

Andrew Scott Cooper

Historian

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BIO

Andrew Scott Cooper, Ph.D, is a historian, analyst and the author of two books on the history of the modern Middle East. His first book, *The Oil Kings: How the US, Iran and Saudi Arabia Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East* (2011), provided readers with a richly detailed account of America's relations with oil producers Iran and Saudi Arabia during the 1970s energy crisis. His second book, *The Fall of Heaven: The Pahlavis and the Final Days of Imperial Iran* (2016), explored the rise and downfall of the Shah of Iran from the perspectives of family members, courtiers, revolutionaries and diplomats. Both books were republished in paperback, translated into Farsi, Arabic and Mandarin, and optioned by entertainment production companies.

Born and raised in Wellington, New Zealand, Dr. Cooper moved to the United States in the 1990s where he began his career as a researcher and writer working on the issue of landmines and unexploded ordnance at the United Nations and Human Rights Watch, a founding member of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the grass-roots organization awarded the 1997 Nobel Prize for Peace. Cooper returned to New York in the early 2000s where he began the part-time research project on pre-revolutionary Iran that eventually morphed into two history books, a doctorate in the history of US-Iran relations, and two years at Columbia University as an adjunct assistant professor. In 2017, he moved to Brussels to start a research and writing consultancy and continue his history research.

Cooper has been interviewed many times and spoken before audiences at a variety of institutions including the Nixon and Ford presidential libraries, the New York Council on Foreign Relations, US Central Command, Third Army, at Fort Shaw Air Force Base, and Al Mustafa University in Qom, Iran. His articles, essays and research have appeared in publications including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, *The Guardian* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

Cooper holds a Ph.D in the history of US-Iran relations (Victoria University, 2012), a masters degree in journalism (Columbia University, 1994), and a masters degree in strategic studies (University of Aberdeen, 2008). He completed a short-term sabbatical at the University of Al-Mustafa in Qom, Iran, in 2013.



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LIVING HISTORY

On a rainy, overcast day in June 2009 I was given a master class in history from someone who had lived it. James Schlesinger's rumpled suits and shock of white hair made him an instantly recognizable figure to television audiences during the Cold War. First as America's Director of Central Intelligence, then as Secretary of Defense and Secretary of Energy, Schlesinger helped steer three presidents through the challenges of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Watergate, collapse in Southeast Asia and two oil shocks. Even after he left government to work in the private sector, Schlesinger remained on call as one of Washington's last "wise men."

On the day I arrived Schlesinger was wrapping up work on a review of nuclear safety protocols. He was in an expansive mood. President Barack Obama, nearing the end of his first six months in office, had just delivered a major foreign policy address in Cairo endorsing democratic reforms in the Arab world and calling for a "new beginning" between Americans and Muslims. The speech was interpreted by most observers as an implicit rebuke of his host, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, an unabashed authoritarian. The President's description of himself as a "student of history" had not impressed Schlesinger, who wearied of politicians citing history to justify controversial policies and decisions. "I've been around a long time," he sighed, "and the one thing I know for sure is that at some point everyone who reaches the highest office in the land starts to believe they're infallible." He listed the names of American presidents and British prime ministers he had worked with in the past. "It's inevitable. And it's unfortunate."

After letting that sink in, Henry Kissinger's old sparring partner briskly moved on to the subject I had traveled thousands of miles to discuss and he couldn't wait to tackle: the Shah of Iran.

Ours was a most unlikely pairing. Three years earlier, to break the tedium of an office job in New York, I had started a research project that quickly took over my weekends, evenings and vacation time. It was the spring of 2006, a time when oil prices were at record high levels. Thinking back to the twin oil shocks of the 1970s, I wondered when fuel costs would start to affect political stability. I decided to use Iran, a major oil producer, as a historical case study. Until now, no one had explained the correlation between high oil profits and the Islamic revolution. Why did the Shah lose control at precisely the moment his economy was reaping billions in oil revenues? Why hadn't those same billions inoculated his regime from social unrest? It looked like a historical paradox in search of an answer.

Within a year I had acquired a trove of declassified US government documents dating back to the Nixon and Ford administrations. The story they told was very different to anything I had seen written before. According to transcripts of conversations between senior US officials, in late 1976 President Gerald Ford had agreed to a secret pact with Saudi Arabia to intervene in the oil markets. He was worried that if the Shah's next price increase took effect it would trigger a global financial crisis and bring down the banks. The Saudi maneuver worked: the flood held prices in line. But short-term success exacted a high price in the long-term when Iran's economy, deprived of an expected infusion of new oil revenues, went off a cliff. The evidence was damning: the US-Saudi oil coup had destabilized Iran's economy and played a role in stirring the unrest that led to revolution.

My findings, published in the October 2008 issue of *The Middle East Journal*, and also in *The Los Angeles Times*, led to a book contract. I requested interviews from the former officials whose names appeared

in the documents. Only Jim Schlesinger agreed to see me right away. The documents revealed that he had harbored serious doubts about the wisdom of US policy toward Iran. Indeed, three years before the revolution, in September 1975 Schlesinger had personally urged President Ford to review the bilateral relationship. The Shah's regime, he warned, was not as strong as it appeared and Iran's prospects were at best uncertain. I wanted to know how and why Schlesinger's training and experience had led him to break with the prevailing view in Washington that the Shah was omnipotent. Why had he been the only senior official to walk into the President's office and give voice to his concerns? Moreover, why did he think those same concerns had been ignored?

Schlesinger became visibly animated. Clearly, this was a conversation he had looked forward to for quite some time. "If you want to understand why I did what I did, there is a book you should read," he said. "It's called *Lessons of the Past* by Ernest May."

Schlesinger and May had known each other at Harvard where the historian was a professor. *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* was published in 1973. That was also the year when Schlesinger grappled with Watergate, the Arab-Israeli War, the Arab oil embargo and the oil shock. In his slim black book, May explained that US government officials with no training in history were too often quick to cite historical analogies to justify decisions that usually ended in blowback. "Potentially," he reminded them, "history is an enormously rich resource for people who govern." Be imaginative, he urged his readers, be more discriminating. Avoid the history trap—avoid future Vietnams. *Lessons of the Past* confirmed Jim Schlesinger's suspicions that trouble might be brewing in Iran. It gave him the confidence to walk into the Oval Office in 1975 and recommend to President Ford a change of course.

The smartest three hours of my life were spent in Jim Schlesinger's company. Afterwards, watching him walk back to his office, I felt as though I had found my north star, my mission. History, he wanted me to know, had a practical purpose and if used in the right way could be harnessed for the public good. His assistant walked me to the elevator. "I don't know *what* you two were talking about in there," she said quietly, "but I have never known him to sit for that long with *anyone*." "History," I answered, still dazed. "We were talking about history."

Schlesinger's decision to meet with me opened doors that would have otherwise remained closed. Former officials who never responded to my requests now felt compelled to share their insights. The following spring, I found myself perched on a sofa in the office of Brent Scowcroft, who as Kissinger's deputy and then as National Security Adviser had participated in many of the events that formed the basis of my book. In our conversation he confirmed that in 1976 US officials had indeed underestimated the potential for damage to Iran's economy when they approved their intervention in the oil markets. It was a sobering moment.

Three years passed. By then *The Oil Kings* had been reprinted in paperback, Jim Schlesinger had died, and I was hard at work on the sequel volume. I was teaching a course in the history of US-Iran relations at Columbia University when I received an invitation to visit the Pentagon. When I arrived, my host explained that my book was making the rounds. He handed me his copy. "This is how much your book means to me," he said. Opening it, I saw that most of the dog-eared pages had been scribbled on, highlighted and littered with sticky notes. It was obvious that his was a *working* book. He explained that recently he had hosted a joint-agency exercise to help officials in government, intelligence and the military better understand how misperceptions between foreign leaders could inadvertently lead to war. The only preparation expected beforehand, participants were told, was that they read *The Oil Kings*. "You are the only person writing books like this," he implored me. "Please don't stop. Your work is important."

For a young historian, my host's encouragement and Schlesinger's example remain powerful motiva-

tions to keep going at a time when many public figures are using history to justify ideas and policies that only a few year earlier would have been dismissed as extreme or dangerous. Universities are slashing funding for the social sciences, claiming that liberal arts degree produce low-wage earners. There are those who say that history as a profession is dying or even dead.

None of this is new. “Is History Dead?” asked *Commentary* magazine in 1970. “Is History Dead?” asked the editors of *American Heritage* in 1976. Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History” essay in *The National Interest* was published in 1989. “Is History Dead?” enquired *Salon* in 1998. If anything, the repetitive nature of these headlines suggests an obsession on the part of non-historians with a force of nature they never appreciated let alone understood.

History can’t “die” and it is not going anywhere: it ends with us.

NONFICTION FAVORITES

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