



COTTAM, RICHARD

COTTAM, Richard, political scientist and Iranist (1925-1997; [FIGURE 1](#)). A native of Provo, Utah, Cottam received his B.A. degree from the University of Utah in 1948, and his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1954. He joined the faculty of the University of Pittsburgh in 1958, and spent the rest of his professional career at the university until his retirement in 1990. He died in Aug 1997 (Martha Cottam, et al, 1998).

World War II coincided with Cottam's formative years and he became convinced of the moral superiority of U.S. and allied forces in their fight against fascism in Europe and the Far East. This belief lingered for some time after the end of the war, allowing him to form an idealistic and romantic view of the validity of U.S. values in its post-war struggle against communism (Siavoshi, 1984). His first trip to Iran in 1951-52 was under a Fulbright scholarship to carry out a survey for his Ph.D. dissertation. He joined the CIA in early 1953 and as its operative made his second trip to Iran under the guise of a political officer of the American Embassy in Tehran for the years 1956-58. It was during his second trip that the August 1953 coup d'état to overthrow the administration of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq was hatched and carried out by this agency. Cottam strongly opposed the 1953 CIA coup and told his superiors that it was a serious mistake to overthrow the popular administration of Moṣaddeq (Gasiorowski, 1987; 1997). It was at this time that he developed a close relationship with a number of prominent members of the National Front, the organization that symbolized Iranians' desire for freedom and independence (Siavoshi, 1983). His interest in this umbrella organization and many of its



constituents went beyond the concern of a social scientist, as he developed a deep and sympathetic appreciation for the Iranian struggle for true sovereignty. He also came to believe that the coup was ultimately a tragic and short sighted policy decision by the Eisenhower administration, caused by the latter's obsession with the cold war with the Soviet Union, an obsession that he argued survived many of the consecutive U.S. administrations, propelling them to offer strong and at times unconditional support to the royal autocracy of Moḥammad Reżā Shah. After the coup, Cottam decided to actively support the liberal opposition to the Shah hoping that by strengthening them the Shah would be forced to open up the political system. His role in the failed 1958 coup attempt by General Qarani was probably his most serious but unsuccessful covert operation toward the fulfillment of that goal (Gasiorowski, 1993; and 1997) His inability to contribute to the development of political pluralism in Iran, and his disillusionment with the CIA as institution that can do much good in that respect led to his resignation from the CIA in 1958.

Cottam believed that the U.S. preoccupation with the cold war and its devastating consequences could be explained, to a large measure, through an analysis of perceptions held by political actors. He argued that when it came to dealings with Third World countries, American political leaders were not only trapped in the cold war prism, but were also afflicted by an imperial perception, the legacy of the Western colonial history. Thus, they depicted the Third World countries in general, and the Iranians in particular, as childlike people who were not ready for democratic and sovereign existence on their own, requiring guidance to “modernize” and to “build nationhood.”(Cottam,1988, Introduction). As a result of this misperception, Cottam argued, the U.S. tragically misjudged the phenomenon of mass politics in Iran. The end product of this view was the replacement of the popular leadership of Prime Minister Moḥammad Reżā Shah for the autocratic rule of Moḥammad Reżā Shah. Two of Cottam's major works on Iran, *Nationalism in Iran* and *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study*, were devoted to this concern. The first book became a classic reference for all subsequent students of Iranian politics. Cottam challenged the established view of nationalism as a necessarily negative ideology, a view that was the product of fresh memory of the integral nationalist experiences of the Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, where authoritarian/totalitarian rule at home went hand in hand with an aggressive foreign policy ideology. Instead, Cottam put forth a dynamic and contextually informed view of nationalism and nationalist behavior. He considered nationalism not as an ideology but as one value, among many, that



contributes to the construction of one's world view, and thus concluded that nationalism should be understood through its concrete behavioral manifestations rather than through a reified conceptualization of the term (Cottam,1979, Introduction).

Cottam's devotion to the study of nationalism, as well as his interest in perception of political actors was due not only to his interest in theory but to his political commitment to the creation of a more peaceful world. Nowhere did the fusion of this intellectual interest and political commitments become clearer than in the case of the United States and Iran. His book *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study* is devoted to an explanation of why the American influence in Iran, which was very intense, was so short lived? His contention in this study, which was consistent with the thesis in his earlier book on nationalism, was that the U.S. misunderstanding of, and contempt for, the phenomenon of mass politics in Iran ultimately led to its total loss of influence on Iranian politics.

Cottam became a leading scholar in the field of Iranian political studies and because of his keen knowledge of Iranian politics and close observance of many of its key players, his advice was solicited by many, including members of the U.S. administration, during the revolution of 1977-79. He was one of the rare scholars who succeeded in interviewing Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, exiled in Paris, at a time when it was clear that the latter had become the undisputed leader of one of the most important revolutions of the 20th century. In January 1980, in the midst of a most serious crisis between U.S. and Iran, after 52 American had been held hostage by Iranian students in American Embassy in Tehran since November 1979, Cottam was approached by Hamilton Jordan, the Carter Administration's Chief of Staff, for advice on how to handle the crisis (see [HOSTAGE CRISIS](#)). For a man who devoted a great deal of his scholarly life to the study of perceptions, the phenomenon of mass politics, the history of relations between Iran and the United States since the 1953 coup, and the dynamics of revolutionary situations along with the attitude of its leader, there was no longer an easy solution for either the crisis at hand or the repairing of the overall damage done to relations between Iran and the U.S. He informed Jordan that Carter had inherited and had continued a flawed policy toward Iran, and that his advice was sought too late. History proved him right.



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(Susan Siavoshi)

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