



Francis J. Gavin, "Politics, Power and U.S. Policy in Iran, 1950-1953," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Volume 1, Issue 1 (Winter 1999): 56-89.

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I would like to concentrate my brief commentary on what I believe is Gavin's somewhat overstated argument that historians and political scientists have exaggerated policy differences between presidential administrations while ignoring important continuities. This has always been true of a subset of historians, particularly those writing about the origins of the Cold War who saw a marked difference between FDR and HST as responsible for its development. But for every such group, there have been others (of whom I am one) who, not always for the same reasons, took a different view and also made the case for continuities, whether between FDR and HST or between HST and DDE.

It is my judgment that the complex factors that contribute to policy (and they include personalities as well as bureaucracies, ongoing international developments, etc.) inevitably contribute to policy outcomes that generally can be seen at least in part as having been influenced by many different factors as opposed to one of them. The real question then, in my judgment, is not whether it is one or another factor that explains an historical development (explaining the past is what I think many of us try to do), but what combination of a multiplicity of factors (not just one vs. another) best explain it.

The difficulty for those of us who believe in complex, multi-causal explanations is that our interpretations don't lend themselves to the kinds of systemic analyses favored by those who concentrate on methodological approaches. I have argued in print that by early 1952 the U.S. had increasingly sided with Britain in a dispute where the issues appeared nonnegotiable and that U.S. support for British policies limited Mossadeq's options, forcing him into a corner and precluding a viable liberal-democratic alternative to the Shah, and that because of this the Truman administration cannot escape major responsibility for the impasse in Iran when President Truman left office. But the fact remains that, at the end of 1952, the Truman administration refused to support a British proposal backed by Churchill and Eden to overthrow Mossadeq; instead, it explored the possibility of finding a solution in collaboration with the major oil companies, while the JCS advocated a break with the British, arguing that animosity toward the British would be greater if the U.S. failed to act than if it did. Efforts to resolve the problem, however, failed. The Eisenhower administration, on the other hand, worked with the British to effect Mossadeq's ouster, and for that reason bears responsibility for a step that violated the principle of sovereignty that previous administrations had pledged to uphold, the consequences of which returned to haunt the U.S. a quarter-century later.

It is true that the U.S. was involved in "special political measures" to restore stability in Iran, but NSC 136, which notes that the USG MAY decide, in the light of circumstances existing at the time, whether to attempt to localize a Soviet ATTACK against Iran or treat it as a cause for war,

is a far cry from deciding to overthrow him in the absence of such an attack. It does not necessarily mean that Truman would have made the decision to overthrow Mossadeq, nor does it follow from Gavin's argument (implied in n. 101) that, because the administration believed Mossadeq's continued rule would make a Communist takeover more likely, thereby justifying covert activity, it would have overthrown him. That the Eisenhower administration came to that conclusion is without question, but in doing so it made assumptions that the Truman administration did not. Whether those assumptions were a function of changes in the balance of power, as Gavin argues, it not clear to me; they could also have been as much a function of new people in a new administration looking at an old problem. Gavin is right to stress continuities. But he does not adequately address the mindsets of key figures in the new administration who were more predisposed than Truman to act and who may well have been as much influenced by issues other than the balance of power, if that in fact was as key a variable as his article suggests.

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