



Looking Towards the Sky

On June 30, International Asteroid Day has everyone looking towards the skies. The day was founded after the 2014 release of the film 51 Degrees North, which explores what would happen if an asteroid were to strike London. The film's creative team (many of whom are scientists) wanted to raise more awareness about the threat of asteroids to earth. In 2015, they celebrated the world's first International Asteroid Day. There are over one million asteroids in space that could potentially strike the earth, but modern scientists have only discovered about one per cent of them. The day focuses on spreading the word of the declaration and helping fellow Earthlings prepare for a potential asteroid impact.

● Francine Uenuma
editors' note, June 23, 2025: The United States bombed three sites in Iran on June 22, joining Israel's military campaign against the country. As the conflict enters a new phase, Smithsonian magazine is resurfacing this 2024 article about an American diplomat who was assassinated in Tehran in July 1924.

American diplomat Robert Imbrie arrived in Tehran in May 1924, two months after Prime Minister Reza Khan, a military officer who'd seized control of the country in a 1921 coup, tried, and failed, to turn Persia (now Iran) into a republic.

A crowd attacked Imbrie on July 18. Reza capitalized on the assassination to impose martial law and present himself to the U.S. as the only leader capable of maintaining order. He named himself Persia's monarch the following year.

American Vice Consul Robert Imbrie approached the crowd gathered at a sacred fountain in Tehran, the capital of Persia (now Iran), on the morning of July 18, 1924, wary due to ominous outbreaks of violence in recent weeks. His status as a diplomat did little to shield him when a member of the throng accused him of poisoning the Bolsheviks. Incensed, the mob attacked Imbrie and pursued him through the streets. Four hours later, Imbrie died of his injuries, becoming the first United States Foreign Service officer to be assassinated abroad.

Imbrie's killing angered the U.S. and inadvertently fueled the rise of an autocratic Iranian ruler who benefited from his death. The vice consul's story also intersects with two flashpoints in Iranian-American relations: a 1953 coup backed by the CIA and the 1979 Iran hostage crisis. On a more personal level, Imbrie bore the grim distinction of being the victim of "the most atrocious assault upon an official of the United States government in the history of this republic," as one member of Congress put it in 1927.

Imbrie was not only a diplomat but also a lawyer, a wartime volunteer and a spy. Born in Washington, D.C. on April 23, 1883, he was taken in by relatives upon the deaths of his parents. After graduating from Yale Law School, he worked as an attorney in between travels to Europe and a 1911 expedition to Congo, which piqued his sense of adventure.

During World War I, Imbrie volunteered as an ambulance driver in Europe, bolstered by his belief in the Allied cause. (The U.S. had not yet entered the war when he arrived in France in late 1915.) The conflict proved to be the most consequential event of Imbrie's youth. As he later recounted in his 1918 book, *Behind the Wheel of a War Ambulance*, he found himself alongside the likes of cowboys, mercenaries, a prospector and a football player.

"At the outbreak of the war, the restless ones of the earth flocked to France, drawn there by the

prospect of adventure and a desire to sit in the game," Imbrie wrote of his comrades and, by extension, of himself. Volunteering offered an opportunity to test his mettle: Hearing the rumble of gunfire for the first time, he "wondered whether my nerve would hold when confronted with the conditions I had come to seek."

Imbrie didn't hesitate when next offered a stint on the Eastern Front, which took him to Greece and Albania. His lengthy service earned him distinction.

"His curiosity, his interest in people and his adventuresomeness are just part of his personality," says Susan M. Stein, author of *On Distant Service*, a 2020 biography of Imbrie.

After leaving the French Army in April 1917, Imbrie pivoted to the diplomatic realm. He was appointed the U.S. vice consul in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) and arrived in Russia shortly before the Bolsheviks rose to power that November. It was a high-stakes first posting: In early 1918, the advance of the German Army prompted the relocation of the consulate's American staff. But Imbrie soon returned to become the U.S.'s sole representative in Petrograd.

While in Russia, Imbrie witnessed a peasant shot dead by a guard over a minuscule amount of food, a portent of the Great Famine that would soon claim millions of lives. Referencing the Bolsheviks in a 1919 telegram, the vice consul wrote, "For every reason, economic, political, humanitarian, should this menace to the world's peace be stamped out."

The rise of Bolshevism, and Imbrie's defiance of it, defined his tenure. He was tasked with gathering intelligence and assisting detained American citizens, a task that led to confrontations with the feared secret police. Imbrie's work placed him in such peril that unsubstantiated rumours of Bolshevik involvement in his death persisted for years.

"I'm never looking for trouble," Imbrie told the *New York Times* in 1918, "but if it comes, I'll welcome it with open arms."

By August 1918, the Bolsheviks were arresting foreigners, making Imbrie a marked man. Norwegian diplomats helped him escape.

Imbrie never returned to Petrograd, but his next destination was about as close as he could get: In early 1919, he arrived in Viborg, Finland (now part of Russia), where "his work consisted largely of securing intelligence reports on the Russian situation. It was a thrilling life," the *New York Times* reported.

The next year, Imbrie was sent to the ascendant Turkish nation, then forming out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. Initially posted to Constantinople (now Istanbul), he met a young Allen Dulles, future head of the CIA, who began his posting there around the same time.

Imbrie also met Katherine Gillespie, a relief worker whom he married in Constantinople on December 26, 1922. The newlyweds lived in a converted boxcar in Angora (now Ankara), where they were "the center of much admiration in local social circles," *Time*

His Death Shaped U.S.-Iran Relations for Decades

Imbrie's assignment to Persia came as the U.S. was eyeing access to the country's oil reserves, which the U.K. had dominated since the first geyser in the region spouted in 1908. The U.S. was lagging behind and seeking an entry point to the lucrative industry. Direct American engagement with Persian politics was limited. But Arthur Millspaugh, an American financial adviser employed by the Persian government, was working to restructure the foreign country's finances, including increasing revenue through taxes. His involvement made him, alternatively, friend and foe to an ascendant politician: Reza Shah Pahlavi (then known as Reza Khan), an officer in the Russian-style Persian Cossack Brigade.



Robert Whitney Imbrie, 1883-1924.



Imbrie Yale

noted. The Imbries' next move was to Persia, an assignment supported by Dulles, then chief of the State Department's Near Eastern Affairs Division. Upon the couple's arrival in May 1924, the department asked Imbrie to delay his posting to Tabriz so that he could fill in for the Tehran-based consul, who was on leave. Persia itself was in a state of

flux. In 1906, the successful Constitutional Revolution created a new parliamentary body, challenging the waning vestiges of the centuries-old monarchy. Clerical leaders, representing the majority Shiite Muslim population, secured political clout under the new constitution. Caught in the middle of a longstanding rivalry between the United Kingdom and Russia, Persia was also transformed by the turbulence of World War I.

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In 1921, Reza supported a coup

that won him control of Persia's armed forces. In 1923, he rose to the position of prime minister. He tried to take his restructuring one step further, pushing for a republic-style government in March 1924, but met with opposition, particularly from Shiite clerical leaders like Sayyid Hassan Modarres. In December 1925, Reza declared himself monarch (shah) of Persia, founding the Pahlavi dynasty just a year and a half after Imbrie was killed.

"There was quite a bit going on in addition to all of the oil interests in the country, so political, religious, commercial, all of these factors were coming together as Imbrie entered Persia," says Stein.

Once again, Imbrie was ready to venture into new terrain. Recounting his journey to Persia from Baghdad, the vice consul wrote dryly to his friend John Oliver La Gorce, vice president of the National Geographic Society: "I began to feel, when I saw men wearing knives, that at last we were in a he-country. We had poor luck, not being held up or shot at, but aside from this had a very good trip."



Mohammad Mossadegh.



Imbrie's wife Katherine.

lent incidents against the Baha'i, a minority religious group viewed as a heretical sect by the majority Shiite Muslim population. Imbrie sensed the inflaming of religious belief for political ends, noting in a June 11, 1924 dispatch that the

demonstrations were 'engineered by the mullahs (Muslim clergy), subsidized by the government.' He added, "Mobs fired by oratory and hashish swarmed through the streets, unhindered by the police, crying against Baha'ists."



Reza Shah's coronation.



Reza addresses parliament on December 6, 1925.

The term 'he-man' (or, in this case, 'he-country') is one that Imbrie used often in his writing. According to Stein, it was indicative of the model of manhood he wanted to emulate. As Dulles once wrote, Imbrie was 'a man of ... impetuous disposition.'

Many of the Americans living in Tehran at the time were Presbyterian missionaries, who had established schools and medical facilities there. The Imbries quickly befriended a prominent member of that community, Harry P. Packard, a physician who had spent nearly two decades in Tehran. Soon, Packard would attend to the mortally wounded Imbrie.

The weeks leading up to Imbrie's killing saw a spate of vio-

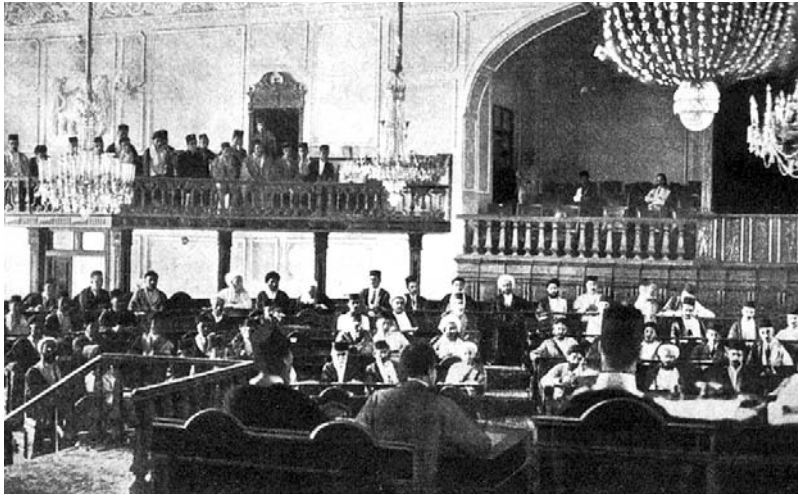
#AMERICAN DIPLOMAT IN PERSIA



Imbrie poses in front of a vehicle in Tehran in 1924.



Arrival of body of Maj Imbrie at Wash Navy Yard.



Parliament, Tehran, 1906.



Reza Shah's uniform.



Allen Dulles.

For Reza, anger at the Baha'is was a far preferable focus for mullah-led opposition than his own tenuous grasp on political power. "The violence in the streets, which is aimed against the Baha'is is, in a sense, Reza's way of yielding to the clergy," says Michael Zirinsky, an emeritus historian at Boise State University, who has written extensively about this period.

Reza's stature had been eroded by his failed bid that sprung to form a republic. It was made even more precarious by a wave of demonstrations over the July 3 killing of a popular newspaper editor by two police agents. "There was this wide hostility to the idea of a republic, and there were demonstrations against Reza, and in early 1924, it looked very much like he had lost his grip," says Zirinsky.

Imbrie waded directly into this tumult, defending two American Baha'i women, physician Susan Moody and nurse Elizabeth Stewart, after angry crowds gathered outside of their home. By demanding government protection, Moody later asserted to reporters

to their carriage, making their way to the nearby Cossack barracks, which Reza then commanded. But they found no harbor there, and blows rained down on them from demonstrators and Cossack soldiers alike. The bloodied men escaped to the hospital, where Packard rushed to attend to Imbrie's wounds, but the rioters soon breeched the building, tearing tiles from the floor of the operating room and using them to inflict grievous wounds on Imbrie's skull. According to Packard's post-mortem report, Imbrie sustained more than 138 wounds, many from sharp objects. He was conscious throughout the attack.

Four horrific hours later, at 3 P.M., Imbrie succumbed to his injuries. He was 41 years old. Seymour, meanwhile, eventually recovered and returned to the U.S.

News of Imbrie's death was met with shock and umbrage. While the possibility of violence against a foreigner amid the anti-Baha'i agitation was well known, the fact that Imbrie's status as an American Foreign Service officer had done nothing to save him, was especially disturbing.

The U.S. threatened to withdraw its representation in Persia and issued a series of demands,

among them full financial compensation for the repatriation of Imbrie's body, with full military honours, and additional compensation for his wife, Katherine, who was attacked in a car after her husband's death.

"The thing that struck me about the archives was that they reflect ignorance, arrogance and a deter-

mination to get revenge on the Persians," says Zirinsky. "And a lot of this seems to be directed by Allen Dulles," Imbrie's friend and boss.

Imbrie's body arrived in Quantico, Virginia, in late September. His funeral at Washington's storied New York Avenue Presbyterian Church was attended by President Calvin Coolidge, and Dulles was among his pallbearers. The words "French Army" and "Foreign Service," highlighting the start and end of Imbrie's career overseas, are inscribed on his headstone at Arlington National Cemetery, where he is buried alongside Katherine, who died in 1968.

Initially, the Persian government claimed the deaths were an 'accident' caused by Imbrie and Seymour's 'own carelessness in going to a sacred place and persisting in taking pictures.' Millspaugh, the economic adviser, similarly argued that 'a foreigner should have realized the extreme danger with respect to any religious manifestation, of provocative action or inappropriate intrusion.'

Whatever role Imbrie might have played in inciting the crowd, Persian representatives moved quickly to assure American officials that 'the culprits will receive drastic punishment after their trial,' as *Time* reported. The trial would take place under martial law, freshly imposed by Reza. The Persian prime minister could 'make use of the present crisis to rid himself of clerical opposition,' the *New York Times* predicted in an article about the decline of 'Mohammedan' influence in the country. "His chance for putting through reorganization will be measurably better."

"Reorganization" was a euphemism for what came next. Reza oversaw the arrest and trial of three teenage scapegoats. Though the court sentenced all three to death, the Persian government commuted two of these sentences to life imprisonment, a reversal that attracted the ire of Dulles and leading politicians in Washington. Ultimately the Persians moved forward with the three executions, fulfilling their promise that American representatives could bear witness to the proceedings.

The teenagers, ranging in age from 14 to 19, would pay for the mob's actions with their lives. As Zirinsky wrote in a 1986 journal article, "Despite strong evidence of high-level military involvement in the riot that led to Imbrie's death, the United States did not insist on punishment of high-ranking officers, nor did it distance itself from a prime minister who also had been implicated."

Whether Reza effected, enabled or cunningly took advantage of Imbrie's death is impossible to prove. Speaking to reporters, Packard suggested that the death of an American in Persia was a political maneuver planned as an excuse to declare martial law. "The speed with which Reza moves is just amazing," says Stein, highlighting the prime minister's fall 1924 military campaign to bring outlying regions firmly under his control. "It just seems so much was in

readiness." The executions seemed sufficient to quell the diplomatic outrage, in part by affording Reza the opportunity to present himself to the U.S. as the only viable alternative to the 'fanatical mobs,' as they were described in contemporary accounts.

"The choice is between a military dictator and chaos under clerical leaders like Modarres," says Zirinsky.

By the end of 1925, Reza had named himself monarch. On April 25, 1926, he was crowned in a dazzling coronation, marking the culmination of his ascension to the famed Peacock Throne of Persia.

Two decades later, Reza's rule was interrupted by the geopolitical shuffle of World War II. Known as the 'Pahlavi Revolution,' the shah's domain boasted oil and a vital location as a supply corridor. In the aftermath of Germany's 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, which bordered Iran at the time, the U.K. forced Reza to abdicate, replacing him with his more acquiescent eldest son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

The younger shah faced his own major crisis involving foreign powers. In 1951, Iranian politician Mohammad Mossadegh, who had opposed granting Reza monarchical powers in 1925, was named prime minister. Mossadegh attempted to nationalize Iran's lucrative oil reserves, attracting the ire of the U.K., which had retained control of the oil fields after World War II. The take down Mossadegh, the British turned to the CIA, then under the leadership of none other than Imbrie's one-time friend Dulles. Fearful of the Soviet Union's growing influence in Iran, the American agency orchestrated a coup that ousted Mossadegh from power in August 1953.

After fleeing the country during the tumult of Mossadegh's overthrow, the shah was promptly reinstated. Over the next two decades, his brutal repression of dissent engendered resentment, as did the U.S.'s support of him.

On November 4, 1979, student supporters of the Shiite cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, taking dozens of American citizens hostage for 444 days. The Islamic Revolution that directly preceded this attack was a seismic event, putting Khomeini, a former student of the clerical leader Modarres, in full control of Iran and ending the Pahlavi dynasty's nearly 54-year reign.

When it comes to risk, the line between justifiable curiosity and roguish recklessness is a thin one, as it was during Imbrie's fatal encounter in Tehran just over a century ago. Imbrie chose to go to the outer fringes of American diplomatic relations, affording him a life of adventure and consequence, one that ended prematurely but influenced the trajectory of his country's relationship with Iran. As Zirinsky says, "The events of 1924 show threats in Iranian culture and politics which had been there for a very long time, and they culminate again in the Islamic Revolution."

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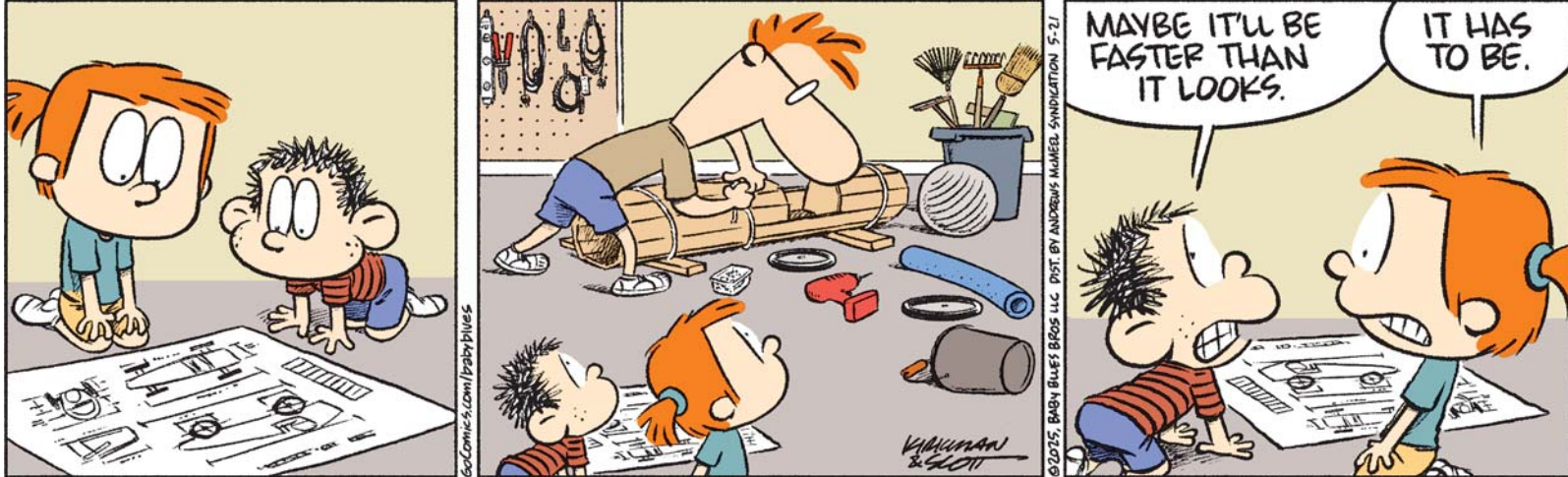
Iran hostage crisis- iraninan students come up US Embassy in Tehran.



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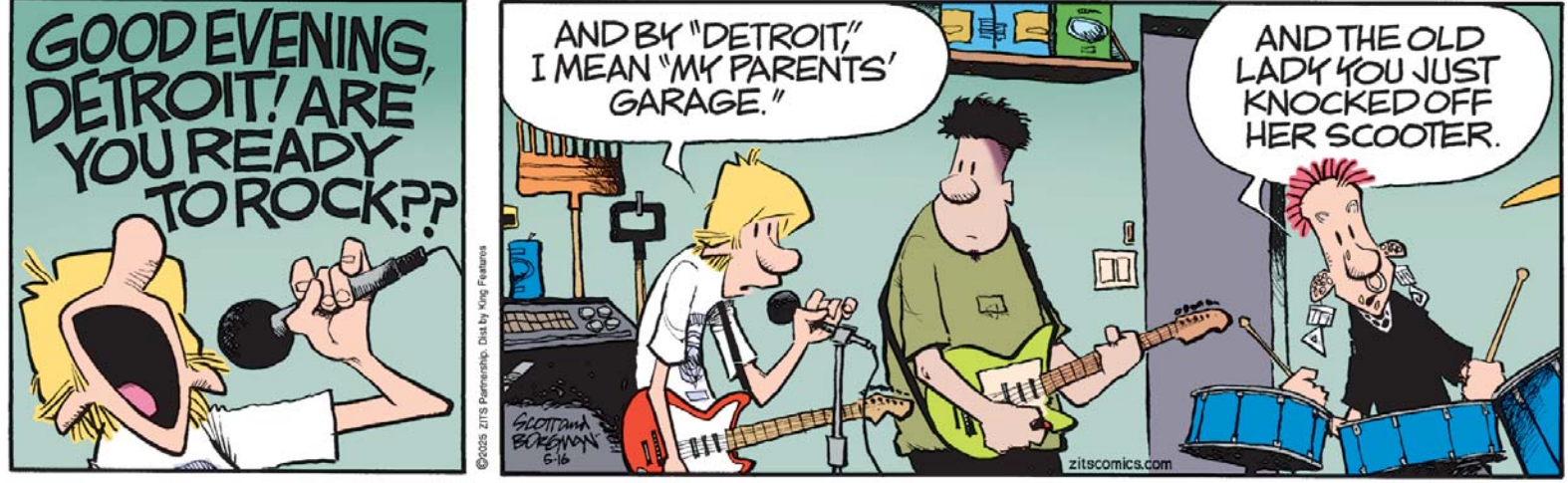


BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman