Real Men Don’t Wear Pajamas: Anglo-American Cultural Perceptions of Mohammed Mossadeq and the Iranian Oil Nationalization Dispute

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Between 1951 and 1953, Iran struggled to gain control of its oil industry—and the considerable wealth it generated—from the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). The AIOC and its predecessor, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), had run Iran’s oil industry since the first decade of the twentieth century. During the First World War, the British government had purchased a large amount of APOC stock, and by the time of the oil crisis it held slightly more than half—or a controlling interest—in that company’s successor. The relationship between the Iranian government and the oil company was never particularly harmonious. Financial arrangements, especially the relatively low level of royalties the company paid to Iran, the almost total lack of Iranians in high-ranking positions within the company, and the overall aura of secrecy that pervaded the company’s operations, led to Iranian discontent. Added to these practical complaints was the growing sense of Iranian nationalism after the Second World War. Nationalism, rather than simply a desire for greater oil revenues, motivated Iranian policy and sustained that policy when its fruits proved bitter. It helps to explain why Iran wanted Britain to abandon its exclusive control of the Iranian oil industry and why the Iranians persisted in spite of tremendous economic hardship. It also helps to account for the decline of Western power in Iran and in other parts of the world where Western leaders failed to take nationalism as seriously as they might have.

The Anglo-Iranian oil dispute seemed irresolvable from the start. Each side saw the conflict through the prism of its own history and perspective, and neither showed much willingness to compromise. The AIOC and the British Foreign Office emphasized legal issues, denied that Iran had the right
to nationalize its oil industry, and sought to protect the considerable British financial stake in Iranian oil. Between 1945 and 1950, the AIOC earned £250 million from its Iranian operations. Iran's oil fields provided Britain with twenty-two million tons of oil products and seven million tons of crude oil annually, including 85 percent of the fuel needed by the British Admiralty. In other words, the British position stressed the company's value as an economic asset of great importance and the contribution that the AIOC made to Britain's overall Middle Eastern and world position. For British officials, this last consideration was paramount, as the crux of the matter for them was the danger that Iranian nationalization posed to their nation's status as a great power. As Britain's largest overseas investment, the refinery at Abadan and the AIOC's Iranian operations symbolized Britain's power in the Middle East. Losing control of these assets would be a deadly blow to British prestige the world over, especially considering Britain's recent withdrawals from India and Palestine. It might also imperil other British holdings around the world, foremost among them the Suez Canal. At a time when British policy makers were keenly aware of their diminishing status as a global power, it is not surprising that they were sensitive to anything that might undermine their position in Iran, particularly surrendering control of the nation's oil industry to the Iranians. Accordingly, from the very beginning of the oil dispute, British officials expressed their frustration at what they termed the "growing Near East practice of twisting the lion's tail." The Iranian nationalization campaign, they believed, struck at the foundations of British pride and Great Britain's "efforts to re-establish [itself] as [an] equal partner" with the United States around the world.¹

By way of contrast, the Iranian stance during the oil dispute stressed politics and national independence. Although Iranian nationalists complained bitterly about the relatively small profits they received from the AIOC's Iranian operations—their royalties between 1945 and 1950 totaled only £90 million, slightly more than one-third of what the AIOC earned from its Iranian operations—what most galled them was the imperious way the company used its oil concession to dominate and control their nation almost as a colony. Convinced that the AIOC and the British government had interfered in Iran's internal affairs for decades by bribing legislators, influencing elections, and essentially holding the country hostage financially, nationalists like Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh asserted that such interference would stop only after Iran had gained control of its rich oil holdings. Mossadegh was ultimately willing to make concessions on price, production levels, and other technical details, but he would not budge on the central point that operational control of the oil industry had to rest in Iranian
hands. Unless British officials were willing to concede that point, the prime minister was prepared to see his nation’s oil industry shut down. “Tant pis pour nous. Too bad for us,” was his usual response when Anglo-American officials warned him that his refusal to reach a resolution of the oil dispute might shut down the industry. To his way of thinking, Iran would be better off leaving its oil in the ground than allowing the British to remain in control. The nation’s “independence,” he said, was more important than “economics.”

It was the inability of the British and the Iranians to resolve the oil dispute on their own that ultimately brought the United States into the conflict. U.S. officials saw the oil crisis as a potentially destabilizing force in Iran—and perhaps throughout the entire Middle East—that could lead to communist advances and provide the Soviets with an inroad to the oil-rich Persian Gulf. As the only direct land barrier between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf, Iran served as a vital link in the Western security chain; Soviet control of its territory would make the defense of Greece, Turkey, and the eastern Mediterranean all but impossible. Compounding Iran’s importance were its rich oil reserves, which U.S. officials considered crucial to the reconstruction and rearmament of Western Europe. Loss of these resources would have dire consequences. In the short term, it would create serious shortages of aviation gasoline and other fuels needed for the military effort in Korea and would raise the specter of civilian rationing in the United States and throughout the West. In the long term it might compromise the West’s ability to fight a protracted war with the Soviets, force augmentation of its military establishments, and result in an expansion of Soviet military bases in the Middle East.

Initially, the Truman administration acted as an honest broker in the search for a settlement that paid lip service to the idea of nationalization but also recognized the contractual rights of the AIOC. On the one hand, U.S. policy makers called for a firm, commercially acceptable agreement that did not set a dangerous precedent or encourage nationalization elsewhere. On the other, they advocated a flexible approach to the nationalization dispute that would make a settlement possible before Iran collapsed internally or succumbed to Soviet penetration. To this end, President Harry S. Truman and his secretary of state, Dean Acheson, lobbied for concessions from both sides, warning that “too much ‘take’” on the part of the Iranians was as dangerous as “too little ‘give’” on the part of the British.

As the dispute dragged on, however, and as the chance of destabilization in Iran became increasingly likely, officials in the Truman administration
abandoned their middle-of-the-road stance and decided to prop up the British position in Iran, just as they were doing in Egypt and would soon do for the French in Indochina. By the summer of 1952, Truman went so far as to join British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill in a joint Anglo-American proposal to Mossadeq than wedded the U.S. government to the British position in Iran. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles continued this pro-British position when they assumed office in January 1953, ultimately joining the British in a covert operation against Mossadeq late that summer. Administration officials justified this coup as necessary to save Iran from communism. The prolonged oil crisis was beginning to take its toll on the Iranian economy, and economic dislocation was spawning mass demonstrations that U.S. officials feared would grow into full-scale revolution. Making matters worse, Mossadeq was forging closer ties with the Communist Tudeh Party and moving his country closer to the Soviet Union through new trade agreements. He was even threatening to sell Iranian oil to the Soviet Union and its satellites. In truth, Mossadeq was a staunch anticommunist who hoped such moves would win U.S. assistance for his financially strapped government. Given the anticommunist hysteria of the early 1950s, however, officials in Washington could not easily dismiss the prime minister’s apparent flirtation with communism. To them, he was a dangerous radical whose policies could lead Iran into the Soviet bloc. Accordingly, they felt they had no choice but to get rid of him. Just weeks after assuming office, Dulles and Eisenhower approved a British plan for joint action against Mossadeq.

In addition to collaborating to remove Mossadeq from office, over the course of the oil dispute, Anglo-American officials came to a common way of looking at Mossadeq that used many of his personal characteristics, habits, and negotiating tactics, as well as some of his policy positions themselves, to justify a view of him as unmanly and unfit for office. Because Anglo-American officials did not view Mossadeq as their equal, they found it easy to dismiss him as an unworthy adversary whose position did not matter. Although these Anglo-American conceptions and descriptions of Mossadeq were not the sole, or even the most important, factor influencing policy, they deserve scholarly consideration because they helped to shape the context within which officials formulated policy. They buttressed claims of Western superiority over Iranian and other Middle Eastern peoples by perpetuating the idea that those peoples were weak and incapable. And their cumulative effect was to paint Mossadeq and others like him in unfavorable ways that rationalized and justified Western control.
The discussion of the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis in this chapter will use gender—and to a lesser extent culture—as its organizing construct. Rather than examining the major episodes of the oil crisis or providing a general overview of its development, the essay will focus on the ways that Anglo-American officials viewed, described, and dealt with Mossadeq. It is a central proposition of this essay that the ways government officials describe each other have import, and that while these descriptions do not in and of themselves determine policy, they are nonetheless influential.

Historians of U.S. foreign relations are just beginning to undertake this sort of analysis, although, as Emily S. Rosenberg has maintained, “examination of [the] gendered overtones of . . . foreign policy language and symbolism can provide fresh, provocative insights into the wellsprings of policy formulation and public legitimation.”5 To date, valuable work in this area has been undertaken by Andrew J. Rotter, Frank Costigliola, Robert D. Dean, and Kristin Hoganson, among others. Andrew Rotter’s work on U.S. perceptions of Indian and Pakistani officials during the early Cold War, which is included in this volume, highlights the value of gender as an analytical category and serves as a model for this essay.6 Frank Costigliola and Robert Dean have analyzed the gendered images that often permeated U.S. foreign policy pronouncements in their work on George F. Kennan’s Long Telegram and the Kennedy administration’s “ideology of masculinity,” respectively.7 And Kristin Hoganson has recently traced the gendered notions that propelled the United States toward war with Spain in 1898.8 Sociologist John Foran has even gotten into the act by comparing press images of Mossadeq and the shah at the time of the joint Anglo-American operation against the former in August 1953.9 As all of these scholars make clear, U.S. officials shared common gender-based assumptions that shaped their worldviews and influenced how they dealt with the world around them. Although none of these scholars would argue that gendered assumptions constituted the sole source of U.S. foreign policy, they would all maintain that these assumptions merit scholarly consideration because they formed part of the context within which U.S. foreign policy was made.

The analysis presented in this essay is intended to complement the work of these and other historians. It postulates that Anglo-American officials joined to formulate a gender-based view of Mossadeq that denigrated him for departing from what they considered to be acceptable Western norms and that worked against their stated goal of seeking a resolution to the vexing oil imbroglio. It should not be construed as a complete picture of the Iranian oil crisis, and it certainly does not purport to be the only way of
looking at what happened in Iran during the early 1950s. On the contrary, it utilizes the concepts of gender and culture as tools for examining the oil crisis in new ways.

When *Time* magazine designated Mossadeq as its 1951 Man of the Year, it proclaimed the Iranian prime minister to be "by Western standards an appalling caricature of a statesman." "His tears, his tantrums," and "his grotesque antics" led the magazine to dub Mossadeq a "dizzy old wizard" who "put Scheherazade in the petroleum business" by nationalizing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in the spring of 1951.10 *Time*'s editors accurately reflected the prevailing sentiment in the West and unknowingly echoed what British and U.S. government officials had been telling each other for quite some time.11 Influenced by long-standing stereotypes that justified Western superiority and sought to maintain Western control, Anglo-American policy makers consistently employed what Edward Said has termed "Orientalism" when dealing with Mossadeq, whom they considered inferior, childlike, and feminine.12 They often referred to him with gendered language that revealed their conviction that he was neither manly enough for international politics nor fit to hold the office of prime minister. They condemned as unacceptable examples of Mossadeq's unmanliness what were accepted forms of behavior in Iran, failed to see Mossadeq as their equal, and dismissed him as an unworthy adversary whose position did not matter. Their cables, reports, and other private documents, intended only for internal consumption and not released to the public for decades, judged Mossadeq by their own standards of acceptable behavior instead of measuring his behavior against prevailing Iranian norms and considering him within the context of the society of which he was a part. As a result, Mossadeq's appearance, behavior, and policies never quite measured up to Western norms or conformed to what Western leaders found acceptable. The end result of the Orientalization of Mossadeq was an increasingly rigid Anglo-American position on the oil crisis that eschewed compromise or concessions and ultimately saw removing him from office as the only acceptable course of action.

Anglo-American officials found Mossadeq different from themselves in many ways, and these differences affected the way they dealt with him during his premiership. One startling difference concerned the way the prime minister dressed and his preferred place of conducting business. Because of his age and poor health, Mossadeq usually worked from his bed while dressed in pajamas, thereby presenting Anglo-American officials with a situation so strange that they took to including the color of his pajamas in
their reports home. Some days, in fact, they noted that the prime minister wore two sets of pajamas on top of each other—khaki and green one day, blue and khaki another.13 Officials also thought it significant to note, sometimes with veiled sarcasm, those occasions when Mossadeq was up and about. U.S. ambassador Loy Henderson, for example, described one meeting in which Mossadeq “received me fully dressed (not pajama clad) as though for [a] ceremonial occasion.”14 Officials from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, who went to Iran seeking to arrange an oil settlement in 1952, made the same point by expressing shock one day to find the prime minister “alert” and “on his feet.” On another occasion they were astonished that Mossadeq actually “got out of bed, put on his slippers, and escorted us to the hall,” as if the prime minister and his iron-framed bed had somehow become conjoined.15 The cultural assumptions behind such remarks are clear: Real leaders are expected to wear suits or other professional attire when conducting business, not pajamas,16 and they are expected to conduct their business from an upright position, not while reclining in their beds. Never mind that Winston Churchill often wore pajamas and worked from his bed. That Mossadeq did so marked him as an “eccentric” at best, a “lunatic” at worst, and contributed to a mounting Anglo-American conviction that what Mossadeq had to say from his bed was unimportant.17

Another thing that U.S. and British officials had difficulty dealing with was what they termed Mossadeq’s “fragile” and “emotional” temperament.18 On many occasions throughout his premiership, Mossadeq became teary eyed when speaking of the plight of the Iranian people, sometimes during private discussions, sometimes during public appearances.19 In part, these outbursts were genuine reflections of his outrage at the sufferings wrought upon the Iranians by the “evil” Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.20 In part, though, these episodes were carefully choreographed plays to the balcony designed to garner important popular support for the prime minister during the long and economically devastating oil crisis. Anglo-American officials did not give enough credence to the possibility that Mossadeq’s tears might have stemmed from something other than uncontrolled emotionalism. To them, they were signs of weakness and effeminacy that diminished Mossadeq’s standing as a statesman and absolved them of the responsibility of dealing with him as an equal.21

Mossadeq’s tears were not the only thing that made him feminine in Western eyes. The prime minister also displayed a host of other traits that earned him the opprobrium of officials in the Foreign Office and State Department and that yielded descriptions thick with gender-coded language. He was “moody,” “impractical,” and “unrealistic,” they said.22 He lacked the
capacity “to carry on complicated negotiations for any length of time in a single direction.”\textsuperscript{23} He had a tendency “to change his mind, to forget, to become confused.”\textsuperscript{24} He approached “international politics from [an] emotional point of view” rather than from a “rational” one.\textsuperscript{25} All of these descriptions painted Mossadeq in feminine terms and seemed to brand him unworthy of playing the role of an international statesman. Sometimes Anglo-American officials even went beyond simply gender-coded language to explicit and obvious characterization, as when they railed against the prime minister’s “negative and feminine [negotiating] tactics.”\textsuperscript{26} This description came during the failed mission of British Lord Privy Seal Sir Richard Stokes to arrange an oil settlement during the summer of 1952 and apparently meant that like most women, Mossadeq had trouble making up his mind, sought to avoid final decisions, and always wanted something better. The cumulative result of such characterizations was the conclusion that Mossadeq was an irrational and fickle adversary who was prone to emotional outbursts, often changed his mind, and could not be trusted. It seemed to follow that any permanent, realistic settlement required his removal from office and the appointment of a more reasonable and reliable prime minister.

Many of Mossadeq’s policies contributed to Western descriptions of him as weak and incapable. By eschewing the economic gains that would come from a compromise settlement and insisting on total Iranian control of the oil industry, even if that meant operating at a reduced output, Mossadeq saw himself as safeguarding his nation’s independence against the rapacious imperialism of the West. Anglo-American officials, however, saw things differently. For them, such a stance was further proof of Mossadeq’s simple mind and unfitness for office. He was living in a “dream world” if he thought that “the simple passage of legislation nationalizing [the Iranian] oil industry [would create a] profitable business” and “‘ludicrously misinformed’” if he thought other countries would step in to help when the AIOC demonstrated its opposition to nationalization by instituting a boycott of Iranian oil purchases by the other international oil companies, including the U.S. majors.\textsuperscript{27} If Mossadeq thought he could play the U.S. firms off against the AIOC, he was sadly mistaken.

Mossadeq’s effort to steer a middle course in the Cold War, which at the time took the name of “negative equilibrium,” also made him look weak in Western eyes. Such a course turned the traditional Iranian policy of playing the Great Powers against each other on its head by proclaiming instead that no foreign power should have influence in Iran. As the prime minister saw it, what would later come to be called “nonalignment” was the only way to protect Iran from the kind of interference that the AIOC had practiced
throughout Iran and thereby to ensure the attainment of the nation’s true independence. For U.S. officials, though, refusing to stand with the West against the communist menace was unmanly, even perfidious. In the “if you’re not with us you’re against us” climate that characterized the early 1950s, especially once the Republicans returned to power in 1953, Mossadeq’s neutralism only further confirmed suspicions that his regime was leading Iran toward disaster.

Also telling were the frequent Anglo-American references to Mossadeq’s childishness and immaturity and the attendant assumption that the West needed to save Iran from his unrealistic and naïve policies. The prime minister was called “insolent” and “intransigent” when he refused to accept British and U.S. plans for resolving the oil crisis, and during negotiations he allegedly had to be “humored” like “a fractious child.” In contrast to the British, who had been “‘saints’” throughout the oil crisis, Mossadeq had “‘been the naughty boy’” who needed to be disciplined. Such descriptions were dripping with the arrogance and superiority of Western colonialism and are prefect examples of the Orientalist thinking that pervaded Western policy-making circles. They denigrated Mossadeq’s capacities, questioned his fitness for office, and justified Anglo-American opposition to his regime—opposition, of course, that ultimately resulted in the coup that overthrew him in August 1953.

Anglo-American officials used yet another category of descriptors to denigrate and dismiss Mossadeq: the language of psychology and mental illness. The documentary record on the oil crisis is replete with references to Mossadeq as “crazy,” “sick,” “mad,” “hysterical,” “neurotic,” “demented,” “periodically unstable,” and “not quite sane.” Because he was “suspicious” and “entirely impervious to reason,” the “ordinary rules [of] logic” were useless when dealing with him. In the discourse of the 1950s, terms like hysterical and neurotic were usually reserved for females, and their use in this context reflects an Anglo-American proclivity to see Mossadeq as feminine as well as demented—and indeed to link the two, to consider Mossadeq’s supposed effeminacy and his apparent mental illness as part and parcel of the same problem and to see both as reasons for dismissing him and what he had to say. Anglo-American references to Mossadeq’s mental state also reflected a tendency by British and U.S. officials to practice pop psychology on the prime minister, to ascribe to him medical conditions they were certainly not qualified to diagnose, and to use those diagnoses to justify their refusal to take what he said very seriously. “If Mr. Moussadiq is as mad as he seems,” they concluded, talking and reasoning with him were futile. These characterizations of Mossadeq as mentally ill continued through the plan-
ning for the coup that ultimately overthrew him: Secretary of State John Foster Dulles reportedly exclaimed, "So this is how we get rid of that madman Mossadegh" when the operation was laid out for him in June 1953.\textsuperscript{35} Mossadegh's "madness," it seemed, truly was grounds for the Anglo-American operation against him.

Finally, Anglo-American officials revealed their cultural biases when describing Iranian society and the Iranian people in general. Mossadegh's supporters were termed little more than "mad and suicidal . . . lemmings" who needed to be saved from their folly by Western benevolence.\textsuperscript{36} It was difficult to negotiate an agreement with Tehran because of "characteristic defects in the Persian mode of conducting business."\textsuperscript{37} And any thought that the Iranians could operate the Abadan refinery in the absence of British technicians was roundly dismissed by Averell Harriman, sent by President Truman to arrange an oil settlement in the summer of 1951, as "lunacy."\textsuperscript{38} Anglo-American officials also wrote often about the "Iranian mentality" and the "Oriental mind," vague, undefined terms that became all-too-easy rationalizations for the failure to reach an acceptable oil agreement and prevented Western officials from searching for the real root of the impasse in oil talks. Blaming the inability to reach a settlement on inherent differences between the Iranians and themselves offered Anglo-American officials what they considered an honorable way to escape responsibility for the continued stalemate.\textsuperscript{39} It wasn't their fault there was no oil agreement; the fault lay with the Iranians, whose way of thinking was so different from the Anglo-American one that no settlement was possible. As Frank Costigliola has pointed out, George Kennan used the same specious logic to explain in the Long Telegram why it was pointless to try to negotiate with the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{40} Not surprisingly, descriptions of Mossadegh fit in with these general assessments of the Iranian people. The prime minister was a "wily Oriental" whose approach to the oil question was "almost purely mystical."\textsuperscript{41} Patronizing remarks about the Iranian people's inability to choose and follow the right leader, assertions that they lacked the intelligence to operate the oil industry on their own, and stereotypical remarks about the mysterious East did more than reveal the cultural biases of Anglo-American officials. By assuming an air of Western superiority, they also suggested, at least implicitly, an imperialist mentality that questioned Iranian fitness for self-government and ultimately justified Western intervention to save the Iranians from self-destruction.

In characterizing Mossadegh as feminine and incapable, Anglo-American officials made two serious mistakes. One was their failure to recognize that Iranian standards of acceptable and normal behavior differed greatly from
those that prevailed in the West. Whereas Mossadeq’s tears symbolized weakness and emotionalism to them, for the Iranian people they were proof of Mossadeq’s deep concern for the welfare of the country, concern that was so strong that he was driven to tears when he thought about the plight of his fellow countrymen. Whereas his proclivity to conduct business from his bed while dressed in pajamas proved his quirkiness to Westerners, for the Iranians these things were, as Andrew F. Westwood has noted, “deeply symbolic . . . of their personal plight and that of their nation, symbolic of the frailty of righteousness beset by powerful forces of evil.” And whereas his fainting spells were for the Anglo-Americans something to mock and laugh about, they were the kinds of public displays of emotion and feeling that Iranians expected from a leader. In other words, the Iranian people found nothing wrong with Mossadeq’s behavior. On the contrary, they respected and admired him for being so concerned about the plight of his nation that he was driven to faint and cry about it.

Anglo-American officials also erred by not giving enough weight to the possibility that Mossadeq’s emotionalism might have been intentional, something he employed to serve his own ends: Maybe he fainted and cried on purpose. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that this is precisely what the prime minister did. The best example of the depth of Mossadeq’s theatrical talent came from a Majlis deputy who related the following personal experience. One day during an emotional speech on the floor of the Majlis, Mossadeq collapsed in a heap. Fearing that the elderly premier had suffered a heart attack, the deputy, who also happened to be a medical doctor, rushed to check Mossadeq’s pulse, which he expected to find weak and fluttering. He was quite surprised when it was strong and regular, and even more surprised when the prime minister opened one eye and winked at him, as if to say, “My trick has worked. You were taken in, and so were the others. I have won you over.” Officials in the State Department and Foreign Office failed to seriously consider Mossadeq’s deliberate use of tears and fainting. And even had they done so, they would have judged such tactics inappropriate for the political realm.

As Time’s editors asserted, and as official descriptions and accounts revealed, when judged by Western standards, Mossadeq clearly did not measure up. He wept in public; he wore pajamas to work; he apparently did not understand the intricacies of the international oil industry; he eschewed involvement in the Cold War. These were not things real men did, and they set Mossadeq apart from the Anglo-Americans.

Like all of us, policy makers in London and Washington judged others, including Mossadeq, in relation to how they saw themselves. They devel-
oped in their own minds standards of acceptable behavior, action, and appearance and used these standards as a yardstick to measure others. Those who met the minimum were respected as equals; those who did not were denigrated and dismissed. As scholars such as Carol Cohn and Emily Rosenberg have noted, these standards consisted largely of opposing pairs of traits and behaviors with the positive element of each pair denoting acceptable (or Western) norms and the negative element signifying unacceptable (or Other) norms. For Westerners, the positive traits were coded as male, the negative traits as female.44 Thus, in the pairs “strong and weak,” “rational and irrational,” and “realistic and emotional,” “strong,” “rational,” and “realistic” were seen as male, and therefore desirable, traits, while “weak,” “irrational,” and “emotional” were seen as female, and therefore undesirable, traits.

In the case of Mossadeq, everything he did fed Western perceptions of him as weak and unmanly, which in turn made it much easier for Anglo-American officials to discount his position—and that of his country. Because Mossadeq neither looked nor acted like a Western leader and refused to kowtow to Western pressures for continued control of Iran’s oil industry, he was described as an irrational lunatic unfit to hold the office of prime minister.

An indication that it was Mossadeq’s behavior, dress, and personal beliefs that fueled Western condemnation of him and not the fact that he was Iranian is that some Iranians did receive positive press from British and U.S. officials. One member of the Iranian opposition who was willing to see the British return to Iran “as partners in the oil industry,” for example, was praised for his “physical and mental” strength and for an ability to drink “his whisky manfully” (always the mark of a competent leader).45 Mossadeq’s successor as prime minister, Fazlollah Zahedi, also won plaudits as “a realistic man who [could] recognize a need to cooperate with the West in order to obtain revenue from sales of Iranian oil.”46 In accepting the necessity of Western influence in and control over Iranian affairs and in displaying other traits that Western officials admired, these men differed from Mossadeq. They went along with Western schemes and tacitly accepted the idea of Western superiority that was built into the Orientalist thinking that so condemned and denigrated Mossadeq. In other words, in order to win Western acceptance, they had put aside their Iranianness and embraced Westernness. They had abandoned the idea of national independence that spurred Mossadeq to defy the Anglo-Americans in order to receive Western support and assistance.

Assessing the immediate influence of Western characterizations of Mossadeq on the formulation of Anglo-American policy is tricky because it is not
possible to determine a direct causal relationship between Anglo-American perceptions and prejudices and specific events. We cannot say, for example, that Western stereotypes led linearly to the coup that removed Mossadeq from office in the summer of 1953. But this does not mean that these stereotypes were unimportant. On the contrary, by shaping the mind-set of Anglo-American officials, they were part of the context within which those officials formulated policy. They buttressed claims of Western superiority over Iranian and other Middle Eastern peoples by perpetuating the idea that those peoples were weak and incapable. And their cumulative effect was to paint Mossadeq and others like him in unfavorable ways that rationalized and justified Western control.

The British and U.S. officials charged with negotiating an oil settlement with Mossadeq were probably not aware of the role cultural perceptions played in circumscribing their ability to reach such a settlement. But as this essay has demonstrated, those perceptions did constitute important obstacles to a negotiated resolution of the oil crisis on terms that Western officials would have considered acceptable. To be sure, there were many other contexts surrounding the oil crisis besides gender and culture—the East-West Cold War, Anglo-American relations, and decolonization and the rise of Third World nationalism, to name only three—and each of these contexts provided its own obstacles to an acceptable oil agreement. But in seeking a complete understanding of the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis, and especially the reasons why resolution proved so difficult, scholars should not discount the role of cultural perceptions. Without a doubt, by judging Mossadeq according to Western standards rather than accepting him on his own terms, Anglo-American officials demonstrated their own cultural arrogance and greatly reduced their chances of reaching a negotiated oil settlement.

In conclusion, this essay makes clear that the question of perceptions—or, perhaps more accurately, misperceptions—proved to be an important one throughout the Iranian oil crisis. Without question, Mossadeq committed his own errors of perception. He misread the willingness of U.S. officials to come to Iran’s assistance in its struggle against Britain, the difficulties of selling nationalized oil on the open market, and the degree of British opposition to surrendering control of Iranian oil. He also miscalculated the usefulness of communism as a way to win U.S. support. But of much greater consequence were the misperceptions of British and U.S. officials about Mossadeq—that he was senile, mentally unbalanced, and unfit for office. Because key U.S. Foreign Service officers had little understanding of Iranian history, culture, or tradition, they did not appreciate the role
that emotion or public tears played in the political culture of Iran or why Mossadeq might have worn pajamas and worked from his bed. Instead of taking Mossadeq on his own terms, Western leaders chose to judge him according to their own standards and to dismiss him when he failed to measure up to expectations. This tendency was not unique to Iran, of course, but applied throughout the world’s developing countries. It reflected an Anglo-American sense of cultural superiority over developing world leaders who sought to maintain their nations’ independence and helps to explain why the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis, which was at its heart a North-South conflict, ultimately proved so difficult to resolve.

Notes

1. Foreign Office telegram 2103 to British Embassy, Washington, 18 May 1951, Foreign Office General Political Correspondence, Record Class FO 371, 91535/EP1531/354, Public Record Office, Kew, England (hereafter FO 371, with filing information); Gifford telegram 5774 to State Department, 5 May 1951, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, file 888.2553AIOC/5–2651, National Archives II, College Park, MD (hereafter RG 59, with file number).


3. Mossadeq quoted in Grady dispatch 1159 to State Department, 29 June 1951, RG 59, 788.00/6–2951.


9. See John Foran, “Discursive Subversions: Time Magazine, the CIA Overthrow of


11. Because British and U.S. officials shared common cultural assumptions regarding Iran and the Middle East—and especially because U.S. officials learned much of what they knew about the Middle East from the British—for the purposes of this essay the two will be considered together.


13. For two instances of reporting on Mossadeq's pajama color see Shepherd despatch 164 to Foreign Office, 3 June 1951, FO 371, 91545/EP1531/609; and Shepherd to R. J. Bowker, 22 May 1951, FO 371, 91542/EP1531/547.


16. See Andrew Rotter's essay in this volume for the importance U.S. officials placed on dress with regard to Indian and Pakistani leaders.


19. For two references to Mossadeq's tears, see Arthur L. Richards (counselor, U.S. embassy, Tehran) despatch 1006 transmitting Mossadeq's 25 May 1951 statement to the press, 26 May 1951, RG 59, 788.13/5–2651; and Henry F. Grady (U.S. ambassador, Tehran) telegram 3255 to State Department, 13 June 1951, RG 59, 888.2553AIOC/6–1351.


24. Ibid.
25. Henderson telegram 2727 to State Department, 16 January 1953, RG 59, 888.2553/1-1653.
27. Harriman telegram 736 to State Department, 22 August 1951, RG 59, 888.2553/8-2251; Gifford telegram 5748 to State Department, 4 May 1951, RG 59, 888.2553 AIOC/5-451.


29. For an examination of how Indian neutrality evoked similar condemnations from U.S. officials see Rotter, “Gender Relations, Foreign Relations.”


31. Walter S. Gifford (U.S. ambassador, London) telegram 1698 to State Department, 5 October 1951, FRUS, 1952–1954, 10:205. Time’s editors echoed these characterizations of Mossadegh, comparing him to a “wilful little boy” who tried to get his own way by threatening to hold his breath until he was “blue in the face.” See “Man of the Year,” 18.


34. E. A. Berthoud minute, 6 June 1951, FO 371, 91551/EP1531/733.

35. Dulles purportedly quoted in Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York, 1979), 8. Roosevelt tells a good story, but readers should proceed with caution, as he tends to exaggerate and may even at times misrepresent the events. A good scholarly account of the coup that makes excellent use of interviews with participants is Mark J. Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* (Ithaca, NY, 1991).

36. Henderson telegram 377 to State Department, 24 July 1952, RG 59, 788.00/7-2452.

37. Shepherd dispatch 376 to FO, “Conduct of the Anglo-Persian Question: Anal-


40. See Costigliola, “‘Unceasing Pressure for Penetration.’”


43. For one recounting of this famous tale see Yergin, *The Prize*, 457.

