Chapter 13

THE RETURN TO CONFRONTATION

By January 1977, when President Jimmy Carter took office, détente was beginning to show unmistakable signs of wear. In both Washington and Moscow, opposition to further accommodations with the other side was on the rise. While Brezhnev had managed to force the hard-liners to "eat" the Vladivostok accords, the prevailing mood within the Soviet elite was that the United States was losing the arms race and that the correlation of forces had turned in favor of the Kremlin.[1] Many in the West—including the Joint Chiefs—agreed that U.S. military credibility was at its lowest ebb since World War II and that the balance of power was in a precarious state. Never, it seemed, had America's prestige been lower or its status as a superpower so uncertain.

The new Carter administration was, if anything, even more committed to preserving détente than its two immediate predecessors. If he achieved nothing else during his Presidency, Jimmy Carter wanted to reduce the threat of nuclear war, cut the number of opposing strategic weapons, and lessen the drain that military expenditures placed on the world's resources. Ultimately, he hoped to shift attention from the Cold War to other issues—the global crisis in energy supplies, the protection of human rights, and especially the need to improve relations and the distribution of resources between the developed and developing worlds. Instead of military power, Carter proposed to rely more on diplomacy and moral suasion to achieve American security objectives.[2] While he did not dismiss the need for armed force in support of foreign policy, he thought it had been overused in the past. Thenceforth, he said in his inaugural address, the United States would "maintain strength so sufficient that it need not be proven in combat—a quiet strength based not merely on the size of an arsenal but on the nobility of ideas."[3]

CARTER AND THE JOINT CHIEFS

Almost from the moment the Carter administration arrived, the Joint Chiefs of Staff found themselves on the defensive, with their advice treated as suspect and their methods and procedures under close scrutiny. Despite a succession of austere

budgets since Vietnam, defense spending remained at what many in the incoming administration deemed excessive, driven by outmoded force-sizing practices, lax management, and inefficient allocation and use of resources. As an immediate target upon taking office, Carter proposed to trim five to seven billion dollars from the military budget. Hoping eventually to reduce military spending even further, Carter never ceased to push and prod the Pentagon to save money, do more with less, and above all keep in mind the greater humanitarian good.

Carter was unlike any President the Joint Chiefs had known. An Annapolis graduate (Class of '46), he resigned from the Navy in 1953 to manage his family's Georgia peanut business. After turning the business around, he went into politics, became governor of Georgia, and acquired a national following. A populist, he identified himself with the center-left wing of the Democratic Party. Like John F. Kennedy, he appeared uneasy, almost awkward, around "the brass." If he dealt with the JCS at all, it was generally through his Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, or the Chairman. Despite his celebrated penchant for mastering detail, he had little patience for lengthy JCS threat assessments and posture statements and preferred crisp summaries prepared by White House aides. In his memoirs, he insisted that he enjoyed "good relations" with the JCS during his 4 years in office.[4] Yet he rarely met with the chiefs as a corporate body. His trips to the Pentagon were few and usually for ceremonial functions rather than substantive discussions. On one of the few occasions when he did listen to JCS advice—in planning the failed Iran hostage rescue mission in 1980—the results were a disaster, confirming Carter's belief that the military was anything but infallible.

Under Carter, as under his immediate predecessors, the CJCS continued to be the pivotal link between civilian authority and the military. Though there was some speculation as the new administration took office that General George S. Brown, USAF, the serving Chairman, would be replaced, Carter brushed such talk aside and kept Brown on until he stepped down from active duty for health reasons in June 1978, 10 days before the expiration of his term. His successor, General David C. Jones, had previously been the Air Force Chief of Staff. A Curtis LeMay protégé, Jones had served on the Air Staff in Washington while McNamara was Secretary of Defense, when civil-military relations were at low ebb. As Chairman, he made it his goal to achieve a harmonious partnership between OSD and the JCS.[5]

Carter's choice of another Air Force officer as Chairman was the source of endless speculation. Some thought that it was a reward for Jones's acquiescence in Carter's decision a year earlier, fulfilling a campaign pledge, to cancel the B–1 bomber. Proponents of the B–1, feeling that Jones had accepted the cancellation order too easily, argued that he should have fought harder to keep the plane. Jones

disagreed. "There were those who said I should have fallen on my sword," he recalled. But he doubted whether it would have served a useful purpose. "Carter had campaigned on cancellation of the B–1. Who am I to sit in judgment?"[6]

Jones's appointment as CJCS seemed to some observers to be consistent with an emerging pattern by the Carter administration of naming competent yet low-profile officers to sit on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. At the same time he nominated Jones, Carter also sent the names of two other new JCS members to the Senate: General Lew Allen, Jr., to become the Air Force Chief of Staff; and Admiral Thomas D. Hayward to succeed the popular and respected Admiral James L. Holloway III as Chief of Naval Operations. Allen, a Ph.D. in physics, was at heart a scientist, while Hayward's background was in naval aviation and program analysis. Both were able and dedicated officers. But they were virtually unknown outside their respective Services and came from technical backgrounds that did little to prepare them as high-level politico-military advisors. The net effect, wrote Bernard Weinraub of the *New York Times*, was "an awareness within the defense hierarchy that the influence of the Joint Chiefs is on the decline."[7]

Efforts by the Joint Chiefs to reestablish their influence and authority initially met with limited success. A case in point was their handling of reforms to the joint strategic planning system, which one administration after another had deplored. As initiated under the Carter administration, these reforms targeted the Joint Strategic Objectives Plan (JSOP), the Joint Chiefs' mid-range (7-year) estimate of military requirements which they updated annually as their major contribution to the budget process. Urged by the administration to modernize their planning methods, the Joint Chiefs introduced the Joint Strategic Planning Document (JSPD) in place of the JSOP over the course of 1978–1979. Like its predecessor, the function of the JSPD was to appraise the threats to U.S. interests and objectives and to recommend a level of programmed forces to address those dangers. Even so, the JSPD was little better than the JSOP in providing a strategic framework for the allocation of resources since it made no attempt to prioritize programs; instead, it treated each Service's needs as having more or less equal importance. Since allocating resources invariably posed the most difficult problems at budget time, the absence of a prioritized list rendered the JSPD almost useless. As a result, few outside the Joint Staff paid any more attention to the JSPD than they had to the JSOP.[8]

Carter was convinced that the only way to make the Joint Chiefs more efficient and effective was through a top-to-bottom reorganization, the subject of a Defense-wide review initiated in November 1977 by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown.[9] Richard C. Steadman, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, chaired the panel that examined the role of the JCS. Reporting its findings in July 1978, the Steadman group recommended streamlining Joint Staff procedures and

increasing the power and authority of the CJCS. Arguing that it was virtually impossible for the Service chiefs to render wholly objective advice, the panel looked to the Chairman as the only military officer with no current or prospective Service responsibilities to interfere with providing the necessary leadership and administrative authority to make the JCS organization more responsive and effective.[10]

The Joint Chiefs were notably unenthusiastic about the Steadman group's findings. At his first press conference as Chairman, General Jones downplayed their probable impact, indicating that there was as yet no consensus on how to proceed. "We have a long ways to go," he said, "before we can really figure out how to merge all of these conflicting views in the joint arena and come up with recommendations on some of these difficult issues."[11] Privately, Jones told Secretary of Defense Brown that while he saw "a number of things" that would improve JCS performance, he expected the changes, if any, to be minor. "I firmly believe," he added, "that the fundamental organizational structure is sound."[12] Commenting as a corporate body, the Joint Chiefs concurred that the Steadman report contained many "innovative, positive suggestions," but cautioned that implementation efforts should be "evolutionary in nature."[13]

Undaunted, President Carter continued to treat JCS reform as unfinished business. Had he been reelected in 1980, he undoubtedly would have proposed legislation along the lines the Steadman report recommended. But as a one-term President, he never had the time or opportunity to go beyond piecemeal changes. The only legislative reform enacted during Carter's Presidency was a law he signed on October 20, 1978, granting the Commandant of the Marine Corps coequal status with the Service chiefs, thereby recognizing in statute what had become commonplace in practice. While the movement for JCS reform was indeed beginning to take definite form, it would still be some time before it gathered sufficient momentum to produce more than superficial changes.

STRATEGIC FORCES AND PD–59

The most striking difference between Jimmy Carter and the Joint Chiefs was in their respective views of the world and the threat posed from Moscow. While Carter acknowledged the Soviet Union as a hostile power, animated by an ideology sharply at odds with Western values, he entered office brimming with optimism that he could do business with the Soviets and reach an early SALT agreement that would obviate both sides' need for new or additional strategic forces. He liked the idea of tailoring basic national security policy accordingly, and favored refinements in strategic-targeting and weapons-employment policy that would reduce the death and destruction from a possible military confrontation. Even though the Joint

Chiefs applauded the President's idealism, they also considered it somewhat naïve and could not help but question the practicality of some of his proposals. As they had for years, the chiefs continued to measure Soviet intentions in terms of Moscow's large and growing military arsenal. As time went on, to be sure, Carter's views on the Soviet Union changed, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan late in 1979. Yet he never accepted the chiefs' basic premise that the United States was falling dangerously behind the Soviet Union in effective military power and could only redress this situation through a major strengthening of U.S. capabilities.

For Carter, as for his two immediate predecessors, strategic modernization was often a source of intense friction between the Pentagon and the White House. Carter was determined to reduce military spending and saw no better place to begin than with the increasingly expensive B–1 bomber, which he summarily cancelled in June 1977, thus fulfilling a campaign pledge.[14] Carter and Secretary of Defense Brown both questioned the B–1's penetration capabilities and concluded that it had become superfluous with the advent of air-launched cruise missiles which could be delivered from existing B–52s and other platforms. Later, they argued that emerging "stealth" technology offered more promising possibilities than the B–1.[15] But according to General David Jones, the Air Force Chief of Staff at the time, stealth R&D then concentrated on developing smaller planes and cruise missiles and was not seriously involved in producing a bomber alternative to the B–1.[16]

Carter's cancellation of the B–1 proved far more contentious than the White House expected and came in the wake of another controversial decision, announced in May 1977, to withdraw U.S. troops from Korea. Like his handling of the B–1, Carter had been thinking about pulling troops out of Korea well before the election. According to published accounts, he was heavily influenced by analysts at the Brookings Institution who believed that the continuation of a large U.S. presence amounted to a dangerous "trip wire" that could easily ensnarl the United States in another unpopular Asian war.[17] That the pullout of U.S. forces would in the long run save money, free up assets for deployment elsewhere, and distance the United States from what President Carter considered the South Korean government's wobbly human rights record became in the final analysis the decisive factor in his thinking.[18]

Underlying Carter's foreign and defense policies was his faith in détente to move the United States and the Soviet Union permanently away from the confrontational politics of the past. While he acknowledged the contributions of military power to an effective foreign policy, he was satisfied with maintaining "essential equivalence" in strategic forces and a balance of power "at least as favorable as that that now exists."[19] But after the contretemps over cancellation of the B–1, he was under constant pressure to reassure the JCS and pro-defense members of Congress

that he remained committed to preserving a credible deterrent posture. Thus, he showed continuing strong support for the Trident program in the face of allegations of shoddy management and enormous inflation-driven increases in construction costs, and let stand the Ford administration's decision to proceed with production of the Mark 12A warhead to increase Minuteman III's accuracy and effectiveness against hardened targets. Most significant of all was his determination to resolve the MX controversy, resulting in his approval in 1979 of a plan to deploy 200 MX missiles in a mobile-basing mode. Yet it was a decision he found personally repugnant, and in his diary he characterized the MX deployment as "a nauseating prospect to confront, with the gross waste of money going into nuclear weapons of all kinds."[20]

Perhaps because he disliked nuclear weapons so much, Carter was determined to exercise the closest possible control over them. Not since Harry S. Truman had a President been so personally involved in the management of the country's nuclear arsenal, its configuration, and how it would be used. Most far-reaching of all were the changes President Carter made in the targeting and employment policies governing U.S. nuclear forces. The Joint Chiefs regarded these matters as basically closed after adoption of the Schlesinger doctrine (NSDM 242) in 1975. But to Carter and his national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, NSDM 242 was merely the first step. Convinced that targeting doctrine should have specific political as well as military objectives, Brzezinski wanted it to include refinements that amounted to the "ethnic cleansing" of the Soviet Union by threatening the heaviest casualties among the Great Russian population, as opposed to the Latvians, Ukrainians, and other nationalities that had been more or less coerced into joining the Soviet state.[21]

The upshot was the appearance in November 1978 of the "countervailing strategy," the product of an interagency review headed by Leon Sloss, a respected strategic analyst and consultant to Secretary of Defense Brown.[22] Presented to the Joint Chiefs as more or less a fait accompli, the countervailing strategy was in many respects a logical extension of the Schlesinger doctrine. As Secretary Brown described it, its function was the maintenance of "military (including nuclear) forces, contingency plans, and command-and-control capabilities to convince Soviet leaders that they cannot secure victory, however they may define it, at any stage of a potential war."[23] But in carrying out these tasks, it imposed a far more sophisticated and rigorous set of targeting requirements. A formidable assignment, Chairman Jones promised to give it his utmost attention but was somewhat skeptical of achieving quick results. In fact, Jones believed strategic nuclear planning and targeting had become so exceedingly complex that he foresaw few significant changes resulting anytime soon, no matter what the declared targeting policy might be.[24]

The most strenuous objections to the countervailing strategy came from the State Department. According to Brzezinski, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance found the whole inquiry into nuclear targeting emotionally disturbing and gave it limited cooperation.[25] As a direct result, approval of a Presidential directive (PD–59) sanctioning the new strategy was held up until July 1980.[26] By then, however, the Joint Chiefs were well along toward putting the countervailing strategy into operation since many of its provisions could be implemented on orders of the Secretary of Defense. The main function of PD–59 was to pave the way for issuance of a new Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy (NUWEP-80), which the Joint Chiefs received in October 1980.[27]

President Carter and Secretary of Defense Brown both insisted that it was never their intention under the countervailing strategy to make sweeping changes in U.S. policy or doctrine. According to Brown, the countervailing strategy amounted to nothing more than a "modest refinement in U.S. nuclear strategy as a response to charges that the USSR had achieved strategic nuclear superiority." Its aim, he insisted, was to strengthen deterrence and not to boost war-fighting capabilities.[28] Carter's view was essentially the same. As much as he abhorred nuclear weapons, he accepted the necessity of their role in U.S. defense policy, but sought to narrow their use for strategic purposes in carefully pre-planned ways, avoiding wholesale destruction. Hence the emphasis on options that would theoretically allow the President to choose from an almost endless array of measured responses to almost any level of Soviet provocation.[29]

By and large, the Joint Chiefs agreed that the more options they and the President might have, the better. As during previous strategic reviews, however, their main concern was one of feasibility. The most complex and demanding targeting policy to that point, the countervailing strategy required them to prepare for almost any contingency, from a limited nuclear exchange to a fully generated nuclear war. Most military professionals involved in this process shared the view of the Chairman, General Jones, that implementing the new doctrine would be a slow and laborious process, testing the patience and resourcefulness of all involved. That it would require significant improvements in technology, from weapons in the field to command, control, and communications, was practically a given. In other words, implementing the countervailing strategy was a long-term process that JCS planners approached with mixed feelings about achieving ultimate success.

SALT II

As intent as President Carter was on exercising closer command and control over the targeting and use of nuclear weapons, he was even more determined to reach

agreement with the Soviets on reducing nuclear arms. Not satisfied with the tentative ceilings set at Vladivostok in 1974, he wanted "deep cuts" and speculated at one point that he saw no need for either side to keep more than 200 ICBMs.[30] Indicative of his thinking was the sweeping statement in his inaugural address that his "ultimate goal" was nothing less than "the elimination of all nuclear weapons" from the face of the earth.[31] "I want the level of our capability as low as possible," Carter told his senior advisors, "but I'm not naive. Possibly 1,000 ICBMs, each with one warhead, with some limitations on the size of the warhead." In any case, Carter added, "we should work for dramatic reductions, carefully monitored and not unfavorable to either side."[32]

Carter's deep cuts plan left the Joint Chiefs stunned. Having never envisioned reductions on the scale Carter proposed, they found it hard to imagine how they could effectively deter the Soviets with such a small strategic arsenal. While the Chairman dutifully pledged his support in helping the President realize his goal, he was uncertain how much cooperation to expect from his JCS colleagues, whom he described as "staunch proponents of reductions, but with caution." "Trying to lead the [Service] Chiefs on this issue," he warned, "is like putting three wild dogs through a keyhole."[33]

With his authority as President, Carter could finesse any objections raised by the Joint Chiefs. The Soviets, however, were another matter. To the leadership in Moscow, as one Soviet foreign minister later estimated, arms control constituted "95 percent of the total relationship, more or less," with the United States.[34] Complaints from the hardliners notwithstanding, SALT more often than not had yielded handsome dividends for the Soviets (most notably confirmation of strategic parity with the United States) which many now saw Carter trying to wrest away. Irritated also by the President's human rights campaign and its strident support for the celebrated dissident physicist Andrei Sakharov, the Soviets viewed the deep cuts proposal not merely with suspicion but with utter dismay. Thus, when Secretary of State Vance arrived in Moscow in late March 1977 to discuss the matter, he received both a chilly reception and a flat rejection of the offer.[35]

Despite the setback in Moscow, President Carter continued to believe that a SALT II treaty with significant reductions was attainable. But from that point on, he was more cautious and never substantially departed from the Vladivostok formula. Nevertheless, the negotiations proved more difficult than expected and moved forward slowly, requiring high-level intervention from time to time to revive the momentum and to overcome deadlocks on key details. Finally, in June 1979, Carter and Brezhnev met in Vienna to sign the SALT II treaty modeled on the Vladivostok accords. A complicated agreement, SALT II was to run for 5 years and imposed a

series of ceilings and subceilings on strategic weapons, including not only missiles but also manned bombers, to create a complex web of quantitative and qualitative constraints. Already a source of growing controversy in the United States, the SALT II treaty faced an uncertain fate in the Senate, where sentiment was almost evenly divided for and against.

Throughout the negotiation of the SALT II treaty, the JCS played a limited role in shaping U.S. policy. A common complaint among officers on the Joint Staff and from the JCS representative to SALT II, Lieutenant General Edward L. Rowny, USA, was that they were often excluded from high-level deliberations and denied access to sensitive exchanges of information between the delegations. While Rowny respected Carter's idealism and enthusiasm, he considered the President inexperienced, closed minded, and ill-served by advisors like Secretary of State Vance and Paul Warnke, the administration's chief arms control negotiator, who seemed to Rowny overly eager to cut a deal with the Soviets. Frustrated and disappointed, Rowny retired from the Army shortly after the Vienna summit to devote his energies to defeating the SALT II treaty in the Senate.[36]

Before stepping down, Rowny tried to persuade the JCS to come out in opposition to the treaty. Broadly speaking, the charges that he and others lodged against it were four-fold: 1) it did nothing to reduce the threat to U.S. land-based forces (missiles and bombers) and risked weakening deterrence by preserving the Soviet Union's overwhelming superiority in "heavy" ICBMs; 2) it failed to impose effective constraints on the Soviet Backfire bomber; 3) it mandated undue curbs on the U.S. cruise missile program; and 4) as a limited duration agreement, it would require immediate renegotiation. The net effect, opponents argued, was an unequal agreement slanted toward the Soviets. Some critics also argued that the treaty would be hard to verify, but most opponents dismissed verification concerns as inconsequential since there were so many concessions to the Soviets that it would be pointless for them to cheat.[37]

The Joint Chiefs agreed that the SALT II treaty was flawed. But they rejected Rowny's basic contention that the United States would be better off without the treaty than with it, and were prepared to accept it provided there were no further delays in deploying the MX and in completing the other remaining elements of the strategic modernization program. Thus, during the debate in Congress, the Joint Chiefs steered clear of evaluating the treaty's merits and concentrated on giving their assessment of its strategic implications. They adopted the position that SALT II was "a modest but useful contribution to our national interests" and could produce effective results only in conjunction with improvements in the overall U.S. defense posture. "Our priority must go to strategic nuclear force modernization," General

Jones told Congress, "but increases are needed across the board for nuclear and nonnuclear forces." A tepid endorsement, it still satisfied the White House and avoided the embarrassment the administration would have suffered had the JCS followed Rowny's advice and opposed the treaty.[38]

Just as support for ratification seemed to be building in the Senate, there came disclosures in August-September 1979 that U.S. intelligence had confirmed the existence of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba. At issue was whether the presence of these forces violated the precedents barring the reintroduction of Soviet military power set by the 1962 Kennedy-Khrushchev agreements ending the Cuban Missile Crisis. In fact, rumors and reports of Soviet military activity in Cuba circulated almost constantly and normally caused little stir. But with the SALT II debate ongoing, the Soviet brigade became a *cause célèbre* that played into the hands of the treaty's opponents, dimming its chances of approval. The fatal blow to SALT II's prospects was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, which Carter himself later admitted doomed any chance the administration might have had of gaining the two-thirds vote needed for approval.[39] To demonstrate U.S. displeasure with Soviet behavior, President Carter withdrew the treaty from Senate consideration and made no recommendation that it be rescheduled for a vote in the foreseeable future. But having come this far with the treaty, he refused to repudiate it outright and in May 1980 announced that the United States would abide by its terms as long as the Soviet Union did the same.[40]

To the Joint Chiefs, Carter's decision to withdraw the SALT II treaty while abiding by its terms seemed a reasonable if not altogether satisfying outcome. Even though the JCS disliked the treaty, they were more concerned by what could happen should there be no treaty at all, a situation that could arguably open the way to a further buildup of Soviet strategic forces and an expensive escalation of the arms race. Flawed as it might be, the JCS were prepared to accept SALT II and work within its terms until something better came along.

NATO AND THE INF CONTROVERSY

The same concerns that prompted uneasiness in the Senate over the SALT II treaty were also reshaping attitudes toward the security of Europe. While NATO leaders had initially welcomed the improved atmosphere of détente, many were increasingly apprehensive as the 1970s wore on lest Moscow exploit this situation to extend its power and influence, undermine support within the Alliance for strong defense policies, and ultimately drive NATO apart. By mid-decade, with the ongoing buildup of Warsaw Pact capabilities showing no evidence of abating, alarm

bells began sounding throughout NATO capitals. While the evidence was by no means conclusive, signs indicated that the Soviets were building up for a large-scale confrontation and posturing their forces for a Blitzkrieg-style attack against the West should war erupt. In assessing the probable outcome, Joint Staff and intelligence analysts in Washington reached the uncomfortable conclusion that the chance of stopping a Warsaw Pact attack with minimal loss of territory "appears remote at the present time."[41]

The most ominous development was the appearance of the SS–20, a land–based triple–warhead mobile missile that the Soviets began deploying in March 1976, apparently as a replacement for their aging SS–4s and SS–5s. Derived from an experimental ICBM (the SS–X–16), the SS–20 had a range of 5,000 kilometers and thus fell just outside the SALT I limits, making it an intermediate-range ballistic missile. Some observers described it as the "pocket battleship" of its time. Like the German and Japanese heavy cruisers built in the 1930s, it eluded arms control constraints but still had almost the same range and payload as a fully functional strategic weapon.[42] "Our new SS–20 missile," boasted one Soviet general, "was a breakthrough unlike anything the Americans had. We were immediately able to hold all of Europe hostage."[43] With the SS–20, the Soviets could target not only every major capital in Europe, but also much of North Africa and practically the entire the Middle East.

As President Carter took office, JCS and NATO planners were still in the preliminary stages of assessing the SS–20's military and strategic impact. Still unknown were how many launchers the Soviets might eventually deploy or how they intended to use them. Operating in this thin air of uncertainty, the new administration downplayed the need for an immediate response and decided to concentrate on improving NATO's conventional capabilities under a new initiative known as the Long-Term Defense Program (LTDP). Calling for a 3 percent real increase in NATO funding (at the same time the United States was preparing cuts in its overall defense budget), the LTDP stressed the increased prepositioning of U.S. supplies and equipment in Europe, better management of resources, and across-the-board upgrades in the Alliance's conventional forces. Even though previous administrations had espoused similar goals, the enthusiasm shown by Washington for the LTDP, coupled with President Carter's well-known antipathy for nuclear weapons, brought to the fore what many Europeans (the West Germans especially) had feared since the adoption of the flexible response strategy in the 1960s—that Washington would try to move NATO away from nuclear deterrence toward almost exclusive (and more costly) reliance on conventional forces.[44]

Shortly after taking office, with a view to allaying these concerns, the administration dispatched State-Defense briefing teams to update European leaders on the

status of U.S. nuclear planning and to reassure them that the United States remained committed to maintaining robust nuclear capabilities by developing the neutron bomb and ground- and sea-launched cruise missiles. Apparently, however, these briefing teams were exceedingly frank in discussing the technical difficulties associated with cruise missiles and conveyed the impression that these weapons would have a limited bearing on the strategic balance if and when they became operational.[45] Shortly thereafter, in June 1977, came the inadvertent and premature public disclosure of the neutron bomb—a tactical nuclear warhead capable of generating high levels of lethal radiation with a small explosion—that left the Carter administration mired in a public relations debacle that eventually sidelined the program. The net result was that many European leaders remained uneasy about American promises and wanted to see more in the way of concrete programs to strengthen their security, lest they take matters into their own hands.[46]

The catalyst for what became the most far-ranging reassessment of NATO's nuclear requirements since the 1950s was a speech by West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt before the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London in late October 1977. Based on the progress made thus far in SALT II, Schmidt was convinced that the United States and the Soviet Union were moving toward an agreement that would suit the superpowers but bargain away capabilities like cruise missiles that could be crucial to European security. Schmidt believed that once the Soviet SS–20 force became fully operational, Europe would be increasingly at the mercy of Soviet military and political pressure, no matter how strong its conventional forces might be, unless it had its own comparable, offsetting nuclear forces. Accordingly, in his speech to the IISS, he called for preserving "the full range of deterrence strategy," and implied that the United States was not doing enough either to curb the SS–20 threat through arms control or, failing that, to provide NATO with more credible theater nuclear forces.[47]

The White House's answer to Schmidt's challenge was to turn the question over to the High Level Group (HLG), a new advisory body to NATO's Nuclear Planning Group. Averse as ever to nuclear weapons, President Carter favored exercising restraint and looked to the HLG to explore policy options that would avoid or lessen the need for additional new deployments. While the President refused to countenance a one-for-one deployment with the Soviets, he knew he had to do something to show his support for NATO or risk irrevocably weakening Alliance solidarity. After much personal agonizing, he finally yielded and endorsed a compromise, formally adopted by NATO in December 1979, that called for the limited modernization of the Alliance's intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF). Simultaneously, NATO announced unilateral plans to reduce its nuclear arsenal by 1,000 warheads (weapons scheduled for decommissioning anyway) and extended an offer to scale back or cancel its INF modernization program if the Soviets would do likewise with their SS–20s.[48]

Slated to begin around the end of 1983, NATO's modernization measures consisted of deploying 572 mobile launchers, broken down into 464 U.S. ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) and 108 U.S. Pershing II (P–II) ballistic missiles to replace an identical number of obsolescent Pershing IAs based in West Germany. The decision to include ballistic missiles in the mix was largely at the instigation of the Joint Chiefs and aimed at placating the West Germans, who wanted the reassurance of an up-to-date, fast-reaction weapon. Though the U.S. programs were still in the developmental stage, each GLCM and P–II would have sufficient range to threaten targets along the western edge of the Soviet Union, a capability that land-based NATO forces had previously lacked. The cruise missiles would be dispersed around Western Europe, while the P–IIs would be based entirely in the Federal Republic. All would be subject to NATO authority under the operational command and control of the U.S. Army.

Though not as extensive as the Joint Chiefs had hoped, NATO's nuclear modernization program satisfied their basic requirements and seemed to point the Alliance in what the JCS considered the right direction. For Carter, however, it was a dreadful setback—the acceptance of more weapons he loathed and an acknowledgement that, at bottom, the security of the NATO area continued to rest directly on the threat to use them. Worse still, from Carter's standpoint, the pending deployment was a further tacit admission that détente in Europe was on the wane. Yet it was probably the only sound decision he could have made without risking a permanent rupture within the Alliance. Whether arms control negotiations would obviate the need for NATO to follow through on its INF deployment plans remained to be seen. But by the time the Carter administration left office, there were few signs that NATO and the Soviet Union would soon reach a deal, if ever. Not until the Reagan administration would talks begin in earnest.

THE ARC OF CRISIS

While they were instrumental in shaping the Carter administration's policy toward nuclear modernization in Europe, the Joint Chiefs were less successful in persuading the White House to adopt a tougher stand against Soviet encroachment on the Third World. In some ways, the chiefs had only themselves to blame. Insisting that they lacked sufficient resources, they had consistently downplayed U.S. military involvement in Third World conflicts in the aftermath of Vietnam and had instead urged the use of diplomacy and covert operations to block the Soviets from making further inroads. This remained the basic JCS position throughout the Carter administration and on into Ronald Reagan's Presidency. But as the 1970s drew to

a close, it was increasingly apparent to the Joint Chiefs that Third World problems were more intractable than they had assumed and that a larger military role for the United States was becoming unavoidable.

Though President Carter eventually came to a similar conclusion, he remained apprehensive about the application of military force to solve problems in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and believed the key to countering Communism in those parts of the world lay in promoting democratic values, economic improvements, and better living conditions. His preference, as always, was for diplomatic initiatives that would ease the threat of future conflicts and improve the North-South dialogue. Toward those ends, he managed to broker two significant breakthroughs: a new treaty with Panama, approved by the Senate in April 1978, ending both the American colonial presence and American control of the Panama Canal; and the Camp David peace accords reached later that year between Egypt and Israel. Cautiously optimistic about both, the Joint Chiefs welcomed the peace deal between Israel and Egypt in hopes that it would strengthen the U.S. strategic posture in the Middle East, but were decidedly cool toward giving up the Panama Canal, which they continued to regard as a vital American interest. Eventually, they gave the treaty a tepid endorsement.[49]

Meanwhile, avoiding U.S. involvement in Third World conflicts was proving increasingly difficult. At the outset of the Carter administration, perhaps the most volatile situation likely to engage the United States was the simmering dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia for control of the barren Ogaden plateau in the Horn of Africa. Overshadowing all was the apparent determination of Moscow to extend its influence throughout the region. Once strong allies of the Somalis, the Soviets had changed sides and thrown their support to the self-proclaimed Marxist regime in Ethiopia that had overthrown the decrepit monarchy of Haile Selassi in 1974. Toward the end of November 1977, on the heels of a series of secret aid agreements, the Soviets launched a massive airlift—larger than anything they had undertaken in Angola or elsewhere in Africa—to fortify Ethiopia with an estimated $1 billion in new arms and supplies and 17,000 elite Cuban combat troops. During the ensuing conflict, Ethiopia and its Soviet bloc allies easily overwhelmed the Somalis, setting off alarm bells in Washington that would reverberate for years to come.[50]

The leading advocate for a more forceful policy to counter Soviet encroachments in the Third World was the President's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski. During the deliberations surrounding the Ogaden crisis, it became clear that U.S. options were limited. About the most the United States could do to influence the situation directly was to deploy a naval task force off the coast of Somalia. Long before the crisis erupted, Brzezinski had foreseen an urgent need for a broader

range of capabilities and had persuaded President Carter, as part of the administration's review of basic policy in the summer of 1977, to include a requirement for a "force of light divisions with strategic mobility," backed by adequate air and naval support, that could respond quickly to emergencies. Out of the bureaucratic process thus set in motion eventually emerged the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force and its successor, the U.S. Central Command.[51]

Despite high-level endorsement, the creation of a rapid reaction force languished "on the back burner" for the next several years.[52] A reluctant supporter to begin with, President Carter gradually lost interest in the idea and seems to have forgotten it altogether once the Ogaden crisis eased early in 1978. Previous efforts to create such a force, starting in 1962 with the establishment of U.S. Strike Command (USSTRICOM) at McNamara's instigation, had little success owing to the initial reluctance of the Navy and Marine Corps to dedicate forces. During the Vietnam War, Strike Command's role further declined as available units for rapid reaction missions virtually disappeared. In 1971, acknowledging that USSTRICOM had outlived its usefulness, the Joint Chiefs replaced it with a new organization they called U.S. Readiness Command (USREDCOM). Based at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, USREDCOM operated without assigned geographical responsibilities and mainly performed training, doctrinal, and advisory functions connected with joint deployments.[53]

Meanwhile, the "arc of crisis," as Brzezinski called it, was moving steadily eastward from the Horn of Africa into the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and Southwest Asia. Across the Middle East and on into Central Asia, conflict and political turmoil were the order of the day. Although the origins of many of these problems had more to do with local feuds and rivalries than with the Cold War, the perception in Washington was that conditions were ripe for Soviet penetration. In light of the West's heavy dependence on Persian Gulf oil, the Carter administration had all the more reason to be alarmed.

The most dangerous threat to U.S. interests was the declining power and authority of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi of Iran, a longtime ally of the United States. Awash in oil revenues, the Shah aspired to modernize his country and turn it into a major partner of the West. Eager to cooperate, the Nixon administration had supplied Iran with an arsenal of sophisticated weapons and advanced technologies, including help for a nascent atomic energy program. The policy that emerged was to develop a "twin pillar" system of security relying on Iran and Saudi Arabia to police the region. Of the two, however, Iran was clearly the preferred partner. Henry Kissinger remembered the Shah as "an unconditional ally . . . whose understanding of the world situation enhanced our own."[54] The Joint Chiefs, after some initial

hesitation, became similarly impressed with the Shah's leadership. By the early 1970s they regarded Iran's role as an anti-Soviet bastion as practically indispensable. In an area where American friends were few and far between, the Joint Chiefs of Staff pointed out that Iran was "a stabilizing influence" and as "strong and trusted [an] ally" as the United States was likely to find.[55]

The Carter White House had a somewhat different image of Iran. Brzezinski dismissed the Shah as a megalomaniac whose overly ambitious policies sowed the seeds of his destruction. Although President Carter was more charitable, finding much about the Shah and his regime to admire, he also saw much that left him uneasy. A founding member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the international oil cartel, Iran had played a key part in setting the high energy prices that were a major contributing factor to the soaring inflation of the 1970s. At the same time, as a direct result of his efforts to liberalize Iranian society, the Shah had alienated a number of powerful interest groups, including conservative Muslim religious leaders. As opposition to his policies mounted, the Shah turned increasingly to his secret police (SAVAK) to quell the dissent, a practice replete with alleged human rights abuses that President Carter found especially repugnant. But despite challenges to the Shah's regime, intelligence estimates soft-peddled the severity of the disturbances and in so doing contributed to a false sense among the Joint Chiefs and others in Washington that Iran was a safe and stable ally.[56]

The collapse of the Shah's power was as sudden as it was unexpected. In late November 1978, with unrest, strikes, and antigovernment demonstrations escalating, it became clear that the level and intensity of the demonstrations were sufficiently serious to threaten the survival of the monarchy itself. Amid the turmoil, the Joint Chiefs endorsed precautionary measures that included the evacuation of American citizens from Iran and stepped-up naval deployments in the Indian Ocean.[57] As the crisis deepened, talk turned to the possibility of a military solution, a discussion cut short by the realization that about anything the United States did would be too little too late.[58] The dénouement began on December 27, 1978, which one press account described as "a day of wild lawlessness and shooting in the capital and a strike that effectively shut down the oil industry."[59] By then, many middle-class Iranian moderates had joined the religious radicals in calling for the Shah to step down. Hoping that the Iranian generals might intervene and restore order, Brzezinski persuaded President Carter to send General Robert E. Huyser, USAF, the Deputy Commander of U.S. forces in Europe, to Tehran on a fact-finding mission. What Huyser found was an Iranian military in utter disarray, thoroughly demoralized and too poorly organized to make a difference. In mid-January 1979, the Shah fled the country, leaving it in the hands of a weak civilian government with little experience

and even less popular support. For all practical purposes, the real head of state in Iran was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a charismatic cleric recently returned from exile in France who was determined to rub out Western influence and establish a way of life based on fundamentalist Muslim principles. As bad as the Shah's downfall may have seemed for U.S. interests in the region, worse things were yet to come.

RISE OF THE SANDINISTAS

Half a world away in the Central American country of Nicaragua, a similar drama was playing out, though on a far smaller scale than the crisis in Iran. Relatively stable and prosperous by Latin American standards, Nicaragua was the virtual fiefdom of a right-wing dictator, Anastasio Somoza, whose family had ruled the country with the help of the U.S.-trained and equipped *Guardia Nacional* since the 1930s. Vehemently anticommunist, the Somoza regime had earned a reputation in U.S. military circles as being a strong and dependable ally against the threat of Cuban-instigated Communist expansion. But by the mid-1970s, Somoza's support both at home and in Washington was beginning to erode. Though known more for political corruption than brutality, Somoza had come under fire from the Carter administration for alleged human rights abuses and soon became the target of U.S. sanctions that included a cut-off of military aid. Starting with the Panama Canal treaty, President Carter hoped to change the U.S. image in Latin America. Withdrawing support for Somoza was part of that process.[60]

In September 1978, with opposition mounting and his back against the wall, Somoza authorized the National Guard to launch an all-out offensive against the most immediate threat to his regime—a leftist insurgency led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Even though the Guard dealt the rebels a severe military setback, it also destroyed many towns and villages and inflicted heavy civilian casualties. Significant segments of the population became alienated and went over to the FSLN. While the Carter administration had no use for Somoza, it was also leery of the FSLN, whose Marxist rhetoric and Cuban connections seemed certain to place it on a collision course with the United States should it ever come to power. Seeking middle ground, President Carter approved a diplomatic initiative early in 1979 aimed at persuading Somoza to step aside voluntarily to make way for a more representative regime. Negotiations broke down, however, and by late May Somoza's forces and the Sandinistas were again engaged in pitched battle.

As with the Shah of Iran, the consensus in Washington was that Somoza would survive the Sandinista challenge. By early June, however, it was clear that U.S. intelligence had misjudged the situation and that the Sandinistas were gaining the upper

hand, in part as a result of weapons covertly supplied by Cuba. Operating without fresh supplies, the National Guard steadily disintegrated, paving the way for a Sandinista victory. When at last on July 17, 1979, Somoza finally stepped down and fled to Miami, he left a country in physical ruin and political disarray. In the view of the Joint Chiefs, Nicaragua was now a ripe target for Communist penetration and a potential launch pad for Cuban adventurism elsewhere in Central America.

During its remaining time in office, the Carter administration wrestled with limiting the consequences of the Sandinista victory. The stated goals in Central America were "the development of democratic societies, the observance of human rights, the ending or diminution of violence and terrorism, and the denial of the region to forces hostile to the U.S."[61] Persuaded that the United States had overreacted to Castro's takeover of Cuba in 1959, many on the NSC Staff and at the State Department believed that the United States should work with the Sandinistas to establish good relations, promote political pluralism in Nicaragua, and steer the country away from becoming "another Cuba." The Joint Chiefs were skeptical of this approach, but among the President's senior advisors, only Brzezinski seemed to share their concerns. Meanwhile, the security situation in Central America continued to deteriorate as intelligence reports confirmed an influx of Cuban-supplied Eastern Bloc arms. But in trying to persuade the White House or the State Department to act, the JCS found little interest in anything that smacked of a military solution. In consequence, development of a comprehensive policy toward Central American became practically impossible, leaving decisions to emerge in a fragmented, reactive manner.[62]

Toward the end of his Presidency, Carter evinced signs of having second thoughts about trying to work with the Sandinistas. Slowly but surely he began to adopt a position more akin to that advocated by the Joint Chiefs and Brzezinski. Hoping to get a better picture of the situation, he authorized the National Security Agency to step up its monitoring of developments in Nicaragua and to expand its coverage of Sandinista communications.[63] Even so, Carter continued to view military action as a last resort and refused to abandon his belief that a political settlement, acceptable to all involved, was ultimately feasible. But in Central America, as elsewhere, his faith in détente and nonviolent solutions had been badly shaken and, as he left the White House, it was with a clear awareness that the next administration would be less reticent and adopt a more forceful course of action to prevent the spread of Sandinista and Cuban influence.

CREATION OF THE RAPID DEPLOYMENT FORCE

The fall of the Shah and the ensuing collapse of the Somoza regime had distinctly unsettling effects on JCS thinking. Alarmed by the sudden escalation of threats to

U.S. interests, the Joint Chiefs acknowledged a pressing requirement for a more responsive force posture capable of interjecting a measure of stability into troubled parts of the world. Although the JCS had been moving steadily in that direction ever since Brzezinski raised the issue in the summer of 1977, it was not until 2 years later that they felt their studies had progressed far enough to begin seriously discussing a mission statement, the assignment of forces, and command arrangements. Assuming that the focus of such a force would be the Middle East, JCS planners generally agreed that the most practical solution would be a joint task force or perhaps a new joint command and that either way, because it was almost certain to have a high political profile, it would be "*the* force except Europe and Korea."[64]

The central figure throughout the subsequent planning and preparations culminating in activation of the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) was Secretary of Defense Harold Brown. Having previously served as Secretary of the Air Force and in other high-level Pentagon positions, Brown was well aware of the potential for inter-Service competition and rivalry that new programs presented. He repeatedly cautioned the Joint Chiefs and Service planners against using the RDF as leverage for more money or resources. What Brown and the President envisioned was a rather small fast-reaction force drawn mainly from available assets. Nonetheless, the opportunities were too inviting for the Services to ignore. Competition became especially acute between the Army and the Marine Corps as each jostled for a larger role on the assumption that the new organization would be first and foremost a ground-based intervention force, with supplemental air and naval support. Advised by Brzezinski that the President was growing impatient, Brown nudged the Services along as best he could and achieved a tentative agreement breaking the impasse by November 1979.[65]

Meanwhile, the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, and the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan the following month sent a shudder through Washington resulting in a wholesale reassessment of U.S. defense and security requirements for the Middle East and Southwest Asia. Both events produced an escalation of tensions and posed serious challenges to the protection of U.S. interests. Of the two, it was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on December 24–25, 1979, that most alarmed the Joint Chiefs and their superiors. Aimed at assuring a pro-Moscow regime in Kabul, the Soviet invasion drew sharp and swift international condemnation. Remote as Afghanistan seemed, Carter and his advisors saw its fate tied directly to that of the United States. "A Soviet-occupied Afghanistan," the President told the country, "threatens both Iran and Pakistan and is a steppingstone to possible control over much of the world's oil supplies."[66] To be sure, many of the responses that followed had been set in motion earlier. But with Afghanistan providing the catalyst, they came to fruition sooner rather than later

and helped expedite the transformation of the RDF from a drawing board concept into a functioning organization.

At the heart of this transformation was the Carter Doctrine, announced in the President's State of the Union Message on January 23, 1980. In effect, Carter confirmed publicly what he and his subordinates had been saying privately to one another and in off-the-record talks with reporters for some time—that Washington had major interests at stake in the Persian Gulf and that the necessary response was a military buildup. Under that policy, President Carter served notice that the United States would not allow the Gulf to fall into hostile hands, that it would pursue a "cooperative security framework" in the area, and that it would back up those initiatives with requisite military force.[67] As evidence of his resolve, the President pointed to the pending creation of the Rapid Deployment Force, which he said would "range in size from a few ships or air squadrons to formations as large as 100,000 men." Among the specific initiatives being taken to support the RDF, the President mentioned the development and production of a new fleet of large cargo aircraft with intercontinental range and the design and procurement of a force of pre-positioned ships to carry heavy equipment and supplies for three Marine brigades.[68]

Announcement of the Carter Doctrine caught the Joint Chiefs largely off guard. Learning of the decision only a few days before the President's speech, they saw the administration acting hastily and without adequate preparations. Nonetheless, from that point on, JCS planning accelerated quickly, culminating in the activation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) on March 1, 1980. Headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, RDJTF was technically a subordinate element of USREDCOM. But because of its prominent political profile, RDJTF reported directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. At Secretary of Defense Brown's request, it also maintained a liaison staff at the Pentagon for politico-military interface with the Joint Staff, OSD, and other agencies.[69] The first commander of RDJTF, Lieutenant General P.X. Kelley, USMC, publicly described the new organization as "an exceptionally flexible force" that would eventually pull together "the capabilities of all four services into one harmonized fighting machine with a permanent command and control headquarters."[70] For the time being, however, RDJTF had no assigned forces and functioned mainly as a headquarters, planning, and advisory organization, much like USREDCOM. For the next several years, RDJTF's primary functions were to organize and supervise exercises acquainting U.S. forces with the peculiarities of operating in the Middle East, and to make plans and preparations for eventually establishing a permanent forward headquarters there.

With the creation of the RDJTF, the Joint Chiefs expected the United States to emerge as the predominant outside power in the Middle East. In years past it had been

the British and, to a lesser extent, the French who had carried out that function. Now it was the turn of the United States. Looking ahead, the chiefs could not help but be uneasy. Apart from the political complications involved (most notably the American relationship with Israel), they saw Washington moving into unfamiliar territory where a continuous U.S. military presence could become unavoidable and require a far larger allocation of resources than the current administration was willing to make. The Carter administration had hoped to avoid such commitments. But as it departed in 1981, it passed along a growing list of obligations that left the United States more deeply embroiled in the Middle East and Southwest Asia than ever before.

THE IRAN HOSTAGE RESCUE MISSION

The creation of the RDJTF was a major step toward coping with the volatility that increasingly plagued the Middle East and Southwest Asia in the late 1970s. By the same token, it signaled a partial revival and resurgence of JCS influence within the policy process in Washington. While the chiefs' role had been growing steadily following the Shah's downfall and the ensuing acceleration of contingency planning for Southwest Asia, it came even more to the fore during the subsequent seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran and efforts by the U.S. military in the spring of 1980 to liberate those held hostage. Even though the mission ended in failure, it confirmed that the United States was far from averse to the use of force and that in keeping with the decisions that had given rise to the RDJTF, it would not hesitate to intervene militarily if its interests became threatened.

The event precipitating the hostage crisis was President Carter's decision in late October 1979 to allow the Shah, then in exile in Mexico, to enter the United States for emergency medical treatment. Outraged by what they considered continuing U.S. support of the Pahlavi regime, a mob of Iranian militants stormed the American Embassy in Tehran on November 4 and seized between fifty and sixty Foreign Service officers and Marine guards. Two days later, with the militants still controlling the Embassy and showing no sign of leaving, President Carter authorized Brzezinski to begin exploring options other than diplomacy for securing the hostages' release. One possibility mentioned by General Jones was a rescue effort using helicopters launched from aircraft carriers in or near the Persian Gulf. Yet even though a rescue attempt appeared feasible in theory, the consensus among the Joint Chiefs was that because of the uncertainties involved it stood a "very high risk of failure" and did not appear viable. Brzezinski disagreed and with President Carter's concurrence he ordered the JCS to proceed immediately with preparation of a contingency plan along the lines the CJCS had proposed.[71]

By November 12, 1979, the JCS had established the nucleus of a joint task force within the Joint Staff (J-3) under the command of Major General James E. Vaught, USA, with advisory support from Major General Philip C. Gast, USAF, the former chief of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group in Iran. From that point on, Joint Staff planners ceased to be regularly involved in the rescue. To preserve secrecy, Vaught and his staff worked in isolation and reported directly to the Joint Chiefs through the Chairman. A high-level ad hoc committee chaired by Brzezinski provided overall coordination and interagency liaison from the White House. According to General Jones's retrospective account, he and his JCS colleagues "went through many, many different options." He recalled that, "In the initial stages, we did not see any option that had a reasonable chance of success."[72] But by late November 1979, he and Vaught agreed that the use of helicopters offered the most practical and effective means of conducting the rescue. From this decision evolved plans for Operation *Eagle Claw*. While Jones later denied any explicit deal-cutting to give each Service a share of the action, his assistant, Lieutenant General John S. Pustay, USAF, remembered things differently. According to Pustay, there was a feeling "that it would be nice if everyone had a piece of the pie." Pustay hastened to add, however, that in his view the multi-Service nature of the operation was dictated by its complex requirements and in no way interfered with its execution.[73]

Even though planning was continuous and intense from mid-November 1979 on, it was not until early March 1980 that Jones recalled feeling "a growing confidence" that the rescue mission was coming together in terms of a feasible plan, trained personnel, suitable equipment, and reliable intelligence.[74] To get the hostages out, the Joint Chiefs proposed launching helicopters from carriers in the Arabian Sea, which would then rendezvous with a Delta Force assault team at a remote location in Iran (code-named *Desert One*) and proceed to Tehran. There, they would liberate the hostages, secure the airport, and fly out. A complicated and risky plan, it rested heavily on exploiting the element of surprise and achieving effective inter-Service cooperation and coordination every step of the way.[75]

Whether President Carter would sanction such a hazardous and complex operation remained to be seen. Toward the end of an all-day meeting at Camp David on March 22, Jones presented what Brzezinski described as the "first comprehensive and full briefing on the rescue mission" the President had yet received. Disappointed over the latest failure of diplomacy to free the hostages, Carter was more ready than ever to contemplate military action. But he thought the plan that Jones presented "still needed more work." To help determine its feasibility, he authorized a reconnoitering mission deep inside Iranian territory, the first step toward establishing the *Desert One* base camp for the planned operation.[76]

With JCS preparations nearing the "go-or-no-go" point of the mission, pressure was growing for President Carter to make a decision. While he continued to favor a diplomatic settlement, he thought time was running out and concluded that forceful action was now his most viable—perhaps only option. Accordingly, on April 11, he assembled the National Security Council for a final look at the rescue plan. The meeting lasted nearly 2 hours. Using a pointer and visual aids to illustrate the logistics involved, General Jones insisted that the rescue option had been well rehearsed and was on schedule to commence in late April. Armed with a list of prepared questions, the President found Jones's answers to be much more satisfactory than at previous meetings. The only dissenting view came from Deputy Secretary of State Warren M. Christopher, sitting in for Cyrus Vance, who was on vacation in Florida. Christopher had attended earlier NSC meetings on the rescue mission but had taken no active part in the discussion. Opposed to military interventions in general, he urged caution and thought there were still important diplomatic and economic avenues to be explored. Carter, however, said he had already discussed the matter privately with First Lady Rosalynn, Presidential advisor Hamilton Jordan, Vice President Walter Mondale, Secretary of State Vance, and Jody Powell, the White House Press Secretary, and made up his mind. Shutting off further debate, he announced: "We ought to go ahead without delay."[77]

Despite over 5 months of intensive training and preparation, *Eagle Claw* remained a perilous undertaking in which much could—and did—go wrong. Launched on April 24, 1980, the operation experienced equipment breakdowns almost from the beginning. By the time of the rendezvous at *Desert One*, there were too few helicopters still operational to complete the mission. While preparing to turn around and go home, one of the helicopters collided with a C–130 transport, causing both aircraft to explode. Eight U.S. Servicemen and an Iranian translator died. The ignominious withdrawal that followed (leaving behind most of the dead) effectively doomed President Carter's hopes of ending the hostage standoff and represented a humiliating blow to the power and prestige of the United States.

In the aftermath of the *Desert One* disaster, the Joint Chiefs sought to piece together what happened and why and to learn how similar failures might be avoided in the future. By far the most detailed and thorough examination of the hostage rescue mission was that undertaken at the Chiefs' request by the Special Operations Review Group (SORG), chaired by retired Admiral James L. Holloway III, a former Chief of Naval Operations. The review group drew two general conclusions—that there had been undue emphasis on untested ad hoc arrangements throughout the operation, and that an overriding concern for operational secrecy (e.g., the exclusion of the National Security Agency) had crippled the planning process. Anticipating future

missions of the kind, the SORG recommended, and the Joint Chiefs concurred, that there should be a permanent Counterterrorist Joint Task Force (CTJTF), with assigned staff and forces, backed by a special operations advisory panel comprised of high-ranking officers with backgrounds in special operations and joint planning.[78]

While the Joint Chiefs sought to draw constructive lessons, critics leapt on the failure of the hostage rescue mission as further evidence, along with Vietnam and the Mayaguez affair, that the JCS had become an ineffectual organization in urgent need of institutional reform. Many of the legislative changes later incorporated into the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act drew their immediate inspiration and impetus from the *Desert One* disaster. To be sure, *Eagle Claw* was a flawed operation. Yet its failure stemmed not from any one cause but from a variety of factors. As much as anything, it revealed the Joint Chiefs' lack of familiarity with the Middle East and the unforeseen difficulties of projecting military power into that part of the world. With tactics, weapons, and training oriented since the onset of the Cold War toward conflicts in Europe or East Asia, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were largely unacquainted with the unique problems of the Middle East and lacked a well-established infrastructure there to support military operations. The creation of the Rapid Deployment Force was supposed to help overcome these problems. But until it became a tested, working reality, the JCS had no choice but to rely on makeshift arrangements and learn as they went along.

The hostage crisis was a desperate, almost unprecedented situation, and it seemed to cry out for desperate, unprecedented measures. Carter knew that the rescue mission was a long shot and never blamed anyone other than himself for its failure. Still, like John F. Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs, he was clearly disappointed with the performance of his military advisors. Never strong to begin with, Carter's confidence in the Joint Chiefs sank even further in the aftermath of *Desert One*. By all accounts, the JCS had done the best they could, but with resources stretched thin in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, their ability to respond effectively in emergencies was severely constrained. In *Desert One* as elsewhere, the effects of the "hollow force" were all too apparent. Carter may have felt that if given a second term, he could have turned the situation around. However, he never had that opportunity. As it happened, that task fell instead to a new administration, operating from a different worldview and a different set of assumptions about national security.

NOTES

1 See Gordon S. Barrass, *The Great Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 190–191.

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Diplomacy in the Carter Years (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986); and Burton I. Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).

3 "Inaugural Address of President Jimmy Carter," January 20, 1977, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1977), 3.

4 Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982), 222.

5 Erik B. Riker-Coleman, "Political Pressures on the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Case of General David C. Jones" (Paper presented before the Society of Military History Annual Meeting, Calgary, Alberta, May 2001), 3–5 and passim, available at <www.unc.edu/~chaos1/jones.pdf> (accessed July 18, 2011).

6 Quotations from Gen David C. Jones, USAF (Ret.), former CJCS, interviewed by Steven L. Rearden and Walter S. Poole, February 4, 1998, Arlington, VA, transcript, JHO. See also Mark Perry, *Four Stars* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1989), 268–269.

7 Bernard Weinraub, "Joint Chiefs Losing Sway Under Carter," *The New York Times*, July 6, 1978: A11.

8 Walter S. Poole, *The Evolution of the Joint Strategic Planning System, 1947–1989* (Washington, DC: Historical Division, Joint Secretariat, Joint Staff, September 1989), 15–18; letters, Lt Gen Richard L. Lawson, J-5, to Brzezinski and Aaron, January 14, 1980, U; Memo, Shoemaker, Utgoff, and Welch to Brzezinski, February 21, 1980, U; and Draft Memo to Dir, OMB, U, all in National Security Adviser Collection, Agency File, box 10, JCS 1/79-2/80 folder, Carter Library.

9 Memo, Carter to Brown, September 20, 1977, "Defense Reorganization," U, JCS 1977/392; OASD(PA) news release no. 529–77, November 17, 1977, cited in JCS 1977/409-5.

10 "Report to the Secretary of Defense on the National Military Command Structure (The Steadman Report)," July 1978, in U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, *Hearings: Reorganization Proposals for the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 97:2 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1982), 912–924.

11 Transcript of News Conference by Gen David C. Jones, CJCS, July 25, 1978, 2–3, National Security Adviser Collection, Agency File, box 10, JCS 3/77-12/78 folder, Carter Library.

12 CM-79-78 to SECDEF, September 1, 1978, "NMC Structure and Departmental Headquarters Studies," U, JCS 1977/409–5.

13 JCSM-290-78 to SECDEF, September 1, 1978, "Comments on NMC Structure and Departmental Headquarters Studies," U, Enclosure A JCS 1977/409-5.

14 "President's News Conference, June 30, 1977," *Carter Public Papers, 1977*, 1197–1200.

15 Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 80–83; Harold Brown, *Thinking About National Security* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983), 72–74.

16 Jones Interview, February 4, 1998.

17 See Larry A. Niksch, "U.S. Troop Withdrawal from South Korea: Past Shortcomings and Future Prospects," *Asian Survey* 21 (March 1981), 326–328; and Don Oberdorfer, "Carter's Decision on Korea Traced to Early 1975," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 1977: A15.

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Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 127–128, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 127, both mention human rights abuses as a factor shaping the administration's attitude toward South Korea.

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20 Diary entry, June 4, 1979, in Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 241.

21 Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1994, rev. ed.), 868; and David M. Walsh, *The Military Balance in the Cold War: U.S. Perceptions and Policy, 1976–85* (London: Routledge, 2008), 26.

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23 Brown, *Thinking About National Security*, 81.

24 Jones Interview with author, February 4, 1998.

25 Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 458–459.

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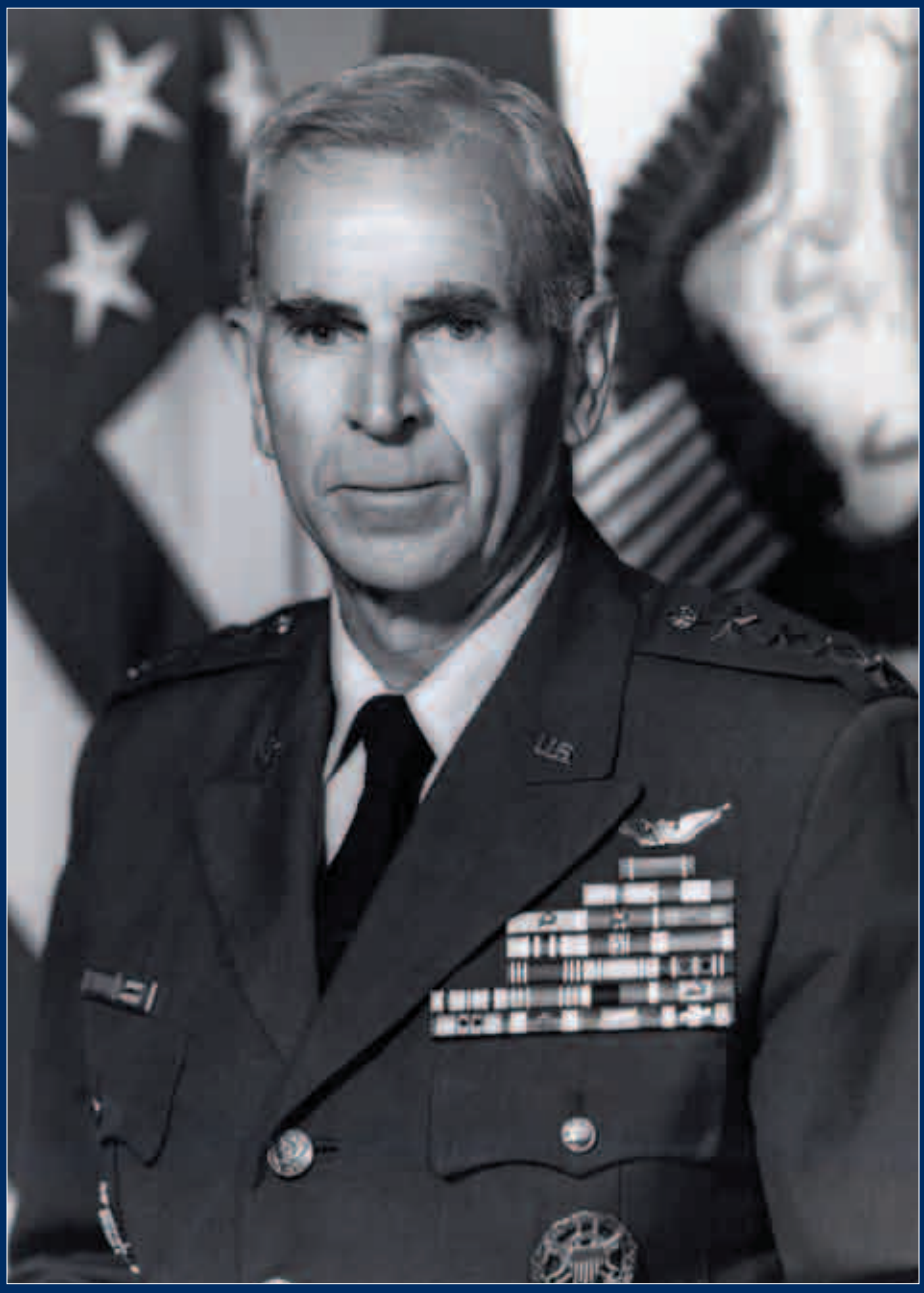

General John W. Vessey, Jr., Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1982–1985