The Reagan Era
From the Iran Crisis to Kosovo
Rodney P. Carlisle and J. Geoffrey Golson, Editors
TURNING POINTS—ACTUAL AND ALTERNATE HISTORIES

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If a particular event had turned out differently, history from that turning point forward could be affected. Important outcomes frequently hinge on an individual decision, an accidental encounter, a turn in the weather, the spread of a disease, or a missed piece of information. Such events stimulate our imagination, accentuating the role of luck, chance, and individual decision or character at particular moments in time. The examination of such key turning points is one of the reasons that the study of history is so fascinating.

For the student, examining alternate histories springing from turning points and exploring, What would have happened if . . . ? gives insight into many of the questions at the heart of our civilization today.
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The Reagan Era from the Iran Crisis to Kosovo

Rodney P. Carlisle and J. Geoffrey Golson, Editors
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I . . . regard the chief utility of all historical and sociological investigations to be to admonish us of the alternative possibilities of history.

—Oscar Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*

There is nothing new about counterfactual inference. Historians have been doing it for at least two thousand years.

—Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics*

Introduction

The question, What would have happened if . . . ? is asked all the time as historians, students, and readers of history examine past events. If some event had turned out differently, the whole course of history from that particular turning point forward could have been affected, we are often reminded. Important outcomes frequently hinge on an individual decision, an accidental encounter, a missed piece of information. Such events stimulate our imagination, accentuating the role of luck, chance, and individual decision or character at particular moments in time. The examination of such key hinge points is one of the reasons that the study of history is so fascinating.

“Alternate history” has become a fictional genre, similar to science fiction, in that it proposes other worlds, spun off from the one we live in, derived from some key hinge point in the past. Harry Turtledove, among others, has produced novels along these lines. Turtledove has written a widely sold sequence of books that follow an alternate past from “counterfactual” Confederate victory at the battle of Antietam, resulting in the rise of the Confederate States of America as a separate nation, with consequences well into the twentieth century.

Alternate or counterfactual history is more than a form of imaginative speculation or engaging entertainment, however. Historians are able to highlight the significance of an event they examine by pointing to the consequences of the event. When many significant consequences flow from a single event, the alternate history question is implicit—the consequences would have been different, and a strange and different history would have flowed from that time forward if the specific event in question had turned out differently. Those events that would have made the
most dramatic or drastic alternate set of consequences are clearly among
the most important; thus key battles in wars are often studied in great
detail, but not only for their own sake. The importance of such battles as
Gettysburg and Antietam is not simply military. Instead, those battles and
others are significant because such deep consequences flowed from their
outcomes. The same could be said of General Erich Ludendorff’s offensive
in 1918—had it been successful, the Allies might have been defeated in
World War I, and the map of Europe and the rest of the twentieth century
would have been very different from the way they actually turned out.
Similarly, if for some reason, the nuclear weapons used at Hiroshima and
Nagasaki in 1945 had failed, the outcome of World War II could have
been very different, perhaps with a greater role for the Soviet Union in the
dissolution of the Japanese Empire. Others have argued that had the
bombs not been used, Japan would have been defeated quite promptly
even without them.

Every key event raises similar issues. What might the world have been
like if Christopher Columbus and his sailors had failed to return from
their voyage in 1492? What if Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro had
been soundly defeated in their attempts to defeat the Aztecs and the Inca
Empire? What if John Wilkes Booth had failed in his assassination attempt
on Abraham Lincoln? What sort of world would we live in if any of the
other famous victims of assassination had survived, such as John F.
Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Malcolm X?

For the student, examining alternate histories springing from multiple
turning points and exploring What would have happened if . . . , gives
insight into many of the questions at the heart of history. What was the
role of specific individuals, and how did their exercise of free will and
choice at a moment in time affect later events? On the other hand, to what
extent are the actions of individuals irrelevant to the larger outcomes?
That is, in any particular period of history, were certain underlying forces
at work that would have led to the same result, no matter what the indi-
vidual did? Do underlying structures, and deeper causes, such as eco-
nomic conditions, technological progress, climate, natural resources, and
diseases, force events into a mold that individuals have always been pow-
erless to alter?

The classic contest of free will and determinism is constantly at work
in history, and an examination of pivotal turning points is key to under-
standing the balance between deep determining forces and the role of
individuals. Frequently, it seems, no matter what individuals tried to do
to affect the course of events, the events flowed onward in their same
course; in other cases, however, a single small mistake or different per-
sonal decision seems to have affected events and altered the course of his-
tory. Close study of specific events and how they might have otherwise
turned out can illuminate this challenging and recurrent issue.

Of course, when reviewing What would have happened if . . . , it is
important to realize exactly what in fact really did happen. So in every
chapter presented in this series, we are careful to explain first what actu-
ally happened, before turning to a possible alternative set of events that
could have happened, and the consequences through later history that
might have flowed from an alternate development at a particular turning
point. By looking at a wide variety of such alternatives, we see how much
of history is contingent, and we gain greater insight into its specific events and developments.

Alternate histories would have flowed had there been different outcomes of a great variety of events, many of them far less famous than the outstanding battles, and the lives and deaths of explorers, conquerors, statesmen, and political leaders. Seemingly obscure or little-recognized events in the past, such as legislative decisions, court cases, small military engagements, and even the lives of obscure minor officials, preachers, writers, and private citizens, frequently played a crucial part in shaping the flow of events. It is clear that if any of the great leaders of the world had died as infants, the events in which they participated would have been altered; but we tend to forget that millions of minor players and less famous people take actions in their daily lives in events such as battles, elections, legislative and judicial decisions, sermons, speeches, and published statements that have sometimes altered the course of history.

Alternate histories are known as “counterfactuals,” that is, events that did not in fact happen. Some counterfactuals are more plausible than others. A few historians have argued that all counterfactuals are absurd and should not be studied or considered. However, any historical work that goes beyond simply presenting a narrative or chronological list of what happened, and begins to explore causes through the use of such terms as “influenced,” “precipitated,” or “led to,” is in fact implying some counterfactual sequences. A historian, in describing one event as having consequences, is by implication suggesting the counterfactual that if the event had not occurred, the consequences would have been different.

If history is to be more than a chronicle or simple listing of what happened and is to present “lessons” about statecraft, society, technology development, diplomacy, the flow of ideas, military affairs, and economic policy, it must explore how causes led to consequences. Only by the study of such relationships can future leaders, military officers, business people and bankers, legislators and judges, and perhaps most important, voters in democratic nations gain any knowledge of how to conduct their affairs. To derive the lessons of history, one has to ask what the important causes were, the important hinge events that made a difference. And once that question is asked, counterfactuals are implied. Thus the defenders of the approach suggest that counterfactual reasoning is a prerequisite to learning lessons from history. Even many historians who resolutely avoid talking about “what might have been” are implying that what in fact happened was important because the alternative, counterfactual event did not happen.

Two scholars who have studied counterfactuals in depth, Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, in an edited collection of articles, *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1996), have concluded that counterfactual reasoning can serve several quite different purposes in the study of history. They define these types of counterfactual work:

1. Case-study counterfactuals that “highlight moments of indeterminacy” in history by showing how things might have turned out differently at such hinge points because of individual free choices. These studies tend to focus on the uniqueness of specific events.
2. “Nomothetic” counterfactuals that focus on underlying deterministic laws or processes, examining key events to show how likely or unlikely it was for events to have turned out differently. The purpose of this type of study is to test how powerful an underlying law or process is by imagining alternative situations or decisions.

3. A combination of types one and two above, blending the test of theory or underlying law approach with the unique event approach.

4. “Mental stimulation” counterfactuals that highlight underlying assumptions most people have by showing how causes that most people believe are inconsequential could have major effects, and other causes that most people believe are very important might have little or no effect in changing the course of history.

The reader will recognize aspects of each of these different models in the accounts that follow. Moreover, the reader can find the contrasts between actual history and alternate history quite puzzling and thought provoking, as they are intended to be. As readers study the cases, they may want to keep asking questions such as these:

- What was the key hinge point on which the author focused?
- Is the altered key event a plausible change—something that could easily have happened?
- Was the change “minimal” in the sense that only one or a few turning point events had to turn out differently than they in fact did?
- Did the alternate outcome seem to develop in a realistic way; that is, does the alternate sequence of events seem to be one that would be likely once the precipitating change took place?
- How plausible is the alternate long-term outcome or consequence that the author suggested?
- Was the changed key event a matter of an individual person’s choice, a matter of accident, or a change in some broader social or technological development?
- Does the counterfactual story help us make judgments about the actual quality of leadership displayed in fact at the time? That is, did key actors in real history act more or less wisely in fact than they did in the counterfactual account?
- Does the outcome of the episode suggest that, despite the role of chance and individual choice, certain powerful forces shaped history in similar directions, in both the factual and counterfactual account?
- Does the account make me think differently about what was important in history?
- Does the counterfactual story challenge any assumptions I had before I read it?

Remember, however, that what really happened is the object of historical study. We examine the counterfactual, alternate histories to get a better understanding of the forces and people that were at work in what really did occur. These counterfactual stories will make you think about history in ways that you have never encountered before; but when you have explored them, you should be able to go back to the real events with fresh questions in mind.
Introduction to The Reagan Era Volume

In this volume of the series, we see how counterfactual and alternative history can help us understand the events of the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union reached a new pitch of intensity, and then, rather quickly through the late 1980s, diminished. Quite suddenly, it seemed, the world changed. After years of negotiations and efforts to control nuclear weapons, the United States and the Soviet Union entered into a series of nuclear disarmament treaties and began to destroy a large fraction of their nuclear arsenals. Through mutually agreed inspection schemes, each side was able to verify that the other side was conforming to the agreements. The threat of nuclear warfare between the two superpowers diminished, and then appeared to vanish altogether. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union itself broke up into fifteen constituent republics, four of them retaining some fraction of the former nuclear arsenal: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Russia continued to retain a smaller number of nuclear weapons and to work on arms reduction, while the other three willingly abandoned the weapons and the expense of maintaining them.

By 1990, it appeared that a “new world order” was emerging, with the United States as the world’s only superpower. The United Nations would help oversee troublesome regions in the world. However, several of those trouble spots soon began to indicate the sorts of crises that the post–Cold War world would encounter. With Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and then with genocide and ethnic cleansing sweeping the republics of the former Yugoslavia, it appeared that the new world order was hardly orderly. Instead, with rogue states like Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and Serbia; failed states like Somalia and Afghanistan; and groups of terrorists independent of any state control pursuing a variety of agendas, the shape of the future began to emerge.

Within the United States, President Reagan faced an attempted assassination, which left him wounded. The nation marveled at his good spirits during his recovery but soon realized that the era of assassination of leaders that had dominated the 1960s—with the deaths of John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—had not ended. The nation’s course and destiny could be altered at any moment by a deranged individual or a group of dedicated conspirators who succeeded in carrying out a criminal act. President Reagan’s second term was marred by the Iran-Contra scandal; investigation of this episode revealed that elements of the administration had conducted a secret deal to raise funds and to purchase weapons to oppose the pro-communist regime in Nicaragua. This secret support for the contra-revolutionaries was in direct violation of congressional restrictions.

President Reagan’s successor, George Herbert Walker Bush, oversaw the reaction of the United States to the Iraq invasion of Kuwait. In the Persian Gulf War, the United States acted as part of a multinational coalition, supported by several European Allies as well as several Muslim and Arab states. Acting under the authority of the United Nations Security Council, Operation Desert Storm proceeded to evict the army of Iraq from Kuwait, and then to accept the surrender of the Iraqi forces. A stringent peace was imposed on Iraq, in which that country would not be able to operate fixed-wing aircraft over either its northern, Kurdish region or the Shia-populated southern third of the country. In addition, Saddam
Hussein accepted visits by United Nations weapons inspectors to ensure that his programs to produce weapons of mass destruction, including poison gas and nuclear weapons, were brought to an end. With those provisions, the ground was set for future difficulties that would come early in the next century.

As we look at the actual history of these events, we can see the importance of numerous individuals, their decisions, and the role of chance in history if we imagine different scenarios at each of a variety of Turning Points. During the last years of the Cold War, the two superpowers could very easily have unleashed a nuclear holocaust if an accident had occurred. The slight change of the angle of a wild gunshot could have proven fatal to President Reagan. If the Iran-Contra exchange had succeeded rather than being revealed, it might have emboldened the administration to attempt an overthrow of the communist regime in Cuba. Had George Herbert Walker Bush been elected to a second term, the Persian Gulf War might have been followed by a longer and more difficult Iraq war in the mid-1990s rather than in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Each of these “might have beens” would have had long-range consequences that would have changed the world.

Speculating about the alternatives and the counterfactuals through this period of the recent past suggests the importance of the role of the individual in shaping history. At the same time, some of the outcomes suggested here show that if we are to unravel the twisted lessons of history, we must recognize that long-range and underlying causes are also crucial. While Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev appeared to reshape the world’s destiny, they had to deal with the momentum of events that had created the Cold War. Although individual players like Oliver North, a leader in the Iran-Contra operation, and John Hinckley, Jr., Reagan’s attempted assassin, also tried to shape events, the world was moving in a certain direction and might very well have continued to do so, whether or not they succeeded in their separate plots.

**WARNING!**

You are probably used to reading a book of history to find out what happened. We offer this book with a major warning. In this volume, the reader will see what actually happened, and that part of history is always designated **ACTUAL HISTORY**.

However, the last part of each chapter presents a history that never happened, and that is presented as the **ALTERNATE HISTORY**.

To be sure it is clear that the **ALTERNATE HISTORY** is an account of what would have happened differently if a **TURNING POINT** had turned out differently than it really did, the **ALTERNATE HISTORY** is always presented against a gray background, like these lines. The **ALTERNATE HISTORY** is what might have happened, what could have happened, and perhaps what would have happened, if the **TURNING POINT** had gone a little differently. Think about this alternate history, and why it would have been different. But don’t think that it represents the way things actually happened!
Each chapter is also accompanied by informative sidebars, and a few discussion questions that take off from the ACTUAL HISTORY and the ALTERNATE HISTORY that allow readers to think through and argue the different sides of the issues that are raised here.

We also want to warn readers that some may be surprised to discover that history, when viewed in this light, suddenly becomes so fascinating that they may never want to stop learning about it!

Rodney Carlisle
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The 1980 presidential election was a turning point in both American politics and the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Cold War had persisted since the end of World War II, reached its apex with the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, and aside from the proxy war of the conflict in Vietnam, had subsided for most of the late 1960s and 1970s, the time of détente. The Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter was the first president to serve a full term after the Watergate scandal that had led to President Richard Nixon's resignation, and his loss to neoconservative Ronald Reagan signaled a new era in both domestic and international politics as well as the national economy.

Carter was the classic example of an “outsider” candidate, a conservative southern Democrat—a Dixiecrat in all but his opposition to segregation. Although he had appeased segregationists in his 1970 Georgia gubernatorial campaign by refusing to condemn Alabama governor George Wallace and talked about states’ rights (“states’ rights” was often a coded phrase for the right of states to retain segregation), he decried the practice of segregation in his inaugural speech. At a time when most Deep South politicians would have considered it political suicide to do so, Carter declared that the age of discrimination and segregation was dead, and that neither would have any place in Georgia thenceforth. His conservatism in other respects won him much support: he was fiscally conservative especially when it came to government spending on public works and other leftover New Deal policies, calling them “pork barrel” expenses, ways for politicians to line the pockets of their supporters. He was a staunchly religious Christian whose sister Ruth was a well-known evangelical.

Carter served only one term as governor before running for president, and his election was an astonishing testament to the public’s desire for an outsider untainted by Washington, D.C., given the brevity of his public life and his lack of federal-level credentials or experience. He was not
2  CHAPTER 1  The 1980 Election

KEY CONCEPT  Neoconservative

The term neoconservative has been around for much of the twentieth century, but when used now it generally refers to a strain of American conservative thought that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and came to power in the 1980s and 1990s. Neoconservatism was a movement away from traditional American conservatism in two principal ways: first, unlike the older conservativism (or paleo-conservativism), neoconservatism is not isolationist or protectionist. Instead it seeks to establish national security through international action: a stable world is a safe world for America, and a safe world for America is a democratic free-market world. Rather than working with any government, as long as trade is healthy and communism is opposed, neoconservatives encourage real, functioning, American-style democracy and free markets around the world. Neoconservatives oppose communism and the Islamic fundamentalism of the Middle East, tending to view world affairs in World War II terms: enemy leaders are described as potential Hitlers who need to be stopped before they bloom into full villainy, and the specter of the postwar spread of Eastern European communism is often invoked. While the worldview indicated by the references to “evil” made by Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush is not universal to all neoconservatives, it is an example of neoconservative thinking.

Second, neoconservatism is more friendly to social programs than traditional conservatism or the extreme anti-welfare sentiments of libertarianism. In the 1960s through the 1980s especially, many neoconservatives were Democrats—either operating within their own party (paleoliberals who, like Carter, were opposed to the changes the New Deal Era had wrought on American liberalism) or moving to the Republican Party, like many of Reagan’s supporters and indeed Reagan himself. A number of neoconservatives in the 1980s

naive, though; a savvy politician, he rarely misrepresented himself in his presidential campaign but knew which element to emphasize at any given time. He was up front about his religious beliefs, even when they earned him mild ridicule, and was a clear alternative to the likable but suspect incumbent Gerald Ford, who had pardoned Nixon and finished out Nixon’s term. Carter’s win was by a narrow margin, but he was the first candidate from the Deep South to be elected since General Zachary Taylor in 1848—before the Civil War and Reconstruction, before the civil rights movement and integration.

The new president inherited a floundering economy that had already suffered an energy crisis in 1973 and saw inflation rise to double digits as unemployment soared. His appointee Paul Volcker, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, would eventually succeed in bringing inflation down from historic highs, but it was a slow process. In the meantime, the Carter administration saw more short-term gains in foreign policy. Carter continued Nixon’s work in building friendly relations with the People’s Republic of China, and he put human rights at the forefront of his agenda, condemning abuses around the world. The Republican Party and much of the American public opposed his signing of the treaty that gave control of the Panama Canal to Panama, but the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) were much more popular, resulting in treaties that reduced nuclear warheads in both American and Soviet arsenals. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979—motivated in part, many feared, by the desire for Middle Eastern oil—Carter promised that no outside force

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were swayed by Reagan’s Cold War policies but still embraced the domestic programs of the Democratic Party. Essentially, neoconservatism is so focused on foreign policy and international affairs that individual neoconservatives can conceivably hold any number of beliefs about domestic policies.

Emerging in 1997, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) is now the best-known neoconservative institution and synonymous in many minds with the movement. The PNAC is a nonprofit organization devoted to establishing American global leadership through greater military spending, more hands-on involvement in global affairs, a new space-based branch of the armed forces, and other such initiatives. Members include Donald Rumsfeld; Dick Cheney; former ambassador to the UN, the late Jeane Kirkpatrick; and many members of President George W. Bush’s cabinet. The PNAC has been criticized for the chauvinism inherent to its goals: one cannot propose that American-style government is best for the world without implying that American-style government is better than other governments. But in essence it has much in common with both left- and right-wing movements of the past and simply phrases its goals in terms of the desire for a safe America rather than more specifically an America safe from foreign interference (as the nineteenth-century statesmen would have said) or communist infiltration (as many twentieth century thinkers saw it).

The current neoconservatives can be traced back directly to Carter, the conservative Democrat; and Reagan, the new-style Republican with bipartisan appeal. Of course the influences are older than that, but today’s neoconservatives originated in an era discovering that conflict in the Middle East could affect the world more than communism in Southeast Asia, one that took for granted the notion that the United States would thenceforth have a hand in international affairs.
The 1980 Election

would be allowed to control the Persian Gulf and instituted a boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, forbidding any American from participating.

The greatest accomplishment of the Carter administration was the Camp David Accords. Affairs in the Middle East had been particularly hostile since the Yom Kippur War of 1973, during which a group of Arab nations led by Syria and Egypt launched a surprise attack on Israel on Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement, advancing on territory Israel had seized in the Six Day War of 1967. Jordan and Iraq were also prominently involved, and Algeria, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia all provided troops or equipment. The attack led to a more militarily focused Israel, better able to defend itself and more willing to strike first. In 1978, Carter invited Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin to Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland, for secret peace talks.

After twelve days, an agreement was signed in which the United States agreed to provide subsidies to both governments; they, in turn, agreed to various conditions to ensure a peaceful relationship. These conditions pertained to such things as passage through the Suez Canal and authority over the Sinai peninsula and the Gaza Strip. The agreement made Sadat unpopular with other Arab nations, but it demonstrated that Israel was willing to negotiate and that the United States could be instrumental in mediating such negotiations. Previously the popular Arab perception had been that Israel was inflexible and that the United States was unwavering in its support of Israel. Between the peace accords and Carter’s friendly relationship with the Shah of Iran—who, though losing some of his Western support, was perhaps the closest the Middle East had to a pro-American leader—affairs in the Middle East seemed like they had at least the potential for improvement.

During the Yom Kippur War, the OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) members, as well as Egypt and Syria, refused to ship oil to nations allied with Israel—the United States and much of Western Europe. OPEC included most of the Middle East’s oil-producing countries, as well as Venezuela, Nigeria, and Indonesia. At a time when inflation was already problematic and American oil consumption had doubled since the previous generation, the price of oil quadrupled over the course of a year. The embargo caused vast shortages, as public buildings closed to save on heating oil, thermostats in government buildings were locked in place, large American cars were replaced by compact Japanese models, and gas rationing went into effect. In an attempt to reduce the long lines of motorists waiting for gasoline, drivers of cars with odd-numbered license plates could buy gas only on odd-numbered days; even-numbered license plates could buy on even-numbered days. Thousands of gallons of gasoline were consumed simply by idling cars waiting to be filled.

Conservation became a national watchword. The national speed limit of fifty-five miles per hour was instituted because this was determined to be the most energy-efficient speed. Daylight saving time was altered to save on lighting costs, though this resulted in public school hours beginning before sunrise in the winter in the northern parts of the country. American auto manufacturers introduced cars designed to meet new federal requirements. More attention was paid to the possibility...
of oil alternatives, though this attention essentially died off during the apparently prosperous era of the 1980s. By then, though, natural gas and nuclear power had reduced some of the demand for oil, but neither of these affected gas consumption by automobiles. Despite its initial appeal, solar power never caught on to the extent its promoters expected.

The economy suffered for the remainder of the 1970s, with inflation continuing to skyrocket and few solutions working until Paul Volcker’s Federal Reserve policies began to pay off in the early 1980s. Alternate sources of oil and non-oil energy contributed to a decline in OPEC’s power, as various nations increased their oil production to meet demand, more American and Canadian sources were found, and the exploitation of Soviet oil began. The embargo caused the poorest OPEC nations to suffer as much as the nations that were subject to it as they had no way to prepare for the lack of oil sales.

Ultimately, the 1973 oil crisis demonstrated the power of the Middle East to affect world events despite the region’s lack of technological or military advantages. The American government considered overthrows and invasions, taking the oil by force, but these solutions were rejected as inappropriate or impractical. This new threat of the Middle East—an economic threat in the midst of détente that had calmed the world’s fears of nuclear threats—would continue to shape foreign policy to the present day, and the interest of Western world in Middle Eastern affairs would have repercussions again and again.
any replacement for the Shah would be an improvement from an American perspective.

The Iranian Revolution led directly to the energy crisis of 1979. Post-revolution Iran was in disarray and exported less oil than before, and even with other OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) members increasing production, supply was lower and prices higher. Panic set in as people feared that the oil crisis of 1973 might be repeated or worsened; prices skyrocketed, rising in the United States from roughly $15 a barrel to nearly $40, a peak that would not be exceeded until 2006. Lines again formed at gas pumps, and rationing was proposed. Carter had solar panels installed in the White House (which Reagan ordered removed as soon as he took office).

The new Iranian government demanded that the Shah be returned to Iran to stand trial for crimes against the people. He eventually left the United States after his medical treatment was finished, but before that happened, Iranian students stormed the American embassy in Tehran and took sixty-six American hostages. Women and African Americans were released after less than a month, but the rest were held for 444 days. Two rescue attempts failed, and the hostage crisis, like the energy crisis and the economy in general, was a critical point in the 1980 presidential election. Presidential candidate Reagan asked the American public if they were better off now than four years ago, the implication was that the country had been better off in 1976 before Carter won the office.
Carter’s opposition in the 1980 election was California Republican governor Ronald Reagan. A former actor who had reported on the communist or “suspicious” activities of his fellow actors in the 1950s, the governor was also a savvy and well-read economist and, like Carter, a staunch Christian. He had nearly won the 1976 Republican nomination and established much of his support then. A neoconservative who attracted backing from many of the right-leaning Democrats, he promised to do away with “big government” and stimulate an economic revival while taking a hard stand against communism and the policies of détente that he believed had left the country—perhaps the Western world—too vulnerable to Soviet attack. Carter tried campaigning by shifting his focus to the right, reinstalling the draft when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and détente came to an end—but Reagan already had the support of conservatives in both parties.

The Iran hostage crisis persisted throughout the 1980 campaign, as did the oil crisis. The Reagan campaign—managed by William Casey, whom Reagan would later appoint as the new director of the Central Intelligence Agency—has been accused of letting the hostage crisis last until after the election had been won. (It seemed too coincidental that the hostages were released on Reagan’s inauguration.) But another explanation proposes that Iran’s fear of Reagan’s “trigger happy” reputation encouraged them to negotiate rather than face disproportionate reprisals.

The hostage crisis was a public embarrassment, especially once rescue attempts failed, and the Ayatollah railed against the United States—popularizing the term “Great Satan” in reference to the country—without actually giving his approval to the hostage takers. The Shah died in 1980, a few months before Iraq invaded Iran and Carter lost the election, and Carter negotiated a release for the hostages by signing an accord pledging that the United States would not interfere with Iranian internal affairs. The hostages were released in 1981, twenty minutes before Reagan’s inauguration, and Carter was the one who met them—his first act as the former president.

The 1980 election signaled more than just a change of presidents; it was a shifting of opinion across the country and the Western world. Margaret Thatcher had been elected prime minister of the United Kingdom in 1979 on a platform much like Reagan’s: smaller government, economic growth, and a return to a prominent, decisive role in global affairs. In the United States, the Republican Party gained control of the Senate. While this rightward movement had been coming for a long time—it was instrumental in the elections of Nixon and Carter—the oil and hostage crises had combined with the weakness of the Democratic Party to do serious damage to the public faith in the Democrats and liberal policies in general. Some historians might even argue that Carter’s depreciation of many New Deal–era policies as symptoms of a bloated government only encouraged his supporters to move on to still more conservative politicians, abandoning not simply the left-leaning segments of the Democratic Party but the party itself.