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# The Golden Triangle: The Press at the White House, State, and Defense

There are three different press corps  
for the three institutions. Each covers its  
“beat” with a different approach and philosophy.

Stephen Hess

*“To be worked successfully, each beat requires its own set of human traits, and this makes for differences among the types of reporters scattered in pressrooms across Washington....The myth that the White House is a glamorous beat impels the men who work it to behave as they conceive glamorous reporters must. Other beats imprint their personalities just as indelibly. The State Department reporter quickly learns to talk like a fuddy-duddy and to look grave, important, and inscrutable. The Pentagon man always seems to have just come in off maneuvers....” —Russell Baker, 1961.*

The press populations at the White House, State Department, and Pentagon have changed in the 22 years since Russell Baker wrote his charming book, *An American in Washington*. Where White House reporters in 1961 sat around the West Lobby viewing the presidential visitors who wished to be seen, they are now sealed into two newsrooms and a briefing room. The “men” on the White House beat are now just as likely to be women, at least if they work for television. Some of Baker’s State Department “fuddy-duddies” have become international media celebrities more famous than the diplomats they cover. And the Pentagon reporters are less likely “to have just come in off maneuvers” than to have been out tracking high-technology products like Titan missiles.

To be able to comment on the connection between government officials and Washington reporters, I requested and was granted the opportunity to be an inside observer of press operations at five federal agencies: the Food and Drug Administration, the departments of Defense, Transportation, and State, and the White House. I obtained the appropriate security clearances and then had access to staff meetings and internal documents. (To the best of my knowledge, I was excluded only from discussions about personnel matters.) I remained at an agency for periods ranging from one month (Transportation) to three months (State) between September 1981 and August 1982. I moved on when I felt that I would not appreciably improve my understanding by staying longer. In those cases where there was a pressroom on the premises, I spent my days shuttling between reporters and officials, often seeing the same events from two perspectives.

This article describes some of the institutional char-

acteristics that I observed at the White House, Pentagon, and State Department.

If Russell Baker were to reexamine this golden triangle of Washington reporting today, he would spot changes in speech, dress, location, and technology. He would also note distinctions in the relative competencies of the three press corps, differences in the working relationships between reporters and sources, and in the philosophies of how best to cover each beat.

At the White House, much of the press corps earned its reporting credentials covering the previous presidential campaign. The experience helps to understand the politics of the White House, but can be decidedly unhelpful when reporting the substance of the president’s programs. Because of the youth of its members and frequent turnover, it is a press corps with little historical memory and little knowledge of economics and foreign affairs. Its members exhibit a weakness for interpreting all presidential actions through a political lens, thus creating a form of distortion that appears to ring with “reality.”

At State, where tenure for reporters is longer, a different problem can occlude the perception of events. The lens through which these reporters refract reality is called “nuance journalism.” It is an elaborate tango in which sources and reporters communicate with each other through glances and code words. It can be a beautiful dance when performed by experts. More often, however, there is a clumsy partner. This was particularly the way it appeared to me during the tenancy of Alexander Haig. But as more and more marginal reporters crowd the dance floor, the routine must become increasingly grotesque.

The Pentagon is the most healthy of the three beats in the golden triangle, with the most information available, and the least refraction in reporters’ translations. Despite recent flaps over leaks, reporters and sources come closest to agreement as to acceptable standards for what should and should not be printed or broadcast. The regular reporters, however, are asking the types of questions that are easiest to answer, although they often appear to be more complex because they are more technical.

To put these beats in context, it needs to be noted that only a handful of government agencies have

newsrooms and a corps of regular reporters who spend part or most of each day inside specific buildings. The vast majority of government agencies get modest attention from the mass media, and most government workers (including many of substantial responsibility) have only to avoid scandal to stay out of the non-specialized press.

Most Washington reporters work for trade publications, or cover Congress and regional news, or are on general assignment. Almost by definition the reporters permanently assigned to the White House, Pentagon, and State Department are an elite, either from the inner ring of Washington journalism (TV networks, weekly newsmagazines, wire services, and the newspapers read by "opinion leaders") or the top people of the middle ring (organizations willing to commit at least six reporters to covering national news from Washington).

The press corps at the White House, State, and Pentagon—mirroring the news values of the mass media—can be thought of as a ratio of 4:3:1. The Associated Press, for example, keeps four full-time reporters at the White House, three at the State De-

being covered than *who* is doing the reporting. Despite surveys that show mainstream reporters do not agree with the policy thrust of Ronald Reagan (or other conservative presidents), my year of pressroom eavesdropping (more important than any interviewing) convinced me that ideology is not an overt factor in serious reporting.

Indeed, little of what reporters say to each other, day after day, has anything to do with policy. Much of their "professional" conversation could be fitted in two categories: traveler and seer. They spend so much time trailing presidents and cabinet officials around the world that a lot of their conversation revolves around such matters as the relative virtues of the VC-137 and the KC-135 (two versions of the Boeing 707 that transport VIPs). They also like to make predictions: "The Argentines won't go to war with the Brits" or "The *Daily News* is going to fold." Beyond ideology, the treatment of reporters—a feeling of being personally abused by certain officials—very well may influence their copy. An administration never gets the press that it thinks it deserves; it almost always gets the press that it brings upon itself.

### White House: Covering a Person

Those whom Theodore White once called "bloodless political scientists" desire that White House reporters devote more attention to writing about "policy," "process," "management," and even "organization." Perhaps they assume that this would happen if only reporters had more access to presidential advisers and the inner workings of the building. The assumption is not correct. The White House differs from every other agency of the executive branch as a news beat in that it is dedicated to covering a person. Reporters are paid to file stories about the president, not the presidency (with the exception of a couple of magazine writers). How available and forthcoming a president and his aides choose to be with the press corps can affect the quantity and quality of the coverage, but will not change the nature of its substance.

There is an almost unending stream of events staged at the White House each day for the amusement or edification of the press. Yet, unless they talk to the president, it has not been a good day. "They never have enough," says Peter Roussel, a deputy press secretary. "I asked Helen [Thomas of UPI] whether it would be enough if she saw the president eight hours a day. She said no."

Reporters are increasingly assigned to the White House because they followed the president when he was a presidential candidate. TV networks, newsmagazines, and leading newspapers seem to think that a year with the winning campaign gives a reporter special connections with presidential assistants and special insights into what may be happening behind doors that are closed to them. My hunch is that this reasoning has only a surface logic. In the campaign the staff and the press corps are consumed by politics; it is the business they are both engaged in. Their levels of knowledge are not very different, and, indeed, some of the senior political reporters are more knowledgeable



partment, and one at the Defense Department. (The less affluent UPI has three White House reporters, two at State, and one at Defense).

The very small number of serious reporters at the Triangle—less than 150, or about 10 percent of the national press corps—are relatively interchangeable. In fact, the more senior reporters may have covered two or even all three of these beats. They are not clones, of course, but much more of the differences in news coverage can be explained in terms of *what* is

in the arcane conventions of running for president than are many on the candidate's staff. Once in the White House, however, the most senior staff and the reporters proceed along different tracks. Aides are forced to become deeply schooled in policy matters, while, in effect, the reporters continue to do essentially what they had been doing during the campaign.

Moreover, I think there is a second kind of separation taking place. In the campaign the reporters and staff were supplicants to each other. It was a relatively reciprocal relationship, and, hence, fairly healthy. This relationship changes once they arrive at the White House. While more often than not in Washington the political executive is the supplicant—a competitor for finite space or time in the news media—at the White House the reporters are the supplicants: They must report on the president almost without regard for whether he is doing anything or not. So as the relationship becomes more unequal, it also becomes more unhealthy.

The practical effects of the presidential-campaign-to-White-House movement are that it ensures a press corps of high energy and low historical memory, and further accentuates politics as the touchstone that the press will use to explain the motivation of all presidential behavior. It does not assure that the reporters will have any substantive knowledge in the two areas that they will be most often writing about—because they are the two areas that presidents must most often deal with—economics and international relations.

When the *Washington Star* went out of business in 1981, its pressroom desk at the White House was reassigned to the newspaper reporter with the next most seniority—four years. ABC's Sam Donaldson, whose colorful personality makes him a leader of the pack, has only been there since 1977. Today's typical president-watcher has "no basis for comparison," according to Clifford Evans of RKO Broadcasting, a veteran of 16 years at the White House. While this is valid criticism, it also could be made of presidential assistants. The White House—where the average age of the staff has dropped markedly over two decades—is a place that increasingly acts as if the world has to be invented anew every fourth year. Since the short tenure of present White House reporters is not unrelated to the short tenure of recent presidents (four since 1974), if the United States starts to have two-term presidents again it might follow that there will be a cadre of more experienced White House reporters as well.

The rapid rotation of reporters to coincide with a new presidential administration may have interesting unanticipated consequences.

The White House has become a catapult for the upwardly mobile reporter, primarily because it is the least specialized of the major beats. The front row of the White House briefing room is reserved for reporters from the following organizations: Reuters, ABC, UPI, CBS, AP, and NBC. On a day in late May 1982, four

of the six seats were occupied by women reporters. On the same day, three of the four NBC reporters were women. Why? The most obvious reason is that in a business with a dismal affirmative action record, the White House is the assignment that (in television, especially) gets the most notice for the least hiring—since it receives the most air time—and does not require elaborate credentializing (a few months on the campaign trail will do, if necessary). As a transitory assignment, women (and blacks, to a much lesser extent) then move from the White House into the competition for the other prestige jobs.

It is hardly surprising that the news medium of choice for presidents has become television. Elected officials need to reach voters; diplomats and generals don't. There were 15 TV cameras at a bill-signing ceremony and I counted six cameras and 27 people (mostly technicians) trooping into the president's office for a routine "photo op." The White House is the one executive agency whose news rhythm is set by TV. Conversely, the degree to which pictures now dominate the planning and timing of events makes the beat less attractive to print journalists.

What the dominance of TV means is that the White House now has a one-story-a-day focus since the networks are not going to use more than one major president story on their prime nightly news program. Thus the "struggle" between the press office and the pressroom is largely over what event will rise to the top each day. There are days when neither the news media nor the president makes the decision and other days when the president and the press pick the same event. It is not a closed system: Both president and White House reporters are also responding to events produced by the Congress, judiciary, opposition party, other nations, and, on occasion, enterprising reporters.

As in the children's game of paper covers rock, a real event will always cover an ersatz event—although an ersatz event can get some coverage if the president is personally involved.

Given all the attention to how presidents "use" the press, content analysis will show that manufactured stories are at the margins of the news. The White House reporters forgo a lot of good stories because of how tightly limited they are to writing for the front page or its TV equivalent, but they don't often fall for the hype and the dubious.

### State Department: "An Historical Memory"

Unlike reporters on the White House beat, reporters at the State Department (and the Pentagon) seem to stay and stay and stay. Given the complexity of their assignments, they contend, this is most appropriate. Barrie Dunsmore, ABC's diplomatic correspondent, says, "On many beats you grow stale and rewrite. At State you keep getting better. You grow in the job. An historical memory is very valuable."

Despite the often lengthy tenure, these reporters are rarely co-opted, an unfounded worry of some who write about the government/press connection. On the contrary, they are prepared (even eager) to criticize the government if they feel it is justified. But long

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tenure on a beat often means that reporters ingest the mind-set of the agency, that they increasingly approach their material from the same vantage point as those they cover.

How serious a problem this is is a matter of debate. In part it does not become more serious because of what reporters must do or how they are treated by sources, serving to remind them periodically of their lowly journalistic status.

The more important the event, the more time reporters spend waiting; the more important the story, the less frequently their calls are returned. A story the size of the Falklands crisis is almost wall-to-wall waiting. There are few people who have any information and fewer still who will share it with the press. A network correspondent, after six hours of phoning, reaches a source who says he'll take *one* question.



Reporter: How much time [until the United States expects the British to invade]? Source: Seven days. The reporter gets 90 seconds on the evening news; in the next booth, his competitor also phones and waits, but he is not as fortunate.

The State Department and the peacetime Pentagon are essentially print beats. The Iranian hostage crisis, a TV story, was an aberration. The noon briefings at the State Department are televised and those at the White House are not, but this does not change the basic equation; it merely gives the State Department, a talking-heads beat, an extra visual angle that may help to sell a story to the nightly news producers.

Reporters from the different print outlets—as with Orwell's animals—are equal except that some are more equal than others. The State Department's paper "of

record" is the *New York Times* (at Transportation the comparable paper is the *Washington Post*). "Of record" means: Foreign service officers read the *Times* first, clip the *Times*, and circulate the clips, as do the department's clients, i.e., embassies and foreign ministries. I sometimes had more than a feeling as I followed events from the government and press sides that State Department officials were negotiating with the *Times* in much the same manner as they would with the diplomats of a sovereign nation.

An agency's press office is the most obvious and routine part of its press relations. The great leaks do not come from press officers and the great reporters have the least need of press officers. Yet if the press office is functioning properly it performs a necessary service as a sort of insider's outsider/outside's insider, chipping away at the permanent government's built-in inertia and suspicions toward the press. It also has a special importance to those reporters for whom doors are less likely to open.

The State Department had 42 full-time "public affairs advisers" (a.k.a. press officers) in Washington as of March 30, 1982; press room facilities with 29 partitioned working spaces, spacious offices for the AP and UPI, and six radio-TV booths; a wire service room where reporters have access to the flowing tickers of AP, UPI, Reuters, and the CIA's Foreign Broadcast Information Service, as well as the use of a photostat machine (often out of order).

Foreign correspondents have the daily briefings piped into a comfortable lounge that the USIA maintains for them at the National Press Building, where many have their offices. "Senior officials" held 55 backgrounders in 1981, and 16 in the first four months of 1982, open to all reporters. The State Department issued 441 press releases in 1981.

Nevertheless, of all the major government agencies in Washington, the State Department interprets its responsibility to the press most narrowly. Unlike the Pentagon, for instance, it clearly does not see its press operation as an information service. "I resent reporters asking me questions that my son could look up in the encyclopedia," said one press officer. "If a reporter wants to know how many children Sadat had, let him call the Egyptian embassy—it's not my job to tell him," said another.

The State Department is also a building full of officials with what Hodding Carter calls "old habits" in dealing or not dealing with the press. He means—as another press officer puts it—"the traditional, nineteenth-century diplomatist's view is that ideally there should be no news at all." News-gathering problems are compounded, according to one person who served in the State Department during the Carter administration, because foreign service officers (FSOs) "see themselves as an elite and the reporters as of a lower social order. They think that foreign policy is so complicated that it can only be understood if you've passed the foreign service exam. Reporters' minds are not subtle enough. They can only botch things up and make life more difficult."

While this may be a caricature, the State Department was the only place where I found some government workers who came close to challenging the legitimacy

of the press—as distinct from the usual bureaucratic tendency, which is to try to ignore the press because it is a nuisance. (The White House is different: Presidential assistants are not against the press, they are against getting a bad press.) Still, I suspect that the FSO's attitude toward the press is only slightly tinged by class or caste distinctions—American reporters and diplomats get along very well when they are overseas, for instance, especially when stationed in countries that are hostile to the United States.

Rather, I think, hostility to the press partly results from this paradox: The State Department has created an elaborate news-generating system, revolving around the daily noon briefings, with great hunks of time spent each morning on the preparation of “guidances” for the spokesman, and no one knows how to turn it off, even as the FSOs watch themselves be swept away from the type of private diplomacy that they think is most respectable and effective.

The effort by State to keep control of diplomacy often forces reporters to search for the unverifiable. As Bernard Kalb tells newcomers, “Watch out that you don’t bump into a nuance.” How do you spot a nuance? Reporters and officials reply that it can be identified through “code words,” “cues,” and even “body language.” A former State Department briefer explains, “You might say the discussions were fruitful. Or you might say that the discussions were frank. ‘Frank’ means that the discussions got nowhere or were hostile.” Another former briefer explains, “‘No comment’ means ‘yes,’ while ‘can’t confirm or deny’ doesn’t necessarily mean yes.”

As I moved back and forth between reporters and officials, I became uneasy: Here was a “communication system” with too much room for misunderstanding, which relied too heavily on the artistic skill of those delivering and receiving messages. I was seeing too many examples of cues that were wrongly perceived. Either there were some not very good cue givers or some not very good cue takers. Or both. Even when the minutes of Secretary Haig’s senior staff meetings were leaked to the *Post*—calling British Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington a “duplicious bastard”—the reporters who cover the State Department (without claiming to know the identity of the leaker) could not agree on whether it was meant to be a friendly or unfriendly leak. Although the story was a nightmare within the bureaucracy, reporters could argue—“nuance-wise”—that since the minutes contained no nasty comments about the president, the leak may have been meant to strengthen Haig’s hand at the White House. And as for the “duplicious bastard” quote, said a reporter, “Carrington can dine off that for a month!”

I asked Alan Romberg, the deputy spokesman, to estimate the number of truly serious reporters in the diplomatic press corps. Fifteen, he said. But there were usually 70 reporters at a noon briefing. The briefings had lured more and more of the marginals of Washington journalism to the State Department, many of them too inexperienced or unsophisticated for this sort of semaphore. Thus the daily sessions have become necessary if only to correct the previous day’s misunderstandings.

## The Pentagon: Gasping for Breath

“A building breathes,” says Roberto Garcia, the Brazilian journalist. “Sometimes there’s more air, sometimes less.”

The Pentagon of early 1982, viewed from outside, seemed to be gasping for breath. Deputy Secretary Frank Carlucci was busy administering lie-detector tests to suspected leakers. Yet inside the newsroom, Pentagon reporters shrugged and mumbled something that sounded like *deja vu*. The press officers were more offended by Carlucci than were the journalists. “This is the most open place in Washington,” a respected newspaper reporter told me.

“Would anyone believe you if you wrote that?”

“Reporters know it.”

Reporters on the beat may know it, but I found that others who drop in are always surprised.

In November 1981, Fred Hoffman of the AP learned that Oman did not want a sizeable landing in its territory by the U.S. Marines during a military exercise called Bright Star. His revelation infuriated the Marine Corps high command. Hoffman, who has covered the Pentagon for over 20 years, replied, “I’ve never used anything that I think might endanger our security. Obviously the Marine commandant disagrees. But we’re not at war with the Omanis.”

Likewise, George C. Wilson’s 1982 articles that so upset Caspar Weinberger and Carlucci when they read them in the *Post*—a high budget estimate, a strategy for prosecuting draft resisters—were merely embarrassments, not threats to the national security. Defense “secrets” may be harder to define than to recognize. If given a list of candidates for such categorization, my hunch is that Pentagon reporters and Pentagon officials would agree over 90 percent of the time: presence or absence of nuclear weapons locations; operational deployments of ships, troops, and aircraft (except during exercises); contingency operations plans, and so forth. In this respect, the Pentagon reporter is less taxed than the reporter at State, where there would be little agreement over whether that Department’s stock-in-trade, diplomatic bargaining chips, are national security secrets. It is ambiguity, not patriotism, that separates reportage on these beats.

For those who learn to navigate the Pentagon’s corridors, the very vastness of the place works to the reporters’ advantage. “If someone is promoting the M-1 tank, there are plenty of people around who will tell you what’s wrong with the M-1. No trouble finding them,” says Richard Halloran of the *New York Times*.

In most cases what you seek is there, your job is only to find it.

Some 34 reporters regularly move through the Pentagon corridors. They are the most specialized press corps in the Golden Triangle, representing such publications as *Armed Forces Journal*, *Aerospace Daily*, and *Air Force Magazine*. The office of the news division at the Pentagon is a large space without partitions. Reporters stand around the press officers’ desks. Press officers wander in and out of the newsroom, which is across the corridor. The press office has a bank of TV sets tuned in to each network (with the sound off) and a board that lists deadlines: COB [close of business]

Thursdays for *Aviation Week*; 1 p.m., *Christian Science Monitor*; 6 p.m., *Los Angeles Times*. (At the State Department the press officers and the reporters are also on the same floor, but on different corridors. Only three times in three months did I see a press officer in the newsroom. There are no TV sets or notice of deadlines in the press office. The State Department press officers' offices have doors.)



Reporters at the Pentagon are more likely to be ranked in a hierarchy based on their competency, rather than on the medium for which they work. The reason this is possible is a remarkable daily document called *Current News*. It is nothing more than a clip sheet—most government agencies have them—but this one is so complete (45 newspapers, TV transcripts, and more than 120 magazines) and so widely circulated (7,000 copies) that it acts as an equalizer, assuring that the reporters—regardless of whom they write for—will be read by their sources. (At State, each unit clips for its own purposes and rarely reaches beyond a handful of papers, thus furthering the inequality among news outlets; at the White House, a substantial amount of news is “summarized”—not clipped—which means that its usefulness is as a quantitative assessment of what the press is covering and it is irrelevant in terms of the relationships between reporters and sources.)

Pentagon reporters in 1981–82 turned out to be the least complaining of all, and those who did complain were usually newcomers and/or worked for fringe operations. How to explain the change from the anger and distrust of the Viet Nam war years?

One theory is that things really have changed. From

a military press officer: “There was so much bad blood—on both sides. We briefed every day and it was hot. *It was hot*. They didn’t believe anything we said. Actually, this was good in the long run.” From an experienced reporter, but not someone who had been at the Pentagon during the war: “Viet Nam taught them that they can’t have second-rate people in PA [Public Affairs]. These are [now] all people who could do well in other places, they’re not rejects.” There also have been reorganizations. Yet I doubt that changes in personnel and an improved configuration of boxes on a chart explain much.

A distinguished general, now retired, has a single explanation: “War is our action time.” In wartime the military services close ranks, secrets become synonymous with national security, and there is less tolerance for the press’ role as critic. And, of course, unpopular wars can make the Defense Department very defensive.

### Leaks and Ideology

While most Washington reporters and their sources almost seem to enjoy the fight over what should be a reasonable accommodation between secrecy and access, the Reagan administration suddenly turned up the decibel level of this controversy when at his news conference of January 19, 1982, the president announced that leaks had “reached a new high”—a claim that is probably correct.

Leaks of any value rarely come from the bureaucracy. (The exceptions are of the whistle-blowing variety that some frustrated civil servant may drop through a reporter’s transom.) The policy-and-personality leaks that so disturb presidents come from their own appointees. Presidents have a right to try to conduct their internal business in an orderly manner and to try to time their moves to their advantage. Their views of what is the national interest may not be apolitical or correct, but they have been elected to receive greater consideration than the views of any other individual.

Why Mr. Reagan’s appointees have been the most gabby is a useful speculation if future presidents are going to appropriately control leaks, that is, by appointing persons who are least likely to say things to reporters that are not in their president’s interests, rather than by using lie detectors. The territory surrounding the secretaries of state and defense and the national security adviser always will be an institutional minefield. Reorganization schemes really make no difference. Perhaps big egos also come with the territory. But presidents (not just Ronald Reagan) do not pay enough attention to personality factors in constructing this keystone relationship of their administration. Certainly the clash between Haig and Richard Allen was predictable. And while some presidents might wish to create this kind of tension, Mr. Reagan clearly did not.

Moreover, I suspect, the number of leaks is in direct proportion to the amount of ideology that an administration brings to Washington. A deeply held conviction is a key ingredient in producing leaks. For presidents, however, it is easier—politically and emotionally—to blame the press. B

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# Balancing Soviet Power in the Persian Gulf

How could Soviet forces threaten  
U.S. interests in the region? American planners need  
a clear answer before formulating strategy.

Thomas L. McNaugher

THE REVOLUTION IN IRAN fundamentally altered the strategic situation in the Persian Gulf region. Under the shah, Iran sat as an apparently stable, relatively powerful pro-Western buffer between the Soviet Union and the other Gulf states. The United States was able to count on the shah's army as a "regional policeman" as well as a first-line deterrent to Soviet aggression, and could expect to use bases in Iran to enter the Gulf region in a crisis. This convenient situation dissolved abruptly when the shah left Iran in January 1979.

That event, coupled with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan less than a year later, raised considerable fear in the United States of a Soviet military threat to Iran and the surrounding oil states. Driven by their own need for oil or by their desire for leverage over oil-dependent Western powers, the Soviets were expected to drive across their southern border toward the Iranian oil fields at Abadan. Rugged terrain, and perhaps angry Iranians, might slow the invading forces, but were not expected to alter their course or change their objective. Such became—and for many remains—the "worst case" scenario for American thinking about the Soviet threat to the Gulf.

With this threat principally in mind, American policy makers set out soon after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan to shore up the U.S. position in the Gulf. President Carter announced his doctrine less than a month after the invasion began. Although planning for rapid deployment of U.S. forces had begun early in the Carter administration, serious interest and budget allocations rose only after the president established the command headquarters for a "Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force" (RDJTF) in March 1980. Meanwhile American diplomats began scouring the region in search of bases among regional friends less willing than the shah to deal openly with the United States.

The three years since this activity commenced have seen no Soviet move into Iran; indeed, as it has consolidated its position in Iran the revolutionary regime there has become almost as anti-Soviet as it has been anti-American. On the other hand, three years is not an especially long time, given the development cycle of modern weapons and the pace of diplomacy, in which to develop a response to the perceived threat. Still, U.S. and allied interests are not the subject of development cycles; the need to "rebalance" Soviet power in the Gulf region has confronted American planners since the shah fell from power.

Thus it is worth asking what the United States has done so far, and what present programs are likely to yield in the future. Such an evaluation must begin, however, with an assessment of just what kind of military threats Moscow can pose in this region, how likely they are to occur, and how dangerous they may be to U.S. interests.

The Soviet capability to project force around the Gulf rests mainly on the forces Moscow has deployed for some time in the military districts that lie along its border with Iran. There are over 20 divisions in these districts: two airborne, one armored, the rest motorized rifle. Most remained at low levels of readiness even after 1979, suggesting that this particular theater is still of lower priority than Europe or the Sino-Soviet border. There is considerable military potential here, but it would become available only after a period in which low-grade units can be fully manned and trained.

Not surprisingly, the time required to mobilize these forces has been hotly debated in the United States, with a consensus emerging that it would take three to four weeks. But the focus on a single number miscasts the issue. The Soviets mobilized forces for the move into Afghanistan—a relatively easy operation, involving only five or six divisions, Soviet troops already in Afghanistan, and the expectation of little resistance—in slightly less than a month. Preparation for the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, by contrast, seems to have taken three months. Thus mobilization is likely to vary substantially with how far Soviet commanders expect to go and how much resistance they expect to meet.

Soviet ground forces north of Iran are supported by over 800 aircraft deployed in the southern military districts and Afghanistan. Since 1979 the Soviets have shifted the mix of aircraft from air defense to ground attack, while airfields have been upgraded. Effective coverage of these air assets varies with type of aircraft, payload and flight profile. Under optimum assumptions the longest range attack aircraft in these armies, the SU-24 Fencer, would have a radius of about 800 miles, while the need to fly demanding combat profiles might cut this radius in half. In either case, Soviet air coverage falls short of the northern end of the Gulf. To cover operations around Abadan the Soviets would have to move their aircraft to bases further south.

Soviet forces in Afghanistan—about 100,000 soldiers and supporting air elements—add an additional di-