour Government.

Of course, one major impediment to military action at this stage was the continued presence at the oil-fields inland of British employees of the AIOC – at the end of April, over a thousand of them if their families are included. The opinions of the Chiefs of Staff concerning a protected evacuation from Abadan varied with the plan they were discussing, but they usually thought it could be managed. But there was never any suggestion of being able to give effective protection to British subjects inland or to guarantee their safe evacuation in the face of hostile Persian forces. On 22 June the Foreign Office had told Shepherd there was 'no possibility' of protecting AIOC staff in the oilfields. Even Plan Midget applied to Abadan island only.[22] Either these distant British subjects would have to be evacuated before British forces landed at Abadan (as was the plan on 18 July) or else the Persian military commanders or adjacent tribesmen would have to be squared.

Neither course was impossible. Evacuation was begun and, for women and children, completed in June. It could have been started a good deal earlier. And Woodhouse, then working for MI6 in Tehran, says:

> One of my officers had successfully suborned the Iranian Commander-in-Chief at Khorramshahr not to offer more than token resistance.[23]

'Monty' Woodhouse joined the Embassy at Tehran (where the small team already planning covert operations were then christened 'Monty's Army')[24] in August 1951, but the understanding he mentions may well have been reached earlier – after General Shahbakti was relieved at Khorramshahr by General Djalali at the beginning of June. When Capper called on the General on 17 July, he found both the General and the Military Governor (Brigadier Kemal) to be friendly and helpful. General Djalali remarked more than once that Makki (the representative in Abadan of the Tehran government and the great British *bête noire*) was the root cause of all the trouble in Khuzistan.[25] As for the local tribes, both the Company and the British Government had long cultivated their cooperation.

Probably Ministers would have preferred prior evacuation, but they could not be expected to sanction a British military occupation of Abadan unless they had good reason to believe that such an operation would not jeopardise British lives in the oilfields inland.

Although 1 May seems, in retrospect, the optimum date for the British Cabinet to consider and sanction a plan for military interven-

tion, it does not necessarily follow that an operation launched later, even weeks later, would have had worse prospects of military success. It was the timing of the ministerial decision on the principle of intervention that mattered most, for thereafter the political environment quickly deteriorated. As Mossadegh consolidated his position, the attitudes of local Persian officials and of the Company's own Persian staff became more hostile. From 10 May onwards repeated diplomatic communications and public statements made painfully clear the opposition of the United States Government to any British use of force. American pressure carried extra weight because Ministers had not yet been offered any credible or encouraging proposal for British military intervention. The cold transatlantic shower culminated in a personal message of 31 May from Truman to Attlee urging him to negotiate with the Persian Government. Acheson afterwards apologised to the British Ambassador because a copy had been given to Mossadegh.[26]

The Americans did not change their attitude in later months, when further political impediments to military intervention were created – for a time at least – by such diplomatic initiatives as the Company's proposal of arbitration, the British Government's resort to the International Court of Justice or the missions to Persia of Averell Harriman or Richard Stokes. Only once did the Persians, who played their hand skilfully, expose a politically vulnerable flank. If the bill presented to the Majlis on 25 June – providing the death penalty for interference with the running of the national oil industry – had been passed and implemented by bringing capital charges against one or more British members of the AIOC staff, there would have been a strong case for Operation Midget, for which, so the CIGS told the Cabinet that day, 'full preparations had been made'.[27] Acheson's statement to the House of Representatives on the following day that the situation in Iran was 'rapidly moving along the road to disaster'[28] suggests that, in these circumstances, even he might have found it difficult to veto a British use of force.

The Persians, however, did not press home their threat, so neither British resolution nor American flexibility were put to the test. There then followed a period of negotiation with the Persian Government, first by the American mediator, Averell Harriman, then by the British Cabinet Minister, Richard Stokes. For most of July and August, therefore, only extreme Persian provocation (for instance, anti-British rioting in Abadan when the withdrawal of British staff from the oilfields began, as originally planned, on 23 July) would

have permitted British military intervention without grave offence to President Truman. Not only was Harriman the President's representative, but Harriman's only achievement had been to persuade the Persians to receive Stokes.

When all these efforts had ended in failure and British forces had reverted to 24 hours' notice on 18 August, there ought again to have been a political opportunity for intervention. In one respect the political argument for a resort to force was even stronger than it had been at the beginning of May, for the chances of resolving the dispute by negotiation had now been thoroughly explored, but without success. Other political factors, however, tipped the balance against Buccaneer. The sterling crisis already looming at the end of August made it even more dangerous to offend the United States. Morrison, the champion of intervention, began his extended absence from the Foreign Office in mid-August, leaving a clear field to the cautious Attlee, who had returned from his Norwegian holiday on 14 August. By then Attlee, who had mentioned the idea of an October election to Morrison at the end of May, could already have reached the decision of which he informed the King on 5 September: to seek a dissolution in the first week of October.[29]

That decision transformed the political environment. No sensible Prime Minister on the eve of a General Election would gladly commit British forces to anything more than the rescue of endangered British subjects. Buccaneer or the extended Midget had now to be considered as operations that ought to be avoidable and, if launched, would inevitably be hazardous, controversial and by no means certain to reap the rewards of success before polling day. Abstention from intervention in Persia was as electorally indicated as supporting British troops under attack in Egypt. In any case, as Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Sanders pointed out to the Chiefs of Staff on 31 August, it was now too late to expect actual advantage from initiating Buccaneer. There were only 350 British subjects left at Abadan.[30] If British forces were still kept at short notice until the final evacuation, this was to guard against a possible threat to British lives and no longer with any view to seizing, holding and operating the refinery.

It does seem, therefore, that the opportunity lost in May because of the unreadiness of the Chiefs of Staff was never repeated in politically acceptable form. Even the scenario briefly envisaged in the second half of July needed a Persian provocation as its trigger and was derailed when Harriman asked for the evacuation of the oilfields to be postponed.

This does not mean that all the planning, the costly preparations and the hardship endured by sailors, soldiers and airmen kept for months at short notice and, in many cases, in conditions of acute discomfort, were undertaken in vain or altogether without result. At any time during those six months there might have been an attack on British subjects at Abadan of a kind that called for an immediate military response. It can even be argued that the self-restraint exercised by Persian troops, and their ability to prevent any repetition of the mob violence of April, owed something to the obvious and visible signs of British readiness: the warships in the Shatt al Arab or the regular RAF reconnaissance flights, for instance.

Welcome though this mouse was to the British Government, it might perhaps have been delivered without moving such military mountains, if only Ministers had been able to make up their minds earlier how far they were, or were not, prepared to go. As it was, the words they used and the actions they authorised made it obvious, not only in Persia but throughout the Middle East, that Britain had been willing to wound but afraid to strike. As *The Times* said on 3 October: 'Mr. Churchill . . . spoke for many in condemning a wavering policy that displayed force without effect.'

12 One Answer to the Question

Did Attlee prudently avoid a damaging fiasco in 1951 or did he let opportunity slip and set an unfortunate example?

Chapter 1

That was the question that prompted a fresh look at an operation planned for months but never launched: Buccaneer. Going through the records suggests that the question was too simple. Military defeat was unlikely if the operation could have been undertaken when the Chiefs of Staff were ready. The risk was rather that the seizure of Abadan island might not achieve the political objective. Military success might be overshadowed by an unacceptable level of damage or casualties. There might not be enough willing Persian workers to enable the refinery to process even a modest amount of Kuwaiti crude. If those obstacles could be overcome, the success of the AIOC in maintaining a token output under military protection might still make too little impression in Tehran to bring about the speedy replacement of Mossadegh by a Persian leader able and willing to compromise. And, unless that happened quickly, there would remain the risk of a serious quarrel with the government of the United States.

Of course, if the Chiefs of Staff had been ready much earlier, or if the Persians had behaved much more provocatively, some of these risks might have been reduced to manageable proportions. In the course of events as they actually developed, there was never a moment when military intervention would not have been a gamble, whether because the soldiers were not ready or because the political obstacles had become too great.

That was a hazard that, in the end, Attlee avoided. Today it may seem more surprising than it did then that Ministers took so long to reject the idea of military intervention and obviously found the decision so difficult. If Buccaneer had been implemented, the operation would have been on a larger scale than any British exercise of coercive diplomacy since the expeditionary force sent to Shanghai in 1927 to protect the International Concession against the risk of attack

by Chinese revolutionary armies. That had involved 40 000 troops and marines (half of them British or Indian) and 35 warships (nine of them British). In 1927, however, public opinion was more used to such intervention and the participation of seven other countries (including the United States and Japan) meant that Britain had no need to fear outside opposition of the kind manifested in 1951 by the United States Government.

In the Persian oil crisis it was American opposition that ultimately proved decisive. On 11 July this had been only one of the arguments advanced in the Cabinet Paper Morrison had commissioned on Attlee's instructions and which concluded that 'force had better be ruled out'.[1] On 27 September, when evacuation of most British staff and greater military readiness had eliminated other obstacles, it was 'the attitude of the US Government' that made the use of force seem inexpedient. 'We could not afford to break with the United States on an issue of this kind.'[2]

It is occasionally suggested that American motives were mercenary.

> Musaddiq was used as an American wedge to break the AIOC's monopolistic grasp on Iran's oil resources.[3]

British suspicions notwithstanding, this seems unlikely. Taking a 40 per cent share as the American commission for helping the British to return to Iran in 1954 was natural enough, but would any sensible American anxious to exploit Iranian oil actually encourage Mossadegh to nationalise it? His subsequent overthrow was by no means a foregone conclusion and the *coup d'état* the Americans helped to organise in 1953 almost ended in failure.

Nor can distaste for the use of force in international relations provide a plausible American motive. Truman might make less use of the classical kind of gunboat diplomacy than many earlier or later Presidents, but he responded vigorously to the Berlin blockade or the hypothetical Chinese threat to Taiwan. British activities in Egypt did not excite his hostility and the French were actually receiving American financial and logistic help for their campaign in Indochina. Even in Iran, as Acheson had more than once explained, force might be used against a Communist government.

In 1951 the foreign policy of the United States was and, for many years would remain, dominated by ideological considerations. The year before, the National Security Council had endorsed a paper (NSC-68) defining the Soviet purpose as

> the complete subversion or forcible destruction of the machinery of government and structure of society in the non-Soviet world and their replacement by an apparatus and structure subservient to and controlled by the Kremlin.[4]

That was the threat to which the British Government were expected to accord priority and against which the Americans hoped to enlist Mossadegh. In the words of an American writer:

> The oil nationalization crisis pitted the economic interests of Great Britain against the cold war politics of the United States.[5]

If we think of the drastic pressure Eisenhower applied against Anglo-French intervention at Port Said in 1956 and the British débâcle that ensued, we must concede Attlee's prudence in 1951.

It is tempting, but probably unprofitable, to wonder what might have happened in 1951, if Churchill had been in power, as he could have been if the Labour Party had won ten fewer seats in the General Election of February 1950. Though seldom as bellicose as his opponents made him out to be, Churchill did not share their instinctive distaste for the idea of using force to protect British assets abroad. He also had a personal, almost proprietary interest in the AIOC concession and he commanded more respect in Washington than Attlee. He might, perhaps, ultimately have yielded to American pressure, but he would not have tolerated the dilatory responses of the Chiefs of Staff. The crunch would have come earlier, perhaps before the Americans, preoccupied as they were by Korea, were ready to interpose a veto. In 1952, in a confidential minute not intended for publication Churchill was still complaining 'how different would the position have been if the late Government had not flinched . . . at Abadan'.[6] Attlee had got closer to intervention than he was subsequently willing to admit, but Churchill could conceivably have gone over the brink. That would still have been a gamble.

If a military solution to the Persian oil crisis was impracticable – Furlonge had so argued as early as 25 April 1951[7] – what was the alternative? The United States Government repeatedly urged the British and Persian governments to negotiate a compromise and later writers have often blamed the British for their failure to act on this advice, even though the idea commanded the intermittent support of Attlee. Shepherd went further than most in suggesting, on 2 May, a possible basis:

an arrangement which would enable the Company to buy oil at a fair market price from a nationalised Persian Company.[8]

His proposal was rejected by the Foreign Office and most British ministers and officials, to say nothing of the AIOC, were unwilling to go so far. To them it would have been not compromise, but capitulation. The evidence (even from Persian sources) suggests, however, that Mossadegh was not interested in compromise. He wanted to get rid of the British. Any acceptable agreement would have had to be reached not merely before Mossadegh became Prime Minister, but well before the death of Razmara – not much later than the summer of 1950. The AIOC had driven too hard a bargain and the Supplemental Oil Agreement they had negotiated in 1949 had probably never been ratifiable, even if the British preferred to blame the fifty-fifty deal Aramco later reached with Saudi Arabia. The advice the Americans had offered in 1950 had been sensible. On 12 August, for instance, the US Ambassador urged Bevin to persuade the AIOC to be more flexible.[9] Repeating that advice in 1951 was a waste of breath. Because British Ministers, the AIOC, the officials of the various Departments in Whitehall had lacked a sense of tempo, the card labelled 'negotiated compromise' could no longer take a trick. 'Time', as President Gorbachev would remark many years later, 'punishes those who come too late.'[10]

Probably by the beginning of 1951, certainly after the murder of Razmara, the true choice facing the British Government was one between military intervention and capitulation, though early negotiation might have softened the terms of surrender. This was not generally realised in London, where the traditional British belief in compromise as the panacea for every dispute was reinforced by the conviction that Mossadegh was only haggling to raise the price of the bargain he would eventually strike. Later writers have added to the confusion by arguing, or implying, that the AIOC had only to imitate the vision and boldness displayed by Aramco to achieve equal success.

It is probably truer to say that the AIOC needed to anticipate Aramco. In the summer of 1950 the offer of a fifty-fifty profit split might have satisfied the Persians, who had unsuccessfully suggested this formula in 1949.[11] When it was squeezed out of a reluctant Company in March 1951 it was too late. Once Razmara was dead, Persia no longer had a Prime Minister willing to negotiate a compromise and able to make it stick. Mossadegh meant what he said:

> the struggle of the Iranian people was not for money, but for the acquisition of total freedom and independence.[12]

In Saudi Arabia, where King Ibn Saud was troubled by neither mobs nor deputies, he already enjoyed freedom and independence and could afford to concentrate on getting more money.

In 1950 the British Government, their advisers and the AIOC failed to realise that further concessions were needed before the Supplemental Agreement could be ratified. In 1951 most of them took too long to understand that any real compromise was no longer available. It would nevertheless be unfair to blame them for not foreseeing the emergence in 1954 of an international consortium able to assume, in agreement with the Persian Government, the production and export of Persian oil. That did not only require the AIOC to exchange their monopoly of Persian oil for a minority share. It also depended on replacement of the existing governments of Britain and the United States (through elections) and that of Persia – by *coup d'état*. Nor would Mossadegh have been so vulnerable in 1953 if the other major oil companies had not cooperated with the AIOC in denying world markets to nationalised Iranian oil.

The predictions of 1951 spread across a broad spectrum, but almost all of them, British or American, optimistic or pessimistic, proved to have been mistaken. The Persians took more than a few months to come to their senses, but the British did not leave Persia never to return. The oil-fields and installations survived the interregnum, but the AIOC monopoly of Persian oil did not. The fall of Mossadegh did not expose Persia to Communism, but to a quarter of a century of increasingly autocratic rule by the Shah. And, if the British were eventually driven from all their positions of privilege, power and influence in the Middle East, this was an evolutionary process not begun by flight from Abadan nor reversible by retention of Abadan.

Naturally determinism must not be carried too far. If we look back across four decades we may think that, by 1951, one of the great tides of history had already turned in the Middle East; that the ebb was sweeping the peoples of the region into the deep waters of independence as irresistibly as it was ending European influence. There were nevertheless significant differences from one country to another in the extent and pace of change and in the manner of its achievement. Kuwait, for instance, cut loose 15 years later than the Lebanon and, thanks to a British military intervention in 1961 to preserve the newly-independent state from the predatory grasp of Iraq, was able,

until 1990, to follow her own path to air-conditioned prosperity. The seeds of the Lebanese disaster were sown as early as 1948 and, in the seventies and eighties, each outside intervention only made the misery worse than it was before.

Elsewhere in the Middle East there have been such sharp contrasts between the experiences of different countries on their separate roads to increased independence as to suggest that particular causes have been more important than the general trend. Sometimes the deciding factor seems to have been the emergence of a new leader or the prolonged survival of an old one. Iran was transformed after Mossadegh was overthrown and again, a quarter of a century later, when the same fate befell the Shah. In a dozen countries of the Middle East indigenous political turbulence has been countered or aggravated by foreign military intervention, particularly but not exclusively, from Britain and France in the early years, but increasingly, and nowadays predominantly, from the United States. When these enterprises foundered, as they often did, it was seldom because the times were out of joint, but mainly because the objective was wrongly conceived or attempted with inadequate resources.

In 1951 the Abadan crisis rang the changes on that famously unhappy theme: too little and too late. The concessions that might have carried the day even in the summer of 1950 were vainly offered in 1951. The soldiers who might have prevailed in May were ready in July. Once lost, tempo was never recovered. The fiasco Britain avoided was hypothetical: military intervention without political result. The humiliation (a word even Attlee used) Britain had to accept was real: the October scuttle after the months of sabre-rattling. The consolation prize achieved by Churchill in 1953 was not foreseen by the actors of 1951 and cannot be pleaded in their defence. Nor did it efface the moral foreigners, not least in Washington, had drawn from the affair of Abadan: Britain could profitably be bullied.

If there are other lessons to be learned from this episode, they will probably be equally unwelcome. Compromise, for instance, is not always a sensible objective. There are some disputes in which one of the parties – Britain in 1940, for instance – will not hear of it. Naturally it can be hard to distinguish genuine obduracy from the poker player's bluff. Even Shepherd took some time to reach the conclusion that Mossadegh would have to be replaced before a tolerable agreement would be possible. And the British Cabinet went on hoping until not only Shepherd and the AIOC, but Harriman and

then Stokes had sought a compromise and failed.

What was less excusable than delay in grasping Mossadegh's tenacity of purpose was that British policy did not spring from a proper consideration of the full range of possible outcomes to the dispute. The only choice envisaged, until very late in the game, was one between a negotiated compromise and military intervention. If Ministers had realised that the true alternative to intervention was the expulsion of the AIOC, they might have thought harder about Buccaneer. They might, on the other hand, have decided to go, but to contrive a more dignified departure.

The Abadan crisis did not, as has sometimes been suggested, demonstrate that coercive diplomacy was no longer feasible in the second half of the twentieth century. It merely provided an instructive example of the wrong way to set about it. In later years, of course, the United States became the leading exponent of large amphibious operations as instruments of coercive diplomacy. The Sixth Fleet maintained 15 000 American Marines in the Lebanon for three months in 1958. In 1965 the United States had 22 000 men ashore in the Dominican Republic and 9000 afloat. Forty ships of the US Navy were involved in this operation, which lasted five months. In 1983 over 7000 American soldiers and marines invaded Grenada and, as had been the case in the Dominican Republic, changed the island's government. Many other states (including Britain) managed at least one operation of this kind. Some were failures. The Argentine Operation Rosario against the Falklands in 1982 led to defeat in war and the downfall of the Argentine Government. But Turkey in 1990 still ruled the slice of Cyprus she grabbed in 1974.

Any kind of coercive diplomacy needs to be considered in the special context of some specific dispute. There is no universal recipe for success. A few principles are occasionally applicable. If the use of force is conceivable, this should be considered at an early stage of the dispute. The actual use of force may also encounter less resistance from the victim and less opposition from third parties if it is early rather than long-expected. And, before any decision is reached, a wide range of options and outcomes ought to be considered, including those disagreeable contingencies with which officials are often reluctant to trouble ministers. That was particularly important when dealing with such a maverick as Mossadegh.

It is improbable that Mossadegh concerned himself with options. He knew what he wanted, was prepared to run risks and maintained his course stubbornly and consistently. Unlike the British he showed

considerable command of tempo and seems to have understood them better than they ever did him. He was quick to correct his one major tactical error – the anti-sabotage bill – and, for the impassioned leader of an excitable people, the degree of moderation he was able to impose on the tactical conduct of the campaign was remarkable. While he was Prime Minister, five months of anti-British agitation brought no British deaths. That was the key to his success.

It would not be 'happily ever after' for Mossadegh or for his country, but in 1951 he won his battle and he deserved to. As Churchill said, Mossadegh had 'measured accurately the will-power of the men he had to deal with in Whitehall'.[13]

Notes and References

1 VERDICT IN DISPUTE

1. On 6 October 1951. Robert Rhodes James (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill – His Complete Speeches 1897–1963*, Vol. VIII (London: Chelsea House Publishers, 1974), p. 8252.
2. Clement Attlee (1883–1967) was then British Prime Minister, later 1st Earl Attlee.
3. The British Government then had a controlling interest in the AIOC, but did not use it to alter Company policy.
4. Quoted in Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), p. 599.
5. At Cabinet Meeting of 27 September 1951. CM 60(51) in Public Record Office. All otherwise unidentified references are to documents in the Public Record Office.
6. Philip M. Williams (ed.), *The Diary of Hugh Gaitskell* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p. 260 and Harold Macmillan, *Tides of Fortune 1945–1955* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 344.
7. George C. McGhee (b. 1912) on 2 May 1951, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1951*, Vol. V: *The Near East and Africa* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 119.
8. Sir William Strang, GCB GCMG MBE (1893–1978) later Lord Strang, was Permanent Under-Secretary from 1949 to 1953. Intelligent, industrious and efficient, he took a kindly interest even in junior members of the Foreign Service.
9. FO 371 91529.
10. John Montgomery, *The Fifties* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), p. 34.
11. Aneurin Bevan (1897–1960) was Minister of Labour and National Service when he resigned in 1951.
12. Harold Wilson (1916–), later Lord Wilson of Rievaulx, was President of the Board of Trade when he resigned in 1951.
13. Ernest Bevin (1881–1951) had been Foreign Secretary until ill-health forced his resignation in March 1951.
14. Sir Stafford Cripps (1889–1952) had been Chancellor of the Exchequer until ill-health forced his resignation in 1950.
15. Herbert Morrison (1888–1965), later Lord Morrison of Lambeth. See Bernard Donoughue and G.W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), p. 514.
16. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919–80). See Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1950*, Vol. V (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 512.
17. According to his biographer Mossadegh (1882–1967) was the transliteration of his name he himself employed. See Farhad Diba *Mohammad Mossadegh* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

18. On 14 May 1951. FO 371 91535.
19. R.K. Karanjia, *The Mind of a Monarch* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977), p. 108.
20. Ibid., p. 240.
21. Ramesh Sanghvi, *Aryamehr: The Shah of Iran* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 202.
22. Yonah Alexander and Allan Nanes, *The United States and Iran – A Documentary History* (Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1980), p. 225.
23. *Foreign Relations 1951*, op. cit., pp. 309 and 314.
24. Francis Williams, *Twilight of Empire: Memoirs of Prime Minister Clement Attlee* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 255.
25. Speech at Liverpool on 2 October 1951, *The Times*, 3 October 1951.
26. Quoted in Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982), p. 404.
27. Donoughue and Jones, op. cit., p. 494.
28. *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1945–1962*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Collins, 1968), p. 206.
29. Montgomery, op. cit., p. 31.
30. CM 33 (51).

2 OIL

1. Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911–1918* (London: Four Square Books, 1960), pp. 93–4.
2. Alistair Horne, *Macmillan 1894–1956* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 310.
3. Henry Longhurst, *Adventure in Oil* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1959), p. 45.
4. R.W. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, Vol. I (Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 432–44.
5. Longhurst, op. cit., pp. 143–5.
6. L.P. Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil: A Study in Power Politics* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955), p. 8.
7. Dean Acheson (1895–1971), *Present at the Creation* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), p. 501.
8. Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979), p. 273.
9. Bevin had suggested to the Company a fifty-fifty split of profits as early as 1946, but without success. Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary* (London: Heinemann, 1983), p. 247.
10. Sent to FO 14 February 1951. FO 371 91448.
11. In conformity with local legislation the Company had changed their name in 1935 to Anglo-Iranian, but the new style was slow to gain general acceptance in Britain.
12. Ronald W. Ferrier and Irvine H. Anderson in James A. Bill and William Roger Louis (eds.), *Musaddiq, Iranian Nationalism and Oil* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), pp. 170–71, 158–9. Also Anthony Eden, *Full Circle* (London: Cassell, 1960), p. 193.

13. Harold Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase* (London: Constable, 1934), pp. 137–47.
14. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1950*, Vol. 5, eds Frederick Aandahl and William Z. Slany (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 635.
15. Acheson, op. cit., p. 504.
16. Cottam, op. cit., p. 22.
17. James A. Bill and W.R. Louis (eds), *Musaddiq, Iranian Nationalism and Oil* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), p. 243.
18. FO 371 91459.
19. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1951*, Vol. V: *Near East and Africa*, ed. William Z. Slany (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 315.
20. Mohammad Reza Pahlevi, *The Shah's Story*, tr. Teresa Waugh (London: Michael Joseph, 1980), p. 53.
21. Farhad Diba, *Mohammad Mossadegh* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. x.
22. William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945–1951* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 640–41.
23. Cottam, op. cit., p. 272 and Musaddiq's *Memoirs*, ed. Homa Katouzian, tr. S.H. Amin and H. Katouzian (London, Jebhe: National Movement of Iran, 1988), pp. 19–20, 37–8.
24. Farhad Diba, op. cit., pp. 187 and 119.
25. Mohammad Reza Pahlevi, op. cit., p. 53.
26. Norman Hillier-Fry, letter of 24 November 1988, to the author.
27. Christopher Gandy, letter of 8 November 1988, to the author.
28. William Roger Louis, op. cit., p. 689.
29. Acheson, op. cit., p. 509.
30. Gaddis Smith, *Dean Acheson* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1972), pp. 399–400.
31. Richard Stokes (1897–1957), letter of 14 September 1951 to Attlee, quoted in Francis Williams, *Twilight of Empire: Memoirs of Prime Minister Clement Attlee* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987), p. 250.
32. Lance Pyman, letter of 15 November 1988, to the author.
33. Mussadiq's *Memoirs*, op. cit., passim.
34. FO 371 91459.
35. Mark Hamilton Lytle, *The Origins of the Iranian-American Alliance 1941–1953* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987), p. 207.
36. Louis, op. cit., pp. 651–89.
37. Cottam, op. cit., p. 219.
38. FO 371 91449 and 91551.
39. Mussadiq's *Memoirs*, op. cit., p. 481.

3 THUNDER IN THE AIR

1. FO 371 91522.
2. Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary* (London: Heinemann, 1983), p. 288.

3. Ibid., p. 832.
4. CP(51) 28 and CP(51) 40. Also Bullock, op. cit., p. 827.
5. FO 371 91521.
6. FO 371 91522.
7. FO 371 91522.
8. FO 371 91523.
9. FO 371 91450 and Hossein Amirsadeghi, *Twentieth Century Iran* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 74. Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran* (London: Macmillan, 1981) summarises other theories about the authorship of a murder still regarded as something of a mystery (pp. 158–60).
10. CP(51) 28.
11. Yonah Alexander and Allan Nates (eds), *The United States and Iran – A Documentary History* (Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1980), p. 225.
12. George C. McGhee, *Envoy to the Middle World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 326–7.
13. FO 371 91450.
14. Nicholas Henderson, *The Private Office* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984), p. 50; Bullock, op. cit., p. 833.
15. Avi Shlaim, Peter Jones, Keith Sainsbury, *British Foreign Secretaries Since 1945* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1977), pp. 70–80.
16. Hugh Dalton, *High Tide and After* (London: Frederick Muller, 1962), p. 323. Dalton (1887–1962) was a fellow member of the Attlee government who had himself wanted to be Foreign Secretary.
17. Roderick Barclay, *Ernest Bevin and the Foreign Office 1932–1969* (London: Barclay, 1975) p. 96.
18. Gunnar Hägglöf, *Engelska År 1950–1960* (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söners Förlag, 1974), p. 56.
19. Bernard Donoughue and G.W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), p. 491.
20. Ibid., p. 470.
21. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), p. 556.
22. Herbert Morrison, *An Autobiography* (London: Odhams Press, 1960), p. 281. See also note 18.
23. Donoughue, op. cit., p. 498.
24. FO 371 91524.
25. Bullock, op. cit., p. 247.
26. FO 371 91525.
27. FO 371 91524.
28. FO 371 91450.
29. Letter of 28 May 1989 from Mr J. Homersham Golds, in 1950 the ship's navigating officer.
30. Private information.
31. Gregory Blaxland, *The Regiments Depart: A History of the British Army 1945–1970* (London: William Kimber, 1971), p. 217.
32. William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945–1951* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 715.
33. Letters of 29 December 1988 and 6 January 1989, to the author.

34. Air Chief-Marshal Sir David Lee, *Flight from the Middle East* (London: HMSO, 1980), p. 53.
35. Blaxland, op. cit., pp. 211 and 221.
36. See note 29 and *Jane's Fighting Ships*.

4 UNCERTAIN APRIL

1. FO 371 91528, submission of 21 April 1951 by G.W. Furlonge, CMG OBE, Head of the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office, later KBE. Born in 1903 he entered the Levant Consular Service in 1926, had never served in Persia and ended his career as Ambassador to Ethiopia (1956–59). He married a tennis champion and died in 1984.
2. FO 371 91454. Major Charles Francis Capper had been Consul-General at Khorramshahr since March 1950.
3. FO 371 91454.
4. Formerly Ambassador in Washington and Minister of Court. British diplomats liked him, but did not think he was the strong man the situation required.
5. FO 371 91456.
6. FO 371 91455.
7. Information from Captain Diamond, then a junior Lieutenant-Commander, who was Staff Officer to Captain Wallis in the early months of 1951.
8. FO 371 91456.
9. FO 371 91455.
10. FO 371 91456.
11. *Hansard*, Vol. 486, Cols 1333–4.
12. FO 371 91455.
13. FO 371 91456.
14. Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten: The Official Biography* (London: Collins, 1985), pp. 499–500.
15. Rt Hon. James Callaghan (1912–) later Prime Minister 1976–79.
16. FO 371 91526.
17. FO 371 91455.
18. FO 371 91471.
19. FO 371 91184.
20. FO 371 91527.
21. FO 371 91529.
22. Foreword by Dean Rusk to George McGhee, *Envoy to the Middle World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. xii. This volume of memoirs is bland, well-researched and discreet.
23. On 3 April 1951. FO 371 91184.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid. R.J. Bowker was born in 1901, entered the Diplomatic Service in 1925, had been Minister in Cairo before becoming Assistant Under-Secretary in the Foreign Office in 1950. As was natural for a member of the Diplomatic Service, he did better than the Consular Furlonge, ending as Sir Reginald Bowker, GBE KCMG and Ambassador at Vienna. Died in 1983.

26. FO 371 91531.
27. FO 371 91456.
28. FO 371 91455 and 91456 and letter of 9 November 1989 from Group Captain Hubbard. See also Vice-Admiral Wilfrid Nunn, *Tigris Gunboats* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1932), pp. 87–92.
29. FO 371 91529.
30. FO 371 91455 and 91456.
31. FO 371 91529.
32. CAB 128 19 and Hugh Dalton, *Political Diary*, ed. Ben Pimlott (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), p. 534.
33. FO 371 91455.
34. FO 371 91457.
35. See Chapter 3.
36. FO 371 91457.
37. Information from Captain Diamond.
38. FO 371 91457.

5 SECONDS OUT OF THE RING

1. Letter of 3 November 1988 to the author from Admiral Sir Rae McKaig, in 1951 a Lieutenant-Commander and, from the end of May, staff officer to SNOPG. 'Red Flannel Alley' referred to a street of villas inhabited by senior staff officers while operational units in the Canal Zone, together with their officers, lived in tents.
2. CAB 128 19 CM(32) 51.
3. FO 371 91531.
4. FO 800 653.
5. FO 371 91531.
6. *Hansard*, Vol. 486, Cols 1333–34. Anthony Eden (1897–1977) had been Foreign Secretary (1935–38 and 1940–45) and was now Deputy Leader of the Opposition. Again Foreign Secretary in Churchill's last government (1951–55). Later Prime Minister and Earl of Avon.
7. CAB 130 67.
8. *Hansard*, Vol. 487, Col. 1012.
9. *Hansard*, Vol. 171, Col. 612. Fifth Marquess of Salisbury (1893–1972), Conservative leader of the House of Lords.
10. FO 371 91457.
11. FO 371 91458.
12. FO 371 91531.
13. FO 371 91457.
14. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1951*, Vol. V: *The Near East and Africa*, ed. William Z. Slany (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), pp. 309–14, and FO 371 91529. Shepherd's formula turned out to be rather close to the Persian proposal in August 1951.
15. Information from Captain Diamond.
16. Letter of 9 November 1988 to the author and ADM 53 130095.
17. FO 371 91458.
18. DEFE 4 43.

19. Herbert Morrison, *An Autobiography* (London: Odhams Press, 1960), p. 281.
20. Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982), pp. 244 and 413.
21. CAB 130 67.
22. CAB 128 19 CM 35 (51).
23. FO 371 91534 and Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952–1954*, Vol. X (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. 52 and 55.
24. FO 371 91533. Furlonge wrote to Shepherd on 26 May that his proposal to return for consultation had not been forgotten, but the time was not yet ripe (FO 371 91538).
25. FO 371 91534.
26. FO 371 91457.
27. FO 371 91459.
28. FO 371 91458.
29. Letters of 9 and 15 February 1989 to the author from Commander Guy Harris, then Secretary to the Joint Planning Staff at Fayid.
30. CAB 128 19 CM 36 (51).
31. FO 371 91458.
32. DEFE 4 43.
33. CAB 128 19 CM 36 (51). William Roger Louis is mistaken in believing that 'three brigades of airborne troops were flown to the base at Shaiba in Iraq'. (*The British Empire in the Middle East 1945–1951* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 674). The single brigade available stayed in Cyprus till it went to Egypt.
34. DEFE 4 43.
35. DEFE 4 43.
36. FO 371 91458.
37. FO 371 91534.
38. FO 371 91458.
39. FO 371 91531.
40. George C. McGhee, *Envoy to the Middle World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 336–7.
41. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1951*, Vol. V: *The Near East and Africa*, ed. William Z. Slany (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), pp. 309–11.
42. FO 371 91534 and 91533.
43. FO 371 91535 and Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), p. 506.
44. Yonah Alexander and Allan Nanes, *The United States and Iran – A Documentary History* (Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1980), pp. 215–16.
45. Harold Macmillan, *Tides of Fortune 1945–1955* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 343.
46. Alexander and Nanes, op. cit., p. 217.
47. McGhee, op. cit., pp. 389–90.
48. FO 800 653.
49. CAB 130 67.

50. DEFE 4 43 and FO 371 91459.
51. For the concept of the terminal situation see Grant Hugo, *Appearance and Reality in International Relations* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970).

6 BUCCANEER IS CONCEIVED

1. On 25 May 1951. Sir Frank Soskice (later Lord Stow Hill) was then Attorney-General. FO 371 91537.
2. On 20 June 1951 in House of Commons. *Hansard*, Vol. 489, Col. 522.
3. FO 371 91460 and 91545. For the activities of Makki see also Norman Kemp, *Abadan: A First-hand Account of the Persian Oil Crisis* (London: Allan Wingate, 1953) and L.P. Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955), both passim.
4. FO 371 91460.
5. FO 371 91459.
6. FO 371 91460.
7. Private information.
8. Ibid. and letter from Captain Diamond.
9. FO 371 91460.
10. FO 371 91543 and 91460.
11. FO 800 653.
12. FO 371 91460.
13. Private information and FO 371 91543.
14. FO 371 91460 and 91548.
15. CAB 128 19 CM 45 (51).
16. Bernard Donoughue and G.W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), p. 497.
17. *Hansard*, Vol. 489, Cols 752–830 and Alistair Horne, *Macmillan 1894–1956* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 327.
18. FO 371 91460.
19. FO 371 91451.
20. CAB 130 67.
21. FO 371 91461.
22. Letter of 9 February 1989 to the author from Commander Guy Harris, then Secretary to the Joint Planners.
23. Minute of 8 August 1943 to General Ismay. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. V (London: Cassell, 1952), p. 583.
24. CAB 128 19 CM 46 (51) and Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982), p. 485.
25. CAB 128 19 CM 46 (51) and FO 371 91460.
26. Information from Group-Captain Hubbard and CAB 130 67.
27. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952–1954*, Vol. X (1951–1954) (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), p. 71.
28. Private information.
29. *Hansard*, Vol. 489, Col. 1185–6.
30. *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*.
31. CAB 130 67.

32. Private information, and FO 371 91460, 91550 and 91551.
33. Private information and Admiral McKaig.
34. Norman Kemp, *Abadan: A First-hand Account of the Persian Oil Crisis* (London: Allan Wingate, 1953), pp. 156–7 and FO 371 91507.
35. Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee, *Flight from the Middle East* (London: HMSO, 1980), pp. 54–6.
36. FO 371 91460.
37. CAB 128 19 CM 48 (51).
38. Henry Longhurst, *Adventure in Oil* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1959), p. 158.
39. FO 800 653.
40. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. VIII (London: Heinemann, 1988), pp. 617–18 and FO 371 91555. President Truman (1884–1972) had come to admire Churchill, but he never much cared for Attlee, he had detested Bevin and any esteem he may have felt for the British did not deflect his pursuit of American interests.
41. *Foreign Relations 1952–1954*, op. cit., p. 74.
42. FO 371 91535 and 91553.
43. FO 371 91550 and 91553.
44. Kemp, op. cit., passim.
45. FO 371 91461.
46. FO 371 91524.

7 DECISIONS, DECISIONS

1. Letter of 9 July 1951 to Attlee, quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. VIII (London: Heinemann, 1988), p. 618.
2. Later Sir Eric Drake CBE (1910–). With the AIOC (later British Petroleum), 1935–75.
3. Lord Fraser (1888–1981) had commanded first the Home Fleet, then the Eastern Fleet, finally the British Pacific Fleet during the Second World War. He had been First Sea Lord since 1948.
4. CAB 128 19 CM 48 (51).
5. Gregory Blaxland, *The Regiments Depart* (London: William Kimber, 1971), p. 221.
6. CAB 131 10.
7. FO 800 653.
8. Letter from Admiral Sir Rae McKaig.
9. FO 371 91560, 91561 and 91567.
10. FO 371 91555.
11. FO 371 91559.
12. FO 371 91461.
13. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), p. 507. The British Embassy in Moscow had reported on 29 June that the treatment of the Persian oil dispute in the Russian press did not suggest that the Soviet Government felt themselves concerned. FO 371 91555.
14. Gilbert, op. cit., p. 619.

15. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952–1954*, Vol. X: *Iran (1951–1954)* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. 80–81.
16. FO 371 91461.
17. Private information.
18. CAB 131 10. Marshal of the RAF Sir John Slessor became Chief of Air Staff in January 1950.
19. FO 371 91562.
20. See previous chapter. Information from Group Captain Hubbard and DEFE 4 45.
21. CP (51) 200.
22. FO 371 91555.
23. FO 371 91462 and FO 800 653.
24. CAB 128 20.

8 SECOND THOUGHTS

1. Captain C.G.T. Dean, *The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire) 1919–1953* (RHQ Preston, 1955), pp. 289–90.
2. William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945–1951* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 668.
3. FO 371 91561 and private information.
4. Brigadier Rayner, *Hansard*, Vol. 490, Col. 842.
5. FO 371 91462.
6. Information from Lieutenant-Commander Randall.
7. CAB 130 67.
8. FO 371 91460.
9. CAB 131 10.
10. *Hansard*, Vol. 489, Col. 828.
11. CAB 130 67.
12. CAB 128 20, CM 48 (51).
13. See Chapter 5.
14. CP (51) 200 and CAB 128 20; CM 51 (51) and CM 52 (51).
15. FO 800 653.
16. FO 371 91507.
17. CM 53 (51) in CAB 128 20.
18. CP (51) 212 and CM 54 (51).
19. Francis Williams, *Twilight of Empire: Memoirs of Prime Minister Clement Attlee* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 255.
20. FO 371 91563 and DEFE 4 45.
21. DEFE 4 45 and FO 371 91566.
22. FO 371 91567.
23. DEFE 4 45 and FO 371 91570.
24. FO 371 91568.
25. CM 55 (51) in CAB 128 20.
26. DEFE 4 45.
27. FO 371 91569.
28. CM 54 (51) in CAB 128 20.

29. Letter from Captain Oglesby; Cyril Ray, *The Lancashire Fusiliers* (London: Leo Cooper, 1971) and DEFE 4 45.
30. FO 371 91462.
31. FO 371 91568.
32. Information from Captain Oglesby.
33. Information from Rear-Admiral Hill.
34. Private information.
35. Information from Admiral McKaig.
36. Chapter 6 and FO 371 91461.
37. General Sir Brian Robertson, Bt (1896–1974), GCB GBE KCMG KCVO DSO MC (later Lord Robertson of Oakbridge), was the eldest son of Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson, who had started as a trooper and risen to be CIGS during the Great War. Sir Brian had been Chief Administrative Officer of 8th Army and British Military Governor in Germany before becoming C.-in-C. Middle East Land Forces (1950–53).
38. Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, *Correspondence between His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom and the Persian Government and Related Documents concerning the Oil Industry in Persia – February 1951 to September 1951* (London: HMSO, Cmd 8425). See also L.P. Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955), pp. 194–5.
39. Bahman Nirumand, *Iran: The New Imperialism in Action* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), p. 49.
40. Averell Harriman (1891–1986) was a wealthy American who had been actively engaged in business until the Second World War, when President Roosevelt drew him into diplomacy and politics. Enjoyed a great reputation as a negotiator. See also FO 371 91451, 91569 and 91573.
41. FO 371 91568.
42. FO 371 91563 and 91564.
43. Farhad Diba, *Mohammed Mossadegh – A Political Biography* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 125.
44. CM 55 (51) in CAB 128 20.
45. FO 800 653. Richard Stokes, PC MP MC (1897–1957), had a distinguished record of front-line service in the First World War, which would have appealed to Attlee. See also FO 371 91551.
46. *The Times* 29 January 1951. The member concerned was asked to resign by the committee of the club.
47. CM 56 (51) in CAB 128 20.
48. Richard Crossman became a Minister in the Wilson government of 1964–70.
49. *Hansard*, Vol. 491, Cols 972–1072.
50. *The Times*, 1 August 1951.

9 HOLIDAYS FOR SOME

1. W. Averell Harriman and Elie Abel, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin* (London: Hutchinson, 1976), p. 531.

2. W.H. Auden, *Some Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940), p. 70.
3. Bernard Donoughue and G.W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), pp. 499–500.
4. FO 371 91572.
5. CM 55 (51) and CM 57 (51).
6. DEFE 4 46.
7. Information from Captain Oglesby and ADM 53 130662.
8. *Daily Telegraph*, FO 371 91574 and 91578.
9. *Daily Telegraph*, FO 371 91574, 91575 and 91576.
10. FO 371 91578 and 91571.
11. FO 371 91576.
12. FO 371 91578.
13. Norman Kemp, *Abadan: A First-Hand Account of the Persian Oil Crisis* (London: Allan Wingate, 1953), pp. 215–19.
14. DEFE 4 46.
15. CAB 130 67.
16. DEFE 4 45 and 46.
17. Information from Captain Oglesby.
18. Information from Lieutenant-Commander Randall and FO 371 91451.
19. FO 800 653.
20. FO 371 91462.
21. Roderick Barclay, *Ernest Bevin and the Foreign Office 1932–1969* (London: Barclay, 1975), p. 99.
22. FO 371 91588.
23. Philip M. Williams, *Hugh Gaitskell: A Political Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), pp. 272–83.

10 FINAL SPASM

1. Minute of 7 September 1951, FO 800 653.
2. CM 58 (51) in CAB 128 20.
3. FO 371 91587.
4. FO 371 91462.
5. FO 371 91463.
6. FO 800 653. On 28 September the Attorney-General agreed: 'policy considerations must be ultimately deciding factor'.
7. FO 371 91587.
8. FO 371 91451 and 91463.
9. On 5 September, FO 371 91572.
10. Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982), p. 486.
11. FO 371 91463.
12. FO 371 91589.
13. FO 800 653.
14. FO 371 91593.
15. Information from Captain Oglesby, and Captain C.G.T. Dean, *The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire) 1919–1953* (RHQ Preston, 1955), p. 290.
16. Hugh Dalton, *Political Diary*, ed. Ben Pimlott (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), p. 544.

17. CAB 128 20.
18. FO 371 91472.
19. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952–1954*, Vol. X: *Iran (1951–1954)* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. 171–2.
20. Ibid., p. 175.
21. CAB 130 67.
22. CP (51) 257.
23. CM 60 (51) in CAB 128 20.
24. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. VIII (London: Heinemann, 1988), p. 639.
25. FO 371 91464.
26. Michael Frayn, in Michael Sissons and Philip French (eds), *Age of Austerity* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1963), pp. 336–7.
27. FO 371 91587.
28. FO 800 653.
29. FO 371 91591.
30. FO 371 91451.
31. ADM 53 130664.
32. Information from Lieutenant-Commander Randall.
33. William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945–1951* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 689 and Henry Longhurst, *Adventure in Oil* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1959), pp. 143–4.
34. ADM 53 130664.
35. FO 371 91593.
36. Information from Lieutenant-Commander Randall.
37. CAB 130 67.
38. FO 371 91594.
39. Information from Rear-Admiral Hollins, then First-Lieutenant of HMS ARMADA.
40. D.E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1951* (London: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 53–5.
41. *The Times*, 3 October 1951.
42. Butler, op. cit., pp. 113–14.
43. *The Times*, 5 October and 2 October 1951.
44. Gilbert, op. cit., p. 642.
45. See Chapter 8.
46. Butler, op. cit., p. 118.
47. The Ambassador reported this long and difficult conversation as occurring on 4 October, but Morrison's record dates it on 6 October. *Foreign Relations*, op. cit., pp. 205–8 and FO 800 653.
48. FO 371 91588.

11 AFTERMATH IN RETROSPECT

1. Anthony Eden, *Full Circle* (London: Cassell, 1960), p. 225.
2. CM 60 (51) in CAB 128 20.
3. *The Times*, 13 October 1951.

4. D.E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1951* (London: Macmillan, 1952), p. 118.
5. William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945–1951* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 714.
6. Gregory Blaxland, *The Regiments Depart* (London: William Kimber, 1971), p. 221.
7. Ibid., passim.
8. Eden, op. cit., p. 244.
9. *The Times*, 11 October 1951 and Louis, op. cit., p. 603.
10. Grant Hugo, *Appearance and Reality in International Relations* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 142.
11. It was on 15 November 1951 that Furlonge minuted that 'covert activities' were 'developing satisfactorily'. FO 371 91465.
12. The five American companies in the consortium owned 40 per cent between them; the Compagnie Française des Pétroles 6 per cent and Royal Dutch Shell 14 per cent. As Anglo-Iranian had 40 per cent and as 40 per cent of Shell was British-owned, Britain still had the largest national stake in the consortium, even if this was now a minority holding.
13. FO 371 91524.
14. FO 371 91454.
15. FO 371 91457.
16. Martin Middlebrook, *Task Force: the Falklands War 1982* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, revised edition 1987), pp. 67–8.
17. Robert Browning – *Never the Time and the Place.*
18. Quoted in Paul B. Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why it Failed* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985), p. 144.
19. Middlebrook, op. cit., p. 62.
20. Harold Macmillan, *The Blast of War* (London: Macmillan), p. 424.
21. To the Vice-Chiefs of Staff, who were not then enthusiastic. FO 371 91548.
22. FO 371 91548.
23. C.M. Woodhouse, *Something Ventured* (London: Granada Publishing, 1982), p. 111.
24. Information from W.N. Hillier-Fry, then Oriental Secretary at Tehran.
25. *The Times*, 1 June 1951 and FO 371 91565.
26. FO 371 91540.
27. CM 46 (51) in CAB 128 20. Those threatened included Drake, who had been told by the Persian Oil Board that he was guilty of 'sabotage'. FO 371 91550.
28. *Keesing's Contemporary Archives.*
29. Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982), pp. 485–6.
30. DEFE 4 46.

12 ONE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION

1. CP (51) 200.
2. CM 60 (51) in CAB 128 20.

3. James A. Bill in Bill and Louis (eds), *Musaddiq, Iranian Nationalism and Oil* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), p. 274.
4. Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (London: Michael Joseph, 1987), p. 42.
5. Mark Hamilton Lytle, *The Origins of the Iranian-American Alliance 1941–1953* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987), p. 193.
6. William Roger Louis and Roger Owen (eds), *Suez 1956: The Crisis and its Consequences* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 54.
7. FO 371 91529.
8. Ibid.
9. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1950*, Vol. V: *The Near East and Africa*, eds Frederick Aandahl and William Z. Slany (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 580.
10. Quoted in *The Times* of 23 March 1990.
11. Ronald W. Ferrier in James A. Bill, op. cit., pp. 172–3.
12. See Chapter 2.
13. *The Times*, 3 October 1951. It has been argued that Makki deserves some of the credit for Persian self-restraint at Abadan. See L.P. Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955), pp. 194–5.

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