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Restoring the Presidency: Ronald Reagan, Iran-Contra, and the Anatomy of a Foreign Policy Scandal

By

Joseph A. Ledford

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

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Abstract

Restoring the Presidency: Ronald Reagan, Iran-Contra, and the Anatomy of a Foreign Policy Scandal

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Joseph A. Ledford

Doctor of Philosophy in History

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This dissertation examines the Iran-Contra affair, a major scandal during Ronald Reagan's presidency that resulted from National Security Council Staffer Oliver North's scheme to convert profits from secret arms-for-hostages deals with Iran into aid for the Nicaraguan Contras to support their war against the Sandinista government. Popular and scholarly literature offer dramatic narratives of the events and personalities but neglect to assess the transformative effects of Iran-Contra on American foreign policy and political institutions. This dissertation, in contrast, argues that Iran-Contra became the defining post-Vietnam War clash over presidential power: the affair ended the vigorous reassertion of congressional power that the Vietnam War and Watergate inspired, propelling a surprising—and rapid—reanimation of the so-called "Imperial Presidency." Deriving political security from his public *mea culpa* and a congressional aversion to impeachment, this dissertation contends, Reagan rescued his presidency and, in the process, restored the president as the arbiter of foreign policy, a consequence of the bipartisan consensus on a strong presidency serving as the foundation for American national security.

Drawing on the most comprehensive set of Iran-Contra related documents to date, this dissertation seeks to explain how, why, and with what consequences Reagan executed a remarkable political recovery and resurrected presidential power from a scandal that threatened, for a time, to compound the presidency's post-Watergate diminution. It focuses on the interplay of domestic politics and foreign policy that produced the scandal and shows how the resulting crisis of the presidency transformed American governance.

This dissertation analyzes Iran-Contra in four parts. Part I traces the origin of Iran-Contra in three chapters on its domestic and geopolitical contexts. Part II follows the initial two months of Iran-Contra's public revelation, concluding with the discovery of the diversion memorandum. It presents for the first time a careful reconstruction of Reagan's decision-making during this pivotal period when Iran-Contra evolved into a crisis. Part III examines Reagan's recovery from Iran-Contra in two chapters, from disclosing the diversion to issuing a public apology. It details why institutional and personal factors endowed Reagan with political security against the scandal and enabled the restoration of his presidency. Part IV follows Iran-Contra's resolution in two chapters on the official investigations. It explores inquiries by Congress and the independent counsel, as well as the congressional probes into the October Surprise conspiracy theory.

For Grace

Who was present at the creation

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Grace Wynn—darling, light of my life—made it all possible without turning me into a dull boy. This dissertation is dedicated to her. We sacrificed our time together so that it could be researched and written. The reader may differ, but we determined the endeavor was worth the cost.

All errors contained herein are the author's own.

Enjoy.

Introduction

War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him.
The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner.
Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West[1]

They called it the Reagan revolution.
Ronald Reagan, Farewell Address, January 11, 1988[2]

Ronald Reagan suffered the greatest political crisis of his presidency during the Iran-Contra affair. It resulted from covert operations overseen by the National Security Council in Central America and the Middle East intersecting. In Nicaragua, Reagan steadfastly supported the Contras, a loose-knit group of counterrevolutionaries, in their war against the Sandinista government, a controversial policy that Congress sought to end through the Boland amendments, which prohibited funding for the insurgency. In Iran, meanwhile, Reagan engaged in clandestine arms transactions with the Islamic Republic, whereby Iran received weapons in exchange for securing the release of American hostages held in Lebanon by Shiite militants, an initiative contradicting Reagan's arms embargo on Iran and his stated policy of not offering concessions to terrorists. A central figure in both operations, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver L. North, the deputy director of political-military affairs for the NSC, concocted what he called "a neat idea" of using the Ayatollah's money to fund the overthrow of the Sandinistas. North overcharged the Iranians and converted the profits into assistance for the Contras, a scheme triggering the most consequential inter-branch clash over presidential power in the post-Vietnam War period. A major foreign policy scandal that, for a brief period, heralded Reagan's demise.[3]

The scandal known as Iran-Contra unfurled in October and November 1986. Details of the private Contra supply network emerged in the press after a cargo plane loaded with arms crashed in Nicaragua on October 5, 1986, leaving behind a surviving American crew member, Eugene Hasenfus.[4] A month later, the Lebanese weekly *Ash-Shiraa* published an account of secret arms deals and ongoing diplomatic talks between Iran and the United States. Reports of the Iran initiative subsequently appeared in the *New York Times*.[5] The disclosure of both operations raised questions about the legality of Reagan's covert actions. Reagan's continued support for the Contras was in defiance of the Boland amendments. The arms shipments to Iran possibly violated statutes governing covert action and the transfers of arms to foreign countries.[6] Sensational media coverage accompanied the disclosures, encouraged by the Reagan

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[1] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Random House, 1985), 259.
[2] Ronald Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1988-1989 (in Two Books) Book 2--July 2, 1988, to January 19, 1989* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), 1718-1723.
[3] United States. Congress., *Testimony of Oliver L. North (Questioning by Counsels): Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition*, Vol. 100-7, Part 1, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 7, 8, 9, and 10, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 109; On Oliver North, see Ben Bradlee Jr., *Guts and Glory: The Rise and Fall of Oliver North* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1988).
[4] Richard Halloran, "American is Captured After Plane is Downed in Nicaragua Territory," *New York Times*, October 8, 1986, A1.
[5] Ihsan A. Hijazi, "Hostage's Release Is Linked to Shift in Iranian Policy," *New York Times*, November 4, 1986, A1.
[6] Edwin Timbers, "Legal and Institutional Aspects of the Iran-Contra Affair," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter 1990): 31-41.

administration's denials. The scandal soon engulfed the White House when Attorney General Edwin Meese uncovered North's diversion and revealed his discovery to the country. It appeared that "full-blown Watergate-style hearings in both Houses" were on the horizon. The direness of Reagan's situation amplified in the echoes of Watergate reverberating inside Washington D.C. Another popular two-term president was enmeshed in a political scandal.[7]

Indeed, Congress, the Office of Independent Counsel, and a presidential commission investigated Iran-Contra, a series of inquiries spanning from 1986 until 1993. In December 1986, Reagan appointed a Special Review Board (Tower Commission), which conducted a three-month probe of the NSC's operational role. Congress convened a Joint Select Committee between the House and Senate, undertaking an eleven-month inquiry, complete with high-profile public hearings. Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh pursued a lengthy criminal probe from December 1986 until February 1993. Through these investigations North's clandestine activities became public knowledge. Americans learned that North worked alongside retired general Richard Secord and his business partner Albert Hakim to supply the Contra insurgency in Nicaragua using a private network funded with over $40 million in domestic and foreign contributions. The same network facilitated the sale of Tube-launched Optically-tracked Wire-guided (TOW) missiles, Homing All the Way Killer missiles (HAWK), and spare parts to Iran in exchange for the release of hostages Reverend Benjamin Weir, Father Lawrence Jenco, and David Jacobsen. Crucially, North's diversion of profits from the Iranian arms sales to the Contra war effort would become the crux of the scandal—what did Reagan know about the diversion, and did he authorize it? Although Reagan had authorized the operations, he did not know about the diversion. Reagan would escape impeachment and surmount Iran-Contra, a startling result examined in the chapters that follow.[8]

Reagan's role in Iran-Contra has become the subject of controversy and intrigue. Theodore Draper and Malcolm Byrne have written the authoritative descriptive accounts. Released in 1991, Draper's *A Very Thin Line* draws principally on documents released by Congress, the Tower Commission, and the criminal trials of Oliver North and former National Security Advisor John Poindexter. Draper produced a lucid reconstruction of Iran-Contra, but he did so before the independent counsel concluded. Draper's work was the definitive account until Byrne's 2014 *Iran-Contra,* a painstaking narrative of the scandal that recounts the covert operations in minute detail based on the prodigious volume of declassified records released over the past thirty years. Byrne's narrative situates Iran-Contra within the partisan divide over foreign policy during the post-Vietnam War period when Congress sought to restrain the president's conduct in foreign affairs by enacting the Arms Export Control Act, Intelligence

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[7] Memo, Pat Buchanan to Donald T. Reagan, "Iran/Contragate," December 19, 1986, ID # 484001, CO071, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California; On the legacy of Watergate affecting presidential scandals, see Bob Woodward, *Shadow: Five Presidents and the Legacy of Watergate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

[8] John Tower, Brent Scowcroft, and Edmund S. Muskie, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President's Special Review Board* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987); Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters.* U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, August 4, 1993. Vol. I*: Investigations and Prosecutions;* Vol. II*: Indictments, Plea Agreements, Interim Reports to the Congress, and Administrative Matters;* Vol. III*: Comments and Materials Submitted by Individuals and Their Attorneys Responding to Volume I of the Final Report* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993); U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views.* 100th Congress, 1st Sess., Senate Report 100-216, November (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987).

Oversight Act, and the War Powers Resolution. Byrne shows Reagan's deep involvement in the covert actions responsible for Iran-Contra. Byrne finds Reagan guilty of "grave misconduct," but he offers only brief analysis on the scandal's ramifications. Byrne's expert recreation of the theatrical interplay of events and personalities ignores the profound effect of Iran-Contra on American foreign policy and political institutions. This focus on misconduct, which, above all, elevates transgressions over historical change, presents a complicated story of *how* Iran-Contra happened rather than a developed argument about *why* it transformed American governance.[9]

Iran-Contra was the defining post-Vietnam War clash over presidential power in the realm of foreign policy: it ended the vigorous reassertion of congressional power that Vietnam and the Watergate inspired, propelling a surprising—and rapid—reanimation of the "Imperial Presidency."[10] The affair thereby dispelled the hulking shadows of Vietnam and Watergate. Reagan restored the presidency as the arbiter of foreign policy, this dissertation argues, a consequence of the bipartisan consensus on a strong presidency serving as the foundation for American national security. Washington had not become anesthetized by the tragedies of the 1970s, but rather acutely aware of the debilitating effects of major scandals and impeachment proceedings. Iran-Contra thus transcended the exploits of NSC staff. Fundamentally, it concerned elite decision-makers in Washington managing a crisis of the American national security apparatus. And it proved to be a watershed moment in the inter-branch contest over the exercise of foreign affairs. Edwin Corwin famously argued that "the Constitution is an invitation to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy."[11] In the Reagan era, Congress accepted the invite but departed the engagement in deference to the president, a decision made in what congressional leaders determined as the national interest.[12] What follows strives to explain how, why, and with what consequences Reagan was able to execute a remarkable political recovery and resurrect presidential power from a scandal that threatened, for a time, to compound the presidency's post-Watergate diminution.

Retold, the history of Iran-Contra reveals an ironic constitutional crisis with a counterintuitive outcome. The solutions to Cold War dilemmas in Central America and terrorism in the Middle East that Reagan improvised enmired his administration in scandal, jeopardizing his presidency, but its resolution secured his political absolution and tilted the constitutional balance of power towards the presidency. Congress at first responded to Reagan's Central

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[9] Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991); Malcolm Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2014); Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus deserve an honorable mention. Drawing on interviews and sources from the Tower Commission and Congress, Mayer and McManus offer a journalistic account of Iran-Contra within a critical portrayal of Reagan's second term. See Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus, *Landslide: The Unmaking of the President, 1984-1988* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

[10] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1973); Andrew Rudalevige views Iran-Contra as one event in a long erosion of the "resurgence regime" of Congress to reign in the presidency. See Andrew Rudalevige, *The New Imperial Presidency: Renewing presidential Power after Watergate* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 8, 136, 139, 156–58, 175, 181, 183, 200–3; On the state of a resurgent Congress and the president in the year before Reagan assumed office, see Thomas E Cronin, "A Resurgent Congress and the Imperial Presidency," *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 95, no. 2 (1980): 209–37.

[11] Edward S. Corwin, *The President: Office and Powers, 1787-1984*, ed. Randall Bland, Theodore T. Hindson, and Jack W. Peltason, 5th ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 201.

[12] Raison d'état has existed since the emergence of the modern state system. This study suggests that it is applicable to the outcome of the Iran-Contra affair. On the United States, see H.W. Brands, "The Idea of the National Interest," *Diplomatic History* Vol. 23, no. 2 (1999): 239–61; See also Charles A. Beard, *The Idea of National Interest: An Analytical Study in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillian, 1934); Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951).

American embroilments by acting, preemptively, to restrain Reagan from aiding anti-communist insurgents in Nicaragua. But when the Contra enterprise intersected with an ill-considered operation to sell arms to Iran, Congress abstained from impeaching Reagan, this dissertation contends, lest doing so imperil American national security, domestic political order, and the presidency itself. Instead, Congress commenced a fact-finding investigation and held hearings that served as a forum for both partisan theatrics and critical debates about bipartisanship in foreign policy. This exercise also produced the Republican-authored minority report, which provided the intellectual impetus to an energized post-Cold War presidency. Congress invoked its political mandate to reveal the affair to the public but declined to seek radical legislative reforms. Citizens, in the end, would render the final verdict on Reagan's conduct through the democratic process, as reflected in both their approval of his presidency and choices at the ballot box, a resolution that Reagan and congressional leaders desired.

Out of a major foreign policy scandal, moreover, Reagan effected a more streamlined national security process. The Tower Commission, for its part, redressed the scandal by empowering the National Security Council, assisting a return of the agency to its "honest broker" advisory role. Reagan tasked a bipartisan group of seasoned policymakers to review the NSC and suggest reforms. The breakdown within the national security bureaucracy had warranted its own kind of restoration.[13] Institutions entrusted with responsibilities for war and national security have emerged, mostly, through reactive waves of institutional improvisation and consolidation, which accelerated through the world wars and crested in the Vietnam era. As the cornerstone of the inter-agency process, the NSC serves a vital role in the national security state. Its revamping in the wake of Iran-Contra was no less a reactive enterprise, one inspired by the domestic political blowback of foreign policy malpractice.[14]

The politics of presidential scandal, meanwhile, continued into the 1990s, affecting American governance beyond Reagan's tenure. Independent Counsel Walsh investigated Iran-Contra through George H.W. Bush's presidency, while Congress initiated investigations into the October Surprise conspiracy theory, which alleged collusion between the Reagan campaign and Iran to influence the outcome of the 1980 presidential election. The prolonged criminal probe into Iran-Contra transformed into a matter of partisan politics after Walsh indicted former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger three days before the 1992 presidential election. The closed-door congressional investigations into allegations that Reagan conspired with Iran to

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[13] Honest broker has become common parlance to describe the role of the national security adviser. Here, this study is referring to its use in the Tower Report, See *Tower Report*, 11-3; see also, John P. Burke, "The Neutral/Honest Broker Role in Foreign-Policy Decision Making: A Reassessment," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* Vol. 35, no. 2 (2005): 229–58; On the National Security Council, see John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: Morrow, 1991); David J. Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); On Reagan's NSC, see Constantine C. Menges, *Inside the National Security Council : The True Story of the Making and Unmaking of Reagan's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).

[14] On the construction of the national security state, see Ernest R. May, "The U.S. Government, a Legacy of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* Vol. 16, no. 2 (1992): 269–77; see also Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Garry Willis, *Bomb Power: The Modern Presidency and the National Security State* (New York: Penguin, 2010); Douglas T. Stuart, *Creating the National Security State: A History of the Law That Transformed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); On the inherent problems of the national security apparatus, see Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

delay the release of American hostages to win in 1980 also rekindled partisan passions. Five years after the Joint Select Committee had dispensed with Iran-Contra, the scandal produced a second major effect on presidential politics, one that exhausted Washington's willingness to deal with the scandal and its ancillary controversies.[15]

In addition to Byrne and Draper, this dissertation engages with an array of popular and scholarly literature. As an episode central to Reagan's legacy, Iran-Contra cuts across several themes and fields, occupying an anomalous place in the scholarship. While Byrne and Draper have produced the principal narratives, journalists and scholars have relegated Iran-Contra to the sole status of a political scandal, a single sensational episode upending Reagan's presidency. In biographies, Iran-Contra situates within the broader context of Reagan's political life, often described by biographers in great detail and generally regarded as one of Reagan's biggest blunders.[16] Iran-Contra is also a small feature in critiques of Reagan's presidency and the Reagan era broadly.[17] Participants in the affair, too, have provided their version of the scandal in memoirs based on their time in the Reagan administration, which offer the insight of individual experiences but vary in validity and quality.[18] Historians, for their part, have likewise approached Iran-Contra as a scandal, exploring it within the confines of the domestic political process and the history of presidential scandals.[19]

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[15] On Lawrence Walsh's person experience with his investigation, see Lawrence E. Walsh, *Firewall: The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-up* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); On the October Surprise conspiracy, see Robert Parry, *Trick or Treason: The October Surprise Mystery* (New York: Sheridan Square Press, 1993); Gary Sick, *October Surprise: America's Hostages in Iran and the Election of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Times Books, 1991); United States. Congress., *Joint Report of the Task Force to Investigate Certain Allegations Concerning the Holding of American Hostages by Iran in 1980*, 102d Congress, 2d Sess., January 3, 1993 (Washington: GPO, 1993); United States. Senate. *The "October Surprise" allegations and the circumstances surrounding the release of the American hostages held in Iran* : report of the Special Counsel to Senator Terry Sanford and Senator James M. Jeffords of the Committee on Foreign Relations, 102d Congress, 2d Sess., November 19, 1992 (Washington: GPO, 1992).

[16] Lou Cannon has written the most in-depth treatment in his biography of Reagan, see Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 589-738; See also, Richard Reeves, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 267-270, 273-274, 297-299, 314, 318, 330-331, 338, 359-360, 362-364, 367-375, 378-379, 388, 392, 381-382, 388-400, 402, 404-409, 411-412, 488; Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution: 1980–1989* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), 4, 16, 131, 260, 403-404, 437, 440, 446, 515-516, 525, 529-550, 556, 591; H.W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2015), 232, 237, 615-617, 619-629, 630-653, 675, 697, 699, 709, 721, 735; Bob Spitz, *Reagan: An American Journey* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 630, 675-682, 738-739, 756, 684-685, 699-700, 703-704, 716.

[17] Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 7, 9, 166, 182-186, 189-200, 203, 215-221; Haynes Johnson, *Sleepingwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 289-301, 321-371, 388, 390, 432, 471.

[18] For examples, see Elliott Abrams, *Undue Process a Story of How Political Differences Are Turned into Crimes* (New York: Free Press, 1992); David Abshire, *Saving the Reagan Presidency: Trust Is the Coin of the Realm* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005); William S. Cohen and George J. Mitchell, *Men of Zeal: A Candid Inside Story of the Iran-Contra Hearings* (New York: Viking, 1988); Michael A. Ledeen, *Perilous Statecraft: An Insider's Account of the Iran-Contra Affair* (New York: Scribner, 1988); Robert C. McFarlane, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell & Davies, 1994); Oliver North, *Under Fire: An American Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Donald T. Regan, *For the Record: From Wall Street to Washington* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988); Richard V. Secord, *Honored and Betrayed: Irangate, Covert Affairs, and the Secret War in Laos* (New York: Wiley, 1992); George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph My Years As Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner, 1993).

[19] On the public's reaction to the media's presentation of Iran-Contra and how it relates to the American political process, see David Thelen, *Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television: How Americans Challenged the Media and Seized Political Initiative during the Iran-Contra Debate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); On Iran-

As a foreign policy scandal, diplomatic historians have treated Iran-Contra as a minor subplot in the history of Reagan's foreign policy. Yet Iran-Contra combined elements of both the Cold War and the transnational threats transcending it. The Contra War located in Reagan's quest to best the Soviet Union. This dissertation proposes that Iran-Contra was not only a threshold in the re-making of presidential power after Watergate, but also both an expression and a result of Reagan's contradictory Cold War strategies. Reagan committed at the outset to pursue diplomatic engagement with the Soviet Union, but he also sought to rollback Soviet geopolitical advances through the Reagan Doctrine, especially in Central America with support for the Contras. Historians have generally emphasized this aspect of the scandal.[20] The Iran initiative, however, may have emerged from separate circumstances, but the arms-for-hostages deals outraged congressional leaders and dominated the public and private discourse during the scandal's onset. In the Middle East, Reagan grappled with terrorism and regional disorder created by the advent of the Islamic Republic. As this dissertation shows, Reagan embarked on a desperate bid to save hostages in Lebanon, which he thought would have the secondary effect of creating a rapprochement with Iran, based on assumptions about the spread of Soviet influence as well as his personal commitment to rescuing American citizens.[21]

This dissertation, then, examines Iran-Contra with a focus on the interplay of domestic politics and foreign policy that produced the affair. It centers the American state, emphasizing the crucial role that foreign policy has in shaping American politics and institutions. The analysis explores the relationship between the executive and legislative branches in both executing

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Contra in context with other scandals during the Reagan administration, see Jeremi Suri, "Worse than Watergate: The Scandals of Ronald Reagan's Presidency," in James M. Banner, Jr. and C. Vann Woodward, eds., *Presidential Misconduct: From George Washington to Today*, revised and expanded edition (New York: New Press, 2019), 405-19; See also James F. Siekmeier, "The Iran-Contra Affair," in Andrew L. Johns, ed., *A Companion to Ronald Reagan* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 321-338.

[20] Reagan's involvement in Central America remains a contentious topic. There are two eminent accounts of Reagan's policy toward Nicaragua, both of which devote some attention to Iran-Contra. See Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* (New York: Free Press, 1996) and William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); On Reagan's involvement in Central America, see also Roy Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy: The Making of American Policy in Nicaragua, 1981-1987* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); Holly Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1988); Peter Kornbluh, *Nicaragua, The Price of Intervention: Reagan's Wars Against the Sandinistas* (Washington, D.C: Institute for Policy Studies, 1987); Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Lain America, the United States, and the Making of an Imperial Republic* (New York: Picador, 2021); On the Reagan Doctrine, see Mark P. Lagon, *The Reagan Doctrine: Sources of American Conduct in the Cold War's Last Chapter* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1994); James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Chester Pach, "The Reagan Doctrine: Principle, Pragmatism, and Policy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* Vol. 36, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 75–88; In the most recent edited collection on Reagan's foreign policy, Iran-Contra receives brief mention in several chapters, see eds. Jonathan R. Hunt and Simon Miles, *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 10, 11, 74–75, 79, 175, 182, 193, 212, 224–225, 238–241, 250–251, 258n67, 274.

[21] The historiography of Reagan's Iran policy in general and the role of Iran-Contra in Middle East policy in particular is underdeveloped. For discussions of Iran-Contra, see Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 168-191; See also Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 110-126, 129; On Iran-Contra's effect on the relationship between the US and Iraq, see Hal Brands, "Inside the Iraqi State Records: Saddam Hussein, 'Irangate', and the United States," *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 43, No. 1 (2011): 95-118; On the Israeli role in Iran-Contra, see Samuel Segev, *The Iranian Triangle: The Untold Story of Israel's Role in the Iran-Contra Affair* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).

foreign policy and resolving a scandal stemming from it. The foreign policy-making process—formulation, implementation, and articulation—and congressional committee oversight—creation, investigation, and conclusion—form key parts of the narrative. The style of presidential politics resulting from a foreign policy scandal, too, concern this study. As elite policymakers and politicians in Washington engaged in the art of government during Iran-Contra, the president, cabinet members, national security staff, and congressional leaders feature prominently. Covert operations created the scandal, and the decisive actions determining the course of the scandal transpired inside the White House. On Capitol Hill, the congressional reaction to Iran-Contra defined the conditions to which the president responded. Together, the executive and legislative branches managed a crisis of the national security state resulting from an ostensibly low-risk intervention and assuredly high-risk diplomacy.[22]

Ronald Reagan is the principal figure of this dissertation. Nancy Reagan once criticized scholars for either over-complicating her husband or simplifying him. Only a select few ever knew him intimately, Nancy Reagan claimed, for the public image overshadowed the private individual, although he was "not a complicated man" to understand.[23] Ronald Reagan was simultaneously aloof and gregarious, reflective and outspoken, a sometimes distant but empathetic leader with deep convictions who displayed a counterproductive stubbornness, all of which manifest in this study.[24] And Iran-Contra is an instructive part of his legacy. Of all the pivotal events during the Reagan era, Iran-Contra was the most consequential to both the foreign affairs and domestic political institutions of the United States; the scandal is the key for understanding Reagan's revolutionary effect on American foreign policy and the post-Cold War American presidency. As this dissertation centers presidential decision-making, it yields fresh insight into Reagan's role in the post-Watergate arc of the presidency's evolution and offers lessons on the coherence and purpose of the presidency itself. The Constitution endows the presidency with ambiguous and vast power, but presidential power waxes and wanes within the bounds of statutory and normative constraints. What follows engages with Reagan's decision-making and his behavior in a holistic fashion—focusing on his personal and institutional power

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[22] On the importance of centering the American state in historical analysis of US foreign policy, see Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol 3. Iss. 2 (Spring 2020): 38-55; On the history of the intersection of foreign policy and domestic politics, see Robert A. Divine, *Foreign Policy and U.S. Presidential Elections, 1940–1960* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974); Ernest R. May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); Paula Stern, *Water's Edge: Domestic Politics and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Westport, CT, 1979); Melvin Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy: The Impact of Domestic Politics on U.S. Foreign Policy, 1789–1994* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); see also, Thomas Alan Schwartz, "'Henry, …Winning an Election Is Terribly Important': Partisan Politics in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* Vol. 33, No. 2 (April 2009): 173–90 and Fredrik Logevall, "Domestic Politics," in Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations,* 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 151–67; On Iran-Contra and the national security state, cf. John Canham-Clyne, who argues that Iran-Contra demonstrated covert operations and government secrecy are incompatible with American democracy and the ability of Congress to exercise oversight of the executive branch. See Canham-Clyne, "Business as Usual: Iran-Contra and the National Security State." *World Policy Journal* Vol. 9, no. 4 (1992): 617–37.

[23] See Nancy Reagan's foreword to Michael K. Deaver, *A Different Drummer: My Thirty Years with Ronald Reagan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), ix-x.

[24] On Reagan's complex personality and leadership, as well as for an insider account of Iran-Contra, see Peter J. Wallison, *Ronald Reagan: The Power of his Conviction and the Success of His Presidency* (Boulder: Westview, 2003).

as president—in seeking to understand his statecraft and why it affected American government.[25]

This dissertation examines Iran-Contra in four parts arranged chronologically. Part I covers the origin of Iran-Contra in three chapters. Commitments central to Reagan's foreign policy, it argues, produced the scandal. Chapter 1 establishes the domestic and geopolitical contexts. It traces the congressional legislative reforms inspired by the Vietnam War and Watergate, which became foundational to the scandal. Next, the chapter turns to the revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua that confounded policymakers and created the geopolitical challenges to which Reagan responded with the covert operations responsible for Iran-Contra. The subsequent two chapters focus on these operations. Chapter 2 explores the Contra War, detailing Reagan's strategy for waging Cold War and his support for anti-communist insurgents in Central America. Chapter 3 follows the Iran initiative, examining the arms-for-hostages deals and the diversion of funds to the Contras.

Part II, in turn, follows the shocking revelation of Iran-Contra during the first two months of the scandal, prior to the discovery of the diversion memorandum. These two chapters present for the first time a careful reconstruction of Reagan's decision-making during this pivotal period when Iran-Contra transformed into a grave political crisis. The close examination reveals why Reagan initially adopted a defiant position regarding disclosing the Iran infinitive. Reagan's personal attachment to the hostages and his misconceptions about the operations, these chapters explain, informed his decision to publicly deny that he had engaged in arms-for-hostages deals with Iran, which both hastened and prolonged the scandal. North and Poindexter's attempted cover up compounded the president's problems. Chapter 4 explores the onset of the scandal following the crash of a Contra supply airplane in Nicaragua and the publication of an exposé in a Lebanese weekly revealing secret contact between the US and Iran. Chapter 5 follows Reagan's failed efforts to stave off the scandal until the crucial discovery that North had diverted funds from the Iranian arms sales to the Contras.

Part III analyzes Reagan's political recovery from the scandal, from publicly disclosing the diversion to issuing a formal apology to the country. It offers a narrative of the key moments and critical decisions, capturing the dynamics between the White House and Congress. These chapters explain why institutional and personal factors endowed Reagan with political security against the scandal and enabled the restoration of his presidency. Chapter 6 follows Reagan's bid to preempt impeachment and surmount the scandal. This chapter explores the execution of

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[25] On Reagan's use of presidential power, see Richard Neustadt, Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 269-294; The literature on the presidency and presidential power is vast, see, for example, Jeremy D. Bailey, *Thomas Jefferson and Executive Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); George C. Edwards III, *The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); William G. Howell, *Thinking about the Presidency: The Primacy of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Theodore J Lowi, *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 2018); Jeffrey K. Tullis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Aaron Wildavesky, "The Two Presidencies," *Transaction* 4 (December 1966): 7–14; Michael Genovese, *The Power of the American Presidency, 1789-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); John Yoo, *Crisis and Command: A History of Executive Power from George Washington to George W. Bush* (New York: Kaplan, 2009). For the fear of the use of unitary executive power, see Peter Shane, *Madison's Nightmare: How Executive Power Threatens American Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009) and Benjamin A. Kleinerman, *The Discretionary President: The Promise and Peril of Executive Power* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2009); On the power of presidents to shape the political order, see Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Reagan's strategy of cooperation, transparency, and reform, which proved an effective response to the crisis. It begins with Reagan disclosing the diversion, tracing the reactions inside the White House and on Capitol Hill, and concludes with the convening of the President's Special Review Board. Chapter 7 examines the most crucial aspects of the affair, including why Congress abstained from impeachment, how the Tower Commission restored the NSC, and why Reagan survived Iran-Contra. This chapter explores how the American government responded to a foreign policy scandal in the twilight of the Cold War. A bipartisan consensus on a strong presidency, it explains, influenced thinking in Washington and assisted Reagan in securing political absolution. Reagan, for his part, leveraged his institutional and personal power to rescue his presidency, an outcome attained with a rare public apology.

Part IV follows the resolution of Iran-Contra in two chapters examining how organs of the government addressed Iran-Contra.[26] Chapter 8 examines the Joint Select Committee's hearings and final report. It focuses on how Congress adjudicated the scandal and explains why the Select Committee contributed to the restoration of the president as the arbiter of foreign policy. The narrative begins with the hearings and concludes with an analysis of the committee's findings and its ramifications. Chapter 9 explores the development and conclusions of the independent counsel investigation and the 1992 congressional investigations into the October Surprise conspiracy. It details Independent Counsel Walsh's dogged efforts to convict members of the Reagan administration. Unlike previous narratives, this chapter expands the scope of Iran-Contra to incorporate the October Surprise investigations, tracing the evolution of the October Surprise conspiracy from fringe allegations into congressional inquiries. Presidential pardons and two congressional probes into the 1980 presidential election, this chapter contends, brought about the end of Iran-Contra. As the last vestiges of Iran-Contra, these investigations converged in the final year of the Bush administration, influencing American politics and exhausting Washington's capacity for engaging with the scandal across party lines.

The vast archival record of Iran-Contra has made this analysis possible. It draws primarily on declassified documents from the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush Presidential Libraries, Library of Congress, National Security Archive, and the National Archives. The abundance of available sources in these archives allow for a thorough examination of the scandal. The Reagan Presidential Library contains extensive holdings related to every aspect, ranging from the covert operations to Reagan's legal and political responses to the scandal. The congressional and independent counsel investigations produced an overwhelming documentary record. Congress published its proceedings and evidentiary base, including testimony, closed depositions, and sources. Independent Counsel Walsh deposited 1,948 feet worth of records at the National Archives, of which a substantial amount has been declassified. Walsh's collection includes an impressive array of diary entries, memorandums, and notes that provide unique vantage on important meetings during the early days of Reagan's response to the disclosures. Periodicals also offer provide insight into the scandal. As Iran-Contra dominated the news cycle, Washington intrigue filled the pages of the country's most prestigious newspapers and magazines. Investigative journalists produced an impressive catalog of reporting, capturing the affair in real time. Iran-Contra was an intricate and bewildering episode, even for the

[26] This study finds that the American government appropriately managed the scandal within the existing political system. It contrasts with Harold Koh, who argues that accountability mechanisms failed to address the flawed legal structure underpinning a national security system which allows the president to dominate foreign affairs. See Harold Hongju Koh, *The National Security Constitution: Sharing Power after the Iran-Contra Affair* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

participants. Now, decades hence, this archival record permits the chapters that follow to lift the fog of scandal.

Part I

ORIGIN

Chapter 1
Genesis: Reform and Revolution in the 1970s

Ronald Reagan: This too shall pass.
Richard Nixon: Everything passes.
Phone Conversion, April 30, 1973[1]

The Iran-Contra affair originated from commitments central to Ronald Reagan's foreign policy. Reagan's strategy for waging the Cold War and his personal attachment to the Lebanese hostage crisis produced the covert operations responsible for the scandal. Faced with a revolutionary Nicaraguan government, Reagan supported the Contras in their bid to overthrow the Sandinista National Liberation Front under the Reagan Doctrine, a policy in which the US aided anti-communist insurgents in the developing world to rollback Soviet-supported regimes.[2] After Congress prohibited funding for the Contras, Reagan tasked the National Security Council with sustaining the insurgency. In the Middle East, Reagan contended with a revolutionary Iran and a Shiʿite terrorist kidnapping campaign in Lebanon. Determined to rescue American hostages and initiate a rapprochement with the Islamic Republic, Reagan authorized secret arms-for-hostages transactions, advancing the initiative against the counsel of his senior advisors. Reagan approved the Iran initiative in opposition to his stated policy and at the risk of grave political and legal consequences. His compassion for the hostages influenced his decision-making. Although repeated setbacks and warnings indicated the initiative was failing, he decided to continue operations. In Iran and Nicaragua, Reagan pursued his policies regardless of impediments. His strategic ambitions and personal commitments informed his decisions to circumvent the constraints that Congress and the inter-agency process imposed.

The three chapters that follow explain the origin of the Iran-Contra affair. The mixture of Reagan's strategic ambitions and his personal commitments, these chapter show, resulted in the greatest political crisis of his presidency. Previous accounts have vividly reconstructed how the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency, working with private actors, secretly coordinated both the Contra War in Nicaragua and the Iran initiative. Malcolm Byrne and Theodore Draper have expertly detailed NSC Staffer Oliver North's efforts to divert profits from the weapons transactions with Iran to fund the Contras, a complex scheme in which North overcharged the Iranians to finance the Contra War.[3] Conversely, these three chapters provide a

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[1] White House Tapes: Conversation 045-053, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, College Park, Maryland, and Yorba Linda, California.

[2] Mark P. Lagon, *The Reagan Doctrine: Sources of American Conduct in the Cold War's Last Chapter* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994); James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1996); Chester Pach, "The Reagan Doctrine: Principle, Pragmatism, and Policy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 75–88.

[3] Although this chapter uses a similar source base, citations are provided for Byrne and Draper where appropriate, either based on their arguments or the sources they cite that this author could not access; see Malcolm Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2014) and Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991); Congress and the Office of Independent Counsel both released detailed final reports containing vivid accounts of the operations, see U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views.* 100th Congress, 1st Sess., 1987. Senate Report 100-216, November (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1987); Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters*. U.S. Court of

broad, sequential examination of the development and intersection of Reagan's covert operations in Nicaragua and Iran. While this chapter offers the condensed historical context, the next two examine the key political, operational, and strategic factors of the Contra War and Iran initiative.

This chapter explores the genesis of Iran-Contra. Reform and revolution are its themes. Reform in Congress and revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua, it argues, created the domestic and international preconditions for Iran-Contra. The Vietnam War and Watergate scandal created an atmosphere in Washington and across the nation ripe with mistrust and reform. Congress enacted legislation to check the "imperial presidency," the buzzword of the post-Nixon era.[4] These laws affected elements of foreign policy and oversight foundational to the scandal: arms transfers, covert action, and independent prosecutors. The chapter turns next to the international context. In 1979, the Iranian and Nicaraguan revolutions ousted US-backed dictators, founding a Shi'ia theocracy in the Middle East and a Marxist state in Central America. Hostile to American security interests, Iran and Nicaragua would prove long-term strategic dilemmas. Carter's approach to crises stemming from each yielded both tragic results in Iran and the groundwork for Reagan's Cold War offensive in Nicaragua. Carter's debacle, this chapter explains, augured Reagan's plight. It concludes with Reagan's assumptions about the Cold War, which account for the operations covered in subsequent chapters.[5]

The Dual Tragedies of Vietnam and Watergate

The Vietnam War and Watergate scandal transformed American government and politics. President Lyndon Johnson's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam in 1965 had ramifications far beyond Saigon. It fomented disorder and visceral reactions on main street and within Capitol Hill. Many Americans lost trust in their government over the war's prosecution. Antiwar protest movements spread throughout the country; the social fabric frayed. Citizens and politicians alike interrogated the limits of American power. They questioned the government itself. Skepticism flourished and "estranged cynicism" set in—for good reason. Richard Nixon's authorized cover-up of the burglary of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate building, and its numerous ancillary scandals, prompted a Senate investigation, compelled an impeachment process, and forced his resignation. Corruption and deception became the watchwords of the presidency. The Cold War consensus on presidential decision-making collapsed. Congress held the president to account. A congressional resurgence in the making of foreign policy assailed presidential prerogative. Congress sought to not only restrain presidential war-making power, but also reform covert action. International and domestic excesses inspired reform.[6]

Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, August 4, 1993. Vol. I: Investigations and Prosecutions (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993).

[4] Arthur, Jr. Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973); See also Andrew Rudalevige, *The New Imperial Presidency: Renewing Presidential Power after Watergate* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2005).

[5] Christian Caryl, *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); On the 1970s in general, see eds. Niall Ferguson, Charles Maier, Erez Manela, and Daniel Sargent, *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[6] Frederik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); For overviews of the Vietnam War, see Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2019); and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of

Vietnam and Watergate would loom large in the succeeding decades. Nixon's tenure produced a concoction of scandals that changed how Americans viewed the president. The American psyche has never recovered. The relationship between the president and Congress forever altered. Vietnam has become a too-often cited historical analogy for decision-makers, and Watergate remains the standard by which major political scandals are judged. In 1999, Bob Woodward, who catapulted to journalistic fame from Watergate, noted that, even after a quarter century had passed since Nixon's resignation, subsequent presidents had not absorbed the lesson of Nixon. "As a result of his actions," Woodward observed, "presidents not only would be subject to doubt and second guessing, they would be suspected of outright criminality." Nixon's predecessors bear the burden of Watergate. Reagan was not an outlier.[7]

Reagan learned that lesson the hard way during the Iran-Contra affair. The legacy of Watergate—and Vietnam, for that matter—informed the institutional and political responses to Iran-Contra. So, too, did the influence of Watergate and Vietnam have an effect on its origination. Legislation enacted in the 1970s was central to the cause and solution of the scandal. Congress passed laws regarding the deployment of US forces, authorization and notification of covert action, the transfer of arms, and investigating the executive branch. The resurgent Congress enacted a series of institutional reforms that affected national security and oversight. These statutes would become central to the debates surrounding Iran-Contra.

On November 7, 1973, Congress overrode Nixon's veto to pass the War Powers Resolution. Nixon argued that the measure was unconstitutional. Congress declared their intent to "insure that the collective judgment of both the Congress and the President will apply to the introduction of United States Armed Forces into hostilities." The War Powers Resolution attempted to place limits on a president's ability to commit US forces abroad. The legislation requires the president to submit notification to Congress within 48 hours and restricts troop deployments to sixty days without congressional approval. Although the act has been ineffectual at preventing presidents from pursuing military action, Congress aimed to generate interbranch cooperation on foreign policymaking. It was a marker of the return of the congressional role in war-making and diplomacy.[8]

North Carolina Press, 2012); On Nixon ending the war, see Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Simon &Schuster, 2001); Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); On Domestic politics, see Andrew L. Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, The Republican Party, and the War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010); Melvin Small, *At the Water's Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005); The records and literature on Watergate are vast. See the following, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *All the President's Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974); Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *The Final Days* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005); Garrett M. Graff, *Watergate: A New History* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2022); Michael Dobbs, *King Richard: Nixon and Watergate: An American Tragedy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021); Michael Shudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); On resurgent Congress, president, and foreign policy, see Thomas E. Cronin, "A Resurgent Congress and the Imperial Presidency." *Political Science Quarterly* 95, no. 2 (1980): 209–37; James M. Lindsay, "Congress and Foreign Policy: Why the Hill Matters." *Political Science Quarterly* 107, no. 4 (1992): 607–28; James M. Lindsey, *Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

[7] Bob Woodward, *Shadow: Five Presidents and the Legacy of Watergate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), xiii-xiv.

[8] War Powers Resolution, Pub. L. No. 93-148, 87 Stat. 555 (1973), https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/STATUTE-87/STATUTE-87-Pg555; Richard Nixon, "311 Veto of the War Powers Resolution, October 24, 1973," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1973* (Washington: GOP, 1975), 893-895; A range of critics have recognized that the law allows presidents the discretion to engage in hostilities as they see fit under the

Next, Congress established new oversight measures for cover action, responding to allegations of illegal activities by the Central Intelligence Agency and the secret military campaigns conducted in Southeast Asia. The Hughes-Ryan amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1974 codified presidential findings of covert action. Presidents had to sign findings and notify up to eight congressional committees within "in a timely fashion." The Church and Pike Committees, which revealed investigated the intelligence agencies, prompted increased scrutiny and further action. Congress accessed the CIA's "family jewels" and discovered the exploits of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and National Security Agency. "What is happening is worse than in the days of McCarthy," Secretary of State Henry Kissinger railed at the disclosures. On the heels of those investigations, Congress created the House and Senate Permanent Select Committees on Intelligence.[9]

By 1980, adjustments were needed. The Intelligence Oversight Act of 1980 amended Hughes-Ryan, limiting notification to the two intelligence committees and permitting the president under "extraordinary circumstances" to only inform chair and ranking members of the intelligence committees; majority and minority leaders of the Senate; and Speaker and minority leader of the House. If the president did not provide notification, then, the president must "fully inform" those members "in a timely fashion" and explain why. The president could still authorize clandestine operations at their discretion. Here, Congress had sought to foster interbranch cooperation on covert action.[10]

In 1976, Congress passed the Arms Export Control Act. The 94th Congress assumed power in the wake of Watergate and Vietnam, featuring a new political class seeking to revamp what they perceived as a hidebound institution and enact new, progressive legislation. Although their enthusiasm was short lived, the "Watergate babies" codified congressional approval for weapons transactions. The Act governs how a president may supply weapons to foreign countries. Provisions would become points of debate during the Iran initiative. The Act permits a president to allow a third country to ship American-made arms with written consent. But a recipient country cannot be involved in terrorism. The Act also requires the president to notify Congress. It aimed to create cooperation on and oversight for military sales.[11]

In 1978, Congress established the special prosecutor, a position that Washington would come to lament. Nixon's efforts to impede the Watergate investigation guided congressional thinking. Title VI of the Ethics in Government Act of 1978 established that the Attorney General could appoint an independent special prosecutor to investigate the executive branch. A three-judge

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time frame. Others have argued that it is ineffectual. See Louis Fisher and David Gray Adler. "The War Powers Resolution: Time To Say Goodbye." *Political Science Quarterly* 113, no. 1 (1998): 1–20; Matthew C. Waxman, Scott R. Anderson, and Oona A. Hathaway, Policy Roundtable: The War Powers Resolution, *Texas National Security Review*, November 14, 2019, https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-war-powers-resolution/; John Yoo, *Crisis and Command: A History of Executive Power from George Washington to George W. Bush* (New York: Kaplan, 2009), 352-353, 356-357, 376.

[9] Foreign Assistance Act, Pub. L. No. 93–559 (1974); Memorandum of Conversation, Saturday, January 4, 1975, DNSA collection: Kissinger Transcripts, 1968-1977, Digital National Security Archive; See also Loch K. Johnson, *A Season of Inquiry Revisited: The Church Committee Confronts America's Spy Agencies* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2015); John Prados, *The Family Jewels: The CIA, Secrecy, and Presidential Power* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2013): Frank J. Smist Jr., *Congress Oversees the United States Intelligence Community* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

[10] Intelligence Oversight Act, Pub. L. No. 96-450, 94 Stat. 1975 (1980).

[11] John A. Lawrence, *The Class of '74: Congress after Watergate and the Roots of Partisanship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018); International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act of 1976, Pub. L. No. 94-329, 90 Stat. 729 (1976).

panel on the U.S. Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia appointed the role. The Act prohibited the president from directly firing the prosecutor, although the Attorney General and court panel could do so for proper cause. In 1983, Congress turned the special prosecutor role into the Office of the Independent Counsel. The question of its constitutionality reached the Supreme Court in 1988. The Court upheld the law by 7 to 1, holding that it did not violate the separation of powers because the Attorney General exercised power over the appointment and dismissal. Justice Antonin Scalia's dissent argued that the law indeed violated the equilibrium of the separation of powers, because an unelected court appointed an almost unaccountable prosecutor who had sole power over the duration, scope, and decisions of a case. Scalia warned that the position could result in overt political acts of prosecution against a president without the political solution of elected officials ending it. Lawrence Walsh's subsequent nearly seven-year investigation of Iran-Contra, followed by Ken Starr's four-year investigation into President William J. Clinton, brought Scalia's criticism into sharp relief. Congressional reforms, like Vietnam and Watergate, cast a long shadow.[12]

Jimmy Carter's Dilemmas

President Jimmy Carter confronted the two revolutions central to the Iran-Contra affair. In Iran, Carter faced a revolution against long-time US all Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, which culminated in the founding of the Islamic Republic in April 1979. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, an anti-American radical Shi'ite leader, returned from exile in Paris to rule as the Supreme Leader. The cleric who called America the "Great Satan" frustrated American leaders and brought about international calamity. Carter, for his part, contended with the Iranian Revolution to no avail, from the ousting of the Shah to the Iranian Hostage Crisis. Carter's dilemma foreshadowed the difficulties Reagan experienced in dealing with Iran.[13]

The Iranian Hostage Crisis encumbered Carter's presidency. After Carter permitted the ailing Shah into the US for lymphoma treatment, student radicals stormed the American embassy on November 4, 1979, capturing hostages. On November 8, 1979, Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan advised Carter of the high stakes. "Mr. President, this crisis is a crisis in every sense," Hamilton stated. "It is a crisis for your Presidency, for the hostages and for our country's image around the world." 52 Americans would remain in captivity for 444 days. Carter's reelection, in many respects, depended on decisions made in Tehran. Carter tried diplomacy and eventually authorized a daring rescue mission in late April 1980 that failed tragically, resulting in Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's resignation as well as the death of three Marines and five Airmen. The media focused intensely on the hostages. It heightened the country's awareness and made the resolution a matter of political significance in an election year. Carter would not succeed. His faltering efforts reaffirmed a sense of national humiliation lingering since Vietnam. Iran released the hostages on January 20, 1981, the day Reagan took his oath. Although a joyous occasion, the

[12] Pub. L. No. 95-521, 92 Stat. 1824 (1978); Pub. L. No. 97-409, 96 Stat. 2039 (1983); The case prompting Supreme Court review did not involve Iran-Contra. Morrison v. Olson, 487 U.S. 654 (1988); Katy J. Harriger, *The Special Prosecutor in American Politics, 2nd ed.* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000).

[13] See Ray Takeyh, *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021); Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin* (London: I.B. Taruis, 1989); Darioush Bayandor, *The Shah, the Islamic Revolution, and the United States* (Switzerland: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2019).

timing would become subject to a conspiracy theory that alleged their release was achieved through a deal brokered between the Reagan presidential campaign and Khomeini, a precursor to Iran-Contra.[14]

In Nicaragua, Carter encountered the Sandinistas, a group of Marxist revolutionaries seeking to topple American-supported dictator Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza. Amid the onslaught and growing opposition, the Carter administration determined that the US could not mediate a political solution favorable to Somoza. Citing human rights concerns, Vance advised Carter to "adopt for the time being a cool but correct posture" toward Somoza until the administration could formulate "initiative that could contribute toward the peaceful resolution of the political crisis." In July 1979, the Sandinistas overthrew Somoza, ushering a revolutionary government into the Central American isthmus, much to the consternation of American policymakers. The Sandnista revolution vexed Carter. The president had been unsure of his own strategy in Central America, and the jarring potential of Soviet and Cuban satellite states proliferating across the region compelled more forceful actions from his administration. In response, Carter laid the groundwork for Reagan's intervention in Central America.[15]

Carter's anticommunist policies in Central America presaged the Reagan Doctrine. His policy toward the Sandinistas adapted to the realities of world in which the "revenge of geopolitics" fell upon the man from Plains, Georgia.[16] The Cold War raged, and Central America was ablaze. Carter had attempted to moderate the new Sandinista government with diplomacy and aid, which failed to inspire good-faith cooperation. The Sandinistas solidified relations with the Soviet Union and armed the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in El Salvador for a "final offensive" in late 1980. These actions impelled Carter to restore aid to the Salvadorean military and initiate assistance to "democratic elements" in Nicaragua. At this time, the Contras formed with the help of the Argentine and Honduran armed forces. The Contras were a motley counterrevolutionary group consisting of former National Guard members and various anti-

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[14] Memo, Hamilton Jordan to Jimmy Carter, November 8, 1979, Office of the Chief of Staff Files, Hamilton Jordan's Confidential Files, Iran, 11/79, Container 34b, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Georgia (Hereafter JCPL); On the Iranian Hostage Crisis, see David Farber, *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah: The Iran Hostage Crisis: The First Battle in America's War With Militant Islam* (New York: Grove Press, 2006; On Carter's decision to launch Operation Eagle Claw, see Betty Glad, *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 236-269; See chapter 9 for the October Surprise conspiracy and its relation to Iran-Contra.

[15] Memo, Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, "Nicaragua," March 6, 1979, Folder: Nicaragua: 1-6/79, Container 35, National Security Affairs Staff Material, Country and Subject Chron Files, JCPL; Robert Pastro cites Carter's own admissions in a memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski regarding the administration's policy on Central, see Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Owen, "US Policy to Central America and the Caribbean -- 2:00 p.m. Meeting, Monday, October 29, 1979," Folder: Serial Xs (10/79-12/79), Container 36, Subject Files, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, JCPL; Quite a few books exist on the Sandinista Revolution, see, for examples, Stephen Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Donald C. Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); Matilde Zimmermann, *Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution (*Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); On Somoza, see Morris H. Morley, *Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas: State and Regime in U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua, 1969-1981* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); On consolidating a revolutionary government, see Stephen Gorman, "Power and Consolidation in the Nicaraguan Revolution." *Journal of Latin American Studies* Vol. 13, no. 1 (1981): 133–49.

[16] Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 261-296; Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2016), 38.

Sandinista Nicaraguans, ranging from ex-Sandinistas to peasants who rejected the Nicaragua Revolution. Reagan would expand Carter's policies, authorizing CIA assistance to the Contras in March 1981 in conjunction with his policy to aid the Salvadoran government. The Contras united months later as the Nicaraguan Democratic Forces and began receiving monetary and military support from the US, Argentina, and Honduras in their bid to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. The Contra War had begun.[17]

Ronald Reagan

The words "I, Ronald Reagan, do solemnly swear" inaugurated the "Reagan Revolution" on January 20, 1981, a new era in which American political order and foreign affairs transformed under ascendant conservatism.[18] The conservative movement that began with Reagan's short-lived run for the presidency in 1968 gained momentum from his 1976 Republican primary challenge to Gerald R. Ford. In 1980, Reagan secured a 44-state victory over Carter. Reagan's rise from a Hollywood actor to two-term governor of California, followed by two-term president, seemed improbable, astonishing naysayers and energizing supporters. Reagan, whose humble beginnings in Dickson, Illinois, suggested a different life trajectory, shaped and defined the 1980s. Along with his vice president and successor George H.W. Bush, Reagan ushered the United States into the zenith of its power in the international system. Reagan's two terms in the Oval Office were not without controversy and surprise, for amid scandal, in political free fall, he

[17] Memo, Situation Room to Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Information Items," January 9, 1981, Folder: 1/1/81 - 1/10/81, Container 18, National Security Affairs Staff Material, Presidents Daily Report Files, JCPL; On Sandinista assistance to Salvadoran revolutionaries, see Presidential Determination on Nicaraguan Support for Salvadoran Guerrillas, c. January 1981, Folder: Meetings - SCC, 1/12/81, Container 32, Subject Files, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, JCPL; On El Salvador assistance, see Memo, Edmund S. Muskie to Jimmy Carter, "Assistance to El Salvador," December 16, 1980, Folder: El Salvador 12/80-1/81, Container 21, National Security Affairs Staff Material, Country Files, JCPL; See also William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 18–32, 57–71, 80-81, 114-118; Roy Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy: The Making of American Policy in Nicaragua 1981-1987* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 56; Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 225–242; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 343; Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 154; Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 212; Robert A. Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 224–228; William Michael Schmidli, "The Most Sophisticated Intervention We have Seen: The Carter Administration and the Nicaraguan Crisis, 1978-1979," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 23 Issue 1 (March 2012), 66-86.

[18] Ronald Reagan, "Oath of Office Administered by Chief Justice Warren Burger," January 20, 1981, by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/241477; Quoted from Reagan's farewell address, "They called it a Reagan revolution." see Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1988-1989 (in Two Books) Book II--July 2, 1988 to January 19, 1989* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), 1718-1723; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak sought early in Reagan's first term to examine the self-conscious revolution of government affairs by tracing its origins, purposes, and prospects. Evans and Novak argued that Reagan's "goals, in foreign and domestic policy, amounted to no conventional agenda for a new administration. They made the Reagan Revolution." See Evans and Novak, *The Reagan Revolution: An Inside Look at the Transformation of the U.S. Government* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981); Martin Anderson referred to Reagan's presidency as "a time of profound revolution." See Martin Anderson, *Revolution* (New York: HBJ Publishers, 1988); On the Reagan Revolution as a concept and its successes and failures, see Gil Troy, *The Reagan Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also, Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order: 1964–1980 (*New York: Random House, 2009).

emerged to shape the Cold War anew, rescue his presidency, and change American politics.[19]

Reagan presided over the Cold War's twilight. He had envisaged its resolution. In 1977, Reagan revealed his intention to Richard V. Allen, a future national security advisor. "My idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple, and some would say simplistic," Reagan informed Allen. "It is this," Reagan said, "We win and they lose. What do you think of that?"[20] Reagan's straightforward proposal captured his idealistic objective. En route to the 1980 Republican National Convention, political strategist Stuart Spencer asked the future president why he sought the job. "To end the Cold War," Reagan responded instantly.[21] Reagan carried this conviction into the Oval Office. He expressed it powerfully at the University of Notre Dame's 1981 commencement. His first public address outside of Washington since surviving an assassination attempt anticipated the post-communist world. "The West won't contain communism," he said, "it will transcend communism."[22] Reagan's certitude was not always welcome.

The former actor and California governor perplexed his contemporaries. The Reagan Era featured a renewal of Cold War tensions before ushering in the conflict's denouement. The period's namesake made the superpower struggle legible in Manichean terms, declaring that the Soviet Union was "the focus of evil in the modern world.[23] By the end of his second term, Reagan regarded the evil empire moniker as belonging to "another time, another era."[24] Reagan understood the American state's capacity for projecting power. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who served under Reagan as Deputy Director of the CIA, has acknowledged that "Reagan was routinely underestimated" despite using "every instrument of American power to push the Soviets over the edge."[25] Reagan's foreign policy had appeared too orthodox and unsophisticated to critics. One prominent detractor posthumously characterized him as "neither a

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[19] On Ronald Reagan dominating and defining the 1980s in America, see Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[20] Richard V. Allen, "The Man Who Won the Cold War," *Hoover Digest*, no. 1 (January 30, 2000), http://www.hoover.org/research/man-who-won-cold-war.

[21] "How do you plan to do that?," Spencer asked Reagan in response. "I'm not sure, but there has got to be a way," Reagan answered, continuing with an exposition on the Soviet Union's weaknesses, nuclear war, détente, and ending the Cold War through American strength. See Thomas C. Reed, *At the Abyss: An Insider's History of the Cold War* (New York: Presidio Press, 2004), 234-235; In the four years preceding his ascent to the presidency, Reagan continually wrote and spoke about foreign policy, outlining his views and positions, see Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson eds., *Reagan in His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 21-219.

[22] Ronald Reagan, "Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame," May 17, 1981, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/247548; Howell Raines Times, "Reagan Is Welcomed on Notre Dame Trip, First Since Shooting," *New York Times*, May 18, 1981, A1.

[23] On Second Cold War, see Aaron Donaghy, *The Second Cold War: Carter, Reagan, and the Politics of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (London: Verso, 1986), David Painter, *The Cold War: An International History* (London: Routledge, 1999), 95-111, and William Safire, "Cold War II," *New York Times*, December 29, 1975, 25; On the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan, see Del Quentin Wilber, *Rawhide Down: The Near Assassination of Ronald* Reagan (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2011); Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida," March 8, 1983, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262885.

[24] Lou Cannon, "Russians, Reagan: A Sizing Up, 'It's Better to See Once Than to Hear 100 Times'," *Washington Post*, June 1, 1988, A1.

[25] Robert M. Gates, *Exercise of Power: American Failures, Successes, and a New Path Forward in the Post-Cold War World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), 6.

fox nor a hedgehog." The architects of détente were no less critical. Speaking at the Library of Congress in 1986, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger mused that "when you meet the president . . . you ask yourself, 'How did it ever occur to anybody that he should be governor, much less president?'" Kissinger, though, conceded that Reagan possessed an uncanny mastery of world politics. "He [Reagan] has a kind of instinct that I cannot explain," Kissinger confessed.[26]

Reagan possessed a singular vision complicated by a contradictory personality. Outwardly hawkish, Reagan was also a devout nuclear abolitionism. Kenneth Adelman, the Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, defined Reagan as an "antinuclear hawk."[27] Reagan's nuclear abolitionism drove his strategy of peace through strength; his grand optimism underpinned it. Reagan resolved to harness national resources to confront the Soviet Union and secure peace. The dynamic nature of liberal democracy and market capitalism, he believed, advantaged the United States in his quest to compel the Soviets to negotiate. He would pursue "quiet diplomacy" with the Soviets. Meanwhile, the American military buildup initiated under President Jimmy Carter would be accelerated. Soviet expansionism in the developing world would be contained or rolled back. If correctly executed, the Cold War could even end.[28]

Reagan's foreign policy relied on the twin pillars of force and diplomacy. "Power and diplomacy work *together,*" Secretary of State George P. Shultz observed in his memoir. Shultz recognized the utility of Reagan's strategic thinking. This perception was not lost in real time either. Two weeks after the 1980 presidential election, *New York Times* Chief Washington Correspondent Hedrick Smith assessed the incoming president's leadership potential. Smith

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[26] Quoted from Christopher Hitchens' quasi-obituary, see Christopher Hitches, "Not Even a Hedgehog: The Stupidity of Ronald Reagan," *Slate*, June 7, 2004, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2004/06/the-stupidity-of-ronald-reagan.html; Writing at the Cold War's end, John Lewis Gaddis observed, "The last thing one would have anticipated at the time Ronald Reagan took office in 1981 was that he would use his eight years in the White house to bring about the most significant improvement in Soviet-American relations since the end of World War II." See John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 119; Christopher Connell, "Kissinger on Contra Issue: Two-Sided Nonsense," *Washington Post*, April 20, 1986, A18; Kissinger expanded on this point in later analysis of Reagan's foreign policy. See Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 764-785.

[27] See page 38 in Kenneth Adelman, interview by Jeff Chidester, Stephen F. Knott, and Robert Strong, September 30, 2003, Arlington, Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan.

[28] On Reagan's anti-nuclear weapons posture, see Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2005); Martin Anderson and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan's Secret War: The Untold Story of His Fight to Save the World from Nuclear Disaster* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009); On Reagan's personal views about peace through strength, see Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (new York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 266-268, 548-549; On the paradox of Reagan's presidency and the end of the Cold War, see Melvyn P. Leffler, "Ronald Reagan and the Cold War: What Mattered Most," *Texas National Security Review* Vol. 1, Issue 3 (May 2018): 76-89; On the Carter era buildup and its advancement, see Edward Keefer, *Harold Brown: Offsetting the Soviet Military Challenge, 1977–1981* (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017) and Ronald J. Granieri, "Beyond the Cap the Foil: Caspar Weinberger and the Reagan-Era Defense Buildup" in Bradley Lynn Coleman and Kyle Longley eds., *Reagan and the World: Leadership and National Security, 1981–1989* (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 51-80; On Reagan's grand optimism, see Elizabeth C. Charles and James Graham Wilson, "Confronting the Soviet Threat: Reagan's Approach to Policymaking," in Jonathan Hunt and Simon Miles, eds., *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 105-122; On Reagan's dual-track grand strategy and its successes in his first administration, see Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

argued that "two Reagans" existed on foreign policy: the "rhetorical cold warrior" and the "pragmatic politician." Reagan, Smith proposed, had the capacity to escalate conflicts as well as exercise power prudently. Although Reagan dismissed the so-called malaise of the 1970s, he would apply this combination to a new set of geopolitical challenges bequeathed by the decade. This duality of Reagan's presidency—the man and his foreign policy—gave rise to the Iran-Contra affair.[29]

Conclusion

Reform at home and revolution abroad set the preconditions for the 40th president to embroil his administration in a foreign policy scandal. Vietnam and Watergate changed the relationship between the presidency and the country. Vietnam shattered illusions about American power and the government. Watergate was a watershed for the presidency. The most infamous presidential scandal resulted in Nixon's resignation and created a new standard for judging presidential transgressions. The American media and public developed a new skepticism toward the presidency. No chief executive could escape the -gate suffix if a scandal beset their administration. Congress, for their part, wanted an equal role in foreign policy-making. Legislation aimed at generating interbranch cooperation on foreign policy passed. Laws governing covert action and investigating the executive branch materialized. The efficacy would be put to test in the subsequent years. Congress, as the dissertation shows, would be unwilling to enforce its resurgent mandate.

The Iranian and Nicaraguan revolutions presented Carter and Reagan with new geopolitical dilemmas. In Iran, Carter faced his paramount political crisis, one that he could not surmount despite his best effort. In the days following the fall of US embassy in Tehran, Reagan expressed his indignation about the Iranian Hostage Crisis to future Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. "I'd give anything to know what our capacities are and what our options for some kind of forceful action are," Reagan wrote, "but I guess you have to have the job first to find those things out."[30] Serving as president, Reagan would discover that managing the growing threat of terrorism and resolving hostage crises are nearly impossible tasks for any commander-in-chief. In Nicaragua, Carter sought engagement with the Sandinistas before fully embracing anti-communism as a lodestar for American policy in Central America. Reagan would advance the rollback posture at great peril to his administration. The solutions to Cold War dilemmas in Central America that Reagan improvised in the early 1980s enmired his administration in the scandal of Iran-Contra.

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[29] Hedrick Smith, "Reagan: What Kind of World Leader?," *New York Times Magazine*, November 16, 1980, SM12; Henry Nau describes Reagan's use of force and diplomacy as tenets of conservative internationalism, see Henry Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy Under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 10; On election eve 1980, Reagan said, "I find no national malaise, I find nothing wrong with the American people." See Ronald Reagan, Election Eve Address "A Vision for America," November 3, 1980, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/285591.

[30] See transcription of Ronald Reagan to Caspar Weinberger, November 15, 1979, in Annelise Anderson, Martin Anderson, and Kiron Skinner, eds., *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 232.

Chapter 2
Operations I: Rollback in Central America

Though we should leave no initiative untried in our pursuit of peace,
we must be clear voiced in our resolve to resist any unpeaceful act wherever it may occur.
Ronald Reagan, Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President, November 13, 1979[1]

Ronald Reagan entered the Oval Office determined to confront the Soviet Union.[2] Reagan viewed the conflict between superpowers as a global struggle between liberal democracy and communism, a contest with ideological and military dimensions.[3] To prevail, Reagan sought to minimize Soviet geopolitical influence while bolstering US global hegemony. Reagan's strategy would rely on maximizing economic, political, psychological, and military actions against the Soviet Union. His adoption of a forceful posture toward the Soviets aimed to reset the relationship between superpowers in terms favorable to the United States. It was designed to guide the US in upgrading defenses to dominate militarily, reversing Soviet geopolitical gains, and forcing internal reform within the Soviet state. This approach, American policymakers deduced, would provide stability in the international system. The Cold War could permanently shift in America's favor and, perhaps, hasten the decline of the Soviet system.[4]

Reagan effectuated a policy of rollback as the centerpiece of strategy for waging an invigorated Cold War. Soviet over-extension in the Global South created opportunities for conflicts in venues less combustible than Eastern Europe. Nicaragua served as a central theater of battle, although the explosive force of the Contra War in US domestic politics was thermonuclear. The Reagan Doctrine guided the administration's policy implementation. Under the doctrine, the Reagan administration would encourage and support anti-communist insurgents.[5] Spawned by the Reagan Doctrine, this chapter explains, the Contra War inaugurated

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[1] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination," November 13, 1979, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255827.

[2] This study concurs with Hal Brands's assessment, see Hal Brands, *What Is Good Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), 102-143; Whereas Brands understands Reagan's paradoxical view of the Soviet Union as both weak and powerful as part and parcel of his grand strategy, James Graham Wilson views it as incoherence, c.f. James Graham Wilson, "How Grand Was Reagan's Strategy, 1976-1984?," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* Vol. 18, no. 4 (December 2007): 773–803. For a triumphalist account see, Douglas E. Streusand, Norman A. Bailey, Francis H. Marlo, and Paul D. Gelpi, eds., *The Grand Strategy that Won the Cold War: Architecture of Triumph* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016); For a critique of triumphalism, see Beth A. Fischer, *The Myth of Triumphalism: Rethinking President Reagan's Cold War Legacy* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2019).

[3] On the global Cold War, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[4] Brands, *What Is Good Grand Strategy?,* 102-143; Nina Silove categorizes grand strategy as either a plan, principle, or behavior. Reagan had both plans and principles, see Nina Silove, "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of 'Grand Strategy,'" *Security Studies* Vol. 27, no. 1 (2018): 27–57.

[5] Mark P. Lagon, *The Reagan Doctrine: Sources of American Conduct in the Cold War's Last Chapter* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994); James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Chester Pach, "The Reagan Doctrine: Principle, Pragmatism, and Policy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* Vol. 36, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 75–88; William M. LeoGrande, "Rollback or Containment? The United States, Nicaragua, and the Search for Peace in Central America." *International Security* Vol. 11, no. 2 (1986): 89–120; For a critical view on this point, see Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Lain America, the United States, and the Making of an Imperial Republic* (New York: Picador, 2021).

the first phase of Iran-Contra and brought together the cast of Reagan administration officials and non-state actors who also facilitated the Iran initiative.

As "the acid test of the Reagan Doctrine," Reagan supported the Contra War to the detriment of his presidency.[6] The Reagan Doctrine, this chapter contends, was key to Iran-Contra's inception. The scandal was not an incidental disrupture, but rather it resulted from Reagan's Cold War strategic ambitions and his ideological commitments. Reagan prioritized rolling back Soviet influence in the Western hemisphere. "If we permit the Soviets, using the Sandinistas, to establish a beachhead on the American mainland and to spread their subversion," Reagan cautioned, "the free world will face a major challenge to the geopolitical balance of power."[7] Congress, however, never developed a strong, bipartisan view that the Sandinistas posed such a threat American national security, as legislation authorizing Contra aid passed with narrow majorities. Eventually, Congress outright prohibited aid through the Boland amendments. Reagan abhorred the collapse of congressional support for the Contras. It would, he rued, "bring joy to the Soviets and Cubans" for America to abandon commitments in Central America.[8] Rather than acquiesce to congressional resistance, though, Reagan tasked the National Security Council with continuing his policy, a fateful decision.

This chapter explores the formulation and implementation of the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua. It begins with the development of the Reagan Doctrine and concludes with the private Contra supply network. Reagan strived to "go on the offensive with a forward strategy for freedom," the consequences of which had a marked impact on domestic politics.[9] The Contra War became a flash point in the bitter contest over foreign policy between the Congress and Reagan. It aroused lingering aversions to American military interventions. Reagan confronted hostile legislators and leery citizens, a political opposition to the Contras heavily informed by the Vietnam Syndrome. After the passage of the Boland amendments, NSC staffer Lt. Col. Oliver North, who served as the Deputy Director for Political–Military Affairs, set about constructing a private network to circumvent restrictions on lethal aid to the Contras, the results of which undermined Reagan's presidency and proved a Pyrrhic victory.

The Reagan Doctrine: Turning the Tides of History

The Soviet Union expanded influence in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America during the 1970s, revealing the shortcomings of détente and containment to Cold Warriors like Reagan who dismissed co-existence as a guide for preventing escalation. Reagan rejected the geopolitical premises of détente. Reagan was dissatisfied with the eternal stalemate of the Cold War as a consequence of mutually assured destruction. The Reagan Doctrine offered a precept

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[6] "The Reagan Doctrine And Counterrevolution," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 20, no. 4 (1986): 18; On the Contras, see Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); Glenn Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo: The CIA & the Contras* (Washington: Brassey's, 1992); Sam Dillon, *Commandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1991); R. Pardo-Maurer, *The Contras, 1980-1989 : A Special Kind of Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

[7] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Regional Editors and Broadcasters, April 18, 1985," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/260149.

[8] Ronald W. Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 231.

[9] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Dinner Marking the 10th Anniversary of the Heritage Foundation, October 3, 1983," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1983, Book 2, July 2 to December 31, 1983* (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1984), 1403–1408.

for foreign policy based on his administration's understanding of containment's failures.[10] Members of the Reagan administration sought to recalibrate the containment strategy. "Containment has been outflanked," Under Secretary of Defense Fred Iklé contended. "It worked in Korea, it worked in Europe, but it doesn't work in the Third World."[11]

Reagan adopted an aggressive posture to address these concerns. Agitated by the perceived failures of the 1970s, the Reagan administration reoriented US foreign policy. The cooperative diplomacy of détente, Reagan suggested, proved catastrophic to American interests. Reagan complained to his staff that "in the previous years of détente we always took steps and got kicked in the teeth."[12] He maintained that détente had allowed the Soviets to foment revolution throughout the globe. Jimmy Carter's administration, he charged, failed to prevent Soviet expansionism. Repealing Soviet advanced on the periphery of its empire thus appeared a prudent strategy for the 40th president.[13]

Communism, Reagan believed, had an expiration date. "Communist subversion is not an irreversible tide," Reagan proclaimed in a televised address, "we've seen it rolled back [...] and where democracy flourishes, human rights and peace are more secure."[14] Reagan strove to reverse the Brezhnev Doctrine, a policy that declared the Soviet Union would intervene in countries to sustain communist governments. Weaponizing nationalism against the Soviets became one of his main objectives. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, and the Cuban presence in Africa created opportunities for exploiting the Soviet empire. Reagan aimed, as historian John Lewis Gaddis has argued, to convince the Soviets "that just as the tides of history were running against command economies, so they were also running against latter-day empires."[15] A new presidential doctrine thus bloomed.

In an April 1985 *Time* article, Charles Krauthammer coined the Reagan Doctrine, recognizing from the Reagan administration's public remarks and policies a new doctrine that "proclaim[ed] overt and unashamed American support for anti-Communist revolution." Krauthammer argued that the doctrine was founded on "justice, necessity and democratic tradition," asserting it offered a fresh concept for US foreign policy.[16] The Reagan Doctrine, however, emerged as a solution to the problem of Soviet geopolitical advances in the 1970s. And much of its intellectual foundation originated from Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's concept of rolling back communism in Eastern Europe during Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration. Embracing the offensive, the US would assist nationalist movements and anti-communist insurgents engaged in counterrevolutionary campaigns against Soviet-supported regimes. The Reagan administration crafted directives to pursue the president's bold initiative. Reagan, meanwhile, championed the policies with speeches that promoted democracy and

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[10] Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 1-2.
[11] Sidney Blumenthal, "The Reagan Doctrine's Strange History," *Washington Post*, June 29, 1986.
[12] Richard Pipes, *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 206-207.
[13] Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 15-16. On the 1970s, see Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[14] Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on United States Policy in Central America, May 9, 1984," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1984, Book 1, January 1 - June 29, 1984* (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1986), 664.
[15] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, Rev. and expanded ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 369-372; On the Brezhnev Doctrine, see Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
[16] Charles Krauthammer, "The Reagan Doctrine," *Time* 125, no. 13 (April 1, 1985); For a contrasting view, see Stephen S. Rosenfeld, "The Guns of July," *Foreign Affairs* 64 (Spring 1986): 203-220.

denounced communism.[17]

National Security Decision Directives 32 and 75 defined his vision for waging the Cold War and contained the essential constituents of the Reagan Doctrine. The development of a national security strategy commenced in the spring of 1982 under the direction of National Security Advisor William Clark. An inter-agency review group constructed a study for the NSC, sending the US on a rendezvous with Cold War confrontation.[18] The Reagan administration deliberated the group's findings twice in roundtable reviews before the president signed NSDD 32. In the second meeting on April 27, 1982, Reagan assured the NSC that the study was "the most significant and meaningful statements of US national strategy." The directive would, Reagan said, "undoubtedly serve as the basis for the national security of the United States for the remainder of this century." The president mentioned briefly the eponymous doctrine's chief purpose. "We should consider attacks at places which while not confronting the Soviet Union directly," Reagan said, "could hurt them just the same."[19]

On May 20, 1982, he signed NSSD 32. It directed the US "[t]o contain and reverse the expansion of Soviet control and military presence throughout the world, and to increase the costs of Soviet support and use of proxy, terrorist, and subversive forces."[20] The Soviets now faced consequences for supporting regimes and radical movements at odds with American interests. The NSDD policy guidelines contained the administration's strategic rationale underlying a rollback of Soviet geopolitical advances.

Expanding on the objectives of NSDD 32, the Reagan administration produced the defining document of Reagan's foreign policy. In August 1982, Reagan requested a wide-ranging economic, political, and military analysis of the Soviet Union. It provided the basis for a new NSDD, building upon previous studies and decisions.[21] Richard Pipes, a historian of Russia, provided the intellectual underpinnings and primary authorship of the directive that became NSDD 75. Pipes rejected not only previous government assessments of the Soviet Union, but also policies of détente and traditional containment. In September 1981, Pipes had circulated a paper recommending the US encourage reforms inside the USSR while simultaneously increasing consequences for the Soviet's expansion. By 1983, most of his initial recommendations remained in the final draft of NSDD 75. Reagan vetoed several lines, however, pertaining to economic sanctions, as he thought they were too "provocative."[22]

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[17] Chester Pach, "The Reagan Doctrine: Principle, Pragmatism, and Policy," 75–88.

[18] National Security Study Directive Number 1-82, "U.S. National Security Strategy," February 5, 1982, Box 91277, Folder "NSSD 1-82 [US National Security Strategy] (1)-(8)," Executive Secretariat, National Security Council: National Security Study Directives (NSSD): Records, 1981-1987, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (Hereafter RRPL).

[19] Minutes, National Security Council Meeting, "NSSD 1-82," April 16, 1982, Folder "NSC 00045 04/16/1982 [Strategic]," Executive Secretariat, NSC: NSC Meeting Files: Records, 1981-1988, RRPL.; Minutes, National Security Council Meeting, "NSSD 1-82," April 27, 1982, Folder "NSC 00047 04/27/1982 [NSDD 1-82]," Executive Secretariat, NSC: NSC Meeting Files; Records, 1981-1988, RRPL.

[20] National Security Decision Directive Number 32, "U.S. National Security Strategy," May 20, 1982, RAC Box 1, Folder "NSDD 32 [U.S. National Security Strategy] (1)-(4)," Executive Secretariat, National Security Council: National Security Decision Directives (NSDD): Records, 1981-1987, RRPL.

[21] National Security Study Directive Number 11-82, "U.S. Policy Toward the Soviet Union," August 21, 1982, Box 91278, Folder "NSDD 11-82 US Policy Toward the Soviet Union (1)-(8)," Executive Secretariat, National Security Council: National Security Study Directives (NSSD): Records, 1981-1987, RRPL.

[22] On Pipes' time at the NSC, see Richard Pipes, "On The National Security Council Staff," in *The Grand Strategy That Won the Cold War; Architecture of Triumph*, ed. Douglas Streusand (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 33–64; On Reagan removing economic warfare language, see Minutes, National Security Council Meeting, "U.S. Relations with the USSR," December 16, 1982, Folder "NSC 00070 12/16/1982 [U.S.- Soviet Policy] (1)(2)," Executive

Reagan nevertheless authorized NSDD 75 in January 1983. The directive defined US objectives as "external resistance to Soviet imperialism; internal pressure on the USSR to weaken the sources of Soviet imperialism; and negotiations to eliminate, on the basis of strict reciprocity, outstanding disagreements." It also directed the US "[t]o contain and over time reverse Soviet expansionism" in the international system. The developing world remained a priority, wherein the US would aid allies and assist movements seeking to reduce and remove Soviet influence. The directive made clear that the administration considered this policy "one for the long haul."[23]

Reagan offered verbal gloss for his strategy to rollback Soviet influence in several notable speeches.[24] Reagan declared in his 1982 speech to the British Parliament that the tide of history had turned against the Soviet Union—a "democratic revolution" was underway. He announced his long-term strategy to usher in "the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ashheap of history."[25] In his March 1983 speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, he proclaimed the Soviet Union was an "evil empire" and the Cold War was a "struggle between right and wrong and good and evil." The president told the receptive crowd at the Sheraton Twin Towers Hotel, "I believe that communism is another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages even now are being written."[26] He set the tone for his administration's approach toward the Soviet Union, an aggressive stance taken in advance of his eventual diplomacy with Mikhail Gorbachev.[27] His administration sought through overt and covert means to bring it to fruition by supporting "freedom fighters" throughout the globe, including in their war against the Nicaraguan government.[28]

Secretariat, NSC: NSC Meeting Files: Records, 1981-1988, RRPL; For Pipes' draft of NSDD 75, see "Response to NSSD 11-82: U.S. Relations with the USSR," December 6, 1982, Historical Collection on Ronald Reagan, Intelligence, and the End of the Cold War, Central Intelligence Agency's Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/17/19821206.pdf.

[23] National Security Decision Directive Number 75, "U.S. Relations with the USSR," January 17, 1983, RAC Box 4, Folder "NSDD 75 [U.S. Relations with the USSR] (1)-(4)," Executive Secretariat, National Security Council: National Security Decision Directives (NSDD): Records, 1981-1987, RRPL.

[24] CIA Director William Casey also spoke on the Reagan Doctrine in early 1985, see Remarks of William J. Casey Director of Central Intelligence before The Union League Club, Union League Club, New York City, Wednesday 9 January 1985, Central Intelligence Agency's Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room., https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP87M00539R002904800038-5.pdf.

[25] Ronald Reagan, "Address to Members of the British Parliament, June 8, 1982," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1982, Book 1, January 1 - July 2, 1982* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1983), 747.

[26] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, March 8, 1983," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1983, Book 1, January 1 - July 1, 1983* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1984), 364.

[27] See James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War (*New York: Penguin Books, 2010); Although James Wilson rejects the notion of a Reagan grand strategy, for a recent study on Reagan and Gorbachev, see also James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2015); Beth Fischer argues that Reagan's turn to diplomacy constituted a reversal in policymaking, see Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MS: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

[28] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Dinner of the Conservative Political Action Conference, March 1, 1985," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1985, Book 1, January 1 - June 28, 1985* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 226–30.

Reagan's 1985 State of the Union Address and Secretary of State Shultz's February 22 speech to the San Francisco Commonwealth Club defined the doctrine that inspired Krauthammer's article in *Time*. Reagan and Shultz announced to the world where the administration's sympathies resided and what Reagan's policies aimed to achieve. In Reagan's State of the Union address, he relied on his acclaimed oratory skills to affirm steadfast US commitment to a global wave of democracy. "We must stand by all our democratic allies," he declared. "And we must not break faith with those who are risking their lives—on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua—to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth."[29]

Two weeks later, Shultz fleshed out Reagan' strategy in San Francisco. Shultz spoke of a global democratic revolution, claiming all events unfolding from Afghanistan to Nicaragua united in their goal of political freedom. He suggested that these nationalist struggles for independence challenged the Brezhnev Doctrine and shared America's democratic values. America's superpower role, he argued, required it to act on the behalf of nationalist movements opposing regimes aligned with the Soviets. "The nature and extent of our support—whether moral support or something more—necessarily varies case to case," he explained, "But there should be no doubt about where our sympathies lie."[30]

The Reagan Doctrine resulted in offensive measures toward the Soviets in diverse regional theaters. Under the doctrine, Reagan supported the mujahedeen in Afghanistan, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in Angola, and non-communist forces in Cambodia. Assistance for the mujahedeen's war against the Soviets became a well-funded, bipartisan endeavor, while UNITA support generated controversy and legislative conflict. Reagan's limited involvement in Cambodia did not attract a similar amount of rancor, as the administration allotted a small amount of non-lethal aid and deferred to Association of Southeast Asian Nations on the diplomatic front.[31] Nicaragua, however, became the site for the doctrine's exercise against communism in the Western hemisphere. It subjected the Monroe Doctrine to the exigencies of the 1980s.[32]

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[29] Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, February 6, 1985," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1985, Book 1, January 1 - June 28, 1985* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 135.

[30] George P. Shultz, "America and the Struggle for Freedom," Address before the Commonwealth Club of California, San Francisco, California, February 22, 1985, United States Department of State, *Current Policy 659* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985).

[31] On Afghanistan, see National Security Decision Directive Number 166, "U.S. Policy, Programs and Strategy in Afghanistan," March 27, 1985, DNSA collection: CIA Covert Operations: From Carter to Obama, 1977-2010, Digital National Security Archive (Hereafter DNSA); see also, John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006) 467-492 and Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004); On Angola, see National Security Decision Directive Number 212, "United States Policy Toward Angola," February 10, 1986, DNSA collection: Presidential Directives on National Security, Part I: From Truman to Clinton, DNSA; National Security Decision Directive Number 272, "United States Objectives in Southern Africa," May 7, 1987, Ibid.; National Security Decision Directive Number 274, "United States Policy Toward Angola," May 7, 1987, Ibid.; See also, Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); On Cambodia, see National Security Decision Directive Number 158, "United States Policy in Southeast Asia," January 9, 1985, DNSA collection: Presidential Directives on National Security. Part II: From Truman to George W. Bush, DNSA; see also, Kenton Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia, 1969-2000: A Troubled Relationship* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), Chapter 5.

[32] On Monroe Doctrine in 20th century, see Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945-1993* (New

The Soviet Union's intervention in the Caribbean and Central America tested Reagan's resolve and his relationship with Congress. Former Ambassador to Nicaragua James D. Theberge had recommended in a 1981 Department of Defense report that Reagan "must reformulate the Monroe Doctrine to meet the needs of the 1980s." Reagan should, he argued, "forge a new Doctrine for the Western Hemisphere which reasserts America's vital interest in preventing the rise of hostile, totalitarian Communist regimes allied with our extra-Hemispheric adversaries."[33] Reagan reoriented the focus of American foreign policy to Latin America. Abiding the Monroe Doctrine in the twilight of the Cold War, however, would provoke fierce resistance. Reagan steadfastly enforced it at great cost to his administration.

Central American Quagmire

Conceived as a component of Reagan's grand strategy, the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua responded to the Cold War realities of the 1980s, unleashing the Contra War. In Latin America, local, regional, and global conflagrations converged during the Cold War, fueled by long-standing economic, political, and social struggles in an era of decolonization and bi-polar world order—and persistent superpower interventions. The Cold War's destructive influence on Central America turned the region into a war zone, as revolution and counterrevolution wrought social and national transformations at the cost of innumerable causalities. Nicaragua was not spared from the havoc.[34]

Reagan's intervention in Nicaragua provoked domestic backlash. It generated public protest and congressional opposition. The political atmosphere hearkened back to the turbulence of the Vietnam War era. The Contra War, for some Americans, brought forth painful feelings of déjà vu: a popular president calling for intervention in a country of dubious importance to the national interest on the pretense of containing communism. For others, the proliferation of Marxist governments in Central America threated both American security and allies in the region. Nicaragua represented ground zero for waging the Cold War. Most of the American public, however, disapproved of Reagan's policy of overthrowing the Sandinista government. Only 32%

York: Hill and Wang, 1994); On the origins of the Monroe Doctrine, see Ernest R. May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); Reagan observed that the Soviet Union had violated the Monroe Doctrine in Cuba and Nicaragua, see Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990) 471-474.

[33] Theberge resent the report to National Security Advisor Clark in 1983, emphasizing its recommendations for a public campaign for support and a covert plan to confront communist expansion in Central America. See, Memos and Reports, "A Central American Security Strategy for the United States: Suggestions for U.S. Action," in Box 1, Folder: "Central America February 1983 (2)," William P. Clark Files, RRPL.

[34] The literature on Latin America's Cold War is substantial. See Hal Brands, *Latin America's Long Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Greg Grandin, "Living in Revolutionary Time: Coming to Terms with the Violence in Latin America's Cold War," in Greg Grandin and Joseph, Gilbert, eds., *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1–42; Thomas Field, Jr., Stella Krepp, and Vanni Pettinà, eds,. *Latin America and the Global Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Mark A. Lawrence, and Julio E. Moreno, eds., *Beyond the Eagle's Shadow: New Histories of Latin America's Cold War* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013); Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America.* 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Michael Grow, *U.S. Presidents and Latin American Interventions: Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Tanya Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); and Patrice J. McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

of Americans expressed support during the war's apogee. The public backlash manifested in social movements.[35]

Protest movements organized in opposition to the Contra War. Activist fervor was reminiscent of the anti-Vietnam War protests roiling the nation years earlier. Those who witnessed the horrors of Vietnam joined with a wide range of anti-war protesters. Prominent activist Charles Liteky, a retired Army chaplain, renounced his Medal of Honor, for which he received for his service in Vietnam, in a demonstration against the Contra War. As the only recipient to renounce the medal, Liteky placed it and an explanatory letter to Reagan at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. "Central America is another Vietnam," Liteky proclaimed. The comparison was palpable in the 1980s.[36]

The Vietnam War cast a long shadow. Many Americans had a deep-seated aversion to foreign intervention. Congress still questioned the limits of American power and the wisdom of interventions abroad. The public skepticism instilled in Reagan officials a realistic sense of its political consequences. A protracted war in Central America could undo the Reagan Revolution. During the first week of the Reagan presidency Chief of Staff James A. Baker III advised Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver that they must prevent a war for the sake of the presidency. "Those bastards in the NSC want to get us in a war in Central America," Baker said. "And you and I have got to keep them out of it." Baker strived in earnest to restrain the president's instincts on Central America. Still, NSC staff advanced their cause in Nicaragua with encouragement from the president.[37]

Reagan dismissed the notion that Central America was the 1980s version of Vietnam. During his campaign for the presidency, Reagan had recast the Vietnam War as a "noble cause," offering an empowering foreign policy that would finally "exorcise the Vietnam ghost." His goal of extirpating the Vietnam Syndrome and restoring national confidence inspired veterans on the NSC staff who became central figures in the Iran-Contra affair: Oliver North, Robert McFarlane, and John Poindexter. "I remember thinking," journalist Robert Timberg mused about their motivations, "that perhaps Iran-Contra was at least in part the bill for Vietnam finally coming due." Reagan himself discerned parallels to Vietnam in his relationship with Congress. Five years into the Contra war, Reagan believed Congress had hamstrung him like Richard Nixon in Vietnam and Gerald Ford in Angola. The congressional resurgence in foreign policy persisted and pestered Reagan, obstructing his foreign policy agenda. Congress, Reagan argued to his NSC principals, had rebuffed presidential efforts to supply South Vietnam and Angola against communist aggressors. "And here we go again," the 40th president charged.[38]

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[35] See polling data in Peter Kornbluh, *Nicaragua, the Price of Intervention: Reagan's Wars against the Sandinistas* (Washington: Institute for Policy Studies, 1987), 189; LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 433; for more on public opinion, see Richard Sobel eds., *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993).

[36] On Charles Liteky's protest, see "Veteran Returns Medal to Protest U.S. Policy," *Washington Post*, July 30, 1986, B3; "Medal of Honor Renounced Over Aid to Contras," *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 1986, C5; for U.S. grassroots movements, see Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst, Mass: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2012) and Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[37] Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *The Man Who Ran Washington: The Life and Times of James A. Baker III* (New York: Doubleday, 2020), 149.

[38] For Reagan's noble cause speech, see Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Chicago, August 18, 1980," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/285595; For a critical appraisal of Reagan and the Vietnam Syndrome, see Mark Atwood Lawrence, "Rhetoric and Restraint: Ronald Reagan and the Vietnam Syndrome" in eds. Jonathan R.

Reagan deemed preventing the spread of Marxist governments in Central America to serve America's national security interest. He spoke continuously about the Contras and the necessity of supporting their mission to oust the Sandinistas. America, Reagan contended, possessed the means and resolve to achieve his policy without sending thousands of troops into Nicaragua. To his lasting frustration, Reagan could not convince a majority that the Contras should be victorious. And those fraught domestic politics of the Contra War reverberated in the halls of Congress.[39]

A struggle over Contra funding persisted throughout Reagan's presidency. Between the Contra War's beginning and Iran-Contra's disclosure, Congress authorized and prohibited Contra aid in whiplash fashion. In fiscal years 1982 to 1989, the Contras received an estimated $322 million in aid, an allocation of $142 million in lethal and $180 in nonlethal assistance. In comparison, the Soviet bloc sent $580 million to Nicaragua for 1986. Scant bipartisanship developed for the Contras, and the partisan battle for funding turned on the public perception of the war.[40]

Congressional resistance to supporting the Contras provoked the Reagan administration to adopt unorthodox methods. The Boland amendments, proposed by Massachusetts Congressman Edward Boland, restricted Reagan's efforts to undermine the Sandinista regime. The first Boland amendment began limiting aid for the Contras in 1983, preventing US assistance for the military objective of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government and reducing the total amount to $24 million. A second amendment outright banned military assistance. Under Boland amendment II, enacted in a 1985 omnibus bill, the Reagan administration could not support the Contras militarily until a congressional reauthorization of lethal aid. In response, the White House interpreted the amendment to only restrict the involvement of CIA, DOD, and intelligence agencies in the Contra War. The NSC assumed operational control under Oliver North until government funding could be restored, using financial aid from third countries, private donations, and profits from the arms sales to support the Contras. This provided the Contras with an estimated $40 million during the restriction period. The diverted profits of the arms sales amounted to $3.8 million. Partisan differences account for the legislative wrangling. Reagan's

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Hunt and Simon Miles, *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 165-187; On North, McFarlane, and Poindexter, see Robert Timberg, *The Nightingale's Song* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Michael T Klare, *Beyond the "Vietnam Syndrome": U.S. Interventionism in the 1980s* (Washington: The Institute of Policy Studies, 1981); Vietnam Ghost quoted from Gen. T.R. Milton, USAF (RET.), "The Lessons of Vietnam," *Air Force Magazine*, March 1983. http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/1983/March%201983/0383vietnam.aspx; Minutes, National Security Council Meeting, "Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance, March 20, 1986," Folder "NSC 00129A 03/20/1986 [Contra Aid]," Executive Secretariat, NSC: NSC Meeting Files: Records, 1981-1988, RRPL; Robert Timberg, *The Nightingale's Song* (New York: Simon & Schuster), 14.

[39] On Reagan's frustration, Reagan, *An American Life*, 471; Judith D Hoover, "Ronald Reagan's Failure to Secure Contra-Aid: A Post-Vietnam Shift in Foreign Policy Rhetoric." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* Vol. 24, no. 3 (1994): 531-41.

[40] On Reagan's struggle with Congress, see Cynthia Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the Reagan Administration, and Central America, 1976- 1993*, 2nd edition (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); On figures for Contra funding, see Richard Sobel, "Contra Aid Fundamentals: Exploring the Intricacies and the Issues," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 110, No. 2 (Summer, 1995): 287-306 and Nina Serafino, "Contra Aid: Summary and Chronology of Major Congressional Actions, 1981- 89" (Washington: Congressional Research Services, 1989); William M. Leogrande and Philip Brenner, "The House Divided: Ideological Polarization over Aid to the Nicaraguan "Contras," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (February 1993): 105-136; "Hill-Reagan Contra Tug-of-War: A Chronology" in *CQ Almana*c 44th ed. (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1989), 496-498.

commitment to the Contras made for a political firestorm.[41]

The Contra War I: Preventing Another Cuba

Reagan arrived in Washington with strategic ambitions for rolling back the Sandinista Revolution and preventing the spread of revolution in Central America, where he perceived an unacceptable expansion of Soviet influence via Cuba. Of the Soviet-aligned states, Cuba committed the survival of the Sandinista government. Cuban dictator Fidel Castro provided Nicaragua with weapons, military advisors, and aid workers. Acutely aware of Reagan's views, Cuban Minister of Defense Raul Castro informed Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze that Cuba's involvement in Nicaragua was seen by American policymakers as Soviet intervention. Reagan did not distinguish between the states, as he understood Cuban support as a proxy for the Soviet Union. "Nicaragua," Reagan believed, "is another Cuba."[42]

Castro gave Reagan reasons for concern. By late 1983, Castro dispatched messages through Cuba's Swiss ambassador to notify the Reagan administration that Cuba's assistance to the Sandinistas was "not negotiable." Cuba would, Castro warned, dispatch additional armed personnel to Nicaragua with orders to "defend themselves." Cuban materiel support subsequently increased and continued. It had, though, from the beginning heavily influenced the Reagan administration's decision-making. Reagan insisted during a February 1981 NSC meeting that his administration "must not let Central America become another Cuba on the mainland." Reagan prioritized curbing Cuba's revolutionary actions in the region. "Intelligence reports say Castro is very worried about me," Reagan recorded in his diary, "I'm very worried that we can't come up with something to justify his worrying." This type of policy necessitated a variety of means, including controversial assistance for the Contras.[43]

Discussion over how to address the advance of communism in Central America began at the outset of Reagan administration, culminating with support for the Contras. CIA Director William Casey provided Reagan with plans in February 1981 to prevent a further spread of revolutionary activity supported by Cuba and Nicaragua. Reagan signed a presidential finding in March 1981 to assist the Contras based on Casey's suggestions. It included $19.5 million dollars in aid, which coincided with military training operations overseen by the CIA and retired soldiers. The Contra war commenced and soon escalated.[44] In November 1981, Reagan signed National Security

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[41] Richard Sobel, "Contra Aid Fundamentals: Exploring the Intricacies and the Issues," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 110, No. 2 (Summer, 1995); On the Reagan administration's understanding of the Boland amendments and legislative prohibitions on Contra aid, see the materials and analysis White House Counsel Arthur B. Culvahouse compiled in Folder "Iran/Arms Transaction: Legal Memoranda - Nicaraguan Contra Aid [Boland Amendment] (7)," Box CFOA 1131, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL; Sobel, "Contra Aid Fundamentals," 295.

[42] Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, 320–321; On Cuban advisors in Central America, see "Memorandum of Conversation between Fidel Castro and Eduard Shevardnadze," October 28, 1985, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Consejo de Estado (Cuban Council of State). Obtained and contributed to CWIHP by Piero Gleijeses and included in CWIHP e-Dossier No. 44. http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118022; Douglas Brinkley ed., Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009) 67.

[43] Minutes, National Security Council Meeting, "Central America," February 11, 1981, Folder: "NSC 00002 02/11/1981 [Nicaragua Finding and Central America, Cuba Policy, Intelligence, Caribbean, Poland]," Executive Secretariat, NSC Meeting Files: Records, 1981-88, RRPL; Memo, Robert C. McFarland to George P. Shultz, Caspar W. Weinberger, and John W. Vessey Jr., "Central America--Portents of Potential Increased Terrorist Violence, Including Against US Targets," December 13, 1983, Folder: "Terrorism (September 1983-December 1984)," Box 111, Executive Secretariat, NSC Subject Files, RRPL; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 4.

[44] Minutes, National Security Council Meeting, "El Salvador and Saudi F-15s," February 27, 1981, Folder "NSC

Decision Directive 17, codifying administration's policy for supporting the Salvadoran government and opposing subversive action by Cuba and Nicaragua. It established the official Contra program, which had begun under the auspice of interdicting weapon shipments from the Sandinistas to the FMNL in El Salvador, where Salvadorean guerrillas waged a civil war against the US-supported military government.[45]

NSDD 17 directed the administration to assist the Contras, aid regional allies, and develop a public information campaign to generate support for Reagan's policy as well as democratic elements within Central America. The Reagan administration had deliberated on a range of policy options, including military intervention into Nicaragua and Cuba. Inter-agency debates over such an intervention reached a conclusion that covert actions should not require direct involvement of US forces. Reagan sought "truly disabling" covert actions rather than what he called "just flea bites." The president, though, had reservations about the kind of accusations that the press would level against the administration. Reagan thought the media would claim he embroiled the US in "another Vietnam" by engaging in covert action in Central America. Reagan also had concerns about the public relations problem of how to "deal with the image in Latin America of the Yankee colossus." Those dilemmas would persist. The administration's policy inflicted destruction on Nicaragua by providing millions in funding and the raising of a 500-person paramilitary force to attack Nicaraguan infrastructure, interdict arms, and subvert the government. It was not without controversy. Reagan's Contra policy proved polarizing at home and abroad.[46]

00004 02/27/1981 [Poland, Caribbean Basin, F-15 Aircraft, El Salvador] (1)-(4)," Box 91282, Executive Secretariat, NSC: NSC Meeting Files: Records, 1981-1988, RRPL; Presidential Finding, "Scope: Central America," March 9, 1981, DNSA collection: Nicaragua: the making U.S. policy, 1978-1990, DNSA; Central Intelligence Agency, Draft Finding to Counter Cuban Activities in Central America, "Scope: Central America," February 27, 1981, DNSA collection: The Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Kornbluh, *Nicaragua: the Price of Intervention*, 19–20.

[45] LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 104-146; Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* (New York: Free Press, 1996, 208-230; and Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*, Chapter 2; On the Contra war's escalation, see also Robert P. Hager Jr and Robert S Snyder, "The United States and Nicaragua: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 17, no. 2 (2015): 3–35; For NSDD 17, see National Security Decision Directive Number 17, "Cuba and Central America," January 4, 1982, RAC Box 1, Folder: "NSDD 17 [Cuba and Central America]," Executive Secretariat, national Security Council: National Security Decision Directives (NSDD): Records, 1981 - 1987, RRPL.; Honduran and Argentine armed forces supported the Contras, too. On the Argentine role in the Contras, see Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1997), Chps 4-5; on El Salvador, see Russell Crandall, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[46] Minutes, National Security Council Meeting, "Strategy Toward Cuba and Central America," November 10, 1981, Folder "NSC 00026 11/16/1981 [Strategy Toward Cuba and Central America, Proposed US Peacekeeping Force in Chad, Military Assistance] (1)(2)," Executive Secretariat, NSC: NSC Meeting Files: Records, 1981-1988, RRPL; Memo, Richard V. Allen to George H.W. Bush [et Al.], "NSC Meeting --November 16, 1981," DNSA collection: CIA Covert Operations: From Carter to Obama, 1977-2010, DNSA; National Security Decision Directive Number 17, "Cuba and Central America," January 4, 1982, RAC Box 1, Folder: "NSDD 17 [Cuba and Central America]," Executive Secretariat, national Security Council: National Security Decision Directives (NSDD): Records, 1981 - 1987, RRPL; Congress requested that the CIA address media leaks about its paramilitary plans, see also Memo, CIA Director of Office of External Affairs to Executive Director, "U.S. Approves Covert Plan in Nicaragua," March 10, 1982, CREST, Central Intelligence Agency's FOIA Electronic Reading Room, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00049R001002440006-0.pdf.

The Contra War II: Exercising the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua

In early 1982, Contra forces launched major offensives against the Sandinistas. The Contras prosecuted the war viciously, prompting public outcry in the United States over the atrocities. Contras sabotaged bridges, burned crops, maimed Nicaraguan soldiers, and assassinated government officials. As one Contra put it, they were "fighting to liberate Nicaragua" and intended to "cut the head off the Sandinistas" in the process. Yet, the Defense Intelligence Agency determined that, for all punishment exacted, the Contras did not "pose a serious military threat to the present Sandinista leadership." The Contra campaign fomented destruction but faltered in seizing territory or winning the political battle. Reagan, too, faced political resistance for his support of their war.[47]

As the Contras launched attacks, the Reagan administration worked to mobilize political support for their cause and encounter the countervailing force of the free press. Reagan formed a public lobbying campaign in May 1982 to persuade the American people and generating legislative support from Congress. Contra exploits, though, were far from covert. Journalists published stories routinely, turning the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua into what can be most adequately described as an overt-covert war. An exposé in *Newsweek* revealed vivid details about the Contra war to the public, including the administration's concerted efforts to facilitate the war with supplies and training. It refuted the administration's stated goal of interdicting arms and suggested Reagan's creeping involvement in the region could be a harbinger for an American war. The public spotlight diminished the prospect of building a consensus on the Contra War.[48]

Reagan's strategy for ousting the Sandinistas never resonated with a large sector of the public. Polling indicates a majority of Americans disapproved of the president's Central American policies. In mid-1984, Reagan's overall approval rating held at 52% while his Central America policies reached only 29%. Internal reports show that the administration had difficulty imparting on the public their message about Reagan's specific policies. Communist expansion concerned Americans. Yet, a majority of Americans favored diplomacy over military action, for they feared another Vietnam War-style experience. Congress and citizens had desired a diplomatic direction for US-Central America relations. Conversely, the president preferred a paramilitary approach. Reagan would not relent on applying the Reagan Doctrine. He believed "the old Vietnam syndrome" prevented Americans from support his Contra policy. Still, he pursued it despite the disapproval, optics, and political backlash. Congressional resistance was an obstacle that a president could surmount.[49]

Congress moved to prohibit forms of American support for the Contras, passing Boland amendments I and II to restrict US assistance. Edward Boland, the House Intelligence Committee Chairman, introduced an amendment to the Defense Appropriations bill for 1983 to

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[47] Report, Defense Intelligence Agency, "Weekly Intelligence Summary: Insurgent Activity Increases in Nicaragua," July 16, 1982, DNSA Collection: Nicaragua: the making of U.S. policy, 1978-1990, DNSA; Christopher Dickey, "Well-Armed Units Show Strong-Holds," *Washington Post*, April 3, 1983.

[48] National Security Decision Directive Number 37, "National Security Decision Directive on Cuba and Central America," May 28, 1981, Executive Secretariat, National Security Council: National Security Decision Directives (NSDD): Records, 1981 - 1987 RRPL; A *Newsweek* article exposed Contra operations, see "A Secret War for Nicaragua," *Newsweek*, November 8, 1982, 42-53.

[49] See memoranda and 7 tabs of attachments in Memo, Richard S. Beal to Robert C. McFarlane, "U.S. Public Opinion -- Central America," Box 28, Folder: "Central America - General 5/3/84) (1), Executive Secretariat, National Security Council: Country File Records, 1981-1985, RRPL; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 308.

prohibit funds for the purpose of overthrowing the Sandinistas. The bill passed with an overwhelming vote of 411-0. In response, Reagan attempted to pacify congressional opposition, signing a new finding directing the Contras to pressure the Sandinistas into holding elections. Publicly, the Reagan administration claimed that their objective was stopping weapon flows into El Salvador. Privately, Reagan remained committed to ousting the Sandinistas. The Contras obliged, leading to further controversy. With help from the CIA, they mined the harbors at Corinto and El Bluff, an attack that the *Wall Street Journal* exposed in April 1984. Congress recoiled in shock and adopted Boland II to the 1985 omnibus spending bill. The pressures of an election year ensured its passing. Reagan reluctantly signed the bill in October 1984. Boland II prohibited the use of US funds from agencies involved in intelligence activities for military and paramilitary operations in Nicaragua. The Boland amendments had effectively ended American support for the Contra War—or so Congress thought.[50]

The Reagan administration improvised ways to circumvent congressional restraints while engaged in a public diplomacy effort to revive Contra funding. Reagan spearheaded the publicity campaign for the Reagan Doctrine's "freedom fighters" in Nicaragua. He referred to the Contras as "the moral equal of our Founding Fathers" in support of their mission. The NSC and Office of Public Diplomacy lobbied Congress on behalf of the Contras and carried out public relations in coordination with conservative think tanks.[51] The administration, meanwhile, expanded the covert. Reagan instructed his NSC to sustain the Contra forces, a directive they followed unwaveringly. In the case of Oliver North, who managed the Contra operation within the NSC, he undertook the order with zeal. North testified that he "was given the job of holding them together in body and soul."[52] And he approached the effort accordingly. Tasked with the daunting operation at the behest National Security Advisor McFarlane, North assisted the Contras by any means necessary. Reagan officials held firm that they "had to win this one" in Central America. North's endeavors reflected this sentiment, and his personal beliefs aligned with his mission. Although resorting to questionable covert operations without congressional and

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[50] National Security Decision Directive Number 59, "Cuba and Central America," October 5, 1982, Executive Secretariat, National Security Council: National Security Decision Directives (NSDD): Records, 1981 - 1987 RRPL; National Security Decision Directive Number 100, "Cuba and Central America," July 28, 1983, Ibid.; David Rogers, "U.S. Role in Mining Nicaraguan Harbors Reportedly Larger than First Thought," *Wall Street Journal*, April 6, 1984; Memo, Oliver L. North and Constantine Menges to Robert C. McFarlane, "Special Activities in Nicaragua," March 2, 1984, DNSA Collection: The Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Presidential Finding, "CIA Covert Operations in Nicaragua," September 19, 1983, DNSA Collection: Nicaragua: the making of U.S. policy, 1978-1990, DNSA; Law, Public Law 98-473 [H.J.Res. 648]; Continuing Appropriations, 1985--Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984 [Including Section 8066(a), Boland Amendment Two], Ibid; On legislative wrangling over Boland amendments, see Arnson, *Crossroads*, 108-112, 125-128, 179, 178-180, 206; The harbor mining resulted in a case before the International Court of Justice, see Military and Paramilitary Activities (Nicar. v. U.S.), 1986 I.C.J. 14 (June 27); Military and Paramilitary Activities In and Against Nicaragua (Nicar. v. U.S.), 1984 I.C.J. 392 (Nov. 26).

[51] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Dinner of the Conservative Political Action Conference, March 1, 1985," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1985, Book 1, January 1 - June 28, 1985* (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1988), 226–30; Minutes, National Security Council Meeting, "Review of US Policy in Central America," January 10, 1986, Folder "NSC000128, 10 Jan 1986 [Review of US Policy in Central America," Executive Secretariat, NSC: NSC Meeting Files: Records, 1981-1988, RRPL; Presidential Finding, "Scope: Nicaragua," January 9, 1986, DNSA Collection: Nicaragua: the making of U.S. policy, 1978-1990, DNSA; On Reagan's public diplomacy efforts, see Arnson, *Crossroads*, Chapter 7.

[52] United States. Congress., *Testimony of Oliver L. North (Questioning by Counsels)*: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-7, Part 1, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 7, 8, 9, and 10, 1987 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987), 75, 267.

public approval created grave problems for the administration.[53]

The Contra War III: The Enterprise

North managed the Contra operation while the administration lobbied for a restoration of aid. To evade congressional restraints, North set about organizing a privatized supply network funded by third-party countries and conservative donors. North termed the resupply operation "Project Democracy." It established, he later stated, an "off-the-shelf, self-sustaining, stand-alone entity that could perform certain activities on behalf of the United States." Project Democracy thus functioned outside of the normal foreign policy bureaucracy. Richard Secord, a retired Air Force General affiliated with the CIA, and his business partner, Albert Hakim, joined the operation at North's request and CIA Director Casey's insistence. Together, they built a private business capable of sustaining the Contras at a time when legislation prohibited US aid.[54]

Secord and Hakim termed their company's involvement "The Enterprise" for its complicated resupply infrastructure. The Enterprise amassed airplanes, warehouses, offshore bank accounts, shell companies, and a crew of pilots and maintenance workers. Its activities included providing the Contras with arms and non-lethal aid paid for by third-party funds transferred into their offshore accounts. Secord presided over an escalation of the Contra War by running routine supply missions into Central America delivering weapons procured from China and the Eastern Bloc. Previously, Secord had facilitated the transfer of arms from Israel to the Contras during Operation Tipped Kettle, in which the Israelis sent several tons of arms confiscated from the Palestinian Liberation Organization. In 1984, Israel again transferred arms confiscated from the PLO to the Contras during Operation Tipped Kettle II. In addition to weapons, Secord presided over the opening of bases in El Salvador and Costa Rica. CIA, NSC, and State officials assisted his efforts to rearm the Contras. The Enterprise succeeded at sustaining the Contra forces, but it was a joint effort between private actors with combat experience and the American government.[55]

Veterans of the CIA and special forces, as well as current Defense, State, and CIA officials, made the Contra supply network operational. In El Salvador, the Ilopango Air Force Base was

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[53] Robert McFarlane reached these conclusions and testified to them in from of the Joint Select Committee investigation Iran-Contra, see United States. Congress., *Testimony of Robert C. McFarlane, Gaston J. Sigur Jr., and Robert W. Owen:* Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-2, 100th Congress, 1st Sess. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 3-4.

[54] *Testimony of Oliver L. North*, 317–319.

[55] Investigations into Iran-Contra produced vast evidence on the Enterprise. For a few examples, see the following: on confirmation of resupply drop, see Cable, "UNO/FARN Lethal Airdrop to Combat Forces [CIA Intelligence Report on Enterprise Resupply Flight]," April 12, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; On Enterprise holdings, see Chart, "Charts Showing Relationships among Enterprise Holdings," National Security Council, July 1986, Ibid.; On Enterprise bank accounts, see List, "Enterprise-Connected Banks and Deposit Instructions," December 1986, Ibid; On arms shipment payments and logistics, see Debit Notice, Royal Bank of Canada, "Notice of Debit to Account for Payment to Romanian Foreign Trade Enterprise "Romtehnica" for Purchase of Arms for the Contras, January 16, 1985, Ibid; Check, Royal Bank of Canada, "Payment to Defex-Portugal for Arms Shipped in Airlift #1 to the Contras," January 21, 1985, Ibid; Malcolm Byrne provides the most in-depth details on the Enterprise, see Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, Chp. 3 and Chp 6; see also, *Select Committee's Report*, chapter 3; Walsh, *Final Report on Iran-Contra*, Volume I, 161-66; On Operation Tipped Kettle I and II, see Court Document, In the United States District Court for the District of Columbia, United States of America v. Oliver L. North, Defendant [U.S. Governments Stipulation on Quid Pro Quos with Other Governments as part of Contra Operations, April 6, 1989, DNSA Collection: The Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

the main location for air supply operations. In September 1985, North contacted Félix Rodríguez, who privately advised the Salvadoran Air Force, to establish the site. An ex-CIA operative with deep connections in Washington, Rodriguez had participated in the Bay of Pigs invasion, Ernesto "Che" Guevara death, and the Vietnam War. Retired Air Force Colonels Richard Gadd and Robert Dutton, whom Secord hired, oversaw flights and crews with the assistance of the US Military Group advising the Salvadorans on counterinsurgency. The Enterprise also built a southern front airstrip in Santa Elena, Costa Rica, with the help of Ambassador Lewis Tambs and CIA Station Chief Joe Fernandez. In Washington, National Security Advisors McFarlane and then Poindexter kept Reagan generally appraised of Contra activity. Reagan possessed working knowledge of the Enterprise's logistical efforts, but he was not steeped in the operational details. The president did not direct North and Secord's efforts. But the Enterprise's supply operations would not have been possible without a steady revenue stream.[56]

Monetary assistance from Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and conservative donors funded the Enterprise along with diversions from the Iranian initiative. The Reagan administration solicited $32 million from Saudi Arabia and $2 million from Taiwan for the Contra cause. Both countries willingly donated to the cause. Conservative donors also contributed a total of $10 million through charitable foundations organized for the purpose of funding the Contra mission. The National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty (NEPL), a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt foundation founded by Carl "Spitz" Channell, coordinated with North on fundraising ventures to funnel money into the Enterprise. NEPL raised $6.3 million for Contra aid, disbursing $3.3 million after siphoning commissions and salaries for their efforts. The White House engaged with Channell's fundraising events. North briefed donors on the Contra war while Reagan, his Chief of Staff Don Regan, Director of Communications Patrick Buchanan, and Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams would appear for short interactions. Those who donated large sums received a short, private visit with Reagan. The White House had found a means for facilitating private citizen contributions for Contra aid. Conservative donors, however, were not the only non-state actors assisting the Reagan Doctrine.[57]

American anti-communist paramilitary groups entered the fray, traveling to Central America to assist the Contras. These groups acted ancillary to the Enterprise, but their services

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[56] Letter, Oliver North to Felix Rodriguez, September 20, 1985, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra, DNSA; For a succinct overview of the establishment of the Enterprise's operations, see LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 402-407; See also see Felix I. Rodriguez and John Weisman, *Shadow Warrior: The CIA Hero of a Hundred Unknown Battles* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 215-248; Using Reagan's answers to Grand Jury interrogatories and his testimony, Lawrence Walsh concluded that Reagan had an understanding of the logistical operations, though evidence did not exist to confirm the extent to which Reagan was briefed. Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters*. U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, August 4, 1993. Vol. I: Investigations and Prosecutions (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993), 450-452.

[57] On third-party funding, see Walsh, *Final Report on Iran-Contra. Vol. I*, Chp. 8 and 13; For a general review of NEPL, including its lobbying efforts, see *Select Committee's Report*, chapter 4; For budget documents containing contribution information, see Budget Document, National Endowment for the Preservation of Libery, "NEPL Contributors 1985," January 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Budget Document, National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty, "[NEPL] 1986 Contributions," October 29, 1986; Ibid; On White House involvement, see Memo, Executive Office of the President, "Central American Briefing for the American Conservative Trust and the National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty," January 30, 1986, Ibid.; Memo, Linda Chavez to Ronald W. Reagan, "Meeting with the National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty [Talking Points Attached]," January 30, 1986, Ibid; Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to Carl Channell, "President Reagan's Expression of Gratitude for NEPL's Lobbying Efforts in Support of Contra Aid Request," February 21, 1986, Ibid; "We dropped in on a meeting of private citizens who have been raising pbt. funds to help the Contras." see March 3, 1986, entry in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 395.

nonetheless bolstered the Contras at a time when the Boland amendments limited supplies. Civilian Military Assistance was the most prominent organization. Founded in Alabama by Vietnam Veteran Thomas Posey, CMA members mobilized for the purpose of fighting the Contra war. Members donated humanitarian and military aid. Relying on their Vietnam War experience, they built Marine-style training camps in Honduras to impart knowledge of warfare on anti-communist insurgents.[58] Posey managed his own resupply network and worked with an NSC liaison to open another Contra base in Costa Rica.[59]

Occasionally, CMA's involvement complicated the Contra operation by launching unauthorized aerial assault raids with Contra forces, resulting in death of American citizens and wide-spread publicity.[60] Reagan did not dissuade such paramilitary assistance. He stated that he "would not want to interfere" with American citizens helping the Contras and thus his policy.[61] North's "Project Democracy" predominately maintained the Contras, but conservative donors and anti-communist paramilitary groups contributed.[62] Yet it was North's scheme to divert funds from Iranian arms sales that brought the Enterprise crashing down along with the Contras and nearly the president himself.

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[58] On Thomas Posey's involvement in Iran-Contra, see "Don't Shoot Them as Individuals, Shoot Them as Communists," The Washington Post, September 23, 1984; "Mercenaries in Fatigues Meet in Nevada Glitter," *New York Times*, September 23, 1984; U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair. Appendix B: Volume 21, Depositions*, 100th Congress, 1st Sess., 1987. Senate Report 100-216, November. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 1-223; On views of US officials, see "Private Aid to Latin Rebels at Issue," *New York Times*, December 13, 1984; CMA sent video footage of bootcamps to the Reagan administration, see Video Transcript, Samuel J. Watsonn III, April 13, 1987, folder "Submission, April 8, 1987 [1]" OA/ID 19864-003, Samuel J. Watson Subject File, Office of Vice President George Bush Files, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, College Station, Texas; Civilian Material Assistance Press Release, August 28, 1986, "F.D.N. Promotes Memphian," Ibid; see also, Samuel J. Watson hand written notes on the CMA video, Ibid.

[59] Report, Office of Senator John Kerry, "Private Assistance" and the Contras: A Staff Report, October 14, 1986, DNSA collection: Nicaragua, DNSA and Cable, "Federal Bureau of Investigation," Thomas Vincent Posey, AKA Thomas V. Posey, Tommy Posey; Neutrality Matter - El Salvador, Nicaragua, January 23, 1985, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; On resupplying and the southern front, see Cable, Central Intelligence Agency, "CMA Pro-Contra Activities in Honduras," January 22, 1985, Ibid.; Cable, Central Intelligence Agency, "Civilian Military Assistance Participation in Air Deliveries to Contras," April 1, 1985, Ibid; Cable, Central Intelligence Agency, "CMA Mercenary Operations and Aircraft," July 1, 1985, Ibid; Memo, Robert W. Owen to Oliver L. North, "Southern Front," April 1, 1985, Ibid.

[60] Memo, Robert C. McFarlane to Oliver L. North, "FDN Air Attack of 1 September [Routing Slip Attached]," September 2, 1984, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair; Cable, John Negroponte to George Shultz, "Deaths of AMCITS," Sept. 6, 1984, folder "DRF/Contra-Military Activities (1)-(12)," Box 4, Oliver L. North Files, RRPL; Memo, Oliver L. North to Robert C. McFarlane, "Nicaraguan Helicopter Downing," September 6, 1984, Ibid; Memo, Charles Hill to Robert C. McFarlane, "American Deaths in Nicaragua helicopter Downing," September 6, 1984, Ibid; Memo, Oliver L. North to Robert C. McFarlane, "House and Senate Intelligence Committee Hearings on U.S. Private Citizens Support to the Nicaraguan Resistance Forces," September 10, 1984, Ibid; Letter, Barry Goldwater to Caspar W. Weinberger, September 7, 1984, Ibid;

[61] David Hoffman, "Private Contra Aid Gets Limited Favor: Reagan Says He 'Wouldn't Want to Interfere'," *Washington Post,* Oct 27, 1984.

[62] Joel Brinkley, "Iran Sales Linked to Wide Program of Covert Policies," *New York Times*, February 15, 1987.

Conclusion

"Central America," United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick declared in 1981, was "the most important place in the world for the United States."[63] And Reagan's policy toward Nicaragua demonstrated the significance. As the Reagan administration discovered, however, drafting directives and giving speeches are easier than implementing policy. To be sure, Reagan exhausted political capital to ensure the Reagan Doctrine's success in Central America, but his political skills could not resolve the predicament. The politics of the Contra War waxed and waned inside the Capitol. Reagan, meanwhile, could not easily persuade a skeptical public.

Reagan had options, and he elected to pursue the one with an appearance of the least political resistance. Reagan could have vetoed legislation prohibiting lethal aid to the Contras, provoking an election-year showdown over a policy that the president deemed high-priority. Instead, Reagan signed the omnibus bill and relied on his staff to sustain the insurgency while he waged the political battle to restore aid. The NSC and CIA improvised and instituted a private network to sustain the insurgents. The Enterprise was thus born, a shady private entity soon to facilitate another controversial clandestine operation. The private supply network, though, was an unsustainable stopgap measure that would corrode the relationship between the White House and Congress.

In the case of the Contras, Congress limited Reagan's grand ambitions for waging Cold War. The politics of the post-Vietnam era were still fraught with concerns about interventions in the developing world and the behavior of US-supported combatants in proxy wars against the Soviet Union. The possibility of direct intervention in the Western Hemisphere inspired new concerns stemming from old fears. Congress proved unwilling to underwrite the Contras insurgency at a time when the lessons of the Vietnam War still exercised a guiding influence on policymakers and citizens alike. The Boland amendments responded to the public outcry over the Contra's war-making. Reagan reacted in a manner consistent with his commitments.

The Contra War showcased the perils of a president conducting foreign policy in defiance of congressional opposition. Congress had prohibited aid and incentivized themselves to hold the administration to account on any violation of statute. Whether Congress would do so is the subject of later chapters. As this study shows, the irregular implementation of policy would make the politics of the Contra War all the more bruising. North, the administration's point man for the Contras, was neither prepared nor competent, although he possessed the requisite attitude. His commitment to the Contras would almost be Reagan's undoing. Reagan's campaign to eradicate Cuban and Soviet influence in Central America would intersect with his bid to establish a rapprochement with Iran, a tragic series of errors to which this study now turns.

[63] Bob Levin with Beth Nissen, "Storm Over El Salvador," *Newsweek*, March 16, 1981.

Chapter 3
Operations II: Rescue in the Middle East

Bud came by—it seems 2 members of the Iranian govt. want to establish talks with us.
Ronald Reagan, Diary Entry, July 18, 1985[1]

Confronting the Soviet Union served as the overarching purpose of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy, but it was not consistently the determining factor. If the Cold War defined Reagan's policy on Nicaragua, the sanctity of American lives drove his covert engagement with Iran. Reagan believed that preventing the spread of Marxist governments in Central America and rescuing hostages in the Middle East served the national interest. He developed personal commitments to the operations designed to achieve those objectives. He demanded support for the Contras in the face of congressional resistance. The Sandinistas received no quarter under the Reagan Doctrine, a centerpiece of Reagan's strategy to wage Cold War. Similarly, Reagan doggedly pursued freeing hostages held in Lebanon despite the consequences, risks, and warnings.

In the Middle East, Reagan encountered intractable problems and improvised questionable solutions. The destabilizing efforts of the Iranian Revolution persisted, and Reagan grappled with the scourge of terrorism. He also confronted a hostage crisis in Lebanon, where the Iranian-backed terrorist organization Hezbollah seized Americans in a deadly kidnapping campaign. To address these vexing circumstances, Reagan pursued unorthodox measures to not only liberate Americans, but also reduce tensions between the US and Iran. Although Reagan sought a strategic opening with Iran, he thought of the hostages first and foremost. Reagan authorized covert arms-for-hostages deals with Iran in a desperate bid to save the hostages. Reducing hostilities with a new adversary would be a secondary benefit. The prospect of creating another bulwark against the Soviets in the Middle East influenced his thinking. If Reagan could negotiate with the Soviets, the so-called "nuclear cowboy" could seek rapprochement with Iran, even if it appeared to violate his own stated policy.[2] Senior advisors argued against the Iran initiative, but Reagan's personal commitment to the hostages, this chapter contends, superseded wise counsel. Repeated operational setbacks and the potential of political fallout over the controversial strategy failed to inspire hesitation on part of the president.

The ill-advised operations flowed from irregular policy development and flawed decision-making. The process for developing, coordinating, and implementing the Iran initiative, this chapter explains, did not function as it should. The National Security Council were operational, overseeing clandestine efforts in Nicaragua and Iran. Reagan, for his part, approved the operations responsible for Iran-Contra and delegated authority to his staff for ensuring their success. Under the direction of two successive national security advisors, Oliver North, an NSC staffer, coordinated with the CIA and private actors to facilitate them. The nature of the operations set the conditions for the scandal's most outrageous aspect—the diversion of funds.

What follows explores Reagan's initiative to save hostages in Lebanon and open a back channel with Iran. This chapter begins with the origins of the Iran initiative before turning to the infamous arms-for-hostages transactions. It examines the initiative's intersection with the Contra supply network and the origins of the diversion of funds to the Contras from the arms sales with

[1] Ronald W. Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 343.
[2] Stephen S. Rosenfeld, "Myth of the Nuclear Cowboy," *Washington Post*, January 8, 1988, A19.

Iran. North's scheming and the Enterprise's management of the operations, this chapter shows, produced on many occasions outlandish—and counterproductive—results. That the Contra and Iran operations sustained for as long as they did remains one of the more puzzling aspects of the affair.

Middle Eastern Quagmire

Reagan authorized the secret Iranian initiative to secure the release of American hostages held in Lebanon and, secondarily, reduce tensions with the revolutionary government in Iran. It saved three hostages but failed to bring about a rapprochement. Reagan was directly involved but possessed limited knowledge of operational details, as the Enterprise's facilitation of the hostage releases remained a highly compartmentalized venture. Reagan's clandestine initiative neither underwent inter-agency review nor was it disclosed to Congress. The president had, however, authorized the initiative. Reagan had not only geostrategic and national security concerns, but also personal reasons for doing so: limiting Soviet regional influence; establishing a rapprochement with the Islamic Republic; reducing state-sponsored terrorism; ending the Iran-Iraq war; and, most importantly to Reagan, saving American hostages. Reagan responded to the confounding set of circumstances presented by the Iranian Revolution. The Islamic Republic destabilized the Middle East. It empowered radical Islam, threatened oil flows, antagonized American allies, and spread terrorism. Thus, insecurity in the Middle East and the fantastical assumptions of American policymakers made possible the arms-for-hostages exchanges.[3]

The Iran-Iraq War, Israeli regional policy, and the rise of Hezbollah created the conditions for the Iran initiative. The Iran-Iraq War commenced in September 1980 and raged throughout the 1980s, straining Iran's resources and necessitating more weapons. The Reagan administration had declared Iran as a state-sponsor of terrorism and enacted an arms embargo. The State Department initiated the diplomatic effort Operation Staunch to limit the world's arm transactions with Iran.[4] Many states did not abide Reagan's blockade. Alongside dozens of countries, Israel had supplied Iran with weapons and spare jet parts in pursuing the last vestiges of its counterbalancing "periphery doctrine" in the region, leaving a communication channel open with the Islamic Republic. Early in Reagan's first term, Israeli officials had raised with American counterparts the prospect of influencing "moderate" Iranian by supplying them with weapons, but Reagan officials dismissed the prospect.[5] Israel had also invaded Lebanon in June 1982 in its conflict with the Palestinian Liberation Organization, giving rise to Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia terrorist organization closely linked with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

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[3] On Reagan's overall approach to the Greater Middle East and his strategy for addressing insecurity and instability in the region, see Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 224-273; On Revolutionary Iran's grand strategy, see Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11-111.

[4] On Iran-Iraq War, see Williamson Murry and Kevin M. Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Strategic and Military Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); On US involvement in Iran-Iraq war, see James G. Blight, Janet Lang, Hussein Banai, Malcolm Byrne, and John Tirman, *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979-1988* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); Malcolm Byrne makes a cogent argument for these three factors influencing the development of the arms-for-hostages deals, see Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 33-40; Lawrence Freedman develops a similar argument in favor of these factors, see Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York PublicAffairs, 2008), 168-191.

[5] On Israel's periphery nostalgia and Iran-Contra, see Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), Chapter 10.

Hezbollah's attacks against American targets changed the dynamics of US policy, influencing Reagan's approach to Iran.[6]

Hezbollah's bombing and kidnapping campaign instilled new fears in Washington policymakers about security in the region. After Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Reagan had dispatched the Marines on a peacekeeping mission. Hezbollah retaliated against US intervention by attacking the American Embassy in Beirut, killing 17 Americans and rattling the Reagan administration. Hezbollah continued the carnage in their bid to expel Westerners from the country. Members associated with Islamic Jihad bombed the Marine barracks in Beirut using a dump truck loaded with explosives. The terrorist attack resulted in the death of 247 Americans, prompting Reagan to withdraw from Lebanon. In the aftermath, Islamic Jihad conducted targeted assassinations on Americans, including the President of the American University of Beirut Malcolm H. Kerr. Islamic Jihad then engaged in kidnappings to further their aims. Seven Americans became victims of Islamic Jihad's hostage campaign from 1984 to 1985. In 1984, Islamic Jihad abducted CNN's Beirut Chief Jeremy Levin, Reverend Benjamin Weir, and CIA Station Chief in Beirut William Buckley, whose captivity especially anguished CIA Director William Casey. Like his predecessor, Reagan faced an escalating hostage crisis in the Middle East. The human element began deeply affecting him.[7]

Reagan's intense desire to rescue hostages underpinned the Iran initiative. Islamic Jihad disseminated audio, video, and photographs of Buckley's torture to American officials. It horrified and angered the Reagan administration, who had sought desperately to free Buckley. Tears filled Reagan's eyes when he reviewed the tape. The horror of terrorism blanketed the Oval Office. In 1985, Islamic Jihad terrorized anew, abducting Associated Press correspondent Terry Anderson, American University Hospital Directory David P. Jacobsen, Father Lawrence Martin Jenco, and American University Dean of Agriculture Thomas P. Sutherland. Vexed by the dire situation, Reagan prioritized the hostage crisis and tried comforting the victims' families. Relatives of the victims, though, often criticized Reagan's response to the crisis in meetings with officials, demanding that the president devote greater effort to rescuing their loved ones. Reagan understood their concerns. The plight of the hostages demanded drastic action, and Reagan had committed to it.[8]

Rescuing hostages consumed Reagan. He believed returning Americans home safely was the president's sacred duty—his chief objective. He later confessed that he "felt a heavy weight on

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[6] On the Hezbollah organization see, Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (London: Hurst and Company, 2013); On war in Lebanon, Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War,* 3rd eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[7] On the kidnapping campaign, see Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Malcolm Byrne provides a crisp overview of the hostage crisis in Lebanon and its effect on Reagan, see Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 38–40; On Buckley Kidnapping, see folders: "TIWG: Buckley Kidnapping Case Oliver L. North, NSC Staff [1] [2]," Box 11, Oliver L. North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (Hereafter RRPL); see also Fred Burton and Samuel M. Katz, *Beirut Rules: The Murder of a CIA Station Chief and Hezbollah's War against America* (New York: Berkley, 2018).

[8] "Captive CIA Agent's Death Galvanized Hostage Search," *Washington Post*, November 25, 1986; Peter Schweizer, *Reagan's War* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 267; Joseph E. Persico, *Casey: From the OSS to the CIA* (New York: Viking, 1990), 390; On family criticism of the administration, see Item #2 from an evening update from George Shultz in Memo, George P. Shultz to Ronald W. Reagan, March 19, 1985, Folder "President/NSC Chron 3/19/1985 - 3/20/1985," Box 34, Situation Room, White House Records, RRPL; See also, Memo, Oliver L. North to Robert C. McFarland, "Your Meeting with Hostage Families," July 30, 1985, 1985 System II Case Files: #8590813 - McFarlane Meeting with Hostage Families, National Security Affairs, Office of the Assistant to the President: Chron File, Records 1981-1989, RRPL

[his] shoulders to get the hostages home." He wrote letters to the victim's relatives, in which he offered "heartfelt sympathy," assured them that saving the hostages "remains a top priority," and promised "every possible effort is being made" to solve the crisis. Meeting with the hostages' families reinforced Reagan's resolve to save them. His empathy run deep to a fault. "Those meetings destroyed him," Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger recalled decades later. Reagan assumed a greater burden after each interaction with the relatives of the hostages. National Security Advisor McFarlane tried persuading Reagan to hide his compassion to avoid causing additional abductions, as Hezbollah would seek to exploit his sentimentality. "But I have a responsibility to these people," Reagan said, "and I just can't ignore their suffering."[9]

Reagan witnessed the agony and calculated the individual suffering into his decision-making. After seeing a photograph "taken by the bastards" responsible for the kidnappings, Reagan noted in his dairy "there is no question but that they are being badly treated." The audio of Buckley's torture traumatized Reagan and affected his judgment, making visceral the brutality of Islamic Jihad. He grappled with the intractable problem of terrorism while confronting both the human element and graphic sensory evidence. Surely, a superpower could liberate its citizens from captivity. The Reagan administration debated rescue plans, even considering the option of launching military assaults on Tehran if Islamic Jihad killed the hostages. In the end, the president opted to deal with the Iranian regime to save the hostages. The White House believed that a form of weapons diplomacy—however unconventional—would foster a warmer relationship with Iran while releasing the hostages from captivity. It seemed plausible to officials despite its counterproductive nature. Iran required weapons to wage war against Iraq, and the Iranians could pressure Islamic Jihad to release the Americans. The plan proved partially successful in its aim and wholly a political disaster for Reagan.[10]

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[9] On Reagan's view of the duty to save hostages, see Reagan, *An American Life*, 490, 492, 513; "Families to Meet Reagan," *Chicago Tribune*, June 28, 1985; Rob Karwath, "Lonely Vigil Continues for Joliet Priest's Family," *Chicago Tribune*, June 30, 1985; Robert C. McFarlane, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell and Davies, 1994), 21-23; In an interview with Malcom Byrne, CIA Iran analyst Bruce Riedel described Reagan as "obsessed," see Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 350, note 56; On Weinberger's comments about the effect of meeting with the relatives of hostages, see pages 18 and 19 of Caspar Weinberger, interview by Stephen F. Knott and Russell L. Riley, November 19, 2002, Washington, D.C., Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan; See letters contained in NSA Case file in 1984 System II Case Files, #8491337 – Letters to Families of Terror Victims, National Security Affairs, Office of the Assistant to the President: Chron file: Records, 1981-1989, RRPL.

[10] On Reagan's interaction with the Buckley audio, see pages 17 and 21 of A.B. Culvahouse, interview by Stephen F. Knott, Darby Morrisroe, and Karen M. Hult, April 1, 2004, Charlottesville, Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 310; On Reagan's discussion of military action in Tehran, see Minutes, National Security Planning Group Meeting, "Response to Threat to Lebanon Hostages," January 18, 1985, 1985 System II Case Files, 8590053 - U.S. Hostages in Lebanon, National Security Affairs, Office of the Assistant to the President; Chron File, Records, 1981-1989, RRPL; For the DEA operation to rescue hostages, see U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views.* 100th Congress, 1st Sess., Senate Report 100-216, November (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), chapter 8 and 361-365.

The Iran Initiative I: The Strategic Opening

The Iran initiative had a murky origin. Motivated by profit, Adnan Khashoggi, a Saudi businessman, and Manucher Ghorbanifar, an Iranian arms dealer, conspired in spring 1985 to sell weapons to Iran by using Israel as an intermediary. Khashoggi and Ghorbanifar proposed to Israel the lucrative idea of selling American made Tube launched Optically tracked Wire-guided (TOW) missiles to Iran, an anti-tank weapon that would rout Iraq's Soviet-made tanks. To push the idea, Ghorbanifar claimed that America and Israel would both benefit from an ongoing political struggle within Iran between "liberals" desiring a Western pivot, hardliners seeking to export the Islamic Revolution, and a purported moderate faction somewhere in the middle. According to him, moderates would receive the weapons, strengthening their position within the government. These arms, in turn, would encourage Iran to pressure Hezbollah into releasing hostages. Israel accepted the premise. Foreign Ministry Director General David Kimche, Yaacov Nimrodi, a former IDF military attaché in Tehran, and Adolph "Al" Schwimmer, the founder of Israel Aerospace Industries and close friend of Prime Minister Shimon Peres, acted as the principal Israeli middlemen. Simultaneously, Prime Minister Peres conferred about the plan with Michael Ledeen, a counterterrorism consultant who visited Israel at the NSC's behest to discuss Iran. They agreed that the plan served everyone's interest. Iran would access American weapons. The US would obtain the hostages. And Israel would engage with Iran to shift the balance of regional power against Arab states. What Ghorbanifar proposed, however, was not novel.[11]

The Reagan administration considered the political utility of weapons. Reagan wanted a communication channel opened with Iran in case of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death, and his administration debated how to nudge Iran back into the geopolitical orbit of the West. Soviet geopolitical advancement brooded over deliberations about the strategy. Policy papers circulated that recommended the president should condone ally arm shipments to Iran in order to diminish Soviet influence within the country. Of senior officials, McFarlane was particularly keen to encourage ally cooperation in selling arms to increase Western influence. Defense Secretary Weinberger and Secretary of State Shultz vehemently disagreed. They dispatched memorandum to McFarlane expressing their dissent. Shultz maintained that permitting Iran to access weapons undermined US policy and rewarded a state supporting terrorists who kidnapped Americans. Shultz also questioned the closeness of Iranian-Soviet relations. He argued that, although the prolonged Iran-Iraq War made the Islamic Republic dependent on Soviet arms, weapons transactions did not result in meaningful political influence. The US, Shultz contended, should mediate an end to the Iran-Iraq War rather than open the arms marketplace to Iran. Yet despite Shultz and Weinberger's objections, Ledeen's coincidental encounter with Peres set in motion the Israeli operation to send TOWs to Iran with American approval.[12]

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[11] Theodore Draper explores the various origin scenarios involving Adnan Khashoggi and Manucher Ghorbanifar, see Draper, *A Very Thin Line*, 129-141; Adnan Khashoggi was one of the wealthiest people alive, see Ronald Kessler, *The Richest Man in the World: The Story of Adnan Khashoggi* (New York: Grand Central Publish, 1986); On Michael Ledeen's involvement, see Michael A. Ledeen, *Perilous Statecraft: An Insider's Account of the Iran-Contra Affair* (New York: Scribner's, 1988); Yaacov Nimrodi released a memoir about his involvement, see Nimrodi, *Irangate: A Hope Shatter* (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2006); For David Kimche's perspective, see Kimche, *The Last Option: After Nasser, Arafat & Saddam Hussein: The Quest for Peace in the Middle East* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1991), 208-221; Trita Parsi argues that each state's reason for the scheme "created a perfectly balanced triangular relationship," see Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 114-116.

[12] Memo, Graham E. Fuller to William Casey, "Toward a Policy on Iran," May 17, 1985, DNSA Collection: Iran-

Although the plan appeared ideal to McFarlane in some respects, he required more assurances before briefing Reagan on the proposal of establishing a strategic opening with Iran. On July 1, 1985, Khashoggi sent McFarlane a 48-page policy paper advancing the sales-pitch he gave the Israelis, complete with a fabricated assessment of Iranian factional politics that suggested a governing coalition of conservative and moderates would ensure a rapprochement with the US. Khashoggi argued that American influence could assist in ousting of the extreme left and combining the right and center factions. Whether these officials would have succeeded Khomeini and alter Iran's relationship with the US remains suspect at best. Speaker of the Majles Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani headed the alleged "Centrist" faction, a close associate of the Ayatollah. The moderate faction did not exist in the way Khashoggi and Ghorbanifar described. Khomeini knew of the arms deals and supported Rafsanjani's efforts to engage Washington for Iran's advantage, quashing any investigation into the matter once it was publicly revealed. Iran required access to American weapons to win its war against Iraq, a war Rasfanjani sought to win without becoming dependent upon the Soviets. Although sound strategic rationale informed the initiative, counterfeit political dynamics underpinned the plan, dooming the operation from the outset.[13]

Israel and the US explored the proposal further. Israel had confirmed Khashoggi's connections and sought to advance the initiative. Khashoggi's paper proved persuasive enough to prompt a meeting between Kimche and McFarlane. Kimche, for his part, pointedly asked McFarlane if Reagan had interest in opening a dialogue with Iran. Soviet encroachment, Kimche said, encouraged Iranians to request Israel to facilitate the opening of a channel with America. Iran supposedly offered to leverage Hezbollah into releasing American hostages to demonstrate their commitment. The procurement of arms, Kimche informed McFarlane, could be a subject in future talks. Inspired to proceed, McFarlane briefed Weinberger on the budding Iran initiative, and Kimche advanced discussions in Europe. Weinberger rejected the proposal outright while Kimche had better luck in Hamburg, Germany. Ghorbanifar and Khashoggi presented Hassan Karoubi, an influential Iranian official, to Kimche and other Israelis to demonstrate their bona fides, injecting the operation with new confidence. Learning of the Hamburg meeting, Leeden conveyed the gist of the Iran proposal to McFarlane: Iran would secure the release of hostages in exchange for the provision of 100 TOW missiles. McFarlane dispatched a cable to Shultz endorsing the overture to Iran in order to save the hostages and reset the US-Iranian relationship. Shultz cautiously supported engaging the Islamic Republic, but he did not endorse arm shipments. Diplomacy had its limits, especially when it contradicted the president's image and

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Contra Affair, Digital National Security Archive (Hereafter DNSA); Memo, William Casey to Robert C. McFarlane, "Draft NSDD re: U.S. Policy Toward Iran," July 18, 1985, Ibid.; Memo, Caspar Weinberger to Robert C. McFarland, "US Policy Toward Iran," July 16, 1985, Ibid.; Memo, George P. Shultz to Robert C. McFarland, "U.S. Policy toward Iran: Comment on Draft NSDD," June 29, 1985, Ibid; See attached Draft NSDD, "U.S. Policy Toward Iran," on Memo, Don Fortier and Howard R. Teicher to Robert C. McFarlane, "U.S. Policy Toward Iran," June 11, 1985, Folder "Iran/Arms Transactions: Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Document Request on 12/4/86 and 12/12/86 Response," CFOA 1130, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL; David Kimche referred to Leedan's meeting with Peres as a coincidence in an interview with Malcon Byrne on November 16, 2007, see Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 355, note 26.

[13] For Adnan Khashoggi's paper, see Cover note and policy paper, Adnan Khashoggi, July 1, 1985, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Crist, *The Twilight War*, 183; Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 255-257; For factional politics in this period, see Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 47-81; See also Bahman Baktiari, *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran: The Institutionalization of Factional Politics* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), ix - 145.

policy.[14]

At the outset of his administration, Reagan took a characteristically hard stance against international terrorism. At a January 1981 welcoming ceremony for victims of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, Reagan vowed to combat terrorism: “Let terrorists be aware that when the rules of international behavior are violated, our policy will be one of swift and effective retribution.” The mental anguish that Iranian kidnappers inflicted upon the imprisoned Americans had a profound emotional impact on Reagan.[15] On the White House South Lawn, he spoke from a place of anger and resolve. “We hear it said that we live in an era of limit to our powers,” he said, “Well, let it also be understood, there are limits to our patience.” His firm public stance on the issue persisted. Following the Trans World Airlines Flight 847 hijacking in June 1985, the president declared: “America will never make concessions to terrorists—to do so would only invite more terrorism—nor will we ask nor pressure any other government to do so.” In early July 1985, Reagan addressed the American Bar Association on international terrorism. He conveyed a message of unyielding defense and proactive offense. “So,” he declared, “the American people are not—I repeat—not going to tolerate intimidation, terror, and outright acts of war against this nation and its people.” Then, McFarlane introduced the prospect of a back channel with Iran.[16]

Convinced by Israeli involvement and supportive of reestablishing relations with Iran, Reagan approved the secret engagement, principally to rescue the hostages. On July 16, 1985, Reagan received a briefing from McFarlane while convalescing from intestinal surgery at the

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[14] Leedan, *Perilous Statecraft*, 116-120; The “false chronology” created by the NSC in November 1986, which cast Israel as the principal architect of the Iran initiative, states that Kimche told McFarlane that Rafsanjani, Musavi, and Montzeri wanted to reorient Iranian foreign policy, see page 4 of Historical Chronology, U.S./ Iranian Contacts and the American Hostages, November 20, 1986 in Folder "Iran/Arms Transaction December 16, 1986, Submission to Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, CFO 1130, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL; See pages 4 and 5 of Ronald Reagan's January 29, 1987, copy of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's Report on Preliminary Inquiry into Iran-Contra in Report on Preliminary Inquiry, January 29, 1987, ID# 45914255, CO071, WHORM Subject File, RRPL; ; U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair. Appendix B: Volume 21, Depositions*, 100th Congress, 1st Sess., 1987. Senate Report 100-216, November. (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1988), 228-231; Samuel Segev, *The Iranian-Triangle: The Untold Story of Israel's Role in the Iran-Contra Affair* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 155-161; Memo, Robert C. McFarlane to George Shultz, “Israeli-Iranian Contact,” July 13, 1985, DNSA Collection: Terrorism and U.S. Policy, 1968-2002, DNSA; Cable, George Shultz to Robert McFarlane, “Reply to Backchannel No.3 from Bud,” July 14, 1985, DNSA Collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

[15] On examining emotions in US foreign relations history, see Frank Costigliola, “Reading for Emotion,” in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, edited by Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 356–74.

[16] Lou Cannon, “Reagan Set to Warn Nations: 'Never Again' Seize Hostages,” *Washington Post*, January 27, 1981; Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Welcoming Ceremony for the Freed American Hostages, January 27, 1981,” Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/246552; Ronald Reagan, “The President's News Conference, June 18, 1985,” Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/260399; Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Bar Association, July 8, 1985,” Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/259665; On Reagan and terrorism, see D.C. Wills, *The First War on Terrorism: Counter-Terrorism Policy During the Reagan Administration* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) and Christopher J. Fuller, “Reagan and the Evolution of US Counterterrorism,” in eds. Jonathan R. Hunt and Simon Miles, *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 64-83.

Bethesda Naval Hospital. McFarlane's proposition to Reagan mirrored Khashoggi's proposal: Israel would transfer arms to "moderates" in Iran, who, in turn, would influence Hezbollah to release the hostages. Reagan and his senior advisors debated the issue on August 6, 1985. It resulted in a split decisions to move forward. Shultz and Weinberger argued against the initiative again. McFarlane and Chief of Staff Donald Reagan favored the plan. Reagan's position at this moment remains unsettled. Reagan's final approval of the TOW shipment has been subject to conflicting accounts by himself and those involved. McFarlane has contended that Reagan offered an "oral finding" in lieu of a signed authorization. Reagan himself offered contrasting testimony about his first authorization, acknowledging that he both approved of the first shipment and denied that he had done so. Whether explicitly approved or not, McFarlane conveyed Reagan's authorization to the Israelis, who believed that they had presidential approval for transferring TOW missiles to Iran. The US would replenish the stock at a later date. And so it began.[17]

The Iran initiative commenced with Reagan's blessing. Reagan referred to his decisions as "easy to make." He thought that all seven hostages may be released, though that was not the case. McFarlane responded to Reagan's approval and the operation was underway. Khashoggi, for his part, ensured the TOW missiles reached Tehran. Israel shipped the arms on August 19, 1985, even though Khashoggi and Ghorbanifar had not provided an ironclad guarantee that Hezbollah would release hostages. Indeed, Ghorbanifar revealed afterward that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard procured the TOWs, abrogating the arms-for-hostages terms. Astonishingly, Ghorbanifar persuaded the Israelis to send another 400 TOWs in exchange for the hostages, placing a call to Prime Minister Hossein Mousavi as a demonstration of the deal's validity. Israel airlifted the TOWs to Iran on September 15. In Beirut, Islamic Jihad dropped Reverend Benjamin Weir near the US Embassy. Reagan celebrated Weir's freedom and anticipated additional releases. "Words cannot describe the joy we fell that you are safe and reunited with your family," Reagan wrote to Weir. "Our relief is tempered only by the realization that six others remain behind and have yet to be freed." North delivered the letter to Weir, whom he was tasked with returning home. The other hostages languished in captivity.[18]

Reagan advanced the Iranian initiative in disregard of broken commitments and over the objections of Weinberger and Shultz. McFarlane coordinated with the Israelis on another deal. He notified Weinberger, Shultz, and Reagan that anti-aircraft Homing All the Way Killer missiles (HAWK) shipped from Israel would provide the currency for the hostages' release.

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[17] Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 343, 349-350; Reagan, *An American Life*, 506-7; Theodore Draper assesses the different versions of McFarlane's July 16 meeting with Reagan and concludes the general theme is that Reagan approved of the initiative, see Draper, *A Very Thin Line*, 156-160; United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence. *Preliminary inquiry into the sale of arms to Iran and possible diversion of funds to the Nicaraguan Resistance*, S. Rep. No. 7, 100th Cong., 1st Sess. 36 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 6-7; See Memorandum, Chris Spaulding to Lawrence Walsh, "Review of Reagan Tower Board Testimony," July 22, 1992 in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 39, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, National Archives Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (Hereafter NARA).

[18] Howard J. Teicher, the NSC Director of Near East Affairs, had recommended to McFarlane that the US could employ Khashoggi "to establish indirect contact" despite his unsavory salesmanship. It removed doubt in McFarlane's mind, see Memo, Howard R. Teicher to Robert C. McFarlane, "Khashoggi Memorandum," August 13, 1985, Folder "Chron File August 1985 (2)," Box 91669, Howard J. Teicher Files, RRPL; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 349-350, 353; Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to Benjamin Weir, September 16, 1985, Folder "President/NSC Chron 9/16/1985 - 9/19/1985," Box 36, Situation Room, White House Records, RRPL; *Testimony of Oliver L. North,* 25, 48; Malcolm Byrne expertly reconstructs the first two deliveries using classified chronologies provided to the Congress by the Israeli government, see Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 71-75.

Weinberger and Shultz registered their disapproval of the plan. The Secretary of State had a clear-eyed view of the arrangement. Shultz told McFarlane the operation "was arms for hostages, plain and simple." The Secretary of Defense turned to the potential legal problems. Weinberger argued that the shipments were likely illegal under the Arms Export Control Act, because Reagan was required to notify Congress of the arms transfers. Reagan approved, though, permitting Israel to again facilitate the transaction.[19]

On November 22, 1985, the transfer of 80 anti-aircraft Homing All the Way Killer missiles (HAWK) had comical results and incorporated Secord's Enterprise into the operation. Requiring arms replenishments and flight coordination, Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin contacted North on November 17 to obtain his help in the HAWK shipment. North and McFarland turned to Secord for assistance on arranging flight clearances in Portugal, where a European departure would hide the shipment's Israeli origins. After Portugal denied a clearance for the flight, the CIA intervened to ensure the shipment succeeded. The Agency used a smaller plane from its proprietary airline to transport the HAWKS. Unfortunately, the delivery arrived late and contained only 18 HAWKS, which still bore Star of David stamps. Notwithstanding Israeli markings, the HAWKs were not suited for the high-altitude targets that Iran sought to hit. The Iranians had received misguided technical advice on their coveted weaponry. Iranian officials became enraged and rejected the missiles. The hostages resided painfully in Lebanon.[20]

The disastrous HAWK shipment spurred two consequential events. First, it resulted in the initial diversion of funds to the Contras. North and Secord concocted the perfect way to raise funds for the beleaguered counterrevolutionaries. To advance the HAWK shipment, Schwimmer had deposited $1 million to cover operational costs in the Swiss bank account used by the Enterprise for the Contra supply operations. On their own accord, North and Secord transferred the residual amount of $850,000 to the Contras after the arms shipment to Iran concluded. Two months later, North presented the Israelis with a *fait accompli* when Schwimmer asked about the remaining funds. The Israelis easily accepted that North had repurposed the money for the Contras. "No one ever came back and asked for it again," North testified. The Iran and Contra operations officially intersected, a consequential decision made by a mid-level NSC staffer without expressed authorization from the president.[21]

The HAWK shipment also produced a retroactive Presidential Finding. The CIA and NSC created a Presidential Finding to authorize the failed shipment, but it was a retroactive rather than anticipatory measure to ensure the administration complied with statutes. The retro finding later

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[19] See transcriptions of Casper Weinberger's Diary for November 9 and 20, 1985, in Powell, Colin (3); John Q. Barrett Attorney Files; US v. Weinberger Files, Box 10, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), 797-798.

[20] Entry, North Diary, November 17, 1985, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair; Letter, Robert C. McFarland to Richard Secord, "Requesting Assistance with Arms Transfer," November 19, 1985, Ibid; Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters.* U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, August 4, 1993. Vol. I*: Investigations and Prosecutions* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993), 14-15; For Secord's recollection, see Richard Secord with Jay Wurts, *Honored and Betrayed: Irangate, Covert Affairs, and The Secret War in Laos* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc), 218-221.

[21] Draper rightly argues that the diversion origin began with the first HAWK ship, see Draper, *A Very Thin Line*, 198-199; Entries, North Diary, November 18, 1985, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; United States. Congress., *Testimony of Oliver L. North (Questioning by Counsels): Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition*, Vol. 100-7, Part 1, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 7, 8, 9, and 10, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 54-58.

raised questions about whether it was legally binding since it covered "prior actions taken by U.S. Government officials." The finding also authorized the CIA Director to withhold the operation from Congress due to "the extreme sensitivity of these operations," invoking the president's power under the National Security Act. Politically, the finding created a bigger problem. It authorized the CIA to assist "private parties in their attempt to obtain the release of Americans held hostage in the Middle East." The strategic rationale of a rapprochement with Iran is absent. "As part of these efforts certain foreign materiel and munitions may be provided to the Government of Iran," the finding states, "which is taking steps to facilitate the release of the American hostages." Reagan signed his copy on December 5. The day before, McFarlane resigned "for family reasons," and his deputy Admiral John Poindexter succeeded him. As the new chief of the Iran initiative, Poindexter presided over an entirely different operation. The Enterprise became more involved and the operations riskier. "It is a complex undertaking with only a few of us in on it," Regan recorded in his diary. "I won't even write in the diary what we're up to."[22]

The Iran Initiative II: "I think we ought to go ahead"

On December 7, 1985, Reagan convened a two-hour meeting to discuss the "high-risk operation" with Shultz, Weinberger, Regan, Poindexter, McFarland, and Deputy Director of the CIA John McMahon. Reagan's top advisors deliberated in the living room of the White House residence. Shultz and Weinberger raised notable objections. They argued that the operations violated the Arms Export Control Act, because Iran was a state sponsor of terrorism, and the act required the president to inform Congress beforehand. Using Israel as an intermediary, they said, would not negate the violation. They also noted that the initiative contradicted Reagan's policy of rejecting "deals with terrorists" and alienated Arab allies. Reagan thought otherwise. He presumed that "moderate leaders in the army" would receive the weapons, a faction that would help reorient Iran favorably toward the U.S. "Gentleman," the president instructed, "I think we ought to go ahead." Reagan intended to dispatch McFarlane to inform Ghorbanifar that hostages must be released before further arms transactions. "As far as the hostages are concerned," Reagan said, "I just couldn't sleep if we didn't pursue every possibility." Reagan could explain the operation to the public, if needed, but he could not account for why "big strong President Reagan passed up a chance to free hostages." Reagan understood the dire consequences for his administration if the plan failed and became public knowledge. "They can impeach me if they want," he said with typical wit, "visiting days are Wednesday." Weinberger reminded him, "You will not be alone."[23]

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[22] For draft of the retroactive finding, see Finding, SCOPE: Hostage Rescue - Middle East, November 26, 1985, in Folder: "Iran/Arms Transaction: CIA Inspector General Report," CFOA 1131, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL; Byrne offers a more troublesome legal analysis based on governing statues, see Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 104-105; On CIA's insistence for the finding and Draper's interpretation of the finding's problems, see Draper, *A Very Thin Line*, 203-216; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 373-374; United States. Congress., *Testimony of John Poindexter*: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-8, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 15, 16, 17, 20, and 21, 1987 (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1987), 118, 188, 299-300.
[23] Walsh, *Final Report*, Volume I, Page 329, Note 35; Deposition of John M. Poindexter, Saturday, May 2, 1987, Tab 11, 121-126, Folder "[Tower Board: 12/07/1985 White House Meeting] (1)(2)," Box 5, Series I: Subject Files 1987-1988, Howard H. Baker Jr. Files, RRPL; Memo, "George Shultz Expression of Opposition to NSC Operation with Iran," December 7, 1985, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; See transcriptions and copies of Casper Weinberger's Diary for December 7, 1985, in Powell, Colin (3); John Q. Barrett Attorney Files; US v. Weinberger

Reagan decided to move ahead notwithstanding the political hazards. Reagan had listened and elected to continue exploring the Iranian channel. McFarlane, though, failed to persuade the Iranians to release hostages before receiving additional missiles. Ghorbanifar informed McFarlane that Islamic Jihad would murder the hostages if the US insisted the political opening advance without another arms sale. On December 10, Reagan discussed his options with his senior advisors. McFarlane recommended shuttering the hostage initiative. Reagan, however, favored continuing a dialogue with Ghorbanifar for the hostages' sake. Reagan advocated allowing the Israelis to ship weapons without providing American commitments to the Iranians. The president maintained that both the initiative and outreach could be "justified as an effort to influence future events in Iran." DCI Casey concurred with Reagan, suggesting Israel adopted this position in their periphery doctrine. Reagan's arguments revealed his proclivity for advancing the initiative primarily to save the hostages, with a strategic opening to Iran as the secondary priority. Senior advisors discerned this as Reagan's preference. Reagan's commitment to the hostages equaled North's zeal for obtaining their release. North, for his part, had disseminated a memo arguing that all hostages would perish if the initiative ceased. To ensure operational success, he proposed that the NSC assume control of the transactions with the help of Secord's logistical assistance. The NSC would soon expand its purview to include running operations.[24]

The next phase began in January 1986. Amiram Nir, an advisor to Peres, proposed a new deal to Poindexter and North. Israel would sell 4,000 TOWs to Iran in two installments and arrange for the Southern Lebanon Army to free incarcerated members of Hezbollah. In turn, Hezbollah would release the five American hostages, and Iran would offer to cease supporting terrorism. The Reagan administration would replace Israel's TOWs and agree to admit Reagan authorized the sale should the initiative become public. Poindexter and North believed it was low risk and would provide evidence that Iranian moderates desired warmer relations with America. Poindexter ordered the drafting of a Presidential Finding. Reagan and his NSC principals debated the plan on January 7. Shultz and Weinberger strenuously opposed the initiative yet again. Vice President George H.W. Bush, Casey, Attorney General Edwin Meese, and Poindexter supported moving ahead. Reagan deliberated on the "highly secret convoluted process" and "gave a go ahead" on January 17. The operational details, though, would soon evolve.[25]

Attorney General Meese's advice changed the administration's involvement in facilitating the transactions. He had advised Reagan that he could authorize the Defense Department under

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Files, Box 10, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; Reagan, *Reagan Diary*, 374-375.

[24] Memo, Oliver L. North to Robert C. McFarlane and John Poindexter, "Next Steps," December 9, 1985, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Page 16 of Summary of Documentary Record of Secretary of State George P. Shultz Concerning Iran Arms Sales, Folder "Iran/Arms Transaction/ Secretary Shultz December 16, 1986 Closed Session Testimony - SSCI," CFOA 1130, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL; See transcriptions and copies of Casper Weinberger's Diary for December 10, 1985, in Powell, Colin (3); John Q. Barrett Attorney Files; US v. Weinberger Files, Box 10, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 375; Memo, William Casey to John McMahon, December 10, 1985, Folder "Iran/Arms Transaction: Chronologies: Memoranda from William Casey, CFOA 1130, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL

[25] See summary of Shultz and Weinberger raising objections on January 7, 1986, in Tab C of Folder "Iran/Arms Transaction: Vice President's Attendance at 12/7/85 and 1/7/86 Meetings," CFOA 1129, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL; Personal Notes, John Poindexter, January 2, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair; See transcriptions and copies of Casper Weinberger's Diary for January 7, 1986, in Powell, Colin (3); John Q. Barrett Attorney Files; US v. Weinberger Files, Box 10, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 381, 384.

the Economy Act to transfer missiles to the CIA. The Agency could then transport the weapons to Iran for the purpose of achieving the strategic objective. Meese relied on an opinion formulated by Attorney General William French Smith regarding a 1981 arms swap with Iraq that never came to fruition. Meese argued that Reagan possessed authority to conduct the operation under Article II of the Constitution and the National Security Act. Reagan did not have to immediately notify Congress "due to the imminent danger facing the hostages." In this instance, Reagan would inform Congress after the hostages were released. The US, however, had to execute the operation in order for the compliance to hold. Reagan accepted the opinion. As Reagan committed to forging ahead, Weinberger dropped his objection and resigned himself to coordinate the transfers through the Defense Department. The president had decided and given the order.[26]

The initiative accelerated in January 1986 with a new Presidential Finding and the NSC commandeering operational control from Israel. The January 17 finding transformed the Iran initiative into solely an American operation. The new finding authorized the CIA and NSC to work in tandem with Secord's Enterprise to facilitate the transfer of arms to Iran. It defined three objectives for the initiative and outlined the process:

> (1) establishing a more moderate government in Iran, (2) obtaining from them significant intelligence not otherwise obtainable, to determine the current Iranian Government's intentions with respect to its neighbors and with respect to terrorist acts, and (3) furthering the release of the American hostages held in Beirut and preventing additional terrorist acts by the groups.
> …
> The USG will act to facilitate efforts by third parties and third countries to establish contact with moderate elements within and outside the Government of Iran by providing these elements with arms, equipment and related material in order to enhance the credibility of these elements in their effort to achieve a more pro-U.S. government in Iran by demonstrating their ability to obtain requisite resources to defend their country against Iraq and intervention by the Soviet Union.[27]

Poindexter briefed the president on the revamped process, urging Reagan to turn complete operational control over to the US government. Reagan's signature marked a turning point. Now, the CIA could officially coordinate with Secord to transfer the weaponry to Iran without using Israel as an intermediary. Poindexter and North would oversee the operation. The finding defined

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[26] United States. Congress., *Testimony of Edwin Meese III*: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-9, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 23, 24, 28, and 29, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 196-198; United States. Congress., *Testimony of Caspar W. Weinberger*: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-9, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 30, 31 and August 3, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 142-146; Letter, William French Smith to William Casey, "Re: CIA Exchange of U.S. Weaponry," October 5, 1981, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

[27] For January 3 and 6, 1986, drafts and the January 17, 1986, final version see Finding Pursuant to Section 662 of The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, As Amended, Concerning Operations Undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency in Foreign Countries, Other than Those Intended Solely for the Purpose of Intelligence Collection, Scope: Iran, Tabs 2, 3, 4 in Folder "Iran/Arms Transaction: Memorandum on Findings," CFOA 1131, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL;

a strategic opening with Iran as the primary objective, a shift from the previous finding and deliberations, where rescuing the hostages was paramount. Saving the hostages, however, remained Reagan's chief concern, as new problems arose under Poindexter and North's management.[28]

The Iran Initiative III: Arms Deals and the Diversion

In early February 1986, North and Poindexter discussed using residual funds from the impending arms sales to fund the Contras. It would serve as "bridge financing" until Congress re-instituted Contra aid. Poindexter considered the Iran funds as private, as the money passed from Iran to Secord; it did not flow from the Pentagon. Poindexter reflected on North's proposition momentarily. "Let's do it," he said. As Poindexter testified, he granted North "broad general authority to carry out the plan." Poindexter presumed that North would keep the operation "highly compartmentalized." North and Poindexter thought diverting the funds was a "neat idea" for supporting the Contras. "And I still," North confessed at his public hearing, "to this day, counsel, don't see anything wrong with taking the Ayatollah's money and sending it to support the Nicaraguan Freedom Fights." The president, however, was not aware of North's hare-brained scheme. Although Reagan privately claimed he was "really serious" about providing Contra aid without Congress, he never ordered a diversion of funds from the Iranian initiative. Poindexter presumed Reagan would approve the plan based on his stated preferences about both operations. Poindexter maintained that, due to his longevity with and proximity to Reagan, he understood Reagan's mindset and acted in his best interest. "I made a very deliberate decision not to ask the President," he testified, "so that I could insulate him from the decision and provide some future deniability for the President if it ever leaked out."[29]

February brought setbacks and profits. On February 10, "Operation Recovery" commenced, with 1000 TOWs headed to Iran via the Enterprise in two installments at a cost of $10 million. Secord transferred $3.7 million to the CIA for reimbursing the Defense Department, and he coordinated the flights. The deal failed to produce any hostages. But it provided Secord with $6.3 million to use for personal profit and the Contra War. In between shipments, North and other interlocutors met with a new Iranian representative, Mohsen Kangarlou, an advisor to Prime Minister Mousavi, on February 25 in Frankfurt, Germany. The meeting soured as Kangarlou demanded high-tech weaponry and North asked for hostages. The US and Iran worked at cross-purposes. Kangarlou also proposed another condition: a face-to-face meeting between US and Iranian representative on Kish Island, where the countries could deepen engagement. The hostages would, Kangarlou suggested, be released in due course. After sending the second round of 500 TOWs, it became apparent that the hostages would stay captive, and the Kish Island meeting would be necessary to ensure their release. Poindexter and North viewed this as a potential breakthrough in communicating with Iran directly, forgiving Kangerlou's for his broken promise. With the hostages' fate in doubt, Reagan thought of their loved ones. "This has

[28] See also cover memo and January 17, 1986, Presidential Finding in Folder "Iran/Arms Transaction: Chronologies: Clean Copy of January 17, 1986, Cover Memo and Finder," CFOA 1130, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL.
[29] On Reagan's seriousness with regard to unilaterally funding the Contras, see Poindexter PROF Note, May 2, 1986, Subject: Contra Project, in Folder "Iran-Contra Hearings - June [May - November 1987] (8)," Box 3, Howard Baker Files, RRPL; Testimony *of John M. Poindexter*, 100-8, 35-42, 181-183; North, *Testimony*, Part 1, 100-7, 118-119; Poindexter conducted interviews with Shane Harris, in which he discussed his role in Iran-Contra. For Poindexter's view on his brief consideration of the diversion plan, see Shane Harris, *The Watchers: The Rise of America's Surveillance State* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 55.

been a long tragic time for the families," he recorded in his diary. The disappointment sprung ingenuity on the part of North.[30]

North salvaged the initiative over the subsequent month, engineering another arms-for-hostages deal, arranging a meeting between US and Iranian officials, and drafting a memorandum that became central to the biggest scandal since Watergate. North created memos for each sale and sent them to Poindexter, who should have sought Reagan's approval. On April 4, 1986, North presented Poindexter with the infamous "diversion memo" at Poindexter's request. North's memo provided background on the operation and explained the new arrangement with Kangerlou. It involved the Enterprise facilitating the transfer of spare parts to make the Iranian HAWK inventory usable in exchange for the hostages. North, McFarlane, and other key U.S. officials would meet with high-level Iranian representatives in Tehran, instead of Kisha Island, to demonstrate a show of trust. Afterward, the hostages would be released and the parts delivered. Controversially, North's memo outlined the use of the residual funds for the Contras: "$12 million will be used to purchase critically needed supplies for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance forces." It specified that the funds were to "bridge" the gap during this period without congressionally approved lethal aid. North's previous actions and his conversations with Poindexter manifested in an official document, one that they would regret.[31]

Reagan neither reviewed North's memo nor approved of the diversion. Evidence has never materialized to prove otherwise. Surviving copies of the diversion memo are unsigned. The President's Special Review Board for investigating the NSC's role in Iran-Contra concluded that North's superiors may have never reviewed the memo, including Reagan. Congress neither received testimony confirming that Reagan read North's memo nor discovered documents to suggest that he had seen it. North only testified to his assumption that Reagan approved it. North had destroyed other initiative memos, which precluded investigators from verifying his story. Poindexter, however, maintained that he chose not to brief Reagan on the diversion. Nor did Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, after nearly seven years of searching, uncover evidence that Reagan viewed the memo or had knowledge of the diversion. "No direct evidence," Walsh determined, "was developed that the President authorized or was informed of the profiteering on the Iran arms sales or of the diversion of proceeds to aid the contras." The diversion memo was solely a product of North and Poindexter's machinations, not Reagan's stated policy. Moreover, the diversion was not the initiative's chief purpose. Rather, North viewed it as a fortuitous solution to the Contra funding issue. In the hierarchy of objectives, using residual funds for the Contras ranked well below the hostages and the strategic opening.[32]

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[30] For the proposed February operation, see Memo, Oliver L. North to John M. Poindexter, January 24, 1986, Folder "Iran/Arms Transaction: Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Document Request of 12/4/86 and 12/12/86 Response," CFOA 1130, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL; The Select Committee provides details of the February operations, see *Select Committee Report*, 213–222; See also, Memo, Oliver L. North to John M. Poindexter, "Operation Recovery," February 18, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; PROFS, Oliver L. North to Robert C. McFarlane, "Exchanges," February 27, 1986; Ibid.; PROFS, Robert C. McFarland to Oliver L. North, "How are Things?," February 27, 1986, Ibid.; KL-43, Richard V. Secord to Oliver L. North, "Meetings with Amiram Nir and Manucher Ghorbanifar," February 27, 1986, Ibid; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 395.

[31] *Testimony of Oliver L. North*, 11-15; North informed McFarlane that he drafted the memo for "our boss" at Poindexter's request, see PROFS, Oliver L. North to Robert C. McFarland, "What's Going on?," April 7, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; For the diversion memorandum, see Memo, "Release of American Hostages in Beirut," circa April 4, 1986, Folder "Iran/Arms Transaction: Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Document Request of 12/4/86 and 12/12/86 Response," CFOA 1130, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL; See also Memo, "Terms of Reference U.S.-Iran Dialogue," April 4, 1986, Ibid.

[32] John Tower, Brent Scowcroft, and Edmund S. Muskie, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the*

The Iran Initiative IV: Disastrous Diplomacy

In a feat of diplomatic failure, McFarlane and North visited Tehran on May 25, 1986. Howard J. Teicher, the NSC Director of Near East Affairs, Amiram Nir, George Cave, a retired CIA officer with Iran expertise, and a CIA communications expert joined the envoy. Housed in Tehran's Independence Hotel, McFarlane engaged in acrimonious negotiations with lower to mid-level Iranian officials over a three-day period. Ghorbanifar had promised that they would meet Speaker Rafsanjani and Prime Minister Mousavi. Instead, lower-level officials appeared alongside Kangerlou. McFarlane sought to make progress on "common ground for cooperation" to sustain a long-term dialogue between the countries. Iranians, for their part, demanded the HAWK parts before exerting influence on Hezbollah. McFarlane protested, requesting to visit with high-ranking officials. Ali Hadi Najafabadi, the Chair of the Majles Foreign Affairs Committee, arrived to manage the fallout. Najafabadi and McFarlane's negotiation quickly stalemated. The American and Iranian officials worked at cross-purposes again. In the mix of middlemen, Ghorbanifar had improperly communicated the arrangements, neglecting to fully convey the American demands for the release of all hostages. McFarlane rightly demanded their release or they would leave. The delegations drafted a compromise deal, whereby the hostages would be freed while the HAWK parts were airborne. Reagan himself approved the plane's departure and its return when the hostages failed to appear. Without a single hostage released, McFarlane ended the visit.[33]

The serpentine initiative had yielded little progress in months except for monetary assistance for the Contras, a source of frustration for those involved. While transitioning planes in Israel, North divulged that one positive outcome to McFarland. "At least we're using some of the Ayatollah's money in Central America," North boasted. The faltering operation had transgressed further. McFarlane suddenly realized the gravity of situation. "Oh, shit," he thought. Unaware of the diversion, Reagan experienced nothing but grief and anger after the botched visit. It stemmed from his sympathy for the victims and his continuous failed efforts to secure their release. "This was a heartbreaking disappointment for all of us," Reagan lamented in his dairy. Reagan, however, was not ready to abandon the mission.[34]

Upon returning from his fruitless venture in Iran, McFarlane expressed his skepticism about the operation and imbued the process with a glimmer of hope. McFarlane briefed Reagan on his Iran trip in the Oval Office for ten minutes. McFarlane reviewed the series of meetings in Tehran, disparaging the "bazaar-style negotiating tactics" of his Iranian counterparts. The vexed former national security advisor recommended that Reagan decline any further meetings until the

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President's Special Review Board (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987), III-21; *Select Committee's Report*, 271-273; Walsh, *Final Report on Iran-Contra*, Volume 1, 446.

[33] Memorandum of Conversation, "U.S.-Iran Dialogue," May 25, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Memorandum of Conversation, "U.S.-Iran Dialogue," 3:30 p.m. meeting, May 26, 1986, Ibid.; Memorandum of Conversation, "U.S.-Iran Dialogue," 9:30 p.m. meeting, May 26, 1986, Ibid; Memorandum of Conversation, "U.S.-Iran Dialogue," 10:00 a.m. meeting, May 27, 1986, Ibid.; Memorandum of Conversation, "U.S.-Iran Dialogue," 5:00 p.m. meeting, May 27, 1986, Ibid.; Memorandum of Conversation, "U.S.-Iran Dialogue," 9:30 p.m. meeting, May 27, 1986, Ibid; Cable, Robert C McFarland to John M. Poindexter, "Report on Meetings with Iranian Delegation," May 27, 1986, Ibid; Cable, Robert C. McFarland to John M. Poindexter, "Report on Meeting with Najafabadi," May 27, 1986, Ibid.; Memorandum of Conversation, "U.S.-Iran Dialogue," May 28, 1986, Ibid.; Byrne uses Iranian and US sources for a detailed account of the meetings in Tehran, see Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 194-203; On Reagan's knowledge of the Tehran meetings, see Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 414-415.

[34] On North divulging the diversion to McFarlane, see Walsh, *Final Report on Iran-Contra*, Volume 1, 21; see also, McFarlane, *Special Trust*, 66; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 415.

hostages returned home. It was the only way to ensure they were released. The strategic opening, he suggested, may still be possible if Iran truly desired it. The future of US-Iranian relations was in the hands of the alleged moderates. McFarlane departed the White House defeated. Two weeks later, McFarlane suggested to Poindexter that he transfer North to the Marine Corps, for his role attracted too much attention. The initiative appeared stalled, and the participants were dangerously close to exposure. Yet, Poindexter kept North on staff, and they embarked on the initiative's final phase.[35]

In July 1986, an encouraging development inspired renewed faith in rescuing the hostages before the operation's collapse. On July 26, Father Lawrence Jenco obtained his freedom. Ghorbanifar had pressed for the release of another hostage to restart the stalled talks—and generate another deal for his profit. Elated, Reagan briefly spoke to a thankful Jenco as he traveled to America. Reagan affirmed to Jenco that he was striving to rescue the remaining hostages. Privately, Reagan reflected on Jenco's release in positive, enthusiastic terms. "It gives us hope the rest of the plan will take place," he recorded in his dairy. "We'd about given upon this." Hezbollah also dispatched with Jenco a videotape of hostage David Jacobsen admonishing Reagan for "not lifting a finger" to save him. The footage had an impact on the president, though he recognized its purpose. The burden of languishing hostages continued to weigh on Reagan. He met Jenco and his family on August 1, describing their visit as "an emotional experience." Jenco's return revitalized the initiative, if only for a couple of months.[36]

Desperate to connect with high-level Iranian officials and hasten the release of hostages, North opened another channel with Rasfanjani's newphew, Ali Bahramani. Secord's business partner Albert Hakim used his extensive network, which included expatriate Iranians, to establish contact with Bahramani. Reagan approved of exploring the alternative connection. In the meantime, Hezbollah abducted Joseph Cicippio and Frank Herbert Reed in Lebanon on September 9 and 12, respectively. The new kidnappings compelled US policymakers to find a way to obtain free any hostages, if not all. North eventually presented a sequential deal to Poindexter, whereby the US would send TOWs to Iran and in exchange for Iran arranging the release of two hostages, maybe one. On October 28, Secord delivered the final shipment of missiles. The next day, North, Secord, Hakim, Cave, and Bahramani gathered in Maniz, Germany, to discuss next steps. At the meeting's outset, Bahramani inform them that pamphlets circulated in Iran with details about McFarlane's diplomatic visit. Moreover, an oppositional political faction had leaked the secret US-Iran negotiations to a Lebanese magazine. The American entourage did not fully comprehend the ramifications. Afterward, North expressed his frustration with the arms-for-hostages deals to Poindexter. "This is the damndest operation I have ever seen," he wrote, "[please] let me go on to other things." The Lebanese exposé would grant North his reassignment.[37]

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[35] Memorandum of Conversation, "U.S.-Iran Dialogue," May 29, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; PROFS, Robert C. McFarland to John Poindexter, "Odds and Ends," June 12, 1986, Ibid.

[36] Memo, Oliver L. North to John M. Poindexter, "American Hostages," July 26, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Memorandum of Conversation, Ronald W. Reagan and Lawrence Jenco, Subject: Presidential Call to Father Jenco, July 28, 1986, 4:02-4:07 p.m., Folder "Hostages: Father Jenco release 07/26/1986 (3)," Box 11, Oliver L. North Files, RRPL; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 427-429

[37] Secord, *Honored and Betrayed*, 279; Memo, Charles E. Allen to William Casey, "American Hostages," September 10, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Ihsan A. Hijazi, "Gunmen Kidnap American in Lebanon," *New York Times*, September 10, 1986, A3; Charles P. Wallace, "U.S. Banker, 55, Abducted From Beirut Campus," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 1986; *Select Committee's Report*, 257-260; *Tower Report*, B-172.

Conclusion

Emotional toll and strategic ambition governed Reagan's decision-making on the Iran initiative. Reagan had sincere commitments to reestablishing relations with Iran for the post-Khomeini era. Yet it was the hostage issue that dominated Reagan's thinking. His personal attachment precluded him from the cold-blood decision-making required of a president. At each juncture, Reagan considered and disregarded Shultz and Weinberger's counterarguments. Reagan not only approved each phase of the Iran initiative, but he also bypassed the traditional inter-agency process. He allowed the operation to become compartmentalized. Reagan had legitimate reasons, fearing exposure could compromise the hostages. Evidence of Buckley's torture reinforced Reagan's worst fears about Hezbollah's treatment of Americans. Still, Reagan's reliance on the NSC—and, in turn, private actors and former government officials—rather than the State Department undermined his own commitment to the initiative's success. Reagan gambled with a high-risk operation to free the hostages and, possibly, rebuild a relationship with an adversary. Failed diplomacy can have significant costs. America itself bore those incurred from Iran-Contra.

The Iran initiative contradicted stated US policy and skirted legislation aimed at preventing the sort of covert antics that North performed. It was only partially successful in achieving Reagan's immediate and long-term objectives. For all the controversy and consequences, Reagan's transactions with Iran resulted in the freedom of three hostages. TOWs and HAWK parts secured the release of Weir and Jenco in September 1985 and July 1986, respectively. David Jacobsen emerged from captivity on November 2, 1986, an episode covered in the next chapter. Buckley never regained his freedom, dying in June 1985 from wounds sustained under torture. The other hostages remained captive in Lebanon. The strategic opening with Iran was ever more elusive.

North's siphoning scheme netted financial rewards for the Contras. Overcharging Iran for the weapons provided $3.8 million in bridge financing when the Boland amendments prohibited US government funding. The Enterprise, though, did not function solely for the benefit of America's national interest. Secord and Hakim, too, profited from their involvement, awarding themselves an estimated $1.5 million in cash and $4 million in direct benefits. As a stopgap measure, the diversion of residual funds sustained Reagan's Contra war. Unfortunately for Reagan, it would usher in the collapse of the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua and bring the wrath of Congress upon his administration.[38]

Iran-Contra demonstrated that noble ends do not necessarily inspire appropriate means.[39] North's zeal for carrying out the president's policy matched Reagan's own enthusiasm for the Contra cause and his desire to safely return the hostages to America. Diverting profits to the Contras from the arms-for-hostages deals followed a path dependency set in motion by both Reagan's call to keep the Contra War raging despite legislative restraints and his authorization of the Iran initiative. North sought Reagan's approval through his memos, but Poindexter decided to keep the diversion highly compartmentalized. Together, North and Poindexter divined from Reagan's actions and words an implicit approval of their misdeeds. Yet Reagan neither ordered nor authorized the diversion. North and Poindexter's decision to act in what they believed was the president's best interest undermined the national interest and upended Reagan's presidency.

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[38] Walsh, *Final Report*, Volume 1, 168–172, see also note 51 on p. 171.

[39] John Patrick Diggins makes this point in his analysis of Reagan and Iran-Contra. See John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 293.

Three weeks into the public revelation of the Iran initiative, the *Wall Street Journal* published Poindexter's rationale. Poindexter argued that Reagan sought to "shape the emerging reality" of a post-Khomeini Iran through engaging with "pragmatic elements." The missiles and parts, Poindexter asserted, served to create a bond of trust between bitter enemies. The US wanted hostages released and terrorism stopped. Iran partially obliged to demonstrate its cooperation. The larger strategic objectives of regional security, ending the Iran-Iraq War, and preventing Soviet influence in Iran remained unresolved. "Actions to achieve policy objectives," he contended, "should not be confused with the objectives themselves." Poindexter stressed the responsibility of policymakers to seek a rapprochement with Iran. Reagan accepted the risks to do so. "But rather than only criticize what we did," he challenged, "they owe the country an explanation of how they would have acted differently given the stakes, the opportunities and the dangers." After reading the op-ed, Reagan scribbled "Great" at the top of his copy.[40] Two decades later, Poindexter admitted that he would have been more considerate of the political fallout: "I'd have come up with a public relations strategy, because we always knew that if were exposed, we'd have a hard time explaining to people what we'd been doing."[41]

[40] For a copy of the op-ed with Reagan's initials and comment, see Transcript, Rear Admiral John Marlan Poindexter interviews by Robert Timberg, 1991-1992, Naval Historical Foundation, Oral History Program 2018, Appendix C, 613, Copy in the author's possession.
[41] Harris, *The Watchers*, 375, Note 55.

Part II

REVELATION

Chapter 4
Disclosure: Exposing a Scandal

Politics is said to be the second oldest profession. Sometimes I think it's close to the first.
Ronald Reagan, Remarks at a Luncheon, 1974[1]

Before the Tower Commission, Iran-Contra congressional hearings, and Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh's investigation captivated the national media, the Beltway buzzed with rumors about National Security Council staff member Oliver North's covert adventures in Central America and American arms-for-hostages deals with Iran. News reports speculated a political crisis would soon envelop the White House. Journalists recognized the makings of a presidential scandal—assuredly another Watergate-style scandal. Famed reporter Daniel Schorr observed that "If you think you smell a whiff of Watergate in the air, it's because the odor is there." For the press, politicians, and Reagan administration officials alike, the Watergate analogy evoked painful memories of an unbridled presidency and shadowy cover-ups.[2]

Watergate loomed large over the Iran-Contra affair. As a cavalcade of disclosures startled Capitol Hill, policymakers identified parallels to the proximate presidential scandal. "I don't want to see the gradual kind of unraveling we saw in Watergate," Democratic Congressman Leon Panetta bemoaned, "it raises that specter."[3] Upon hearing the National Security Council would deny reports and hinder journalists, Secretary of State George Shultz confided to his executive assistant Charles Hill that a scandal was afoot. "Sort of like Watergate," Shultz observed to Hill, "They get in it - can't get out." Shultz recognized the trappings of a cover-up from his experience in Richard Nixon's administration. The White House, Shultz predicted, would "stonewall and get in deeper."[4] Reagan's response to the public disclosure of the Iranian initiative and his NSC staff's nefarious activities embroiled his administration in controversy. A protracted scandal reminiscent of Watergate followed, one remarkably close to Shultz's

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[1] Quoted from George Skelton, "Reagan Slaps Politics in Talk for GOP Candidate McLennan: Again Alludes to Prostitutes, Lauds Pension Bonus Repeal in Campaigning Against Gonsalves in Hot Assembly Race," *Los Angeles Time*s, October 25, 1974, A3.

[2] Daniel Schorr, "A Whiff of Watergate?," *Washington Post*, November 12, 1986, A19; Schorr covered Watergate as the chief Watergate correspondent for CBS. He famously run afoul of the Richard Nixon administration and Congress. He had discovered his inclusion on Richard Nixon's infamous enemies list while reading the list during a broadcast. Nixon also had the FBI investigate Schorr over his reporting. Later, Schorr leaked drafts of the final report of the Pike Committee on covert operations. The House Ethics Committee subsequently subpoenaed him, but he refused to reveal his source. On Schorr's experience, see Daniel Schorr, *Clearing the Air* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

[3] Robert S. Greenberger and Jane Mayer, "Deepening Crisis: Reagan Effort to Clear Air About Arms to Iran Raises More Questions," *Wall Street Journal*, November 26, 1986, 1.

[4] The Office of Independent Counsel created a classified "MEGA-chron" of November 1986, which detailed the Reagan administration's actions by the hour. For George Shultz's quote cited from Charles Hill's notes, see OIC chron entry date 11/5/86 - Wednesday on page 4; General Investigative 1986 Incredibly Exhaustive Chron; Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (Hereafter NARA); Shultz was aghast that the National Security Council would attempt to "stonewall" journalists and Congress. Relying on Charles Hill's notes, he records his comments differently in his memoirs, writing "I don't mean to compare it directly, but it is somewhat like Watergate. They get in and can't get out, so they stonewall and get in deeper." see George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), 787.

prognosis. Yet Reagan's fate was not analogous with the fall of Nixon.

The "Teflon president" experienced domestic blowback arising from the foreign policy mistakes of Iran-Contra.[5] While the Contra element proved less damaging in the interim, the disclosure of the Iranian initiative received unrelenting attention from the national media and on Capitol Hill. Journalists hounded the administration and clamored for answers. Congress protested the president's actions and exercised oversight. Buoyed by popularity and charm, Reagan relied on his rhetorical power in his attempt to mitigate the immediate consequences.[6] But Reagan's refusal to concede fault and redress the scandal prolonged his political crisis. As the preceding chapters explored the intersecting covert operations in Central America and Iran responsible for Iran-Contra, the following two chapters, in turn, closely examine the volatile phase of the scandal from early October until late November 1986. During this period, Reagan's presidency careened into a full-blown political crisis after a Contra supply airplane crashed in Nicaragua and a Lebanese weekly published an exposé containing details of Reagan's secret initiative to rescue American hostages.

This chapter, then, provides a vivid account of the onset of Iran-Contra's public revelation, from the unraveling of Nicaraguan and Iranian operations to the midterm elections. International incidents precipitated public disclosures of the operations. Individual actions and institutional factors created the conditions responsible for how the scandal unfolded. Inside the White House, National Security Advisor John Poindexter and NSC staffer Oliver North concealed information and strived to keep operations ongoing, establishing a compartmentalized cover-up that undermined the presidency. Reagan, for his part, decided to refrain from commenting on the Iranian infinitive, delaying his public response in gambit to preempt the scandal by savings the hostages. Reagan's commitment to saving hostages, and his belief that media attention jeopardized his efforts and their lives, guided his thinking. In response to the disclosures, Congress questioned the administration's role in the private Contra supply network, which administration officials denied, and sought answers on the reported secret Iranian arms deals. In the November midterms, Democratic congressional leaders obtained the advantage, as the balance of power shifted in their favor, inspiring calls for bipartisanship and anticipating a partisan probe. Reagan's reversal of fortune in October 1986 began gradually in the quagmire of the Contra War before quickening with the publication of a story in a Lebanese magazine. Subsequently, the state of Reagan's presidency deteriorated by the day.

Nicaragua

On October 5, 1986, the Reagan administration's clandestine efforts to support the Contras unraveled in the sky over El Tule, Nicaragua. A teenage Sandinista soldier, José Fernando Canales, successfully launched a surface-to-air missile at an American C-123k transport plane

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[5] Colorado Representative Patricia Schroeder coined the phrase in a speech on the House floor in 1983, "Mr. Speaker, after carefully watching Ronald Reagan, he is attempting a great breakthrough in political technology--he has been perfecting the Teflon coated Presidency." See, "Congresswoman Pat Schroeder speaking on The Teflon Presidency," 98th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 129 (August 2, 1983): p. 22188; Schroeder later wrote an op-ed on the phrase following Reagan's death, see Patricia Schroeder, "Nothing stuck to 'Teflon' President," *USA Today*, June 6, 2004, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2004-06-06-schroeder_x.htm.

[6] On the rhetorical power of the presidency, see Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); For a critical account of Ronald Reagan's rhetoric at the onset of Iran-Contra, see Toby Glenn Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric: History and Memory in 1980s America* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011), Chapter 5.

operated by pilot William Cooper and co-pilot Wallace "Buzz" Sawyer, alongside cargo specialist Eugene Hasenfus and Contra radio operator Freddy Vilches. Hasenfus, a seasoned Marine who previously assisted the Central Intelligence Agency in Southeast Asia, survived the blast by parachuting into the dense terrain below. The others perished in a fiery crash. Sandinista forces captured Hasenfus the next day and transported him to Managua for interrogation. As Hasenfus arrived, a young solider greeted him: "So what now, Rambo?" Interrogators, though, encountered cooperation rather than an action hero's resistance. Hasenfus divulged details of his supposedly secret mission. The Sandinista government reported their findings to the world.[7]

In Washington D.C., the Reagan administration, Congress, and the press scrambled for clarification about the downed plane. Joseph Fernandez, the CIA Station Chief in Costa Rica assisting the Contras, immediately informed retired Air Force Lt. Col. Robert Dutton, who managed daily operations for the private Contra network. Fernandez suggested that "necessary damage control" was needed.[8] Félix Rodríguez, the ex-CIA officer coordinating Contra efforts in El Salvador, also dispatched an update to the office of Vice President George H.W. Bush.[9] Reagan received his notification of the crashed plane during his morning briefing on October 7.[10] Poindexter told the president that the Americans had acted in a personal capacity.[11] Reagan told reporters the next day that his administration had not coordinated with Hasenfus.[12] Reagan barely addressed the Hasenfus issue, but he had other important tasks at hand: the upcoming Reykjavík Summit with the leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. In the meantime, Secretary Shultz kept Reagan updated on the developments in his evening reports.[13] The Restricted Interagency Group, an informal unit coordinating Contra policy among the executive branch, convened on October 8 and decided on a policy of denying government involvement while requesting the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) accept responsibility for the crash.[14] Their best efforts to deflect responsibility would fail.

Congress sought to uncover the truth about the downed C-123K while State Department officials denied any links between the administration and the plane. Congressman Ike Skelton called the CIA to verify Hasenfus worked for the agency. Director of Congressional Affairs David Gries notified Skelton that Hasenfus was not an employee of the CIA, even though he

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[7] "Hasenfus: Nothing But the Fact," *Envio* 65 (November 1986), https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3243; On information obtained from the interrogation, see Notes, "Informaciones Obtenidas sobre el Prisionero Eugene Hasenfus [Spanish Language Translation of Nicaraguan Government Interrogation of Eugene Hasenfus]," October 8, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, Digital National Security Archive (Hereafter DNSA).

[8] KL-43 Message, Joseph Fernandex to Robert C. Dutton, "Report of Downing of Contra Resupply Aircraft and Recommending 'Damage Control'," October 5, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

[9] Note, Samuel J. Watson III, Office of the Vice President, "Notes on Telephone Conversation with Felix Rodriguez on Downing of Hasenfus Plane," October 5, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

[10] Note, Rodney B. McDaniel, Office of the White House, "Rodney McDaniel Notes on Morning National Security Briefing with President Reagan - Discussion of Hasenfus Plane Downing," October 7, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

[11] See pages 193-197 of Deposition of Ronald W. Reagan, February 17, 1990; Transcript 2/17/90, 9:45am #013072 (Reagan Deposition); U.S. v. Poindexter (88-0080-01), Box 34, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

[12] Ronald Reagan, "Informal Exchange With Reporters on the Budget, October 8, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255560

[13] George P. Shultz to Ronald W. Reagan, October 8, 1986, Box 37, Folder "President/NSC Chron 10/8/1986 - 10/17/1986," Situation Room, White House: Records, 1981-1989, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA (Hereafter RRPL).

[14] PROFS Note, Vincent Cannistraro to John M. Poindexter, "Downed Plane [Report from Restricted Interagency Group (RIG) Meeting on Hasenfus Plane]," October 8, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

previously worked for the CIA-front company Air America. The CIA also released a public statement clarifying that the CIA had not employed Hasenfaus.[15]

Congress accepted the administration's denials with apprehension. Vice-Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Patrick J. Leahy warned journalists that the administration was "in for some very serious trouble" if the plane belonged to private actors skirting the bounds of the Boland amendments, which proscribed US aid the Contras. Denials only went so far. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliot Abrams praised their actions. "God bless them," he said to reporters, "If these people were involved in this effort, then they are heroes." UNO spokesman Ernesto Palazio attempted to allay concerns about the administration's involvement, claiming the plane "could very well be" owned by the Contras.[16] Nicaragua's Secretary General of the Foreign Ministry Alejandro Bendaña appeared on ABC's *Nightline* and *Good Morning America* to claim the plane belonged to the CIA. "We now have Americans dying in Mr. Reagan's dirty war," he declared.[17] Those tragic deaths, in time, would have an effect on America's involvement in the Contra War. Several weeks later, however, a story published in a Lebanese weekly changed the course of Reagan's presidency.

Iran and Lebanon

On Sunday, November 2, 1986, the terrorist organization Hezbollah released David P. Jacobsen, the director of the American University of Beirut Medical Center, after holding him hostage in Lebanon since May 29, 1985. In high spirits, Jacobsen jokingly challenged reporters to a six-mile foot race while waiting to return home at the airport in Larnaca, Cyprus. "I am damn proud to be an American," he confessed to reporters, "I'm proud of the American Government."[18] Reagan issued a measured statement that revealed he had "been working through a number of sensitive channels for a long time" to secure Jacobsen's release, but he would not discuss it out of concern for the safety of the remaining hostages.[19] White House spokesman Larry Speakes informed the press that US policy toward terrorists remained unchanged, although the administration would negotiate without offering concessions.

Chief of Staff Donald Regan appeared on *This Week with David Brinkley* for an interview about Jacobsen's release. Regan spoke about the matter in a similar vein, disclosing negotiations had taken place over months while refusing to divulge further information about the process and intermediaries. He denied the administration made direct concessions to Hezbollah for Jacobsen's release, and he refused to comment on any other aspect of the negotiations. According to Regan, US policy toward Iran had not changed. But journalists reported that sources claimed Iran may have actively been involved in Jacobsen's release. The press sensed

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[15] Memo, Dave Gries, "Telephone Conversations with Representative Ike Skelton on 7 and 8 October 1986," October 8, 1986, CREST, General CIA Records, Central Intelligence Agency FOIA Electronic Reading Room, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP11M01338R000400140007-8.pdf. (Hereafter CIA ERR).
[16] Joanne Omang, "Reagan Administration Denies U.S. Link to Plane," *Washington Post*, October 8, 1986, AI.
[17] Paul Goepfert, "American held by Nicaragua," *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1986.
[18] John Kifner, "American is Freed After 18 Months as Beirut Captive," *New York Times*, November 3, 1986, A1; On David P. Jacobsen's experience, see Jacobsen and Gerald Astro, *Hostage: My Nightmare in Beirut* (New York: D.I. Fine, 1991).
[19] Ronald Reagan, "Statement on the Release of David Jacobsen in Beirut, Lebanon, November 2, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/254422.

something amiss about Jacobsen's case.[20]

On Monday, November 3, 1986, a power struggle with the Iranian government resulted in the Lebanese publication *Al-Shiraa* releasing a story on the arrest of Iranian hardliner Mehdi Hashemi, a murderous extremist linked to Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, the designated heir to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Hashemi headed the Islamic Liberation Movement and coordinated with terrorists in the Middle East to export the Islamic Revolution. But Hashemi's revolutionary activities had finally irked Khomenini, and he was arrested for his opposition to Iran dealing with the US and Israel. Hashemi's had opposed former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane's secret May 1986 visit to Tehran, even organizing a protest against it. After Hashemi's arrest, his supporters leaked the details of McFarlane's visit to the editor of *Al-Shiraa*, Hassam Sanra, to damage the reputation Majlis Speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a close associate of Khomeini and central figure in the arms-for-hostages deals. *Al-Shiraa* printed Hashemi's rebuttal of the charge that he was arrested for kidnapping Syrian charge d'affaires, Iyad al-Mahmoud, and smuggling guns to Saudi Arabia during Hajj, which created tensions between Iran and the region. The article also contained a loosely factual account of McFarlane's visit to Tehran, exposing that the US had sold arms to Iran in exchange for eliminating support for "liberation movements." It purportedly led to Hashemi's incarceration. Nearly a year later Khomeini ordered Hashemi executed for "desecrating the martyrs of the Islamic Revolution" amongst other charges, removing any opposition to Rafsanjani's aims. Meanwhile, the revelation of an American diplomat in Iran created a sensation in Tehran and D.C.[21] Reagan and Rafsanjani each tried to maintain control over their respective situations following the leak.

Rafsanjani benefited from the tyranny of theocracy. He appeared at a rally to celebrate the seventh anniversary of the American Embassy siege to speak misleadingly about McFarlane's May 1986 visit and establish his narrative. Rafsanjani's remarks obscured his involvement and cast the entire operation as a failed diplomatic overture from Reagan. Iranian leaders, Rafsanjani falsely asserted, refused to meet with McFarlane and his entourage, who were then held in custody for five days at a hotel. Rasfanjani claimed Iranian officials had taken umbrage with Reagan's diplomats arriving uninvited at Mehrabad airport on Irish passports to deliver Reagan's message to the Ayatollah. Despite the Americans bringing military hardware to address the country's "complex needs," Khomeini had ordered officials to rebuff Reagan's team and refuse

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[20] Gerald M. Boy, "Reagan Applauds Hostage's Release," *New York Times*, November 3, 1986, A14; Doyle McManus, "Secret Talks, New Flexibility Led to Release," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1986, 1; David B. Ottaway and Lou Cannon, "White House Says Others Share Credit: U.S. Credits Multiple Efforts for Release," *Washington Post*, November 3, 1986, A1.

[21] "Lebanese Paper on Hashemi, McFarlane Issues," Beirut AL-SHIRA (November 3, 1986), Translation by Foreign Broadcast Information Service, FBIS Daily Report, South Asia, FBIS-SAS-86-215), November 6, 1986, Page I 1 - 3, heading: Iran, NewsBank, Foreign broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports; Robin Wright, "Iranian Power Plays Reflected in Terrorist Moves?," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 5, 1986; Samuel Segev, *The Iranian Triangle: The Untold Story of Israel's Role in The Iran-Contra Affair* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 283-285; On Mehdi Hashemi's arrest, confession, charges, and execution, see Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 162-167; At the time, the CIA analysis of Iran's internal political dynamics raised three possibilities for the infighting: Rafsanjani sought to discredit Montazeri as he grew in independence as the designated successor to Khomeini; Montazeri's opposition to Rafsanjani had become untenable; Or, Medi Hashemi was "a rogue operator" whose actions harmed the regime. Near East and South Asia analysts "favored" the third interpretation. See Memo, [Name withheld] Assistant National Intelligence Officer for NESA to William Casey and Robert Gates, "Warning and Forecast Report for Near East and South Asia," December 2, 1986, CREST, General CIA Records, CIA ERR, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP00M00244R000500040010-1.pdf

their gifts, which consisted of pistols and a Bible inscribed by Reagan. According to Rasfanjani, the Americans "begged" to meet with Iranian leaders before protesting Iranian refusals. Rasfanjani used the botched visit to argue that the US was not a "frightening giant." He also disclosed McFarlane requested Iran's assistance in freeing hostages held in Lebanon. Rasfanjani conceded that Iran may help with the hostages if the US reduced tensions between the two countries. Yet he offered no guarantees, suggesting Hezbollah were not abiding Iranian orders. Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi followed him, stating that diplomatic talks would not happen, notwithstanding American overtures. American officials, Mousavi stated, denied the visit for obvious reasons: "such news could create disgrace inside America."[22]

Washington, D.C.

Reagan's problems began when American newspapers picked up the story and linked the release of hostages to arms deals. Administration officials, however, had forewarnings about the leak of McFarlane's trip from Montazeri's associates. After Oliver North's late October meeting with Iranian representatives in Frankfurt, Germany, Charles E. Allen, the National Intelligence Officer for Counterterrorism and Narcotics, briefed Director of Central Intelligence William J. Casey on the outcome. Item number one of Allen's memo informed Casey that "Bud MacFarlane's trip is becoming known."[23] It is unclear whether at the time North and others realized the gravity of the disclosure of McFarlane's trip. After *Al-Shiraa* published the story, Howard Teicher, then Director of Political-Military Affairs for the National Security Council, messaged Poindexter, telling him that the White House should view the McFarlane leak as a grand opportunity to take advantage of a "secession struggle" within Iran. Teicher advised Poindexter to discuss with Shultz and Casey the ways to "signal the Iranians in a productive manner" without using spare military parts.[24] Teicher had a strikingly wrong understanding of the political situation, for he did not realize the US could not use this revelation to influence Iranian politics. Rather, the McFarlane leak would adversely affect the Reagan administration, rather than providing a strategic opening through the alleged Iranian moderates.

Shultz, however, grasped the severity of an unfolding scandal and strived to mitigate it. After encountering a barrage of questions from journalists about McFarlane's secret trip to Iran, Shultz cabled Poindexter to recommend divulging details of the operation but with a caveat: the administration should claim that it was a one-time operation conducted on humanitarian assistance grounds. "At this point," Shultz presciently observed, "the story is building and there are so many aspects to it - political legal diplomatic and in policy terms - that leaks and

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[22] "Hashemi-Rasfanjani on Alleged McFarlane Visit," Tehran Domestic Service (November 4, 1986), Translation by Foreign Broadcast Information Service, FBIS Daily Report, South Asia, FBIS-SAS-86-214), November 5, 1986, page I 1 - 7, heading: Iran, NewsBank, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports; CIA Officer George Cave, who was on the mission, subsequently revealed to the Senate Intelligence Committee that the group did indeed take the gifts to Tehran. It leaked to the press almost immediately. See Bernard Gwertzman, "McFarlane Took Cake and Bible to Teheran, EX-C.I.A. Man Says," *New York Times*, January 11, 1987; For complete text of Rafsanjani speech, see FBIS printout from Tehran Domestic Service in Persian of "Iran: Rafsanjani Criticizes U.S. at Rally on Capture of Embassy Take 1 of 8 --Rafsanjani Speech," in "Iran Policy-Sensitive (1 of 6)," Box 91682, Howard R. Teicher Files, RRPL.

[23] Memo, Charles E. Allen to William J. Casey, "Frankfurt Meetings," November 3, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.; See the previous chapter for details of the meeting.

[24] PROFS, Howard J. Teicher to Alton G. Keel, "Allegations of Bud's Trip [Need to Assess Impact of Revelations of Robert McFarlane's Mission to Tehran on U.S.-Iran Relations]," November 4, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

revelations could keep it going for a long time in a bigger and bigger way."[25] The story, in fact, outlasted Shultz's tenure as secretary of state, but it ensnared him in the whirlwind of investigations, palace intrigue, and political theater for the remainder of his service.

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, too, felt dismayed at the revelation of McFarlane's trip to Iran. Shultz and Weinberger had argued against Iranian arms deals during the "intense" meetings over the matter. "We both regarded the [Robert] McFarlane proposal," Weinberger later recalled, "as perfectly absurd and dangerous, and said so many times." Upon learning the finer details of the operation and what the president had allowed to transpire, he regarded it as "repugnant news" for the administration. In the aftermath of the revelation, Weinberger greeted the US Ambassador to NATO David M. Abshire at an airport in Brussels, Belgium. During their conversation, a disheartened Weinberger expressed his vexation, "Not again, not after Watergate!"[26] Weinberger understood the grave political problems besetting the administration and voiced his frustration, although never to the extent of Shultz.

Vice President Bush, for his part, discerned trouble was on the horizon for the administration and offered a measured response. As the scandal brewed in the early days of November, Bush noted in his diary that he was "one of the few people that know fully the details, and there [was] a lot of flack and misinformation out there" in media reports. Bush desired for the hostages to be freed but he feared that disclosures from the White House or State Department would jeopardize their release. "This is one operation that has been held very, very tight," he recorded for posterity, "and I hope it will not leak." Reporting, of course, continued and Bush would face questions for his role, including a fierce showdown with Independent Counsel Walsh over his diary. Days later, when the Saudi ambassador Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud visited Bush to ask if US policy toward Iran had changed, Bush told Bandar that he could not provide details on what transpired. He assured Bandar that nothing changed regarding American policies toward Iran or the Gulf states, reaffirming US neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war and support for the Gulf Cooperation Council. "All of that seemed to make him feel pretty good," Bush reflected triumphantly. But calm demeanor and reassuring language would not mollify Congress and pacify the press once operational details leaked.[27]

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[25] Cable, George P. Shultz to John M. Poindexter and Nicholas Platt, "U.S. Policy on Iran [Suggestion for Putting Best Light on Iran Revelations]," November 4, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

[26] On Weinberger's understanding that Shultz and he agreed about Iranian arm sales despite fierce disagreements over other policies, see pages 18-19 of Caspar Weinberger, interview by Stephen Knott and Russell L. Riley, November 19, 2002, Washington, D.C., Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential oral History Program, Miller center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan; Quoted from pages 2-3 of Office of Independent Counsel interview with Caspar Weinberger on 10/10/90, see Record of Interview, Caspar Weinberger, Interview with Office of Independent Counsel, Washington D.C., October 10, 1990; Powell, Colin (2); John Q. Barrett Attorney Files; US v. Weinberger Files, Box 9, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; David M. Abshire writes that following a greeting at the Brussels military airport, Weinberger entered their limousine, put his head into his hands, and made the statement. See David M. Abshire, *Saving the Reagan Presidency: Trust is the Coin of the Realm* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 3.

[27] The Independent Counsel did not receive George H.W. Bush's diary entries until December 1992 even though Lawrence Walsh requested them in 1987; See pages 1 - 3 in Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

Contra Fallout

Prior to the disclosure of the Iranian initiative, the administration attempted to contain the political fallout from Hasenfus' capture. After the C-123k plane crash, Casey ordered the Enterprise shuttered. The CIA promptly dismantled and destroyed its possessions in Central America. While Oliver North and Casey discussed how the operation "was coming unraveled," Casey informed North that Roy Furmark, a former legal client, told him about arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi supposedly borrowing $15 million from Canadian investors to finance the Iranian arms sales without repaying the loan. Furmark suggested that these investors may divulge the deals to Democratic Senators Patrick Leahy, Alan Cranston, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Based on this perturbing news, Casey and North felt an imperative to have the situation "cleaned up." On Casey's insistence, pilots and crew of "Project Democracy" evacuated Central America, leaving behind seven planes and other equipment. According to North, CIA officers later placed the planes in a crater, incinerated them, and filled the crater with dirt. "One might call it the ultimate cover-up," North joked in his memoir. In early October, North had commenced shredding documents, an act that would attract attention during his televised congressional testimony. Using a paper shredder, North destroyed every file associated with the Iran-Contra operations that he could lay hands on, claiming he did so to prevent individuals and organizations from "being in danger." In reality, North sought to conceal the diversion of funds from Iranian arms sales, third-country contributions to the Contras, and other operational details of the Enterprise's network.[28]

Disclosures and congressional oversight quickly revealed the intricacies of the Contra operation once politicians and reporters pressed for answers. During this phase of the scandal in October and early November, however, CIA officers felt optimistic about evading consequences over the Hasenfus incident, principally because the Agency denied direct involvement, which could not be corroborated, and declined to comment on the precise role of the White House.[29] Still, Congress demanded answers, and the administration had to provide them without compromising operations. Senator Dave Durenberger, the Republican chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, suggested Reagan admit to facilitating the resupply missions. When a reporter asked Durenberger whom he thought was behind the effort, he responded bluntly: "Ronald Reagan is sponsoring all of this private action--ask him or somebody who

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[28] United States. Congress., *Testimony of Oliver L. North (Questioning by Counsels):* Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-7, Part 1, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 7, 8, 9, and 10, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office 1987), 19-20; Oliver L. North, *Under Fire: An American Story* (New York: Harpers Collins, 1991), 272, 297-299; On Casey's meeting with Furmark, see Memo, William J. Casey, "William Casey's Memo regarding Meeting with Concerned Investor in Iran Initiative," October 8, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA**;** Furmark later disputed the Canadian investor story, claiming that Khashoggi told him he received the money from a bank in the Cayman Islands, see Bob Drogin and Kenneth Freed, "Heads Little-Known Affiliate of Contra-Aid Group: Ex-Canadian Lawmaker's Arms Action Probed," *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 1986; In March 1987, Khashoggi gave an interview to the *New York Times*, in which he said he invented the story about Canadian investors to dupe the US government into reimbursing him $10 million to pay an unnamed Saudi business associate. See Jeff Gerth, "Saudi Businessman in Iran Affair Tells of 'Playing Games' with U.S. Aides," *New York Times*, March 10, 1987, A16.

[29] Alan D. Fiers reflected this sentiment in his Office of Independent Counsel interview, see Page 8 of Record of Interview, Alan D. Fiers, Jr., Interview with Office of Independent Counsel, Washington D.C., July 29, 1991, Fiers, Alan; John Q. Barrett Attorney Files; CIA Investigative Files, Box 6, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

works for him."[30] The press asked without much success.

Reagan denied White House involvement, telling reporters that his administration knew about private entities facilitating the Contra War but his staff were unaware of the specifics. Responding to a question about his approval of their missions, Reagan remarked, "Well, we're in a free country where private citizens have a great many freedoms—including the fact that some years ago, many of you spoke approvingly of something called the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War."[31] The president supported American citizens who assisted the Contras, and he vocalized it without divulging what his administration had done to ensure a Contra victory. Few, if any, would believe the administration had a completely hands-off approach. The White House openly approved of and encouraged Americans helping the Contras. Senator Patrick Leahy, the Democratic deputy chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, described Reagan's assistance of the private ventures as "being done with a wink and a shrug." It was more than approving gestures.[32] Reagan wanted the Contras supplied and fighting. The Sandinista government was, after all, a communist adversary of the Reagan administration.

Reporters rapidly uncovered the finer details about the Contra operations, a sign that loose-tongued officials would enable dogged journalists to tell all in due course. An article linking Bush to Félix Rodríguez, whom journalists referred to by his alias Max Gomez, appeared in the San Francisco Examiner, followed by another one in the Washington Post. Using anonymous sources, reporters claimed that Rodríguez had met with Bush and facilitated the Contra operations at Bush's direction. Bush did not disavow the meeting, but he denied offering direct support to the Contras. Rodríguez had met Bush through his National Security Advisor Donald Gregg, a friend of Rodríguez from his time in Vietnam. At a press conference, Bush admitted to knowing "Felix Gomez," mixing up his real name and alias. "I met with him twice," Bush said. "Saw him at a political event," he continued, "Shook hands with him a third time. He's a patriot."[33]

The reporting on "Max Gomez" brought public attention to how the Reagan administration had a role in building the Contra supply infrastructure. The media attention raised questions about how far and to what extent these measures had skirted the Boland amendments. It would soon be revealed, too, that Saudi Arabia funded the private supply network, and Richard Secord established it alongside his partner at the NSC, Oliver North.[34] Congress and the press began piecing together America's most overt-covert operation at the exact moment when $100 million in funding would be flowing into the Contra coffers as a result of the June congressional vote authorizing new military aid.[35]

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30 Stephen Engelberg, "Reagan Urged to Admit Contra-Aid Role," *New York Times*, October 10, 1986, A3.
31 Ronald Reagan, "Informal Exchange With Reporters on the Budget, October 8, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255560
32 Richard Halloran, "Reagan on Downed Plane: Like Lincoln Brigade," *New York Times*, October 9, 1986, A8.
33 "Contra Plane Linked to Bush," *San Francisco Examiner*, October 10, 1986, p. 1; Doyle McManus, "Bush is Linked to Head of Contra Aid Network," *Washington Post*, October 11, 1986, A1; Bush gaffed by mixing the two names together. Philip Shenon, "Close Aide to bush Linked to Figure Helping Contras," *New York Time*s, October 13, 1986, A1.
34 Doyle McManus, "Ex-Pentagon Aide's Role in Start of Contras Airlift Told," *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 1986.
35 Funds were appropriated under the Fiscal Year 1987 Continuing Resolution (P.L. 99-951), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-100/pdf/STATUTE-100-Pg3341.pdf; Reagan also signed Executive Order 12570 to implement the funding, see Ronald Reagan, "Executive Order 12570—Delegating Authority To Implement Assistance for Central American Democracies and the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project,

At this time, the administration's cooperation with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence gave rise to the first in a series of fatal mistakes, a sequence of obfuscations and purposeful omissions that the independent counsel investigated for years. On October 9, Casey lunched with CIA Deputy Director Robert Gates and North, during which North wrongly informed Gates and Casey that the CIA "were absolutely clean" in regard to Hasenfus. Afterward, Casey briefed oversight committees on the CIA's connection to Hasenfus. Casey denied the Agency's involvement. Casey showed members evidence of the supply operations derived from intelligence reports. He maintained that the CIA "did not know who was giving what to whom." Following the briefing, a skeptical Senator Durenberger told another member, "I believe that the director of Central Intelligence has just told us what the CIA knows. But I'll bet you Bill Casey knows everything about it."[36] Others certainly knew about the inner workings of the Contras network, too.

In a set of congressional hearings, CIA officers and State Department officials denied the existence of links between the CIA and the private supply network, knowledge of Rodríguez's involvement, and the use of third-party funding. On October 10, Assistant Secretary of State Abrams and CIA Deputy Direct of Operations Clair George attended a closed hearing in front of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. They provided on-the-record denials of the involvement of the US government in the Contra resupply effort. Senator Richard Lugar, the Republican chairman of the SCFR, demanded to know who managed the network. Abrams assured him the American government did not assist the Contras in running operations. The supply operations went "without any encouragement and coordination from us," Abrams told the committee, "other than a public speech by the President, that kind of thing, on the public record." George testified that "we [CIA] did not directly or indirectly assist them." Abrams and George also made two more significant denials. First, Abrams and George claimed to not know Richard Second. George told Democratic Senator John Kerry that he "did not know the man." Second, Abrams and George claimed to have no knowledge of foreign governments funding the Contras. Abrams remarked to Kerry that the US had "not received a dime from a foreign government, not a dime, from any foreign government."[37] These comments haunted Abrams and George for years. Several days later, they continued to deny the administration's involvement to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

On October 14, Abrams, George, and CIA Central America Task Force Chief Alan Fiers appeared before the HPSCI. During the hearing, Abrams, Fiers and George faced a barrage of questions about the supply operations, third-country funding, and Rodríguez. George's opening statement erroneously proclaimed the Agency "was not involved directly or indirectly in arranging, directing, or facilitating resupply missions conducted by private individuals in support of the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance." It set a trend of misleading statements. George and Fiers both denied knowing who funded and supported the supply flights. Abrams likewise stated

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https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/254260.

36 Joseph E. Persico, *Casey: The Lives and Secrets of William J. Casey: from the OSS to the CIA* (New York: Viking, 1990), 528-529; See also, Memorandum for the Record, Robert Gates, "Lunch with Ollie North," October 10, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

37 Quoted from Elliot Abrams Senate Foreign Relations Committee Transcript, 10/10/86, in Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters*. U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, August 4, 1993. Vol. I: Investigations and Prosecutions (Washington, D.C, 1993), 384; and quoted from Clair George, SFRC Testimony, 10/10/86 in *Final Report of the Independent Counsel*, 241; On foreign funding, see Hearing Transcript, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, October 10, 1986, pages 75-76, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

that he lacked knowledge of the government's involvement. On the topic of Rodríguez, George and Fiers testified that Rodríguez no longer had a relationship with the CIA. Rodríguez, they claimed, assisted the Contras of his own volition. Abrams remarked that Rodríguez worked for the Salvadoran air force, and the administration was unaware of his Contra activities. Republican Congressman Richard Cheney noted their responses appeared "credible," but recent events were enough to make the public skeptical of the administration. The next day, Abrams continued his denials in front of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs. Notably, he refuted allegations that Saudi Arabia had provided the Contras funding in a quid pro quo for Airborne Warning and Control System surveillance planes. Abrams, Fiers, and George's testimony failed to stave off further congressional inquiries or resolve the burgeoning scandal. Instead, it piqued the curiosity of Congress and eventually created legal problems for them.[38]

Unconvinced, Congressional Democrats refused to accept the administration's responses and increased pressure on the White House to admit its role in the Contra network. On October 14, Senator Kerry released an interim report on the legality of the administration's support for the Contras. It offered details on North and Secord's private supply network using information from anonymous sources. Kerry's report argues that preliminary evidence suggests private actors have likely both violated Arms Export Control and Neutrality Act laws and worked in tandem with the administration to aid the Contras. It makes a recommendation for "a full scale Congressional investigation." Kerry's staff excised any reference to the Contras' involvement in narcotics trafficking, though the CIA received notification from SFRC staff that Kerry would investigate drug trafficking after the midterm elections.[39]

Days later, Democrats asked for an investigation for the sake of Reagan's credibility. Democratic members of the House Judiciary Committee demanded Attorney General Edwin Messe appoint an independent counsel to investigate the Contra matter. "The credibility of the Administration in this instance depends on its candor and adherence to the law," the letter contends, "That is why an independent counsel is needed."[40] Senator Leahy published an op-ed in the *New York Times* urging the administration to come clean for the sake of its credibility. "The administration's credibility with the American people, Congress and the press has been badly shaken over the last few weeks," Leahy claimed, "It can be restored only by a complete, open and conclusive revelations of all ties, direct or indirect, between Administration officials and private groups aiding the contras."[41] Appeals to credibility and adherence to the law, however, would not bring forth the kind of admissions Democrats sought.

Inside the CIA, a sense of impending doom afflicted Casey and Gates, exacerbated by the possible revelation of the Iranian initiative. George and Fiers, meanwhile, partook in an office

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[38] See 13-page extract, Transcript, "Briefing on Downed Plane," House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, October 14, 1986, DNSA Collection: Iran-Contra Affair; Memorandum for the Record, "Testimony before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Regarding the Crash of a C-123 in Nicaragua," October 14, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; On Abrams' denial of Saudi quid pro quo, See the DNSA three page extract, Transcript, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, October 15, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; On legal problems, see chapter nine.

[39] Non-classified report, "'Private Assistance' and the Contras: A Staff Report," Office of John Kerry, October 14, 1986, DNSA Collection: Nicaragua, DNSA; Memorandum for the Record, "Foreign Relations Committee to Investigate Contras," October 20, 1986, CREST, General CIA Records, CIA ERR, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90B01390R000700780014-3.pdf.

[40] See the House Judiciary members two-page letter to Edwin Meese, Letter, "Request to the Attorney General to Appoint an Independent Counsel," October 17, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

[41] Patrick J. Leahy, "Let's Gets the Facts on Nicaragua; Is the C.I.A. Involved?," *New York Times*, October 23, 1986, A27.

joke regarding Rodríguez, in which CIA officers distributed buttons with "Who is Max Gomez?" written on them.[42] Casey, though, had received analysis from National Intelligence Officer for Counterterrorism and Narcotics Charles E. Allen suggesting that revenue streams crossed between the Iran and Contra operations. It impelled Casey and Gates to approach Poindexter at the White House.[43] Allen had previously told Casey and Gates that surveillance and recent events suggested a diversion of the Iranian profits to the Contras had occurred. Casey asked Allen to draft a memorandum. Drawing on Allen's report, Casey warned Poindexter about the dire consequences of a disclosure, recommending that Poindexter raise the matter with White House Counsel Peter Wallison. Poindexter was not persuaded. Casey then directed Allen to interview Roy Furmark about the Iranian deals. Furmark confirmed that profits had been diverted to the Contras. Casey, again, recommended to Poindexter that he should inform Wallison. Poindexter once more demurred, a critical mistake.[44]

Groundwork

At the White House, the president and his advisors laid the groundwork for what became a dismal response. Immediately after the McFarlane disclosure in *Al-Shiraa,* North and Teicher attempted to stop the press from reporting on the story. Veteran NBC News correspondent John Scali had contacted James R. Stark, a Director of Political-Military Affairs responsible for the Middle East, about the Lebanese exposé to confirm its validity. Stark said that "all the indications" suggested the story was likely true. Stark notified Deputy Director of Counterterrorism Robert Earl of Scali's surprise probing. It prompted North and Teicher to demand the reporter's name from Stark. North argued the disclosure "could kill the hostages." He falsely told Stark that the US was holding family members of Iranian leaders hostage in secure locations until American hostages were released. North lied similarly to Vincent Cannistraro, the Director of Intelligence Programs, who promptly contacted the CIA to debunk North's ludicrous tale. Stark had nevertheless provided Scali's name. Teicher tried to persuade

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42 See Page 12 of Record of Interview, Alan D. Fiers, Jr., Interview with Office of Independent Counsel, Washington D.C., July 29, 1991; Fiers, Alan; John Q. Barrett Attorney Files; CIA Investigative Files, Box 6, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA.

43 In his report, Allen warns that "major elements of this initiative are likely to be exposed" and "There is no indication that the White House has a plan to prevent the exposure or a plan to deal with the potential exposure." Allen also alludes to the diversion of funds. "The government of the United States, along with the Government of Israel," Allen writes in a key passage, "acquired a substantial profit from these transactions, some of which profit was redistributed to other projects of the US and of Israel." See Memorandum, "Charles Allen's Overview of the Iran Initiative," October 14, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

44 This series event is recounted in Persico, *Casey: The Lives and Secrets of William J. Casey*, 524, 527-531; see also United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence. *Preliminary inquiry into the sale of arms to Iran and possible diversion of funds to the Nicaraguan Resistance*, S. Rep. No. 7, 100th Cong., 1st Sess. 36 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 32-34, 47-49; The Independent Counsel's final report questions when Robert Gates knew about the diversion, arguing that Gates knew prior to Charles E. Allen informing him. See Walsh, *Final Report, Vol. I*, 223-226; Memorandum, Charles E. Allen to William J. Casey and Robert Gates, "Ghorbanifar [Excised] Channel," October 17, 1986, DNSA ICA; On Furmark's interview, see Personal Notes, Charles E. Allen, "Handwritten Notes on Charles Allen and George Cave Meeting with Roy Furmark," October 22, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.; Casey wrote a memo reporting the findings of Allen's October 22 meeting with Furmark. Casey recalled never sending Poindexter the memo but other testimony suggests that Casey did read and conveyed it to Poindexter. For memo, see Memorandum, William J. Casey to John M. Poindexter, "Roy Furmark's Comments on the Hostage Situation," October 24, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

Scali to drop the story. Scali responded, "it was too late."[45] A series of conversations about what to do transpired over several days at the White House as recent events pressured the president to address the nascent scandal.

Chief of Staff Donald Regan, like Shultz, recognized the headwinds facing the administration from journalists eager to report on McFarlane's Tehran trip. "The cover is blown here," Regan told his staff. He considered the best course of action would be "to go public with it," letting Congress and the public know about the secret deals with Iran. Poindexter vociferously disagreed with Regan, however, citing a need to deny the story to rescue more hostages, thinking that Terry Anderson and Thomas Sutherland would soon be released.[46] Regan's plan was not gaining allies within the White House. Poindexter had called McFarlane to notify him that the White House would not comment on the Lebanese story out concern for the remaining hostages. Poindexter asked McFarlane to abstained from commenting publicly. Poindexter also mentioned that the president tasked him with creating a chronology of the events in question. McFarlane correctly suspected that Poindexter as well as Reagan planned to deny the story, simply because they thought it possible to rescue more hostages and reduce the public outcry by doing so.[47]

Poindexter also responded to Shultz's message suggesting that the administration go public to diminish the impact of the disclosure. Poindexter argued that confirming the story would undermine future hostage releases and "establishing a correct relationship with Iran." He suggested wrongly that the public would in due course accept the administration's actions since it was "a good story." Poindexter maintained that they should secure the release of hostages and then brief Congress prior to informing the public. He offered two points for consideration: additional public disclosures would affect Iranian interpretations of US intentions, because "a power struggle of some sort" was occurring, and "only play into the hands of radical Iranians who want to distance Iran from the US." The administration should, Poindexter contended, reiterate its policy toward Iran and make clear that further discussion of the issue would endanger hostages. Poindexter claimed Bush, Weinberger, and Casey agreed with his position. He also advised Shultz that he thought Rasfanjani's factually incorrect statements about McFarlane's trip was a "message" to the US.[48] Rasfanjani's message was not so clear to Shultz; he read the cable with only Watergate in mind. Poindexter had failed to convince the secretary of state, whose prior experience in Nixon's administration and better understanding of politics provided a deeper perspective on the unfolding crisis.

On November 4, White House spokesman Larry Speakes delivered Poindexter's message to the press aboard Air Force One. Speakes declined to comment on the allegation in the interest of "the safety of the hostages." Speakes clarified that Iran still supported terrorism and the arms

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[45] See page 3 of Memorandum for the File, Peter D. Keisler, "Interview of James Stark," April 21, 1987, folder "Iran/Arms Transaction: Interview of James Stark - April 21, 1987," box CFOA 1129, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, RRPL.

[46] United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, *Iran-Contra investigation : joint hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, One Hundredth Congress, first session, 100-10, July 30, 31, and August 3, 1987 : testimony of Donald T. Regan and Caspar W. Weinberger* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 21.

[47] For Robert McFarlane's testimony on John Poindexter's call and frame of mind, see pages D3-D5 of Appendix D in United States, John Tower, Brent Scowcroft, and Edmund S. Muskie, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President's Special Review Board* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987).

[48] Cable, John Poindexter to George Shultz, "U.S. Policy on Iran," November 5, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

embargo would continue.[49] Under the direction of North, NSC staff prepared White House guidance on US policy toward Iran with similar aims and disseminated it to diplomatic posts in the Middle East. It advised diplomats to not speak to local media and only respond to host governments "if asked," but they should stress the need for confidentiality to keep the hostages alive. The cable summarized Reagan's policy as engaging in "sensitive talks with several intermediaries" to secure the release of hostages in Lebanon but his policy had not changed otherwise. Above all, America sought a dialog with Iran to end the Iran-Iraq war and eradicate terrorism in the region.[50]

American diplomats, though, confided in allies their views on the burgeoning scandal. At the US Embassy in London, diplomat Robin Raphel did "loosen her tongue" when Peter Collecott, Head of the Iran/Iraq section for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), broached the subject. Raphel refused to deny McFarlane's activities, stating "that the whole operation was clearly one which had been masterminded in the White House." Raphel told her British counterpart that a consideration for domestic politics underpinned operations. The White House, she assumed, wanted hostages released to affect midterm elections. "According to Ms Raphel," Collecott cabled to the FCO Middle East Department, "the current operation with Iran was the kind of thing that 'they' (amateurs in the White House) would do, without properly considered advice." In response to Collecott's questions, Raphel stated that she believed that the White House would not cease dealing with the Iranians to free the hostages despite the bad press.[51] The NSC certainly had no plans to stop even as the press and Congress pried further. Poindexter campaigned inside the White House for the administration to stay silent on the McFarlane revelations. The scandal, however, developed beyond not only the national security advisor's control, but also the president himself.

Congress would not accept denials. On November 5, Lee Hamilton, the Chair of House Intelligence Committee, and Dante Fascell, the Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, wrote to Reagan requesting an immediate briefing on the Iranian arms deals. "The total denial of information of explanation to date," they stressed, "is simply unacceptable."[52] Casey and Gates met Poindexter the next day. Casey encouraged Poindexter to involve White House Counsel Peter Wallison. Poindexter declined to involve Wallison based on his unfounded mistrust of Wallison, a fateful decision. He preferred, instead, to talk to his military assistant Paul Thompson, who also served as counsel to the NSC.[53] Poindexter's thinking and his actions reflected the serious lack of political acumen required to address a domestic political crisis, one of his own making no less. Poindexter would stonewall Wallison and attempt to shield

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[49] David Hoffman, John M. Goshko, and Peyman Pejman, "Iran Says McFarlane Came on Secret Mission to Tehran," *Washington Post*, November 5, 1986.

[50] See Memo, Howard R. Teicher to John M. Poindexter, "Cables re Iran," November 5, 1986, folder "Iran Policy-Sensitive (1 of 6), Box 91682, Howard R. Teicher Files, RRPL; Cable, Secretary of State to All Near Eastern and South Asian Diplomatic Posts, "White House Guidance: U.S. Policy Toward Iran," November 5, 1986, folder "Iran Policy - Sensitive (2 of 6)," Box 91682, Howard R. Teicher Files, RRPL.

[51] Memorandum, Peter S. Collecott to Graham H. Boyce and Henry David A.C. Miers, "U.S./Iran Relations," November 6, 1986, DNSA collection: U.S. Policy and Iran, 1978-2015, DNSA.

[52] For a copy of the letter, see page 177 in *The Foreign Policy Implications of Arms Sales to iran and the Contra Connection: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, House of Representative, 99th Congress. 2nd sess., November 24; December 8, 9, 1986 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986).

[53] See Page 54 of Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Report on Preliminary Inquiry into the Sale of Arms to Iran and the Possible Diversion of Funds to the Contras, January 29, 1987. Cited from Ronald Reagan's copy (See "RR" initials indicating Reagan had seen the document) of SSCI Report, January 29, 1987, ID #45914255, ND006, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

McFarlane and North, compounding problems for the administration. Wallison has contended that Poindexter's efforts during this period to suppress information about the Iran-Contra operations marked "the beginning of a cover-up of the Iran-Contra matter in the White House."[54]

The cover-up was not a grand conspiracy.[55] Rather, two overlapping but uncoordinated set of actions created the appearance of a widespread cover-up. One, Poindexter, North, and others principally involved in the affair conspired to conceal information and mislead Congress, the press, and the White House, including the president. Two, Reagan prioritized rescuing hostages over the future of his presidency based on his misguided views about the goals, nature, and purposes of the operations. The actual cover-up thus resulted from a coordinated campaign by national security staff to hide their activities. Reagan's decisions to deny reports and delay disclosures unknowingly aided their scheme.

Reagan possessed no knowledge of the diversion of funds from the Iranian arm sales to the Contras. Reagan, however, believed that any disclosure of his administration's ongoing efforts to rescue hostages could not only endanger the hostages, but also disrupt establishing a relationship with who he believed were political moderates in Iran. Poindexter knew fully about the operations and willfully chose to reaffirm Reagan's views in his arguments that more hostages could be saved and the Iranian policy was worth continuing. Poindexter's machinations were against Reagan's best interests despite Poindexter's misguided belief that the public would forgive the president if he both saved all of the hostages and presided over a rapprochement with Iran. Shultz, however, understood the dilemma and the terrible optics: Reagan traded arms for hostages in violation of his own policy toward Iran. Shultz, assisted somewhat by Regan, encouraged full disclosure and transparency from Reagan. Reagan and his senior advisors clashed over handling the political fallout rather than effortlessly coordinating to deceive the country.

No Comment and No Position

Reagan adopted an approach of deny and delay from the inception of the scandal based on his belief that his administration could manage the national media and Congress while securing the release of the hostages Terry Anderson and Thomas Sutherland. On November 4 in Los Angeles, reporters questioned Reagan about McFarlane as he boarded Air Force One en route to Washington. "No comment," the president replied, a position that his chief of staff recorded as the new official guidance.[56] After Rasfanji's speech, the White House held to a position of "no commenting" on the substance.[57] The following day, Reagan reaffirmed his "no comment posture" during his morning national security briefing, for media "speculation" made his task of

[54] Peter J. Wallison, *Ronald Reagan: The Power of his Conviction and the Success of His Presidency* (Boulder: Westview, 2003), 179.
[55] cf. Jonathan Marshall, Peter Dale Scott, and Jane Hunter, *The Iran Contra Connection: Secret Teams and Covert Operations in the Reagan Era* (Boston: South End Press, 1987).
[56] Bernard Weinraub, "Iran Says McFarlane and 4 Others Went to Tehran on a Secret Trip," *New York Times*, November 5, 1986; See item #5 on Donald Regan's note for 11/4/86 in folder "Regan Documents 1985-1987 from Legal Task Force--Received by WHORM 5/15/1987 (8)," box 9, Regan, Donald T: Files Series II White House Legal Task Force, RRPL.
[57] On the no commenting posture, see item #5 on Donald Regan's note for 11/5/86 in folder "Regan Documents 1985-1987 from Legal Task Force--Received by WHORM 5/15/1987 (8)," box 9, Regan, Donald T: Files Series II White House Legal Task Force, RRPL.

freeing the remaining hostages "difficult."[58]

Later, Reagan received a question from a reporter about "a deal going with Iran" after signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. "No comment," the president answered firmly. Reagan attempted persuading the press to drop the story over national security concerns and due to its questionable source. Reagan made an appeal to the press corps: "[T]he speculation, the commenting and all, on a story that came out of the Middle East, and that to us has no foundation —that all of that is making it more difficult for us in our effort to get the other hostages free."[59] Regan and Meese knew the tactic would not work. In the afternoon, they met with Reagan for a few minutes to inform him that Congress would launch inquiries. Regan tried to impress upon the president a sense of what lay ahead. He made a note to himself that "skeletons will come" out of an investigation. Reagan's advisors were suggesting that he should pivot to a difference stance.[60] But former hostage David Jacobsen's visit to the White House the next day reinforced the president's belief that denying and delaying a public response was the correct approach.

On November 7, David Jacobsen visited Reagan, and the president resolved to control the press in order to continue the Iranian initiative. In his morning national security briefing, Reagan stressed and reiterated the need to avoid commenting on hostage negotiations to avoid endangering those held captive in Lebanon as well as the Iranians working with his administration. Poindexter raised the matter of dealing with Congress. Reagan had little desire to engage Republican Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole and Democratic Minority Leader Robert Byrd, but he decided the intelligence committees should be briefed. In Reagan's view, securing the release of hostages took precedence; any actions diminishing the prospect of securing their freedom should be avoided.[61]

Jacobsen gathered with Reagan in the early afternoon, and they addressed the press in the Rose Garden. Jacobsen's hostility toward reporters manifested in a solemn opening statement

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[58] Personal Notes, Rodney McDaniel, "Notes on Morning National Security Briefing with President Reagan - Discussion of Release of Hostage David Jacobsen and Press Strategy," November 6, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

[59] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, November 6, 1986," by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/254470.

[60] Donald Regan noted to himself that "[Democrats] will start investigation" and "any skeleton will come." See also Regan note for 11/6/1986 in folder "Regan Documents 1985-1987 from Legal Task Force--Received by WHORM 5/15/1987 (7)," box 9, Regan, Donald T: Files Series II White House Legal Task Force, RRPL; see also footnote 5 in Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters. U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, August 4, 1993. Vol. I: Investigations and Prosecutions* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993), 506.

[61] Personal Notes, Rodney McDaniel, "Notes on Morning National Security Briefing with President Reagan - Discussion of Iran and Problems Created by Official Comments to the Press for Securing Release of Hostages," November 7, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Personal Notes, John Poindexter, "Notes from President's Morning Briefing," November 7, 1987, Ibid. Reagan writes in his diary, "I've proposed & our message will be 'we can't & won't answer any Q's on this subject because to do so will endanger the lives of those we are trying to help.'" see Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: Harper Collins) 448; Reagan affirmed holding the no comment position five years later under questioning from the Independent Counsel. See page 67 of Deposition of Ronald W. Reagan, July 24, 1992; Reagan Deposition 1992; Attorney Files: Records of Christina A. Spaulding Witness Files: General; Box 5, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; For Reagan's thoughts on November 7 national security briefing and his decision to brief Intelligence Committee while maintaining a "no comment" posture, See page 277 of Deposition of Ronald W. Reagan, February 17, 1990; Transcript 2/17/90, 9:45am #013072 (Reagan Deposition); U.S. v. Poindexter (88-0080-01), Box 34, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

urging the press to act responsibly. "A simple speculation on your part," he warned, "could cause the death of my dear friend Tom Sutherland or Terry Anderson or Joe Cicippio or any other of the other hostages." He pleaded, "I am worried about what you might say, or someone else, might result in a death of somebody that I love. I don't want that on my conscience, and I don't think you want it on yours." Following Jacobsen's comments, reporters questioned Reagan about the hostages. The president answered Bill Plante of CBS News by pointing to Jacobsen's statement. "There's no way," Reagan said, "that we can answer questions having anything to do with this without endangering the people we're trying to rescue." As the president walked back to the Oval Office, he refused to speculate about the hostage negotiations, remarking that "it has to happen again and again and again until we have them all back." Jacobsen quickly defended Reagan, castigating reporters: "In the name of God, would you please just be responsible and back off?"[62] Jacobsen's words resonated with Reagan, a source of inspiration.

After the exchange, Reagan continued his meeting with the Jacobsen family in the Oval Office, an engagement that validated his instincts on managing the political crisis. Before the Rose Garden remarks, Jacobsen had expressed to Reagan his immense displeasure over the way reporters covered the hostage issue. He told the president that reckless stories jeopardized Anderson and Sutherland's release. Jacobsen worried Hezbollah would react negatively to publicity. Donald Regan observed that Jacobsen's dire pleas to the press "made quite an impression." Jacobsen's handling of eager, assertive reporters had also impressed Bush, who thought Jacobsen performed "a magnificent job explaining to the press that on the Iranian caper, by speculation and guessing, they are risking the lives of hostages." Reagan, too, appreciated that Jacobsen's statement corresponded with his administration's posture. It convinced Reagan that he had an appropriate and necessary public stance. Even as Regan pressed Reagan afterward to disclose the Iranian operations, the president told his chief of staff that "We can't endanger those lives." Reagan refused to budge on this point, but he relented on meeting to discuss what could be disclosed to Congress. Reagan's time with Jacobsen and his family had affected the president deeply. Reagan described their interaction as "emotional [and] heartwarming" in his diary, a true reflection of his feelings toward Jacobsen.[63]

Reagan's emotional attachment to the hostages and his strong commitment to bring Americans home safely not only underpinned his support for the secret Iranian initiative, but also influenced his intransigence about briefing Congress and appropriately addressing the political crisis. Prior to Jacobsen's release, Reagan had met with Jean Sutherland, the wife of hostage

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[62] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks and an Informal Exchange With Reporters Prior to a Meeting With David Jacobsen," by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258038.

[63] Select Committee, *Testimony of Donald T. Regan*, 22; Regan documented that Jacobsen was "hostile to press reports" in his daily notes. See item #4 on Donald Regan's note for 11/7/86 in folder "Regan Documents 1985-1987 from Legal Task Force--Received by WHORM 5/15/1987 (8)," box 9, Regan, Donald T: Files Series II White House Legal Task Force, RRPL; Bush was incensed over how the press questioned Jacobsen and Reagan, writing in his diary: "Bill Plant yelling, Andrea Mitchell yelling, some other guy, the terrible question and then at the end, -- after the hostage and the president and all of us walked back into the Oval Office, having come out together-- Helen Thomas, 'What about your statement? What about your statement?' The man, under duress, had made a statement, and, here she was. He having put the press down, she then having to have the last word on behalf of the press--a shoddy, sorry performance and it showed me exactly why the press has so little respect in this country." See diary entry on page 3 of Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA, *Reagan Diaries*, 449; Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 527-528.

Thomas Sutherland, in Colorado Springs, Colorado, while he was campaigning for the midterm elections. Reagan regarded Jean as a "remarkable woman" and a "very strong person." Reagan assured Sutherland that he was "exploring every option, every avenue" to rescue her husband. Sutherland apprised the president that she was pursuing her own plan. The Sutherlands, she said, had "put their lives on the line." Neither Reagan nor Sutherland divulged details of their plans to each other.[64]

Reagan, though, felt sympathy for a hostage's wife, seeking to provide reassurance that his administration would free her husband from captivity. The president would pursue every option for doing so. He believed in his responsibility to protect American citizens at all costs.[65] The release of Jacobsen and his anger at the media in the wake of meeting with Sutherland reinforced for the president that his initiative—however sketchy—was worth the consequences and could bring the other hostages home.

Wary of briefing Congress and averse to engaging the media, Reagan's intransigence impeded the White House from containing the political fallout and preventing further damage to Reagan's popularity and the presidency itself. Nancy Reagan, who usually nurtured the president's best instincts, initially recoiled at Donald Regan's suggestion that Reagan speak openly to the press. After the Jacobsen gathering, Regan had pushed Reagan to release a substantive statement in anticipation of the eventual full disclosure of the Iranian operations. Drawing on his recent meeting with Jacobsen as well as Poindexter's advice, Reagan refused to provide any information that he erroneously believed might compromise another hostage's freedom. Regan advised him that pundits would not accept silence. Reagan would be "ripped apart on the weekend talk shows" over the spectacle. "The American people," Regan stressed, "are going to start demanding to know what's going on here." The president acquiesced to holding a meeting on Monday, November 10, to "see where we stand." That evening Nancy called Regan and confirmed that the president was "not going to talk to the press" like he wanted. "My God, Nancy," Regan exclaimed, "He's going to go down in flames if he doesn't speak up."[66]

This would not be the last consequential confrontation between them over Regan's handling of Iran-Contra. For the president, a strong reluctance to bringing the matter public created further problems. In addition to the ravenous Washington press corps, Reagan had to think strategically about how to deal with Congress, for a harsh reality awaited his administration in the 100th Congress.

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[64] The meeting between Reagan and Sutherland lasted for around ten minutes; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 447; "Reagan: U.S. 'doing everything' for Lebanon Hostages," *United Press International*, October 30, 1986, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1986/10/30/Reagan-US-doing-everything-for-Lebanon-hostages/7309531032400/.

[65] On background, a source inside the administration told reporters that "There is a pressure that comes from our national sense of humanity, our softness about individual people in trouble," and "The president reacts that way too, even though it doesn't track with his policy." See Doyle McManus and Gaylord Shaw, "Secret Iran Talks Began Last Year: Reagan Sought Tehran's Help to End '85 Hijacking; Policy Shift Split Aides," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1986.

[66] Quoted from Donald T. Regan, *For the Record: From Wall Street to Washington* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1988), 27-28; Regan's 1988 memoir revealed that Nancy Reagan had relied on astrology during her tenure as First Lady, using the advice of her Astrologer Joan Quigley to inform her decision-making. While Nancy used astrology to determine times for events and other action, it never affected policies, summits, or Ronald Reagan's major decisions. For an in-depth examination of Nancy's use of astrology, see Karen Tumulty, *The Triumph of Nancy Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 341-354.

Midterms

The outcome of the 1986 midterm elections shifted the balance of Congress in favor of the Democratic Party and had ramifications for how the institution addressed Iran-Contra. With their new majority, Democrats sought to simultaneously grind the Reagan Revolution to a halt while engaging in bipartisan governance when the act suited the Democratic legislative agenda. Democrats obtained control of Congress by gaining eight seats in the Senate and five more in the House, bringing their majorities in January 1987 to 55-45 and 258-177, respectively. In his usual style, Reagan exuded optimism about his predicament, especially since Republicans won a majority of governorships, and what an adversarial Congress meant for his remaining two years in office. Reagan was determined to pursue his policies, even if it required compromise.[67]

Reagan and the Democrats both had political objectives. Their calls for bipartisanship thinly masked their policy goals. Democrats would control congressional committees and set the agenda for each chamber. A mutually beneficial sense of bipartisanship existed, but the exigency of partisan politics tested it. Crucially, these factors influenced how the Iran-Contra affair unfolded on Capitol Hill and affected the political responses of Republicans and Democrats.

Reagan campaigned hard to retain Republican control of the Senate in an "issueless" election marked by local and regional matters, personalities, and negative campaigning. Republicans had the difficult task of defending 22 seats while mitigating losses in the House. Reagan appeared at rallies to support each senator, often telling crowds to "win one for the Gipper." Reagan attempted to turn the election into a referendum on himself to avoid becoming a lame duck president. "Don't make me a six-year President," Reagan pleaded with voters. His advisors presumed the approach would increase support for Republican candidates. Polarizing issues, such as the Contra War, remained largely absent from campaigns. Poindexter, though, believed that a timely release of an American hostage could provide a polling bump for Republicans. Shortly before election day, he suggested the prospect to White House Political Director Mitch Daniels. Daniels thought otherwise, telling journalist Lou Cannon that a hostage release would only serve as a "distraction." And voters apparently agreed on election day, as Jacobsen's release had little influence on the vote.[68]

Still, elections remained divisive, with seething advertisements hitting the airwaves from both parties. Republican consultant Roger Stone commented on the use of negative ads in midterm campaigns. "The negative tactics that [Democrats] decried in the 1978 and 1980 elections, especially, they're using," Stone explained, "And they're using them because they work." Democratic campaigning worked well enough to best Reagan and the Republicans to secure majorities in the next Congress. Calls for bipartisanship swiftly arrived alongside claims

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[67] In his diary, Reagan notes on Wednesday, November 5, that "We now know we lost the Sen. But gained a number of Gov's. In fact, Republican Gov's now govern 51% of the American people." See entry in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 448; The 1986 midterms were the first time in the post-World War II period that an incumbent president gained governorships. See John F. Bibby, "The 1986 Midterm Elections for Governor and State Legislatures: A Modest Departure from Past Patterns," *Publius* Vol. 17, No. 3 (Summer, 1987): 67-82.

[68] Robert Shogan, "Close Races to Decide Fight for Senate Control," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1986, A6; Mary McGrory wrote a column on election day criticizing "the almost total silence on the subject of Nicaragua." See Mary McGrory, "Nicaragua: An Issue Ignored," *Washington Post*, November 4, 1986, A2; On Reagan's campaign effort, Poindexter's hostage comments, and Mitch Daniels' views see Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 670-74; On 1986 midterms, also see Richard Reeves, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 360; White House political director Mitchell Daniels said that "Ronald Reagan made a difference--just not enough of one." See "White House Insists Visits by Reagan Played a Role," *Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 1986, pg 18.

from both Reagan and the Democrats that their agendas would advance.[69]

Reagan handled the losses with his characteristic optimism and vowed to continue pushing his policies, projecting an upbeat attitude that belied his burgeoning political scandal. He only expressed disappointment at failing to unseat California Senator Alan Cranston.[70] Crowded into room 450 of the Old Executive Office Building, White House staff received a rousing speech from the president about the election and his administration's future. Reagan thanked his staff, congratulated the winners, and offered condolences to the losers. Reagan provided a positive assessment of the campaign and results. He vowed "to seek solutions where problems exist and progress where barriers may arise" in a gesture of impending bipartisanship. "Hard work and bipartisan cooperation will be ahead," Reagan noted. He asked staff to help him "complete the revolution that we have so well begun," adding that he had three general aims: "We must make America more prosperous, more productive, and the world more peaceful." On the ability of him to achieve these aims, Reagan remarked, "Washington ain't seen nothin' yet." He reminded his staff that "voters reelected us in 1984 to keep the revolution alive--not just for 2 years, but for 4." Losing Republican control of the Senate would not deter that objective. "For 2 years more, my friends, let us make history together," he cheerfully concluded.[71]

Others in the White House recognized the difficulty ahead for Reagan's agenda without mentioning the dual crises of the Contra War quagmire and recently revealed Iranian arms-for-hostages deals. Bush did not share Reagan's optimism, admitting that he felt "discouraged" to NBC News. Dennis Thomas, who served as a deputy to Chief of Staff Donald Regan, likewise felt the upcoming Congress could stymie the administration. "Hell, yes, it's difficult," Thomas said of the situation, "But we're not going to change our agenda or shrink from the challenge." Confrontation and partisanship, of course, would not disappear, except now a Democratic-controlled Congress shared the burden of governing. White House Communications Director Patrick Buchanan observed that "The Democrats may be in for more than they realize," because "they share co-responsibility." A responsibility that required the balance between partisan political wrangling and delivering legislative results. Democrats and Republicans, too, shared responsibility for addressing Reagan's scandal. Quick on the offensive, Donald Regan announced two days after the election that the president would pursue a new theme of "a more productive America," a plan for deficit reduction, revising the budget process, deregulation, and "peace through strength" in foreign policy. Reagan had set forth these goals in his post-election speech to staff. Regan seized the opportunity to send a message to the public, declaring that the Reagan administration continued unabated in spite of Democratic gains in the upcoming Congress.[72]

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[69] Roger Stone quoted from E.J. Dionne Jr., "Two Parties Focus on Senate Control in Election Today," *New York Times*, November 4, 1986, A1.

[70] Reagan responded to a letter from George Murphy, in which he informed Murphy that he "didn't see this election as a setback to what we've been trying to do." Reagan also confided in Murphy his displeasure at Ed Zschau losing to Alan Cranston in the California Senate race. "This one did disappoint me," he wrote, "because you and I both know what A.C. [Alan Cranston] really is and I was dying to get rid of him." See the transcript of the letter Reagan wrote to George Murphy on November 18, 1986, in Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, eds., *Reagan: A Life In Letters* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 568.

[71] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a White House Briefing for Senior Staff on the Congressional and Gubernatorial Election Results, November 5, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/254460.

[72] Lou Cannon, "White House Lays Plans to Show that Reagan 'Can Still Govern'," *Washington Post*, November 5, 1986, A35; Lou Cannon, "Consoling Aides, Reagan Reaffirms His 'Revolution'," Washington Post, November 6, 1986, A45; Jane Mayer and David Shribman, "New Partisanship: Democrats Are Ready To Challenge Reagan After

The Democratic Party, meanwhile, basked in victory and signaled the new Congress would govern differently. Democratic Senator Robert Byrd, the incoming Senate majority leader, celebrated by calling for bipartisanship while declaring voters had tasked the Democrats with moderating the Reagan administration. "I don't think the American people want confrontation," Byrd said in an interview with the *New York Times*. Byrd placed the onus on the president to cooperate and avoid "bitterly partisan" politics. "Reagan does not need to be a lame duck," Byrd emphasized, "if he is realistic." Byrd promised to work alongside his colleagues in the House to achieve his goals, some of which included foreign policy oversight. Using his position as Senate Majority Leader, Byrd wanted to bring the Contra War to an end. Byrd promised that "there won't be any secret war fought in Central America that is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency through the back door." He also declared his intention to investigate the legality of the Iranian deals after being "shocked" by their disclosure.[73]

Bipartisanship only extended so far. Retiring Speaker of the House Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr., announced, "If there was a Reagan revolution, it's over." He also suggested that "the art of government by compromise" would define Reagan's second term. In a radio address after the election, he claimed Americans desired "public officials who are ready to work together in a bipartisan spirit." He then announced a premature end of the Reagan Revolution. "I would like to say for the record that there is only one revolution at work in this country," he boasted. "It's called the American Revolution."[74]

Conclusion

Reagan's policies for containing communism in Central America and secretly engaging with Iran to rescue American hostages triggered his greatest political crisis. Two seemingly disconnected events led to the exposure of his administration's exploits. A plane crash in Nicaragua instigated the shuttering of the Enterprise's private supply network. An article published in an obscure Lebanese weekly revealed the outline of clandestine arms deals between bitter geopolitical enemies. The optics could not have been worse, especially on the eve of the midterms and during the apex of Reagan's popularity.[75]

The 1986 midterm elections shaped how Iran-Contra would be litigated and investigated. Democrats called for bipartisanship after winning a new majority in the midterm elections. Reagan welcomed the renewed spirit of cooperation for his final two years in office. Bipartisanship served mutual political ends in divided government. Yet the partisan politics of presidential scandal soon complicated desires to compromise for the betterment of the country.

Winning Senate," *Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 1986, 1; Jane Mayer, "Regan Suggests 'Productivity' Theme for Final Years of Reagan Presidency," *Wall Street Journal*, November 7, 1986, 70.

[73] UPI, "Byrd Says Reagan Doesn't Need to Be A Lame Duck," *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1986, 30; Steven V. Roberts, "Democratic Senate May Impede Reagan," *New York Times*, November 5, 1986, A28; David Rogers and David Shribman, "Democrats Capture Control of the Senate as GOP Seats Fall in South and Midwest," *Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 1986, 68; Sara Fritz, "Victorious Democrats See End of 'Reagan Revolution'," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1986, 10; Doyle McManus, "Byrd Shocked, Wants Probe of Deal with Iran," *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1987, 21; Paul Taylor, "Senate to Have 55 Democrats," *Washington Post*, November 6, 1986, A1.

[74] "Retiring House Speaker Urges Bipartisan Spirit," *Washington Post*, November 9, 1986, A5.

[75] Lydia Saad, "Gallup Vault: Reaction to Iran-Contra 30 Years Ago," *Gallup*, November 25, 2016, https://news.gallup.com/vault/198164/gallup-vault-reaction-iran-contra-years-ago.aspx; 70% approved of Reagan's handling of the US-Soviet summit in October 1986, see Jane Mayer and Albert R. Hunt, "Public Broadly Backs Reagan's Summit Stance," *Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 1986, 1.

The Iranian initiative would especially concern congressional leaders. The operations appeared counter to American interests and outside of the bounds of normal foreign policy process. Regan's reaction to its disclosure would have the veneer of a cover-up. Washington would brace for another president's fall. American would wonder if this was the foreign policy equivalent of Watergate. Accordingly, politicians, pundits, and policymakers assumed their respective positions.

Upon Jacobsen's release, Jody Powell, the erstwhile Press Secretary and political advisor to President Jimmy Carter, suggested that the timing—and conditions—brought Reagan's clandestine dealings with the Ayatollah into sharp relief. Powell availed himself of the opportunity to rehash the 1980 presidential election and propose ulterior motives. The Reagan campaign in 1980, Powell declared, had "accused an American President of offering bribes and appeasement to Iran to obtain the release of hostages at a politically propitious time." Now, Powell claimed, Reagan may be guilty of the same charges he leveled against Carter. "To put it bluntly," Powell stated, "the questions raised by Reagan six years ago are relevant again." Powell's own accusations of hypocrisy and illicit behavior revealed the domestic political repercussions awaiting Reagan for Iran-Contra. The answers to why Reagan had pursued the Iran initiative, however, would not be quickly forthcoming, even though the president could not cling to the position of "no comment" indefinitely.[76]

[76] Jody Powell, "Questions About a Convenient 'No Deal'," *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1986, C5; For Powell's analysis of the intersection of politics and the media, see Jody Powell, *The Other Side of the Story* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1984).

Chapter 5
Denial: Precipitating a Crisis

The end of a tough week for the President -- the toughest of his presidency.
George H.W. Bush, Diary Entry, November 21, 1986[1]

The onset of the Iran-Contra affair in October and November 1986 presented Ronald Reagan with a taxing set of political challenges. The period shaped both the congressional response and the media's sensationalism. The scandal slowly built from reports of a Contra supply aircraft crashing in Nicaragua to the surprising news that Reagan secretly sold arms to Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages in Lebanon. Reagan's support for insurgent warfare in Nicaragua had received special attention from since its inception. Journalists reported on the Contras' efforts, and Congress had focused intensely on Reagan's involvement in Central America, questioning if the president was violating the Boland Amendments. It momentarily subsided, however, once the arms-for-hostages deals hit the newswire. The ensuing media frenzy surrounding Iran and the hostages heightened the congressional reaction. The biggest scandal since Watergate beset the Reagan administration.

Reagan's transition from reserving comment to yielding public denials hastened the scandal. Initially, Reagan embraced an untenable position of not commenting on the Iranian initiative. He wrongly assumed he could save the hostages before a political crisis developed. Media attention, Reagan believed, jeopardized those efforts. As the scandal evolved, this chapter contends, the president adopted a defiant tone publicly and privately based on his misconceptions about the Iranian operations. Reagan argued that his policy principally served to reestablish relations between the United States and Iran. The hostage releases, he claimed, were a prerequisite for rapprochement. He repudiated accusations that selling arms to Iran in exchange for the release of hostages was the cardinal objective. National Security Advisor John Poindexter reinforced those erroneous beliefs, encouraging and supporting Reagan's obstinacy while he conspired with Oliver North in a cover-up. Of the cabinet members, this chapter shows, George Shultz directly challenged Reagan, striving in earnest to convince the president to disregard Poindexter's advice, renounce the policy, and provide a forthright explanation to the country. Reagan listened but disagreed.

As a result of the Iranian initiative's disclosure, Reagan faced intractable political problems requiring the reshuffling of staff, policy reversals, and a public apology, a set of solutions Reagan declined undertaking.[2] Instead, Reagan engaged in a campaign of denials. Reagan sought to resolve the crisis without admitting a mistake or abandoning his policy. His devotion to rescuing the hostages and his desire to reduce tensions with Iran heavily influenced his decision-making. These commitments reinforced his hostility toward the media and his unwillingness to change policy and admit error. So, too, did his limited knowledge about the execution of his

[1] See page 17 in Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland (Hereafter NARA).

[2] White House Counsel Peter Wallison contends that Reagan could have defused the scandal by publicly admitting a mistake in a manner similar to John F. Kennedy's *mea culpa* after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. See Peter J. Wallison, *Ronald Reagan: The Power of Conviction and the Success of His Presidency* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2003) 92, 155, 169, 189.

policy govern his reaction. Poindexter's selective advisement concealed the finer operational details from the president. Reagan thus resisted public and private pressure to renounce the initiative until confusion over the basic facts of the operations warranted an internal investigation. Reagan, in his better judgment, would authorize a brief, fact-finding inquiry by Attorney General Edwin Meese. It uncovered the diversion memorandum that exposed North had funneled profits from the Iranian initiative to the Contras, registering a grim realization that the scandal would bring forth dire consequences.

This chapter covers the period from Reagan's fateful decision to publicly deny allegations of trading arms for hostages until the discovery of the diversion memorandum. It provides insight into Reagan's actions and choices during the key moments that escalated Iran-Contra into a full-blown political crisis. The narrative explores Reagan's decision-making and captures the dynamics between the White House and Congress. It begins with a close examination of the November 10, 1986, Oval Office meeting that defined the conditions of Reagan's response to the public revelations. Relying on imperfect—and false—information, Reagan resolved to deny allegations that he traded arms for hostages. Next, the narrative turns to Reagan's public offensive, in which the president's press release, congressional briefing, public address, and press conference embroiled him further controversy. It also traces the dispute between Shultz and Reagan over the president's management of his brewing foreign policy scandal. Reagan aimed to forestall it, but his efforts exacerbated tensions within the administration and invited scrutiny from Congress and the press. This chapter concludes with the crux of the scandal: the diversion memorandum. Its discovery shocked Reagan and changed the course of his presidency.

November 10 - Setting the Agenda

As political backlash increased and administration officials conflicted, Reagan acquiesced to an Oval Office meeting on the arms-for-hostages crisis. During a November 10 meeting Reagan and his senior advisors developed a working consensus on what a public statement should accomplish rather than coordinating their responses to congressional inquiries. The meeting featured debates over the nature of the operations, strategic objectives, and the congressional reaction. It marked a crucial departure from the administration's no comment posture. Here, the president organized a public response based on his misguided beliefs about the nature of the Iranian operations and the duplicitous arguments of his national security advisor. The negative public reaction to the Iran initiative prompted Reagan to act.

Reagan had monitored the dispiriting news coverage and conferred with Donald Regan prior to the meeting. Regan advised the president that the arms deal ballyhoo deserved addressing. They debated the merits of it. Reagan decided to determine a path forward on Monday, November 10.[3] Press coverage especially irked Reagan. He believed reporters unfairly covered the story by elevating rumors and leaks, potentially damaging his approval ratings and jeopardizing the hostages. "They can do great harm with their irresponsible drum beating," he noted in his diary. He placed equal blame on Democratic politicians who "joined the chorus."[4]

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[3] Donald Regan's viewed the Iranian arms-for-hostage crisis as a "major story," see item #2 on Donald Regan's note for 11/10/86 in folder "Regan Documents 1985-1987 from Legal Task Force--Received by WHORM 5/15/1987 (9)," box 9, Regan, Donald T: Files Series II White House Legal Task Force, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (Hereafter RRPL).

[4] See entry for Saturday, November 8, and Sunday, November 9, 1986, in Douglas Brinkley ed., Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 449.

The president grousing about unfavorable news coverage translated into a bid to change the public narrative about his infinitive.

Reagan, however, had valid reasons for concern. On Saturday, November 8, NBC Nightly News reported that he covertly dealt with Iran to secure the release of American hostages in Lebanon by offering military equipment, possibly using Israel as an intermediary. NBC also aired comments from Jimmy Carter, in which the former president referred to the deals as "quite disgusting [...] if it's true."[5] Elsewhere, Senate Minority leader Robert Byrd joined Meet the Press to accuse the administration of "attempting to circumvent the Congress." On This Week with David Brinkley, the incoming Democratic Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee Sam Nunn questioned Reagan's decision-making process, stating Congress had "some profound legal inquiries as to whether any laws have been violated." From the White House, only Donald Regan appeared on television to defend the president in a pre-taped interview with John McLaughlin. Regan offered scant details about the Iranian operations, although he promised to reveal more later. "I'll assure you we're not breaking any laws," Regan proffered, "we're not doing anything illegal or immoral, and I think when we can tell the story the American public will appreciate the efforts of this president to get American hostages release."[6] Reagan decided how and when to tell the story. But it would not be the full story, and his cabinet members would diverge in opinions about it.

Prior to the November 10 meeting, Bush and Shultz privately quarreled over the unfolding scandal. Shultz had expressed his displeasure to aides, asked Poindexter to be forthright, and informed senior members of both political parties about his limited involvement.[7] Now, Shultz wanted Bush to know the scandal would sink his presidential ambitions as it consumed the Reagan administration. Bush, meanwhile, worried about "crazy information" in the news as well as Shultz promptly resigning. Bush called Poindexter to discuss Shultz's mood. Poindexter remarked that Shultz had resigned before amid a scandal, "back in the Nixon/Watergate days." Shultz, meanwhile, raised concerns with Nicholas Brady, a close friend of Bush, about the vice president's public statements, in which Bush disputed the description of the Iranian operations as arms-for-hostages deals. Shultz sought to support Reagan by confronting staff in the White House and even cabinet members, if necessary, to prevent further stonewalling. Shultz wanted Bush to act prudently in the wake of the Iranian disclosure. It prompted a face-to-face meeting between the vice president and secretary of state.[8]

Shultz visited Bush in the late afternoon on Sunday, November 9. Shultz and Bush engaged in a charged conversation. Although they avoided operational details, Shultz explained that he possessed limited information about what transpired, although he found North untrustworthy and knew the public opposed trading arms to Iran in exchange for hostages. Shultz emphasized to

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5 See transcript of NBC Nightly News, November 8, 1986, CREST, General CIA Records, Central Intelligence Agency, Electronic Reading Room, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00965R000200990010-4.pdf. (Hereafter CIA ERR).

6 Quoted from Mark Matthews, "2 Democrats hint at new NSC scrutiny," *Baltimore Sun*, November 10, 1986, A1 and Walter Pincus, "Hill Probes of NSC Planned," *Washington Post*, November 10, 1986, A1.

7 Republican Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Richard G. Lugar appeared on ABC's *This Week* and stated that Shultz was "not really conversant" on the Iranian arms deals. Democratic minority leader Robert C. Byrd appeared on NBC's Meet the Press and similarly claimed that Shultz was "out of the loop." See Bernard Weinraub, "Shultz Examining How to Keep Syria from Terror Role," *New York Times*, November 10, 1986, A1.

8 See diary entry on pages 4 and 5 of Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years As Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993). 807-808.

Bush that he faced trouble in next year's presidential election if his public comments contradicted what Congress may uncover. Bush raised the strategic objectives of engaging with Iran and claimed he made his comments carefully. Shultz reminded Bush that he failed to voice opposition to the Iranian deals like Weinberger and himself. "You can't be technically right," Shultz firmly reminded Bush, "you have to be right." Bush realized that Shultz feared "a Watergate syndrome" debilitating the administration. Bush also understood congressional investigations awaited, but he thought Shultz overstated his exposure to political consequences. Privately, Bush believed the perception of the Iranian operation as an arms-for-hostages deal was based on "uninformed speculation," and both the release of hostages and breakthrough diplomacy with Iran would mitigate negative publicity. After talking, they parted with tension between them. Bush perceived Shultz as a liability to the president if he abruptly resigned during a crisis, while Shultz viewed Bush as too accepting of the no comment posture, embroiling himself further in the scandal.[9]

On the morning of November 10, Bush visited Reagan to brief him on his meeting with Shultz. Speaking in the Oval Office, Bush advised Reagan that Shultz was not likely to resign, although Shultz felt "he'[d] been cut out" of the decision-making and had the wrong ideas "on this Iran deal." According to Bush, Shultz had been called to the White House to meet with Poindexter over the weekend, but Poindexter claimed he was too busy to see Shultz. The discord between Bush and Shultz bothered Reagan. The president pondered if the State Department bureaucracy bore responsibility for Shultz's perception of the crisis. Bush recounts in his diary that Reagan "wondered if perhaps the State Department people were perhaps playing games and trying to undermine the policy" on Iran. Reagan, though, agreed to discuss the matter with Shultz. Bush had assured Reagan that Shultz would remain in place during the crisis, staying close to Reagan during a time in which a rift developed between the White House and the State Department. The November 10 meeting on the arms-for-hostages crisis would exacerbate this tension.[10]

November 10 - Moving Beyond the Stage of No Comment and into Denial

Shortly before noon, Reagan, Bush, Casey, Meese, Poindexter, Regan, Shultz, Weinberger, and Deputy to the National Security Advisor Alton Keel met for 94 minutes to discuss the administration's public posture. At the outset, Reagan mentioned negative press coverage and the

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9 See diary entries on pages 5, 6, and 7 of Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 809; Although Shultz used Charles Hills for his memoir, he selective quoted for the section on his meeting with Bush. Hill's notes contain unused quotes about Shultz's meeting with Bush. The Independent Counsel cites them in OIC chron for November 1986, see OIC chron entry date 11/5/86 - Wednesday on page 15; General Investigative 1986 Incredibly Exhaustive Chron; Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; See also pages 27-28 of George P. Shultz, interview by Stephen F. Knott, Marc Selverstone, and James Sterling Young, December 18, 2002, Stanford, California, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential oral History Program, Miller center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan.

10 Bush recounts the morning meeting in his diary. See diary entry extract on page 6 of Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

necessity of issuing a statement. He stated that the operations were justifiable, within the law, and served his strategic ambitions of moving "Iran toward [a] constructive role" in the Middle East, especially after Khomeini's eventual death, while helping secure the release of American hostages. Any statement, Reagan stressed, must not divulge details both to keep the hostages safe and protect the Iranian moderates. Poindexter followed with a lengthy, deceptive chronology of events that excluded actions from 1985 and withheld the connection to the Contra operations. Poindexter explained to the cabinet officials the strategic objectives of dealing with Iran, ranging from an enhanced relationship in the post-Khomeini future and reducing terrorism to the release of hostages. Several hours earlier, Poindexter had attempted to coax Shultz into supporting the Iranian policy. It neither persuaded Shultz then nor during the meeting. Next, Poindexter admitted that Reagan signed a secret presidential finding in January 1986 outlining those three objectives. It was also revealed that Casey had been informed by Reagan to not report this finding to Congress. Poindexter argued that providing arms to "moderates" made them credible as a political faction. Lacking knowledge of the finding, Shultz and Weinberger were apoplectic at the disclosure and confounding briefing.[11]

Poindexter nevertheless continued with his selective briefing. He stated falsely that the arm shipments initiated through Israel after North had unwittingly discovered a cache of the arms in a Portuguese warehouse. Israel, Poindexter alleged, had sold these weapons to Iran to perpetuate the Iran-Iraq War and buy the safe passage of Iranian Jews. America, Poindexter said, then used the Iranian arms merchant, Manucher Ghorbanifar, to develop connections with Iran, which led to McFarlane's 1986 trip to Tehran that yielded nothing. Here, the channel to Iranian moderates switched to one presided over by Rafsanjani's nephew, and it resulted in hostages being released. Poindexter provided limited details on arm shipments. Instead, he offered rationale for the deals, arguing that defensive weapons could not affect the war and created good faith between countries. Moreover, he asserted that arm shipments prevented hostages from being kidnapped for over a year, established a channel to the Iranian moderates, reduced terrorism, and resulted in the release of three American hostages—only partially true. Poindexter followed with a flawed analysis of the political factions inside Iran, highlighting that Rasfanjani was a political moderate who made factually incorrect statements in his speech as a "signal" that the US should continue contact with his inner circle. Shultz found Poindexter's briefing absurd, but he waited to challenge him.[12]

The conversation transitioned to problems with Congress. Poindexter complained of "too much talk" in the executive branch. He claimed to have spoken about the Iranian policy to ten members of Congress who were "ok" with it. Senator Byrd, however, had "problems" with the administration. Indeed, Byrd had angrily declared several days earlier that "with Democrats in

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11 The Independent Counsel investigated the November 10, 1986, meeting to determine if the administration had coordinated congressional testimony. Investigators used a collection of notes taken at the meeting by Weinberger, Shultz, Regan, and Keel to create a composite account of what happened. Full copies of these notes and a side by side comparison are located in the IC files. This account draws on the notes, see folder "11/10/86 White House Meeting" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; Shultz recalls details of the call in his memoir, writing that after the call he thought of a line signifying gullibility from Bernie Kalb, "Is that what they told you, Missy?" in response to Poindexter's justifications for the Iranian operation and the possibility of engaging Rafsanjani. See Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 810.

[12] Notes taken by Donald Regan and Charles Hill contains the most detailed descriptions of this portion of the meeting, see Hill and Regan notes in folder "11/10/86 White House Meeting" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; Shultz writes, "His tale was ludicrous." See Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 813.

control we're going to have some answers." Byrd warned the administration that "they just can't slough it off, and they can't hold it off, and they can't just refuse to hold hearings." The incoming Senate Majority Leader vowed to uncover the truth. Democratic Senator Sam Nunn was "not helpful" to the administration when Weinberger had called him. Nunn had publicly voiced his skepticism of the White House. He had appeared on ABC questioning Reagan's policy process and the legality of the operations. Byrd and Nunn, above all, resented what they viewed as the president circumventing Congress, shattering a normally constructive relationship between Congress and the White House on hostage issues. The meeting, however, quickly moved to another topic without participants dwelling on the dwindling support from congressional leaders.[13]

The meeting evolved into a lively discussion about operations. Shultz became "the problem child" by asking Poindexter about the latest delivery of 500 TOW missiles to Iran and disputing the president's characterization of the affair. Poindexter responded that North and CIA Officer George Cave arranged the shipment, noting North had informed him two additional hostages would be released in the coming days, which never happened. Weinberger asked why additional TOWs were sent when hostages languished in captivity. Poindexter contended that sending more arms was necessary to obtain their release, and the president supported it.[14]

The conversation turned to which country held the hostages. Meese proposed that sending arms to Iran did not constitute trading arms for hostages since the hostages were held by a terrorist organization in Lebanon. Shultz rightly objected, stating a clear linkage existed between hostage releases and the sale of defensive equipment. Meese again maintained that the US had not "dealt directly with terrorists." Reagan concurred, arguing that selling arms to Iran served as a "reward" for securing the release of hostages, not a direct benefit to the terrorists. America had bought Iran's "support [and] persuasion" while seeking to influence a post-Khomeini government. Reagan's description strained credulity, particularly for Shultz, and reflected his misunderstanding. Shultz conceded to the benefits of stronger relations with Iran, but he declared it arrived at a "heavy price." Shultz also reminded everyone the administration needed to carefully describe what happened, for "technically correct statements" could obscure what actually transpired. Whether sold to a terrorist group in Lebanon or the Iranian state, defensive weapons served as the currency for the release of American hostages.[15]

The meeting concluded with a debate about public posture. After Weinberger questioned Rasfanjani's cooperation, Casey read his draft press statement that highlighted long-term relations with Iran and denied paying ransom for hostages. Weinberger reminded everyone that the administration would have to give answers and endure congressional hearings. In response, Reagan suggested releasing a statement. It should, he argued, clarify two points: the US government had an obligation to its citizens' well-being and public discussions of ongoing operations endangered the hostages. Reagan demanded that no one answer questions regardless

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[13] On Byrd's statements, see Jack Nelson, "Byrd Shocked, Wants Probe of Deal with Iran: Administration's Signals Mixed on policy on Tehran," *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1986, 21; On Nunn's statement, see Doyle McManus and Don Shannon, "Criticism of U.S.-Iran Deal Grows: Report Shultz May Quit Is Disputed by State Dept.," *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1986, 8; On Poindexter and Weinberger's discussion with congressional contacts, see Donald Regan and Alton Keel's notes in folder "11/10/86 White House Meeting" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA.
[14] See copies of Donald Regan, Charles Hill, and Caspar Weinberger notes in folder "11/10/86 White House Meeting" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA.
[15] Ibid.

of the statement. Poindexter raised opposition to the public statement on grounds it would end the US relationship with Iranian middlemen. Donald Regan, in contrast, argued for the statement to stave off political attacks and an erosion of "credibility." Poindexter dismissed Regan's fears, remarking that the news cycle would soon pass. The meeting quickly spiraled into spirited disagreement.[16]

As his advisors debated the merits and substance of a public statement, Reagan made recommendations for the public statement, which, after discussion, the principals accepted. Reagan declared that he must release a statement, one explaining how he had not dealt with terrorists. Rather, it should state that president doggedly pursued a long-term strategy with Iran and announce his administration would not speculate or take questions. Poindexter suggested repudiating accusations rather than detailing actions. Weinberger cautioned against too much information, which Israel and Iran could publicly refute. Meese proposed describing the policies as legal and within the constitutional framework of conducting foreign policy. Reagan, for his part, wanted to encourage congressional leaders to support his posture by informing them that the administration could not "take a chance" on the hostages. Regan asked about question-and-answer forums, to which Reagan, Casey, and Meese stated strong opposition. Thus the statement would provide few points of clarity about Iranian operations other than the policy was decidedly not an arms-for-hostages transaction.[17]

With the parameters of the statement agreed upon, Shultz mentioned he lacked knowledge of the presidential finding, prompting a short confrontation. Poindexter informed him the finding resulted from a meeting in the White House, and the CIA, DOJ, and NSC collaborated on its drafting. Shultz asked about future hostage negotiations and the possibility of selling more arms to Iran. Poindexter responded angrily that answering the question would "tie hands." Reagan promptly requested everyone to support his policy and not speak to the media. Shultz voiced support for better relations with Iran but not for trading arms for hostages. He advised Reagan that US foreign "policy is what we do not what we say." Reagan pivoted, remarking that he thought providing arms to the moderate political faction in Iran assisted their efforts against Iraq. "We want to have things even," he said. Shultz reminded participants to keep their discussions secret. Regan retorted that Iran had leaked the information, not the Reagan administration.[18]

As the meeting ended, everyone collectively decided on the statement addressing as much of the story as possible within Reagan's approved framework. Shultz departed feeling "a dangerous electricity in the air," primarily due to the president asking officials to support what was ostensibly an arms-for-hostages policy. Shultz believed the policy would continue and did not receive direct assurances that it would stop. Weinberger concurred with Shultz regarding the policy, although he refrained from confrontation. Despite Bush's concerns before the meeting, he neither raised questions about the Iranian policy nor objected to Reagan's directives. Bush

[16] For a copy of Casey's draft, see attachment to Letter, William Casey to John M. Poindexter, November 10, 1986, CREST, General CIA Records, CIA ERR, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88B00443R002004500049-1.pdf; This draws on the collection of notes from Weinberger, Shultz, Regan, and Keel, see each in folder "11/10/86 White House Meeting" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA.

[17] This draws on the collection of notes from Weinberger, Shultz, Regan, and Keel, see each in folder "11/10/86 White House Meeting" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA.

[18] See notes from Regan, Hill, and Keel in folder "11/10/86 White House Meeting" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA.

supported Reagan wholeheartedly. The president's decision had been made nearly unopposed.[19]

As a result of the lengthy Oval Office meeting, Reagan directed a public statement refuting that he paid ransom with arms, and it contained the core of his "no comment" position taken the week prior. Reagan adamantly opposed answering questions, because he believed it would result in the death of hostages and close diplomatic channels in Iran. Reagan made his decisions based on Poindexter's advice. Reagan also had other significant issues on his mind, such as arms control with the Soviet Union, and wanted to focus on those matters. He had placed trust in his national security advisor and acted accordingly. The statement thus set the course for his subsequent public offensive and congressional briefings. By now, Chairman of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Lee Hamilton had dispatched a letter to Casey, Poindexter, Shultz, and Weinberger requesting their testimony on November 21. Congress was moving forward with exerting pressure and exercising its constitutional role of oversight. Reagan would brief congressional leaders two days after his public statement failed to please the media.[20]

Lackluster Statement

After a final disagreement over the language, the White House released the president's statement on American hostages. Of the principals involved, only Shultz strenuously objected to the first draft, particularly the line "there was unanimous support for the president's decisions." Shultz told his aide Charles Hill that he could accept the line that "there was unanimous support for the president" but not the way it was currently written. "That's a lie," Shultz observed, "It's Watergate all over." Nixon's scandal loomed large once more. Shultz pressed an obstinate Poindexter to change the press guidance to reflect only support for the president himself, resulting in the final statement including Shultz's preferred wording. Shultz knew Poindexter actively sought to misrepresent what happened and lied to him repeatedly. The wording amounted to a small victory.[21]

The brief White House statement released that evening announced the meeting had taken place over Reagan's concern for the hostages and a "spate of speculative stories" endangering them. It also affirmed cabinet support for the president and declared the administration's policy legal, not one of "making concessions to terrorists." The press release concluded by revealing Reagan directed the executive branch to "refrain from making comments or speculating about these matters."[22] Reagan had finally commented officially on the crisis, and it failed to clarify

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[19] See notes from Regan, Hill, and Keel in folder "11/10/86 White House Meeting" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; Shultz's view of the meeting outcomes are listed on Charles Hill's notes and he recounts the meeting's conclusion in his autobiography, wherein he argues that Reagan's desire to rescue the hostages has led him to be deceived by his national security advisor, see Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 814.

[20] Diary entry for Monday, November 10, 1986, see Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 449; Letter, Dave Gries to William J. Casey and Robert M. Gates, "Hamilton Letter on Iran," November 10, 1986, CREST, General CIA Records, CIA ERR, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88G01116R000600620001-7.pdf; See pages 276-281 of Deposition of Ronald W. Reagan, February 17, 1990; Transcript 2/17/90, 9:45am #013072 (Reagan Deposition); U.S. v. Poindexter (88-0080-01), Box 34, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

[21] See OIC chron entry date 11/10/86 - Monday on pages 18-19; General Investigative 1986 Incredibly Exhaustive Chron; Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; Shultz recounts his disagreement with Poindexter in his autobiography, see Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 815.

[22] Press briefing, "Press Statement of Hostage Situation," November 10, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair,

what happened. Rather, the statement solidified a policy of secrecy and stonewalling.

While Reagan believed both media speculation jeopardized hostages and their release was imminent, the calls to remain silent proved insufficient to a curious press and demanding Congress. Reagan needed to disclose the operations, albeit in different forums and to varying degrees of detail. In public, former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane spurred reporting by advocating for a stable relationship between Iran and the US, endorsing his involvement with secretly engaging Iran. He also sent a note to Poindexter, in which he argued for pushing Iran to demonstrate moderation in hopes of showing the president's policy working. White House Press Secretary Larry Speakes, meanwhile, told reporters that media speculation was likely a factor in the administration's failed effort to free the remaining hostages. In Congress, Byrd pressed for an investigation and criticized the administration for being "very amateurish" and committing "a very serious mistake." Incensed, he declared that "the administration has seriously damaged its credibility at home and overseas." Inside the White House, Reagan thought the press completely ignored his statement and, instead, circulated "false stories." Journalists, to be sure, refused to abide secrecy on the latest presidential scandal. Turmoil inside the White House and new details about the Iranian operations appeared in the news. Unintentionally, the intense focus on Iran had the effect of shifting attention away from the Contras, if only for the moment.[23]

Unconvincing Briefing

On November 12, Reagan opted to both brief congressional leaders and appear on television the next day to explain his policy. These two important decisions resulted from both an inescapable duty to inform Congress and Reagan's own feelings that the press attempted "to create another Watergate." Reagan's chief of staff supported his immediate action. Regan had received a memo from Communications Director Buchanan recommending Reagan offer the "earliest and fullest disclosure" or otherwise the administration would suffer a precipitous decline in approval. Regan informed Buchanan that Reagan would "do something." Reagan, in fact, had decided to "tell the people the truth" during his morning briefing after he "laid down the law" to his staff. The president wanted to make the statement himself, one in which emphasized that his policy remained legal, excluded concessions to terrorists, and required secrecy to ensure the safety of the hostages. Reagan declared publicly what he argued privately, although his perception of events conflicted with reality. Congressional leaders, though, had to first receive their own briefing.[24]

At 2 p.m., senior congressional leaders joined Reagan and his senior advisors in the Situation

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Digital National Security Archive (Hereafter DNSA).

[23] PROFS, Robert McFarlane to John Poindexter, "Strategy," November 11, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Gerald M. Boyd, "Reagan Reaffirms Secrecy on Effort to Free Hostages," *New York Times*, November 11, 1986, AI; Diary entry for November 11, 1986, in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 449; Doyle McManus, a reporter who extensively covered Iran-Contra, for instance, continued reporting details on the on-going efforts to deal with the political fallout. See Doyle McManus and Jack Nelson, "Reagan's Cabinet, Staff Split on Iran; Outsters Suggested," *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 1986, AI.

[24] Memo, Pat Buchanan to Donald T. Regan, November 12, 1986, ID #440275, CO071, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL; Memorandum of Conversation, Alton Keel's Notes on Daily Briefing, November 12, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Donald T. Regan, *For the Record: From Wall Street to Washington* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1988), 29-30; On Reagan's views of the morning briefing, see entry for November 12 in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 450.

Room for their first briefing on the Iranian arms deals. The meeting featured stalwart Republican allies and the Democratic leaders of Congress who would preside over any investigation. Byrd, Dole, and Lawton Chiles joined from the Senate, while Richard Cheney and Jim Wright visited from the House. Reagan told attendees that his administration had neither broken laws nor paid ransom. The policy, Reagan stated, had not circumvented agencies. Reagan argued that the arms deals enhanced America's contacts with influential members of the Iranian government, and the defensive weapons were sold rather than "given away." Poindexter delivered an overview of initiative. He revealed the January 1986 presidential finding, asserting the legality of all operations under section 662 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. He mentioned McFarlane's May 1986 visit to Iran and the shipment of TOWs and Hawk missile parts, an action facilitated with the assistance of Israel. CIA and NSC officials, Poindexter claimed, had carried out all meetings with Iranians. He also asserted that the transfers of arms resulted in a cessation of terrorism, return of three hostages, and a relationship with the moderate political faction within Iran.[25] The selective disclosure obscured the Enterprise and neglected the direct link between selling arms to Iran in exchange for their pressure on Hezbollah. One participant saw a clear connection between the sale of arms to Iran and the release of American hostages in Lebanon.

Byrd, the lone skeptic, actively listened, making detailed notes of the arguments presented by Poindexter to make sense of the situation. At one point, Byrd quietly asked Shultz about his disagreement with Reagan's policy. Shultz declined to answer. Reagan scribbled a thank you-note to Shultz in response. Byrd, for his part, voiced his disbelief in the administration. He opposed Reagan's policy toward Iran, telling Reagan that "it's selling arms for hostages and it's a bad mistake." Byrd jotted a note to himself that his "mind was not changed" by the briefing. Byrd had made his disbelief clear to everyone present. His disapproval worried Reagan. The president considered Byrd an obstacle not only to his agenda, but also to his survival of this political crisis.[26]

The two-hour meeting obliterated Reagan's no comment posture and press release. Reagan's battle to control the trajectory of the crisis pitted him against the press, and his political survival rested with Congress. Poindexter, however, had confirmed to congressional leaders that the US sold weapons to Iran as a means to engage the country, which, in turn, led to the release of American hostages. Details of the meeting immediately leaked to the press. Reagan's failed attempt to emphasize the potential relationship between Iran and the US increased media attention and speculation. McFarlane did not help the situation, as he advocated in interviews for the administration to provide full disclosure. He wrote a bizarre, hypothetical op-ed in the *Washington Post* comparing clandestine engagement with Iran to Henry Kissinger's secret diplomacy with China. Iranian officials, too, commented on the growing scandal. Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations, Saeed Rajai-Khorasani, told reporters McFarlane had visited Tehran as a part of a rapprochement between the two countries, rather than to conduct arms-for-

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[25] See Ed Meese's three pages of notes in folder "November 12, 1986, Reagan Meeting with Congressional Leaders" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA.

[26] Bush notes in his diary that Cheney was mostly supportive, Dole noncommittal, and "nothing [Byrd] had heard had changed his mind." See Page 8 of Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; Reagan wrote in his diary that "Bob Byrd will double cross us. He's out to undo one--President Reagan." see entry for Wednesday, November 12 in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 450; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 818.

hostages deals.[27] Reagan soon appeared on television to address the nation, an effort to use the rhetorical power of the presidency to his advantage.

Questionable Speech

Seated in the Oval Office, Reagan delivered a prime-time televised speech on the Iranian arms controversy on November 13. It offered the first public acknowledgment of the arms deals based on the president's erroneous assumptions about the operations. Most of his senior advisors supported the decision, except for Poindexter. Bush reasoned the time had come to be direct with the public. "I remember Watergate," he recorded in his diary, reflecting on the political damage inflicted on the Nixon administration when small disclosures continually "oozed out" into the news.[28] Reagan, however, optimistically trusted that his direct communication to the public would alleviate negative public relations and congressional opposition. This was not yet a Watergate-style scandal. The situation nonetheless had potential to quickly spiral out of control.[29]

Reagan opened his address with a disarming joke about media speculation and ended it with a strong denial of the ransom accusation. "Well, now you're going to hear the facts from a White House source," he quipped, "and you know my name." He briefly detailed his reasons for secret diplomacy with Iran and refuted charges that he traded arms for hostages. "The United States," the president declared, "has not swapped boatloads or planeloads of American weapons for the return of American hostages." Reagan admitted that he "authorized the transfer of small amounts of defensive weapons and spare parts for defensive systems." Reagan defended his approach, contending the arms deals showed good faith on his part in seeking a rapprochement. He also uttered a regrettable line: the total amount of arms "could easily fit into a single cargo plane." According to the president, Iran only had to stop supporting terrorism and use its influence to help free the hostages. He explained the strategic reasons for warming relations with Iran. Then, he revealed McFarlane's visit to Tehran, noting Kissinger's covert diplomacy with China to highlight the need for secrecy and its advantages. Reagan denied circumventing Congress and violating the law. He concluded by stating unequivocally the US "did not trade weapons or anything else for hostages, nor will we."[30] Reagan had admitted to selling arms to Iran as part of diplomatic effort, but he categorically denied it was an arms-for-hostages deal despite saying Iran influenced terrorists in Lebanon to secure the release of American hostages.

The political backlash arrived immediately. Describing Reagan as overly defensive, reporters

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[27] John Walcott, "Reagan Said to Have Signed Order Seeking Rapprochement with Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 1986, 3; David Hoffman and Walter Pincus, "Meant to Aid Iran Factions, Reagan Says: Hill Told Iran Arms Deals Meant to Aid Dissidents," *Washington Post*, November 13, 1986, A1; Jane Mayer, "Reagan Approval of Arms for Iran Stirs Legal Debate," *Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 1986, 3; Bernard Weinraub, "HE TELLS CONGRESS: Iranian Denies Exchange -- President Hopeful on 2 More Captives Reagan Confirms Iranians Got Arms Aid and Calls the Deals Vital," *New York Times*, November 13, 1986, A1; Robert C. McFarlane, "McFarlane on Why," *Washington Post*, November 13, 1986, A21.

[28] See diary entry on page 9 of Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

[29] Reagan wrote in his diary that he "gave the facts to refute the firestorm the press is raising based entirely on unsubstantiated rumors & out right inventions." See entry for Thursday, November 13, 1986, in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 450.

[30] Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy," by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258119.

challenged his address, observing that he neglected to mention Israel's involvement and avoided the issue of timing between arms sales and hostage releases. Congress promptly questioned if the Iranian initiative violated the 1979 arms embargo, Arms Export Control Act, or Section 501 of the 1947 National Security Act requiring Congress to receive notification of intelligence actions. A bipartisan cadre of congressmen and senators criticized the administration. Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan called Reagan's Iranian diplomacy "the worst handling of an intelligence problem in [American] history." Democratic Representative Dave McCurdy, a member of the House Intelligence Committee, stated that "If Jimmy Carter pulled that stunt, he would have been hung from the rafters." Staunch Republicans denounced the policy, too. Senator Barry Goldwater called the arms-for-hostages deals "probably one of the major mistakes the United States has ever made in foreign policy." Republican William Broomfield, the ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, frustratingly asked why Reagan had "been saying for years that we wouldn't deal with these people, and now it seems we're sending them weapons." Reagan, however, had at least one vocal defender. Congressman Cheney maintained that, if they critics were president, most "would have made exactly the decision he made."[31] Reagan's address, overall, had failed to persuade Congress, prompting bipartisan condemnation and deepening interest in uncovering the affair.

In Iran, meanwhile, President Ali Khamenei responded to the presidential address. Khamenei delivered a message targeted for domestic consumption. He disavowed rapprochement and refused to help American hostages. He described Reagan's address as "right and wrong," referring to the diplomatic purpose of McFarlane's visit as "a pure lie." Half-truths were emerging in Washington and Tehran.[32]

Rue the Press Conference

Reagan decided to hold a press conference on November 19, which had the potential to either destroy his credibility or rescue his presidency. Although Reagan held a high approval rating among voters, Americans thought he was lying. A *Los Angeles Times* poll shockingly found that 79% of its nation-wide respondents believed his statements on trading arms for hostages were either misleading or false.[33] Reagan had manifold problems related to the now volatile arms-for-hostages scandal: Shultz's potential resignation, impending congressional oversight, and a persistent negative news cycle affecting his ratings. Crucially, Reagan's national security advisor gravely misjudged the politics of the scandal and actively withheld the facts from him while

[31] John Walcott and Ellen Hume, "Crisis for Reagan: Setbacks May Unravel Foreign-Policy Gains Of the Administration," *Wall Street Journal*, November 14, 1986, 1; David Hoffman, "Reagan Denies Ransom Was Paid for Hostages: Arms Sent to Iran to Enhance U.S. Influence," *Washington Post*, November 14, 1986, A1; Bernard Weinraub, "Shipments 'Small': He Says the Object Was 'A New Relationship--More Talks Held," *New York Times*, November 14, 1986, A1; John Felton, "Reagan Tries to Put Out Fire on Iran Dealings." *CQ Weekly* (November 15, 1986): 2883-84. http://library.cqpress.com/cqmagazine/WR099409135.

[32] AP, "Iran's President Rebuts Reagan, Denying There Were Contacts," *New York Times*, November 15, 1986, 5; Reuters, "Iran Says It Can't Help On Hostages: Khamenei Insists U.S. Change Policy," *Washington Post*, November 15, 1986, A28.

[33] Reagan had a 63% approval rating at the end of October 1986 heading into the Iran-Contra affair, see Ronald Reagan Approval Ratings, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/presidential-job-approval; see *Los Angeles Times Poll*, David Lamb, "79% Reject President's Explanation of Iran Deal," *Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 1986, 8; White House Spokesman Larry Speakes disputed the poll's methodology, see Elenaor Clift, "Speakes Decries 'Sensationalism' on Reagan Poll," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 1986, 20A.

seeking to falsify the record. Shultz tried to convince Reagan that he lacked the requisite information to fully inform the press, and he was not receiving the full story from Poindexter.

And, worse, Reagan's preparations for the news conference portended disaster. He flubbed responses about Iranian operations and confused decisions and timing. Reagan had not pressed Poindexter for specifics about the transfer of arms—and it showed. Concerned about Reagan's understanding of the finer details of the operations, White House Legal Counsel Peter Wallison instructed the president to cite the advice of Attorney General Meese and refer reporters to Meese when asked about the legality of the operations. Reagan was unprepared for the media onslaught, but he would face it nevertheless. He also had internal conflicts to address.[34]

Bush and Shultz had met separately with Reagan before his evening press conference. Bush and Reagan discussed the growing rift between the White House and State Department. Bush counseled Reagan to "iron out the difficulties" to prevent Shultz's immediate departure and quell media speculation. While Bush sought to resolve staffing issues, Shultz focused on the presidency. He argued to Reagan that America should stop dealing arms to Iran, provide a full disclosure of what happened, and return to normal operational procedures for foreign policy. Iran, Shultz informed Reagan, continued supporting terrorism regardless of what he had been briefed, showing the president intelligence to prove Iranian-backed terrorists had kidnapped additional Americans. "You have been deceived and lied to," Shultz contended. Reagan admitted that Shultz had presented new information to him. "Mr. President," Shultz candidly responded, "if I'm telling you something you don't know—I don't know much—then something is terribly wrong here!" Reagan appeared unmoved and Shultz departed. That evening Reagan faced the Washington press corps to deliver his worst performance as president. He relied on a jumbled set of facts to address an explosive political crisis, a growing scandal in which Shultz tried in vain to forestall.[35]

In the East Room, Reagan delivered his opening statement to reporters and commenced a brutal question and answer session. Reagan detailed the strategic purposes and acknowledged the risks involved, casually revealing that "top advisers opposed" selling arms to Iran. Reagan accepted "responsibility for the decision" and reaffirmed its "correctness," declining to admit error and fault. Yet, he also confirmed he "directed that no further sales of arms of any kind be sent to Iran" and for his administration to fully brief Congress, another small victory for Shultz.[36]

In response to a reporters' questions, Reagan made several misstatements and blunders. Reagan disclosed that the US was not officially negotiating directly with the Iranian government, which he had stated previously, but rather "negotiating with certain individuals with the country." Reagan also denied that he discussed resignation with Shultz. In responding to a sharp question about the timing of arms sales and the release of hostages, Reagan maintained Iranians had not kidnapped anyone, but the Islamic Republic had influenced the kidnappers to release the hostages. The reporter pushed further, and Reagan refuted the notion that the terrorists had "gained anything." He noted that two additional hostages would have been released except for the media speculation, a result of the misinformation he heard from Poindexter. On the subject of

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[34] Regan, *For the Record*, 35; Peter Wallison, *Ronald Reagan: The Power of his Conviction and the Success of his Presidency*, 190-191.

[35] Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 827-828; See diary entries on pages 14-15 of Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

[36] Ronald Reagan, "The President's News Conference," by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258194.

Israel, Reagan denied that he permitted third-party countries to ship arms to Iran. Reagan then refused to answer another question about Israel's involvement, because the US "had nothing to do with other countries or their shipment of arms," a major blunder since Donald Regan previously confirmed Israel's involvement.[37]

Under pressure, Reagan defended his decisions against a barrage of hostile questions. Reagan repeatedly denied condoning shipments to Iran from other countries. Journalist Andrea Mitchell caught the president off guard with a question about condoning Israeli shipments prior to the January 17, 1986, presidential finding. Mitchell referenced Donald Regan's previous statements on the issue, and Reagan remarked that he had not heard the comments. Reagan again admitted to "dealing with individuals" who had ties to the military, a point at odds with his earlier characterization of the initiative. Reagan disputed the connection between arms sales and hostage releases, telling reporters that he asked the Iranians show their "sincerity" by influencing Hezbollah to release hostages. "And as a matter of fact," Reagan pointedly said, "I believe and have reason to believe that we would have had all five of them by this last weekend, had it not been for the attendant confusion that arose here in the reporting room." Reagan's remarks showed his consternation. He reminded everyone he did not have to defend his policy. "With the circumstances the way they were, the decision I made I still believe was the correct decision," Reagan protested. Reagan avowed he did not "think a mistake was made," adding "that what we did was right, and we're going to continue on this path." Reagan departed rightly believing the press "were out for blood" and wrongly thinking he had a convincing performance.[38]

More political fallout arose from a skeptical public and an array of incredulous politicians on Capitol Hill. The White House issued a correction on Reagan's comments regarding Israel twenty-five minutes after the press conference, disclosing again that "a third country [was] involved in our secret project with Iran." In an attempt to minimize the quantity of arms, the statement also restated the arms "authorized or condoned taken in total could be placed aboard a single cargo aircraft." Mainstream outlets were either roundly critical of Reagan's performance, with some describing the president as confused and unsure, or reporting on the contradictions and palace intrigue involving Shultz. The public responded accordingly. A poll by the *Wall Street Journal* and NBC News found a majority of Americans both disapproved of Reagan shipping arms to Iran and thought it was an arms-for-hostages deal. Reporting and polling displayed a swift blow to Reagan's credibility.[39]

The day after the press conference pollster Richard Wirthlin showed Reagan and Regan how news of the Iranian deals negatively affected Reagan's approval ratings, which dipped below 60%. They agreed the press conference may prove worth the risk but required additional data to assess trends. Wirthlin committed to track its real time impact. His polling data eventually revealed a slight downward trend in approval from November 17 to 22. Respondents did not regard the hostage issue as the most important of the moment. A majority, however, viewed the press conference unfavorably, believed the US should not trade arms for hostages, and

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.; Reagan wrote his thoughts about the press conference in his diary, see entry for November 19, 1986, in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 452.

[39] Ronald Reagan, "Statement on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy," by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258195; Lou Cannon, "President Points to Release of 3 Hostages: Reagan Defends Iran Arms Deal, Says It Led to Hostages' Release," *Washington Post*, November 20, 1986, A1; Bernard Gwertzman, "Confusion Over Iran: Reagan's New Conference Remarks Don't Mesh with Previous Comments," *New York Times*, November 20, 1986, A13; John Walcott and Ellen Hume, "Reagan Defends Sale of Weapons to the Iranians," *Wall Street Journal*, November 20, 1986, 70.

disapproved of Reagan's handling of the matter. In wake of the press conference, Wirthlin found a sharp increase in those who thought Reagan actively covered up the affair, a rise from 63% to 70%. Still, three quarters of respondents liked Reagan personally, and they split on the accuracy of the press coverage of the story. Reagan's internal polling demonstrated a proliferation of the scandal. It also reflected the president's strength in general approval and likability despite growing public skepticism toward his explanation of the Iranian initiative.[40]

Congressional pressure compounded the impact on Reagan's credibility. Democrats remained suspicious of Reagan's statements, and they outright opposed the arms dealing. Reagan's press conference only furthered Democrats' desire to investigate and provided an opportunity for them to publicly criticize him. Senator Nunn openly disputed Reagan's descriptions of events. The scandal was "a real problem now." Minority Leader Byrd called Reagan's policy "exchanging arms for hostages" and warned him that "making excuses" ensured a lame duck second term. Incoming Speaker of the House Jim Wright described Reagan as both being "not careful with factual accuracy" when discussing Iran and in violation of the law as it pertains to informing Congress about arms transfers. Reagan's defenders suggested that he did not possess correct information about the operations and should therefore admit fault. Senator David Durenberger dismissed the perception that Reagan lied. "He's not deceitful," Durenberger clarified, "He's just not fully informed." Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole suggested Reagan "ought to admit that a mistake was made and move on."[41]

Yet Reagan was unwilling to acknowledge failure. He had misrepresented key details and confused his prior knowledge, but he also lacked accurate information, as Poindexter withheld details from him and prevented the White House Counsel from gathering them. The president required convincing that his national security staff had created grave problems for him, and he would be best served by an internal investigation to collect the appropriate set of facts before sealing his political fate.

"It was bark off all the way" - The Diversion Memo and the Dawning of Iran-Contra

In addition to Congress, Reagan had to manage Shultz's growing displeasure with his handling of the political crisis. Shultz was attempting to save Reagan's presidency from himself. In the late afternoon of November 20, Shultz confronted Reagan in the family quarters of the White House alongside Donald Regan. According to Reagan, the two had a "touchy meeting" about Iran. Shultz later testified, "it was bark off all the way." Shultz and Reagan passionately argued about the dilemma facing the president. Shultz tried to convince Reagan that he had traded arms for hostages regardless of what he thought. Shultz provided Reagan with a

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[40] Reagan calls the press coverage as the "Iran Drum Beat" and refers to the positive phone calls and telegrams sent to the White House after the press conference, See Diary Entry for November 20, 1986, in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 452; Regan, *For the Record*, 36; See also Donald Regan note for 11/20/1986 in folder "Regan Documents 1985-1987 from Legal Task Force--Received by WHORM 5/15/1987 (8)," Box 9, Donald T. Regan Files, Series II: White House Legal Task Force, RRPL; For internal polling, see the November 17 - 22 results from Richard Wirthlin's opinion research firm Decision/Making/Information in folder "Iranian Tracking Flash Results September 23, 1986 [Actually November 17-22, 1986]," Box 23, David Chew Files, RRPL.

[41] John Felton, "Reagan's Iran Deal: The Skepticism Builds." *CQ Weekly* (November 22, 1986): 2927-28. Http://library.cqpress.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/cqmagazine/WR099409156; AP, "Bipartisan Storm Greets Reagan Remarks on Iran," *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1986, 1; Jonathan Fuerbringer, "Lawmakers Find Reagan Misleading," *New York Times*, November 20, 1986, A13; Edward Walsh and Helen Dewar, "Reagan Defends Iran Arms Deal, Says Mission No 'Fiasco'," *Washington Post*, November 20, 1986, A1.

compilation of evidence refuting Poindexter. Reagan, however, sincerely believed that he directed a rapprochement with Iran using the arms as a means to show good faith, which incidentally led to the release of hostages. Reagan had developed an understanding of his own objectives that contrasted starkly with what happened. He viewed the policy goals as noble and thus the implementation as acceptable. Shultz implored Reagan to reassess the facts and recognize the quandary—Poindexter misled him purposively, and he now confronted a major scandal. Unconvinced, Reagan settled on convening a senior-level meeting about Iran on Monday, November 24. Shultz left the White House thinking he "didn't make a dent on him," even though Reagan listened attentively.[42]

Thereafter, Reagan authorized Attorney General Meese to perform a weekend inquiry to obtain the relevant facts before Monday's meeting. As Casey was set to brief the House and Senate Intelligence committees on November 21, staff from the CIA, NSC, and State collaborated on his testimony to ensure accuracy. Meese, Shultz, and others soon realized the information shared between the departments differed dramatically. Casey's planned testimony included inaccuracies. Notably, information about the November 1985 HAWK missiles shipment had emerged, a transaction that resulted in Reagan signing a retroactive presidential finding to authorize the operation. The HAWK shipment had both occurred before the publicly-known January 17, 1986, presidential finding and contradicted Reagan's statements, prompting questions of legality. Moreover, Casey's draft statement included reference to Southern Air Transport's involvement in shipping arms to Iran, revealing a direct link between the Contra supply network and the Iranian initiative. Based on this confusion, Meese asked Reagan for permission to create "a complete overview" because the operations had been "so compartmentalized" that each department possessed knowledge of "different parts of the puzzle." Meese told Reagan that he would interview key individuals and report the full story. Perhaps shaken by Shultz's arguments, Reagan readily instructed him to do so, requesting Meese finish before Monday's meeting. Reagan's directive proved to be a key turning point for the Iran-Contra affair. The arms-for-hostage scandal mushroomed in the wake of Meese's hasty, fact-finding mission.[43]

Meese's inquiry proceeded in uncovering the memorandum outlining the diversion of funds

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[42] Reagan referred to the meeting as "touchy" in his diary, noting also that Shultz may give him an ultimatum soon: "Either someone else is fired or I quit." See diary entry for November 20, 1986, in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 452; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 832-833; United States. Congress., *Testimony of George P. Shultz*: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-9, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 23, 24, 28, and 29, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 45; Regan noted the meeting would determine if Reagan was "being well served." See Donald Regan note for 11/20/1986 in folder "Regan Documents 1985-1987 from Legal Task Force--Received by WHORM 5/15/1987 (8)," Box 9, Donald T. Regan Files, Series II: White House Legal Task Force, RRPL; For Shultz's talking points, see Briefing Paper, "Briefing Paper for George Shultz's Meeting with President Reagan on November 20, 1986, concerning the Iran Initiative," November 20, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

[43] Reagan, *An American Life*, 529; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 831-836; Meese, *With Reagan*, 295-297; Friday November 21 entry in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 453; See also U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*. Appendix B: Volume 18, Depositions, Edwin Meese III, 100th Congress, 1st Sess., 1987. Senate Report 100-216, November. (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1988), 83-85; See also Personal Notes, Department of Justice, "[Handwritten Notes on Issues Undertaken by Inquiry by Edwin Meese]," November 21, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; For more on retroactive finding, please see previous chapter; for draft, see Draft Memorandum, "Presidential Finding on Middle East," November 26, 1986, Ibid.

to the Contras from the profits of the Iranian arms sales. Meese enlisted Department of Justice officials Arnold Burns, Charles J. Cooper, William Bradford Reynolds, and John Richardson to conduct the investigation. Casey, meanwhile, had briefed the intelligence committees. Poindexter also met with the members. Neither Casey nor Poindexter provided fully accurate accounts.[44] Meese and his team encountered resistance to the truth when interviewing key participants, including Casey, McFarland, and North. Shultz, for his part, discussed the inaccuracies, inconsistencies, and potential illegalities with Meese. Remembering the involvement of Southern Air Transport, Shultz also suggested that the Iran operations could be linked to the support network for the Contras.[45] At the Old Executive Office Building, Reynold and Richardson confirmed the Iran-Contra connection in North's office.

Reynolds and Richardson unearthed what became known as the "diversion memo." While seeking documents related to the Iranian initiative from North's files, Reynolds stumbled upon an April 1986 document on the operations. It contained a section on the allocation of "residual funds," describing that "$12 million will be used to purchase critically needed supplies for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance Forces." After reading the line, Reynolds blurted "holy cow" and showed the document to Richardson. Over lunch, Reynolds briefed Meese about the memo. The news elicited an "oh, shit" from the attorney general.[46] Meese interviewed North the following day, a lengthy, detailed discussion in which North provided details about operations, lied about the extent of his own knowledge, and confessed Reagan's primary concern was hostages rather than rapprochement. North both denied knowing how much money had been diverted to the Contras and blamed the scheme on the Israel. Meese interrogated North about Reagan's approval of the diversion. North stated he did not know if the president had authorized it.[47] Meese, nonetheless, possessed the explosive evidence confirming Shultz's worst fears and potentially leading to the impeachment of the president. Meese waited until after Monday's meeting to inform Reagan about the diversion.

In the meantime, North and his secretary Fawn Hall embarked on a final five-hour, late night escapade of shredding documents. North had begun destroying documents pertaining to the

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[44] See Memorandum, "HPSCI Meeting with National Security Advisor Admiral Poindexter, November 21,1986 -- White House Situation Room," November 21, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Notes from HSCI November 21, 1986, meeting, Robert Michael Leadership Notes, Leadership Meeting Notes 1987 1, Leadership Series, Box 11. F. Leadership 100th, Robert Michel Papers, Everett M. Dirksen Congressional Center, Pekin, Illinois.

[45] Personal notes, "[Charles Cooper's Notes of Attorney General Edwin Meese's Interview with Robert McFarlane]," November 21, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; Interview notes, "[John Richardson's Handwritten Notes of Edwin Meese's Interview of Oliver North, November 23, 1986]," November 23, 1986, Ibid; Interview notes, "[Charles Cooper's Handwritten Notes of Edwin Meese's Interview with George Shultz and Charles Hill]," November 22, 1986, Ibid; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 835-836.

[46] Memorandum, "Release of American Hostages in Beirut," April 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA; On finding memo and its importance, see U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*. Appendix B: Volume 22, Depositions Raymond - Reynolds, 100th Congress, 1st Sess., 1987. Senate Report 100-216, November. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 1128-1138 1255-1259; see also U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*. Appendix B: Volume 23, Depositions Richard - Rudd, 100th Congress, 1st Sess., 1987. Senate Report 100-216, November. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 284-285, 293-297.

[47] Interview notes, "John Richardson's Handwritten Notes of Edwin Meese's Interview of Oliver North," November 23, 1986," November 23, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

Contra and Iranian operations in early October. Reynold's find had surprised North, for he destroyed evidence apace. North had, in fact, wrongly informed Poindexter that he shredded all documents with mention of the diversion of funds.[48] Poindexter, too, discarded important documents during the Meese fact-finding inquiry. He tore apart the sole signed copy of the November 1985 retroactive finding and tossed it into his office burn basket, removing a key piece of evidence. The finding, Poindexter reasoned, "was a significant political embarrassment" for Reagan, preciously because its narrow language described an arms-for-hostages operation without the purpose of creating an opening to Iran.[49] As subsequent chapters examine, Congress later concentrated on and hyped these efforts by North and Poindexter to cover up the affair during the Iran-Contra hearings.

The Monday meeting on Iranian policy was a forum for venting. Donald Regan asked for clarity on the November 1985 HAWK shipment, and Poindexter inculpated McFarlane, offering little explanation other than McFarlane presided over it. Weinberger and Meese, though, agreed that a lack of finding likely made the operation illegal. Meese recounted details about the shipments he had learned from his inquiry, but he withheld the diversion. Shultz interposed that McFarlane had informed him of the operation, and he opposed the shipments, thinking that participants were "rearranging the record." Reagan again defended his decisions to engage Iran, noting that it was pursued with a modest number of arms in comparison to what Europe had sold to Iran. Reagan also claimed "he didn't know what Bud [McFarlane] was up to." Reagan had known, and he signed the retroactive finding, although no one present said otherwise. Reagan explained he supported pursuing a relationship with moderate political factions in case Khomeini died. He invoked the judgment of history to justify the necessity of reseting the US-Iranian relationship. In Reagan's mind, the release of the hostages was ancillary. He refused to admit wrongdoing, saying he was not "that good an actor" to acknowledge a mistake if he disbelieved it. He opposed appealing "to [a] lynch mob for [an] apology." Reagan expressed his displeasure with "Unnamed sources" and directed officials to prevent media leaks. To conclude, Reagan reaffirmed his opposition to apologizing. The president believed he acted correctly, adamantly so.[50]

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[48] United States. Congress., *Testimony of Oliver L. North (Questioning by Counsels): Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition*, Vol. 100-7, Part 1, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 7, 8, 9, and 10, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 15-16, 22-24, and 254; United States. Congress., *Testimony of Fawn Hall*: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-5, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, June 2,3, 4, 5, 8, and 9, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 484-500.

[49] On destroying the finding, see United States. Congress., *Testimony of John Poindexter*: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-8, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 15, 16, 17, 20, and 21, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 17-20; U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*. Appendix B: Volume 20, Depositions John Poindexter, 100th Congress, 1st Sess., 1987. Senate Report 100-216, November. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 1103-1110.

[50] See the collection of meeting notes from Weinberger, Shultz, Regan, and Meese in folder "11/24/1986 NSPG Meeting" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; In his diary, Reagan wrote that Shultz was "still stubborn that we shouldn't have sold the arms to Iran--I gave him an argument." see entry for November 24, 1986, in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 453.

Meese and Regan met with Reagan to inform him of "a smoking gun." Earlier, Meese disclosed the diversion to Regan, much to his "horror, sheer horror." Meese then told the president in a brief interaction something went awry with the arm sales, and they would convene on it later. Meese had "a few last-minute things to button up." Afterward, Regan cryptically told White House Counsel Peter Wallison to "get ready to go into action." Following the senior meeting on Iran, Meese asked Poindexter about the diversion, and he admitted that it occurred on his watch, principally because Congress opposed supporting the Contras. In the Oval Office, Meese then apprised Reagan of the diversion of funds to the Contras from the arms sales to Iran. Over the weekend, Meese explained, he discovered that Iranians overpaid for the arms and North arranged a transfer of the profits into Swiss bank accounts for the Contras. The revelation stunned the president. "Jesus," Regan later testified, "he really looked his age for the first time." Regan described the scene as "like a person was punched in the stomach." Processing this shocking development, Reagan immediately stated they must publicly reveal the diversion. Meese and Regan briefly discussed with Reagan a morning press conference, bipartisan commission to investigate, and potentially initiating an independent counsel investigation. The dynamic of the scandal changed drastically. "This may call for resignations," Reagan confided in his diary.[51]

The revelation of the diversion memo launched the Iran-Contra affair. It connected the controversial, clandestine Contra supply network to the already scandalous Iranian secret arms deals. The press conference, bipartisan commission, and independent counsel materialized in short order. Resignations and firings also promptly followed, although coming much too late. The next morning at 7:15 a.m., Regan confronted Poindexter about the diversion. Poindexter divulged that he was aware of North's scheme and decided to let it proceed. Regan asked why an admiral allowed such abhorrent behavior. "I was thinking of those poor people in the jungle and the fact they weren't getting any money," Poindexter explained, "I wanted them to stay alive." Exasperated at Poindexter's confession, Regan replied: "You damn well better have your resignation when you go in to see the President at 9:30 because we just can't stand this, John." Two hours later, Poindexter admitted to Reagan that he ignored North's activities when he should have prevented them. Poindexter apologized to the president. Reagan accepted Poindexter's resignation. "John," Reagan said with a somber finality, "I'm very sorry that it's come to this." Reagan subsequently fired North.[52]

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[51] See page 19 of Donald T. Regan's testimony before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Thursday, December 18, 1986, in Box 206, Folder 2, Donald T. Regan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; See also U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*. Appendix B: Volume 22, Depositions Donald T. Regan, 100th Congress, 1st Sess., 1987. Senate Report 100-216, November. (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1988), 656-668. See diary entry for November 24, 1986, in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 452; Regan, *For the Record*, 37-39; Edwin Meese, *With Reagan: The Inside Story* (Washington and Lanham: Regnery Gateway, 1992), 300.

[52] See page 169 of Donald T. Regan's testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Thursday, December 16, 1986, in Box 207, Folder 5, Donald T. Regan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; See also pages 10 and 12 of the transcripts of Donald T. Regan's 19987 interview with the Independent Counsel in Box 206, Folder 6, Ibid; For Reagan's view, see diary entry for November 25, 1986, in Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 453-454.

Conclusion

At the outset of the Iran initiative's exposure, Reagan adopted a defiant position, hastening the decline of his presidency. Reagan refuted accusations of impropriety and asserted his explanation of events, seeking to influence the public, pacify Congress, and continue to rescue hostages. Reagan's conception of the Iranian initiative affected how he approached the growing scandal and why he denied the story. A convergence of political and policy problems confronted the president, compounded by not only his motives and misconceptions, but also his national security staff concealing operational details. Reagan found himself in an impossible, unfavorable predicament. Reagan's trust in Poindexter proved his undoing.

Congress assumed a cautiously adversarial position. Senators and congressmen castigated Reagan for possibly violating laws by selling missiles and spare parts to Iran without informing the appropriate committees. Congressional leaders appeared skeptical after hearing the administration's explanations and rationale for the Iranian initiative. Reagan's circumscribed engagement with Congress irked lawmakers who rigorously defended their right to exercise oversight and outright opposed his policy. Although Reagan maintained support from his party, the future Democratic Senate Majority Leader and Speaker of the House resolved to uncover the truth about the Iranian initiative, albeit without upending the political order. Iran-Contra would dominate the agenda of the incoming Congress.

The November 10 meeting was of paramount importance to how the scandal unfurled and why the allegations of a cover-up ensued. It also demonstrates that Reagan and his senior advisors were not crafting a grand conspiracy, though some were conspiring to stonewall reporters and Congress. Reagan and his senior advisors developed a public response, much to Shultz's opposition. Reagan justified his position based on the pursuit of a new strategic relationship with Iran and the secondary benefit of saving hostages. Reagan presented his objectives in the order of importance that he incorrectly thought set the policy. Poindexter offered cabinet members a falsified account of operations and objectives to support Reagan's misconceived view. Securing the freedom of hostages had been the first priority in 1985, although Poindexter never corrected Reagan's erroneous view. Poindexter also failed to satisfy Shultz with his explanation of the Iranian operations, deepening Shultz's suspicions and determination to prevent another Watergate. Poindexter's purposeful distortions did not serve Reagan well. The press statement inaugurated a series of denials and obfuscations about the Iranian initiative, invited further scrutiny from Congress, and perpetuated rather than quelled the scandal.

Reagan's brand of crisis management vindicated Shultz's warnings. Reagan elected to inform congressional leaders about ongoing efforts to rescue hostages and presented his views to the public. Neither action achieved his desired result. At the November 12 briefing, congressional leaders heard for the first time what had transpired between the Reagan administration and Iran. Byrd found Reagan and Poindexter's explanations wholly unconvincing. The linkage between selling arms to Iran and the release of hostages in Lebanon was significantly manifest—and, to be sure, increasingly more difficult to deny. Since the briefing leaked immediately, congressional leaders had swiftly ignored Reagan's pleas to maintain secrecy to ensure the safety of the hostages. Accordingly, the national media placed less of an emphasis on Reagan's argument about a strategic relationship with Iran. Reporters concentrated on the real story: arms-for-hostages deals. Reagan's televised address may have defended his policy, but it created a ripe opportunity for Congress and journalists to seize on his misstatements and denials. Reagan's

attempts to communicate directly to the American people backfired.

The November 19 press conference exacerbated Reagan's problems, a "real shocker" for the president.[53] Shultz had again failed to convince Reagan of his national security staff's deviousness. Reagan should have listened. As a result of Reagan's stunning display of misstatements and resolute defenses of his disastrous Iranian policy, the scandal took a dramatic turn. Here, Reagan's performance precipitated a decline in his approval ratings and increased congressional criticism. Americans disbelieved Reagan's statements and opposed arms-for-hostages, even though Reagan held high approval ratings on his personality. America liked Reagan, but Americans disliked secret weapons transactions with Iran. Reagan faced a political conundrum: Congress and the American people rejected his explanations and opposed his policy; yet Reagan sincerely believed he was in the right.

Reagan's behavior in both cabinet and private meetings, as well as his diary entries and public comments, reveal a consistent—but wrong—set of beliefs about the Iran mission. Had Reagan thought otherwise, he would not have stubbornly endured the political blowback and declined to follow constructive advice. Shultz's final heated discussion with Reagan was a case in point. Iran-Contra intensified Reagan's relationship with Shultz. Although Reagan fiercely disagreed with Shultz, his respect for Shultz was manifest in the spirit of the debate. Shultz later remarked, "I never thought I would talk to a president of the United States in such a direct and challenging way."[54] Reagan, for his part, welcomed Shultz's dissent even if he outright rejected his advice.

Defiant to the end, Reagan expressed his displeasure with how the scandal was unfolding until he received Meese's briefing on the diversion memorandum. Reagan allowed an inquiry when general confusion over the Iran matter demanded it. Perhaps an earlier inquiry would have prevented North from destroying a vast number of incriminating documents. It could have saved Reagan's presidency sooner. Still, the diversion memo elicited swift admissions from Poindexter and North. Their confessions transformed Iran-Contra into a political cataclysm. What now awaited Reagan tested his strengths as a leader and exposed his weaknesses. Reagan's political recovery from the throes of scandal proved remarkable, a reversal of misfortune rarely seen in presidential politics.

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[53] On November 20, 1986, Reagan told Bush during their routine lunch: "I really had a shocker." See diary entry for November 20, 1986, on page 15 of Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA

[54] Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 832.

Part III

RESPONSE

Chapter 6
Nadir: Explaining Foreign Policy Malpractice

"The President made a mistake which he never makes of this size."
George H.W. Bush, Diary Entry, December 2, 1986[1]

Ronald Reagan found himself in a mire of scandal. His public standing deteriorated with the revelation of the diversion memorandum. Two weeks earlier, Lieutenant General William E. Odom, the Director of the National Security Agency, already rendered a bleak assessment of Reagan's situation. Painfully aware of the secret Iranian initiative, Odom had wondered when journalists would publish operational details to the country's embarrassment. "Now we look quite silly," he recorded in his diary. "Having bleeted endlessly about the iniquities of dealing with terrorists, here we are dealing with them, paying them with arms in secret." Contradictions aside, problems arising from domestic and international affairs beleaguered Reagan. The media had disclosed details about former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane's clandestine visit to Tehran. Arms control between the world's superpowers appeared stalling. The Contra war in Nicaragua raged, unencumbered by the Boland amendments, provoking congressional ire. And voters had elected a Democratic majority in the Senate, returning control of Congress to the opposition party. Odom discerned a critical threat to the presidency. "This accumulation of issues is more than the President has faced before," he noted. "The teflon is going to be tested."[2]

The public revelation of the United States selling arms to Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages presented Reagan with his greatest political crisis. As the previous chapters detail, Reagan's response to the outbreak of the scandal from October to November 1986 embroiled him in controversy. The disclosure of Oliver North's diversion of profits from the Iranian arms sales into the coffers of the Contras transformed a budding scandal into the potential death knell of Reagan's presidency. Analogies to Watergate abounded inside the Beltway. The appearance of a cover-up was palpable. Democrats and Republicans alike turned to the powerful recourse of Watergate—the obvious, proximate historical case with which to contrast what was now known as Iran-Contra. In the throes of a major scandal, Reagan's besieged staff recognized the sudden dangers and engaged in crisis management. Reasserting presidential leadership was a prerequisite to mitigating the political damage. Redressing Iran-

[1] See page 33 in Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland (Hereafter NARA).

[2] Quoted from page 31 of Odom's typed diary transcript, see Odom, William E. *9 Nov 86*. Diary. Folder: "1986, July 6 - 1987, July 6." Part II: Box 9, William E. Odom Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter LOC); Odom noted that Michael Armacost, a State Department official, occasionally briefed him on Iran. Odom wrote that Armacost "calls [him] regularly on all this," though it is not clear whether Odom is referencing the breaking scandal or acknowledging that Armacost informed him in real time about ongoing operations; Odom was aware of the operations because he viewed what is known as the "retroactive memo" in 1985, see page 32 for the November 15, 1986, entry, Ibid; It is also likely that Odom knew details about the Iranian operations from routine signal intelligence as well as what the NSA gathered through Crypto AG, a front company owned by the CIA in partnership with the BND. Crypto AG sold encryption equipment to 120 countries from the 1950s into the 2000s, including Iran. see Greg Miller, "'The intelligence coup of the century': For decades, the CIA read the encrypted communications of allies and adversaries," February 11, 2020, *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/world/national-security/cia-crypto-encryption-machines-espionage/.

Contra, however, involved more than restoring presidential credibility. America's national security apparatus was in peril.[3]

The two chapters that follow collectively explain how and why Reagan was able to execute a remarkable political recovery from Iran-Contra, which threatened to diminish not only his presidency but the office itself. Reagan's principal involvement in Iran-Contra ended with an apology, not an impeachment. Institutional and personal factors, these chapters demonstrate, granted Reagan political security and enabled the restoration of his presidency. Informed by Watergate, Reagan's staff assembled and implemented a plan for rescuing the presidency following the disclosure of the diversion. It consisted of revamping the National Security Council, cooperating with Congress, complying with investigations, and convincing Reagan to admit fault. They sought to banish the appearance of a cover-up, a quashing of the Watergate brand.

This chapter, then, focuses on Reagan and his staff's endeavor to surmount Iran-Contra. It proceeds from the revelation of the diversion in late November 1986 until December 2, 1986, when the President's Special Review Board (known as the Tower Commission) commenced reviewing the Iran initiative. Captive to political circumstances, this chapter argues, Reagan executed a strategy of cooperation, transparency, and reform to rescue his declining presidency. The chapter explores the process in two parts. The first section begins with presidential and congressional responses to the diversion's disclosure. Next, the chapter closely follows the measures undertaken by Reagan to restore credibility, reform the inter-agency process, and preempt impeachment. It examines the formation of the Tower Board and explores the key announcements Reagan made on December 2 regarding the scandal. The hectic aftermath of the diversion's public disclosure shocked Washington. The reactions of both Congress and the Reagan administration fostered the political dynamics that would ensure the president's survival. Reagan, though, could often be his own worst enemy.

Revealing the Diversion Memorandum and Building Walls Around the President

Chief of Staff Donald Regan formulated a plan that guided Reagan's response to the public revelation of the diversion memorandum. On November 24, 1986, Regan devised a strategy to address the expected political crisis resulting from Meese's weekend inquiry into the Iran initiative. That evening Nancy Reagan called Regan to probe, offer suggestions, and impart a message of "Heads would roll" for the fiasco. It inspired Regan's first draft, which featured an eight-point list of actions. Regan recommended publicizing the diversion, placing blame on the NSC, announcing a commission to examine how it operations, and clarifying that Reagan neither possessed knowledge of the diversion nor authorized it. Regan determined that National Security Advisor John Poindexter's replacement should be a consensus appointment among Congress, the media, and allies. Former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, who later served on the Tower Commission, was one of Regan's top choices. Regan criticized Meese's role in advising the president, noting that Meese should not be allowed to investigate. Regan had sketched out the

[3] Policymakers draw on history—often badly—to inform their decision-making. This behavior can also be attributed to members of Congress, who may use historical analogies to make decisions. On the problem of policymakers perceiving issues in terms of historical analogies and drawing on the most proximate historical parallels, see Ernest R. May, "*Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); On Reagan's use of public relations techniques and damage limitation strategies, as well as the institutional memory of Watergate and its influence on Iran-Contra proceedings, see Robert Busby, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair: The Politics of Presidential Recovery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc, 1999).

genesis of Reagan's recovery.[4]

The final "Plan of Action" document expanded into fourteen points. Regan planned for the president to notify his senior national security staff, congressional leaders, and the public in succession. Reagan would relieve Poindexter and North of their duties and convene a bipartisan review board to study the NSC. Regan wanted the NSC to shoulder the blame for a "rogue operation" while demonstrating that Reagan acted quickly to divulge North's scheme. Regan added further details about finding a consensus appointment for the position of national security advisor and included a point about averting leaks from executive branch agencies. By generally adhering to this plan, Reagan catalyzed the institutional responses to the scandal, an act of private and public disclosure succeeded by political fallout. It was, however, a necessary plan in order for Reagan to mount a political recovery.[5]

The departure of Poindexter and North on November 25, 1986, marked the beginning of Reagan's response to the discovery of the diversion memorandum. Still, the president had to inform congressional leaders and the public that members of his NSC diverted profits from arms sales with Iran to the Nicaraguan Contras. It would not be an easy task. Reagan had to explain why clandestine operations in Iran intersected with those in Nicaragua. A political firestorm awaited.

Poindexter, for his part, understood that White House staff and senior advisors would seek to protect Reagan at all costs. He spoke to Richard Secord, who had facilitated the arms sales through the Enterprise, following his resignation. Despondent over the emergence of the diversion memorandum and Poindexter leaving, Secord called Poindexter to prevent "the Son-of-Watergate" from unraveling the Iranian initiative. He made a desperate attempt to persuade the national security advisor from quitting his position, demanding that Poindexter confront Reagan over the president's responsibility for the operation. Poindexter had accepted his fate, however, explaining that he was resigning and a press conference announcing the diversion was soon taking place. Secord asked to speak to Reagan, an absurd request given the situation. "It's too late," Poindexter informed Secord, "They're building a wall around him."[6] Reagan and his staff had indeed moved swiftly to manage the new phase of the scandal.

A proper, professional response to the mushrooming scandal was underway. White House Counsel Wallison needed to ascertain what happened with the Iranian initiative, when, and by whom to properly defend the president. Poindexter and North had sought to keep the White House, Congress, and the press from finding out the finer details of the Iran operations. According to Wallison, Poindexter and North's departures allowed "access to the fundamental facts" of Iran-Contra. As detailed in the previous chapter, Poindexter had briefed the president on the consequences of divulging information about the Iranian initiative, erroneously contending

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[4] Donald Reagan both wrote in his memoir and told investigators that he created the plan following Edwin Meese's weekend inquiry, see page 6 of the transcript of the Office of Independent Counsel interview with Donald T. Regan, July 14, 1987, 8:40 a.m., Box 208, Folder 6, Donald T. Regan Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC, and Donald T. Regan, *For the Record: From Wall Street to Washington* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1988), 40; Donald Reagan originally wrote the plan by hand. For the first typed copy, see the untitled eight-point list in Box 211, Folder 4, Donald T. Regan Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC.

[5] On the final draft of Donald Reagan's plan, see "NSC Matter -- Plan of Action" in Box 14, Folder "Iran [Iran-Contra] (7)," Dennis W. Thomas Files: Office of the Chief of Staff Series IV: Issues File, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (Hereafter RRPL).

[6] Richard Secord recounts his conversation with John Poindexter in his memoir. It is debatable whether he asked to speak to Ronald Reagan during the call. See Richard Secord and Jay Wurts, *Honored and Betrayed: Irangate, Covert Affairs, and the Secret War in Laos* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1992), 329-331.

that the purported moderate faction would be arrested, and the hostages killed if the public learned of the operations. From Wallison's perspective, Poindexter tried involving Reagan in a "pretty pedestrian, bureaucratic cover-up" by providing the president with false information. It encouraged Reagan's stubbornness about disclosing the operations. He refused to do so out of his concern for the hostages. The diversion memorandum hastened Poindexter's departure and removed the barrier to uncovering the affair. "There wasn't anyone who was interested, bureaucratically, in a cover-up at that point," Wallison later recalled. And a cover-up—existing in actuality or only in the public perception—was precisely what the White House sought to prevent.[7]

The White House planned to disabuse the media and the public of the notion that Reagan's predicament mirrored the cover-up and crimes of Watergate. Chief of Staff Regan fretted about the diversion. "We're facing a problem here that looks much like Watergate," Regan told Wallison immediately after learning about the diversion. Wallison recognized the legal implications of the arms and money transfers. He suggested that the administration recommend the appointment of an independent counsel.[8] At the Department of Justice, Attorney General Edwin Meese and his deputies worried about Congress impeaching Reagan if the administration failed to promptly disclose the diversion of funds. The intersection of the Iran and Contra operations carried with it a grave political dimension.[9]

Optics were key to the president's survival. Reagan himself believed that an immediate press conference would stave off accusations of a cover-up and prevent the media from disclosing the information before the president. Although Reagan remained concerned about the safety of the hostages, he decided that publicizing the transfer of money from Iran to the Contras was appropriate despite it severely limiting his ability to secure their release.[10] Here, Reagan acted decisively against his instinct to withhold information from the public in his effort to rescue the hostages. With Poindexter discredited and the presidency itself at serious risk, Reagan braced for the difficult act of admitting foreign policy malpractice.

Reagan prepared for the press conference. He informed senior advisors before briefing congressional leaders. A half hour after accepting Poindexter's resignation, Reagan presided over a National Security Planning Group, in which Meese told Defense Secretary Caspar

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[7] On Peter Wallison's perspective, see pages 85 and 88-89 in Peter J. Wallison, interview by Jeff Chidester, Stephen F. Knott, Darby Morrisroe, and Christine Nemacheck, October 28-29, 2003, Charlottesville, Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan; See chapters 3 and 4 for a close examination of John Poindexter's selective advice and briefings to Ronald Reagan.

[8] Peter Wallison recalled Donald Regan making the comment about Watergate when informing him about the diversion, see page 86 in Peter J. Wallison, interview by Jeff Chidester, Stephen F. Knott, Darby Morrisroe, and Christine Nemacheck, October 28-29, 2003, Charlottesville, Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan; On Peter Wallison suggesting an independent counsel, see page 17 of the transcript of the Office of Independent Counsel interview with Donald T. Regan, July 14, 1987, 8:40 a.m., Box 208, Folder 6, Donald T. Regan Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC.

[9] Using a trial transcript, Theodore Draper quotes verbatim from Charles Cooper and Edwin Meese's testimony on impeachment at Oliver North's 1989 trial, see Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991), 520-522.

[10] Ronald Reagan noted his intentions in his diary, see Douglas Brinkley ed., Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 454; On Ronald Reagan's decision to disclose the diversion despite grave consequences for the hostages, see Donald Regan's reflections on page 26 of the transcript of the Office of Independent Counsel interview with Donald T. Regan, July 14, 1987, 8:40 a.m., Box 208, Folder 6, Donald T. Regan Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC.

Weinberger, Secretary of State George Shultz, Treasury Secretary James A. Baker III, and CIA Director William Casey about the diversion and dismissals of Poindexter and North. Vice President George H.W. Bush had already heard the news. Meese did not possess all of the relevant facts. He had a distorted, incomplete version of events principally elicited from North during his short inquiry conducted days earlier. The participants nevertheless learned that arms had been shipped to Iran through Israeli intermediaries at inflated prices, and the profits deposited into Swiss bank accounts were withdrawn by the Contra leader Adolfo Calero. While an accurate version of events would later emerge during the congressional investigation, the revelation that the Contras benefited from arms sales to Iran shocked Reagan's principal advisors regardless of how it actually transpired. Officials agreed to make public what was presently known about the diversion. Reagan directed Meese to make a "full disclosure." Reagan and his advisors discussed the concept of a presidential commission to investigate the affair, agreeing to its formation. Next, Reagan told congressional leaders about Meese's discovery.[11]

Ten minutes after the NSPG meeting, Reagan and his national security team faced a bipartisan group of congressional leaders. They delivered the worst news of his presidency. The meeting featured both a damaging surprise announcement and warm display of bipartisan concern for the stability of the foreign policy process. In the Cabinet Room, Republican Senators John Warner and then-Majority Leader Robert Dole joined their Democratic colleagues Senators Sam Nunn and Robert Byrd for the disclosure. The incoming Democratic Speaker of the House Jim Wright also attended. Reagan opened the meeting by telling them that he discovered new information about the Iran initiative and had taken appropriate actions. Reagan asked Meese to report on the evolving situation. Drawing on North's inaccurate statements, Meese explained that profits from the arms sales to Iran had been transferred to Swiss bank accounts for the Contras as a result of overcharging the Iranians. North, Meese revealed, was the principal malfeasant from the NSC, while Israel had facilitated the transactions. Reagan said that the diversion of funds was the "only incident of this kind." Poindexter had resigned due to withholding information about the transfers from him. Reagan emphasized that his administration would investigate further. He would show what they uncovered to the American people. His candid admission spawned immediate questioning from the perplexed legislators.[12]

Byrd, Dole, Nunn, Wright, and Warner engaged with Reagan and his advisors on how to proceed. According to Bush's diary, the congressional delegation "were shocked." Byrd

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[11] Memoirs and interviews corroborate what was discussed at the principals briefing, see Donald T. Regan, *For the Record*, 43-44; George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), 839.; See also pages 1 and 3 of Office of Independent Counsel interview with Caspar Weinberger on 4/7/1988 in Record of Interview, Caspar Weinberger, Interview with Office of Independent Counsel, Washington D.C., April 7, 1988; Powell, Colin (2); John Q. Barrett Attorney Files; US v. Weinberger Files, Box 9, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; Edwin Meese learned that evening Israel only dealt with the weapons and Iran paid money directly to an American company's Swiss bank account, see Meese's handwritten notes of his conversation with the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Shimon Peres, Personal Notes, November 25, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, Digital National Security Archive (Hereafter DNSA).

[12] See John Richardson's handwritten notes from the congressional briefing in folder "November 25, 1986, Reagan Meeting with Congressional Leaders" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA; Congressman Robert H. Michel is listed on Donald Regan's Plan of Action, though there is not a record of his attendance based on available documents; Donald Regan made a note of the meeting on White House stationary. It includes the general overview of Ed Meese's points. See Handwritten Note, "Meeting on Iran/Contra/NSC Matter," November 25, 1986, in Box 9, Folder "Regan Documents 1985-1987, from Legal Task Force – Received by WHORM 05/15/1987 (8)," Donald T. Reagan Files, 1985-1987: SERIES II: White House Legal Task Force File, 1985-1987, RRPL.

appeared "puzzled" and the ensuing meeting was "tumultuous." Wright asked who approved the transfer of funds and what Poindexter knew about it. Meese placed blame on North and described Poindexter as ignoring North's actions because he wanted to support the Contras. Byrd asked who was involved from the Contras. Meese replied that Adolfo Calero obtained the funds. Byrd wondered aloud why the operation persisted for ten months without Poindexter intervening. Dole asserted that North would not cooperate with investigations. On the question of Israel's participation, Meese expressed that he did not know details, but he assumed the Israelis volunteered for the project. Wright thought it "strain[ed] credulity" that Israel developed the operation on their own. Meese divulged that North and other Americans had coordinated the diversion to Calero. Meese estimated around 13 million dollars in surplus funds went to the Contras. Byrd observed that the media would cover the story for the foreseeable future. Participants grasped the magnitude of the news. With the revelation of North's scheme, the briefing primarily focused on the implications for the country and the future.[13]

Reagan and congressional leaders discussed redressing problems stemming from an operational NSC. Byrd asked Reagan how the situation could be resolved and prevented in the future. Reagan responded that he would investigate and appoint a commission to review the NSC's procedures. Nunn strongly recommended an executive order to halt the NSC from conducting operations. "The single most important thing you can do," Nunn said, emphasizing that without congressional oversight a president and the country could become "very exposed" from the NSC running covert operations. Reagan suggested the national security advisor traditionally provided oversight. It had "served [America] well," especially with Richard Nixon's opening to China. A distinction, Nunn clarified, existed between diplomatic initiatives and covert operations. The Iran initiative was not tantamount to Nixon's opening to China.[14]

Next, the discussion turned to the eroding relations between Congress and the president. Wright raised his concern about the prospect of Congress and the president working together on foreign policy. "None of us," he noted, "get pleasure from embarrassment [of the United States government]." He recognized the "harsh feelings" over the Contras and spoke about trusting Congress on matters of national security. Wright stressed that Congress should have been notified about Iran, for foreign policy cannot be left to "a zealot, patriot" with bad judgment like North. Wright desired for the trust to continue for the country's sake. Noting that "it wasn't contrary to policy," Reagan told Wright that he accepted cooperation but "where human lives [were] at stake" he would maintain a "close hold" rather than inform Congress. Reagan again claimed that Iranian contacts and American hostages would be in danger if the initiative leaked.

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[13] On George H.W. Bush's observations about the congressional briefing, see page 24 in Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; On the substance of the briefing, see John Richardson's handwritten notes from the congressional briefing in folder "November 25, 1986, Reagan Meeting with Congressional Leaders" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA.

[14] Theodore Draper's overview of this meeting neglects portions of the conversation focusing on executive-legislative relations and misrepresents Reagan's comments as referencing Poindexter during his exchange with Nunn. Reagan references the national security advisor in general and cites Henry Kissinger's role in Richard Nixon's opening to China. Nunn's responses illustrate Reagan's point. See Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs*, 540-541; For exchanges between Reagan, Byrd, and Nunn, see John Richardson's handwritten notes from the congressional briefing in folder "November 25, 1986, Reagan Meeting with Congressional Leaders" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA.

Reagan thus kept the operation on a "need to know—to control damage." Congressional leaders and Reagan generally agreed on the necessity of stable foreign policymaking for the country's security, notwithstanding trust issues between branches of government.[15]

How Reagan disclosed the diversion would have an impact on its public reception. Reagan decided to provide cursory remarks, and Meese would follow with a more thorough accounting. Wallison worked on the president's statement that morning with Dennis Thomas, an aide to Donald Regan, and Assistant Attorney General Charles Cooper. Regan had drafted a short paragraph containing a "sincere [and] deep apology to the American people" about pursuing "noble ends" with "excessive means." It was not adopted into the final draft, a key mistake. Reagan departed the Cabinet Room, conferred with advisors for several minutes, and then greeted the cameras in the Press Briefing Room.[16]

Reagan's remarks focused on Meese's discovery, his lack of knowledge, and his forthcoming actions. Reagan stated that Meese had reviewed his Iran policy and reported preliminary findings at his direction. Reagan declared that he "was not fully informed" on one aspect of his initiative, and it "raise[d] serious questions of propriety." The Department of Justice would proceed accordingly. Reagan had duly informed Congress and would convene a President's Special Review Board to examine the NSC. He also announced Poindexter's resignation and North's firing. Reagan avoided an apology. "I am deeply troubled," he acknowledged, "that the implementation of a policy aimed at resolving a truly tragic situation in the Middle East has resulted in such controversy." He nonetheless referred to his Iran policy as "well founded," conceding that "one aspect […] was seriously flawed." Reagan assured the public that he had taken appropriate action to ensure future foreign policy followed his authorization. He responded with "No" when a reporter asked if he made a mistake. Reagan ignored reporter questions about Shultz's potential resignation, stepped aside, and introduced Meese to the room of wolfish reporters demanding answers.[17]

Meese reported his preliminary findings and answered questions, deepening Reagan's political crisis and creating more curiosity about the Iran initiative than providing clarity. Meese's briefing relied on the falsehoods of North, which cast Israel as the primary agent involved in diverting funds to the Contras instead of North and Secord. Meese contended that the president did not know about the diversion. North was "the only person" with direct knowledge of the diversion, although Poindexter "did know that something of this nature was occurring" but opted not to investigate it. Meese assured reporters that the Department of Justice was examining potential criminalities, with the option of appointing an independent counsel if needed. Meese's brief responses to reporters eschewed specifics and invited further questioning.[18]

Reagan's vague remarks and Meese's evasive answers suggested there was more to the story.

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[15] See Richardson's handwritten notes in Ibid.

[16] See also U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*. Appendix B: Volume 7, Depositions Charles J. Cooper, 100th Congress, 1st Sess., 1987. Senate Report 100-216, November. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 264-265; See Donald Reagan's handwritten paragraph for the remarks from 5:55 a.m. on 11/25/86 in Box 14, Folder "Iran [Iran-Contra] (7)," Dennis W. Thomas Files: Office of the Chief of Staff Series IV: Issues File, RRPL.

[17] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks Announcing the Review of the National Security Council's Role in the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, November 25, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258235.

[18] "Transcript of Attorney General Meese's News Conference," *Washington Post*, November 26, 1986, A8; See also Personal Notes, "Meese Press Conference," November 25, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

Presently, Congress and the media had learned that North presided over transferring surplus funds to the Contras in the course of dealing weapons to Iran in exchange for American hostages. The roles of Secord and the Enterprise remained hidden for the moment, awaiting their shocking discovery during the impending investigations. Reagan had followed the guidance of his chief staff by informing Congress and briefing the press, a crucial first step in surmounting the political crisis set off by the diversion memorandum. The reactions of the press and Congress portended the grueling path to recovery ahead for Reagan.

Escalation and Reactions - Congress, Media, and the President

Divulging the diversion transformed a single scandal about selling arms to Iran in exchange for hostages into a multifaceted political crisis involving the controversial Contra-support operation. Impelled to investigate, Congress sought to hold the administration to account, albeit without irreparably damaging the president. Reagan had to manage the crisis and avoid his own ruination. The media profited from the ensuing frenzy. Reagan's Iran debacle was indeed a high-profile story. The media covered the daily intrigues—much to the constant chagrin of the White House. According to Reagan, reporters "were like a circle of sharks" surrounding Meese at their press conference, a harbinger of the media attention to come.[19]

After Reagan's disclosure, the Beltway entered "into full-scale post-Watergate scandal mode," with the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* publishing over a thousand articles on Iran-Contra within ninety days.[20] On American television, meanwhile, news anchors from across ABC, CBS, and NBC reported Reagan now faced a major scandal. "[T]he Iran affair is now a scandal," announced ABC anchor Peter Jennings. A new Watergate captured their attention. CBS News host Fred Graham felt "a sense of deja vu" while Tom Brokaw of NBC reminisced that "we have been here before."[21] In Nicaragua, the sense of repeating the past was also manifest: *Barricada*, the official newspaper of the Sandinista regime, described the scandal as "another Watergate."[22] The American media had a duty to report current events to the public, to be sure. But too many in the press desired the theater of congressional hearings and accompanying high television ratings. Reagan would have to contend with the sensationalism. Congress, though, had different priorities, pursued with a penchant for partisanship, heated rhetoric, and a genuine concern about the presidency.

Congressional leaders calmly accepted Reagan's disclosure but increased the political tension. Wright had requested inter-branch cooperation at the White House. Yet Wright recognized that Reagan possibly violated the Anti-Terrorism Act, Arms Export Control Act, Defense Department Appropriations Act, and National Security Act by selling arms to Iran without notifying Congress and allowing residual funds to be transferred to the Contras. What worried Wright, then, was managing hearings without permitting every relevant committee seeking to address "the juiciest thing since Watergate" to turn oversight into "a year-long feed frenzy" replete with partisan rancor tantamount to "a three-ring circus." Wright met with Byrd, Dole, and House minority leader Robert Michel to determine "a dignified public way" of handling the affair. They decided to form one committee. Still, the moment required public

[19] Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 454.
[20] Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution, 1980-1989* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), 531-532.
[21] Quoted from John Corry, "How TV Is Covering the Iran Story," *New York Times*, November 27, 1986, C18.
[22] "Sandinistas Talk of Watergate," *New York Times*, November 27, 1986, A11.

comment, and congressional leaders would not forgo an opportunity to express their dismay.[23]

Congressional leaders balanced harsh criticism with legitimate concern. Wright castigated Reagan to reporters, questioning both Reagan's ability to execute foreign policy and his assertion that only Poindexter knew about the diversion. Wright was not the only participant from the congressional briefing concerned with foreign policymaking. Nunn, too, raised publicly his private anxiety about Reagan's inability to conduct foreign policy due to the scandal. "We must, all of us, help the President restore his credibility in foreign affairs," Nunn implored, "We can't have a crippled President for two years." Byrd likewise supported a robust presidency, stating that "We all want to see a strong president. We don't want to see a fatally damaged presidency." Congressional leaders thus faced a conundrum. On the one hand, the Iran initiative demanded a congressional inquiry. Congressional leaders, on the other hand, wanted to minimize the damage to the presidency itself. Partisanship and polarization, though, would prove difficult to overcome.[24]

Beset with aggravating institutional and political factors, Reagan struggled with managing public perception and congressional inquiries while addressing his own idiosyncrasies about apologizing for the scandal. Reagan had difficult decisions to make on staffing, responding to Congress, and recovering from cratering public approval ratings. Reagan received critical advice from inside the White House and within Republican leadership. After the November 25 press conference, Bush advised Reagan to fire both Shultz and Regan to focus on moving beyond the scandal. Reagan was upset at the situation and suspected the State Department undermined his policy. He questioned if Shultz supported him after their disputes over the Iranian initiative. Bush made his case for Reagan "to clean the slate" by dismissing his chief of staff and secretary of state. Reagan's apprehensiveness about it prevailed. "The President just smiled," Bush dictated in his dairy.[25] Reagan wanted Shultz and Regan to remain in his administration.

Shultz and Reagan reconciled the next day, with Shultz committing to serving the remainder of Reagan's term. Reagan and Shultz amicably discussed Reagan's issues with the State Department. They reached an understanding about Shultz's position as "point man on foreign policy" and State's role in conducting it. Shultz voiced his support for both the president and the presidency. "It's in State's interest to have a strong president," Shultz assured Reagan, "Only a strong president can make foreign policy succeed." Reagan also retained Regan despite growing Republican demands that Regan resign. House Minority Leader Michel suggested Regan tender his resignation, a belief also voiced by the Republican Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar. Yet Regan's fate awaited the results of the Tower Commission.[26]

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[23] Jim Wright recalls being briefed at the White House in his memoirs, and he discusses the consensus developed among congressional leaders. Wright, however, confuses the time-line of events, see Jim Wright, *Worth It All: My War for Peace* (Washington: Brassey's, 1993) 86-87 and Jim Wright, *Balance of Power: Presidents and Congress from the Era of McCarthy to the Age of Gingrich* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1996) 437-438.

[24] Steven V. Robert, "Top Legislators Promise Inquiry," *New York Times*, November 26, 1986, A1; John Felton, "Iran Arms and 'Contras': A Reagan Bombshell." *CQ Weekly* (November 29, 1986): 2971-76.

[25] See pages 24-25 in Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; On the substance of the briefing, see John Richardson's handwritten notes from the congressional briefing in folder "November 25, 1986, Reagan Meeting with Congressional Leaders" in Attorney Files, John Q. Barrett, General Investigative Files, Box 55, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record Group 449, NARA.

[26] Reagan noted in his diary that Shultz's "sworn fealty until I leave the job." See Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 454; Quoted from Shultz's recounting in his memoir of meeting with Reagan on November 26, 1986, See Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 841; Robert Michel expressed his views on Donald Regan to reporters. See James Gerstenzang,

Reagan confronted an unforgiving quandary: a congressional investigation, outsized media attention, and public disapproval compounding to undermine and potentially destroy his presidency. The press battered him with questions at public appearances. On November 26, at the lighthearted White House turkey presentation to celebrate Thanksgiving, reporters incessantly interrupted him with questions about the scandal. ABC reporter Sam Donaldson lambasted Reagan, shouting at the president: "you've never ducked tough questions before."[27] Reagan had entered an unfamiliar political position. Congress, citizens, and reporters questioned his behavior, and he could not bring about belief in his positions.

The American public neither believed Reagan nor supported his Iran policy. By the end of November, Reagan's internal polling showed that 59% of respondents did not believe Reagan's claims about his lack of knowledge about the diversion, and 71% thought he engaged in a cover-up. Still, 75% expressed that they liked Reagan personally, even though 69% viewed his Iranian policy as a mistake. Reagan sustained influence with the American public. Convincing the public of his honesty and willingness to properly address the scandal, however, presented the chief obstacle to his survival. Reagan had to accept his errors in judgment. Reagan struggled with the proposition, for he sincerely believed seeking the release of hostages was the correct policy regardless of how he pursued it. As he ruminated on its prudence, Reagan sent a letter on November 26 to the sister of American hostage Terry Anderson, who languished in captivity. "Please be assured those hostages are never out of my mind," Reagan pledged. "I'll never rest until their ordeal is ended." Reagan's profound commitment to rescuing hostages not only precipitated Iran-Contra, but also affected his struggle to concede absolute fault.[28]

Prior to Thanksgiving, Reagan participated in an unrepentant interview with *Time* magazine editor Hugh Sidey. Reagan appeared intransigent defending his Iran policy. His disappointment stemmed solely from his failure to liberate every hostage. The attempt, he suggested, was worth the political blowback. Acknowledging the impact on congressional relations, Reagan said he "still would have risked it." Sidey asked if he considered the Iran initiative a mistake. "I am not going to disavow it," Reagan stated defiantly. "I do not think it was a mistake." Reagan only resented that he "wasn't told everything." He referred to North as "a national hero" and claimed Poindexter "took the responsibility" by resigning. Lacking the facts, Reagan wrongly told Sidey "another country" facilitated the diversion. Inculpating the press, Reagan criticized reporters for pursuing the story after he requested a moratorium out of concern for the hostages. "The press," he demanded, "has to take the responsibility for what they have done." Two days prior, Reagan had expressed similar sentiments in letters to *National Review* publisher William A. Rusher and real estate magnate Paul Trousdale. The politics and media sensationalism aggravated Reagan.

"Regan May be Losing Support of GOP Leaders," *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 1986, A20.

[27] Elizabeth Kaston, "White House Fuss and Feathers: Queries Fly at Turkey Presentation," *Washington Post*, November 27, 1986, D1.

[28] On polling, see questions 57, 69, 70bb, and 86a from Iran Tracking/ 382691/ November 17 - 28, 1986, in Box 27, Folder "Iranian Tracking Flash Results November 30, 1986," in David Chew Files, 1985 - 1988, RRPL; Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to Margaret Peggy Say, November 26, 1986, box 17, Folder 266, Presidential Handwriting Files: Series II, RRPL; George Shultz has made two observations on these points. One, the American public did not believe Reagan, and it upset him tremendously. Reagan thought that he could convince the public to support the Iran initiative. Two, Reagan's "intense concern" about American hostages precipitated Iran-Contra. It was his "weakest suit" as a leader. See pages 30 and 33 of George P. Shultz, interview by Stephen Knott, Marc Selverstone, and James Sterling Young, Stanford, California, December 18, 2022, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential oral History Program, Miller center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan; Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 532.

"This is a Beltway bloodletting," he complained to Sidey. He vowed to withstand the onslaught. The political maelstrom enveloping Reagan soon forced a choice between his belief in correctly conducting foreign policy in the national interest and his desire to surmount the scandal. Reagan had to separate the value of his policy goals from the operations.[29]

Executing a Recovery

Reagan made paramount decisions about addressing the scandal within a week of the diversion becoming public knowledge. These choices influenced the next three months of his presidential recovery, the direction of the congressional hearings, and the subsequent seven-year independent counsel investigation. Reagan heavily relied on the advice of his White House counsel and the management of his embattled chief of staff. They aimed to avoid any appearance of a cover-up. The results were mixed.

Although stonewalled and misled by the NSC, White House Counsel Peter Wallison anticipated a scandal and attempted to uncover the facts when the Iran story made headlines in early November. Wallison recognized that the White House could not conduct an internal investigation for its lack of time, resources, and, above all, the optics involved. To restore Reagan's presidency, Wallison supported the President's Special Review Board, waiving executive privilege, and fully complying with external investigations.[30] Watergate informed Wallison's judgment. He knew the Iranian initiative begot controversy but "allegations of cover-up were more dangerous politically."[31]

Reagan followed his guidance in spite of his aversion to apologizing. The president set his political recovery in motion by formally instituting the Special Review Board, replacing his national security advisor, consulting with Republican leadership about pending congressional investigations, and appointing a special counselor to the president for the Iran-Contra investigations. On December 1, Reagan acted on three of these measures, determined to rehabilitate his public standing. Reagan decided on a new national security advisor, and he requested that Meese seek an independent counsel to investigate the episode. Then, he held a public event for what became known as the Tower Board.[32]

Reagan formed the Special Review Board in the hectic aftermath of the diversion discovery. Donald Regan conceived of the Presidential Commission based on the Rogers Commission that Reagan tasked with investigating the National Aeronautics and Space Administration after the *Challenger* space shuttle explosion. Congressional investigations advance at a glacial pace; whereas the Special Review Board could offer a more timely resolution. Reagan selected a respected, bipartisan group with extensive national security experience and an expert knowledge

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[29] Hugh Sidey, "An Interview with the President," *Time*, Vol. 128, No. 23, December 8, 1986, 18; Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to William A. Rusher, November 24, 1986, box 17, Folder 266, Presidential Handwriting Files: Series II, RRPL; Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to Paul Trousdale, November 24, 1986, Ibid.

[30] Peter J. Wallison, *Ronald Reagan: The Power of Conviction and the Success of His Presidency* (Boulder: Westview, 2003), 204, 206; See also pages 81-84 and 88-89 in Peter J. Wallison, interview by Jeff Chidester, Stephen F. Knott, Darby Morrisroe, and Christine Nemacheck, October 28-29, 2003, Charlottesville, Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan.

[31] On Wallison's views of Watergate and executive privilege, see page 14 of Peter J. Wallison, Interview by Martha Kumar, January 27, 2000, Washington D.C., White House Interview Program, https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/research/transition-interviews.

[32] Reagan notes these measures in his diary, writing that his "truthfulness seems to have become the issue. See Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 455.

of government: former Texas Senator John G. Tower, who chaired the commission, former Secretary of State Edmund Muskie, and former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft. Tower and Scowcroft had been considered by White House staff as potential replacements for Poindexter. Scowcroft, an expert of the inter-agency process, reluctantly accepted; the monumental workload of both probing and redressing the NSC process troubled him more than investigating former colleagues. Presidential politics directly affected the makeup of the commission. Regan had suggested to the president that former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker, a member of the Senate Watergate Committee, chair the Presidential Commission. Bush objected over Baker's presidential ambitions and his own. Bush thought Baker would "run against all the White House like the Watergate thing." Reagan concurred and Bush later floated the idea of himself as chair. Reagan accepted Tower as chair for the board, whom both Bush and Regan had ultimately suggested. Reagan moved swiftly to announce their roles and demonstrate his commitment to transparency and reform to the public.[33]

Reagan released public statements announcing the Special Review Board on November 26 and formally consulted with the members on December 1.[34] Prior to the event, Wallison and Regan debated the board's purpose. Wallison supported a broader scope focused on "what had happened in the Iran-Contra matter" to preempt partisan investigations on Capitol Hill. Regan, meanwhile, preferred limiting the board to analyzing NSC rules and procedures to make future recommendations. Wallison's view prevailed in practice, but Reagan's executive order reflected Regan's vision. It set a 60-day deadline, mandated executive branch cooperation, and charged the board with the following:

> The Board shall conduct a comprehensive study of the future role and procedures of the National Security Council (NSC) staff in the development, coordination, oversight, and conduct of foreign and national security policy; review the NSC staffs proper role in operational activities, especially extremely sensitive diplomatic, military, and intelligence missions; and provide recommendations to the President based upon its analysis of the manner in which foreign and national security policies established by the President have been implemented by the NSC staff.

In the Cabinet Room, Reagan introduced Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft to reporters. Reagan

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[33] On Donald Reagan's conception of the Tower Board, see Page 63 of Transcript, Deposition of Donald F. Reagan, July 15, 1987, Washington D.C. in Box 206, Folder 3, Donald T. Regan Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC and page 12 of the transcript of the Office of Independent Counsel interview with Donald T. Regan, July 14, 1987, 8:40 a.m., Box 208, Folder 6, Donald T. Regan Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC.; On Regan's support for Scowcroft, see the untitled eight-point list in Box 211, Folder 4, Ibid; White House Director of Legislative Affairs William Ball had recommended Tower to replace Poindexter. See Memo, Will Ball to Don Reagan, November 25, 1986, Box 213, Folder 11, Ibid; On George H.W. Bush's observations about the selection of John Tower, see pages 24 - 28 in Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; Regan claims credit for the Tower Board members in his memoir, see Regan, *For the Record*, 44-45; Bartholomew Sparrow, The Strategist: *Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security* (New York: Public Affairs), 248.

[34] Ronald Reagan, "Statement on the Special Review Board for the National Security Council, November 26, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258244; Ronald Reagan, "Appointment of Three Members of the Special Review Board for the National Security Council, November 26, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258245.

asked them "to review past implementation of administration policies," in addition to "the future role and procedures of the National Security Council's staff." Reagan included a request to review whether the NSC should be involved in operations. He emphasized the board's role in determining how the NSC implemented the Iranian initiative. "I want all the facts to come out about learning of a possible transfer of funds from the sale of arms to Iran to those fighting the Sandinista government," Reagan told members. The president also endorsed an independent counsel investigation to complement the board. "If we're to maintain confidence in our government's foreign policy apparatus," Reagan stated, "there must be a full and complete airing of all the facts." After the press withdrew, Wallison clarified to the board members that they could investigation the implementation of Reagan's Iran policy. On December 2, Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft received the board's charter and embarked on their high-stakes, fast-paced inquiry.[35]

On December 2, Reagan made three crucial announcements from the Oval Office. Reagan endorsed the Attorney General's pursuit of an independent counsel, requested Congress consolidate investigatory committees, and appointed Frank Calucci as national security advisor. Reagan opened with a transparency pledge and reaffirmed his openness to an independent counsel. Meese had "turned up reasonable grounds" for the appointment. Reagan revealed that he "immediately urged him to apply to the court." To merge accountability with reform, Reagan coupled the Special Review Board's "tough, no-nonsense investigation" of the NSC with naming an independent counsel. "With the appointment of an independent counsel," Reagan said, "we will have in place a dual system for assuring a thorough review of all aspects of this matter."[36]

After the address, Meese submitted a formal request to a three-judge panel of the US Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia. Meese drafted an application "broad enough to give an independent counsel the opportunity to look into all aspects" of the affair. Judges Walter Mansfield, Lewis Morgan, and George MacKinnon adjudicated who should be named. Judges Mansfield and MacKinnon contacted Lawrence Walsh, a Republican former federal judge and Deputy Attorney General in the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration, to discuss the position and inquire about his receptiveness. The three-judge panel promptly appointed Walsh after he passed an FBI clearance. Walsh assembled a team of elite lawyers and took his oath on December 19, embarking on what became a seven-year mission. No one anticipated the prolonged investigation at its inception. As chapter 9 shows, Walsh's appointment would become one of the most crucial decisions made to redress the scandal. It would take years for the

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[35] Ronald Reagan, "Executive Order 12575—President's Special Review Board, December 1, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258282; Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Meeting With the President's Special Review Board for the National Security Council, December 1, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258257; Wallison, *Ronald Reagan*, 207; Memo, Peter J. Wallison to John Tower, "Charter for the President's Special Review Board," December 2, 1986, OA 14289 Folder "PJ Wallison Chron December 1986 [S - Tut]," Peter J. Wallison Files, 1985 - 1987, RRPL; Wallison dispatched memos directing agencies to cooperate with the Tower Board and maintain all records. See Memo, Peter J. Wallison to Alton G. Keel, "President's Special Review Board," December 10, 1986, OA 14289, Folder "PJWallison Chron December 1986 [H-M]," Ibid; Memo, Peter J. Wallison to White House Staff, National Security Council Staff, and Heads of All Offices in the Executive Office of the President, "Pending Inquiries by Justice Department and the Special Review Board," November 28, 1986, OA 14289, Folder "PJWallison Chron December 1986 [Multiple Addressees]," Ibid.

[36] Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Investigation of the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, December 2, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258290.

realization to set in.[37]

In his address, Reagan affirmed the proper oversight role of Congress and committed to cooperation. He had waived executive privilege, revealing that he allowed McFarlane and Poindexter to submit congressional testimony, if they so choose. He had recently released a press statement endorsing a grant of immunity from Congress, provided the act would induce testimony. Reagan encouraged Congress to streamline the investigatory process in order for the branch to "carry out its duties in getting the facts without disrupting the orderly conduct of a vital part of this nation's government." The president invited oversight but encouraged a functioning government.[38]

Earlier, Reagan had met with Republican Senators Robert Dole and Alan K. Simpson, alongside Congressmen Robert Michel, Trent Lott, and Richard Cheney. Reagan gave them a candid overview of his understanding of the affair and disavowed knowledge of the diversion. Republican leaders suggested Reagan stop attacking the press and issue an apology to avoid damage to the presidency. Afterward, Michel told reporters, "I know the President is telling the truth [and] I'm convinced he has not broken any laws." Reagan continued meeting with Republican leaders over the next four days in consultation about how Congress should perform oversight. Reagan's national address quelled their fears, but the makeup of congressional committees produced anxieties. Dole had urged Reagan to convene a special session to form a select committee. Reagan dismissed the idea. Eventually, Dole and Byrd arranged to form one committee. Republicans wanted urgent actions from the president, too. In "a feisty meeting" on December 5, 1987, Republicans leaders demanded Reagan fire Donald Regan. The embattled chief of staff was present in the room. Reagan resisted calls for dismissing his staff. Reagan would not "throw people to the wolves without adequate cause." Grievances aside, Republican legislators rallied to the president's cause. Reagan worked closely with them, although he rarely accepted their advice.[39]

Reagan concluded his address with an announcement of Carlucci's appointment as national security advisor. Carlucci, a former Foreign Service officer, had served as Deputy Secretary of Defense for Reagan and Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency in Jimmy Carter's administration. Carlucci emerged as the consensus choice between Regan, Shultz, and Weinberger for his management skills and perceived ability to reform the NSC. Reagan approved of their suggestion and summoned Carlucci to the White House's basement, where he asked him to take the role. "Because you're the only person that George and Cap can agree on," Reagan told him. Carlucci, though, was hesitant to immediately accept. He wanted Reagan to

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[37] Bernard Weinraub, "2 Moves by Reagan: Special Panel Will Select Independent Counsel in Iran Arms Affair," *New York Times*, Dec 3, 1986, A1: Lawrence E. Walsh, *Firewall: The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-up* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 26-29.

[38] Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Investigation of the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, December 2, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258290; Statement by the Principal Deputy Press Secretary, December 1, 1986, DNSA collection: Iran-Contra Affair, DNSA.

[39] Barbara Vobejda and Hene Dewar, "Dole Urges Recalling Congress for Inquiry: Special Session Asked on Iran-Contras Affair," *Washington Post*, December 1, 1986, A1; David S. Broder, "GOP Leaders Warn Reagan: Fast Action Urged to Avert Long-Term Damage GOP Leaders Urge Reagan to Act Quickly," *Washington Post*, December 1, 1986, A1; Jack Nelson and Ronald J. Ostrow, "Reagan Asks for Special Inquiry," Los Angeles Times, December 3, 1986, A1; Gerald M. Boyd, Reagan Turns Down Calls to Dismiss Senior Officials," *New York Times*, December 6, 1986, 6; Regan, *For the Record*, 52-54, Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 455-457; Handwritten notes, Donald T. Reagan, 12/5/86, in Folder "[Regan Documents 1985-1987 from Legal Task Force - Received by WHORM 5/15/1986] (6)," Box 9, Donald T. Regan Files, Series II: WH Legal Task Force, RRPL.

know his personality and positions. Carlucci described his qualities as staffer and raised his policy disagreements with the president. He gave Reagan a summary of the man he would hire. "I can repair the damage," Carlucci admitted. "But I'm not a great visionary." In case Reagan desired a strategist, Carlucci declared he was "not a Henry Kissinger." Carlucci expressed his disagreement with Reagan over Iran. Carlucci was "looking to the future," not "going into the past."[40]

Reagan appointed a stern organizer who would return the NSC to advising, assisting, and coordinating. Carlucci assumed the role primarily out of concern for the presidency. He recruited Colin Powell, who served as his senior military assistant at the Defense Department, as his deputy to "impose order and procedure on the NSC." Powell's reluctance prompted Carlucci to explain the exigency: "This is serious," Carlucci pleaded with Powell, "Believe me, the presidency is at stake." Still, Powell hesitated, needing assurance from the president. Reagan called Powell to secure his assistance. Within two weeks Carlucci fired numerous staffers and concentrated only on present policy matters, a return to the honest broker system.[41]

Reagan undertook these measures to restore his credibility, reform the policymaking process, and prevent Congress from seeking the most severe accountability procedure—impeachment. Reagan efforts were targeted at lawmakers, journalists, and, above all, the American public. Reagan spoke directly to the American public and tasked citizens with resolving the scandal. "[T]he American people—you—will be the final arbiters of this controversy," the president proclaimed. In the United States, Reagan had suggested, citizens hold the president to account in the end. At bottom, government institutions are accountable to American citizens. Reagan adhered to this belief in his response to the scandal, and it served him well.[42]

Conclusion

Reagan thought his December 2 address ameliorated the political pain. "I think we cooled some of the savage beasts," Reagan surmised in his diary. It was a short-lived, optimistic conclusion. Instituting reforms and cooperating with investigations produced new political dilemmas in short order. The postwar national security system had went awry under Reagan. Congress, in turn, intervened by exercising its constitutional role of oversight—first, investigating through the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence; then, forming a Joint Select Committee between the House and Senate to produce the Iran-Contra hearings. Vice President Bush, for his part, recognized that the protraction of the scandal would hinder the administration and upend the president's agenda. "This thing will drag on for a long, long time," he privately

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[40] Ronald Reagan, "Appointment of Frank C. Carlucci as Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, December 2, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258291; See page 24 in the transcript of Frank Carlucci, Interview by Stephen Knott, Don Oberdorfer, and Philip Zelikow, Charlottesville, Virginia, August 28, 2001; Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential oral History Program, Miller center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 842-843.

[41] Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Ballantine Book, 1995), 329-331; John P. Burke, *Honest Broker?: The National Security Advisor and Presidential Decision Making* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 227-233.

[42] Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Investigation of the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, December 2, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258290.

lamented.[43]

Reagan' staff crafted a plan to weather the blossoming political crisis, and he executed on the strategy. For all Donald Regan's faults during his tenure as Chief of Staff, his plan of action was the genesis of Reagan's recovery. With Poindexter removed, Wallison was able to effectively mount a defense of the president, rightly encouraging a prompt executive review of the Iran initiative and advising full cooperation with other investigations. This would not be Watergate, although the decisions made during this period would both provide resolution to the scandal and prolong it.

Forming the Tower Board was a significant decision with lasting consequences. The national security bureaucracy had become dysfunction, and the NSC too operational. The Tower Board, as the next chapter argues, would serve as the government's response to an institutional crisis, a reactive measure to institution forms to the national security process. Its bipartisan, expert composition reflected the seriousness of the problem. The board's mandate demonstrated Reagan's commitment to restoring the foreign-policymaking process. Carlucci's appointment would be key to the reform. Reagan appointed a manager and reformer; he did not seek a visionary. Carlucci brought with him a capable deputy in Powell. Reagan's political crisis had afforded him an opportunity to build a more cohesive and astute national security team.

Other decisions would also have long-term ramifications. Reagan endorsed an independent counsel to investigation Iran-Contra. Walsh assumed the role, launching America's longest special counsel investigation. As chapter 9 details, Walsh's probe would be a source of ire for presidents and Congress alike, becoming a matter of political consequences in the waning days of the affair. Congressional leaders, for their part, decided to create one joint committee to address the scandal. It spawned from the bipartisan intention to minimize partisan political aims. Manifest in private and public statements, support for a strong presidency cut across the legislative and executive branches. Congressional simultaneously worried about an out of control investigation and abdicating their responsibility to conduct oversight. The Joint Select Committee on Iran-Contra would attempt to resolve the tension between the positions, resulting in a favorable outcome for the presidency.

Reagan's staff sought to build a fortified political position for the president. The walls erected around Reagan were not impenetrable. Public skepticism about Reagan's actions in Iran and Nicaragua would prove intractable. His personal popularity, on the other hand, would be easier to revive. And although Reagan made the right moves, his reluctance to admit fault undercut his political standing. Reagan was not yet convinced the Iran initiative had been a series of grave mistakes, a belief that would take much longer than it should to form. Reagan's reluctance to fire staff, too, worked against him, except in the case of Shultz. Reagan resisted calls for the resignation of Regan, who should have resigned from the administration on principle.

[43] Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 455; See page 38 in Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

Chapter 7
Mea Culpa: Containing a Scandal

"Our Wedding anniversary. Nancy says my speech tonite [*sic*] is her present from me."
Ronald W. Reagan, Diary Entry, Wednesday, March 4, 1987[1]

News that the Contras received money from arms-for-hostages deals with Iran shocked America. The Teflon presidency was in crisis. Ronald Reagan's political survival depended on several factors, including the nature of the scandal itself. The Iran-Contra affair invoked the national interest. In contrast to Watergate, the policies of Iran-Contra did not emerge from the naked personal, political interests of the president. Rather, the affair resulted from Reagan's failures in implementing foreign policy, an act that both Congress and the American public could forgive but not forget. Reagan's institutional and personal power would bring about resolution. Reagan derived strength from the office and his personality, an indispensable executive backed by Congress and liked by the people, who was not wholly regal but quintessentially American. Crucially, Reagan leveraged these factors to offer a *mea culpa* to America and overcome the scandal.[2] His address to the nation on March 4, 1987, proved a turning point in the Iran-Contra affair. "From that moment on," White House Counsel Peter Wallison has observed, "it was all over but the shouting."[3]

Reagan capitalized on personal appeal and an elite consensus on foreign policy, this chapter agues, successfully implementing his strategy of cooperation, transparency, and reform to restore his presidency. Reagan's high-profile acceptance of responsibility marked a critical juncture in his involvement in the scandal. He established a form of political security from a broad consensus on the indispensability of a strong presidency and his personal popularity. In response to the scandal, a bipartisan consensus on the stability of the presidency and national security cohered in Washington. It guided congressional leaders and the former policymakers who comprised the Tower Commission. The American public, for their part, simultaneously disapproved of Reagan's handling of Iran-Contra but supported him as an individual statesman. Reagan personified leadership for many, notwithstanding his unpopular Iran policy.

This chapter examines congressional and presidential decision-making during *the* crucial phase of Iran-Contra. Unimpeachable motives incited potentially impeachable conduct. Yet Congress abstained from impeachment and launched a Joint Select Committee to investigate and hold public hearings. It would, however, create the perfect venue for partisan theatrics regardless of the bipartisan intentions. This chapter thus explains why Reagan's survival owed much to Democratic leaders who determined that the necessity of a strong presidency transcended

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[1] Douglas Brinkley ed., Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 480.

[2] This broad conception of presidential power contrasts with Richard E. Neustadt's view, which emphasizes the presidency as a formally weak institution that relies on the power of persuasion, c.f. Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: Free Press, 1990); For a different broad conception of power, see William G. Howell with David Milton Brent, *Thinking about the Presidency: The Primacy of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); On the political environment influencing presidential power, see Stephen Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008); On the historical context of the American presidency's origins and the scope of its power, see Michael W. McConnell, *The President Who Would Not Be King: Executive Power under the Constitution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[3] Peter J. Wallison, *Ronald Reagan: The Power of Conviction and the Success of His Presidency* (Boulder: Westview, 2003), 93.

partisanship. It shows how Watergate's pervasive, overbearing presence influenced the course of events. As this chapter demonstrates, however, Iran-Contra proceeded differently, not only because Iran-Contra was a foreign policy scandal, but also because of Reagan's efforts to rectify his mistakes. The narrative concludes with Reagan's bid for political recovery. Reagan's comeback was gradual, aided by the Tower Commission and his advisors' counsel. What follows explores Reagan's incremental approach to recovering from the scandal and how he secured political absolution.

Congressional Reactions I: Impeachment

Congress redressed Iran-Contra through a Joint Select Committee. The prospect of Reagan's impeachment loomed large over the affair. Yet Congress abstained from exercising their constitutionally granted power. Drawing on the Watergate experience, congressional leaders considered the national and international ramifications of their inquiry resulting in impeachment proceedings. Impeachment and removal from office is a political process dependent upon "impeachment for, and conviction of, treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors." To impeach Reagan, Congress had the high standard of establishing Reagan's knowledge of the diversion of funds. Appearing on NBC's *This Week with David Brinkley*, Lee Hamilton, the chairman of the House Select Committee on Iran-Contra, stated that evidence showing Reagan approved the diversion memo would be "the smoking gun." It would be sufficient in "political terms" to create "a demand for impeachment proceedings." This smoking gun could justify seeking an impeachment a mere 13 years after the House Judiciary Committee approved three articles of impeachment for Richard Nixon. While Nixon resigned rather than face the proceedings, Reagan persevered despite the faint likelihood of being removed from office.[4]

Reagan's actions warranted a proportional political response based on the evidence. Only former National Security Advisor John Poindexter testifying that Reagan approved of the diversion could induce Reagan's impeachment. Congressional leaders evaluated their options. They became unwilling to impeach Reagan over a foreign policy scandal. This was not Watergate. Republican William S. Cohen, a member of the Senate Select Committee on Iran-Contra, distinguished between Watergate and Iran-Contra, revealing a shared belief among committee members. "Watergate involved presidential abuse of power," Cohen said. "Here, we are dealing with a foreign policy disaster." The ultimate dishonor did not befall the Reagan presidency. Congress chose the political alternative of investigating and holding public hearings.[5]

Congress had compelling reasons to abstain from impeachment. Both domestic politics and foreign policy affected their calculation. Delaware Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr. captured the exigent circumstances surrounding Reagan's predicament in his December 3, 1986, remarks to the National League of Cities convention. Biden expounded on his concern that the scandal could affect advancing domestic policy. The government would accomplish less if mired in a protracted scandal inflaming tensions between Congress and the president. Both parties, Biden

[4] U.S. Const. art. II, § 4; Doyle McManus, "Reagan Impeachment Held Possible," *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1987, B15; For a concise overview of Richard Nixon's impeachment proceedings, see Timothy Naftali, "Richard Nixon by Timothy Naftali," in eds. Jeffrey A. Engel, Jon Meacham, Timothy Naftali, and Peter Baker, *Impeachment: An American History* (New York, Modern Library, 2018), 83-154.

[5] Lawrence L. Knutson, "The Differences, Similarities of Iran-Contra, Watergate Hearings," Associated Press News, August 8, 1987.

suggested, should seek an immediate resolution for the sake of the country. "I think this is a time for all of us - Republican and Democrat - to aid an effort to save the presidency," Biden stated. "America cannot tolerate another failed presidency."[6]

Congressional leaders questioned if impeaching Reagan served the national interest. What impeachment meant for national security especially troubled them. Reagan's remaining time in office also presented an obstacle. Committee members surmised that impeachment would be pointless by the time proceedings concluded in the House and Senate. And the lack of direct, verifiable evidence of Reagan's involvement in the diversion precluded the filing of articles of impeachment over the most egregious aspect of the affair. Reagan himself neutralized the political will of congressional leaders to impeach him by sustaining personal popularity with Americans and pursuing accountability and transparency by dismissing Poindexter and Oliver North, convening the Tower Board, cooperating with inquiries, and supporting an independent counsel appointment. Congress, for their part, acted as politicians rather than prosecutors, seeking to supply the American people with a full account of the affair and permitting voters to decide the penalties at the ballot box.[7]

Congressional leadership formed a consensus on *how* to approach the scandal. At the revelation of the diversion, Congress reflected concern about the presidency. Democrats Robert Byrd, Jim Wright, and Sam Nunn had expressed how critical a strong presidency and stable foreign policy process was to the country during Reagan's briefing. That feeling crossed the aisle. "It's pretty damn serious," remarked Richard Cheney, one of Reagan's staunchest supporters in the House. The scandal was both a burden on governance and a serious transgression.[8]

Iran-Contra did not warrant the severest punishment, and congressional leaders factored it into their response. Some Democrats privately insisted on impeachment. Speaker Wright thought otherwise. "The last thing we needed," Wright later stated, "was an impeachment outcry, or a frontal challenge to the President's personal integrity." Democratic congressional leaders refused to preside over another Watergate. Senate Majority Leader Byrd concurred with Wright. "We saw no national purpose to be served by embarrassing the President personally," Wright admitted. Byrd and Wright planned to appoint a Joint Select Committee between the House and Senate, staffed with respected bipartisan legislators who reserved impeachment as a last resort. Wright told Democrats "it would be a disservice to the Nation if anyone mentioned the word 'impeachment'." At a 2003 conference, Wright explained the rationale behind their decisions: "our overriding concern in the congressional leadership, frankly, was less in embarrassing the administration and sending people to jail than in getting at the truth, maintaining the Nation's equilibrium, emphasizing the rule of law, and avoiding a bloody constitutional confrontation." Byrd and Wright were unwilling to precipitate a national crisis or compound the problems besetting the administration. Wright's public comments matched his memoir, wherein he stressed that Democratic leaders had civility in mind when addressing the scandal. Reagan was

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[6] Joseph R. Biden Jr., quoted from Nadine Cohodas, "City Leaders Fear Iran May Pre-empt Domestic Needs." *CQ Weekly* (December 6, 1986): 3011.

[7] Joel Brinkley, "Why Contra Hearings Aren't Like Watergate," *New York Times*, May 24, 1987, 4; At the outset of the scandal, famed Harvard Law School Professor Alan Dershowitz warned against this "radical surgery of impeachment," arguing that "political remedies" existed within the constitutional system to address Reagan's behavior, see Alan Dershowitz, "Impeachment Is Radical Surgery for Body Politic," *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1986, B5.

[8] David S. Broder, "Secrecy Trips a President: Iran-Contras Imbroglio May Be Long-Term Trouble," *Washington Post*, November 26, 1986, A1.

the president after all. A convergence of these domestic political factors and potential foreign policy implications explains why the congressional consensus developed.[9]

Of the domestic political factors, Reagan's lack of knowledge about the diversion precluded impeachment proceedings. It vaporized congressional will to remove him from office. Unlike Watergate, many members of Congress were skeptical of Reagan's impeachment at the outset of the inquiry. And contrary to Watergate, the evidence never materialized. As examined in the next chapter, Poindexter foreclosed the opportunity to indict Reagan on the diversion by testifying in July 1987 that he neglected to inform the president. Poindexter acknowledged that he "made a very deliberate decision" to withhold the diversion from Reagan to "provide some future deniability" on the issue. "The buck stops here with me," Poindexter declared to the committee. "I made the decision." The former national security advisor absolved the president and denied accountability for those seeking to hang Iran-Contra on Reagan. "This was the bombshell I've been waiting for 7 months," Reagan recorded in his diary, "The day is brighter." The press likewise acknowledged the vanquishing of impeachment. *New York Times* correspondent and editor R.W. Apple Jr., reported that Poindexter's testimony "almost certainly removed whatever remote possibility of impeachment might have existed." Serious discussions of impeachment vanished in the aftermath of Poindexter's testimony. Byrd and Wright had dismissed the possibility of impeachment early in the process. Committee members arrived at the same conclusion based on a paucity of evidence.[10]

Chief counsels for the Select Committee reaffirmed the views of congressional members. John W. Nields Jr., the chief counsel for the House Select Committee, assessed the evidence and concluded that Reagan's actions were below the standards for impeachment. Senate Select Committee chief counsel Arthur L. Liman, on the other hand, personally believed Reagan had knowledge of the diversion but the committee could not obtain definitive proof. Impeachment would not be their primary concern. "In fact," Liman recounted later, "there was never a debate on the issue among our committee members, nor did we take a vote." Critics would later cast aspersions over the decision.[11]

Liman defended his position publicly during a dispute with investigative journalist Seymour Hersh three years after the congressional hearings ended. Hersh published an article accusing the House and Senate committees of avoiding responsibility in their investigation by declining to hold Reagan to account. Liman responded forcefully in an op-ed, in which he repudiated Hersh's charge that he failed to conduct an exhaustive investigation. Liman contended that the committee refused to "abuse our power and say that just because we do not believe Admiral Poindexter, that we can start an impeachment process." He also submitted a sharply critical letter to the editor of

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[9] United States. Congress. *The Cannon Centenary Conference: The Changing Nature of the Speakership* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2004), 43 - 45; Wright, *Balance of Power: Presidents and Congress from the Era of McCarthy to the Age of Gingrich,* 440-442, 457-458, 510-511.

[10] United States. Congress., *Testimony of John Poindexter: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition*, Vol. 100-8, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 15, 16, 17, 20, and 21, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 37-38; R.W. Apple Jr., "Iran Inquiry: Little Fervor: Hearings Start Today, but Drama Is Missing," *New York Times*, May 5, 1987, A1; R.W. Apple Jr., "Reagan Supported, but Still Vulnerable, *New York Times*, July 16, 1987, A1; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 516.

[11] John W. Nields Jr. revealed his thoughts on Reagan's action in an interview with Malcolm Byrne, who has argued similarly about the domestic political and foreign policy factors affecting the decision to not impeachment Reagan, see Malcolm Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 283-284; Arthur L. Liman, *Lawyer: A Life of Counsel and Controversy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998), 310, 349-350.

the *New York Times Magazine.* The letter refuted Hersh's article and reasserted Liman's belief in the unrealistic expectations of Reagan's impeachment. "The thesis that such leading Democrats would seek to protect Ronald Reagan is ridiculous," he noted. The committees had acted responsibly and judiciously. Democrats "made the morally right judgment in not recommending impeachment without sufficient evidence," Liman maintained. Morality and evidence aside, Congress made the politically viable decision. As Liman warned, the precedent of impeaching a president on such paltry evidence would threaten future presidencies. It could have even affected world order.[12]

The Cold War influenced congressional decision-making, too. Congress abstained from impeaching Reagan, lest doing so imperil Reagan's strides toward U.S.-Soviet détente. Reagan's relationship with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev weighed heavily on impeachment deliberations. Reagan had met with Gorbachev at Reykjavik, Iceland, for a summit a week before Iran-Contra erupted in the press. Arms control talks had faltered but long-term progress appeared within reach by summer 1987. The scandal's timing was fortuitous for Reagan.[13]

Committee members believed Cold War hostilities would endure if Congress put the country through the rancorous process of removing the president. Daniel Inouye, Chairman of the Senate Select Committee, explained in a 1988 speech at Tufts University that committee members believed prolonged, damaging hearings would weaken Reagan and compromise American national security. Inouye reasoned that the Soviets would exploit domestic upheaval. Liman also raised a similar point during a forum at Tufts in October 1988, suggesting that Reagan could not seek détente with the Soviets if the hearings hamstrung the White House. In 1990, Liman argued that pursuing impeachment "could have sacrificed whatever opportunity there was to try to establish some new order with the Soviet Union." Committee members had worried about impeachment's effect on arms control from the outset, maintaining they had a duty to resolve the matter in a timely fashion for the sake of Reagan's Cold War policy—for the country's security. Reagan thus became the indispensable man—beloved by the public, respected by Congress, and engaged in major arms control negotiations. The Cold War was at stake, and Congress factored in the exorbitant cost of domestic politics. Iran-Contra would not be another Watergate.[14]

A foreign policy scandal is different. Watergate involved abuses of presidential power for personal, domestic political gain. Reagan's fiasco emerged from excessive covert operations undertaken in what the president determined as the national interest. Haynes Johnson, the prominent *Washington Post* journalist, identified this distinction early in the congressional inquiry. Nixon's "pursuit of political power" created Watergate; Nixon's scandal was domestic

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[12] Seymour Hersh, "The Iran-Contra Committees: Did They Protect Reagan?," *New York Times Magazine*, April 29, 1990; On these points, Chief counsel for the Senate Arthur Liman responded in an op-ed to explain why Reagan wasn't impeached, see Arthur L. Liman, "Road to Impeachment Requires Evidence," *New York Times*, May 3, 1990, A26 and Liman, Letters to the Editor, *New York Times Magazine*, May 20, 1990, 13.

[13] On Reagan and Gorbachev, see Robert Service, *The End of the Cold War*, 1985-1991 (New York: Public Affairs, 2015); James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of The End of the Cold War* (New York: Viking, 2009).

[14] As the first to recognize the Cold War influence, James G. Hershberg argues that the Select Committee sought to expedite the hearings out of concern for arms control. See Hershberg, "National Insecurity: How the Red Menace derailed the contragate probe," *Boston Phoenix*, February 3 - 9, Vol 18. Issue 5, 1989, 10 and 16; Liman told Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh that the committee had a responsibility to holding the hearings in a timely manner in order to "not leave a cloud over the president" as he negotiated with the Soviet Union, see Liman, *Lawyer*, 312; Liman quoted from Seymour Hersh, "The Iran-Contra Committees: Did They Protect Reagan?," *New York Times Magazine*, April 29, 1990;

in nature, a corruption of executive institutions for political purposes. Whereas Reagan's aims of eradicating communism on the Central American isthmus and rescuing American hostages in Lebanon resulted in his staff "adopting an end-justifies-the-means philosophy to accomplish policy objectives." The conduct of foreign policy defined Iran-Contra. Reagan had noble goals of saving hostages and reorienting the relationship between the US and Iran. His implementation, however, called for investigation and potential punishments—legal or political. The interaction between Congress and Reagan determined the resolution. Republicans abjured impeachment. House Minority Leader Michel "didn't hear any" discussions about it in the caucus or think Reagan had violated laws. The Democratic majority held the prerogative of initiating impeachment proceedings; they declined. That the scandal stemmed from the realm of foreign policy affected their decision to pursue fact-finding inquiries and public hearings while dispensing with impeachment.[15]

A year after the hearings, Senators William S. Cohen and George J. Mitchell, who served on the Senate Select Committee, published their bipartisan view on the particularity of Iran-Contra. "A foreign-policy mistake," they submitted, "did not demand a political beheading." Reagan obtained political absolution from his character, popularity, and "the perceived transgression" of Iran-Contra. Unlike Nixon, Reagan "confessed ignorance and offered openness," sharing documents with Congress and waiving executive privilege. The American public also liked Reagan as an individual. And, above all, committee members determined that Reagan made "a foreign-policy error of major proportions" but had not committed impeachable offenses. "Most Committee members," they revealed, "doubted form the very beginning that Poindexter or North would contradict the President's often repeated declaration that he was unaware of the diversion scheme." Without persuasive evidence, the committee both rejected an outright impeachment and preferred Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh to address any criminal matters involved. They understood the affair solely as a case of foreign policy malpractice, a clash between the president and Congress over conducting foreign policy. As Cohen and Mitchell argued, "precisely because the sale of weapons to Iran and the diversion of money to the Contras were *perceived* as misguided abuses of process rather than arrogant abuses of power, the central parallel to Watergate failed to take hold." The committee promptly "dismissed as the wishful thinking of irresponsible partisans" any references to Watergate and impeachment.[16]

Congressional Reactions II: SSCI and Forming the Joint Select Committees

Congress investigated the affair and convened a series of hearings that served myriad purposes, from revelatory fact-finding to being a forum for both political theater and critical debates about a president's proper role in foreign policy. It began with inquiries by both the House Foreign Affairs and Intelligence Committees and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, culminating with the Joint Select Committee to investigate Iran-Contra. The House initiated closed sessions from December 9 - 11, 1986, and the SSCI launched a preliminary inquiry on December 1. The House hearings merged into the Joint Select Committee that formed

[15] Haynes Johnson, "A Scandal, but Not a Watergate: Similarities to Watergate Era are Striking but Superficial," *Washington Post*, December 4, 1986, A54; For Robert Michel's comments, see page 24 of Robert H. Michel interview by Robert Remini, January 19, 2005. Robert H. Michel Papers, Interfile: Personal, f. 2005 Interview, Robert H. Michael Papers, Dirksen Congressional Center, Pekin, Illinois.

[16] William S. Cohen and George J. Mitchell, *Men of Zeal: A Candid Inside Story of the Iran-Contra Hearings* (New York: Viking, 1988), 43-50.

at the start of the 100th Congress. The SSCI published their findings on January 29, 1987, and released the evidence to the Joint Select Committee. Neither committee received stunning admissions from Poindexter and North, who appeared and invoked the Fifth Amendment on advice on their counsels. Despite offering silence, members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee praised North and Poindexter. Florida Democratic Representative Daniel A. Mica remarked that "North has acted in what he thought was the best interest of the country" even though "laws may have been broken." The SSCI, meanwhile, gathered in a soundproof room nestled in the Hart Building to interview 36 witnesses over a span of two weeks and review several thousand documents. What they uncovered invited controversy and presaged the coming dramatics.[17]

The SSCI report contained a "damning vindication" of Reagan and spurred partisan wrangling over its release. SSCI ascertained from testimony and documents that Reagan lacked knowledge of the diversion and his staff had acted beyond his control. Staff director of the SSCI Bernard F. McMahon informed the White House that evidence exculpated Reagan of the diversion offense. The report may have even exonerated the president of conducting an arms-for-hostages scheme. White House Counsel Peter Wallison thought it could affirm Reagan's stated aim of a strategic opening with Iran. Wallison previewed a copy of the draft report. It argued that former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane pitched the initiative to Reagan as breakthrough diplomacy with Iran and tasked North, who cared only about rescuing hostages, with facilitating the plan. The operation quickly devolved into arms-for-hostages, and the NSC staff kept the details from Reagan. The tentative explanation did not incorporate North and Poindexter's testimony. It could, though, give Reagan a credible document to reference in his defense. David Durenberger, the chair of SSCI, briefed Reagan on the findings before completing the report. "I didn't cover anything up," Reagan recorded in his diary afterward. Voting 7-6, however, the SSCI withheld the report. Disagreement erupted between members. Patrick Leahy, the vice chairman of the SSCI, opposed a rushed release, suggesting Reagan "would like a report that says they didn't trade arms for hostages ... But they're not going to get it."[18]

Those public comments belied Leahy's support for the presidency. During Donald Regan's closed hearing, Leahy claimed a bipartisan consensus existed on preserving Reagan's ability to conduct foreign policy. Leahy maintained "that this should well be wrapped up, finished, and f[ou]nd out, because it is a foreign policy disaster." Leahy, in fact, leaked the draft report to NBC News, which selectively broadcast sensational portions on January 8, leading to Leahy's resignation from the SSCI. The leaked draft focused the media's attention intently on the arms-for-hostages and diversion aspects, reflecting poorly on Reagan. Eventually, the committee

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[17] John Felton, "Reagan, Hill Move to Deal With Arms Scandal." *CQ Weekly* (December 6, 1986): 3007-12; "A Parade of Witnesses to Capitol Hill." *CQ Weekly* (December 13, 1986): 3041; John Felton, "Witnesses Invoke the Fifth Amendment But Get First-Rate Congressional Praise." *CQ Weekly* (December 13, 1986): 3042-43: United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence. *Preliminary inquiry into the sale of arms to Iran and possible diversion of funds to the Nicaraguan Resistance*, S. Rep. No. 7, 100th Cong., 1st Sess. 36 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), III-IV.

[18] Jacob V. Lamar Jr., "Mixed Blessing: A Senate Report Provides a Damning Vindication for Reagan," *Time*, Vol. 129 No. 3, January 19, 1987, 16-17; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 461; John Felton, "Iran-'Contra' Deals: Looking for Answers." *CQ Weekly* (December 13, 1986): 3039-47; John Felton, "Congress Presses Its Inquiries Into Iran Deal." *CQ Weekly* (December 20, 1986): 3091-94; John Felton, "Report Confirms Arms-for-Hostages Goal." *CQ Weekly* (January 10, 1987): 88; Steven Pressman, "Partisanship Marks Launching of Iran Panels." *CQ Weekly* (January 10, 1987): 87-90; John Felton, "Draft Report: Finding Fault With Reagan Aides." *CQ Weekly* (January 24, 1987): 149; For Peter Wallison's recounting of the SSCI draft report episode, see Wallison, *Ronald Reagan*, 211-235.

published a revised version. It contained only an overview of the Iranian initiative without any conclusions.[19]

The Senate formed the Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition on January 6, 1987, and the House created the Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran the following day. The committees joined to investigate Iran-Contra, setting deadlines of August for hearings and November for publishing a report. The formation contained elements of bipartisanship. In practice, however, the committee would supply a venue for partisan theatrics regardless of best intentions.

Byrd worked closely with Robert Dole to form the Senate committee. Byrd selected the cast of moderate and liberal Democrats Daniel Inouye, David Boren, Sam Nunn, George Mitchell, Howell Heflin, and Paul Sarbanes. Dole appointed conservative and liberal Republicans Warren Rudman, James McClure, Orrin Hatch, William Cohen, and Paul Trible. On December 16, Byrd and Dole publicly announced members together. It showed Senate bipartisanship and an agreement on expedited hearings in the national interest. In responding to reporters, Byrd explained why the proposed Iran-Contra committee diverged from the Watergate committee in its chronological arrangement. The Watergate committee investigated for a year. Because of this scandal's nature, the Iran-Contra committee would work expeditiously. Watergate "was a matter involving domestic politics in the main," Byrd said. "But, here we have foreign policy involved," Byrd continued, "We have national security policy involved. We have a situation which covers several countries and spans several continents... [a]nd so we have a far different matter, and we have this nation's credibility and its standing in the world involved here."[20]

The bipartisan press junket continued. On December 17, Byrd and Dole appeared on *Good Morning America* and *CBS Morning News* to discuss the committee's bipartisan composition. Circumspect, Byrd stated that he preferred Democrats to "not rush to judgment" in seeking a fair and thorough process, describing his approach to appointments as "very unpartisan." Dole concurred with Byrd's sentiments, referring to the Democratic members as "excellent choices." Dole had selected his members based on their collegiality, legal training, and willingness to "expedite this hearing to get the facts out." Knowing a politically volatile situation awaited, Byrd and Dole prudently selected members to ensure a punctual, detailed, and legitimate process.[21]

In the House, the committee makeup featured a mixture of sober-minded legislators and fierce partisans. Reagan would have defenders and detractors alike adjudicating his scandal.

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[19] Stephen Engelberg, "Iran-Contra Hearings; Senator Leahy Says He Leaked Report of Panel," *New York Times*, July 29, 1987, A1; For Leahy's comments, see page 88-89 of Donald T. Regan's testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Thursday, December 16, 1986, in Box 207, Folder 5, Donald T. Regan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (Hereafter LOC); United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence. *Preliminary inquiry into the sale of arms to Iran and possible diversion of funds to the Nicaraguan Resistance*, S. Rep. No. 7, 100th Cong., 1st Sess. 36 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987): For Ronald Reagan's initialed personal copy of the SSCI report, see Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Report on Iran and accompanying notes from David L. Chew, January 29, 1987, #45914255, CO017, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (Hereafter RRPL).

[20] See Press Release, Tuesday, December 16, 1986; Transcript, Good Morning America, Interview With Senator Robert Byrd and Senator Robert Dole, Interviewed by Joan Lunden and Steve Bell, Tuesday, December 16, 1986, located in Box 091; Folder "Iran Contra 1988"; Archival; Press Series; Robert C. Byrd Center for Congressional History and Education, Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

[21] See the following: Wednesday, December 17, 1986; Transcript, CBS Morning News, Interview Senator Robert Byrd and Senator Robert Dole, Interviewed by Sandy Hill, Wednesday, December 17, 1986 located in Box 091; Folder "Iran Contra 1988"; Archival; Press Series; Robert C. Byrd Center for Congressional History and Education, Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Speaker of the House Wright assembled a mixture of liberal and moderate Democrats, a majority of them were committee chairs, for his "special blue-ribbon committee." Wright initially called on Jack Brooks, the irascible Texan, to chair the House committee before settling on Lee Hamilton as the consensus choice for his "reputation for reason and fair play." Brooks nonetheless joined the committee as the designated Democratic rabble-rouser. In addition to Hamilton and Brooks, Wright selected Peter Rodino, Dante Fascell, Les Aspin, Louis Stokes, Tom Foley, Ed Jenkins, and Edward Boland, the namesake for the amendments allegedly violated. Wright aimed to preempt a "partisan witch hunt" with his appointments. House Minority Leader Michel, on the other hand, appointed bona fide conservative supporters of the president. Michel selected Richard Cheney as ranking member, elevating his profile. Michel yielded authority to Cheney, relying on the Wyoming Republican to oversee the House Republicans' involvement in the inquiry. Michel also chose two staunch Reaganites in William Broomfield and Henry Hyde, as well as young firebrands Jim Courter, Michael DeWine, and Bill McCollum. Michel ensured Reagan had supporters on the House Select Committee to prevent Democratic members from using the hearings to undermine Reagan's administration.[22]

Although comprised of joint committees, partisan differences on investigating Iran-Contra split between the institutional bodies and political parties. The Senate embraced bipartisanship. Stalwarts of the Senate, Byrd and especially Inouye, who chaired the Senate Select Committee, strived for congressional amity and fair procedures in the interest of the country, a product of their reverence for America's political institutions, particularly the presidency. Byrd adopted a bipartisan stance on the issue as soon as Reagan disclosed the diversion. His press conference notes are illustrative of his thinking. "This is not a partisan matter," he wrote," It affects the whole country and the institution of the presidency." Informed by his Watergate committee service, Inouye chaired the Senate committee with a similar disposition. He categorically rejected subpoenaing Reagan. The spectacle of Reagan testifying proved too much for the institutionalist who preferred unity over division. "This would have torn the country, just ripped it apart," Inouye remarked on the possibility. Crucially, Inouye named Warren Rudman vice-chair of the Senate committee and merged the staff to create a bipartisan committee with legitimacy. Republicans would be "full partners."[23]

The House, however, experienced a complicated formation, replete with bipartisan concern for the presidency and partisan intentions. Wright and Michel agreed on creating one House panel and joining with the Senate to avert the "circus atmosphere" they fretted would plague the chambers. While Wright carefully appointed his members and sought bipartisanship, he publicly castigated Reagan for damaging the relationship between Congress and the president. Reagan's failure to inform Congress about the Iranian operations agitated Wright far more than any other aspect. Wright aimed for the hearings to restore the partnership between the executive and legislative branches, a co-equal approach to foreign policy without diminishing the executive. "The nation does not want an imperial presidency," he said, "but [it] does not want or need an

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[22] Brendan and Tim McNulty, *The Meanest Man in Congress: Jack Brooks and the Making of an American Century* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2019), 380-381; Andrew J. Taylor, "Leading the Minority: Guiding Policy Change through Legislative Waters," in eds. Frank H. Mackaman and Sean Q. Kelly, *Robert H. Michel: Leading the Republican House Minority* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2019) 121; Wright, *Balance of Power*, 438, 441-442; Jim Wright, *Worth It All: My War for Peace* (New York: Brassey's, 1993), 88.

[23] See 11/26/1986 notes in Box 091; Folder "Iran Contra 1988"; Archival; Press Series; Robert C. Byrd Center for Congressional History and Education, Shepherdstown, West Virginia; Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 334-335; Warren B. Rudman, *Combat: Twelve Years in the U.S. Senate* (New York: Random House, 1996), 113; Cohen and Mitchell, *Men of Zeal*, 22-23.

enfeebled presidency" either. Hamilton, though, neglected to name Cheney as vice chair of the House committee and permitted separate staff, a fatal miscalculation. Republicans harbored reservations about serving on what could become a vehicle for undermining Reagan. Yet their involvement was necessary to guarantee political balance and a hasty conclusion. "If we don't pull this thing out, it will be back to 1974 again and Watergate and the devastation of the Republican Party," Congressman Henry Hyde predicted. Although Michel staffed "scrappy people," Cheney did not want his "colleagues to go to war immediately." Still, Senators "feared the worst" about merging committees, for the allure of partisanship was too strong. With the Joint Select Committee on Iran-Contra underway, Reagan's political survival entailed managing the hearings and restoring his credibility with the American public.[24]

The Road to Recovery and Establishing Political Security I: The Tower Commission

Reagan reconstituted the NSC, supported an independent counsel, and convened the Tower Commission to mitigate the spiraling scandal stymieing his presidency. Salvaging the remaining two years of his term, however, required both a coherent process for managing the Iran-Contra investigations and Reagan issuing a *mea culpa* to America. Reagan resolved the former before addressing the latter. Consumed by the ongoing political crisis, White House staff formulated a plan to reassert Reagan's leadership. By mid-December, they had decided that the exacting situation demanded a special Iran-Contra unit to handle the independent counsel and congressional investigations, with a special counselor to oversee it.[25]

In a memorandum to Regan, Assistant to the President William Henkel raised two lessons from Nixon's approach to Watergate that had bearing on creating the unit. Beyond the cover-up, Watergate demonstrated that failing to recognize the gravity of the situation early on and then belatedly misallocating resources to issues outside of the White House's influence sabotaged Nixon's response. Reagan thus had to focus his efforts on what he could change. Above all, Reagan needed an individual with "an independent perspective" to exert authority and skillfully address Iran-Contra. Reagan, Henkel wrote, "can rebuild his special relationship with the American people if we efficiently manage the Iran issue while he leads the country."

Drawing on his Nixon administration experience, White House Communications Director Patrick Buchanan provided a solution. He advocated for "a Special Counsellor, with a rank comparable to the Chief of Staff, a lawyer-politician who can handle the entire Irangate franchise." Buchanan's memorandum spurred action. Reagan set about selecting someone with political and legal experience to join the White House as the principal coordinator for his response to Iran-Contra.[26]

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[24] Rudman, *Combat*, 126; Steven Pressman, "Hill Tries to Avoid a 'Circus Atmosphere' By Consolidating Each Chamber's Probes," *CQ Weekly* (December 6, 1986): 3008-9; John Felton, "Reagan, Hill Move to Deal With Arms Scandal," *CQ Weekly* (December 6, 1986): 3007-12; Steven Pressman, "Reagan Inquiry: A Hot Spot for Republicans," *CQ Weekly* (February 7, 1987): 231-35; Bernard Weinraub, "New Speaker Faults Reagan on Iran," *New York Times*, January 10, 1987, A6; Karen Tumulty and Sara Fritz, "Democrat-Led Senate Creates Special Panel," *Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 1987, B1.

[25] Memo, The Communications Group to Donald T. Regan, "Iran - A Strategy/General Observations," December 5, 1986, Folder "Iran [Iran Contra](6)," Box 14, Series IV: Issues File, Dennis W. Thomas Files, RRPL.

[26] Memo, William Henkel to Donald T. Regan, "Special White House Unit for Iran," December 10, 1986, Folder: "Iran [Iran Contra] (5)," Box 14, Series IV: Issues File, Dennis W. Thomas Files, RRPL; Memo, Patrick Buchanan to Donald T. Reagan, "Iran/Contragate," December 19, 1986, ID # 484001, CO071, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL; Memo, Patrick Buchanan to Donald T. Reagan, December 19, 1986, ID# 469117, CO071, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

On December 26, 1986, Reagan appointed David M. Abshire, the Ambassador to NATO, to Special Counselor to the President for "all aspects of the Iran matter," a three-month post for streamlining the White House response to the scandal. A veteran of the Korean War, Abshire had a distinguished career as a congressional staffer and at the State Department before becoming NATO Ambassador. Abshire also previously declined an offer to assist Nixon with congressional relations during Watergate, chiefly because he viewed Nixon as dishonest. Donald Regan offered the Special Counselor position to Abshire on December 19, an appointment Abshire wisely placed conditions on, including a Cabinet rank and his own legal deputy. Reagan called Abshire on December 26 to secure his position. "David," the president said, "I want your help in carrying out my commitment to get out all of the facts […] I want to ensure that there will be no cover-up." On hearing Reagan's candid request, Abshire accepted and promised "to keep the presidency strong."[27]

Abshire assumed his key role on January 5, 1987, inaugurating a dual track process for navigating the Iran-Contra matter, whereby Reagan and his staff concentrated on domestic and foreign policy while Abshire spearheaded the president's cooperation with the independent counsel, Joint Select Committee, and the Tower Commission. Abshire's role made an important contribution to Reagan's political recovery. He proved crucial in assisting Reagan restore the presidency. While coordinating with Congress and Independent Counsel Walsh, Abshire helped guide Reagan through his own punishing presidential commission, in which their critical findings about the NSC and Iranian initiative both reprimanded the president and offered him a chance to redeem himself.[28]

On February 27, 1987, the Tower Commission issued their report on the NSC, a product of a three-month inquiry in which John Tower, Edmund Muskie, and Brent Scowcroft examined evidence and conducted interviews. The board developed "a broad historical perspective." They based their report on interviews with former presidents, vice presidents, secretaries of state, defense secretaries, CIA directors, and former national security advisors, as well as twelve historical case studies. The board also constructed a narrative of the Iranian initiative using documents and testimony, including from Reagan and Bush, which created a case study for them to use for their recommendations. Poindexter, North, and Richard Secord declined to participate. McFarlane had attempted suicide before his interview. He eventually spoke to interviewers from the Bethesda Naval Hospital. Casey suffered two cerebral seizures in mid-December, resulting from a brain tumor. He remained in recovery and unable to talk. Nonetheless, a lack of subpoena power, curtailed testimony, and an inability to force non-government agencies to relinquish documents hampered their progress and scope. Still, Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft labored diligently under the constraints to analyze the voluminous material on Iran-Contra, dividing their tasks between politics, legal, and process, respectively. Reagan allowed two fourteen-day extensions for the board to finish. Reagan's cooperation and acceptance of the findings tested him.[29]

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[27] Ronald Reagan, "Appointment of David Abshire as Special Counsellor to the President," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/257550; David M. Abshire, *Saving the Reagan Presidency: Trust is the Coin of the Realm* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 12-13, 19-24; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 462-463.

[28] On two-track process, see Memo, David M. Abshire to Thomas Gibson, "Talking Points on Iran-Contra Affair for Use by Cabinet Members," February 18, 1987, ID# 483992, CO071, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL; See also Memo, Donald T. Regan to Ronald W. Reagan, "Planning for 1987," January 6, 1987, Box 213, Folder 10, Donald T. Regan Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC; Wallison, *Ronald Reagan*, 164-165.

[29] John Tower, Brent Scowcroft, and Edmund S. Muskie, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the*

Reagan's interaction with the Tower Commission was worrisome. On January 26, 1987, Reagan testified in the Oval Office. Displaying limited knowledge about the affair, Reagan nevertheless admitted to authorizing the August 1985 shipment of TOW missiles, even though he previously informed Wallison three times that he had not done so. Wallison thought Reagan had read McFarlane's congressional testimony, in which he claimed Reagan had approved the shipment in advance. Reagan would testify again on February 11. Beforehand, Wallison sent a memorandum to Reagan arguing that the Iranian initiative was an arms-for-hostages deal in an attempt to persuade Reagan. Wallison and Abshire prepped Reagan for his second interview, during which the president contended that he had authorized the arms shipment after the fact. Wallison had prepared an *aide-mémoire* on the matter for Reagan. Regrettably and astonishingly, Reagan read directly from it the interview. "At that point," Abshire recalled, "Tower's jaw went slack, the faces of Scowcroft and Muskie drained, and my heart skipped." Afterward, Reagan told Wallison and Abshire that he truly possessed no recollection of the decision in question. They sought to resolve the "muddled record." The before *or* after the fact authorization discrepancy created a potential catastrophe for Reagan, if not rectified. The public would perceive a cover-up. Abshire coordinated with Tower for Reagan to personally communicate with the board. Reagan submitted a handwritten statement clarifying his position. "I don't remember—period," Reagan wrote. Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft absorbed Reagan's testimony into their record. They produced a critical report that affected not only the NSC, but also Reagan's recovery.[30]

Iran-Contra, the report argues, was a case of "the perils of policy pursued outside the constraints of orderly process." The Tower Commission rebuked Reagan's leadership, indicted NSC behavior, and confirmed that the president was unaware of operational details. Reagan had presided over a ramshackle policy process, an informal one without reviews, vetting, or regard for legal questions. "The result," the board concluded, "was an unprofessional and, in substantial part, unsatisfactory operation." Their report found that Reagan's management style failed and his NSC principals acted improperly. Reagan should have directed the process, the report contended, demanding accountability and ordering reviews of the risky operations. His "intense compassion for the hostages" had influenced his judgment for the worse. The president ignored Congress. Moreover, the NSC directly controlled operations instead of the CIA, State, and Defense. Reagan's senior advisors also received critical appraisal. NSC staff were derelict in their duty to

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President's Special Review Board (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987), i-ii, I-1-I-3; Bartholomew Sparrow, *The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 249-251, 257; For interview summaries and case studies, see the following, Folder "Case Studies AOD 1193," Box 93222, President's Special Review Board (Tower Board) Records, 1986-1987, RRPL; Folder "[Case Studies - Summaries Wise Men - Lesson Learned Scowcroft] 1/2," Box 93222, President's Special Review Board (Tower Board) Records, 1986-1987, RRPL; Folder "[Case Studies - Summaries Wise Men - Lesson Learned Scowcroft] 2/2," Box 93222, President's Special Review Board (Tower Board) Records, 1986-1987, RRPL; and the four folders from the Wise Men Master book, see Folder "Case Studies Wise Men Master Book AOD 1193," Box 93224, President's Special Review Board (Tower Board) Records, 1986-1987, RRPL; On McFarlane's suicide attempt, see Robert C. McFarlane, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell & Davies, 1994), Chapter 18; On Casey's illness, see Joseph E. Persico, *Casey: The Lives and Secrets of William J. Casey: from the OSS to the CIA* (New York: Viking, 1990), 550-553, 572-573.

[30] Abshire and Wallison recount the briefings and interviews in vivid detail. See Abshire, *Saving the Reagan Presidency*, 118-125 and Wallison, *Ronald Reagan*, 243-272; Reagan did speak with the board about NSC process. Wallison provided Reagan with talking points on the NSC staff's role in policymaking. See Memo, Peter J. Wallison to Ronald W. Reagan, "Talking Points for Tower Board Meeting," January 23, 1987, Folder "PJ Wallison Chron January 1987 [Memos to the President] (1)," Box OA 14289, Peter J. Wallison Files, RRPL.

ensure an orderly process. Poindexter engaged in subterfuge. Shultz and Weinberger "distanced themselves" and "were not energetic" in dissuading Reagan from advancing a harebrained operation. Casey had abdicated his responsibility for vetting intelligence and briefing Congress. Donald Regan, the report stated, "must bear primary responsibility for the chaos that descended upon the White House," a condemnation that sealed his fate. On the charges of cover-up, the board judged Reagan as striving to allow "the full story to be told." The Tower Report delivered a verdict. Reagan displayed flawed judgment and poor leadership on the matter, but he escaped the most serious charges of diverting funds and covering up the scheme.[31]

The Tower Commission, for their part, empowered the NSC, returning the agency to its "honest broker" advisory role under the supervision of Carlucci and his deputy Powell. Applying the lessons of twelve historical case studies, and incorporating the experience of former senior policymakers, Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft eschewed radical changes to the NSC. Rather, the board maintained "that NSC structures and processes must be flexible, not rigid." They recommended better management from the president and national security advisor using the NSC's traditional structure organized around a small, competent staff focused on inter-agency cooperation and providing advice. The board also suggested an expanded role of legal counsel for the NSC. Yet they maintained that the national security advisor should remain exempt from Senate confirmation—independent and accountable only to the president.[32]

Scowcroft used his position on the commission to perfect the role of the national security advisor on paper. Stephen J. Hadley, a national security advisor for President George W. Bush, served as Counsel on the Tower Commission, completing 20 drafts of these recommendations under Scowcroft's supervision. "Brent was the driving force in using the 'Tower Commission' report to defend the system as an instrument of Presidential prerogative," Hadley later said. Carlucci and Powell relied on the report as an "owner's manual" when they restored the NSC: downsizing staff, shuttering directorates, removing the agency from operations, and imposing an orderly inter-agency process. Reagan issued National Security Decision Directive 266 on March 31, 1987, to codify the report's guidance. Scowcroft thus instituted few reforms when he assumed control of the NSC during the George H.W. Bush administration. Carlucci had implemented his recommendations and revived the NSC.[33]

The Tower Commission bequeathed a twofold legacy of institutional and political consequence. Reagan appointed the board as a means for transparency and reform. Possessing a bipartisan consensus about the agency's purpose and organization, the board produced a classic guidebook for the NSC process and generated a restoration of the agency lasting into the post-Cold War era. Steeped in reverence for the presidency and inter-agency process, the Tower Commission absolved Reagan of chief responsibility for the diversion while criticizing his

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[31] Tower, Scowcroft, and Muskie, *The Tower Commission Report*, Section IV.

[32] Tower, Scowcroft, and Muskie, *The Tower Commission Report*, part V.

[33] Jon Gans, *White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019), 87-88; David J. Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 252-259; Stephen J. Hadley, "The Role and Importance of the National Security Advisor," Address at the Scowcroft Legacy Conference at the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs at Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, April 26, 2016; See page 11 of Brent Scowcroft, interview by Philip Zelikow and James H. McCall, August 10-11, 2000, Washington D.C., George H.W. Bush Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/george-h-w-bush; National Security Decision Directive Number 266, "Implementation of the Recommendations of the President's Special Review Board," March 31, 1987, RAC Box 11, Executive Secretariat, NSC: National Security Decision Directives (NSDD): Records, 1981-1987, RRPL.

management, lending a helping-hand to an imperiled presidency and compromised NSC. Tower explicitly stated their purpose to staff. "Look," Hadley recalled in an interview, "our job is to give the president of the United States a punch in the stomach." Shortly after releasing the report, Scowcroft confirmed at a Washington dinner his reasoning for reaffirming the president and NSC's role in national security. "[I]f I were advising Admiral Poindexter and he had told the President about the diversion," Scowcroft explained, "I would advise him to say that he hadn't." The presidency must survive to ensure stable foreign policymaking.[34]

Upon receiving the Tower Report, Reagan avoided immediately commenting on its substance. "I intend to read and digest it first," he said, "think carefully about its findings, and promptly act on its recommendations." Consequentially for Reagan, the Tower Board's conclusions inspired his *mea culpa* speech on March 4, 1987. His tortured path to the crucial speech, however, began in the aftermath of appointing the board, a step-by-step undertaking that required him to examine his role in the affair and accept the arms-for-hostages label.[35]

The Road to Recovery and Establishing Political Security II: Reagan's *Mea Culpa*

Reagan developed political security from congressional consensus, investigatory cooperation, inter-agency reform, and, above all, delivering a persuasive public apology. Reagan's passage to political absolution, though, was fraught with resistance related to his legendary stubbornness. Reagan's paradoxical approach to surmounting the scandal consisted of taking action to promote transparency and institute reform while refusing to both accept the policy objective of arms-for-hostages and admit he mistakenly permitted the initiative. Reagan's public apology was imperative to his political survival. Frustrated and stubborn, Regan resisted pressure from within the White House and in Congress to offer one. As Reagan's intransigence had embroiled him further in the scandal, his reluctance to issue a *mea culpa*—from the disclosure of the diversion until the conclusion of the Tower Commission—restrained his ability to contain the scandal. Reagan gradually recognized the error of his ways. Several factors prompted Reagan to rethink his position: interacting with the Tower Board and consuming their findings; declining poll numbers and a loss of the public's trust; consistent sage counsel from staff; and Nancy Reagan's persistent cajoling. These factors convinced Reagan to reverse his position, a synergy of sound advice and revelation.

Reagan encountered pleas and requests for him to admit fault for the Iran operations without implicating himself in the diversion. Wallison and Regan had counseled Reagan to confess to the public that he mistakenly authorized the Iran initiative. John F. Kennedy's *mea culpa* following the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion offered the perfect historical analogy. It could work. Reagan steadfastly refused. Congressional Republicans, too, wanted Reagan to accept responsibility himself. When the news of the Iran initiative had reached bylines and the airwaves, then-Senate Majority Leader Dole offered prescient advice: "The president ought to admit that a mistake was made and move on to something else." Republicans who served on the House Select Committees

[34] See Stephen J. Hadley remarks on the legacy of the Tower Commission, page 12 of Stephen J. Hadley, interview by Russell Riley and Seyom Brown, October 31-November 1, 2011, Washington D.C., George W. Bush Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/george-w-bush; Scowcroft and Tower quoted from Sparrow, *The Strategist*, 258 and 260.

[35] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Receiving the Final Report of the President's Special Review Board on the National Security Council, February 26, 1987," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252126.

made appeals, too. Congressman Michael DeWine encouraged Reagan to speak directly to the American public and admit his error. Congressman Henry Hyde urged Reagan to acknowledge the mistake. "If he is going to take credit for salutary developments in foreign policy," Hyde said, "then he has to take the blame for the bad ones." Hyde proposed to Abshire that he should convince Reagan to use his 1987 State of the Union Address as a venue for such an apology. Republican Senator Orrin G. Hatch made a similar suggestion to Reagan's staff. A consensus built between Republicans in the White House and on Capitol Hill that solving Reagan's political crisis was within his power. He only had to vocalize what his actions suggested.[36]

Reagan, for too long, firmly believed that the arms component was a condition for rapprochement, a belief reinforced by his unrelenting concern for the hostages and stubborn regard for his version of events. Abshire used his first private meeting with Reagan to discuss the public's belief that Reagan actively covered-up the affair because it was an arms-for-hostages operation. Abshire explained the "perception problem" to no avail. "Dave," Reagan declared, "I don't care if I'm the only person in America that does not believe—I *don't* believe it was arms for hostages." Reagan's jarring admission demonstrated his counterproductive conviction and disinclination to taking the path of least political resistance. Reagan's personal letters during this period reflected a similar capacity for stubbornness. Reagan described the press as a "lynch mob" seeking to "tighten the rope around [his] neck" despite his honest forthcoming. Accusations of cover-up haunted Reagan, for he had informed the public, appointed the Tower Board, and endorsed an independent counsel. Reagan's frustration appears in the text. "I don't know one d—n thing more than I told them," he wrote to Clark Mollenhoff, a journalist and attorney who served as Special Counsel to Nixon. Reagan expressed a particular displeasure that the scandal had disrupted "something good going that could have established a relationship with some responsible people in Iran." Reagan denied knowing about the diversion. He wrote that he approved the operation to open a strategic dialogue with Iran. Reagan could not accept that the Congress, media, and public opposed his policy and found him dishonest.[37]

Reagan's intransigence continued to stem from a sincere belief in his policy objectives. Reagan expressed these views privately to friends. Writing to Laurence W. Beilenson, a Hollywood attorney and long-time associate, Reagan argued that moderate Iranians had approached the US, prompting a dialogue that consisted of "a token arms sale" as an act of good faith, which, in turn, inspired Iran to secure the release of American hostages to demonstrate "concrete evidence" of their commitment to anti-terrorism. Reagan cited Western Europe and the Communist Bloc's arms sales to Iran and Iraq as counterevidence to the significance of American sales to the Iran-Iraq war. The press, of course, accused him of a cover-up regardless of his efforts to uncover the truth. Reagan would convey similar points to former President Jimmy Carter.[38]

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[36] Wallison, *Ronald Reagan*, 8, 92-93, 155-156, 169, 189-190; John Felton and Steven Pressman, "Hill Drumbeats Increase for a Reagan Apology." *CQ Weekly* (January 17, 1987): 109-13; John Felton, "Reagan's Iran Deal: The Skepticism Builds." *CQ Weekly* (November 22, 1986): 2927-28; David E. Rosenbaum, "Supporters Say President Owes Apology on Iran," *New York Times*, January 14, 1987, A1.

[37] Abshire, *Saving the Reagan Presidency*, 88-89; Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to Jaquelin H. Hume, December 3, 1986, Box 17, Folder 267, Presidential Handwriting Files: Series II, RRPL; Letter Ronald W. Reagan to Nackey Loeb, December 4, 1986, Ibid.; Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to Philip B. Crosby Sr., December 8, 1986, Box 17, Folder 268, Presidential Handwriting Files: Series II, RRPL; Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to George Murphy, December 9, 1986, Ibid; Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to Clark Mollenhoff, December 10, 1986, ID# 445092, CO071, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

[38] Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to Laurence W. Beilenson, December 10, 1986, Anne Volz Higgins Collection, Young

Reagan wrote to Carter after witnessing the former president's appearance on CBS. Carter had suggested that Reagan could reveal more information about the Iran initiative. Carter also faulted the policy for "betraying our allies" and "rewarding terrorists." For Carter, Reagan's policy undermined America's relationship with Arab allies who viewed Iran as "a more formidable military power" due to the arms sales. In response, Reagan apologized for not briefing Carter on the matter and offered the same argument that he had given Beilenson. Reagan disputed that "Our shipment of $12 million worth of spare parts and older Tow missiles" could tip the balance of power in the Iran-Iraq war. Reagan also defended himself from charges of hesitancy to publicly disclose all relevant facts. Reagan maintained that "we are doing everything we can to get at the bottom of this." Reagan flatly denied trading arms for hostages. "The matter of whether or not we were trading weapons for hostages," he explained, "again has been fuzzed up in the reporting." That was Reagan's viewpoint, whether expressed in public or private.[39]

Reagan experienced emotional toil, to be sure, a potent mixture of certitude, frustration, and stubbornness. It prevented him from accepting a policy failure and the American public's rejection of it. In late December, Bush suggested to Reagan that evidence indicated they had engaged in arms-for-hostages. Reagan denied the premise of Bush's argument, displaying the counterproductive certitude of his position. As Reagan mulled his public apology, the kidnapping of three additional hostages in mid-January 1987 weighed heavily on his mind. Agitated and angered, he considered launching air strikes on Iran in retaliation. The welfare of hostages was paramount. Reagan's sympathies certainly lay with the hostages, but his strategic ambitions aimed for a moderated Iran and constrained Soviet regional influence. He had, though, confused the order of their importance and prescribed irregular means in the Iranian initiative. His commitment to the hostages had not only precipitated the crisis, but also prolonged his involvement in the affair. It was his overriding concern in national security briefings, a vexing dilemma that his senior advisors and investigators recognized. In an interview with journalist Lou Cannon, Tower Commission member Muskie remarked that "the testimony we got from everybody was that the president was preoccupied with this goddamn problem every day." So, too, did the public's disbelief dismay the president daily.[40]

Reagan's apprehension diminished his public standing. Noble intentions do not mitigate disastrous policy. And the American public understood the distinction. By December 1986, Reagan's approval shockingly declined 21% within a month, from 67 to 47. Reagan had also lost public confidence on foreign policy, with 56% disapproving of his approach. An NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll found that more Americans approved of Carter's Iranian policy than Reagan's. Only half the respondents to another *New York Times*/CBS News poll thought Reagan demonstrated honesty and integrity. Reagan's internal polling reflected a 63%

America's Foundation, Reagan Ranch Center Archives, Santa Barbara, California.

[39] See News transcript attachment and Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to Jimmy Carter, ID# 448153, CO071, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

[40] On George H.W. Bush's conversation with Reagan, see page 60 in Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (Hereafter NARA); See page 21 of the transcript of John Poindexter's background briefing, Background Briefing by Senior Administration Official, November 13, 1986, Box 211, Folder 7, Donald T. Regan Files, Manuscript Division, LOC; Pages 15 and 16 of George Shultz, interview by Stephen F. Knott, Marc Selverstone, and James Sterling, December 18, 2002, Stanford, California, Ibid; Lou Cannon, *President Regan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York Simon & Schuster, 1991), 710.

disapproval of his handling of the scandal in mid-December. The same polling discovered that 75% liked Reagan personally. By mid-January, it showed a 55% general approval rating, with the same 63% disapproving of his handling of the scandal and 79% liking Reagan personally. The 69% who believed Reagan engaged in a cover-up and the 53% who thought he was lying were at issue. The numbers were troublesome.[41]

The credibility crisis burdened and weathered Reagan. "I can't understand why the people don't believe me," he complained to his friend Senator Paul Laxalt. The polling served as a warning. The scandal exacted emotional and political costs. Reagan appeared visibly shaken, and his staff unsettled. Bush encountered a dejected Reagan in the Oval Office on the day of the annual White House Christmas party. "Clearly," Bush recorded in his diary, "this thing is taking a toll on him." With a presidential scandal engulfing the White House, Bush feared that the climate was analogous to Nixon's White House during Watergate. Unlike Nixon, however, Reagan still maintained likability with the public, possessing the skill to restore the presidency and availing himself of the opportunity.[42]

Reagan adopted an incrementalist approach to acknowledging fault. Bush anticipated Reagan's first utterance of "mistakes" by three days, using his December 3 speech at the American Enterprise Institute to admit error. "Clearly mistakes were made," Bush said. His passive statement emerged from a "lively discussion" with the president and staff. Reagan tacitly approved the admission. Bush's speech boosted morale inside the administration. Reagan followed with a radio address on December 6, telling America "it's obvious that the execution of these policies was flawed and mistakes were made." Reagan's own passive reference to mistakes revealed his aversion to criticizing the policy. Implementation was the problem, not the policy itself. His remarks contained the same justifications that he offered Carter. Journalists discerned a shift in his position; they noted he remained wedded to the policy.[43]

Reagan slowly changed his mind. On December 12, in remarks to American Legislative

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[41] See *New York Times*/CBS poll results in Richard J. Meislin, "46% Approve Reagan's Work, Down 21 Points," *New York Times*, December 2, 1986, A1; On NBC New/*Wall Street Journal* Poll, see "Carter Gets Higher Iran Marks than Reagan," *Los Angeles Time*s, December 5, 1986, 2; Adam Clymer, "Poll Finds Reagan's Credibility Continues to Drop," *New York Times*, December 17, 1986; See DMI National Tracking Sheet, Reagan Job Rating: Handling The Iranian Situation, Folder "Iranian Tracking Flesh Results, December 17, 1986," Box 32, David Chew Files, 1985-1988, RRPL; DMI National Tracking Sheet, "Generally Speaking, Do You Like Ronald Reagan Personally," Ibid; On mid-January see DMI National Tracking Sheets in Folder "Iranian Tracking Flash Result January 14, 1987," Box 35, David Chew Files, 1985-1988, RRPL. On Donald Regan tracking internal polling, see Handwritten Notes, Donald T. Regan 12/18/86, in Folder "[Regan Documents 1985-1987 from Legal Task Force - Received by WHORM 5/15/1986] (7)," Box 9, Donald T. Regan Files, Series II: WH Legal Task Force, RRPL.

[42] See page 7 of Paul Laxalt, interview by Stephen F. Knott and James Sterling Young, Tuesday, October 9, 2001, Washington, D.C., Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan; On Bush's interaction with Reagan, see page 50 in Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

[43] See transcript of speech and draft versions in Bush: 12/3/86 AEI Speech; Records of John Q. Barrett, Box 3, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; see also pages 35 and 36 in Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; Reagan, Reagan Diaries, 457; See speech and draft in Folder "12/06/1986 Radio Address: Iran," Box 297, Series I: Speeches, 1981-1988, White House Office of Speechwriting: Research Office: Records, 1981-1989, RRPL; Gerald M. Boyd, "President Admits Flaws in Pursuing Secret Iran Policy," *New York Times*, December 7, 1986, A1; Oswald Johnson, "Reagan Concedes That Aides Made 'Mistakes' on Iran," *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1986, A1.

Exchange Council, Reagan granted "there's no doubt mistakes were made" and reiterated his support for the investigations. At his 1987 State of the Union Address, Reagan expressed "one major regret," in that his Iran initiative failed to "establish contacts with a country of strategic importance." Reagan accepted "full responsibility" for the policy faltering, but he offered neither an apology nor admission that it was arms for hostages. "The goals were worthy," he declared, for saving hostages and advancing American interests in the region were worth the risk. "But we did not achieve what we wished," he conceded, "and serious mistakes were made in trying to do so." Again, the implementation proved disastrous but not the policy's original intent. Reagan appealed to bipartisan consensus to blunt criticism. "Much is at stake here," the president said, "and the Nation and the world are watching to see if we go forward together in the national interest or if we let partisanship weaken us." The American government would advance in the national interest, but Reagan's half measures would not suffice for long, especially in the wake of the Tower Report.[44]

Reagan's interaction with the Tower Commission and Nancy Reagan heavily influenced his decision to publicly admit that he engaged in an arms-for-hostages operation. Reagan's interviews with the Tower Board shattered his illusions about North, the chief malfeasant of the affair. In preparation, Reagan reviewed transcripts showing North had told Iranian officials absurd anecdotes about himself and Reagan bonding at Camp David. Reagan, North claimed, spoke of admiration for the Iranian Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini. Incensed, Reagan exclaimed "that's bullshit, never happened." The evidence of North's duplicity upset Reagan and made him rethink his prior assumptions.[45]

Still, Reagan denied that he had traded arms for hostages in the days before the Tower Report's release. When Treasury Secretary James A. Baker III pressed Reagan to admit a mistake, Reagan again refused to say the operations involved weapons in exchange for hostages. In receiving the Tower Report, Tower briefed Reagan on their findings in the Cabinet Room, advising the president that they found he traded arms for hostages. Reagan denied it. Then, Scowcroft persuasively detailed for Reagan why the initiative was an arms-for-hostages deal. "No question, it became arms for hostages," Reagan finally conceded. Still, Reagan refused to say it publicly. Bush and Regan advised him to use his post-Tower speech for such an occasion. Reagan dismissed their advice. Regan's daily notes describe the president as "dug in."[46]

It would take additional persuading, and Reagan's staff understood the exigency. Prior to the report's release, Abshire devised a plan to capitalize on it to restore the presidency. Abshire encouraged staff to "recognize that the strong Presidency is in great danger" and suggested they had a month "to overcome the danger of a more permanent image of a weakened presidency."

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[44] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a White House Briefing for the American Legislative Exchange Council," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258424; Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252758.

[45] Reagan wrote angrily about the discovery of North's lies to the Iranian in his diary, see Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 474.; See also page 92 in Peter J. Wallison, interview by Jeff Chidester, Stephen F. Knott, Darby Morrisroe, and Christine Nemacheck, October 28-29, 2003, Charlottesville, Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan

[46] Abshire, *Saving the Reagan Presidency*, 129-132; See Handwritten Notes, Donald T. Regan 2/27/87, in Folder "[Regan Documents 1985-1987 from Legal Task Force - Received by WHORM 5/15/1986] (2)," Box 8A, Donald T. Regan Files, Series II: WH Legal Task Force, RRPL; Summary Notes, Oval Office Meeting, February 23, 1987, Folder "Iran [Iran-Contra] (2)," Box 13, Series IV: Issue File, Dennis W. Thomas Files, RRPL.

Asbhire reasoned that congressional partisanship over the hearings would complicate matters thereafter. He urged Reagan to "go beyond the Report" in part by delivering a speech confirming his initiative transformed into trading arms for hostages. After the report's release, Abshire recommended Reagan's speech include a direct acknowledgment of the Iran policy being arms for hostages. "The President," Abshire advised, "must accept responsibility for the whole affair."[47]

Nancy Reagan proved instrumental in ensuring Ronald Reagan's political survival. Nancy worked behind-the-scenes nudging Ronald to accept responsibility and make necessary staff changes. Nancy exercised a clear-eyed vision for how to save the presidency by lending her support to those in the administration who likewise thought that the president should admit fault and comply with investigations. Nancy allied with Abshire and supported his efforts. As political opinion dropped and media attention increased, Nancy lobbied Ronald to admit fault and fire Donald Regan. They argued intensely over the matter. Ronald once yelled at Nancy, "Get off my goddamn back!" Nancy persisted, inviting external counsel to advise her husband on how to move forward, including former Secretary of State William Rogers, former Democratic Party chairman Robert Strauss, former Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver, and Reagan's former political strategist Stu Spencer. Nancy influenced speech writing, too, summoning Ken Khachigian to draft the 1987 State of the Union address, because she lacked confidence in Buchanan. Nancy "handpicked" Landon Parvin to write the *mea culpa* speech. Nancy told Parvin to only "trust" Abshire. She arranged for Parvin's direct access to the president, increasingly the likelihood that Ronald would accept Parvin's speech.[48]

Nancy also scheduled *the* crucial meeting between Ronald, Parvin, Spencer, and none other than the Chair of the Tower Commission. At this key White House meeting, Tower delivered a two-hour "hard truth" lecture about what the commission discovered. He advised the president to come clean. Tears swelled in Tower's eyes. In recalling the exchange, Spencer described Tower as "emotional as hell—Jesus, God, it was a mess." Spencer, for his part, continued lecturing after Tower departed. Reagan would not yield. "Mr. President," Spencer pleaded, "whatever you did, *mea culpa* this. You can survive it." Reagan finally relented. He had a moment of clarity amid the spectacle. And Parvin drafted the speech that restored the presidency.[49]

On March 4, 1987, Reagan addressed the nation about Iran-Contra. Bush had again anticipated Reagan's remarks. Released the previous Friday, Bush's statement on the Tower Report declared that "arms for hostages is wrong." Bush stated that the policy implementation "failed the American people and it failed the President." Reagan went further in his speech, accepting the Tower Report in whole and acknowledging the obvious. "Its findings are honest, convincing, and highly critical" Reagan announced, "and I accept them." Reagan admitted fault.

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[47] Memo, David Asbhire to Donald T Reagan and Frank Carlucci, "Beyond the Tower Board Report," February 19, 1987, Folder "Iran [Iran-Contra] (2)," Box 13, Series IV: Issue File, Dennis W. Thomas Files, RRPL; Memo, David Abshire to Senior Staff, "Post Tower Board Program for the President," February 26, 1987, Folder "Iran [Iran-Contra] (1)," Box 13, Series IV: Issue File, Dennis W. Thomas Files, RRPL.

[48] Abshire, *Saving the Reagan Presidency*, 146-148; On Nancy Reagan's role in the White House response to Iran-Contra, see Karen Tumulty, *The Triumph of Nancy Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), Chapter 21.

[49] On Stu Spencer's recollection of the meeting with John Tower, see pages 82 - 84 of Stuart Spencer, interview by Paul B. Freedman, Stephen F. Knott, Russell L. Riley, and James Sterling Young, November 15 - 16, 2001, Charlottesville, Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan; Chris Whipple, *The Gatekeepers: How the White House Chiefs of Staff Define Every Presidency* (New York: Crown, 2017), 150-152; Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, 734-737.

"I take full responsibility for my own actions and for those of my administration," he said. "A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages," Reagan confessed. "My heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not."[50]

Reagan finally told America what his advisors had pressed him to say for months. His policy for "a strategic opening to Iran deteriorated, in its implementation, into trading arms for hostages." The president declared the Iranian initiative "was a mistake." His address also contained three other significant acknowledgments. He confessed that his emotional investment in the hostages clouded his judgment. He had approved shipping arms to Iran, conceding that he could not "escape responsibility" for the diversion regardless of his lack of knowledge. He spoke of implementing the Tower Report's recommendations in personnel, policy, and process, announcing the addition of former Senator Howard Baker as chief of staff and the nomination of Judge William Webster for CIA Director. He concluded with a comment on "the healthiest way to deal with a problem." For this president: "You take your knocks, you learn your lessons, and then you move on."[51]

Reagan's surprising *mea culpa* allowed the president to assume responsibility for Iran-Contra, distance himself from its most controversial aspects, and return to governing. Reagan incurred blame for a foreign policy mistake committed in what he deemed the national interest. His acceptance resonated with the public and politicians alike. "Even the TV bone pickers who follow the speech with their commentaries said nice things about it," Reagan wrote in his diary. After his speech, Reagan told members of the National Newspaper Association that learning from mistakes was an American trait. Reagan solidified his forgiveness with a March 14 radio address, in which he conceded that Shultz and Weinberger "were right and [he] was wrong" about Iran. At a March 19 press conference, Reagan reiterated that his policy was trading weapons for hostages, albeit the policy degenerated from its original intent. "[T]he conversation was totally arms-for-hostages," Reagan said. Yet, he explained that, in his view, dealing with a third country was not directly engaging with those responsible for kidnapping Americans. It allowed the Iranians, however, to turn the dealings into arms-for-hostages. For him, the implementation was wrong, but the initial plan had merit. Reagan considered the release of three American hostages a success. "And one thing about the Iranian initiative will never change," he wrote in his memoir, "we did bring home three hostages." He may have never fully accepted that he presided over an arms-for-hostages policy. Nevertheless, Reagan's March 4 address returned his presidency from the abyss.[52]

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[50] For Bush's remarks, see Press Release, Remarks as Delivered Concerning the Tower Commission Report by Vice President George Bush, Before, Massachusetts, Feburary 27, 1987 in folder "Bush Chron Files: Tower Commission," Attorney Files, Records of Craig A. Gillen; Box 27; Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; Speech, Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, March, 4, 1987, Folder 521-22 "03/04/1987 Address to the Nation on Tower Board Report 443460 SP1120," Box 26, Presidential Handwriting File: Presidential Speeches, 1981-1981, RRPL.

[51] Ibid.

[52] On the rhetorical attributes, power, and consequences of the address, see Toby Glenn Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric: History and Memory in 1980s America* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois Press, 2011), 130-152: Nancy told Ronald that the speech served as a present for their wedding anniversary, see "Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 480; Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a White House Briefing for Members of the National Newspaper Association, March 5, 1986," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252211; Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on National Security and Administration Goals," March 14, 1987, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252271; Ronald Reagan, "The President's News

"Bingo!!," Nixon wrote excitedly to Reagan. The architect of Watergate recognized the impact and finality of Reagan's words. Nixon distinguished between the controversy of Iran-Contra and the severity of Watergate. In an earlier conversation with Bush, Nixon used the idiom "The Tempest in the Teapot" to refer to Watergate and Iran-Contra. Nixon conceived of Iran-Contra as the teapot, a matter of insignificance creating an uproar. Reagan's address had quelled the outrage, at least for himself. Actor Charlton Heston also offered enthusiastic support to Reagan after feeling "electrified" by his address. "I honestly think it's the best of your entire administration," he gushed. Positive telegrams and telephone calls flowed into the White House at a high volume. The Teflon held.[53]

Journalists praised the speech across mainstream networks. Chris Wallace and Bill Plante privately said Reagan "gave an outstanding speech." On the front page of the *New York Times*, R.W. Apple Jr., described Reagan as speaking "in a spirit of contrition that has not been heard from the White House in a quarter century," drawing a direct parallel to Kennedy's Bay of Pigs speech. Reagan had, Apple contended, cooperated with investigations, replaced staff, and now accepted responsibility, but the affair was far from over. Internationally, Reagan also received favorable reviews. Charles Z. Wick, the Director of the United States Information Agency, assessed international reception and reported that Reagan had "arrested the decline of his authority at home and abroad." Writing to Reagan, Yasuhiro Nakasone, the Prime Minister of Japan, used a golf analogy to describe Reagan's address: "It was a superb shot from the rough which caught the green right at the pin!"[54]

Reagan's words resonated with Congress, too. Republican Senator Dan Quayle captured Washington's sentiment: "The Gipper's back." Republicans praised Reagan, as the speech heralded a fresh direction for Reagan. "Reagan isn't altogether out of the woods," House Minority Leader Michel quipped, "but he's certainly gotten to the firebreak." Senate Minority Leader Dole interpreted Reagan's remarks as "the first big step on that comeback trail." Democratic leaders perceived it similarly. Speaker of the House Wright called the address "a very good step in the right direction." With staff changes and an about-face on Iran-Contra, Wright felt that "a new spirit of cooperation and partnership" was developing between the executive and legislative branches. Reagan satisfied Democratic leaders. House Majority Leader Thomas S. Foley confirmed Reagan's success to reporters. He qualified his statement, however,

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Conference, March 19, 1987," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252297; Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*, 542; Steven F. Hayward observes that evidence indicates Reagan spoke privately about Iran-Contra in a different, claiming that the policy was not arms-for-hostages deals. See Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution, 1980-1989* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), 698 fn23.

[53] Letter, Richard M. Nixon to Ronald W. Reagan, March 5, 1987, ID #464267, SP1120, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL; Page 32 in Extracts from Vice President Bush "Diary" Transcripts 4 November - 31 December 1986, Prepared by Chester Paul Beach, Jr. Associate Counsel to the President; 600-1-1b-2845; Bulky Evidence File, Box 1528, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; Letter Charlton Heston to Ronald W. Reagan, March 5, 1987, ID# 484295, SP1120, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL; Memo, Johnathan S. Miller to Howard H. Baker, "Telegram Readout on Speech," March 5, 1987, ID #464718, Ibid; Memo, Johnathan S. Miller to Howard H. Baker, "Update on the Telephone Tally," March 5, 1987, ID# 483748, Ibid.

[54] Memo, Marlin Fitzwater to Ronald W. Reagan, "Reaction to Speech," March 4, 1987, ID# 46446255, SP1120, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL; Memo, Charles Z. Wick to Howard H. Baker, "Overseas Reaction to the President's March 4 Speech," March 6, 1987, ID# 464520, Ibid; Letter, Yasuhiro Nakasone to Ronald W. Reagan, March 6, 1987, ID# 484296, Ibid; Special Report, Foreign Media Reaction, USIA, "Reagan Speech: Tower Commission Report," March 6, 1987, Ibid; R.W. Apple Jr., "In a Spirit of Contrition: Reagan's Concession on Iran Affair Evokes Memories of Kennedy's Bay of Pigs," *New York Times*, March 5, 1987, A1.

noting that Democrats wanted to experience "it in actual practice." Senate Majority Leader Byrd voiced similar concerns. "One speech is not enough to rebuild trust," he said, encouraging Reagan to "change his work style" to avoid future conflicts with Congress. Democratic leaders were looking beyond Iran-Contra for political victories. Unlike Watergate, Iran-Contra would not be a singular, decisive issue to dethrone Reaganism and usher into legislation a Democratic agenda.[55]

Reagan's address, in addition to his staff changes and investigatory cooperation, had assuaged congressional fears. Reagan's efforts encouraged praise. His nomination of Webster to replace the ailing Casey as CIA Director immediately received enthusiastic support on Capitol Hill. Outside of Washington, a perceptive politician noticed Reagan's political recovery in motion. Future president William J. Clinton, then Governor of Arkansas and National Governors' Association Chairman, observed that Reagan "made the speech credibly by the actions he had taken." Clinton suspected that the 40th president could recover. Indeed, Reagan did.[56]

The results at home reflected slowly in the polls. Reagan's credibility with Americans gradually returned. In the week after Reagan's Iran-Contra address, 47% of respondents to an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll approved of Reagan's job performance. An August 1987 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll showed that 50% now held favorable views of Reagan's performance while the percentages who believed Reagan engaged in a cover-up stood at 43%. In December 1987, the same poll found 58% approved of Reagan, a reflection of his progress on arms control. By the following summer, 59% of respondents to a *Washington Post poll* considered Reagan an "honest person" while 53% believed that Reagan had a positive impact on the country. In the remaining six months of his term, Reagan's approval numbers climbed.[57]

By January 1989, Reagan had cemented his legacy. A *New York Times*/CBS News poll discovered that Reagan's overall job performance received a 68% approval and his record on foreign policy garnered 71%. The seven previous presidents had not obtained a 60% approval rating upon their departure from the Oval Office. Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., observed that Reagan had "restored a certain amount of confidence in the Presidency." Still, over half of the respondents thought Reagan withheld the truth about Iran-Contra. Americans may not have wholly believed Reagan, but they liked him. According to Gallup polling, Reagan's approval ratings in the final months of his presidency increased from 57% in November 1988 to 63% in

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[55] Gerald M. Boyd, "President Asserts He is Moving Away from Iran Affair," *New York Times*, March 6, 1987, A1; Steven V. Roberts, "Makes 'No Excuses': But Speech Falls Short of Explicit Disavowal of the Original Idea," *New York Times*, March 5, 1987, A1; "Democrats Call on President to Face Press," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1987, 2; James Gerstenzang, "Reagan Concedes Arms Deal 'Was a Mistake'," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1987, 8; Sara Fritz and Paul Houston, "Many in Congress Doubtful on President," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1987, C16; E.J. Dionne Jr., "Republicans Praise Reagan Speech; Democrats Wary About the Future," *New York Times*, March 5, 1987, A18; "Reagan Takes 'Responsibility' for 'Mistake'." *CQ Weekly* (March 7, 1987): 408-10.

[56] "Congress Quick to Welcome Webster Appointment." *CQ Weekly* (March 7, 1987): 419: John Felton, "Administration Tries Again With Webster: Gates' Nomination to Head CIA Withdrawn." *CQ Weekly* (March 7, 1987): 418-20; Felton, Ronald Reagan, "Statement Announcing the Nomination of William H. Webster To Be the Director of Central Intelligence," March 3, 1987, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252190; David S. Broader, "Corner Turned, Leaders Say: Actions Before Speech Called Key to Its Success," *Washington Post*, March 5, 1987, A1.

[57] David S. Broder, "Public Doubt Lingers on Reagan, Iran Affair," *Washington Post*, March 11, 1987, A1; David S. Broder, "Assessing Reagan," *Washington Post*, June 30, 1988, A1; David S. Broder, "President's Credibility Rises in Poll," *Washington Post*, August 7, 1987, A1; Richard Morin, "Post-Summit Poll Shows Reagan Gaines," *Washington Post*, December 15, 1987, A1.

December; Reagan left office with a 14-point increase from January 1988. Reagan sustained personal approval throughout his presidency, as the American public viewed him favorably. Before Iran-Contra became public in October 1986, Reagan possessed an 81% personal approval rating. Reagan reversed the declination of his presidency, a marvel of political recovery assisted by his public persona, competent staff, and a bipartisan consensus on the presidency.[58]

Conclusion

Reagan emerged from the March 4 speech rejuvenated, publicly relieved of the burden and personally committed to maximizing his remaining two years. Reagan's successful bid for political recovery was a joint venture. His chief of staff, White House counsel, and special counsel worked in unison to avert political catastrophe. The First Lady assisted behind the scenes. Donald Regan's planning proved an important element of the recovery effort. It did not save his job. Regan resigned unceremoniously after the Tower Report, sending Reagan a one-sentence resignation letter. Regan's iron-fisted behavior inside the White House and feud with Nancy Reagan combined with Iran-Contra to seal his fate. Former Senator Howard Baker, a star of the Watergate committee, replaced Regan. Wallison, too, soon departed the administration, replaced by Arthur B. Culvahouse, a close associate of Baker. Wallison protected Reagan and the presidency, an astute counsel during the melee of Iran-Contra's early days. Wallison strived to determine the facts, advised waiving executive privilege, and ensured cooperation with investigations. Abshire had joined Reagan's staff at the right moment, assisting Wallison, Regan, and the First Lady in rescuing the presidency. "I want to see the strength of this presidency fully restored," Abshire promised Reagan. His role in coordinating the White House response assured it. Nancy's advising, badgering, and organizing facilitated a transformation in Ronald's attitude and willingness to express fault. It was, taken together, a Herculean effort to both contain the scandal's damage and persuade Reagan to formally acknowledge responsibility.[59]

Iran-Contra dispelled the hulking shadow of Watergate from Capitol Hill and the White House. Republicans fully supported the president. Rank-and-file Democrats, meanwhile, muttered about impeachment behind closed doors while Democratic leaders devised other plans. As the opposition party controlling Congress, Democrats dictated proceedings. Byrd and Wright acted cautiously, embracing a bipartisan approach in what they deemed to be the national interest. Republican leaders Dole and Wright assisted them in convening a Joint Select Committee to streamline the process. Congressional hearings invited partisanship, but it would be an acceptable amount in comparison to a multitude of committees conducting investigations

[58] Steven V. Roberts, "Reagan's Final Rating is Best of Any President Since 40's," *New York Times*, January 18, 1989, A1; Frank Newport, Jeffrey M. Jones, and Lydia Saad, "Ronald Reagan From the People's Perspective: A Gallup Poll Review," *Gallup*, June 7, 2004, https://news.gallup.com/poll/11887/ronald-reagan-from-peoples-perspective-gallup-poll-review.aspx; The American Presidency Project uses Gallup data to show approval ratings throughout a president's term. For Reagan, see Ronald Reagan Public Approval, John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/ronald-reagan-public-approval.

[59] For Regan's version of his departure, see Regan, *For the Record*, 58-59. 96-98, 329, 366-374; For a copy of Regan's one-sentence resignation letter, see Letter, Donald T. Reagan to Ronald W. Reagan, February 27, 1987, Box 214, Folder 2, Donald T. Regan Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC; On Regan and Nancy Reagan's feud, see Karen Tumultry, *The Triumph of Nancy Reagan*, 304, 352, 396, 399, 470-471, 474-77, 481-88, 497; Abshire, *Saving the Reagan Presidency*, 88, 143; See pages 96-99 in Peter J. Wallison, interview by Jeff Chidester, Stephen F. Knott, Darby Morrisroe, and Christine Nemacheck, October 28-29, 2003, Charlottesville, Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan;

into the next presidential election. Congressional leaders wanted to avoid another Watergate scenario, especially for a foreign policy scandal. The will of Congress to impose accountability on the president was subject to their ability to brave the perceived political costs. Congress adopted an approach with the least political damage in deference to the presidency. They had several compelling reasons: national security, Reagan's personal popularity, his remaining time in office, and the lack of verifiable evidence that he authorized the diversion. The alternative evoked painful, unbearable visions of a country torn asunder by the collapse of another presidency.

Congressional reverence for the presidency transcended partisanship. While the affair produced partisan theatrics and investigations, Democratic and Republican leaders in the end concurred that impeaching Reagan did not serve the national interest, especially at a crucial juncture in the Cold War. Geopolitics crossed the water's edge. As an omnipresent force, the Cold War influenced the thinking of congressional leaders and staff. Arthur Liman, the chief counsel for the Senate Select Committee, who found impeachment unjustified, emphasized that "the misuse of the impeachment process has a cost in any era, which is magnified in a nuclear age."[60] Democratic and Republican leaders embraced national security as the top priority. In this defining moment, congressional leaders determined that attempts to arrest the president's ability to conduct foreign policy should be avoided for the country's security. Democratic leaders were especially unwilling to impeach a personally popular president over a foreign policy scandal. Instead, any form of political punishment would be delivered via elections. Reagan's eventual downfall could wait for the elusive smoking gun, if it ever materialized.

The bipartisan consensus on the presidency extended outside of Congress. Former policymakers returned to the political arena to rehabilitate the NSC. The Tower Commission stabilized the inter-agency process and assisted Reagan in combating the scandal. Incomplete and perhaps imperfect, the Tower Board's investigation and research produced a probing report. The Tower Report cast Reagan as an awful manager and recommended that the NSC undergo a slight revamping. Radical reform of the inter-agency process was not in order. The Tower Report became the defining document for managing the agency. With it in hand, Carlucci reshaped the NSC with his deputy Powell, including hiring new staff and shuttering North's office. As Powell succeeded Carlucci as national security advisor, they jointly returned the NSC to its traditional role of advising and assisting the president on national security, removing the agency from conducting covert operations. Tower himself counseled Reagan on the board's findings and encouraged him to accept the mortifying reality.[61]

Reagan eventually mastered his precarious circumstances. The majority of Americans disapproved of his handling of the affair and remained skeptical of his statements. Losing credibility with the public depressed Reagan. A president who inspired confidence faced a situation in which he aroused disbelief. Reagan sought to ameliorate the scandal's effect on his public approval but hedged on the one action necessary for his resurgence. Reagan's incremental admission of wrongdoing culminated with an effective address that garnered instant approval from politicians and the mainstream press, even from Nixon himself. Public approval, however, only steadily trended upward, increasing as the congressional hearings concluded and Reagan advanced arms control. Reagan improved his ratings over the long-term. Although the Teflon president never recaptured his public standing from the halcyon days that preceded Iran-Contra.

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[60] Arthur L. Liman, "Road to Impeachment Requires Evidence," *New York Times*, May 4, 1990, A26.
[61] Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 253-257; John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1991), 538-547.

Regardless of reservations or disagreements, White House officials, congressional leaders, the Tower Board, and the American public agreed in principle on the indispensability of a strong presidency. Reagan assumed the role and satisfied the demands of each. Questions about his culpability lingered. "There ain't no smoking gun," Reagan declared in his defense.[62] It was true. Neither Congress nor Independent Counsel Walsh uncovered evidence that Reagan authorized the diversion. Still, the scandal enervated his presidency and portended his ruin. Reagan's inability to promptly admit that both his policy failed and he had blundered the process perplexed his advisors and prolonged his personal and political torment.

Reagan, however, survived Iran-Contra. Deriving political security from his public *mea culpa* and a bipartisan consensus on national security, Reagan saved his presidency and induced an ebbing of congressional power. In the process, he restored the president as the arbiter of foreign policy, a development that only became apparent in the aftermath of the congressional hearings, for how Congress managed Iran-Contra had implications beyond the high-profile hearings. The chapters that follow explore both the affair's effect on domestic political institutions and its afterlife in the politics of presidential scandal.

[62] David Hoffman, "'Hearsay' Evidence In Hearings Assailed," *Washington Post*, June 17, 1987, A1.

Part IV

Outcome

Chapter 8
Judgment: Congressional Hearings and the Final Report

> Well, it is my hope that, once everything is settled and known, history will deal with it as the big investigation that finally discovered the President was telling the truth from the very beginning.
> Ronald Reagan, Interview with Hugh Sidey, August 12, 1987[1]

"The Iran-Contra hearings have become a crashing bore," Richard Nixon observed in his memorandum for "a close circle of friends." Nixon's analysis of current domestic and international politics arrived shortly before Oliver North and John Poindexter testified. Ronald Reagan received a copy and absorbed Nixon's critique. Nixon criticized Reagan's spokesmen for initially accepting the media's framing of the scandal, which centered the Watergate question: "What did the President know and when did he know it?" Nixon dismissed the premise. "That question assumes that what the President knew was something illegal," he reasoned. The administration, Nixon praised, had refocused the narrative on the constitutionality of the Boland amendments. But Nixon chided the administration for presenting Reagan "as a forgetful, fumbling, detached leader who didn't know what was going on." That image evoked a weak president. "Far better to plead guilty of actions which were at best of doubtful illegality than to plead not guilty by reason of incompetence," Nixon advised. The scandal, he predicted, would subside without great effect. Since many Americans believed Reagan approved the diversion, Nixon explained, North and Poindexter's testimony would not affect approval ratings. Other topics engrossed Americans. "The average person could not care less about 'process' which is supposed to be the subject of the final phase of the hearings," Nixon reminded friends. The disgraced former president remained an astute political soothsayer.[2]

Nixon's read of the Iran-Contra hearings proved strikingly close to the outcome. The Select Committee investigated to establish an official account of Iran-Contra and held high-profile televised hearings to reveal the administration's conduct. The tension between holding Reagan to account and reestablishing bipartisanship on foreign policy flared during the hearings. The discord informed the committee's final report, which featured two different interpretations of the scandal. As this chapter contends, the ramifications of the committee were not detrimental to the president. Rather, akin to the Tower Commission, the committee was a powerful catalyst in the reactive wave of institutional responses to Iran-Contra. The Iran-Contra hearings and report, this chapter argues, served to restore the presidency. What follows examines the public testimony of key figures involved in Iran-Contra and explores the committee's final report. The committee's efforts, it explains, achieved counterintuitive results, in which the public received a shocking account of Reagan's foreign policy in exchange for the reaffirmation of presidential power.

This chapter first follows the Iran-Contra hearings. Broadcasting the hearings live thrust the scandal's core issues into the public sphere, where citizens engaged with what happened and

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[1] Ronald Reagan, "Interview with Hugh Sidey of *Time* Magazine, August 12, 1987," in *Public Papers of the presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1987 (in Two Books), Book II--July 4 to December 31, 1987* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989), 963.

[2] Frank Carlucci received a copy and forwarded it to Ronald Reagan. Reagan's initials are in the top left-hand corner, indicating that he read it. See cover letter and memo attached to John H. Taylor to Frank Carlucci, June 29, 1987, Folder "President/NSC Chron 6/29/1987 - 6/30/1987," Box 38, White House Situation Room Records, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (Hereafter RRPL).

why to formulate their own conclusions about US foreign policy, a bedrock of democratic governance.[3] Once underway, the hearings featured calls for bipartisanship amid a partisan contest. Democratic Chairman of the Senate Select Committee Daniel Inouye's opening statement expressed concerns about bipartisanship and the need for its restoration in foreign policy through "interbranch cooperation and trust." Lee Hamilton, Democratic Chairman of House Committee, conveyed similar sentiments about the "process of restoration." Yet, as this chapter demonstrates, congressional investigations of the president are a partisan affair regardless of nonpartisan aims when different political parties control the executive and legislative branches. Republican members of the committee recognized the danger posed to Reagan. At the outset, Republican Congressman Henry Hyde forewarned that he "may break step with what is becoming a bipartisan funeral march for the administration." Indeed, the hearings concluded with a divided verdict."[4]

The second half of this chapter turns to the Select Committee's final report. Congressional leaders had convened the committee with best intentions. In early January 1987, Senator Inouye instructed Arthur L. Liman, the lead counsel for the Senate Committee, that moving with "deliberate speed" was in the country's interest, for the Soviet Union benefited from an incapacitated president. The American people, furthermore, deserved to know if a "smoking gun" existed—and promptly. Reagan's knowledge of the diversion was the linchpin of the scandal. If the evidence did not materialize, Inouye warned, Reagan "had to be exonerated no matter what we ourselves believed about his conduct."[5] As this chapter shows, though, exoneration did not come without sharp criticism intended to impose political consequences. Unable and unwilling to impeach Reagan, the committee's majority focused on the egregious behavior of his subordinates and held the president responsible for the scandal. The minority, however, recognized in the scandal a profound institutional conflict transcending arms-for-hostages deals. And although the final report released to muted attention, the minority's findings were the lasting legacy.

The Hearings I: High-Stakes Testimony

The televised Iran-Contra hearings convened on May 5 and continued until August 3, 1987, followed by three executive sessions with Central Intelligence Agency Officers Duane Clarridge, Alan Fiers, Jr., and Clair George.[6] As detailed in chapter 7, the House and Senate formed a joint committee. Senator Inouye chaired the Senate committee alongside Republican Vice Chairman Warren Rudman. On the House committee, Congressman Hamilton chaired, and Republican Congressman Richard Cheney served as the Ranking Member. The Select Committee prepared for the unpredictable nature of live hearings by taking depositions beforehand. They also acceded

[3] David Thelen, *Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television: How Americans Challenged the Media and Seized Political Initiative during the Iran-Contra Debate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
[4] United States. Congress., *Testimony of Richard Secord: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition*, Vol. 100-1, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, May 5 through May 8, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 1-4, 9-10; 2-4, 18-19.
[5] Arthur L. Liman, *Lawyer: A Life of Counsel and Controversy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1998), 304.
[6] United States. Congress., *Testimony of Dewey R. Clarridge, C/CATF, and Clair George*: Joint Hearings in Executive Session as Declassified before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-11, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, August 4, 5, and 6, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987).

to the demands of oversight and granted limited immunity to 21 witnesses, including North and Poindexter, to compel their testimony, a tactic that later complicated Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh's prosecutions. By a majority, the committee had determined that their priorities took precedence over criminal matters.[7] The range of witnesses spanned from principal participants and cabinet members to Contra leader Adolfo Calero and the private citizens who funded his cause. William Casey did not appear. He died from a brain tumor as the hearings began in May 1987.[8] Israeli officials declined to sit for questioning. Instead, Israel supplied the committee with documents, including an extensive chronology of events.[9] White House Counsel Arthur B. Culvahouse, Jr. and Chief of Staff Howard Baker closely monitored the testimony.[10] And despite the committee's best intentions, the hearings inflamed partisan tensions.

The hearings opened with displays of partisan division. Inouye's opening statement declared Iran-Contra a "sad and sordid" story of "secret policymaking, which the Constitution has always rejected," and "a tale of working outside the system, and of utilizing irregular channels and private parties accountable to no one on matters of national security." Inouye suggested that "self-examination" would benefit the country. "These hearings do not represent our democracy's weakness," he said, "but its strength." Cheney, for his part, cast the affair as a series of unfortunate events that should be considered within both the broader context of Soviet and Cuban involvement in Central America and a combative Congress who stalled the president's policy. Cheney also warned not to hastily draw conclusions about limiting a president's power to conduct foreign policy based on the scandal. The Ranking Republican harbored low expectations about the committee's work. This was not Watergate. Prior to the hearings, Cheney predicted that "there's a very real possibility that [Iran-Contra's] going to be at best a footnote in the history books." While Democratic committee members—and Republican Senators Warren Rudman, Paul Trible, and William Cohen—perceived Iran-Contra as a consequential and possibly criminal breach of foreign policymaking, Republicans acknowledged its irregularities in protocol but maintained that mistakes in implementing foreign policy were not a constitutional crisis. The committee's final report would reflect their divergent viewpoints. In the meantime, the hearings hinged on whether Reagan authorized the diversion of funds.[11]

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[7] Warren B. Rudman, *Combat: Twelve Years in the U.S. Senate* (New York: Random House, 1996), 126-127; William S. Cohen and George Mitchell, Men of Zeal: A Candid Inside Story of the Iran-Contra Hearings (New York: Viking, 1988), 38-42; Arthur L. Liman, *Lawyer: A Life of Counsel and Controversy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1998), 313-314.

[8] Casey's obituary requested that the grieving may donate to the William J. Casey Fund for the Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters, see Obituary for former CIA Director William Casey, prepared by Mrs. Casey. Central Intelligence Agency, May 6, 1987, U.S. Declassified Documents Online; Eric Pace, "William Casey, EX-C.I.A. Head, is Dead at 74," *New York Times*, May 7, 1987.

[9] U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views.* 100th Congress, 1st Sess., Senate Report 100-216, November (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), XVI.

[10] See summaries of witness testimony from the Iran-Contra hearings in Folders "Iran-Contra Hearings - June [May - November 1987] (1) - (9)," located in Box 3, Howard Baker Files, RRPL.

[11] See opening statements, United States. Congress., *Testimony of Richard Secord: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition*, Vol. 100-1, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, May 5 through May 8, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 1-4, 9-10; Cheney quoted from Dana Walker, "Cheney: Iran-Contra scandal will be a footnote in history," April 7, 1987, *United Press International*, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1987/04/07/Cheney-Iran-Contra-scandal-will-be-a-footnote-in-history/5486544766400/.

North and Poindexter's testimony in July represented the apex of the hearings. Confirming that Reagan knew about the diversion would launch impeachment proceedings. The incriminating testimony was not forthcoming. "Olliemania" momentarily captured America, however, following North's flamboyant performance as the Marine lieutenant colonel who acted as a selfless patriot carrying out the president's orders—saving democracy in Central America and rescuing hostages in the Middle East. "I came here to tell you the truth, the good, the bad and the ugly," he proclaimed. Donning his uniform, which he did not wear in the White House, North admitted his misdeeds on live television, defending both his actions and Reagan's objectives in Iran and Nicaragua. He testified that he implemented Reagan's policy with authorization from superiors. North never met with Reagan in a one-on-one environment. Although the president, North claimed, would have supported his actions, if he had known. "We were conducting a covert operation to support the Nicaraguan Resistance, to carry out the President of the United States' stated, publicly-articulated foreign policy," North declared. "Why should he tell me to stop?" North was unapologetic about diverting funds from the Iran initiative to the Contras, the scheme he called "a neat idea." Democratic committee members challenged North's bravado to no avail. The former NSC staffer portrayed himself as a victim of congressional overreach, blaming Congress for the fracas and convincing swaths of Americans of his worldview. He offered Congress defiance rather than damning testimony.[12]

Poindexter foreclosed indicting Reagan on the diversion. Committee lawyers Arthur Liman and John Nields discovered Poindexter declined to inform the president about the diversion three days before the hearings. On May 2, Poindexter participated in a closed deposition, where his revelatory testimony would either initiate Reagan's impeachment or portend anticlimactic hearings. If Poindexter testified Reagan authorized the diversion, the White House would be notified, and his testimony would be shared with the committee. If he denied it, his testimony would be sealed. Limon pressed Poindexter on Reagan's knowledge of the diversion. Unflinchingly, Poindexter absolved the president. "But because it was controversial, and I obviously knew that it would cause a ruckus if it were exposed," Poindexter confessed, "I decided to insulate the President from the decision and give him some deniability." Afterward, Liman told Vice Chairman Rudman that Poindexter offered "nothing to discuss." Reagan had survived. In contrast to North, Poindexter appeared before the committee in July to answer for his actions wearing civilian attire, for the Admiral believed his role was solely political. He acknowledged that he "made a very deliberate decision" to withhold information about the diversion from Reagan to "provide some future deniability" on the issue. "The buck stops here with me," Poindexter testified. "I made the decision." Eight months of controversy and intrigue ended with calm, calculating denials from the erstwhile national security advisor.[13]

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[12] United States. Congress., *Testimony of Oliver L. North (Questioning by Counsels): Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition*, Vol. 100-7, Part 1, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 7, 8, 9, and 10, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 9-11, 93, 109, 187-192; See also *Testimony of Oliver L. North*, Part II, July 10, 13, and 14, 1987; "Olliemania Breaks Out All Over," *Time*, Vol. 130 No. 3, July 20, 1987; Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 216-219; For a critical analysis on North's testimony, the media, and public opinion, see Amy Fried, *Muffled Echoes: Oliver North and the Politics of Public Opinion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

[13] Liman, *Lawyer*, 329-332; Rudman, *Combat*, 128-130; Cohen and Mitchell, *Men of Zeal*, 197; U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*. Appendix B: Volume 20, Depositions, 100th Congress, 1st Sess., 1987. Senate Report 100-216, November. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 1067-1071; United States. Congress., *Testimony of*

The Hearings II: Foreign Policy and Bipartisanship

In the hearings, debates about the exercise of American power interspersed with the political theatrics. Committee members and witnesses litigated factors that affected the scandal, such as the spread of Soviet influence in Central America and congressional opposition to the Reagan Doctrine. Former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane testified that the sheer volume of Soviet monetary and military assistance to Nicaragua demanded an aggressive response "in our own back yard." Although the Vietnam War inspired a "realistic awareness" about the limits of American power in supporting democracy around the globe, the Soviets had "phenomenal success" in the late 1970s "sponsoring guerilla movements" from Angola and Afghanistan to Nicaragua. The Reagan Doctrine was a pragmatic reaction to these exigencies of geography and geopolitics. McFarlane argued to a nation-wide audience that Reagan's policy was morally just on grounds of assisting the spread of democracy and strategically sound in its goal of reducing Soviet influence in the developing world. McFarlane also lamented the loss of bipartisanship in foreign policy, and committee members readily agreed with his mourning. Chairman Inouye concurred that "we all want bipartisanship in foreign policy." Inouye criticized Reagan's refusal to gain "Congress' informed consent" and acknowledged that Congress itself "bears some responsibility" for the breakdown of bipartisanship. For Inouye, McFarlane's testimony showed that "we invite disaster" in the absence of "an honest and complete dialogue between the Congress and the Executive." Amid holding the Reagan administration to account, the committee highlighted the importance of a healthy, functioning, and bipartisan American foreign policy.[14]

The spirit of bipartisanship manifested in late July during testimony of the chief diplomat responsible for executing Reagan's foreign policy. In questioning Secretary of State George Shultz, Republican Congressman William Broomfield cut to the point: "Why do you believe we are unable to maintain a bipartisan policy that advances freedom and protects U.S. interests in our own backyard in Central America?" Contrary to previous discussions before the committee, Shultz explained that, since the early 1980s, a bipartisan consensus had formed around fostering democracy in Central America and on threats to the region posed by the Sandinistas, even though the Contras remained a flash point. Shultz, moreover, reminded the committee that bipartisanship existed on arms control, in which Congress supported Reagan's initiatives. On the Reagan Doctrine, Shultz credited "some real bipartisan and executive legislative collaboration" for helping facilitate "the sweep toward freedom and democracy that's taking place." Shultz's optimism and astute observations suggested a larger purpose for the hearing. "I think it's important for people to see that there's a lot more to American foreign policy," he said, "than this Iran arms-hostages, fund diversion, and so on problems that we have been discussing here." Iran-Contra, in his view, should not detract from the administration's past accomplishments and imperil future successes. Congress would fulfill its role in redressing the scandal and revealing the accounting to the public. The White House and Capitol Hill, meanwhile, had to return to the

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John Poindexter: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-8, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 15, 16, 17, 20, and 21, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 37-38.

[14] United States. Congress. *Testimony of Robert C. McFarlane, Gaston J. Sigur Jr., and Robert W. Owen : Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition*, Vol. 100-2, 100th Congress, 1st Sess., May 11, 12, 13, 14, and 19, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987,) 2, 190-192, 269-271, 275, 282-283.

business of governing foreign affairs.[15]

Reagan welcomed the end of the Iran-Contra hearings. The president called Shultz on July 26 to express how well he thought the Secretary of State performed.[16] Nearly three weeks later, on the cusp of the final report's release, Reagan addressed Iran-Contra in an interview with *Time* magazine and then spoke to the nation. Reagan told *Time* editor Hugh Sidey that, despite the dire circumstances, he maintained composure throughout because he believed the investigation would eventually reveal he had not authorized the diversion. Reagan never suspected that he would suffer Nixon's fate. In his televised address, Reagan admitted two truths about the scandal. One, Shultz and Caspar Weinberger were right to oppose the Iran initiative. Two, Reagan allowed his sympathy for the hostages to affect his judgment. "The image—the reality—of Americans in chains, deprived of their freedom and families so far from home, burdened my thoughts," he said. "And this was a mistake." Reagan again accepted responsibility. "[T]he buck does not stop with Admiral Poindexter, as he stated in his testimony," he said, "it stops with me." For Reagan, "the eventual blessing in disguise" would be renewed cooperation on foreign policy between the executive and legislative branches. Yet, for all the discussion of bipartisanship in Congress and at the White House, the committee's final report would demonstrate the political divide.[17]

The Select Committee Report I: The Majority

The Joint Select Committee released their report on November 18, 1987, a judgment of the affair based on more than 300,000 documents and over 500 witnesses. It contained the Select Committee's findings, conclusions, and recommendations, in addition to supplemental, minority and additional views. Chronologies, depositions, exhibits, and testimony accompanied the report as appendixes. The Select Committee delayed the release by one day to provide aides with time to conduct one last review of the footnotes.[18] In the meantime, a 28-page summary of the Republican minority report leaked to the *New York Times*, revealing that most Republican members dissented from the majority report prior to the publication of the Select Committee's judgments.[19] The final report bore the imprint of its divided authors, and partisanship soon prevailed in its release. Congressman Hyde referred to the majority report as "a raw political document." The Iran-Contra investigation "started out as a witch hunt," Hyde claimed, "It proceeded as a witch hunt and indeed the final report (of the majority) indicates that it was a witch hunt." Republican Senator Warren B. Rudman similarly criticized the minority. The minority "report is one in which the editors separated the wheat from the chaff," he said, "and, unfortunately, it printed the chaff."[20]

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[15] United States. Congress., *Testimony of George P. Shultz and Edwin Meese, III*: Joint Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, Vol. 100-7, Part 1, 100th Congress, 1st Sess, July 23, 24, 28, and 29, 1987 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), 90-94.

[16] Douglas Brinkley ed., Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 519.

[17] Ronald Reagan, "Interview With Hugh Sidey of Time Magazine, August 12, 1987," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/253171; Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy and Administration Goals, August 12, 1987," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252993.

[18] "Footnotes Delay Iran-Contra Report," *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 1987, B4.

[19] Philip Shenon, "G.O.P. Iran Report Defends President: Criticizes Finding of Majority on Panels as 'Hysterical'," *New York Times*, November 17, 1987, A1.

[20] George Lardner Jr., "GOP Minority Denounces Panel Findings as 'Hysterical'," *Washington Post*, November 19,

Unlike preceding phases of the scandal, however, the report received little fanfare upon its release. The congressional hearings served as the high point for media coverage and public attention. The scandal exhausted its entertainment and educational value by November 1987. Democratic Senate Select Committee member David Boren recognized that Iran-Contra's teachable moment had passed. "The hearings were important, and I'm not sure the report will be," Boren admitted to the press. Enthusiasm for a nearly 690-page report dissipated within the week. But the report's substance carried a contemporary flash of importance and maintained an under-appreciated legacy.[21]

To be sure, major newspapers carried the story on their front pages and offered analysis on the substance of the report. Network news anchors, too, covered the committee's findings. NBC aired a special news report, during which anchor Tom Brokaw interviewed Ranking House Committee member Richard Cheney, who appeared to defend the Republican-authored minority report. Cheney's criticisms of the majority reflected the division present in the document itself. Cheney viewed the majority's conclusions as "hysterical." As the congressman explained to Brokaw, the majority based their findings on an assumption that Congress possessed the authority to severely limit by statute a president's constitutional power to conduct foreign policy. And this was the crux of the matter.[22]

Endorsed by the Democratic members of the committee and Republican Senators Rudman, Trible, and Cohen, the majority report found the Reagan administration culpable for grave misdeeds and presented a narrative supporting their critique in six parts. As Congress deferred to Independent Counsel Walsh on matters of criminality, the report was solely political in nature. Yet many of its accusations border on criminal. The majority criticized the Reagan administration for circumventing Congress, privatizing foreign policy, and engaging in deceptive tactics to undermine oversight. They charged the administration with a "disdain for the law" that, combined with "a seriously flawed policymaking process," produced a scandal "characterized by pervasive dishonest and inordinate secrecy." The administration had violated the Boland amendments in letter and spirit. As for responsibility, the majority determined North carried out the operations, including the diversion of funds, but his direct superiors deserved blame for approving his actions. They claim Attorney General Edwin Meese's actions "departed from standard investigative techniques" and thus "placed a cloud" over his internal inquiry. Vice President George H.W. Bush escaped their ire, principally because he had a minor role in the affair and his National Security Advisor Donald Gregg testified that he did not tell him about operational details. But the buck stops in the West Wing.[23]

The majority found that Reagan bore "the ultimate responsibility" for Iran-Contra. Reagan

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1987, A25; Sara Fritz, "Final Iran-Contra Report Refuses to Exonerate Reagan," *Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 1987, B1.

[21] John Felton, "Report Deals Another Blow to Reagan Record," *CQ Weekly* (November 21, 1987): 2847-53; Helen Dewar, "GOP Spat May Undercut Dissidents: Friction Seen Potentially Rekindling Public Interest in Reagan's Role," *Washington Post*, November 19, 1987, A32.

[22] The *Washington Post*, for instance, published three front-page stories. See Dan Morgan, "Iran Report Accuses Administration of 'Disdain for Law'," *Washington Post*, November 19, 1987, A1; Walter Pincus, "Meese Is Singled Out For Sharp Criticism," *Washington Post*, November 19, 1987, A1; David Hoffman, "Reagan Tried to Conceal Key Events, Panels Say," *Washington Post*, November 19, 1987, A1; See also additional stories on A25-36; The *New York Times* followed a similar publishing strategy. see the November 19, 1987, edition of the *New York Times*, sections A1, A10, A12-15; The Iran Contra Committee Final Report #659635, NBC Special for Wednesday, November 18, 1987, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/659635.

[23] *Select Committee's Report*, 3-22, 405-407.

had accepted responsibility in his March 1987 address, but the report sought to permanently assign culpability. "If the President did not know what his National Security Advisers were doing," they wrote, "he should have." Reagan, of course, was unaware of the diversion, although that did not save him from criticism. According to the majority, Reagan was responsible for enabling the misdeeds of his staff. Reagan fostered "an environment where those who did know of the diversion believed with certainty that they were carrying out the President's policies." Reagan's management style, coupled with officials willing to skirt the law, dismantled a system of checks and balances in the pursuit of a secret foreign policy by using private actors. The majority suggested that the president failed to faithfully execute the laws, flaunting Article II, Section 3 of the Constitution. Reagan, for his part, had also publicly denied both government connections to the Contra supply network and accusations that he engaged in arms-for-hostages deals with Iran. For the majority, Reagan should have known the activities of his staff and been more forthcoming as the affair unraveled in public. Iran-Contra, then, marred Reagan's presidency, a result of his own actions.[24]

While the majority highlighted the deep fissures Iran-Contra revealed between the president and Congress, they declined to offer revolutionary legislative remedies, for "the Iran-contra Affair resulted from the failure of individuals to observe the law, not from deficiencies in existing law or in our system of governance." Instead, the majority recommended minor changes to existing laws in support of a greater role for Congress in foreign policymaking, suggesting that comity between the president and Congress serves the national interest. On timely notification of covert action, for instance, they recommend that the president notify Congress within 48 hours "except in certain rare instances," using vague wording to provide for presidential prerogative. Presidential Findings should be written and signed before undertaking covert action, except when "the press of time prevents it," and include specific language about agencies and participants. The majority also suggested that the president submit a report to Congress on the activities and organization of the NSC, a step by Congress to exert more control over the agency. The majority, too, advised that an active-duty military officer should not serve as the national security advisor. As for Congress itself, the report only made vague recommendations for stronger oversight. The changes were thus not profound and provided concessions for the president to pursue covert action.[25]

The post-Iran-Contra period was not a time for radical reform, as the president and Congress moved on from the report and into the politics of it. Indeed, some of the majority-suggested changes never completely manifested, even though Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd claimed they would receive "high priority." Despite advocating for a larger role for Congress, the majority's recommendations were intended to foster comity between the president and Congress under the existing constitutional framework. The hearings and report itself meant to restore confidence and efficiency to foreign policy. Congress, for example, declined to raise objections to Lt. General Colin Powell succeeding Frank Carlucci as national security advisor days after the report's release. Chairman Inouye clarified that the majority "[did not] wish to in any way suggest that General Powell is unfit." When a reporter asked the president why he had appointed Powell against the majority's recommendation, Reagan remarked, "I guess I wasn't listening to them." Reagan's humor pacified journalists, who immediately laughed and accepted his

[24] Ibid., 21-22, 419-420; Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, March 4, 1987," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252209.
[25] On Conclusions and Recommendations, see *Select Committees Report*, Chapters 24-28.

justification on grounds that Powell was eminently qualified. Reagan's joke had contained an element of truth. The president, though, wisely addressed deficiencies in the covert action process and anticipated the report's findings.[26]

Reagan mollified congressional concerns with public statements and institutional reforms. Upon the report's completion, Assistant to the President for Press Relations Marlin Fitzwater released a measured statement underscoring Reagan's acceptance of responsibility, cooperation with investigations, and commitment to reforming the policymaking process. Reagan commended the Select Committee for their work, especially because it allowed the public "direct access" to the facts. "The American people have had the opportunity to make their own judgments," the statement read, "and it serves no purpose for us to argue with the opinions of the committee members." Reagan's acknowledgment of the report's findings demonstrated his desire to leave the final verdict to citizens. A public spat between the president and Congress would not serve the country's interest, a point recognized by the White House and Capitol Hill.[27]

More substantively, Reagan incorporated many of the majority's recommendations on covert action into National Security Decision Directive 286, which revamped covert operations guidelines. Reagan dispatched a letter to Senator Cohen, the Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, informing him of the recommendations that president accepted: Presidential Findings would be written; retroactive Findings would be prohibited; Findings would specify all agencies and participants involved; periodic inter-agency reviews of operations would occur; and "timely notification" within 48 hours except in cases of "exceptional circumstances" would be followed. NSDD-286 contained these modifications. Still, Cohen was not pleased that Reagan codified the "exceptional circumstances" condition, providing the president with discretion to withhold notification beyond 48 hours, if deemed appropriate.[28]

Exceptional circumstances would stand the test of Congress. Cohen sponsored legislation to enshrine the 48-hour rule into law, which passed the Senate but languished in the House. Cohen pursued the rule into the Bush Administration, conflicting with Bush over his insistence that the president accept a 48-hour notification. Eventually, the Fiscal Year 1991 intelligence authorization bill contained language calling for a "timely notification." But it allowed the president the discretion to withhold it for longer than two days. Although Reagan adopted many of the report's recommendations, the 48-hour notification proved too burdensome for foreign policymaking. Congress did not impede on the president's prerogative to conduct sensitive covert operations in the national interest, an outcome reflecting the argument of the minority report.[29]

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[26] David Rosenbaum, "Cabal of Zealots," *New York Times*, November 19, 1987, A1; Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Swearing-In Ceremony for Frank C. Carlucci as Secretary of Defense, November 23, 1987," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/251812.

[27] Ronald Reagan, "Statement by Assistant to the President for Press Relations Fitzwater on the Report of the Congressional Committee Investigating the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy, November 18, 1987," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/251714.

[28] National Security Decision Directive 286 re: Cover Operations, Folder "NSDDs 261-270," Executive Secretariat, National Security Council: National Security Decision Directives (NSDD): Records, 1981-1987, RRPL; Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 524; Extract of Letter is reproduced in William S. Cohen and George J. Mitchell, *Men of Zeal*, 279-282.

[29] For analysis and supporting documents on the "timely notification" debate, see Electronic Briefing Book #659, Edited by John Prados and Arturo Jimenez-Bacardi, The National Security Archive, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/intelligence/2019-02-07/what-cia-tells-congress-or-doesnt-about-covert-operations-barrcheneybush-turning-point-cia#_ednref25; George Bush, "Statement on Signing the Intelligence

The Select Committee Report II: The Minority

Opposed to the majority's conclusions, House Republicans, joined by Republican Senators James A. McClure and Orrin Hatch, produced a 196-page minority report that both challenged the majority's judgments and presented a case for presidential prerogative in foreign affairs. Although critical of Reagan's decision-making, the minority defended his administration from the most severe accusations of criminality and malpractice. They also criticized the role of Congress in the affair. The perennial struggle between Congress and the president over the exercise of foreign policy featured prominently in the minority report. And the minority's recommendations primarily targeted Congress rather than the president. They advocated for reforms to the intelligence committees and federal law to reduce the disclosure of classified information, as well as revising notification laws to allow the president to only brief the "Gang of Four" on extremely sensitive matters. Prior to its release, Hyde described the difference between the minority and majority reports. The minority report, he claimed, was "critical of the administration, but at the same time not as doctrinaire."[30] Hyde undersold its biting dissent.

The minority rejected the majority's "hysterical conclusions." They argued that "mistakes in judgment, and nothing more" characterized the Reagan administration's actions. "There was no constitutional crisis, no systematic disrespect for 'the rule of law,'" the report charged, "no grand conspiracy, and no Administration-wide dishonesty or coverup." Republicans admonished the majority for sowing doubt about Reagan's lack of knowledge about the diversion and for televising the hearings, which imperiled national security by displaying intelligence sources and methods for the world to see. They denied an official cover-up transpired while stating Poindexter and North acted deplorably by falsifying records. The diversion raised legal questions, of course, but the administration had acted properly under the law. Yet Reagan does not escape criticism. While acknowledging Reagan accepted responsibility and enacted reforms in the scandal's wake, the minority criticized Reagan for withholding notification of the Iranian initiative and failing to inspire support for his Contra policy. Reagan's geopolitical objectives were not at issue, but rather the disastrous implementation of his policies deserved critique. Iran-Contra was thus chiefly a policy—and political—debacle.

The minority report contextualized the foreign policymaking that produced Iran-Contra. This analytical approach, however, "does not explain [mistakes] away, or excuse their having happened." Republicans placed Reagan's questionable decision-making within the context of his geopolitical aims in Central America and the Middle East, as well as his concern for the hostages, congressional resistance to his policies, and national security leaks undermining his administration. Their report argued that "political guerrilla warfare over foreign policy" influenced Reagan's mistakes. Congress had, it contended, hamstrung the Reagan administration with the vaguely worded Boland amendments, which Republicans maintained did not cover the NSC. Reagan, though, exercised poor "political judgment" by neither vetoing them nor making an impassioned public defense of his policies and presidential power. The NSC, too, demonstrated terrible judgment by conducting deceptive operations in pursuit of a strategic opening with Iran and in support the Contras. Reagan, the minority report suggested, "would have been better served over the long run by insisting on a principled confrontation over those

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Authorization Act, Fiscal Year 1991," August 14, 1991, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/265852.

[30] Walter Pincus, "Iran-Contra Panels Approve Report; Republicans to Publish Own View," *Washington Post*, November 6, 1987, A6.

strategic issues that can be debated publicly." Iran-Contra had therefore emerged from a paradox. "President Reagan has been praised by his supporters as a 'communicator' and criticized by his opponents as an ideologue," the report noted. "The mistakes of the Iran-Contra Affair, ironically, came from a lack of communication and an inadequate appreciation of the importance of ideas." Reagan, the logic followed, had deviated from the political playbook that underlay his presidency.[31]

The minority based their conclusions on a president's constitutionally endowed power to conduct foreign affairs. As the driving force behind the report, Ranking Republican Cheney ensured it offered "a more balanced view, one that took the long history of struggle between the executive and the legislative branches over foreign-policy making into consideration."[32] Here, Republicans strove to restore the president as arbiter of foreign affairs by rebuking a "boundless view of Congressional power [that] began to take hold in the 1970s." After the Vietnam War, Congress reasserted itself to reign in the presidency, an effort that the Republicans considered deeply worrisome. The War Powers Resolution and the Intelligence Oversight Act curbed the president's ability to wage war and use covert means to achieve foreign policy objectives without strict accountability. Congress desired stronger oversight capabilities to check a president's power and passed legislation for that purpose. The minority report, then, served to reassert the proper role of presidential power during a political crisis that raised rigorous debate over it.[33]

The minority supported the exercise of robust executive power in foreign policy. As a theoretical basis, Republicans invoked Alexander Hamilton's argument from Federalist No. 70, wherein Hamilton advocates for the energetic executive in acts of "decision, activity, secrecy, and dispatch." Hamilton rightly contends that "the energy of the executive is the bulwark of national security." Congress should not impede a president's capacity to act with haste and vigor. In contrast to the majority, Republicans argued that "the power of the purse—which forms the core of the majority argument—is not and was never intended to be a license for Congress to usurp Presidential powers and functions." According to the minority, Congress had overstepped its constitutional authority by using the Boland amendments to limit the president's conduct in foreign policy. The Boland amendment's language was the subject of controversy, as it stated "no funds available to the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, or any other agency or entity of the United States involved in intelligence activities" could support the Contras. Republicans concluded that the language excluded the NSC as an entity involved in intelligence. Congress could, however, defund the operations, if they wanted them to end. Citing *U.S. v. Curtiss-Wright*, the minority asserted that, as "sole organ" of US foreign policy, the president could share information, ask governments to support the Contras, and negotiate secretly with Iran. Reagan's policies had been constitutional, even if they were "unwise.[34]

Drafting the minority report proved formative for its architects. Political Scientist Michael J. Malbin, the report's principal author, later observed that the affair revealed the necessity of Congress and the president using "nonstatutory levers" to prevent "mutually harmful procedural warfare." Executive-legislative relations had reached a new low during the episode. The major lesson of Iran-Contra, Malbin argued, was "[m]utal cooperation is a necessary ingredient of a

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[31] For the minority report's conclusions, see *Select Committee's Final Report*, Section II; for general summary and finding, see 431-456.
[32] Richard Cheney, *In my Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), 146.
[33] *Select Committee's Report*, 457, 475-477; For a classic study of the resurgence of legislative power, see James L. Sundquist, *The Decline and Resurgence of Congress* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1981).
[34] *Select Committee's Report*, 457-483, 489-501; On Federalist No. 70, see Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, ed. Lawrence Goldman, *The Federalist Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 343-350.

healthy foreign policy."[35] Cheney, for his part, viewed serving on the Select Committee and writing the report as "crucial to defend[ing] the presidency itself against congressional attempts to encroach on its power." The Vietnam War and Watergate had compelled Congress to diminish the presidency. Iran-Contra offered critics an opportunity to respond. The experience influenced Cheney during his remaining years in Congress and throughout his service as secretary of defense and vice president. Drawing on the minority report, Cheney published in the aftermath of Iran-Contra a critique of "creative legislative usurpation of executive authority," expounding on the need for an energetic presidency while sustaining comity between branches of government. Recalling the minority report during a March 2000 interview, Cheney remarked, "It's probably the best, most comprehensive statement of how I viewed the world." In December 2005, he referred the "obscure text" as the finest articulation of presidential prerogative in foreign policy. The majority report's impact, however, has been less perceptible.[36]

The Select Committee published the final report for posterity. Aware of its potentially limited influence, members of the majority differed in how the report would be received. Some assumed enterprising journalists would consult it for further investigations. The report would also serve as a historical document for students and politicians alike. "It will be a footnote," Chairman Inouye declared, in the history of the Reagan Era. Vice Chairman Rudman regarded the report as instructional, too. The Select Committee had created a case study on presidential excesses for Reagan's successors. Others were not so sanguine. "We blew it," one committee lawyer confessed to journalists Bob Woodward and Walter Pincus. Over 20 staff members privately registered their complaints about the investigatory process to Woodward and Pincus. They thought the "full story" of Iran-Contra would not be told, a disservice to the public. But Capitol Hill was ready to move on. Congress had deferred to Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh on legal matters. This phase of Iran-Contra was drawing to a close.[37]

Reagan greeted the Select Committee's final report with his typical optimism and a preoccupation with a forthcoming US-Soviet summit. The president elected to neither contest the findings nor dwell on the scandal. Reagan had already authorized the Tower Commission, cooperated with Congress, and endorsed Independent Counsel Walsh's appointment. And he adopted many of the majority's recommendations without compromising the president's ability to conduct foreign policy.[38] After being briefed on the report's findings, Reagan observed in his diary that "the majority report kicks me around pretty good," but the "Minority report repudiates the full report [and] gives me a clean bill of health." Reagan understood the politics of the

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[35] Michael J. Malbin, "Legislative-Executive Lessons from the Iran-Contra Affair," in Lawrence Dodd and Bruce Oppenheimer, eds., *Congress Reconsidered*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1989), 375-392.
[36] Cheney, *In my Time,* 147; Richard B. Cheney, "Clarifying Legislative and Executive Roles in Covert Operations," *George Mason University Law Review* 11, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 203-220; Richard B. Cheney, "Vice President's Remarks to the Traveling Press, December 20, 2005," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/283347; See pages 19-20 in Richard B. Cheney, interview by Philip Zelijow, Tarek E. Masoud, Richard Betts, and James H. McCall, March 16-17, 2000, Dallas, Texas, George H.W. Bush Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/george-h-w-bush.
[37] David Rogers, "Iran-Contra Panels' Effort to Complete Report Was Complicated by Politics," *Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 1987, 1; Warren B. Rudman, *Combat*, 151; Walter Pincus and Bob Woodward, "Iran-Contra Report Won't Tell Whole Story," *New York Times*, November 5, 1987, A1.
[38] White House Counsel Arthur B. Culvahouse, Jr. recommended emphasizing Reagan's cooperation instead of addressing allegations. See Memo, Arthur B. Culvahouse, Jr. to Howard H. Baker, Jr., "Reaction to Iran/Contra Reports," November 10, 1987, Folder "Iran-Contra Hearings - June [May - November 1987] (1)," Box 3, Howard Baker Files, RRPL.

moment. “It’s obvious the report is aimed at discrediting me,” he wrote. When the congressional investigation ended, Reagan called Cheney to express his gratitude for Cheney’s participation on the committee. The president was ready to move on. Three weeks later, Reagan signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev, a culmination of his Cold War policy and harbinger of the final phase of relaxed tensions between superpowers. “We have made history,” Reagan remarked at the summit. As Reagan secured the capstone of his foreign policy agenda, he embarked on his final year in office, with Iran-Contra behind him.[39]

On December 16, 1988, Reagan ruminated on what he learned from Iran-Contra at the University of Virginia, where he reflected of his foreign policy achievements. Reagan praised his successes in areas where a bipartisan consensus cohered, such as supporting the mujahideen in Afghanistan and achieving arms reduction with the Soviet Union. On Central America, however, Reagan lamented that the struggle between himself and Congress prevented an ousting of the Sandinistas. Instead of conflict, cooperation among the executive and legislative branches ensured a foreign policy that protected the national interest. Reagan’s experience thus showed Congress and the president “must work together in common cause with all deference, but within their separate spheres.” Congress controlled appropriations, spending, and taxing; the president was Commander in Chief. According to Reagan, legislation aimed at limiting a president’s power to conduct foreign policy institutionalized the very “adversarial relationship” that he denounced. The Founders, Reagan said, embraced “effectiveness, coherence, consistency, and flexibility in the conduct of foreign affairs.” So, too, should the modern-day American government welcome an energetic executive. “Today we live in a world in which America no longer enjoys preponderant power, but must lead by example and persuasion; a world of pressing new challenges to our economic prosperity; a world of new opportunities for peace and of new dangers,” Reagan warned. “In such a world, more than ever,” Reagan proclaimed, “America needs strong and consistent leadership, and the strength and resilience of the Presidency are vital.”[40]

Conclusion

Of those congressmen charged with investigating Iran-Contra, Richard Cheney has consistently identified the central theme. Speaking at a luncheon for the Gerald R. Ford Journalism Prize in 2006, Vice President Cheney fielded a reporter’s question that, in referencing the presidency’s post-Watergate diminution, asked about the limits of executive power. Cheney recounted the problems of a resurgent Congress in the 1970s seeking to constrain the presidency.

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[39] Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, 549; Cheney, *In My Time*, 148; Ronald Reagan, “Address to the American and Soviet Peoples on the Soviet-United States Summit Meeting, December 8, 1987,” Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252160; Ronald Reagan, Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Elimination of Their Intermediate- Range and Shorter-Range Missiles Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252158; On the summits leading to the INF treaty, see Thomas Blanton and Svetlana Savranskaya eds., *The Last Superpower Summits: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Bush – Conversations that Ended the Cold War* (Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press, 2016), 1-365.

[40] Ronald Reagan, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, December 16, 1988,” Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/253537.

Iran-Contra had offered a chance to restore order. “For those of you who are bored and don't have anything else to do,” Cheney recommended, “there are minority views we filed with that report that lay out a view with respect to how we think the balance ought to exist between the executive and the legislative in the conduct of national security policy.”[41]

The Select Committee helped ensure Reagan’s vision of the presidency. The president emerged from Iran-Contra as the arbiter of foreign policy. In hindsight, the outcome should not come as a surprise. Congress had raised concerns about weakening the presidency since the scandal began. The committee originated from bipartisan intentions and for the purpose of disclosing the facts to the public. The venue, though, was ripe for partisan theatrics as well as legitimate disagreement. The testimony and final report contained elements of each. Although the committee spiraled into partisan division over constitutional matters underpinning the scandal, critical debates about foreign policymaking evoked the spirit of bipartisanship. Congress and senior administration officials agreed in principle on the need for cooperation on foreign policy between the executive and legislative branches. The crisis precipitated by Iran-Contra fostered a longing for the return of a bipartisan foreign policy. Shultz reminded the committee that it existed in most areas concerning the Cold War.

Still, the hearings primarily served as a forum for airing the shocking details of the Iran-Contra operations. The question of whether Congress should impeach Reagan loomed over the proceedings. Poindexter had offered the answer before the hearings commenced. That Liman, Nields, Rudman, and presumably other committee members and staff knew Poindexter would not implicate Reagan underscored the political nature of the hearings. The committee granted limited immunity to North and Poindexter, even though it would compromise criminal cases. The public deserved the full story, and the committee fulfilled their role in bringing it to the their attention. Congress entrusted the American people to render the final verdict. Partisan theatrics had a role in that process. North blindsided the committee and turned the hearings into a spectacle, but his contributions to their lasting consequences are minimal. The hearings may have had the maximum political impact, but the final report is the historical legacy.

Paradoxically, the congressional investigation into Reagan’s foreign policy’s scandal stemming from alleged abuse of presidential power led to the creation of the intellectual impetus for an energized post-Cold War presidency. Despite being critical of Reagan, the majority did not request major legislative changes. To be sure, Reagan preemptively instituted reforms, streamlining the covert action process and making the national security bureaucracy more efficient. Bush inherited the improved procedures and rebuffed congressional attempts to limit a president’s power to conduct sensitive covert action. The minority’s experience proved formative, especially for Cheney, and resulted in a report articulating an interpretation of presidential power in foreign affairs that Congress tacitly accepted.

Both Reagan and Bush emerged from the hearings relatively unscathed. Reagan had achieved political security by the summer hearings, but the majority report was strikingly critical, more so than the Tower Report. Reagan accepted the committee’s findings in stride, as he discerned public interest had dwindled. Days after the hearings wrapped, Cheney told Reagan that “he feels the public is fed up with the whole subject of Iran-Contra.” Reagan concurred. “I think he’s right,” he recorded in his diary. The Great Communicator had little to say on the subject. The minority report had proffered a robust enough defense of the president and the presidency. The

[41] Richard B. Cheney, “Vice President's Remarks at the Gerald R. Ford Journalism Prize Luncheon Followed by Q & A, June 19, 2006,” Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/282965.

constitutional crisis ended anti-climatically. Reagan neither resigned nor faced impeachment. Instead, he sat for an interview with *Time* magazine and then addressed the nation. For Bush, the committee determined he was a secondary participant without decision-making responsibility. Americans would have at their disposal enough information to decide for themselves if they would punish Bush at the ballot box. In November 1988, Bush became the 41st president by securing 426 Electoral College votes and winning 40 states.[42]

The Iran-Contra hearings mostly accomplished the Select Committee's political objective. Congress sought to reveal the facts to the public and redress the breakdown in executive-legislative relations. It was more successful with the former than the latter. Independent Counsel Walsh was responsible for addressing the criminal dimensions of the scandal, which committee members regarded as less important than the political dynamics. "It was our political system that had broken down really badly," Nields, the lead counsel for the House Committee, remarked retrospectively. The politics of Iran-Contra mattered immensely to the committee. Its effect on the country influenced their response. "I thought whether Oliver North or somebody else went to jail for six months was not as important as getting to the bottom of this and doing it with reasonable expedition," Nields said.[43] The televised hearings and final report reflected these sentiments. Yet the committee's work did not permanently resolve the scandal. Walsh's investigation continued for nearly six years after the congressional hearings. In the process, Walsh would run afoul Congress and the president alike. The complex web of Iran-Contra expanded, too. Congress turned their attention to an alleged precursor of the Iran initiative. The affair was far from over.

[42] Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 524; On the 1988 presidential election see Richard Ben Cramer, *What it Takes: The Way to the White House* (New York: Random House, 1992); See also John J. Pitney, Jr., *After Reagan: Bush, Dukakis, and the 1988 Election* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2019).

[43] See pages 177-178 of John W. Nields, Jr., interview by Elizabeth Cavanagh, September 27, 2017, March 20, April 24, May 22, July 10, and October 22, 2018, Washington D.C., Oral History Project of the Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit, https://dcchs.org/sb_pdf/nields-complete/.

Chapter 9
Aftermath: Investigating and the Politics of Presidential Scandal

While many may have doubts about our legal process during this time, we must have faith -- faith that the truth will prevail, fully exonerating you of these charges.
Ronald Reagan, Letter to Casper Weinberger, September 23, 1992[1]

I am disappointed in this Mr. Sick, whoever he is.
George H.W. Bush, Remarks at a Press Conference, May 8, 1991[2]

The Iran-Contra affair entered a period of prolonged legal battles before the scandal's second major effect on presidential politics manifested during the 1992 presidential election. As chapter 6 details, Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh began his investigation in December 1986 with support from Presidential Ronald Reagan. After the congressional hearings resolved, Walsh's investigation had "its own momentum," propelling his bid for justice—through trials and tribulations of its own—until he delivered a three-volume final report to the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit on August 5, 1993. In the end, Walsh never obtained and sustained a conviction of anyone in the Reagan administration for violating the statues at issue in Iran-Contra, including the Arms Export Control Act and Boland amendments. Instead, Iran-Contra participants received indictments for process crimes related to the investigations, including perjury and obstruction.[3] Oliver North and John Poindexter successfully had their charges vacated on appeal. President George H.W. Bush pardoned others in the aftermath of Walsh's surprising indictment of Casper Weinberger mere days before the 1992 presidential election. Walsh's investigation began with grand designs for securing conspiracy indictments and ended with a stroke of a president's pen.[4]

Walsh's investigation was not the only inquiry into Iran-Contra related matters launched in the aftermath of the Select Committee. The web of Iran-Contra expanded to include allegations that the 1980 Reagan presidential campaign conspired with the revolutionary government in Iran to delay the release of American hostages to affect the outcome of the presidential election. The "October Surprise" originated as a catchall term used by Reagan campaign officials to describe last-minute actions that would better Jimmy Carter's reelection prospects. It then became a

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[1] Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to Caspar Weinberger, September 23, 1992, in Box III: 144, Folder "Iran-Contra Investigations Friends of Caspar Weinberger Tribute," Caspar W. Weinberger Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter LOC)

[2] George Bush, "Remarks Announcing the Resignation of William H. Webster as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency and a News Conference, May 8, 1991," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/265148.

[3] Albert Hakim's corporation pleaded guilty to unauthorized use of US government funds from illegally diverting the Iranian arms sales proceeds to the Contras. Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters*. U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, August 4, 1993. Vol. I: Investigations and Prosecutions (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993), 179-180.

[4] On indictments, see Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters*. U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, August 4, 1993. Volume II: Indictments, Plea Agreements, Interim Reports to the Congress, and Administrative Matters (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993); "Iran-Contra Scandal Report Won't Affect Probe--Walsh: His Inquiry has Own Momentum, Prosecutor Says," *Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 1987, 2.

signifier for the quid pro quo that was allegedly a forerunner of the Iranian initiative.[5]

The pernicious conspiracy theory arose in the aftermath of the 1980 presidential election and matured with the public revelation of Iran-Contra. Journalists, amateur sleuths, and hucksters raised specious claims about the Reagan campaign's involvement in the hostage crisis in books, magazines, and newspapers. Network television programs explored the conspiracy over multiple episodes. Former Carter administration officials added credibility to the allegations. Former President Carter himself requested Congress review the accusations. And members of Congress pressed for action. In response to growing public speculation, the House and Senate launched separate inquiries into the October Surprise conspiracy. Bush repudiated the allegations but cooperated with Congress. The investigations eventually rebutted the allegations, finding the October Surprise a complete fabrication.[6]

The Select Committee on Iran-Contra did not resolve the affair. Rather, Iran-Contra spawned ancillary scandals, this chapter argues, that converged and concluded in a glaring irony during the second half of the Bush administration. While Congress probed allegations of undue influence on the 1980 presidential election, Walsh's continuing investigation into Iran-Contra prompted the surprise October indictment of Weinberger, potentially affecting the 1992 presidential election. Congress would absolve Reagan and Bush of the egregious October Surprise accusations. Bush's presidential pardons would bring an end to Walsh's nearly seven-year probe. And a scandal born from discord between the president and Congress would reach a bipartisan agreement that the controversy was finally over.

What follows examines the resolution of the Iran-Contra affair. This chapter begins with the culmination of Walsh's lengthy criminal investigation. It explores how Walsh prosecuted crimes stemming from Iran-Contra and why his efforts proved fruitless. Next, the narrative turns to the October Surprise congressional probes. What Reagan called "absolute fiction," it explains, developed on the fringes of American political discourse and transformed into an episode of legitimate congressional inquiry with the help of former Carter administration officials and journalists who enabled it.[7] If the onset of the scandal was political dynamite, the ending was no less explosive.

The Independent Counsel: Long Bid for Justice

Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh pursued crimes stemming from the Contra operation before resigning himself to prosecuting acts that allegedly obstructed official investigations. The Iran infinitive itself did not yield prosecutable crimes. In December 1986, Charles J. Cooper, an Assistant Attorney General in the Office of Legal Counsel, concluded that Reagan was within his

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[5] See pages 61-63 of Richard V. Allen, Interview by Stephen F. Knott, Russell L. Riley, and James Sterling Young, May 28, 2002, Charlottesville, Virginia, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ronald-reagan; See also, Howell Raines, "Reagan Aides Seek Way To Defeat Any 'Surprise': Guessing Possible Moves," *New York Times*, October 7, 1980, D21.

[6] United States. Congress., *Joint Report of the Task Force to Investigate Certain Allegations Concerning the Holding of American Hostages by Iran in 1980*, 102d Congress, 2d Sess., January 3, 1993 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993); United States. Senate. *The "October Surprise" allegations and the circumstances surrounding the release of the American hostages held in Iran*: report of the Special Counsel to Senator Terry Sanford and Senator James M. Jeffords of the Committee on Foreign Relations, 102d Congress, 2d Sess., November 19, 1992 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992).

[7] John E. Yang, "Reagan Calls Hostage Plot 'Fiction': Effort to Delay Release Denied," *Washington Post*, June 16, 1991, A4.

constitutional powers to conduct the arms-for-hostages deals. The Iranian initiative, Cooper argued, was legal based on the National Security Act and statutes governing presidential authorization of covert action. The "full blueprint" of Walsh's prosecutions supported Cooper's analysis. Walsh sought to bring about indictments related to "the supposed runaway conspiracy to supply the Contras," which Reagan had not authorized. "The deceitful misuse of government personnel and funds could support a charge of conspiracy to defraud the government," Walsh later justified, "even though the Boland amendments carried no criminal penalties." The National Security Agency, however, refused to release its classified records for North's trial, which would reveal the extent of knowledge about North's activities within the administration. Lieutenant General William E. Odom, then Director of the NSA, had vowed from the scandal's outset to prevent public disclosures of the agency's sources and methods. With no recourse, Walsh retreated from the serious conspiracy and diversion charges. Seeking convictions on process crimes became his strategy.[8]

Over the nearly seven-year period Walsh investigated the disparate actions related to Iran-Contra in an unrelenting manner. Walsh first indicted Carl Channell and Richard Miller for illegal Contra fundraising. They accepted plea bargains on counts of defrauding the US by converting tax-exempt donations into lethal aid for the Contras. Then, Walsh's investigation faced the headwinds of political and bureaucratic fidelity to national security. Walsh blamed executive agencies for his inability to prosecute defendants for conspiracy. He complained that "with the limitations put on us, we couldn't prove in court the diversion and the actual misconduct in supporting the contras." Walsh settled for lesser charges, focusing primarily on false statements that participants had given to Congress. Ultimately, Walsh indicted 14 participants, with 11 pleaded guilty or convicted upon trial. In November 1989, Richard Secord and Albert Hakim accepted plea bargains for their roles in operating the Enterprise. Secord pleaded guilty to lying to Congress in exchange for cooperating with the investigation. Hakim entered guilty pleas to a misdemeanor charge of supplementing the salary of a government office and the felony charge of unauthorized purposes of US funds as the primary stakeholder of Lake Resources Inc., a company used to manage the Enterprise's supply operations.[9]

Walsh targeted secondary figures in the Reagan administration with equal vigor. CIA and State Department officials tangled with Walsh over their October 1986 statements before Congress regarding Iran-Contra (See chapter 4). Walsh pursued indictments against CIA Officers Duane Clarridge and Alan Fiers. George was convicted on two charges of false statements and perjury before Congress. Fiers, for his part, accepted a plea bargain on two counts of withholding information from Congress, offering in exchange "extensive and exemplary" cooperation on pending investigations, including against former Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs

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[8] Memorandum, Charles J. Cooper to Edwin Meese III, "Legal Authority for Recent Covert Arms Transfer to Iran," December 17, 1986, Folder "Iran/Arms Transaction: OLC Opinion-Legal Authority for Recent Covert Arms Transfers to Iran (December 17, 1986)," CFOA 1131, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (Hereafter RRPL); Lawrence E. Walsh, *Firewall: The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-up* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 65-66, 1778-181; Odom, William E. 26 *Dec 86*. Diary. Folder: "1986, July 6 - 1987, July 6." Part II: Box 9, William E. Odom Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC.

[9] On Channell and Miller's indictment, see Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters*. U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, August 4, 1993. Volume II: Indictments, Plea Agreements, Interim Reports to the Congress, and Administrative Matters (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993), 5-17; On Walsh's painstaking efforts, see George Lardner Jr., Lawrence Walsh, "Taking Pains," *Washington Post,* May 11, 1987*;* On challenging prosecution and investigation, see Scott Spencer, "Lawrence Walsh's Last Battle," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 4, 1993; On Secord and Hakim, see Walsh, *Final Report*, Vol. II, 133-195.

Elliott Abrams, who would face indictments for his October 1986 statements. Abrams challenged Walsh's charges that he gave false testimony to Congress about the extent of his knowledge of North's activities and Contra fundraising. Eventually, Abrams accepted a plea bargain to avoid the emotional and financial costs of a trial. In 1991, Abrams pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges of withholding information from Congress. Reflecting on his experience with Walsh, Abrams later wrote, "Political differences should not be turned into crimes." Walsh had less success with the prime suspects.[10]

Although both were convicted, North and Poindexter benefited from their congressional testimony. In May 1989, North lost his case at trial. A jury found him guilty of aiding and abetting obstruction of Congress, shredding and altering official documents, and accepting an illegal gratuity. Walsh also secured Poindexter's conviction in April 1990, obtaining guilty verdicts on conspiring to obstruct official inquiries and proceedings, obstruction of Congress, and false statements to Congress. In July 1990, however, the Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit vacated North's conviction on grounds that his immunized testimony influenced witnesses. North declared that he was "totally exonerated." In a similar ruling, the US Appeals Court overturned Poindexter's convictions in November 1991. At Poindexter's trial, North had claimed that he could not distinguish between his memories and Poindexter's congressional testimony. Walsh's decision to allow the testimony into trial undermined his cases. His approach has attracted criticism, particularly from those tasked with investigating Iran-Contra in Congress.[11]

The lead counsels for the Select Committee on Iran-Contra have questioned Walsh's methods. Arthur L. Liman, the lead counsel for the Senate Select Committee, was critical of Walsh for declining to prosecute North prior to the congressional hearings for obstruction of justice related to his destruction of documents. Walsh's fateful choice "to build a massive conspiracy case" portended its lackluster results. Liman also had a bizarre interaction with Walsh that revealed his penchant for conspiracy. As Liman and Walsh debated the committee's decision to grant Poindexter limited immunity, Walsh stated that he had to probe whether Poindexter secretly worked for the Soviet Union, as his behavior suggested "improper motives." Aghast, Liman dismissed the absurd accusation and reminded Walsh that Congress had an obligation to resolve the scandal quickly for the nation's sake. "Judge Walsh did not have the slightest feeling for the facts," Liman concluded. Lead counsel for the House Committee John Nields Jr. held a similar opinion. In a recent interview, Nields suggested that Walsh's prosecutions of North and Poindexter failed due to his insistence on using immunized testimony as evidence. Walsh should have known the tactic would ensure vacated sentences. Walsh's zeal for bringing the transgressors of Iran-Contra to justice equaled that of the participants themselves in carrying out the operations. Walsh was undeterred throughout his investigation, which even ensnared the former president.[12]

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[10] On George see Walsh, *Final Report*, Vol 1, Chapter 17; On Fiers, see Walsh, *Final Report*, Vol 1., Chapter 19; On Abrams, see Walsh, *Final Report*, Vol 1., Chapter 25; see also Elliott Abrams, *Undue Process: A Story of How Political Differences Are Turned into Crimes* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

[11] On Poindexter and North indictment and pleas, see Walsh, *Final Report*, Volume II, 31-279; On North and Poindexter, see Walsh, *Final Report,* Volume I*,* 120-22 and 135-16*;* Haynes Johnson and Tracy Thompson, "North Charges Dismissed at Request of Prosecutor," *Washington Post,* September 17, 1991; Tracy Thompson and George Lardner Jr., Appeals Court Reverses Poindexter Conviction, *Washington Post,* November 16, 1991.

[12] Liman reprints his notes from the meeting in his memoir, see Arthur L. Liman, *Lawyer: A Life of Counsel and Controversy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1998), 312; On Nields views, see pages 197-199 of John W. Nields, Jr., interview by Elizabeth Cavanagh, September 27, 2017, March 20, April 24, May 22, July 10, and October 22, 2018, Washington D.C., Oral History Project of the Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit,

The President and His Men

Reagan's relationship with the independent counsel investigation evolved from endorsing the investigation to becoming both a target and witness. In 1987, Reagan carefully responded to 53 written grand jury interrogatories on Iran-Contra. As the independent counsel inquiry progressed, Reagan cooperated in person and without protest. On February 16 and 17, 1990, Reagan participated in a closed, videotaped deposition for Poindexter's trial. Reagan neither invoked executive privilege nor needlessly disclosed classified information. Reagan's dwindling memory complicated his testimony. The former president could not recall specific details about conversations, meetings or the operations, which impeached Poindexter's defense that Reagan knew of and supported his actions. Reagan had one more interaction with Walsh before consigning Iran-Contra to the past. On July 24, 1992, Reagan voluntarily sat for a final deposition with Walsh, when his memory showed serious signs of decline. Walsh conceded that Reagan's recollection was "very faded." And a bad memory was not sufficient proof for the crimes of making false statements or committing perjury. Reagan had not purposively lied to Walsh and his staff. Although suffering from memory loss, the former president charmed his chief investigator and antagonist. "It had been a long time since anyone had captivated me so completely," Walsh later confessed.[13]

Lacking evidence, Walsh decided that he would not charge Reagan for Iran-Contra. Walsh, however, assigned full responsibility for the scandal to Reagan in his final judgement. It was, after all, the president's foreign policy that created it. In his report, Walsh claimed that members of the Reagan administration "skirted the law, some of them broke the law, and almost all of them tried to cover up the President's willful activities." Walsh viewed his efforts as a thorough fleshing out of the scandal. The independent counsel investigation, he suggested, offered "a much more accurate picture" than the congressional inquiry. He rejected the Select Committee's majority opinion, denying that it was "an aberrational scheme" conducted by "out-of-control mavericks" on the NSC staff. Rather, Walsh argued, Iran-Contra resulted from two of Reagan's foreign policy initiatives that the NSC carried out at Reagan's behest in conjunction with the CIA, State and Defense departments. The buck indeed stopped with Reagan, not Poindexter. Although Reagan survived scrutiny, former members of his cabinet became Walsh's prime targets. Walsh discovered new evidence several years into his investigation, compelling him to seek former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's indictment.[14]

Walsh's team uncovered that the administration had not released all relevant documents to the congressional committees. Walsh acquired a treasure trove of material containing intimate details about the activities of senior officials. Investigators discovered detailed notes by State Department aide Charles Hill and former Chief of Staff Donald Regan. In December 1992, they received Bush's personal diary from his tenure as vice president. More importantly, Walsh

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https://dcchs.org/sb_pdf/nields-complete/.

[13] Walsh, *Final Report*, Vol 1., 131-134, 446-447, 470-472; Walsh, *Firewall*, 420-421; David Johnston, "Reagan Testifies in the Poindexter Case," *New York Times*, February 17, 1990, 11; For Reagan's depositions, see Deposition of Ronald W. Reagan, February 17, 1990; Transcript 2/17/90, 9:45am #013072 (Reagan Deposition); U.S. v. Poindexter (88-0080-01), Box 34, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (Hereafter NARA); Deposition of Ronald W. Reagan, July 24, 1992; Reagan Deposition 1992; Attorney Files: Records of Christina A. Spaulding Witness Files: General; Box 5, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

[14] On Walsh's investigation into Reagan, see Walsh, *Final Report*, Vol 1., Chp. 27; On Walsh's conclusions, see Ibid., 561-566.

obtained Weinberger's voluminous notes, which he had deposited at the Library of Congress. After reading in Hill's documents that Weinberger routinely took notes, investigators reviewed Weinberger's classified holdings at the Library. They initially missed the files because Weinberger placed them in what became his unclassified holdings. Upon finally discovering Weinberger's notes, Walsh sought his indictment for obstruction, false statements, and perjury. Walsh aimed to prove that Weinberger's notes both contradicted his previous testimony about his involvement in Iran-Contra and demonstrated that he intentionally concealed documents from investigators. Walsh subsequently indicted Weinberger for making false statements to Congress four days before the 1992 presidential election. Weinberger castigated Walsh for "a grotesque abuse of the prosecutorial power" and using him as "a pawn in a clearly political game." The timing could not have been more burdensome for Bush.[15]

Walsh's surprise indictment crossed a threshold in his investigation's impact on presidential politics. Bush had publicly maintained that he had a minor role in the affair, as the Select Committee determined. Walsh's allegations and indictment brought Bush's story into question, increasing political pressure on the incumbent seeking reelection. Arkansas Governor William J. Clinton's presidential campaign capitalized immediately on Weinberger's indictment and the disclosure of his notes, boasting that Walsh's investigation proved Bush was dishonest. In a press release prepared by George Stephanopoulous, the Communications Director for Clinton, the campaign highlighted alleged discrepancies in Bush's comments about Iran-Contra. The statement contained a portion from one of Weinberger's notes, which Walsh had released. The note confirmed Bush supported the Iran initiative at a crucial January 6, 1987, meeting in the Oval Office. The Clinton press release claimed the "smoking gun showing that George Bush lied to the American people" had arrived. Clinton and his running mate Senator Al Gore campaigned on the message that Bush was a liar. "Secretary Weinberger's note clearly shows that President Bush has not been telling the truth when he says he was out of the loop," Clinton declared at a press conference. Gore, meanwhile, proclaimed "a true smoking gun" had emerged indicating Bush was intimately involved in the scandal. The controversy sparked last minute election concerns and inflamed partisan tensions. Republicans looked upon Walsh with renewed concern.[16]

Presidential Pardons

Walsh's indictment of Weinberger was a breaking point for Republicans. By 1992, Republicans protested, Walsh had spent over $35 million in tax payer money for a never-ending, partisan probe. Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole fiercely criticized Walsh. Dole referred to Walsh's investigation as a "high-cost, low-result crusade against Republicans." Dole spearheaded efforts to end it due to its duration and costs to taxpayers. "Like the every-ready rabbit in television commercials," Dole characterized Walsh, the independent counsel probe "just

[15] Walsh, *Firewall*, 488-489, 358-360, 254-256; Walsh, *Final Report*, Vol 1., 326, 331, 474, 505-506; On Weinberger's indictment, see Walsh, *Final Report*, Vol 1., 405-443 and Vol II, 439-467; David Johnston, "Weinberger Calls His Indictment a Political Move," *New York Times*, November 25, 1992.

[16] Press Release, "New Iran-Contra Evidence Released by Prosecutor Shows Bush Flatly Lied about His Role in Arms-for-Hostages," George Stephanopoulous, October 29, 1992, in folder "Iran-Contra [2] [3]," OA/ID 4571-004, John Schmitz, Iran-Contra Files, George H.W. Bush Presidential Records, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, College Station, Texas (Hereafter GHWBPL; Robert Pears, "'86 Weinberger Notes Contradict Bush Account on Iran Arms Deal," *New York Times*, October 31, 1992, 1; Walter Pincus and George Lardner Jr., "Bush Stance, Iran-Contra Note at Odds," *Washington Post*, October 31, 1992, A1.

keeps on going, and going, and going."[17]

Dole mobilized congressional opposition to renewing the Independent Counsel Act. After Republicans promised to filibuster, Congress allowed the law to expire on December 15, 1992, only to reauthorize it under the Clinton administration. After the presidential election, Republican Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee Alan K. Simpson, Strom Thurmond, Hank Brown, and Charles E. Grassley asked Attorney General William P. Barr to seek an independent counsel to probe Walsh for "unethical activities" related to the Iran-Contra investigation's undue influence on the presidential election. Barr concluded that an independent counsel cannot investigate another independent counsel. Inside the White House, an upset Chief of Staff James Baker raised the possibility of exploring whether Walsh had violated the law by using his position to affect the election outcome. The political turmoil climaxed with Bush's pardons, before giving way to the rhythms of a new presidential administration in Washington.[18]

Aggravated and exhausted, Bush sympathized with the embattled former Defense Secretary and fellow Republicans, following through with pardoning six offenders embroiled in Iran-Contra. Bush considered Walsh's behavior overtly political and an abuse of his position, possibly causing him to lose the election.[19] Bush asked Richard Cheney, then serving as Secretary of Defense, and Baker for their input. They supported pardons under the circumstances. Following the Justice Department's review, Barr also recommended that Bush grant broad pardons. Barr regarded Walsh as "a headhunter" who "had completely lost perspective."[20] The Bush administration were in agreement that politics animated Walsh's prolonged prosecution and he was only chasing minor offenses in pursuit of the president. White House Counsel C. Boyden Gray advised Bush that, while he considered compassion as an important factor, the president should pardon every former administration official except himself and Reagan "on grounds of

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[17] Press Release, Robert J. Dole, "Walsh Investigation," February 27, 1992, Folder 37: Walsh Investigation, 2/27/1992, Subject: Foreign Relations, Digitized Press Releases, 1961-1996, Robert J. Dole Archive and Special Collection, http://dolearchivecollections.ku.edu/collections/press_releases/920227sca.pdf; Robert J. Dole, "Walsh Probe Update," December 7, 1992, Folder 274: Walsh Probe Update, 12/7/1992, Subject: Foreign Relations, Digitized Press Releases, 1961-1996, Robert J. Dole Archive and Special Collection, http://dolearchivecollections.ku.edu/collections/press_releases/921207wal.pdf; Robert J. Dole, "Walsh's Waste Exposed," December 22, 1992, Folder 285: Walsh's Waste Exposed, 12/22/1992 Subject: Government Affairs, Digitized Press Releases, 1961-1996, Robert J. Dole Archive and Special Collection, http://dolearchivecollections.ku.edu/collections/press_releases/921222wal.pdf.

[18] George Lardner Jr., "4 GOP Senators Seek Probe of Iran-Contra Prosecutor," *Washington Post*, November 13, 1992, A4; Walter Pincus, "Barr Rejects Counsel for Walsh Probe," *Washington Post*, December 12, 1992, A6; Helen Dewar, "GOP Filibuster Threat Kills Independent Counsel Bill," *Washington Post*, September 30, 1992, A11; Peter Baker and Susan Glass, *The Man Who Ran Washington: The Life and Times of James A. Baker III* (New York: Doubleday, 2020), 506.

[19] Journalist Bob Woodward claims that Bush "bellowed" in front of Attorney General William Barr that Walsh had political motivates, abused his power, and ensured his reelection loss. Barr rebuked Woodward's characterization of their conversation, although Barr confirmed that Bush believed Walsh's indictment of Caspar Weinberger four days before the election resulted in Bush losing. See Bob Woodward, *Shadow: Five Presidents and the Legacy of Watergate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 205-206; See page 23 of William P. Barr, Interview by James S. Young, Daniel J. Meador, Russell L. Riley, and Nancy V. Baker, April 5, 2001, Charlottesville, Virginia, George H.W. Bush Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/george-h-w-bush.

[20] On Cheney and Baker, See Richard Cheney, *In my Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), 409-410; On Barr, see pages 22 and 91 of William P. Barr, Interview by James S. Young, Daniel J. Meador, Russell L. Riley, and Nancy V. Baker, April 5, 2001, Charlottesville, Virginia, George H.W. Bush Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/george-h-w-bush.

abuse of process." All participants deserved equal treatment. Otherwise, Walsh would use any opportunity to continue the investigation with vigor regardless of merit. Bush had consensus within his administration and found the arguments convincing.[21]

On Christmas Eve 1992, Bush pardoned Elliott Abrams, Duane Clarridge, Alan Fiers, Clair George, Robert McFarlane, and Casper Weinberger. Bush hailed Weinberger as a patriot, decried the investigation as "criminalization of policy differences," and proclaimed "honor, decency, and fairness require" granting pardons. Gray summarized the justification to National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, who was one of the first to grapple with the scandal as a member of the Tower Commission:

> The pardons today were based on compassion, on the long and distinguished public service of those pardoned, on the price they have already paid for any misdeeds, on the fact that the case traces its roots to now-anachronistic policy dispute during the Cold War, on misgivings about the criminalizing of disputes between the President and Congress, and on the fact that, after six years of investigation, it is time to put the matter behind us and look to the future.[22]

Bush had formally ended Iran-Contra. Reagan said he was "glad that this long ordeal has ended for them and their families." Walsh, for his part, was not pleased, promptly releasing a statement denouncing Bush's decision. Walsh prepared for another round of legal battles, turning his attention to Bush. He publicly referred to Bush as "the subject now of our investigation." Walsh's staff, meanwhile, lacked a similar disposition. They opposed seeking to depose Bush in front of a grand jury. The general mood in Washington, too, did not favor another year of Iran-Contra.[23]

Bush had formed broad consensus for the pardons. The Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Iran-Contra supported Weinberger's pardon. Senators Daniel Inouye and Warren Rudman submitted a letter on Weinberger's behalf. "It is inconceivable to

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[21] On Walsh's investigation into Bush's participation, see Walsh, *Final Report on Iran-Contra*, Vol 1., Chap 28; On the debate over pardons, see Memo, C. Boyden Gray, Reasons Why A Pardon of Caspar W. Weinberger Is Appropriate; Memo, C. Boyden Gray, Justification For Presidential Pardon of Clair E. George; Memo, C. Boyden Gray to George H.W. Bush, "Iran-Contra Pardons," December 19, 1992 in folder "Iran-Contra [2] [3]," OA/ID 4571-004, John Schmitz, Iran-Contra Files, George H.W. Bush Presidential Records, GHWBPL; On further advice from Gray, see Memo, C. Boyden Gray to George H.W. Bush, December 21, 1992, in Ibid.; see also Memo, C. Boyden Gray to George H.W. Bush, "Iran-Contra Pardons," December 17, 1992, Folder "Caspar Weinberger: Letter from Skadden Arps Requesting a Pardon and Materials [2]," OA/ID 45555-019, Mark Paoletta Pardon Files, Office of Counsel to the President, GHWBPL; For Weinberger's pardon request, see Pardon Request, Robert S. Bennett and Carl S. Rauh to George H.W. Bush, December 18, 1992, Folder "Affidavits and More Weinberger Pardon Material [1]," OA/ID Number: 45553-013, Mark Paoletta Pardon Files, GHWBPL.

[22] For Grant of Executive Clemency, see George H.W. Bush, "Proclamation 6518--Grant of Executive Clemency, December 24, 1992," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=20265; Memo, C. Boydon Grey to General Brent Scowcroft, "Pardons Granted Casper Weinberger and Others Involved in the Iran-Contra Affair, " December 24, 1992, Folder "Casper Weinberger: Letter from Skadden Arps Requesting a Pardon and Materials [1]," OA/ID Number: 45558-018, Mark Paoletta Pardon Files, GHWBPL.

[23] Ronald Ostrow and Robert Jackson, "Bush Pardons Weinberger, 5 Others in Iran-Contra," *Los Angeles Times*, December 25, 1992, A1; Walter Pincus, "Bush Pardons Weinberger in Iran-Contra Affair: 5 Others Also Cleared; Angry Walsh Indicates A Focus on President," Washington Post, December 25, 1992, A1; "Independent Counsel's Statement on the Pardons," New York Times, December 25, 1992, A22; Walsh, *Firewall*, 515.

us," they wrote, "that he would intentionally mislead or lie to Congress."[24] Democratic Speaker of the House Thomas S. Foley and Wisconsin Congressmen Lee Aspin, whom Clinton selected as Defense Secretary, also endorsed pardoning Weinberger. And Weinberger himself attracted high-profile supporters for his legal defense, including former presidents Reagan, Gerald Ford, and Richard Nixon. Colin Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, submitted an affidavit attesting to Weinberger's honesty. David Jacobsen, a hostage freed by the Iran initiative, advocated not only for Weinberger, but also the other participants, asking Bush to grant sweeping pardons. Still, some critics on Capitol Hill denounced the pardons and proposed hearings, which encountered immediate resistance. "All this Congress needs is more hearings on Iran-Contra," Rudman said. "The people would laugh Congress out of town." The scandal was over. As the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board observed, the pardons preempted impediments for incoming President Clinton, who could now govern without the divisive political atmosphere that would surround Walsh prosecuting his predecessor. Washington closed the chapter on Iran-Contra, awaiting the next so-called Watergate.[25]

The October Surprise

The effect of Walsh's investigation on the 1992 presidential election was not the only "October Surprise." On August 5, 1991, Speaker of the House Thomas Foley and Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell announced congressional probes into the 1980 presidential election. "We have no conclusive evidence of wrongdoing," their statement read, "but the seriousness of the allegations and the weight of circumstantial information compel an effort to establish the facts." Foley and Mitchell deliberated for months before tasking the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and House Foreign Affair Committee with separate but coordinated "behind closed doors" investigations. The optics were terrible: another investigation into Reagan and Bush's interactions with Iran while the independent counsel investigation persisted. Robert Michel, the House Republican leader, dismissed the probes as "political shenanigans" designed to influence the upcoming presidential election. "There's nothing there," he said, "and people back home don't give two hoots about it, what happened 10 years ago." President Bush condoned a "responsible" investigation but warned against "a political trial" using "flimsy evidence" and relying on "less than reliable" witnesses. For Bush, the public would render the final judgment based on the evidence. The news received a lukewarm reception. A *Los Angeles Time* poll discovered that 57% of respondents supported a formal investigation. Congress would pursue the October Surprise conspiracy theory for the next two years.[26]

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[24] Letter, Daniel Inouye and Warren Rudman to Robert S. Bennett, April 29, 1992, Folder "Affidavits and More Weinberger Pardon Material [1]," OA/ID Number: 45553-013, Mark Paoletta Pardon Files, GHWBPL.

[25] Jack Nelson and Ronald J. Ostrow, "Walsh Moves Up Talks on Whether to Target Bush," *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 1992, A3; Letter, David Jacobsen to George H.W. Bush, November 16, 1992, Folder "Affidavits and More Weinberger Pardon Material [1]," OA/ID Number: 45553-013, Mark Paoletta Pardon Files, GHWBPL; On Weinberger's legal defense support, see ""Friends of Cap," *Washington Times*, September 7, 1992, A6, Letter, Caspar Weinberger to Richard Nixon, September 28, 1992, in Box III: 144, Folder "Iran-Contra Investigations Friends of Caspar Weinberger Tribute," Caspar W. Weinberger Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC; Letter, Richard Nixon to William P. Clark, September 23, 1992, Ibid; Letter, Ronald W. Reagan to Caspar Weinberger, September 23, 1992, Ibid; See List of donors and Co-Chairmen in Ibid; Affidavit, Colin L. Powell., April 2, 1992, in Box III: 144, Folder "Iran-Contra Investigation Legal Defense Trust Fund," Caspar W. Weinberger Papers, Manuscript Division, LOC; "The Bush Pardons," *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 1992, A1.

[26] Michael Ross, "Alleged 80s Hostages Deal to be Examined, *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 1991, A1; Walter Pincus and Tom Kenworthy, "Democrats Set Hostage Deal Probe," *Washington Post*, August 6, 1991, A1; Richard

Congress had addressed the October Surprise before. The linkage between an October Surprise and the Iranian hostage crisis first arose during the 1984 congressional investigation into the leaking of Carter's presidential debate briefing materials. During their probe the Subcommittee on Human Resources discovered that the Reagan campaign had "an intelligence operation" to determine if Carter would secure the release of hostages late in the campaign cycle to boost his reelection chances. The Reagan campaign dedicated resources and tracked Carter's efforts. Although the committee established Reagan campaign staff worried about an October Surprise, they did not find evidence suggesting anyone contacted Iran to engineer a traitorous deal. It was more the art of campaigning than treason.[27] Next, the Joint Select Committee on Iran-Contra evaluated the conspiracy during their inquiry, dedicating one footnote in their final report. The Select Committee determined that, while self-professed Iranian intermediaries approached the Reagan campaign with offers, Reagan's staff rebuffed them. The committee "found no credible evidence to suggest that any discussions were held or agreements reached on delaying the release of hostages or arranging an early arms-for-hostages deal."[28] Still, events of dubious origin and questionable evidence had now prompted another congressional inquiry into Iran-Contra related matters

Allegations about the Reagan campaign's involvement in the hostage crisis emanated first from Iran, followed by the American political fringe. On September 6, 1980, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sadeh Ghotbzadeh told a French reporter that the Reagan campaign sought to prevent the release of the hostages before the November election. A week later, Ghotbzadeh claimed Reagan, as well as Henry Kissinger, would "do everything in their power to block" a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Ghotzbzadeh believed Reagan's presidency would "be a disaster" for Iran and despised Kissinger for helping the Shah in exile. Subsequent congressional investigations determined Ghotzbzadeh possessed no evidence for assertions.[29] Next, the October Surprise conspiracy circulated in a radical political journal after the presidential election. On December 2, 1980, Robert Dreyfuss published an article based on unnamed sources alleging that Kissinger met with high-ranking Iranian officials in November 1980 to thwart Carter's efforts. It appeared in *Executive Intelligence Review*, an outlet owned by the Lyndon LaRouche movement, a political cult with a penchant for propagating perverse conspiracies. Although he accused Kissinger of conspiring against Carter, Dreyfuss noted that Reagan had not

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L. Berke, "Inquiry is Ordered on 1980 Campaign," *New York Times*, August 6, 1991, A1; George Bush, " Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters Aboard Air Force One," August 6, 1991, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/265757; See also George Mitchell's request to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reproduced in the SFRC report, George Mitch to Claiborne Pell and Terry Sanford in *The "October Surprise" allegations,* 129-130.

[27] United States. Congress. *Unauthorized Transfers of Nonpublic Information During the 1980 Presidential Election*, Report prepared by the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, House of Representatives, 98th Congress., 2d. sess, Part 1, May 17, 1984, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1984), 10—1, 46-57.

[28] U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, and House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*, with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views. 100th Congress, 1st Sess., 1987. Senate Report 100-216, November (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1987), 142 fn4.

[29] "Qotbzadeh Views U.S. Hostage Issue, Foreign Relations," *Paris AFP* (August 6, 1980), Translated by Foreign Broadcast Information Service, FBIS Daily Report, South Asia (FBIS-SAS-80-175), September 8, 1980, Page I13; "Qotbzadeh: Hostage Crisis May End Before U.S. Elections," *London Reuters* (September 16, 1980), FBIS Daily Report, South Asia (FBIS-SAS-80-183-A), September 18, 1980; On the falsehood of Ghotbzadeh's allegations see *Joint Report of the Task Force to Investigate Certain Allegations Concerning the Holding of American Hostages by Iran in 1980*, 80-82.

sanctioned Kissinger's action, which the former secretary of state supposedly undertook to boost his profile with the incoming Reagan administration. Dreyfuss crafted the general framework of the allegation that revised and expanded in the aftermath of Iran-Contra's revelation.[30]

The mainstream emergence of the October Surprise theory developed from an inconsequential meeting. In late November 1986, *New York Times* columnist William Safire mentioned that Robert McFarlane, then a staffer on the Senate Armed Services Committee, contacted the Reagan campaign in fall 1980 on behalf of an individual who may have important information pertaining to the hostages. Safire drew on comments made by Circuit Court Judge Laurence H. Silberman, who served as Co-Chairman of Reagan's foreign policy advisors. Silberman and Richard Allen, the first national security advisor under Reagan, had attended a meeting with McFarlane and a Malaysian man who purported to know new developments. At the brief meeting, he proposed approaching the Iranians with a plan to postpone resolving the hostages crisis until after the election. Silberman outright rejected the proposal. "[W]e Americans only have one President at a time," Silberman raged. That meeting at the L'Enfant Plaza surfaced months later in *Miami Herald* article by Alfonso Chardy, who charged Reagan officials with creating "a virtual parallel government" that originated with the campaign. Chardy claimed Silberman, Allen, and McFarlane conspired against Carter. Chardy also reported former President of Iran Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr discovered Ayatollah Khomeini's advisers had coordinated with the Reagan campaign. In an August 1987 interview with journalist Flora Lewis, Bani-Sadr asserted without evidence that the October 1980 collapse in negotiations resulted from a deal between the Reagan campaign and hardliners seeking to embarrass Carter. Similar specious claims appeared elsewhere.[31]

Across publications October Surprise allegations ranged from embellishment and speculations to wild accusations, forming a convoluted story about a secret deal to influence the election. Journalists Bob Woodward and Walter Pincus reported Secretary of State Alexander Haig had approved Israel supplying American military equipment to Iran in 1981 after McFarlane, then a State Department counselor, advocated for it. Woodward and Pincus also mention the McFarlane overture to Silberman and Allen. In the summer of 1987, journalist Christopher Hitchens began advocating the conspiracy in his biweekly column for *The Nation*. Hitchens alleged the Israeli arms shipments were payment to Iran for withholding the hostages until Reagan's inauguration. In *Playboy*, Abbie Hoffman and Jonathan Silvers relied upon Bani-Sadr's unfounded claims to provide an account that cited the L'Enfant Plaza meeting as a key moment where the Reagan campaign and Iran negotiated an arms-for-hostages deal in which Iran would receive arms through Israel if the hostages returned after Reagan's election. Bani-Sadr suggested that a meeting in Paris before the election featured Bush and Iran-Contra participants Manucher Ghorbanifar and Albert Hakim. In April 1989, Barbara Honegger, a disgruntled former campaign staffer and special assistant at Department of Justice, published *October*

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[30] Robert Dreyfuss, "Strange Diplomacy in Iran," *Executive Intelligence Review*, Vol. 7, No. 47 (December 2, 1980): 43-44; Dennis King, *Lyndon LaRouche and the New American Fascism* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

[31] William Safire, "Enough Already," *New York Times*, November 24, 1986, A19; Alfonso Chardy, "Reagan Aides had Hostage Meeting in '80," *Miami Herald*, April 12, 1987; Alfonso Chardy, Reagan Aides and the 'Secret" Government, Miami Herald, July 5, 1987, A1; For Laurence Silberman's account of the allegations against him in the October Surprise conspiracy, see Laurence H. Silberman, "On Honor," Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy 32, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 509-512; Flora Lewis, "The Wiles of Tehran," New York Times, August 3, 1987, A17; See also the transcript of Silberman's 302 interview on the incident with the Federal Burea of Investigation on December 30, 1988, located in Detailed Agency Staff Files; Michael Foster; Investigative File; Box 27, Folder: October Surprise; Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

Surprise, in which she argued that William Casey, then campaign manager for Reagan, brokered a deal with Iran in late October 1989 in Paris. "This may be the crime of the century," Honegger remarked to a journalist, "It may mean that Ronald Reagan stole the 1980 election."[32]

Gary Sick and the October Surprise Goes Mainstream

Gary Sick, a former National Security Council staffer during the Carter administration who worked on Iranian affairs, popularized the October Surprise conspiracy. Sick published about his experience with the hostage crisis and began researching the October Surprise conspiracy after it gained prominence.[33] Sick reviewed secondary sources and interviewed questionable figures from America, Europe, and the Middle East. Sick thought his evidence confirmed the story. On April 15, 1991, he published a summary of his findings in the *New York Times*. Sick claimed that, on behalf of the Reagan campaign, Casey asked Cyrus Hamshemi, an Iranian middleman, to arrange a meeting with Mehdi Karrubi, a representative of Ayatollah Khomeini, in Madrid, Spain, in July 1980 to negotiate for Iran to hold the hostages until inauguration day in exchange for Israel providing arms to the revolutionary government. Casey finalized the arrangement in October 1980 during a Paris meeting, where Bush allegedly joined. Iran held the hostages captive until Reagan entered the White House, Sick alleged, and Israel then shipped weapons to Iran. Sick's accusations prompted renewed interest in the conspiracy and became its central tenets.[34] In November, Sick published a full-length account aimed at convincing a skeptical public and casting doubt on Reagan's election. "A covert political coup…engineered by Casey in 1980," his book charged, "challenges the legitimacy of the political order."[35]

Sick's publications coincided with television programs on the October Surprise. The Public Broadcast System's *Frontline* program and ABC News' *Nightline* dedicated shows to conspiracy. Sick appeared on both. *Nightline* focused on Casey's role across multiple programs, uncovering that the deceased CIA Director had been at a conference during the alleged meetings in Span. *Frontline* featured Sick and covered his accusations, showcasing interviews with Iranian arms deal Jamshid Hashemi, who claimed his brother brokered the deals with Casey in Spain. Other figures appeared to corroborate Hashemi's story, including a self-professed former Israeli intelligence officer Ari Ben-Menashe and an American arms dealer, William Hermann. Nicholas Veliotis, a former State Department official in the Reagan administration, appeared to attest that Haig had authorized Israeli shipments of American military equipment to Iran, which Haig denied. With former officials, journalists, and television reports probing the events surrounding

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[32] Bob Woodward and Walter Pincus, "Israeli Sale Said Allowed by Hair in '81," Washington post, November 29, 1987, A1; Christopher Hitchens wrote continually about the October Surprise in his column. See, for instance, Christopher Hitchens, "Minority Report," *The Nation*, June 20, 1987; Christopher Hitchens, "Minority Report," *The Nation*, July 4, 1987; Hitchens, "Minority Report," *The Nation*, October 24, 1987; and subsequent columns; Abbie Hoffman and Jonathan Silver, "An Election Held Hostage," *Playboy* (October 1988), Barbara Honegger, *October Surprise* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1988); Doyle McManus, "Leads, Leaps of Faith in Hostage Tale," *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 1988.

[33] Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter With Iran* (New York: Random House, 1985).

[34] Gary Sick, "The Election Story of the Decade: How the Evidence turned a Skeptical investigator into a Believer," *New York Times*, April 15, 1991, A17; Walter Pincus and Dan Morgan, "New Allegations Link Reagan Campaign to Arms-Hostages Deal," *Washington Post*, April 16, 1991, A12; Neil A. Lewis, "New Reports Say 1980 Reagan Campaign Tried to Delay Hostage Release," *New York Times*, April 15, 1991, A9.

[35] Gary Sick, *October Surprise: America's Hostages in Iran and the Election of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Times Books, 1991), 288.

the 1980 presidential election, the politics of presidential scandal crystallized.[36]

Mainstream attention to the allegations spurred congressional reaction. On June 24, 1991, Senator Al Gore opened the morning business sessions with an announcement that he would introduce a resolution to form an investigation into the October Surprise. Gore cited "several distinguished journalists" and Sick as raising the allegations warranting an official probe. On the evidence, Gore said, "Much of it is circumstantial, but is compelling." Gore had viewed the *Nightline* episode on Casey's alleged dealings with Hashemi and considered the story worthy of inquiry. Gore's address to the Senate was not without histrionics suggesting Reagan and Bush had conspired with Iran. "Some deals should never be made, Mr. President," Gore said, "Whether arms for hostages or hostages for election." In the House, meanwhile, congressional aides examined Sick's claims and reviewed the available evidence on the matter. Speaker Foley determined that an investigation would have to occur despite the political optics. The mounting circumstantial evidence and the lasting impression of Iran-Contra proved too convincing for a Congress plagued by the arms-for-hostages scandal.[37]

The former president himself bolstered calls for an investigation. Carter had not dismissed the October Surprise allegations when presented with the claims. Appearing on a 10th anniversary *Nightline* special on the hostage crisis, Carter raised his suspicions about the October Surprise. During his segment, Carter suggested that the incoming Reagan administration were not prepared to immediately resolve the hostage crisis. Anchor Ted Koppel played segments from an interview with Sick for Carter, in which Sick aired his allegations about the Reagan campaign conspiring with Israeli and Iranian representatives. Koppel asked Carter if he ever suspected that the Reagan campaign and Iran had made a deal. Carter responded, "Yes, I've had suspicions, but I don't have any evidence, and I've never sought any evidence." Carter mentioned the former Iranian president had stated the Reagan campaign dealt with Iranian representatives. "I agree with Gary Sick," Carter continued, "that it is mindboggling just to think about, you know, American leaders, at a time of crisis for our country, when the lives of the hostages were at stake and when their safety was preeminent, to be doing anything that would subvert the efforts of their own government." Two years later, Carter appeared more resolute.[38]

Carter requested action from Congress amid renewed speculation. Former policymakers and hostages joined him. On April 25, 1991, Carter endorsed a congressional probe of the

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[36] Transcript, Frontline, Show #916, April 16, 1991; Detailed Agency Staff Files; Michael Foster; Investigative File; Box 27, Folder: October Surprise; Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; Nightline #6474977, ABC Special for Monday, April 15, 1991, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/646977; Nightline Financial Times Investigation: The October Surprise #647025, ABC Special for Thursday, June 20, 1991, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/647025; Nightline #647029, ABC Special for Wednesday, June 26, 1991, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/647029; Robert Parry, a journalist involved with Frontline, released his own account of investigating the October Surprise, see Parry, *Trick or Treason: The October Surprise Mystery* (New York: Sheridan Square Press, 1993).

[37] Senator Gore, Speaking on the Release of Hostages, 102nd Congress, 1st. Sess., *Congressional Record* Vol. 137 (June 24, 1991): S 15970-15971.; "Foley Considering Formal Inquiry on Iran Hostage Release," *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1991, A18; Michael Ross, "Democrats Expected to Order Hostage Inquiry," *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 1991, A1; Tom Kenworthy, "Probe of '80 Reagan Campaign Eyed," Washington Post, May 1, 1991, A6

[38] See copy of transcript, Nightline, November 3, 1989, Show #2205, in Detailed Agency Staff Files; Michael Foster; Investigative File; Box 27, Folder: October Surprise; Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; For episode, see Nightline #646340, ABC Special for Friday, November 3, 1989, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/646340.

controversial charges. “But the evidence, I think, is so large that I think it has aroused a genuine question,” Cater told reporters. “I think there ought to be a more thorough investigation of the allegations.” Journalist Craig Unger reported Carter had asked Foley to launch an official inquiry. Support mounted for Congress to clarify what happened in 1980. In June, eight victims of the Iranian hostage crisis dispatched an open letter to Congress requesting “an unbiased, bipartisan congressional investigation with full subpoena power.” Former Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who had managed the hostage crisis with Carter, later called for an investigation after Senator Mitch McConnell published an op-ed recommending the Senate Foreign Relations Committee dispense with the investigation. “We lack the facts,” McConnell wrote, “We should forgo the fantasy.” Christopher thought McConnell gave “the misleading impression” he opposed the probe. McConnell had referenced Christopher’s view that Iraqi military assaults on Iran and factional infighting with the Iranian government had affected the hostage crisis’ resolution. “I believe there are enough suspicious circumstance to warrant a bipartisan investigation,” Christopher stated. By fall 1991, Congress also held the same belief. Independent Counsel Walsh, meanwhile, had explored the October Surprise allegations and refrained from expanding his mandate.[39]

Government Responses to October Surprise

The Office of the Independent Counsel considered a full investigation of the October Surprise theory. On September 20, 1988, Associate Counsel Evan Wolfson recommended that the independent counsel investigation should expand to include the October Surprise allegations. Wolfson had attended Barbara Honegger’s August 25 press conference on the conspiracy and included her accusations in his memorandum. Honegger had previously mailed Walsh a 22-page brief and submitted letters requesting a formal inquiry into the October Surprise. Now, Wolfson reasoned that the circumstantial evidence suggested Reagan and Bush may be criminally liable for abetting a kidnapping and violating the Arms Export Control Act. Wolfson also raised questions regarding Iran-Contra that could be resolved by examining events surrounding the 1980 presidential election. These questions were conspiratorial in nature: “Was the Beirut hostage problem a post hoc rationale?” and “Was the 'diversion' --itself so insignificant as a source of contra funding --an attempt to divert attention from something else?” Wolfson warned his colleagues that Walsh would be “criticized as derelict” if they did not promptly explore the charges, especially if “they may implicate Bush.” Wolfson recommended collecting media reports and conducting interviews to build a case for broadening their jurisdiction. Later, he noted, they would have to review intercepts from the National Security Agency and subpoena campaign records. Walsh’s office gathered documents but restrained from a more rigorous examination.[40]

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[39] “Carter Seeks Probe of Iran-Deal Claims” *Washington Post*, April 26, 1991, A4; Craig Unger, “October Surprise,” *Esquire*, October 1991; On open letter to the United States Congress from former American Hostages in Iran, see reproduced copy in *House Task Force Report*, 386; Mitch McConnell, "Don't Waste Time on This Wild Tale," New York Times, January 15, 1992, A21; Warren Christopher, "Hostage release Merits Looking Into," New York Times, February 8, 1992, A20; “Christopher Urges Probe of Hostage Deal Charge,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1992.

[40] Evan Wolfson to Lawrence Walsh and Chris Todd, September 20, 1988, “Charges Regarding the 1980 Reagan-Bush Campaign's Dealings with Iran and Alleged Subsequent Arms Deals”; Mary Belcher Office Files, Box 9, Folder: October Surprise (4 of 4); Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; Letter, Barbara Honegger to Lawrence Walsh, August 27, 1987, Detailed Agency Staff Files; Michael Foster; Investigative File; Box 27, Folder: October Surprise; Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record

Walsh wisely declined to broaden his mandate, but his staff amassed a sizable collection of media reports and manuscripts pertaining to the October Surprise theory. Walsh accepted letters from "concerned citizens," essays from journalists, and referrals from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.[41] The issue did not fade away. In May 1990, Associate Counsel Bryan Blaney revived the prospect of probing October Surprise allegations. Blaney had encountered Wolfson's memorandum and found it credible. "As you will see," he wrote colleagues, "it is very good." Blaney's reservations about investigating the 1980 presidential election did not prevent him from suggesting they interview Sick and Honegger. Blaney noted that "the memo raises several very provocative ideas." But even the tenacious Walsh was not sold on requesting a broader mandate from D.C. Circuit Judges. The October Surprise would remain within the purview of Congress.[42]

Walsh never publicly commented on his decisions regarding the October Surprise conspiracy. He did, however, include a brief recitation of the infamous L'Enfant Plaza meeting in his memoir. Walsh casually notes that Reagan campaign officials engaged in negotiations to prevent Carter from securing the release of the hostages before the election. Silberman and McFarlane, Walsh writes, met with someone who proposed delaying the end of the hostage crisis. Walsh's substantive involvement in the October Surprise investigation amounted to supplying material to the House and Senate Task Forces. The documents were a mix of articles, interviews, memorandums, and transcripts of television programs. Walsh's office had conducted a polygraph examination of Bush's former National Security Advisor Donald Gregg, in which one of the questions related to his supposed role in the October Surprise. Walsh sent his denial to the House Task force for their review. Walsh thus opted against formally repudiating the theory. The House and Senate inquiries, though, would conclude that the grand scheme to affect the outcome of the 1980 presidential election was political fantasy.[43]

The House and Senate Task Forces

Congressional investigations into the October Surprise conspiracy were not as bipartisan as the probe of Iran-Contra. Republicans spurned examining the 1980 presidential election after a

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group 449, NARA; Paul L. Friedman to James Wieghart and John Doglass, "Possible Taint," September 14, 1987; Ibid.

[41] Letter, William M. Baker to Lawrence Walsh, July 30, 1991; Master Interagency Correspondence File, Master Interagency 1991, Volume 5; Folder October Surprise, Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; Memorandum, Rodney Stich to Lawrence Walsh, "Attempt to Report Federal Crimes to Special prosecutor Walsh," January 6, 1992, Ibid; Memorandum, Mary Belcher to Lawrence Walsh and Chris Mixter, "Attached article on genesis of Iran deals," September 12, 1990; Mary Belcher Press Office Files, Box 8, Folder October Surprise (1 of 4), Ibid; Letter, John Q. Barret to Craig Gillen, Bryan Blaney, Michael Foster, Vernon Francis, Ellen Glasser, Greg Mark, Ricardo page, and Barbara Zelenko, "October Surprise," April 24, 1990; Detailed Agency Staff Files; Michael Foster; Investigative File; Box 27, Folder: October Surprise; Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

[42] Memorandum, Bryan Blaney to Craig Gillen, Sid Barrett, Michael Foster, Vernon Francis, Ellen Glasser, Greg Mark, Ricard page, and Barbara Zelenko, "October Surprise," May 4, 1990, Detailed Agency Staff Files; Michael Foster; Investigative File; Box 27, Folder: October Surprise; Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA.

[43] Walsh, *Firewall*, 249; Walsh, *Final Report*, Vol 1., 501, fn146; See also, Letter, Terry Sanford and James Jeffords to Lawrence Walsh, February 27, 1992; Detailed Agency Staff Files; Michael Foster; Investigative File; Box 27, Folder: October Surprise; Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; Letter, Lawrence Walsh to Robert A Kushen, "RE: October Surprise Documents," June 4, 1992; Master Correspondence File, Box 42; Master Correspondence 1992, Volume 1, October Surprise; Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, Record group 449, NARA; Letter and Index, Lawrence Walsh to Lis Mallory, June 4, 1992; Ibid.

decade, especially with outrageous accusations regarding the sitting president bandying about. In late October 1991, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee appropriated $600,000 for the Senate probe with a vote of 9 to 8. Senator James Jeffords, who would conduct the investigation with Democratic Senator Terry Sandford, abstained for the motion to pass. The committee's ranking Republican, Jesse Helms, accused his Democratic colleagues of fomenting "a political shakedown designed to produce an October surprise for the Presidential election of 1992." The committee's "atmosphere of intense partisan combat" persisted into the late November Senate floor vote, where Helms and fellow Republican Richard G. Lugar filibustered the authorization of funds, and the resolution failed. Three weeks later, the SFRC appointed Reid Weingartern, a former associate counsel for Independent Counsel Walsh, as Special Counsel to the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, which undertook the probe through regular committee funding. In the House, meanwhile, Democrats approved convening the 13-member House October Task Force with one Republican vote. Lee Hamilton, who chaired the House Select Committee on Iran-Contra, chaired the task force and Henry Hyde served as ranking member. The House and Senate investigations coordinated and reviewed the evidence throughout 1992.[44]

As Congress debated investigations, magazines across the political spectrum published articles debunking the October Surprise. The conspiracy had not achieved mainstream acceptance. John M. Barry, a respected journalist, who had previously explored the inner workings of Congress in an acclaimed book, examined the conspiracy, finding it baseless.[45] Barry and *Newsweek* correspondents explored the allegations with serious intent. "What the evidence does show," he argued, "is the murky history of a conspiracy theory run wild." Barry reported that the Imperial War Museum in London held records of Casey's participation in the Anglo-American Conference on the History of the Second World War. Casey was not committing treason; he was presenting a paper on covert action during the war. Jonathan Chadwick, a secretary at the Imperial War Museum, would rebuke Sick's claims about Casey's whereabouts in the *New York Times* weeks later, revealing that he had taken records of Casey's attendance and accommodations. The Madrid and Paris meetings never happened. Barry had also raised that Secret Service records showed Bush was not in Paris. Instead, Bush was campaigning in northeastern states. Former CIA officer turned journalist Frank Knepp likewise provided a robust debunking in the *Village Voice*, arguing that evidence demonstrated purported witnesses of the European meetings fabricated their claims. Steven Emerson and Jesse Furman had arrived at similar conclusion in the *New Republic.* A mixture of frauds and conspiracy theorists concocted the story.[46]

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[44] Guy Gugliotta, "Pane Votes to Probe 'October Surprise'," *Washington Post*, October 30, 1991, A11; Neil A. Lewis, "Inquiry on Report of '80 Hostage Deal," *New York Times*, October 30, 1991, A22; Michael Ross, "'October Surprise' Inquiry Hits Obstacle," *Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 1991, A24; David Brown and Guy Gugliotta, Washington Post, February 6, 1992, A11.

[45] John M. Barry, *The Ambition and the Power: The Fall of Jim Wright: A True Story of Washington* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989); Barry later attained notoriety for two influential studies on natural disasters, pandemics, and politics. See Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) and Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History* (New York: Viking, 2004)

[46] John M. Barry, "Making of a Myth: The October Surprise: It Wasn't Treason, but a Conspiracy Theory Run Wild," *Newsweek* Vol. 118, Issue 20 (November 11, 1991), 18-24; Frank Snepp, "October Surmise," *Village Voice*, February 25, 1992, 29-41; Steve Emerson and Jesse Furman, "The Conspiracy That Wasn't: The Hunt for the October Surprise," *New Republic*, November 18, 1991; Jonathan Chadwick, "When Casey Could Have Met Iranians in '80," *New York Times*, December 5, 1991, A32

In 1992, the House October Surprise Task Force and Senate Special Counsel labored in private, coordinating between branches and amassing evidence. This would not be Iran-Contra redux. The Senate committee agreed to hold closed hearings and refrain from public statements. Special Counsel Weingarten interviewed over 150 people. Sanford and Jeffords submitted questions to Reagan, who "had no recollection or other information relevant." The Special Counsel received files from the FBI, Office of the Independent Counsel, CIA, NSA, NSC, as wells as the Defense, Justice, Treasury, and State Departments. Staff also had access to Casey's personal papers and records from the 1980 Reagan presidential campaign. The House Task Force, for their part, employed ten lawyers and six investigators who interviewed 230 individuals and reviewed a similar set of documents from executive agencies and private individuals. The Task Force also cooperated with foreign governments, including Israel, to conduct interviews and review records where available. Congress completed the most exhaustive investigation of a conspiracy theory in the modern era. The Bush administration had coordinated across executive agencies to ensure access and cooperation. And congressional staff worked diligently.[47]

By July 1992, the House Task Force cleared Bush from the charges he attended the alleged October 1980 meeting in Paris. The Task Force filed an interim report. It "concluded that Mr. Bush was in the United States continuously during the October 18-22 time period, and that he therefore did not travel to Paris, France to participate in the alleged secret meetings." The Bush administration, of course, had previously reviewed Secret Service logs placing the president elsewhere. Bush thanked the Task Force for the full vindication. "We are glad that Congress, in a bipartisan report, concluded today what we knew all along," his press statement read, "that President Bush had no involvement with any alleged meetings in Paris in October 1980, and in fact, he never left the country at that time." Still, Hamilton informed the media that the Task Force would continue until they resolved all allegations. By early August, the House had not uncovered corroborating evidence for the alleged Madrid and Paris meetings. As the Task Force determined Bush was not in Paris, they were soon to decide that Casey never interacted with Iranian intermediaries. Republicans sought a swift determination that a deal was never sought, but Democratic Congressman Sam Gejdenson wanted to research the Israeli angle further. The Task Force would continue their work until the new year. Special Counsel Weingarten moved more expeditiously.[48]

The SFRC released Weingarten's final report on November 23, 1992. The Special Counsel

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[47] *Report of the Special Counsel to Senator Terry Stanford and Senator James M. Jeffords*, 10-17, 208-209, 223; *House October Surprise Task Force Report*, 15-26; Memorandum, Nicholas Rostow to Brent Scowcroft, "Congressional Investigations of the 'October Surprise'," November 14, 1991, Folder: "October Surprise [1] [OA/ID CF00600-17]," Ronald Von Lembke Files, White House Counsels Office, GHWBPL.

[48] U.S. Congress. House. *Interim Report of the Task Force of Foreign Affairs Committee Members to Investigate Certain Allegations Concerning the Holding of American Hostages by Iran in 1980 (October Surprise Task Force),* House Report, 102nd Congress, 2nd Sess. [House Report 102-640] (Washington: Government Printing Office, July 1, 1992), 9; Neil A. Lewis, "Panel Rejects Theory Bush Met Iranians in Paris in '80," *New York Times*, July 2, 1992, A16; George Bush, "Statement by Press Secretary Fitzwater on Congressional Findings on the President's Involvement in the Alleged Paris Meetings, July 1, 1992," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https:/\www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/267385; For copies of the Secret Service logs and memorandum to White House Counsel and President Bush, see documents in Folder "October Surprise: Secret Service Logs [OA\ID CF00600-019}," Ronald Von Lembke Files, White House Counsels Office, GHWBPL; On status of the House October Surprise Task Force in August 1992, see Memorandum, Ted Van Der Meid to Robert H. Michel, "RE: October Surprise Investigation," August 10, 1992, Box 1, Folder October Surprise Meeting Notes, Legislative Series, Special Subjects, October Surprise 1987-1993, Robert H. Michel Papers, Dirksen Congressional Center, Pekin, Illinois.

determined that a secret agreement between Iran and the Reagan campaign to postpone the release of hostages never transpired. "In sum" Weingarten concluded, "the Special Counsel found that by any standard, the credible evidence now known falls far short of supporting the allegation of an agreement." The report, however, suggested that Casey "was 'fishing in troubled waters'" in relation to the hostage crisis, as he sought through covert means to "gather intelligence on the volatile and unpredictable course of the hostage negotiations." While Weingarten confirmed that evidence neither placed Casey at the Madrid meeting nor indicated he arranged a deal, his report noted that not all of Casey's documents relevant to the dates in question were available for review. The Reagan campaign, too, received criticism for seeking information about the hostage crisis to benefit Reagan's election chance. The alleged key meeting in Paris proved a total fabrication as well. On Israeli involvement, Weingarten found that the Reagan administration tacitly condoned Israel shipping spare jet parts to Iran, although the transactions pertained to Israel's periphery strategy, not arms-for-hostages. The report described Weingarten's "preliminary conclusion," for he believed an inability to interview every Israeli and Iranian witness and limited resources hampered his inquiry. The House Task Force was more unequivocal in their judgments.[49]

On January 3, 1993, the House Task Force published their bipartisan report on the October Surprise, making it publicly available ten days later. The Task Force presented a meticulous examination of the allegations. It "concluded that there is wholly insufficient credible evidence of any communications by or on behalf of the Reagan Presidential campaign with any persons representing or connected with the Iranian government or with those holding American hostages during 1979-1981." The Task Force established that the Madrid and Paris meeting never took place. The L'Enfant Plaza Meeting was exactly what former campaign officials described. Although campaign aides collected information on the hostage crisis, the report stated, their monitoring was not an illegal effort—it was campaigning. The Task Force also determined that any American weapons obtained by Iran were not the result of a quid pro quo over the hostage issue. Lastly, the report disputed charges that Reagan campaign officials actively tried to conceal evidence or obstruct the government's investigation. The bipartisan conclusions buried the October Surprise in the graveyard of political disrepute.[50]

But not all proponents were satisfied. The January 24, 1993, edition of the *New York Times* featured competing op-eds under the banner, "Last Word on the October Surprise?" Sick, the catalyst the for the investigations, expressed both doubt and satisfaction. "I am gratified that my research prompted these investigations," Sick boasted. He conceded that Congress has resolved whether the Reagan administration had authorized Israel to ship weapons to Iran in 1980 as a quid pro quo for delaying the release of hostages. Yet Congress, he argued, had not conclusively proved Casey's locations in July and October 1980, because relevant dates of his calendar were missing and his passport disappeared. The former House Chairman in both the Iran-Contra and October Surprise investigations responded in kind. Hamilton summarized the Task Force's findings and addressed Sick's claim about Casey's whereabouts. Hamilton reminded skeptics that other corroborating records and witnesses sufficed to prove Casey resided in California, London, and Washington during the alleged meetings. "The overwhelming weight of the evidence," Hamilton declared, "should put the controversy to rest once and for all."[51]

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[49] *Report of the Special Counsel to Senator Terry Stanford and Senator James M. Jeffords*, 15, 111-121.
[50] On The House October Surprise Task Force conclusions, see *House October Surprise Task Force Report*, 5-13.
[51] Lee H. Hamilton, "Case Closed," *New York Times*, January 24, 1993, E17; Gary Sick, "Missing Link," *New York Times*, January 24, 1993, E17.

Conclusion

Iran-Contra had a politically charged ending. Independent Counsel Walsh's investigation incurred financial and political costs. It persisted despite his prosecutorial strategy collapsing and without regard for the ramifications. After spending millions and almost seven years probing, Walsh settled for convictions on minor process crimes. He blamed Congress as well as the Reagan and Bush administrations from his inability to indict either president.[52] Congress, to be sure, had granted limited immunity, which assisted North and Poindexter's defenses. Congressional leaders determined that fact-finding, public disclosure, and political accountability superseded any potential criminal charges resulting from Walsh's investigation. As a foreign policy scandal, Congress judged Iran-Contra as first and foremost a political matter. Top lawyers from the Select Committee on Iran-Contra, who deplored Reagan's actions, objected to Walsh's tactics. Rather than securing an assuredly easy conviction of North prior to the congressional hearings, Walsh unsuccessfully sought a bigger conspiracy case and pursued presidents without obtaining solid evidence warranting indictments. By the end, Walsh dispensed with his aims for Reagan and instead focused on Bush, inviting scornful reactions to his methods.

Walsh's decision to indict Weinberger prior to the 1992 presidential election eroded the legitimacy of his prosecution. The timing and decision appeared too partisan, not the objective conduct expected of an independent prosecutor. Bush's decision to pardon former government officials entangled in Iran-Contra reflected both his personal grievance with Walsh and Washington's desire to move on from the interminable scandal. The country, in a profound sense, was ready to move on. The American people had elected Clinton; Bush's twelve-year executive service was ending. Congress, too, looked ahead to a Democratic presidency. Yet, for Walsh's doggedness, he would not incorporate the October Surprise conspiracy into his mandate.

Democratic congressional leaders buckled under the political fervor and launched two October Surprise investigations. The House and Senate probes, taken together, employed vast resources to thoroughly debunk the conspiracy, the last vestige of Iran-Contra. Congress vindicated Reagan and Bush—but at what political cost? The conspiracy originated in the accusations of unreliable sources before being promulgated by journalists and former government officials. Sick's high-profile claims fueled speculation that responsible politicians should have disavowed. Former President Carter's engagement with the allegations and his refusal to denounce them lent credibility to the conspiracy.[53] His call for an investigation certainly inspired Special Counsel Weingarten and the House Task Force. Reagan's Iran initiative, of course, made the October Surprise scenario appear plausible. The October Surprise episode featured the same principals and states operating under a similar agreement. But Congress had twice reviewed the incident and found nothing to substantiate it. The politics of presidential scandals can make the impossible seem plausible, especially if another election is on the horizon.

Political scandals—real or imagined—have a life of their own. Three weeks after Foley and Mitchell's announced a formal investigation into the October Surprise, Manucher Ghorbanifar, a key intermediary in the Iranian initiative, denounced the conspiracy. "If the Ayatollah Khomeini

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[52] Walsh concludes his memoir by casting blame on Congress and the Reagan and Bush administrations. See Walsh, *Firewall*, 531.

[53] In the 2010 abridged version of his White House diary, Jimmy Carter refers to Sick's book as "The most thorough analysis of this question." Carter also states, "I prefer to let the reader decide how much credence to give to his claims." See Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 480.

and Mr. Casey were able to cut a major secret deal on their own and stand by it," Ghorbanifar proposed, "who would have needed my services five years later?"[54] Indeed, the October Surprise may have seemed probable to willing believers in the wake of Iran-Contra, but the conspiracy collapsed under the weight of evidence and logic. House and Senate bipartisan investigations, in addition to investigative journalists, debunked the October Surprise. Still, the allegations occasionally appear in publications from reputable authors. American political conspiracies—and scandals—always find a receptive audience.[55]

[54] Manucher Ghorbanifar, "Spoiling the 'October Surprise'," *New York Times*, August 28, 1991, A21.
[55] Pulitzer Prize-winning author Kai Bird's recent biography of Jimmy Carter revives the October Surprise conspiracy theory, see Kai Bird, *The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter* (New York: Crown, 2021), 551-563, 625.

Conclusion

> After so much turmoil in the sixties and seventies, our nation had begun to lose confidence, and some were heard to say that the presidency might even be too big for one man. That phrase did not survive the 1980s.
> Richard Cheney, Eulogy for Ronald Reagan, June 9, 2004[1]

The Iran-Contra affair was a foreign policy scandal with a surprising resolution and lasting ramifications, proving a formative experience for those involved. Institutional reforms and international revolutions in the 1970s shaped the domestic and geopolitical conditions from which it emerged. The Vietnam War and Watergate scandal inspired a resurgent Congress to constrain the presidency. In Iran and Nicaragua, revolutions swept US-backed dictators out of power. Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency with strategic ambitions to wage the Cold War, adhering to the commitments central to his foreign policy in his bid to contend with the Ayatollah and Sandinistas. In defiance of Congress, Reagan doggedly pursued rolling back the Sandinista government. Without consulting Congress, Reagan negotiated the release of American hostages in Lebanon with secret arms sales to Iran. The resulting scandal pitted a popular Republican president against a Democratic Congress in a consequential struggle over the exercise of foreign policy. Iran-Contra thus presented a fortuitous moment to restore the presidency as the arbiter. Some consciously sought this consequence while others tacitly accepted it in the national interest. Reagan executed a remarkable political recovery from Iran-Contra, and Congress refrained from imperiling the presidency. The bipartisan consensus on a strong presidency in theory and in practice superseded notions of a Watergate-like outcome.

Not confined to the Reagan administration, the resolution of Iran-Contra was years in the making. The scandal persisted through the end stages of the Cold War and into the "Unipolar Moment" under President George H.W. Bush.[2] It spawned not only a nearly seven-year independent counsel investigation, but also two congressional investigations in the October Surprise conspiracy theory regarding the 1980 presidential election. Iran-Contra's conclusion featured ironic circumstances: congressional investigations into the October Surprise of Reagan's 1980 election were underway while Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh secured a surprise October indictment of former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger mere days before the vote on Bush's 1992 reelection. After Bush's reelection bid failed, Washington had finally lost its appetite for Iran-Contra. Bush granted pardons, effectively ending Walsh's probe. Congress issued reports debunking the October Surprise before declining to further pursue any matter related to Iran-Contra, bringing the scandal to a close. Iran-Contra receded from the headlines in short order. Its impact on American domestic and foreign affairs endured.

The operations responsible for Iran-Contra resulted in different outcomes for each theater. In Nicaragua, Oliver North's machinations hastened an end to the Contras' efforts to oust the Sandinista government. Political and military momentum for their insurgency stalled amid the scandal. Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, meanwhile, orchestrated the Central American Peace Accords that eventually resolved the Contra War. The conflict ended when Violeta Barrios de Chamorro defeated Daniel Ortega in the February 1990 presidential election. "In this remarkable year of political change," President Bush celebrated, "democracy won another

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[1] U.S. Congress. Joint Committee on Printing, *Ronald Reagan: Late a President of the United States, Memorial Tributes Delivered in Congress* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2005), xx-xxi.
[2] Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (1990): 23-33.

victory yesterday." Bush subsequently terminated the national emergency that Reagan had declared in response to Sandinista government's "unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States." The Reagan Doctrine had achieved its objective. And it arrived at the cost of over thirty-thousand deaths, a staggering per capita loss for a small country with a population of approximately four million people. Nicaragua also experienced an economic collapse, and its infrastructure lay in ruins. The Bush administration sent Nicaragua a total of $541 million in economic assistance. As the Cold War faded from memory, American policymakers soon developed an indifference to the country's geopolitical significance.[3]

Iran-Contra's immediate effect on US-Iranian relations was less pronounced. Reagan's covert diplomatic efforts collapsed in wake of the scandal. His desired rapprochement did not come to fruition. Rather, Reagan entered into direct military confrontation with Iran, following an escalation of hostilities in the Persian Gulf. In retaliation for the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* hitting an Iranian mine while escorting Kuwaiti oil tankers, Reagan launched the largest surface warfare operation since World War II. The moment for rapprochement had passed, if it were ever a possibility. On April 18, 1988, Operation Praying Mantis resulted in the US Navy demolishing two oil platforms serving as surveillance bases and sinking Iranian warships. On July 3, 1988, tensions sharped to the point that, in a tragic accident, the USS *Vincennes* mistakenly identified Iran Air Flight 655 as an F-14 and shot the plane down, killing the 290 people on board. Antagonism between the US and Iran has sustained since Reagan's departure from office, and diplomatic relations have not been restored.[4]

The Lebanese hostage crisis concluded in the early 1990s, and its mastermind faced justice years later. Thomas Sutherland obtained his freedom in November 1991 and joined Bush on the campaign trail the next year to stump for the president. Terry Anderson safely returned home in December. Although anguished by the kidnappings and murders, Reagan did not live to see America's retribution. In 2007, the US and Israel launched a joint operation between the Central Intelligence Agency and the Mossad to locate and assassinate Imad Mughniyeh, the man who orchestrated Hezbollah's bombing and kidnapping campaign against Americans. In January 2008, intelligence operatives replaced the spare tire located on the rear of Mughniyeh's SUV with an explosive device. On February 12, 2008, the bomb detonated as Mughniyeh entered the vehicle, terminating his decades-long reign of terror. "The world is in a better place without this man in it," remarked State Department spokesman Sean McCormick.[5]

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[3] Statement by the President, February 26, 1990, Folder: "Nicaragua (Elections) [2]," OA/ID CF01576-010], David Pacelli, Subject Files, National Security Council, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, College Station, Texas; Executive Order #12707, March 13, 1990, Folder: "Nicaragua [1]," [OA/ID CF00940-015], Daniel Levin, Subject Files, Ibid; William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 553-564; John H. Coatsworth, *Central America and the United States: The Clients and the Colossus* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 196-216; Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy Toward Latin America in the Reagan Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 92-95, 107, 273 fn28.

[4] On Operation Praying Mantis, see Craig L. Symonds, *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles that Shaped American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 263-320; Reagan notified Congress pursuant to the War Powers Resolution, see Letter, Ronald Reagan to Jim Wright, April 19, 1988, Folder: "War Powers Notebook (7 of 7)," CFOA 1175, Office of Counsel to the President Records, 1981-1989, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California; Letter, Ronald Reagan to John C. Stennis, April 19, 1988, Ibid; On the Reagan administration's involvement in and response to Iran Air Flight 655, see Folders "Iranian Engagement of USS Vincennes 07/03/1988 (1)-(7)" in Box 5, White House office of Situation Support Staff, Ibid.

[5] Dirk Johnson, "Ex-Hostage Joyfully Returns to the U.S.," *New York Times*, November 26, 1991, A14; Stephen

A Foreign Policy Scandal Resolved

The American government's response to Iran-Contra, in many respects, was an exercise in crisis management for the national security state. The inter-agency process had broken down on both the Contra and Iran operations. Reagan's appointment of the bipartisan Tower Board wrought a restoration of the National Security Council's status as the "honest broker" of the national security apparatus. Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski rightly referred to Iran-Contra as the "midlife crisis" for the NSC. The scandal offered a ripe opportunity to revamp it, drawing on its past successes to impose order on future policymaking.[6] Under Brent Scowcroft's direction, the Tower Report provided national security advisors with an "owner's manual," a guide for how to make the NSC system work as intended. Reagan's new directives and appointments of Frank Carlucci and Colin Powell ensured the enactment of the Tower Board's suggested reforms. The Tower Board thus provided a crucial redressing of the deficiencies in the Reagan administration's policy process. Reagan's subsequent arms control achievements with the Soviet Union were a testament to these changes. The lessons of the Tower Commission resonated with Carlucci and Powell's successors. At a 2019 press briefing on the new National Biodefense Strategy, National Security Advisor John Bolton clarified that the NSC would only serve in a coordinating capacity. "NSC," Bolton stressed, "in this area or any other area, is not operational, going back to the lessons of the Tower Commission report after the Iran-Contra affair."[7]

Iran-Contra also brought to the fore the significant responsibility that a national security advisor has in counseling the president. National security advisors must be careful to not ask leading questions in an attempt to guide a president's thinking. Reagan, Scowcroft observed, experienced this improper style of advising during Iran-Contra. John Poindexter had given Reagan selective counsel and withheld the diversion from him. Reagan, though, understood well before he assumed the presidency that an executive's dependency on staff for both providing information and implementing policy can place one in a vulnerable position. Reagan had trusted Poindexter, who wrongly believed he was acting in the president's best interest. Reagan also followed his own instincts, often disregarding advice from cabinet members who opposed the operations. Reagan had made the consequential decisions during Iran-Contra that initiated and prolonged the scandal.[8]

Reagan, in effect, was the cause of and solution to Iran-Contra. Final reports from the Tower

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Kinzer, "The Last U.S. Hostage; Anderson Arrives at Germany Base And Appears Vigorous and Healthy," *New York Times*, December 6, 1991, A1; Peter Roper, "Sutherland Stumps for Bush, Says Iran-Contra Not an Issue," *Pueblo Chieftain*, October 31, 1992; Adam Goodman and Ellen Nakashima, "CIA and Mossad Killed Senior Hezbollah Figure in Car Bombing," *Washington Post*, January 30, 2015; Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakri, "Bomb in Syria Kills Militant Sought as Terrorist," *New York Times*, February 14, 2008, A1. Ronen Bergman, *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations* (New York: Random House, 2018), 588-610.

[6] Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The NSC's Midlife Crisis," *Foreign Policy* No. 69 (Winter, 1987-1988): 80-99.

[7] "Press Briefing by National Security Advisor Ambassador John Bolton and Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar on the National Biodefense Strategy, September 18, 2018," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/336255.

[8] See page 40-41 of Brent Scowcroft, interview by Philip Zelikow, Ernest May, Fareed Zakaria, and James H. McCall, November 12-13, 1999, Washington D.C., George H.W. Bush Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/george-h-w-bush; See Reagan's letter to Mr. And Mrs. Elwood H. Wagner, June 22, 1973, in Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, Martin Anderson, eds., *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 777-778.

Commission, the Select Committee, and Independent Counsel Walsh concluded that ultimate responsibility for the scandal resided with Reagan. The voluminous documentary record corroborates that Reagan set the policy and authorized the operations responsible for Iran-Contra. Reagan did not, however, have a full understanding of the operational details. Oliver North's "neat idea" of diverting funds from the Iranian arms sales to the Contras was a compartmentalized scheme. Reagan should have known, and he suffered the political consequences. Iran-Contra was Reagan's worst mistake, to be sure. It occurred due to serious errors in the president's judgment and his legendary stubbornness. The affair displays the deepest flaws in his personality. Yet the episode also reveals why Reagan's personal and institutional power enabled him to execute a remarkable political recovery. Americans by a large majority liked Reagan as an individual. Most Americans, too, neither supported the Contra War nor the Iranian initiative. They were likewise skeptical of Reagan's explanations once the scandal captured the nation's attention. Congress reflected a similar disposition. Facing his greatest political crisis, Reagan's strategy of cooperation, transparency, and reform proved effective, especially without evidence that he authorized the diversion and with a rare public apology. Reagan, in the end, placed his fate in the hands of citizens. So, too, did Congress entrust citizens to render the final judgment.

The nature of Iran-Contra defined the congressional response. As a foreign policy scandal, congressional leaders believed, Iran-Contra threatened the political order and the nation's security. A bipartisan contingent of congressional leaders supported an energetic executive and agonized over the ramifications of seeking Reagan's removal from office. They would not permit another Watergate. Their private and public statements affirmed their position. The Select Committee investigation and report confirmed it. From the moment Reagan disclosed the diversion until the Select Committee issued their final report, Congress focused on rebuilding comity between branches in the realm of foreign policymaking. The congressional investigation was a fact-finding enterprise aimed at educating the public and reinvigorating the role of Congress in foreign policy, not prompting a period of radical legislative reforms. Partisan politics flared, of course, but impeachment was not a realistic option in the absence of a "smoking gun" showing Reagan had approved the diversion. Reagan, for his part, preempted Congress by instituting reforms designed to streamline the covert action process and ensure accountability while maintaining the president's discretion to launch the most sensitive operations. Subsequent legislative action on the 48-hour rule failed to materialize. And although Congress had divided in their final judgments on the scandal, the minority report was an interpretation of a president's authority in foreign affairs that Congress accepted by virtue of their actions.

The congressional hearings did not resolve Iran-Contra. Rather, the independent counsel and October Surprise investigations exhausted Washington. As the Select Committee determined their political mandate superseded the independent counsel's criminal purview, the decision to grant limited immunity in order to conduct the congressional investigation foreclosed Walsh's grand designs for conspiracy indictments. Single-minded, Walsh persisted for years and politicized his criminal investigation. Walsh secured convictions on minor process crimes in his bid to hold Bush and Reagan to account. While Walsh declined to charge Reagan, he targeted Bush in an election year, indicting former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger at a moment which raised serious questions about the purpose of his investigation. Bush's ability to build broad support inside Washington for pardons demonstrates how partisan differences on the scandal congealed into an elite consensus on finally moving beyond Iran-Contra.

By December 1992, Capitol Hill had contended with Iran-Contra for six years, including its purported connection to the 1980 presidential election. The Iran initiative's disclosure may have made the absurd allegations appear plausible, but public officials and former policymakers had a civic responsibility to treat the October Surprise matter with care. Transforming baseless accusations of aggrieved politicians and conspiracy theorists into a legitimate congressional inquiry erodes public trust and permits future endeavors undertaken for partisan advantage. Two congressional probes would thoroughly debunk the October Surprise after exhaustive probing. Still, the conspiracy theory called into question the legitimacy of the political order under Reagan and Bush, a pernicious side effect with lasting implications for the American political system.

In January 1993, Washington looked to the future, not the past, although the politics of presidential scandal would amplify in more potent forms. President Bill Clinton's domestic political scandals revived the independent counsel, and Congress followed through with impeachment proceedings for the first time since 1868.[9] It would take two decades before a foreign policy scandal ended in a president's impeachment, although Congress would find that this time the president elevated his personal interest over the nation's. In 2019, the House impeached President Donald J. Trump for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. It stemmed from allegations that Trump solicited interference in the 2020 presidential election from Ukraine in exchange for military assistance, an act that the House determined was "for corrupt purposes in pursuit of personal political benefit," and his defiance of congressional subpoenas related to the inquiry. Trump, like Clinton, escaped conviction in the Senate.[10]

Reagan had a different experience. Iran-Contra resolved years after Reagan departed the Oval Office. Reagan never faced impeachment proceedings for his foreign policy scandal. His worst mistake compelled him to apologize to America. "As president," Reagan wrote in his memoir, "I was at the helm, so I am the one who is ultimately responsible."[11] The breakdown of the national security apparatus under Reagan's watch inspired its reform and induced Washington to embrace the president in the national interest. Amid the fog of scandal, Washington cohered around restoring the presidency, ensuring the president's political survival. Reagan bore equal responsibility for precipitating the crisis and provoking a resolution that favored the president.

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[9] US Congress, House, *Referral from Independent Counsel Kenneth W. Starr in Conformity with the Requirements of Title 28, United States Code, Section 595(c)*, January 8, 1999, 105th Cong., 2nd sess., 1999. H. Doc. 105-310; US Congress, House, *Impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton, President of the United States, Report of the Committee on the Judiciary House of Representative together with Additional, Minority, And Dissenting Views to accompany H. Res. 611*, December 16, 1998, 105th Cong., 2nd sess., 1999. H. Rep. 105-830.

[10] US Congress. House. *Impeaching Donald John Trump, President of the United States, for high crimes and misdemeanors*, December 15, 2019, 116th Cong., 1st Sess., 2019, H. Res. 755 Report No. 116-346, https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hres755/BILLS-116hres755rh.pdf; *Trial of Donald J. Trump, President of the United States*, 116th Cong. 2nd sess., *Congressional Record--Senate* 166 (February 5, 2020: S937-S938.

[11] Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 487.

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