

# Middle East International

## From our Correspondents

### Iranian Saga Produces New Moods in Washington

*Psychological changes are taking place within the American polity as patience with the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic of Iran continues to be stretched. In coming years, writes Mark Bruzonsky from Washington, these shifts in national mood, attitudes and will-power may be far more crucial to the international community than the specific events still unfolding in Tehran which nurture them.*

Last Sunday, major American newspaper commentators tried to capture the spirit of the alterations taking place in the American collective psyche toward themselves and their largely harnessed power.

Washington Bureau chief for the *New York Times*, Hendrick Smith, front-pages a description of how "Iran is helping US to shed fear of intervening abroad". Quoting a former senior government official to the effect that "in terms of domestic politics, this has put the end to the Vietnam syndrome", Smith surveys the foreign policy establishment and concludes that "an important shift of attitudes" is evolving

out of the current crisis which "will have a significant long-term impact on the willingness of the United States to project its power in the Third World and to develop greater military capabilities for protecting its interests there".

The *Washington Post's* British-born commentator on the American scene, Henry Fairlie, also weighed in on Sunday with a penetrating discussion of how "America is ready to resume world leadership". "The Ayatollah Khomeini may not realize what he has done," Fairlie points out. "As a result of his actions in the past four weeks, the Vietnam war is now over in the American mind. Americans have, at last, stopped fighting it – and stopped losing it. Perhaps nothing more important has happened as a consequence of the gross events in Iran . . . it is as if the '70s are over," Fairlie summarises. "There has been the rekindling of patriotism, even among the most tender of internationalists. There has been the expressed desire to stand up and fight somewhere, even from the most pacific and waif-like of liberals."

Fairlie's analysis of the emerging American condition, though, is based

on his view that "only a nation that is strong and feels sure could act with such firmness while at the same time setting such an example of preserving the habits of civility between nations; indeed, of preserving the peace in a hostile situation, and not striking a spark in a tinderbox".

For this kind of mature leadership the West has been waiting a considerable time, argues Fairlie. "If the United States does not backslide when the immediate crisis is resolved — or take actions merely out of vengeance, actions which do not serve its real interests — it is in a commanding position to strengthen old alliances, restore some that are broken and even create some new ones."

Of course, other commentators here are far more cautious in predicting the short and long-term outcomes of today's chaotic and unprecedented drama. For one thing, as *Business Week* asserts, the current American mood coupled to President Carter's new image of strength "is totally dependent on a successful resolution of the Iranian crisis". Unforeseen events could still alter the budding American renewal of fortitude which both Smith and Fairlie have accurately described.

*Christian Science Monitor* columnist Joseph Harsch presciently noted last week that "Mr Carter's biggest problem is how to hold off the political pressures on him at home" to take actions which could threaten long-term American force both at home and abroad. Carter "is under enormous pressure from some American politicians and the most volatile elements of public opinion to do exactly those things most likely to harm the hostages . . . and reduce the flow of oil from the Middle East to the industrial Western world". "Were he to do the things being demanded of him,"

Harsch adds, "he could all too easily destroy the hostages, turn Muslim sentiment against the United States massively, cause a sharp decline in the flow of oil from the Middle East and an economic crisis in the entire industrial world. Gasoline shortages in the US would be just another symptom of a huge world crisis. Western allies would blame the US for their new troubles."

Yet the military option is quite alive here and a number of well-respected and usually restrained commentators, including Carl Rowan, are predicting that the present crisis will not be fully ended without some show of American force. The low-key American evacuation from eleven Islamic states, coupled with

repeated State Department warnings that American travellers should reconsider their plans to go to these countries, is a subtle yet clear indication that military strikes are being considered.

The president himself is said to be icily furious about the ayatollah's conduct and about other embassy sackings where local authorities have failed to protect American diplomatic property and lives. Brzezinski is known to be arguing that American determination is under severe test while Vance, as usual, continues to press for restraint.

In such a situation as this, as Joe Harsch concluded his comments last week, "why does anyone want to be president of the US of A?" □

