

Public affairs books to be published in January.

# political book notes

**An Ambassador's Wife in Iran.** *Cynthia Helms. Dodd, Mead, \$12.95.* The publisher's blurb describes this book as "A story of assassination only a shadow away, of women struggling for their rights in a country dominated by religion...." Needless to say, it's no such thing. What it is, is the quintessential product of the old-style foreign service spouse. Maybe I'm a little sensitive about this subject, being a foreign service spouse myself these days, but this book is simply bursting at the seams with examples, all unintentional, of what's wrong with our diplomatic corps.

Cynthia Helms lived in Iran, as the wife of the American ambassador, Richard Helms, for four years prior to the Shah's fall. She led, as ambassadors' wives tend to lead, a relentlessly upbeat life. If she is not redecorating the ambassador's residence, then she's taking classes on Persian history, or hosting one of the diplomatic circuit's inevitable dinner parties. She likes the pace of this life—and why not? It's invigorating; it's fun; it's seductive.

Unfortunately, the Cynthia Helmses of the world have no sense of how seduced they've become. To take the most obvious example, the Helmses, during their stay in Tehran, came to know most of the Iranian elite. (Who, after all, was coming to their dinner parties?) Helms makes it explicitly clear that she and her husband weren't just acquainted with the Shah and his wife—they *really knew him*. They had been taken into his confidence, seen Iran through his eyes. So naturally they empathized with him. Thus, Mrs. Helms writes:

"As the caviar was served, I asked the Shah if it was true that he didn't like it. He had never been seen eating it. He told me he liked it very much, but that he was allergic to all fish. As I listened to him, I thought that if he only had become more personally popular with his people, Savak would not have cast such a shadow on the land."

You get that connection, don't you?

The book is full of instructive details like that. Mrs. Helms writes that she and her husband read *The London Times* and *International Herald Tribune*

each day, but not any local Iranian dailies. She has praise for the Shah's education, his fluency in French and English, and his quest to modernize Iranian life (particularly the lives of Iranian women), but it seems never to have occurred to her that there were plenty of Iranians—and not just those nasty mullahs—who didn't want what the Shah had in mind.

Mrs. Helms begins one chapter with the eternally valid observation, "An ambassador needs to stay informed about his host country." She adds, "Dick encouraged me to travel throughout the country... to meet Iranians... often the only way we could be sure of news from Iran's many remote provinces was to take a trip ourselves." One begins to think that here, finally, Mrs. Helms understands something important: foreign service people must get out into the country to find out how life is really being lived, and what ordinary people really think. This hope is dashed at the next paragraph; it turns out that when she is talking about traveling in the country, what she really means is going on a dig with an eminent archeologist. An American archeologist, at that. The rest of her chapter about "staying informed" is her breathless account of the dig.

What comes through most in this book is the picture of a woman who thinks she knows a lot about Iran, but really doesn't. Huge gobs of the book are spent on Persian history and culture, for example, but those sections have a show-offy, superficial quality. They come more from the textbooks Mrs. Helms used in class than any real depth of understanding. Again and again, she points out the silly faux pas of less "knowledgeable" people—Henry Kissinger, for example, compared the Shah to Alexander the Great (Oh, Henry, how gauche!).

Mrs. Helms describes seeing the Shah's wife receive a degree at Georgetown: "The dignitaries found innumerable ways to articulate the word *Shahbanu*, some of which defy description. One official, in gown and cap, outdid all the others with what sounded like the *Shahbanger*. (The correct pronunciation is shaba-noo.) I wished they had been coached in advance or advised to use the word *Empress*."

*Continued*

That is the image we're left with of Cynthia Helms's Iran: a place where they know about Alexander the Great, and how to pronounce Shahbanu, and why the Shah can't eat caviar. The only thing missing is the real world.

—Joseph Nocera

**All You Need To Know About the IRS: A Taxpayer's Guide, 1981 Edition.** Paul N. Strassets, Robert Wood. Random House, \$11.95.

**America's Energy.** Robert Engler, ed. Pantheon, \$17.95. Reading this anthology—a collection of energy articles from *The Nation*, dating back to 1919—you're struck by one thing: how often they were wrong. Some of the articles are brilliantly prescient, but others are way off base on matters where the facts now seem obvious. So you wonder—how much of the magazine's current crop of articles can be believed?

Not all. *The Nation* has a weakness for cast-of-thousands conspiracy theories and miracle 30-second energy solutions, like burning kelp in your fireplace. Yet on one vital point, *The Nation's* writers—especially Fred J. Cook and Robert Sherrill—have been lonely voices of reason. Namely, they've been saying all along that the “energy crisis” is the corporate scam of the century. When the next *Nation* anthology comes out in another 100 years, people will look back and know how right they were about that.

—Gregg Easterbrook

**America Through the Eye of My Needle.** Josephine Alexander. Dial, \$9.95.

**The Atom Bomb Besieged: Extraparliamentary Discontent in France and Germany.** Dorothy Nelkin and Michael Pollak. MIT, \$17.50.

**Black Representation and Urban Policy.** Albert K. Karnig, Susan Welch. Univ. of Chicago, \$20.

**Best Evidence: Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy.** David S. Lifton. Macmillan, \$15.95.

**The Cambodia File.** Jack Anderson, Bill Pronzini. Doubleday, \$13.95. Syndicated columnist Jack Anderson was not satisfied that his May, 1978 columns recapitulating the mass murder and physical destruction of the Cambodian nation by the communist Khmer Rouge had conveyed the enormity of the tragedy, or the degree of blame to be placed on the American government. So he had a novel written about it.

The fictionalization manages to trivialize the horror of the situation to the level of an ordinary mystery. Stereotype characters—the boozing Hemingwayesque journalist, the CIA-State Department operative who ends up questioning his country's role, his beautiful and mysterious Cambodian mistress, and the dedicated Jewish social worker—are suitable for a serialized soap opera.

The attribution of malice and neglect to the U.S. government is overly simplistic; Sihanouk and Pol Pot were neither invented by Nixon and Kissinger, nor as susceptible to manipulation as the book implies.

The story does get told, however, and raises (without answering) the larger question of why men slaughter each other. Hitler wanted to purify the white race; Pol Pot wanted to purify the Khmer nation. Both went to grotesque lengths to gain political power; so far, only one has gotten his just reward.

—Pat Martin

**The Company That Bought the Boardwalk: A Reporter's Story of How Resorts International Came to Atlantic City.** Gigi Mahon. Random House, \$10.95. Is Resorts International, the gambling consortium, really an underworld operation? *Barron's* reporter Gigi Mahon tries to prove it. The book starts slowly, and you may be tempted to junk it in favor of a *Kojak* rerun. (The first 50 pages are soap-opera stuff in which Mahon congratulates herself for her “sleuthing,” which seems to have consisted mainly of checking the clip file and calling for an appointment with Resorts' CEO.) But don't give up, because it gets good. In the end, you are convinced that Resorts is so sleazy, Ozzie Myers should be its PR director.

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