

# Editorial

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## Our Ultimate Weapon: Retreat

The ups and downs of the Iranian crisis demonstrate again that the source of much of our woe is within us. Firmness and rigidity by others make us doubt our rightness as we abandon one position after another in a long and steady series of retreats. Walter Cronkite reported, for instance, that the FBI was instructed not to check too closely on Iranians admitted into the U.S. in the last few months so as not to alienate Khomeini, even when they were known to be ex-terrorists and troublemakers. Undignified retreat has become our middle name. Only the affluent and the comfortable who have sufficient space to retreat into can engage in such a dubious luxury, but not for long. Both affluence and safety have always been lost this way.

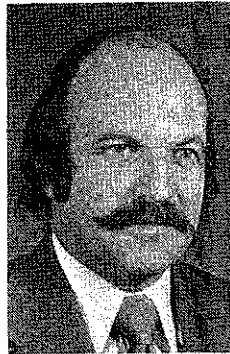
Those who must struggle for personal or national existence, having few choices, cannot afford to yield so easily. No survivors exist who did not have the courage or the will to be forceful, even in the face of extreme adversity and fear. Britain in World War II and Israel during the last 30 years are prime examples. The fear of losing our relative comfort clouds our judgment and weakens our stand, and our adversaries recognize this and take advantage of it.

"We have nothing to negotiate with," claimed a somewhat desperate *Washington Post* reporter from Teheran, "now that the Shah has gone to Egypt," as if that were *our* issue, rather than the one of the kidnappers'. Our reasoning has slowly changed under repeated exposure to the big lie, and even we tend to forget what *our* real issues are. The Iranians have successfully dragged us, step by step, into seeing the situation more and more as they do. The same thing has been done by the bureaucracy to the private practice of Medicine. The leadership of the country, as that of the profession, has often lost perspective in the pursuit of single points.

Appeasement not only never yields the desired results, but it also always involves self-degradation and self-humiliation. It invariably encourages the aggressor to commit ever more flagrant acts of abuse, for appeasement is correctly understood as an expression of weakness, stimulated by fear. It legitimizes distortions of reality, and eventually leads to greater disasters.

What is true about our society in general, is true about the medical profession in particular. We have been worn down and become weary by being subjected, year after year, to the need to defend the right to make independent medical judgments. Compromises that appeared impossible only a few short years ago are now routine. A shortage of perspective may be even more dangerous than an energy shortage.

Forecasting the future is an activity of questionable reliability. But, anyone contemplating the odds of surviving by anyone who would not stand up for his or her vital



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interests knows that they are very, very low, unless radical changes occur. This is as true for the United States as a nation as it is for the private practice of medicine as a profession.

Radical changes are very difficult to come by, however. They require leadership that is not self-serving, and followers who realize that short-term ease may well be the guaranteed way to self destruction. Knowledge of what we are up to may not in itself stir us to do what we must. Perhaps the actual experience of the beginning to slide downwards will wake us before it is too late.

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