

### In Memoriam

**Richard W. Cottam** died on 29 August 1997 at age 72 as a result of complications arising from cancer. With his passing, Iranian studies lost a major and courageous voice. Although Dick Cottam had longstanding interests in comparative foreign policy and theories of great power intervention, he is best known among his MESA colleagues and his students, as well as in policy circles and the media, for his work on Iranian nationalism and politics. A student of Rupert Emerson in his graduate days at Harvard University, Dick was always convinced of the compelling power and lasting effects of ethnically-rooted affiliation. Moreover, although his studies of Iran did not focus upon the sociology of Shi'ism, he was always impressed by the ability of religious beliefs to shape social action in the Iranian setting. And when the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979 broke out, Dick not only brought that shattering event within the compass of his consuming scholarly interests but, true to deep and long-standing convictions, he put his learning and experience in the service of conflict resolution between Tehran and Washington.

It may have come as a surprise to some that a University of Pittsburgh political science professor had an audience with Ayatollah Khomeini in January 1979 at Neuphle-le-Chateau. But this meeting was entirely consistent with his long-standing view that it was not enough to study politics—one had to contribute one's knowledge to promote understanding among governments and peoples. It was contact with an Iranian student studying in the United States, Sadiq Qutb-zadah, that was eventually to lead to this encounter in a Paris suburb. Qutb-zadah, like many Iranians, had known about Dick's endorsement of the merits of the Iranian nationalist arguments against the Shah's autocracy. And later, he was to become a member of the inner circle surrounding Khomeini in exile and, after the capture of the Embassy by student militants on 4 November 1979, the country's Foreign Minister. Reporting on his meeting with Khomeini, Dick stated that he had expected to find in the latter a shrewd political figure but was bewildered to see that he seemed completely uninterested in politics.

Dick Cottam was born in Provo, Utah in 1924. As is customary for Mormons, he engaged in a brief period of missionary activity for the church. His father was a botanist at the University of Utah and, enrolling there in 1941, it is from that institution that he earned the bachelor of arts degree in 1948. The seven year interval is explained by his tour of duty in the Navy during World War II. He then attended Harvard University and received the MA degree in 1951 and the Ph.D. in 1954. In academic year 1951-1952 he was the recipient of a Fulbright scholarship, which led to a field trip to Iran, during which he also attended the University of Tehran. While at Harvard, in addition to his studies on nationalism with Emerson, he also studied with Richard N. Frye. Although never a student of T. Cuyler Young of Princeton, he evidently had many hours of conversations about Iran with him.

Cottam served in the division of covert operations in the CIA between 1953 and 1958, serving the early part of that time in Washington and seconded as a Political Officer to the Embassy in Tehran during 1956-1958. The year 1953 was

a critical time in Iranian politics, as the British, the US, and Iranian royalists engineered the overthrow of Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq's government in August. His work at the Agency included assessments of Iranian politics in general and, in particular, writing profiles of prominent Iranian political figures. The British were interested in his analyses, as is shown from documents that scholars have seen in the Public Record Office in London. His views were basically those of the Truman Administration on Iran—namely that Musaddiq and his National Front followers were genuine nationalists who deserved understanding. However, his perspectives were overwhelmed by the "dominoes" mentality of the Dulles brothers and the Eisenhower White House in the Cold War context of conflict with the Soviet Union.

Choosing to try to influence the Administration's policies on Iran from within, Dick remained in the Agency after the coup. During his tenure in the Embassy, he maintained contact with the Musaddiqists and, indeed, is said to have exerted efforts to make their views known in the media back in the United States. It is believed, for example, that he encouraged Sam Pope Brewer, Beirut correspondent of *The New York Times*, to come to Iran and inform himself on the growing opposition to the Shah and to write about this for his paper.<sup>1</sup> It is also believed that at the time of the abortive military coup against the Shah's regime by General Wali Allah Qaranah'i in February 1958, Cottam and the Embassy had wind of the plan and did not inform the Shah's government.<sup>2</sup> Qaranah'i was arrested and eventually served a three-year sentence. Not long after the Qaranah'i affair, Dick left the Agency.

Reminiscing many years later about the critical months of 1953, Cottam declared: "I was the youngest person in the foreign service in Iran at the time. I knew we were about to overthrow Musaddiq and I was horrified, but not influential. I thought it was a mistake of historical proportions at the time. I think that even more so today [1988]."<sup>3</sup>

At the time of his death, Cottam was University Professor of Political Science Emeritus. Among his books are *Nationalism in Iran* (1964; second edition, 1979), *Competitive Interference* (1967), *Foreign Policy Motivation* (1977), and *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study* (1988). When the Iranian revolution broke out, Dick wrote a trenchant article entitled "Goodbye to America's Shah,"<sup>4</sup> advocating an American "dissociation strategy" with regard to unpopular governments with which the US had close ties. But he concluded that Washington's habit of stressing association strategies until it is too late would not be easy to break. Although the Cold War was still ongoing when this article was published, its end by the early 1990s did not—in his view—change the importance of this message, given the continued predilection of the US to follow association strategies with unpopular Middle East governments.

Not only was Dick a productive scholar in his research, but he was also a gifted teacher who consistently received high praise from his students. He was among his university's first recipients of the College Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award. His classes on foreign policy simulation at Pitt were among that institution's most popular course offerings. Remarkably, he refused to cancel any of his classes when he went to meet Khomeini or, later, when he went to

Tehran in November 1979 on a private mission to try to get the American diplomats released from their captivity. He also continued to consult with the State Department throughout the 1980s, when the Reagan Administration found itself entangled in a complicated web of foreign policy initiatives with Tehran and in Lebanon.

It is important to note that Dick did not believe that he had the answers to the problems that were troubling US-Iranian relations. But he did believe very passionately that the relationship needed to be re-examined in the clear light of day, and without ideological blinkers. It might be thought that he was an advocate of Iranian nationalism, but nothing could be further from the truth. It would be more accurate to say that he was convinced of the formative power of nationalist beliefs, and that any disregard of that power was bound to be counterproductive. For the rest, he had a healthy skepticism of any emotionally driven point of view. The academic and policy worlds have lost a major voice of reason and understanding. And for those of us who were fortunate enough to have known him, we have lost a mentor, colleague, and friend.

SHAHROUGH AKHAVI  
*University of South Carolina*

NOTES:

1. Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The Qarani Affair and Iranian Politics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 25:4 (November 1993), p. 628, 641, fn. 12. Gasiorowski does not explicitly name the individual, but it may be presumed that it was Dick Cottam. The article appeared under the title, "Unrest is Viewed as Threat in Iran," on 2 January 1958, p. A5.
2. Gasiorowski, p. 638. Again, Cottam is not specifically identified by Gasiorowski, but it seems likely that he was involved. Gasiorowski makes the point that having the Embassy not inform the Shah of what Qaranah'i was up to was likely not the position of Allen Dulles or Richard Helms, then head of CIA's covert operations division, but rather the preference of a senior official in the Agency's Middle East section.
3. *Pitt Magazine*, March 1988, p. 32.
4. *Foreign Policy*, 34 (Spring 1979), pp. 3-14.

### Richard Cottam: An Appreciation

Richard Cottam, a CIA agent in Iran in the early 1950s and one of the most eminent American Iran scholars, was also a patriot. In 1972 I was a Foreign Service Officer enroute to assignment in Embassy Tehran. Having no experience with the country, I asked the State Department desk officer to recommend background reading. "There are no books on modern Iran," he replied. Cottam's *Nationalism in Iran* had been out eight years, I learned later. Dick wasn't read, but he also wasn't seen at the State Department. In those days there was no contact with the Shah's opposition. Dick befriended those people. Thus, there was no contact with him.