

## The Iran Hostage Crisis: Jimmy Carter's Disaster?

**Historical Thinking Skills Assessed:** Corroboration, Claim, Evidence

**Author/School/System:** David Sleichter and Caroline McDermott, Howard County Public School System

**Course:** United States History from 1877

**Level:** High School

**Task Question:** How did the Iran Hostage Crisis affect public opinion of President Jimmy Carter during his time in office?

**Learning Outcome(s):**

Students will be able to analyze how foreign policy decisions affect the public's opinion of U.S. Presidents.

**Standards Alignment:**

[Common Core Standards for Literacy for History/Social Studies](#)

- RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

[National History Standards](#)

Era 10: Contemporary United States

Standard 1: Recent developments in foreign and domestic politics

[College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework for Social Studies Standards](#)

- D2.Civ.5.9-12 Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national and international level.
- D2.Civ.11.9-12 Evaluate multiple procedures for making governmental decisions at the local, state, national, and international levels in terms of the civic purposes achieved.
- D2.His.1.9-12 Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
- D2.His.16.9-12 Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.
- D4.1.9-12 Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.

---

**Materials:**

- *Argo Trailer (Trailer No. 1)*. *IMDB*. IMDb.com, Inc., 2012. Web. 16 Oct. 2013.  
<[http://www.imdb.com/rg/VIDEO\\_PLAY/LINK//video/imdb/vi3569066521/](http://www.imdb.com/rg/VIDEO_PLAY/LINK//video/imdb/vi3569066521/)>.
- RS #01: Iran Hostage Crisis – Student Background Essay
- RS #02: Iran Hostage Crisis – Documents (Excerpts)
- RS #03: Document Analysis Graphic Organizer
- RS #04: Iran Hostage Crisis – Town Hall Organizer
- RS #05: ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric – Secondary

## **Background for the Teacher:**

The oil-rich, Middle Eastern country of Iran was occupied by Britain and the Soviet Union during the Second World War in order to prevent Germany from capturing or controlling the region. A king, called the Shah, Reza Shah Pahlevi (**pah-luh-vee**) was in power in Iran from 1941-1979. As WWII came to an end, the Shah requested that both nations remove their troops, which occurred by the end of 1946. After the war, the United States took interest in Iran, and continued to support the Shah's government. At the height of the Cold War, the United States wanted both to prevent the Soviet Union from spreading its influence in the region and to have access to Iran's oil.

During the 1960s, the Shah became increasingly authoritarian. He dissolved parliament and increased his powers in 1961. Additionally, he pursued ambitious plans for economic and agricultural modernization, both of which disrupted traditional Iranian society and made life more difficult for the poor and ordinary citizens. As opposition to the Shah's policies grew, his government became brutally repressive. His security service suppressed, imprisoned, and tortured Iranians who dared to challenge or resist the Shah. American support, both diplomatic and military, emboldened the Shah, but also linked the US with his oppressive regime in the eyes of his opponents. Many in the opposition were liberals or Marxists, but many others wanted the nation to be governed by Islamic law. However, their shared dislike of the Shah united the opposition behind one prominent leader, Ayatollah (A-yat-ol-LAH) Ruhollah (ROOH-ol-LAH) Khomeini (ko-MAY-nee), a leading Muslim clergyman. He had begun to speak out against the Shah and his policies in 1960, and had been forced into exile [to leave the country] in 1963.

By 1978, the opposition began to organize mass demonstrations in Tehran, the capital of Iran, and other major cities. The following year, the agitation forced the Shah to flee the country, and Khomeini returned in triumph as the leader of a new revolutionary regime in Iran. At this point, the modernization that had occurred under the Shah was reversed, and a number of his former officials were jailed or executed. On November 4, 1979, the Shah received permission to come to the U.S. for medical treatment. This led to angry demonstrations in Tehran, as Iranians were outraged by what they viewed as continued American support for the hated dictator. The protesters demanded that the Shah be returned to Iran, so he could be tried for crimes committed against the country and its citizens. During one violent riot, a group of Iranian student revolutionaries stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran. They were able to breach its walls and to capture the Americans inside. The revolutionaries released all women and African Americans, as well as one diplomat who became ill, but 52 Americans were to be held as hostages for the next 444 days. Six Americans escaped this fate by hiding in the homes of Canadian diplomats in Tehran. They were later smuggled out in a joint Canadian-CIA mission that was depicted in the 2012 American film, *Argo*.

Both the public and government officials in the United States were shocked by this breach of diplomatic immunity. President Jimmy Carter tried to negotiate the release of the hostages, but his efforts proved unsuccessful, mainly because the new Iranian regime clearly enjoyed embarrassing the hated U.S. by holding its embassy staff captive. In April of 1980, Carter ordered operation Eagle Claw, a military rescue mission by the recently created Delta Force army unit. Unfortunately, the mission was aborted as a result of a sandstorm and mechanical problems. During the withdrawal, one of the helicopters crashed, killing eight servicemen. President Carter assumed responsibility for the failed rescue mission. Though Carter continued diplomatic efforts to secure the release of the hostages right to the end of his presidency, American public opinion came to blame him for the prolonged crisis. The failure to free the imprisoned Americans was seen as a product of his weakness and indecision.

As a result of both diplomatic and military failures, the American hostages continued to be held by the student revolutionaries in Iran as the election of 1980 approached. Carter lost the election to Ronald Reagan, his Republican opponent, by the biggest margin of any defeated presidential incumbent in U.S. history. It was not until January 20, 1981, the day Reagan was sworn into office, that the hostages were released after being held captive for 444 days. The two countries approved the Algiers Accords, whose central stipulations were that the U.S. would agree to stay out of Iranian internal affairs and remove economic sanctions against them, while Iran would release the hostages and pay its debts to U.S. institutions.

## Sources:

- Citra, Natalie. "CHAPTER 3 The Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission." *The University of Michigan Press*. University of Michigan Press, 12 Nov. 2012. Web. Accessed 18 June 2013. <http://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472108670-03.pdf>.
- Hochman, Steven H. "Jimmy Carter-39th President of the United States and Founder of the Carter Center." *Waging Peace. Fighting Disease. Building Hope*. The Carter Center, 5 Sept. 2013. Web. Accessed 16 October 2013. [www.cartercenter.org/news/experts/jimmy\\_carter.html](http://www.cartercenter.org/news/experts/jimmy_carter.html).
- Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State.
- "1979: Exiled Ayatollah Khomeini Returns to Iran." *On This Day: 1950-2005*. BBC, n.d. Web. Accessed 16 October 2013. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/1/newsid\\_2521000/2521003.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/1/newsid_2521000/2521003.stm).
- Bowden, Mark. "The Desert One Debacle." *The Atlantic* (May 2006). Accessed 12 September 2014 . <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/05/the-desert-one-debacle/304803/4/>.

## Procedure

### Context Setting:

- Begin by asking if students have seen or know about the 2012 movie *Argo*. After a quick straw poll vote, have a few students summarize the story and then tell students that they will watch the movie trailer. After viewing the clip, ask the students to describe what they saw. Remind students that although based on a true story, the movie is the Hollywood version and is not entirely historically accurate.
- Have students read RS#01: Iran Hostage Crisis – Student Background Essay. Ask the following questions for understanding: Why did the United States get involved in Iran? Who was the Shah? Who was Ayatollah Khomeini? Why were many Iranians unhappy with the Shah? Who occupied the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, and why did they do so? How long were the Americans held hostage and why were they released?

### Document Analysis:

- Explain that foreign policy issues can also affect the American public's attitude toward its political leadership.
- Place the students into 2-3 heterogeneous groups. Distribute RS #02: Iran Hostage Crisis – Documents (Excerpts) and RS#03: Document Analysis Graphic Organizer. Instruct students that they will work collaboratively to read the documents and complete the organizer. The organizer directs students to identify the perspectives on President Carter revealed in the documents. Students must provide an explanation for the perspective they identify for each document, as well as cite specific evidence from the documents to support their explanations.

### Corroborating Evidence and Constructing Interpretations – Close Analysis:

- Students will answer and briefly discuss the corroboration questions at the bottom of the Document Analysis Graphic Organizer (RS#03).
- Next, ask students if they have heard of the term "Town Hall." After a few students respond, share the following information: The purpose of a town hall meeting is for voters to ask questions of the candidates in an open forum. Tell them they will gather evidence in order to participate in a Town Hall on the handling of the Iran Hostage Crisis by President Carter.
- Distribute and have students complete RS #04: Iran Hostage Crisis – Town Hall Organizer. Students will use the organizer to develop their statements for the meeting to be held during the next class period. In class and for homework (if time is needed), students will take a stance and write a brief statement to be read at the Town Hall meeting. They will need to cite at least two pieces of evidence to support their stance.
- (Next class period) Tell students: "The purpose of today's town hall meeting is for you to vocalize your opinions on the Iran Hostage Crisis to President Carter (teacher) and to support what you say with evidence."

(Note: This portion of the task will be graded at the teacher's discretion. Teachers may choose to just score the students' written statements.)

- Project and read:  
Basic Guidelines for a Town Hall Meeting
  - The teacher will act as the President.
  - The students will volunteer. [or all students will speak if the Town Hall is to be scored]
  - Each student will stand and read aloud his or her prepared statement.
  - Students who have the same or differing opinions will then raise their hands for an opportunity to participate. (The President will call on the students.)
  
- Use RS#05: ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric – Secondary to grade the prepared student statements and/or Town Hall Meeting.

## Resource Sheet #01

### Iran Hostage Crisis – Student Background Essay

Iran is an oil rich country in the Middle East that was occupied by Britain and the Soviet Union during WWII in order to prevent Germany from capturing or controlling the region. A king, called the Shah, Reza Shah Pahlevi (pah-luh-vee) was in power in Iran from 1941-1979. As WWII came to an end, the Shah requested that both nations remove their troops, which occurred by the end of 1946. After the war, the United States took interest in Iran, and continued to support the Shah's government. At the height of the Cold War, the U.S. wanted both to prevent the Soviet Union from spreading its influence in the region and to have access to Iran's oil.

During the 1960s, the Shah became increasingly authoritarian. He dissolved parliament and increased his powers in 1961. Additionally, he pursued ambitious plans for economic and agricultural modernization, both of which disrupted traditional Iranian society and made life more difficult for the poor and ordinary citizens. As opposition to the Shah's policies grew, his government became brutally repressive. His security service suppressed, imprisoned, and tortured Iranians who dared to challenge or resist the Shah. American support, both diplomatic and military, emboldened the Shah, but also linked the US with his oppressive regime in the eyes of his domestic opponents. Many in the opposition were liberals or Marxists, but many others wanted the nation to be governed by Islamic law. However, shared dislike of the Shah united the opposition behind one prominent leader, Ayatollah (A-yat-ol-LAH)Ruhollah (ROOH-ol-LAH) Khomeini (ko-MAY-nee), a leading Muslim clergyman. He had begun to speak out against the Shah and his policies in 1960, and had been forced into **exile** [to leave the country] in 1963.

By 1978, the opposition began to organize mass demonstrations in Tehran, the capital of Iran, and other major cities. The following year, the growing agitation forced the Shah to flee the country. Khomeini returned in triumph as the leader of a new revolutionary regime. At this point, the modernization that had occurred under the Shah was reversed, and several of his former officials were jailed or executed. On November 4, 1979, the Shah received permission to come to the US for medical treatment. This led to angry demonstrations in Tehran, as Iranians were outraged by what they viewed as continued American support for the hated dictator. The protesters demanded that the Shah be returned to Iran, so he could be tried for crimes committed against the country and its citizens. During one violent riot, a group of Iranian student revolutionaries stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran. They were able to breach its walls and to capture the Americans inside. The revolutionaries released all women and African Americans, as well as one diplomat who became ill, but 52 Americans were to be held as hostages for the next 444 days. Six Americans escaped this fate by hiding in the homes of Canadian diplomats in Tehran. They were later smuggled out in a joint Canadian-CIA mission that was depicted in the 2012 American film, *Argo*.

Both the public and government officials in the United States were shocked by this breach of diplomatic immunity. President Jimmy Carter tried to negotiate the release of the hostages but his efforts were unsuccessful, mainly because the new Iranian regime clearly enjoyed embarrassing the hated U.S. by holding its embassy staff captive. In April of 1980, Carter enacted operation Eagle Claw, a military rescue mission by the recently created Delta Force army unit. Unfortunately, the mission was **aborted** [called off] as a result of a sandstorm and mechanical problems. During the withdrawal, one of the helicopters crashed, killing eight servicemen. President Carter assumed responsibility for the failed rescue mission. Though Carter continued diplomatic efforts to secure the release of the hostages right to the end of his presidency, American public opinion increasingly came to blame him for the prolonged crisis. The failure to free the imprisoned Americans was seen as a product of his weakness and indecision.

As a result of both diplomatic and military failures, the American hostages continued to be held by the student revolutionaries in Iran as the election of 1980 approached. Carter lost the election to Ronald Reagan, his Republican opponent, by the biggest margin of any defeated presidential **incumbent** [sitting president] in U.S. history. It was not until January 20, 1981, the day Reagan was sworn into office that the hostages were released after being held captive for 444 days. The two countries approved the Algiers Accords, whose central stipulations were that the U.S. would agree to stay out of Iranian internal affairs and remove economic sanctions against them, while Iran would release the hostages and pay its debts to U.S. institutions.

## Resource Sheet #02

### Iran Hostage Crisis – Documents (Excerpts)

#### Document A: Letter to the Editor. *Denver Post*, November 4, 1979.

“Carter's **predecessor** [earlier Democratic president] Harry Truman, whom he says he emulates, would have landed the Marines and offered to cripple Iran's economic base. These Iranians have committed an act of war against the United States and all Carter wants to do at the moment is talk. It is time to speak with the power and the might of a first rate country instead of the wishy-washy language of diplomatic compromise.”

Source: Daniel A. Darlington, “Letter to the Editor,” *Denver Post*, November 4, 1979. “American Experience: Reactions to the Hostage Crisis.” PBS. WGBH Educational Foundation, 1996-2012. Accessed on 23 June 2013 at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/carter-444-text/?flavour=full](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/carter-444-text/?flavour=full)

---

#### Document B: “Survey Finds Carter’s Popularity has Risen Sharply in Iran Crisis.” *New York Times*, December 10, 1979.

“Public approval of President Carter’s performance in office has increased dramatically in the month since the United States Embassy in Tehran was seized and hostages held by militant students, according to a poll by the Gallup Organization.

The percentage of people who approved of Mr. Carter's handling of the Presidency jumped from 32 [percent], in a Gallup survey taken Nov. 2 to Nov. 5 to 61 [percent] in the latest poll, which was taken by telephone last Wednesday and Thursday. The Tehran embassy was seized Nov. 4...

On the basis of the sample size, the margin of error results is plus or minus five percentage points, said Mr. Kohut, who directed the poll.

“What’s really amazing about the results,” said Mr. Kohut, “is that in the first week of the crisis Carter’s popularity stayed at about 30 percent, then moved up to about 38 in the second week; then rose up to 44 and then to 60. It slowly built up, and in the last week it just took off.”

Summing up the response to other questions concerning attitudes, he said “It’s not just a case of a the public rallying around the President. It’s a growing admiration and respect. The public approves of all the basic elements of the Carter handling of the crisis...”

“Most people were critical of the Shah’s past rule in Iran, felt we had a moral **commitment** [promise] to let him in our country and had a **restrained** [reserved] attitude toward how to deal with the crisis.”

Seventy-seven percent in the survey specifically approved of Mr. Carter’s handling of the Iranian situation. [49] percent favored diplomatic and economic sanctions against Iran, and 41 percent favored using military force, even if some of the remaining hostages were harmed as a result...”

Source: "Survey Finds Carter's Popularity Has Risen Sharply in Iran Crisis." *New York Times*, 10 Dec. 1979, sec. A: 22. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Accessed on 24 June 2013 at <http://search.proquest.com/docview/123894644?accountid=6126>.

---

**Document C: Letter to the Editor on the failed effort to rescue the hostages.**  
***Denver Post*, April 25, 1980 (Day 174).**

“It turned out unfortunately sad and tragic, but I am proud that it was at least attempted. All those politicians and news reporters who are trying to make President Carter out to be a fool because of its tragic failure would have been the first to jump on the bandwagon and called him a hero if it had turned out to be a success.”

Source: Lee Schweighart. “Letter to the Editor,” *Denver Post*, April 25, 1980. “American Experience: Reactions to the Hostage Crisis.” PBS. WGBH Educational Foundation, 1996-2012. Accessed on 23 June 2013 at: [www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/carter-444-text/?flavour=full](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/carter-444-text/?flavour=full).

---

**Document D: Stuart L. Koehl and Stephen P. Glick “Why the Rescue Failed.”**  
***American Spectator* (July 1980).**

“The Carter Administration and the Pentagon have both tried to excuse this fiasco by referring its failures to ‘equipment failure,’ but the conception and execution of the mission were so deficient and amateurish that it was probably doomed to failure from the start, especially when judged by the rules of warfare generally and of commando warfare in particular. ... Were the bungling and ineptness of Eagle Claw an anomaly, the raid would have no more significance than any other isolated incident of military stupidity. Instead, it is indicative of a decline in American military competence first noticed by some observers during the Vietnam war. ... A plan made by confident men would have been bold, risky, and successful. ... Much of the timidity of American foreign policy can be traced to a lack of confidence in our military forces to carry out the missions assigned to them...”

Source: Stuart L. Koehl and Stephen P. Glick “Why the rescue failed: There was more to Operation Eagle Claw’s failure in the desert of Iran than Jimmy told us.” *American Spectator* (July 1980). Accessed on 09/12/2014 at: <http://spectator.org/articles/34807/why-rescue-failed>.

---

**Document E: “Approval of Carter’s Foreign Policy Drops in Poll to Pre-Hostage Level.”**  
***New York Times*, June 25, 1980.**

“Increasing unhappiness over policy toward Iran and foreign policy in general has eroded President Carter’s public standing back to the level it had before the hostages were seized at the United States Embassy in Tehran, according to the latest New York Times/ CBS News Poll.

Only 20 percent of the public, the smallest in his presidency, now approves of Mr. Carter’s conduct of foreign policy, and the 30 percent who say they approve of his handling of the Presidency generally equals the percentage that backed him just before the embassy was seized last Nov. 4. His overall approval rating rose to 53 percent last February; it was 40 percent two months ago...

The President’s rating on his handling of the hostage situation declined to 29 percent approval. There appeared to be a strong correlation between growing unhappiness on that issue, on foreign policy in general and on the public’s view on how Mr. Carter has handled his job.

Only 30 percent of those polled, down from a high of 53 percent in February... said they approved of Mr. Carter’s handling of his job as President.

Source: Clymer, Adam. “Approval of Carter’s Foreign Policy Drops in Poll to Pre-Hostage Level.” *New York Times*, 25 June 1980, A1: n. pag. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. Accessed on 24 June 2013. <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/121035977?accountid=6126>>.



### Resource Sheet #03: Document Analysis Graphic Organizer – Public Opinion of President Jimmy Carter

Document	Date and Creator	For or Against Pres. Carter	Explanation	Evidence/Quote
A				
B				
C				
D				
E				

On the back, answer the following questions:

1. Which of the documents corroborate each other (say the same thing).
2. What details are similar between the documents? (What did the authors agree upon?)
3. Why might the other source(s) have a different perspective than those that corroborate?

## Resource Sheet #04

### Iran Hostage Crisis – Town Hall Organizer

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Using the information from the documents, state whether you support or oppose President Carter’s handling of the hostage crisis and explain why. Cite three pieces of evidence/examples that support your opinion. Include one counter argument to yours, along with one piece of evidence that supports it.

**Opinion:**

---

---

**Explanation:**

---

---

---

---

---

**Evidence 1:**

---

---

---

---

---

**Evidence 2:**

---

---

---

---

---

**Evidence 3:**

---

---

---

---

---

**Counter Argument:**

---

---

---

**Evidence for counter argument:**

---

---

---

## RS #05: ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric – Secondary

	Strategies/Procedural Concepts	Procedural Concepts	
Criteria	Corroboration	Claim	Evidence
<b>4</b>	Constructs an interpretation of events using information and perspectives in multiple sources. Identifies consistencies and inconsistencies among various accounts.	Formulates a plausible interpretation, argument, or claim based on the evaluation of evidence found in a variety of primary and secondary sources.	Justifies claims using appropriate direct evidence from a variety of reliable sources.
<b>3</b>	Explains similarities and differences by comparing information and perspectives in multiple sources.	Generates a reasonable interpretation, argument, or claim based on an evaluation of the evidence found in selected primary and secondary sources.	Justifies claims using some appropriate direct evidence from a variety of reliable sources.
<b>2</b>	Identifies similarities and differences in information in multiple sources.	States an interpretation, argument, or claim that may or may not be based on evidence found in selected primary and secondary sources.	Justifies claims using generalizations or limited appropriate direct evidence.
<b>1</b>	Demonstrates little to no attempt to examine sources for corroborating or conflicting evidence.	Does not state an original claim, argument, or interpretation.	Does not justify or support claims using appropriate direct evidence.