

*Rethinking the American Era:
A Historical Perspective of Iranian Islamic
Revolution and the U.S. Intelligence
Community (IC)*

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DOĞAN, Taylan, Rethinking the American Era: A Historical Perspective of Iranian Islamic Revolution and the U.S. Intelligence Community(IC). CTAD, Year 8, Issue 15 (Spring 2012), 19-30.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 that occurred as a result of Ayatollah Rouhoullah Khomeini leading the overthrow of Shah's regime is an Islamic revolution. The revolution was viewed partially as a way for Iranian conservatives to counter the Pahlavi who was so attached to the West, especially the United States. Before the Revolution, all foreign intelligence services believed that the Shah was strong and decisive and would not shy away from what he needed to do. The role of nationalism and its twin in Iranian domestic politics, anti-Americanism, was missed and misunderstood by the CIA station in Tehran. The CIA could not foresee the Revolution because they had no connection with the streets, bazaars, and mosques. After taking the oath of office as president, Ronald Reagan ordered a covert action directed by National Security Council (NSC) to support Iranian paramilitary and political exile groups. This study aims to develop our understanding of how a country's foreign policy and its decisionmakers was affected by an intelligence agency.

Keywords: Iranian Islamic Revolution, U.S. Foreign Policy, CIA, Intelligence Community, Covert Action.

DOĞAN, Taylan, İran İslam Devrimi ve Amerikan İstihbarat Topluluğu'nun Faaliyetleri. CTAD, Yıl 8, Sayı 15 (Bahar 2012), 19-30.

Ayetullah Humeyni'nin, İran Şahı Rıza Pehlevi'yi 1979 yılında devirmesi ile gerçekleşen İran Devrimi, İslami özellikler taşıyan bir devrimdir. İran İslam Devrimi, özellikle ABD olmak üzere, Batılı güçler ile yakın ilişkileri olan Şah'a karşı, İslami

özellikleri ağır basan İran muhafazakârlarının bir tepkisi olarak görülmüştür. Devrimden önce bütün yabancı istihbarat birimleri, İran Şahını güçlü, kararlı ve yapması gerekeni yapmaktan çekinmeyen bir lider olarak değerlendirmişlerdir. Ancak, İran iç politikasında birbiriyle neredeyse aynı anlama gelen ulusalcılık ve Amerikan karşıtlığı hesaba katılmamış ve/veya yanlış anlaşılmıştır. Sonuçta, CIA İran İstasyon Şefliği, İran halkının nabzını tutmakta yetersiz kalmış ve devrim önceden tahmin edilememiştir. Devrimden hemen sonra göreve gelen ABD Başkanı Ronald Reagan, devrim karşıtı paramiliter ve siyasi grupları destekleyebilmek adına örtülü bir operasyon yapılması için Ulusal Güvenlik Konseyi'ne talimat vermiştir. Bu çalışma, bir ülkenin dış politikasının, o ülkenin istihbarat kurumunca nasıl etkilendiğini ve bu durumun olumsuz sonuçlarını ortaya koymayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İran İslam Devrimi, ABD Dış Politikası, CIA, İstihbarat Topluluğu, Örtülü Operasyon.

Introduction

During the 20th century, two revolutions and several political movements have taken place in the Farişî land to eradicate despotism and establish rule of law and democracy. The first revolution started with the “Constitutional Revolution” in 1906 and continued with the arising of Tudeh Party (National Front) and the eventual taking over of the democratic government of Dr. Mossadeq on August 19, 1953. The activities of different political groups with distinct attitudes such as the Second National Front, Freedom Movement, the communist People’s Fadaian, and People’s Mujahedin of Iran led to the 1979 Revolution of Iran. It can be ideologically claimed that the 1979 Revolution was the third in the world after the French and the Russian revolutions.¹ The significant point of the 1979 Revolution is how it led to theocracy and religion taking over as the fundamental political structure of Iran where the United States, the most powerful intelligence community in the world, could not foresee this dramatically unique revolution.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is commonly referred to as the Islamic Revolution. The “revolution” refers to events that led up to and occurred as a result of Ayatollah Rouhoullah Khomeini leading the overthrow of Shah’s regime. This event would mark the end of Pahlavi monarchy, which would be replaced by Khomeini’s Islamic regime. The revolution was viewed partially as a way for conservative Iranian people to counter the Pahlavi who was so attached to western culture.

¹ Micheal D. Richards, *Revolutions in World History*, Taylor&Francis Press, New York, 2004, pp. 40-41. For a detailed analysis and historical facts of the Iran Islamic revolution see: Amir Ahmad Fakri (2011) *Tarihsel Gelişim Sürecinde İran Devrimi*, Mızrak Yayınları, İstanbul; Serkan Taflıoğlu (2009) *Humeyni—İran İslam Devrimi (Şah Nasıl Mat Oldu?)*, Kripto Yayınları, İstanbul; Ervand Abrahamian (2011) *Modern İran Tarihi*, İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, İstanbul.

All revolutions are, to some extent, unexpected and contain elements of originality, nor do they challenge established political theory. The Iranian revolution is no exception. The most obvious aspect is the religious content of the revolution—the dominance of Islamic values in the rhetoric and program of the revolution, and the leading role played by the ulema, the Islamic clergy, in the upheaval and post-revolutionary order. It is still an open question as to what extent the Islamic value system caused the revolution and to what extent it was caused by more material, socio-economic factors. It is also important to remember that protest movements guided by religion have been seen in other countries and other epochs.² This religious character of the Iranian Revolution has three other important ideological consequences, which make it distinct from other modern revolutions.

First, it is a revolution that formally rejects any idea of material well-being or progress. Khomeini has stressed the need for economic austerity. The post revolution government aspires to be of the Prophet Mohammed and of his designated successor Imam Ali in the seventh century AD. This invocation of the early Muslim period has a second consequence: that while strong nationalistic and 'anti-imperialist' sentiments clearly played a part in the Iranian upheaval, the ideology of the movement is not nationalistic. Khomeini himself usually talks about 'the nation of Islam', rather than Iran. While in the face of the Iraqi attack of September 1980 he was forced to acknowledge Iranian nationalist sentiment, and he still places the greater emphasis upon a religious internationalism. This ideological choice yields a third element that the Iranian revolution eschews historical legitimation: since the only true precursors are in the seventh century.³

Despite the religious and, in a certain limited sense of the word, traditionalist orientation, the Iranian revolution is distinct from other contemporary revolutions by the modern form and context in which it took place. Whereas most contemporary Third World revolutions have taken place through mobilization of the rural population and forms of military resistance, the Iranian revolution did so in the cities and through forms of resistance conventionally associated with developed societies, such as mass protests and political strikes. Moreover, on certain significant indices, Iran was a more developed society than any other in which a modern revolution occurred. In 1979, Iran was 50 per cent urbanized, and had a per capita income of over \$2,000.⁴ Whether the revolution occurred because of this apparent modernity, or despite the event, poses central analytic questions. Given these features and

² Fred Halliday, "The Iranian Revolution", *Political Studies*, Vol. XXX, No. 3, Blackwell Publishing Limited Press, London, 1980, pp. 437-438.

³ Fred Halliday, "The Iranian Revolution...", pp. 437-438.

⁴ *Ibid.*

the modern means by which the revolution triumphed to see that the Iranian revolution can be viewed as the first modern one.

This revolution was especially surprising because of the apparent strength of the regime it overthrew. The Shah's regime, at the time, appeared to be endowed with many advantages: it had large supplies of money, international support, and one of the best-armed military apparatuses in the world. Many people had benefited from the oil boom. In the light of what had happened in Chile or Indonesia, it was to be expected that authoritarian regimes could not be overthrown by internal resistance alone. Yet this resistance is what happened in Iran: the Shah's army was not defeated in a foreign war; the opposition did not receive substantial assistance from abroad—be it materialistic or ideological. The question arises as to why such a unique result was achieved, and why the Shah's state was so weakened it fell after a few months of political protest. Although the Iranian revolutionary movement had clear leadership with an equally clear agenda, the element of confusion, terror, and economic disruption were common in the post-revolutionary situation. Iran has been unprecedented, and at the time of writing, it shows no sign of abating. The pattern of events in post-revolutionary Iran has been distinguished by a degree of fragmentation and disorder unique in the annals of modern revolutions. The economy has spiraled downwards, despite the availability of oil revenues.⁵

Since 1979, revolts have broken out in the provinces, and the new regime has been unable to conduct a coherent foreign policy agenda, embroiling itself in costly disputes with the United States and Iraq. The revolutionary coalition itself has broken up and a low-level civil war has been waged in the same major cities where the revolution occurred. The very unity of the initial revolution has yielded to a murderous disunity. Some attribute this to the nature of the Islamic political project—its totalitarian intent, or its straightforward incompetence. Alternatively, it can be seen as an inevitable result of the revolution's triumph, the achievement of that one goal upon which all were united, namely the eviction of the Shah. Whatever interpretation is accepted, this post-revolutionary disorder is an important, revealing, and distinguishing feature of the Iranian revolutionary process as a whole.⁶

The Shah and the White Revolution

Mohammad Reza Shah's reform program called the "White Revolution" was initiated in 1963 to strengthen the classes that supported the traditional system. The Shah promulgated the White Revolution as a step towards westernization, but there is little doubt that he also had political motives, to

⁵ Ervand Abrahamian (2011) *Modern İnan Tarihi*, İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, İstanbul, 2011, pp. 28-29.

⁶ Abrahamian, pp. 38.

include legitimizing the Pahlavi dynasty. Part of the reason for launching the White Revolution was so that the Shah could minimize landowners' influence and create a new base of support among the peasants and working class. The bulk of the program was aimed at Iran's peasantry, a class the Shah hoped to gain as an ally to thwart the threat of the increasingly hostile middle class in order to legitimize the White Revolution. The Shah called for a national referendum in early 1963 in which 5,598,711 people voted for the reforms, with only 4,115 voting against them.⁷

As a political leader, the Shah not only was repressive but also sought major economic and social changes with his reform program. A fundamental cause of the revolution was that the Shah's project was a dangerous one that intelligence and other observers should have grasped at the time. Both losers and winners were created by economic change, as well as individuals and groups who were quick to blame the Shah for their misfortunes. Although the power of the revolution was simplified and exaggerated by social scientists during the period when modernization theory flourished, rising expectations were hard to meet. At the time, President Carter called Iran an "island of stability"⁸, a common perspective held by outside observers.

These reforms were part of an all-encompassing program that envisaged enfranchising the women, continuing the implementation of land reforms, nationalizing forests and the state industries, beginning a profit-sharing scheme for industrial workers, and setting up literacy corps for rural populations.⁹ In the late 1970s, the Shah instituted a series of political reforms to supplement economic ones, which allowed an opposition to surface. More important than American pressure to liberalize was the Shah's belief that greater civic participation, if not Western-style democracy, was a central part of development that would increase support for him and his policies. After all, these policies were for the good of the country and so would receive widespread assent. But revolutions from above are notoriously difficult to execute, and neither the Shah nor foreign observers fully took this into account.¹⁰

Another important handicap for the Shah was his association with American dominance. American officials who served in Iran in the late 1970s perceived the Shah as an important ally deserving of full support, but far from a puppet.

⁷ "Iran: The White Revolution", *Time Magazine*, 11 February 1966.

⁸ Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*, Cornell University Press, Washington D.C., 2010, pp. 29-30. For the term of "island of stability" see also; Mark Thiessen, *An Island of Stability: The Islamic Revolution of Iran and the Dutch Opinion*, Sidestone Press, Leiden, 2008.

⁹ Michael M.J. Fischer, "Imam Khomeini: Four Levels of Understanding", *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford, 1983, p. 152.

¹⁰ Fischer, "Imam Khomeini: Four Levels of Understanding", p.152.

Although the United States and the United Kingdom, in conjunction with a significant segment of Iranian society, had protected his throne in 1953, a generation later he continued to be perceived by westerners very much his own man. Many Iranians, conversely, saw the Shah as a tool of the Americans, and this meant that nationalism could be enlisted in a revolutionary cause.¹¹

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Fall of the Shah

Any specific instance of intelligence failure will, by definition, seem unusual, but the fact of the failure is itself quite ordinary. This may be unfortunate, but is not mysterious. Intelligence is a game between hidiers and finders, and the former usually have the easier job.¹² The most obvious sense of intelligence failure is a mismatch between the estimates and what later information reveals. This is simultaneously the most important and least interesting sense of term. It is most important because, policy, to some extent, depends on accurate assessments.¹³

When the opposition led by Ayatollah Rouhoullah Khomeini grew, the Shah used measured force, but never instituted full-scale repression. Until the final months of the regime the army would have carried out such orders. It is possible that, like foreign intelligence services, the Shah simply misjudged the situation. But unlike them, he could not have relied on the belief that the situation must be stable because if it had not been, he would have used force. After the fact, the Shah said that “*a sovereign may not save his throne by shedding his countrymen’s blood*” a view he said he expressed to the British and American ambassadors in the fall and winter of 1978.¹⁴

It is still unclear that much of the answer lies in three main factors involving the Shah. The first was his personality. Although most contemporary CIA analysts believed that he was strong and decisive, historical analysis proves otherwise. Intelligence from the collectors had characterized him correctly in the decade following the 1953 coup, but in the subsequent years his efforts to appear in charge of himself as well as the country partly because of his unwillingness to brook any opposition.¹⁵ Had CIA and other observers

¹¹ Mansur Rafizadeh, *Witness: From the Shah to the Secret Arms Deal: An Insider’s Account of U.S. Involvement in Iran*, William Morrow and Company Press, New York, 1987, p. 167.

¹² Ralph White, “Why Aggressors Lose”, *Political Psychology*, UCLA Press, New York, 1990, pp. 227–42

¹³ Robert Jervis, “Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq”, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Taylor&Francis Group Press, Vol. 29, No. 1, 3 – 52, New York, February 2006, p. 10.

¹⁴ William H. Sullivan, *Mission to Iran; Parsons, The Pride and the Fall*, W. W. Norton & Co Inc Press, Washington D.C., 1981, p. 167.

¹⁵ Marvin Zonis, *Majestic Failure: The Fall of the Shah*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1991, p. 181.

understood the Shah accurately, they would not have been so certain that he would act boldly to save his regime. The United States might also have been more careful to speak with one voice, although it is far from clear that this would have been possible or made a difference. A second factor is the Shah's serious illness. He had been under treatment for some years from a form of cancer, which led to his death shortly after the revolution. It is possible that the disease or its treatment affected his reasoning. The CIA knew nothing about the Shah's illness, however it is now clear that the Shah's French doctors did not even tell their own government.¹⁶ In retrospect, there were signs of the Shah's illness, but this was mainly in the context of his changing moods, and no diplomat or intelligence service even entertained the hypothesis that the Shah's behavior was traceable to an ailment or its treatment.

Was the CIA able to foresee the fall of the Shah?

In the late 1970s, some of the central beliefs held by intelligence were disconfirmable. One of the major reasons why CIA analysts did not think the situation was tenuous because the Shah had not cracked down. If it were tenuous, they reasoned, he would do so. The very absence of a massive response then led them to conclude that the situation, although unpleasant, remained under control. Indeed, a good social scientist would have argued that revolutions cannot succeed in the face of functioning and effective security forces, and it was not until months after the revolution that crucial facts came light. That might have explained why the Shah did not use them. What the analysts failed to realize was that they could discover that this belief was incorrect only if the crisis became very severe.¹⁷

Indeed, all foreign intelligence services believed that the Shah was strong and decisive and would not shy away from what he needed to do. American and other diplomats saw the Shah as a self-confident, even arrogant, leader who would not waive. But also some scholars painted a different picture of the Shah, drawing on his youth and behavior in the 1953 coup.¹⁸

On the other hand, no one in or out of the Shah's government understood the role of religion and Khomeini. The senior Iranian political analyst from the CIA had a great interest in the religious establishment and had conducted thorough research on this subject, but he did not perceive the beginnings of

¹⁶ John, D. Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1981, p. 289.

¹⁷ Jervis, "Why Intelligence Fails...", pp. 24-25.

¹⁸ Ibid.

what we would now call radical or fundamentalist Islam.¹⁹ Surprisingly there were only two political analysts and two economic analysts in CIA who focused on Iran. Neither the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) at the State Department, nor the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), had a dedicated expert on Iranian politics, although each did have a person who was nominally responsible for such matters. The CIA station in Tehran was not large and produced little political intelligence. During the cold war, only the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and, to a lesser extent, the People's Republic of China (PRC) were studied by more than a handful of analysts.²⁰

Some years before the Revolution, an enterprising State Department desk officer for Iran organized monthly meetings to discuss the situation in Iran, but such interactions depended on individual initiative and were ad hoc. Contact was also inhibited by the CIA's physical isolation, located outside of Washington, DC and a significant distance from other U.S. Government agencies, and the fact that at the time secure telephones were rare and cumbersome. This might not have been so bad if the analysts working on different countries had formed a peer group whose members shared ideas and reviewed one other's analyses. The hierarchical structure of the CIA, and short assignments of its analysts provided a barrier to the open discussions that could have revealed telling signs of an impending revolution.²¹

Finally, the role of nationalism and its twin in Iranian domestic politics, anti-Americanism, was missed and misunderstood by the CIA station in Tehran. The CIA associated these dynamics with terrorism, a danger that was of primary concern at the time. Analysts were aware that Khomeini had led violent protests against a status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) governing the small American military presence in Iran in 1964 and they took comfort from the fact that this pattern was not recurring. Perhaps if the U.S. Embassy and CIA officers had filled the analysts' requests for more of Khomeini's tapes or had been able to gather information by talking to people in the streets, bazaars, and mosques, intelligence would have detected this dynamic. But people were slow to understand how nationalism was functioning, especially because everyone in the United States knew that the Shah was anything but a puppet.²²

¹⁹ Erik Gartzke, "War Is in the Error Term", *International Organization*, Vol. 53, The IO Foundation and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, Massachusetts, 1999, pp. 580-581.

²⁰ Jervis, "Why Intelligence Fails...", pp. 21-22.

²¹ Jervis, "Why Intelligence Fails...", pp. 21-22.

²² Jervis, "Why Intelligence Fails...", pp. 25-26.

A U.S. Intelligence Community Challenge to Iranian Revolution and Ayatollah Rouhoullah Khomeini; Covert Actions of CIA

On November 4, 1979, an angry mob of young Islamic revolutionaries overran the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, taking more than 60 Americans hostage. The hostages remained in captivity for 444 days, until minutes after Ronald Reagan took the oath of office as president. After that the hostages' release, a covert action was directed by President Reagan's National Security Council(NSC) that ended in the Iran-Contra affair. This action was highly publicized, whereas other covert operations-directed by the CIA-were not. CIA operations during the Reagan and Bush years were designed to aid Iranian paramilitary and political exile groups, counter Soviet influence in Iran, and give the United States a role of its own in the event that the Khomeini regime fell. The initial goal was to knit together a coalition of exile groups and their supporters still in Iran so that if the opportunity arose they could be a significant factor in shaping the future of Iran.²³

The covert action included providing several million dollars to units composed largely of Iranian exiles in eastern Turkey. The larger of the paramilitary groups had 6,000 to 8,000 men under the command of former Rear Admiral Ahmad Madani, the commander of the Iranian navy under the Shah, who was court-martialed for being against the government. Madani also became the first defense minister in the Khomeini regime.²⁴ The second unit, which consisted of less than 2,000 men, was commanded by Gen. Bahram Aryana, chief of staff of the Iranian army under the Shah. The paramilitary groups were intended to perform two functions: in the event of a Soviet invasion of Iran, they could harass the flanks of the Soviet armed forces, and in the event of a civil war or domestic upheaval, they would be able to enter Iran to protect and bolster any centrist forces.²⁵

The CIA also supported some other exile groups situating principally in France and Egypt. Support was made available to groups both on the Left and on the Right side but not including the monarchist factions.

The CIA established and financed a radio station in Egypt to broadcast anti-Khomeini information. In 1987, regular features included reports on long food lines, pocket of opposition and small uprisings against the clergy and revolutionary guards, torture and killings by the government, and gains made by Iranian Communists and agents of the Soviet Union. In September 1986, the CIA provided a miniaturized suitcase television transmitter for a clandestine

²³ Leslie H. Gelb, "U.S. Said to Aid Iranian Exiles in Combat and Political Units", *New York Times*, March, 7, 1982, pp. 11-12.

²⁴ Leslie H. Gelb, "U.S. Said to Aid Iranian Exiles...", p. 3.

²⁵ Lawrence E. Walsh, "Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matter in 1993" pp. 248-249.

broadcast to Iran by the Shah's son. The broadcast disrupted two channels of Iranian television for 11 minutes at 9 p.m. on September 5.²⁶

In addition, the CIA supplied information to Iraq to aid the country in its war with Iran. The intelligence supplied by the CIA was detailed enough to assist with Iraqi bombing raids on Iran's oil terminals and power plants. In 1984, when some feared that Iran might overrun Iraq, the United States began supplying Iraq with intelligence that reportedly enabled Iraq to calibrate mustard gas attacks on Iranian ground troops.²⁷ In early 1985, Iraq began receiving regular satellite information from Washington, particularly after Iraqi bombing raids. It is still not clear whether the Iraqis were receiving actual photos or information derived from the photos at that point.²⁸ In August 1986, CIA established a direct, Top Secret, Washington-Baghdad link to provide the Iraqis with better and timelier satellite intelligence. The Iraqis would thus receive information from satellite photos "several hours" after a bombing raid in order to assess damage and plan the next attack. By December 1986, the Iraqis were receiving selected portions of the actual photos taken by KH-11 and SR-71 overhead platforms. According to one account, some of the information and images provided were incomplete or doctored—the size of the Soviet troop strength on the Iranian border was inflated—in order to further the Reagan administration's goals.²⁹

Conclusion

As indicated in this study, the CIA, an espionage organization, was not good at determining the causes or the extent of the revolutionary impulses in Iran. Neither this, nor the subsequent call for the American IC to be in better touch with mass opinion, should be surprising. For one thing, predicting revolutions is very difficult. They are not well understood by social science and almost by definition must come as a surprise to many informed observers, including CIA analysts. If the latter understood what was coming, the CIA officers would flee, use force, or make concessions.³⁰ Although intelligence organizations do not like to recognize it, they rarely have special advantages in understanding revolutions and general political developments. The CIA and its IC

²⁶ Ibid; Bob Woodward, "CIA Curried Favor with Khomeini Exiles", *Washington Post*, November 19, 1986, pp. A1-A28.

²⁷ Bob Woodward, "CIA Aiding Iraq in Gulf War", *Washington Post*, December 15, 1986, pp. A1, A18-A19.

²⁸ Jeffrey T. Richelson, *The U.S. Intelligence Community*, Westview Press, Colorado, 2008, pp. 419-420.

²⁹ Stephen Engelberg, "Iran and Iraq Got Doctored Data", *New York Times*, January 12, 1987, pp. A1, A16.

³⁰ Gartzke, "War Is in the Error...", p. 575.

counterparts are in the business of stealing secrets, but the secrets are rarely at the heart of revolutions. This does not mean that confidential information is irrelevant. Better non-classified information would have helped more. Mingling with the demonstrators and talking to the rank and file in the opposition might have revealed the extent of the hatred of the Shah, the power of nationalism, and the role of religious leaders as focal points. But even with the relevant linguistic and interpersonal skills, it is still unclear how much any foreigner could have learned, although American diplomats serving in the consulates outside Tehran did provide better information because they mixed with people across much more of the social spectrum.³¹

On the other hand, the overthrow of the Shah in Iran portended the rise of anti-American force and Islamic fundamentalism. Such were the challenges facing the administration of President Ronald Reagan when it took power in 1981. Reagan responded to this situation by undertaking an array of covert operations unparalleled by that of any preceding administration. Reagan stepped up covert operations and to support any opposition of the new Iranian regime.

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³¹ Jervis, “Why Intelligence Fails...”, pp. 26.

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