

Editorial

I The Writing on the Wall

‘Ayes to the right 291! The noes to the left, 322!’

These words will not prove to be immortal, but they may well be remembered for some time, as the writing on the wall for Tony Blair.

MENE, MENE, TEKEL UPHARSIN. These were the truly immortal words written on the wall at Belshazzar’s feast.

‘They drink wine, and praise the Gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone.’

It is not reported whether Mr. Berlusconi was present to give them each a handful of designer watches, or whether other benefactors were able to offer them villas in Sardinia or the West Indies in which to relax.

‘In the same hour came forth fingers of a man’s hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the pilaster of the wall of the King’s palace; and the King saw the part of the hand that wrote...And this is the writing that was written. MENE, MENE, TEKEL UPHARSIN.

This is the interpretation of the thing:

MENE; God hath numbered thy Kingdom, and finished it.

TEKEL; thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting.

PERES; thy Kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.’¹

It remains to be seen for how long this message will remain emblazoned on the front wall of Downing Street. But it is unlikely to be needed for very many months. The finger of Crispin Blunt, the teller who called out the fateful numbers, which pointed up that dreaded message from the House of Commons, may not write the next injunction: but the opportunity to inscribe one or two more not dissimilar ones may be given to his colleagues. But there cannot be so very many of these before the end. We can anticipate the demise of Mr. Blair with some pleasure. However, there are many better men and women who have preceded him to early graves in his various wars, who will not be able to share in the widespread rejoicing.

II Iranian Ghosts Walk

The British ghosts are lashing themselves into a fury about Iran. Uncannily, history is repeating itself, with Jack Straw slopping about in the shoes of the late and sadly unlamented Herbert Morrison, another equally ill-fated Foreign Secretary, while Tony Blair huffs, puffs and fails to blow the house down.

There is obviously dirty work going on again, as there was fifty years ago during the last Anglo-Iranian crisis. Burly SAS men in Basra don fancy dress and

drive off cars full of explosives to blow things up. (Which things? Where are the targets? Why is it necessary for the Brits to wear Arab clothes? Is someone being fitted up for the blame for spurious terrorist attacks? Who knows: the fact that the British army sprang its agents loose from an Iraqi prison means that the Iraqi authorities may never find out.)

Today, intemperate outbursts against the Israelis from the Iranian side are matched and returned in prime ministerial fulmination. Just as it happened before, in 1951, so it happens again. Tony Blair's zeal against the Iranians is reined in by his American allies, who have made their own arrangements with Iran. Whilst they are not averse to a little red-hot rhetoric, they wish to keep sulphurous threats in bounds, because their plans for the future of Iraq could be ruined without some semblance of Iranian goodwill.

Not so long ago we drew attention to the judgement of General William E. Odom, that one of the main beneficiaries of the war in Iraq was, in fact, Iran.

'Achieving... war aims has not necessarily served the American interest. Yet they have benefited the interests of America's foes. The destruction of Saddam's regime serves Iran's aim of sweet revenge for Iraq's invasion in 1980.

Four of Osama bin Laden's interests have also been served ...'²

Blair's self-righteousness knows no bounds, but it runs in inverse proportion to his judgement. It is for this powerful reason that we may take leave to doubt whether his belligerence will find free expression. Retail actions, including the ones in fancy dress, are one thing: an all-out wholesale offensive is another, and this one is, at any rate for the present, off limits.

We were there before. On March 9th 1951 Ernest Bevin resigned as British Foreign Secretary, and he was succeeded by Herbert Morrison. Later Clement Attlee was to describe this as 'the worst appointment I ever made'. Morrison, who was not lacking in ambition, was in fact quite deficient in almost all the skills that might be deemed necessary in a Foreign Minister. It was not surprising that he chose to enter on a collision course with Iran, in defence of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company which had pillaged the country without let up, in the preceding years. But this implied defiance of the United States of America, which had other ends in view.

Morrison had set up a British 'Working Party on Persia' which commissioned various studies. One, on the psychology of Iranians, was not calculated to impress liberal opinion. Its author, a British diplomat, characterised the typical Iranian as motivated by

'an unabashed dishonesty, fatalistic outlook, {and} indifference to suffering... The ordinary Persian is vain, unprincipled, eager to promise what he knows he is incapable or has no intention of performing, wedded to procrastination, lacking in perseverance and energy, but amenable to discipline. Above all he enjoys intrigue and readily turns to prevarication and dishonesty whenever there is a possibility of personal gain. Although an accomplished liar, he does not expect to be believed. They easily acquire a superficial knowledge of technical subjects, deluding themselves into the belief that it is profound.'³

Such an account would not be possible in 2005, less because British diplomats have become more tolerant of other peoples than because they would believe such a vignette uncomfortably accurate as a description of their own masters.

Dean Acheson, in his wry memoir, *Present at the Creation*, recalls Morrison, in Washington,

‘giving him the now familiar hardnosed line of how to deal with Iran in the course of which he informed me of what seemed oddly heterodox Socialist doctrine – that Iran by setting the terrible precedent of taking over property without justification was making strong action necessary. To this my notes recall me as replying that to keep cool might do more to solve the problem.’⁷⁴

The hero of the Iranian decision to nationalise their oil was Mohammed Mossadegh, who had already, at the beginning of the crisis, built up a massive following in his country. But the manner by which he came to be recognised was extraordinary. In his gripping history *All the Shah's Men*, Stephen Kinser tells us:

‘Not even the most fervent nationalist could have predicted what happened when the Majlis assembled... All eyes were on Mossadegh, the hero of the hour. Everyone expected him to lead the opposition, with one of his withering tirades against the British and their traitorous errand boys. But when the speaker asked who wished to begin the debate, Mossadegh sat quietly and expressionless. A prominent right-wing deputy named Jamal Emami, who was on the British payroll, took the floor instead. Emami did not even mention Sayyed Zia. Instead he launched into a bitter attack on Mossadegh, pillorying him for having plunged the Majlis into immobility and paralyzed the country with his constant carping. If the old man wanted a real challenge, Emami said scornfully, he should try being prime minister himself and see how difficult the job was. Mossadegh had several times turned aside suggestions that he take over the government, and Emami said he knew the reason why: Mossadegh was one of those irresponsible windbags who delighted in making speeches about how wrong everyone else is, but never offer anything positive.

The chamber fell silent as Emami finished. Mossadegh waited for a long moment and then rose to his feet. Speaking slowly and deliberately, he said that he was honored and grateful for the suggestion that he become prime minister and would in all humility accept. Everyone was stunned, Emami most of all. Soon the shock turned to pandemonium. A formal motion was made that Mossadegh be named prime minister, and the speaker called for an immediate vote. It passed by a margin of seventy-nine to twelve.

Sensing the power he held at that moment, Mossadegh said that he would serve as prime minister only if the Majlis also voted to approve an act he had drawn up to implement the nationalization of Anglo-Iranian. Under its provisions, a parliamentary committee would audit Anglo-Iranian's books, weigh the claims of both sides for compensation, begin sending Iranians abroad to learn the skills of running an oil industry, and draw up articles of incorporation for a new National Iranian Oil Company. The Majlis approved it unanimously that very afternoon.’⁷⁵

Morrison hastened to keep hold of nurse, for fear of something worse. He promptly sent a delegation to Washington, chaired by Sir Oliver Franks, to argue

that to allow Iran to nationalise the oil company ‘would be widely regarded as a victory for the Russians’. It would also cost the British Treasury about £100 million per annum, and jeopardise the British re-armament programme. The Americans were not impressed. Acheson advised the British to abandon confrontation, and to look instead for a legitimate compromise.

On May 18th 1951, the State Department publicly declared that Americans ‘fully recognise the sovereign rights of Iran and sympathise with Iran’s desire that increased benefits accrue to that country from the development of its petroleum’.

Morrison spluttered, and harrumphed. The Americans responded on May 31st with a presidential note to Attlee, urging immediate negotiations. At Attlee’s insistence, the Anglo-Iranian Company then sent a group of officials to Tehran for negotiations. But the negotiations turned out to be another form of confrontation, and no progress was made. The British press energetically echoed the position of Herbert Morrison: condign punishment was called down on Iranian heads. But the American press likened Mossadegh to Thomas Jefferson or Thomas Paine. The *Chicago Daily News* reported that ‘The whole affair was badly handled by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company with the connivance, by default, of the Foreign Office’.

Sternly agnostic about the virtues of the British Empire, the American administration could hardly be accused of consistent anti-imperialism. There was no objection to hanging Herbert Morrison out to dry, and there were quite serious fears that the Brits would blunder into an all-out war, for which the Americans were most certainly unready.

Firstly, they remained somewhat apprehensive about the possibility of Russian intervention. The Russians had withdrawn support for a communist regime in Azerbaijan, the northern province of Iran, after strong American pressure, and the current troubles in Korea encouraged some nervousness about whether Soviet intentions would remain pacific. Certainly Morrison had the bit between his teeth.

Anglo-Iranian’s general manager, Eric Drake, fearing an arrest for sabotage, withdrew to an office in Basra and began to run the Company from Iraq. Tanker captains were ordered to pump back all the oil in their holds, and to leave Abadan empty. ‘When they need money’ said the Company ‘they will come crawling to us on their bellies.’ Inevitably, the Abadan office of the Company was seized. So was the office in Tehran. It thus became a simple matter for the Iranians to prove that the Company had meddled in every aspect of Iranian political life, and had influenced, not to say bribed, a wide variety of Senators, Deputies and former Cabinet Ministers. With fine impartiality it had displaced those who opposed it from office.

‘Among the documents was evidence that former Prime Minister Ali Mansur had begged AIOC to allow him to remain in office, promising in return to appoint a new Finance Minister more agreeable to the Company.’⁶

While Mossadegh’s Government was publishing its incriminating dossier, British warships were already steaming up and down the coastline.

All this worried President Truman, the more so because his National Security Council had warned that the anticipated British invasion

‘might split the free world, would produce a chaotic situation in Iran and might cause the Iranian Government to turn to the Soviet Union for help’.

In a paroxysm of actions and counter-actions, Morrison went to the House of Commons to announce that the Royal Navy would be ordered into action should the Persians fail to discharge their responsibilities.

Seventy thousand troops were stood by for the British invasion and occupation of Iran. And a variety of other madcap schemes were hatched in the Foreign Office, involving the seizure of the refinery. The First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Fraser, favoured a bold military strike, which ‘would dispel Britain’s “dumps and doldrums” and prove that it would not tolerate “being pushed around by Persian pipsqueaks”’.

It would, however, be pushed around by North American pipsqueaks, who were having none of it. When the carefully laid schemes for the deposition of Premier Mossadegh finally came to fruition, it was under completely new management, with the Americans in charge, and the changed British Government playing second fiddle.

The CIA is more honest, and indeed, more boastful about its achievements in the world of subversion, and it has told the story of the overthrow of Premier Mossadegh, after the fall of the Attlee administration, and the accession to power of Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden. Below we feature (see page 59) a short excerpt from the memoir by Daniel N. Wilber. All this should warn us that the relations between British and American plunderers have something in common with the adventures of Mac the Knife and John Jeremiah Peacham:

‘Betray your own brother, you rogue
and sell your old woman you rat.
You think the Lord God’s just a joke?
He will give you His judgement on that.’

The same tensions that attended Britain’s relations with America and Iran in the days of Mohammed Mossadegh, have also been present in determining Britain’s policy towards nuclear proliferation.

Today, Jack Straw is resolutely for ‘counter-proliferation’, the subtle transmogrification of the doctrine of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Straw is encouraged to intimidate the Iranians in order to prevent any possibility that they might arm themselves with nuclear weapons, at the same time that his Government is busily secreting the funds and the human resources to embark upon a new wave of nuclear armaments in the ‘modernisation’ of the increasingly outdated Trident nuclear submarines.

But there is only one genuine act of proliferation in the Middle East, one which was exposed by Mordechai Vanunu, who worked in the Israeli nuclear weapons plant at Dimona.

It has now been revealed that it was the British Government which facilitated the Israeli (and South African) decision to manufacture nuclear weapons (see page 74). This would have been impossible without the provision of heavy water from Norway, which was withheld by the Norwegians but obligingly supplied by the British. When this fact was revealed by Michael Crick on *Newsnight*, Mr. MacNamara, the former US Defence Secretary, confessed that he had never been informed about this. Indeed, not. British officials are on the record as insisting that it would be better not to inform the Americans. Was this discretion aimed at protecting the Israeli decision to proliferate, or was it more to do with the protection of Israel's partner in crime, the apartheid regime in South Africa?

The ethics of banditry being what they are, we should always be prepared for surprises when Governments seek to collaborate. A careful look at these forgotten moments in our history may prove to be an important contribution to political science.

Ken Coates

Footnotes

1. Book of Daniel, 5, verses 4-5, 25-28.
2. William E. Odom: 'Iraq – Arguments for Withdrawal', *Spokesman* 84, 2004, p.20.
3. Stephen Kinzer: *All the Shah's Men*, 2003, Wiley, pp.80-81.
4. Dean Acheson: *Present at the Creation*, 1970, Hamish Hamilton, p.510.
5. Kinzer, op cit, pp. 81-2.
6. Ibid, p.96.



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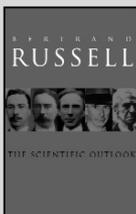
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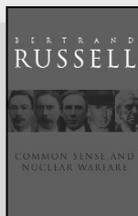
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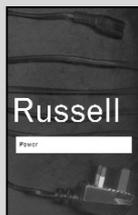
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'It looks beautiful from the outside. A Crusader castle is lovely. But when you're inside and it's cold and damp and you can't see out, you just have to peer through these loopholes, arrow slits ... I could only see a mosque and a little bit of a river. That's all. And that's all the Crusaders saw of the land they were occupying.

And that's now happening to the Americans in Iraq. They sit in this little Green Zone, which is where the Republican Palace was, where the American and British embassies are and where all their American-appointed Iraqis are, surrounded by palisades of pre-stressed concrete, the nearest we've got to the Crusader castle. And they peer out through the machine gun openings and they see a street outside. That is Baghdad. That is their contact with the land they occupy. And all these new positions, Kandahar airport in Afghanistan, the huge American base outside Falluja, the Green Zone inside Baghdad, are massive Crusader compounds ...'