

National Security Archive
Electronic Briefing Book No. 28

The Secret CIA History of the Iran Coup, 1953

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Edited by [Malcolm Byrne](#)
Updated November 29, 2000

For more information:
202/994-7000
mbyrne@gwu.edu

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The CIA history of operation TPAJAX excerpted below was first disclosed by James Risen of *The New York Times* in its editions of April 16 and June 18, 2000, and posted in this form on its website at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/041600iran-cia-index.html>

This extremely important document is one of the last major pieces of the puzzle explaining American and British roles in the August 1953 coup against Iranian Premier Mohammad Mossadeq. Written in March 1954 by Donald Wilber, one of the operation's chief planners, the 200-page document is essentially an after-action report, apparently based in part on agency cable traffic and Wilber's interviews with agents who had been on the ground in Iran as the operation lurched to its conclusion.

Long-sought by historians, the Wilber history is all the more valuable because it is one of the relatively few documents that still exists after an unknown quantity of materials was destroyed by CIA operatives – reportedly “routinely” – in the 1960s, according to former CIA Director James Woolsey. However, according to an investigation by the National Archives and Records Administration, released in March 2000, “no schedules in effect during the period 1959-1963 provided for the disposal of records related to covert actions and, therefore, the destruction of records related to Iran was unauthorized.” (p. 22) The CIA now says that about 1,000 pages of documentation remain locked in agency vaults.

During the 1990s, three successive CIA heads pledged to review and release historically valuable materials on this and 10 other widely-known covert operations from the period of the Cold War, but in 1998, citing resource restrictions, current Director George Tenet reneged on these promises, a decision which [prompted the National Security Archive to file a lawsuit in 1999](#) for this history of the 1953 operation and one other that is known to exist. So far, the CIA has effectively refused to declassify either document, releasing just one sentence out of

339 pages at issue. That sentence reads: “Headquarters spent a day featured by depression and despair.” In a [sworn statement by William McNair](#), the information review officer for the CIA’s directorate of operations, McNair claimed that release of any other part of this document other than the one line that had previously appeared in Wilber’s memoirs, would “reasonably be expected to cause serious damage to the national security of the United States.” Clearly, the “former official” who gave this document to *The New York Times* disagreed with McNair, and we suspect you will too, once you read this for yourself. The case is currently pending before a federal judge. (See related item on this site: “[Archive Wins Freedom of Information Ruling Versus CIA](#)”)

In disclosing this history, the *Times* initially reproduced only a summary and four appendixes to the original document. It prefaced each excerpt with a statement explaining that it was withholding the main text of the document on the grounds that “there might be serious risk that some of those named as foreign agents would face retribution in Iran.” Eventually, the *Times* produced the main document after excising the names and descriptions of virtually every Iranian mentioned.

In posting the main body of the history on June 18, 2000, the *Times*’ technical staff tried to digitally black out the unfamiliar Iranian names, but enterprising Web users soon discovered that in some cases the hidden text could be “revealed” without much technical savvy. The *Times* quickly pulled those portions of the document and reposted them using a more fool-proof redaction method. The Archive is reproducing the latter versions of the document, even though most of the individuals known to be named in the history are either already dead or have long since left Iran.

The posting of this document is itself an important event. Although newspapers regularly print stories based on leaked documents, they far more rarely publish the documents themselves, typically for lack of space. The World Wide Web now offers a tremendous opportunity for the public to get direct access to at least some of the sources underlying these important stories — much like footnotes — rather than relying on second-hand accounts alone. The *Times* performed a valuable public service in making available virtually the entire Wilber history. Its precedent should be a model for future reporting that unveils the documentary record.

Although the *Times*’ publication was not without controversy, mainly over the unwitting revelation of Iranian names, fundamental responsibility for their exposure rests with those officials at the CIA who, despite compelling public interest and the filing of a lawsuit, insisted that virtually the entire document had to remain sealed. As Steven Aftergood of the [Federation of American Scientists](#) put it:

If the CIA had exercised a more discerning classification policy and had declassified the bulk of the report, then there would have been no "leak" to the New York Times, and no subsequent disclosure of agent names. Instead, through overclassification, [Director of Central Intelligence George] Tenet failed in this case to fulfill his statutory obligation to protect intelligence sources and methods.

As a brief substantive introduction, the Archive is reproducing a preliminary analysis of the document by Prof. Mark Gasiorowski (Louisiana State University), the most prominent scholar of the coup, and a member of the Advisory Panel of the Archive’s Project on Iran-U.S. Relations. It takes the form of a response to a request for his “take” on the document

from the listserv Gulf2000, directed by Dr. Gary Sick of Columbia University. From June 7-8, 2000, the Archive co-sponsored an international conference in Tehran on Iran and the great powers during the early 1950s, specifically focusing on the Mossadeq coup.

“What’s New on the Iran 1953 Coup in the New York Times Article (April 16, 2000, front page) and the Documents Posted on the Web”

By Professor Mark Gasiorowski

19 April 2000

There is not much in the NYT article itself that is not covered in my article on the coup (“The 1953 Coup d’Etat in Iran” published in 1987 in the International Journal of Middle East Studies, and available in the Gulf2000 archives) or other sources on the coup. The most interesting new tidbit here is that the CIA’s agents harassed religious leaders and bombed one’s home in order to turn them against Mossadeq. The article does not say, but this was probably done by Iranians working in the BEDAMN network, which is described in my article. There are also some new details on how that US persuaded the shah to agree to the coup, including a statement that Assadollah Rashidian was involved in this effort and that General Schwartzkopf, Sr. played a larger role in this than was previously known. There are also a few details reported in the article that I knew about but chose not to reveal, including that Donald Wilber and Norman Derbyshire developed the original coup plan and that the plan was known as TPAJAX, rather than simply AJAX. (The TP prefix indicated that the operation was to be carried out in Iran.) The NYT article does not say anything about a couple of matters that remain controversial about the coup, including whether Ayatollah Kashani played a role in organizing the crowds and whether the CIA team organized “fake” Tudeh Party crowds as part of the effort. There may be something on these issues in the 200-page history itself.

Much more important than the NYT article are the two documents appended to the summary document giving operational plans for the coup. These contain a wealth of interesting information. They indicate that the British played a larger—though still subordinate—role in the coup than was previously known, providing part of the financing for it and using their intelligence network (led by the Rashidian brothers) to influence members of the parliament and do other things. The CIA described the coup plan as “quasi-legal,” referring to the fact that the shah legally dismissed Mossadeq but presumably acknowledging that he did not do so on his own initiative. These documents make clear that the CIA was prepared to go forward with the coup even if the shah opposed it. There is a suggestion that the CIA use counterfeit Iranian currency to somehow show that Mossadeq was ruining the economy, though I’m not sure this was ever done. The documents indicate that Fazlollah Zahedi and his military colleagues were given large sums of money (at least \$50,000) before the coup, perhaps to buy their support. Most interestingly, they indicate that various clerical leaders and organizations—

whose names are blanked out—were to play a major role in the coup. Finally, the author(s) of the London plan—presumably Wilber and Derbyshire—say some rather nasty things about the Iranians, including that there is a “recognized incapacity of Iranians to plan or act in a thoroughly logical manner.”

Perhaps the most general conclusion that can be drawn from these documents is that the CIA extensively stage-managed the entire coup, not only carrying it out but also preparing the groundwork for it by subordinating various important Iranian political actors and using propaganda and other instruments to influence public opinion against Mossadeq. This is a point that was made in my article and other published accounts, but it is strongly confirmed in these documents. In my view, this thoroughly refutes the argument that is commonly made in Iranian monarchist exile circles that the coup was a legitimate “popular uprising” on behalf of the shah.

In reply to Nikki Keddie’s (UCLA) questions about whether the NYT article got the story right, I would say it is impossible to tell until the 200-page document comes out. Nikki’s additional comment that these documents may not be entirely factual but may instead reveal certain biases held by their authors is an important one. Wilber was not in Iran while the coup was occurring, and his account of it can only have been based on his debriefing of Kermit Roosevelt and other participants. Some facts were inevitably lost or misinterpreted in this process, especially since this was a rapidly changing series of events. This being said, I doubt that there will be any major errors in the 200-page history. While Wilber had his biases, he certainly was a competent historian. I can think of no reason he might have wanted to distort this account.

Here are a few other notes. It is my understanding that these documents were given to the NYT well before Secretary Albright’s recent speech, implying that they were not an attempt to upstage or add to the speech by the unnamed “former official” who provided them to the NYT. I think there is still some reason to hope that the 200-page document will be released with excisions by the NYT. I certainly hope they do so.

CIA Clandestine Service History, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952-August 1953," March 1954, by Dr. Donald Wilber.



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[The CIA's Broken Promises on Declassification](#)

Follow the link above for information on the Archive's lawsuit against the CIA to force the declassification of key documents on the agency's role in the European elections of 1948 and the 1953 coup in Iran, and to read what five former CIA directors and others have said about the agency's declassification policies. From there, follow the link at the bottom to view the complaint filed with U.S. District Court on May 13, 1999.

The document below is the court filing of a sworn statement from William H. McNair, the Information Review Officer for the CIA's Directorate of Operations. In the statement, McNair explained why he believed that all but one sentence out of the 200 page history later disclosed the the *Times* should remain classified.



[Defendant's Notice of Filing of Defendant's 'Vaughn Index', which Includes Defendant's 'Glomar' Response to Plaintiff's Request for Certain Documentation](#)

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<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB28/index.html>

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