

# *Blind, Deaf and Dumb*

THE FAILURE OF THE PRESS IN THE IRAN-CONTRA SCANDAL

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*I am sure that I have never read any memorable news in a newspaper... all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who read it or edit it are old women over their tea.*

– Henry David Thoreau

*Too often, government reporting follows the agenda set by politicians and public officials – not the agenda of concern to citizens. We tend to cover government passively rather than actively. Thus, we allow ourselves to act as press agents for government officials, rather than the eyes and ears of our readers.*

– Robert Boyd  
Washington bureau chief for Knight-Ridder Newspapers

*All I know is what I read in the papers.*

– Will Rogers

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In the 1980's, the Ronald Reagan administration exploited the press like never before. The Reagan administration used images to run a campaign, used legislation that looked good only on the surface, and underneath it all, ran a series of secret wars around the world with money taken from other wars, as well as from United States citizens. The country is now in serious financial trouble, and is still cleaning up the scandals that the Reagan administration wrought. The largest military scandal (the largest single scandal in history probably being the looting of S&Ls) was the Iran-Contra affair. It involved bribes, lies, robbery and two wars on two continents. New clues are still being uncovered, but the old ones seem to be disappearing even faster.

The press, during the affair, was, like the public, hypnotized by the media manipulation orchestrated by Reagan's public relations team. But the loving coverage the press gave Reagan is only one reason it failed to uncover the scandal. Blatant facts eluded even veteran journalists, and most reporters blindly followed the lead of the White House. There are three main reasons for the press' lax coverage of the affair: the White House's media manipulations, the press' love affair with Reagan, and the press' inability to make connections despite overwhelming evidence. These reasons become clear looking back over the wealth of data on the affair and on the press coverage – and much is available, from books, magazines, newspapers, television programs, and computer databases. It should be noted that the case is far from resolved, as the ongoing investigation continues to uncover new information. As the Congressional report on the affair concluded, “all the facts may never be known.”

A complete history of the relationship between the press and White House would be much too lengthy for this paper. But there are two watershed incidents in the early 1970's that must be recalled: the Pentagon Papers and Watergate. The two events closely mirror the present scandal both in the sequence of events and in the issues concerned, namely illegal doings and subsequent cover-ups in the White House. In addition, the two Nixon-era incidents serve as precedents for political journalists in the Reagan/Bush era. Many who covered Iran-Contra were either in school or just beginning journalism careers during the time of the two stories; both events, (and especially Watergate), also drew new journalists to the profession, probably more than any other event in U.S. history. The notable difference between the past and present events is in the persistence and attitude of the press.

President Lyndon Johnson's Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, had become disillusioned with the continuing war in Vietnam, and in 1968 ordered an investigation of its origins. A forty-seven volume, 7,000-page study resulted three years later which detailed U.S.-Vietnam relations since the end of World War II. Daniel Ellsberg had worked on the project, and began to oppose the war. After the Top Secret study was completed, Ellsberg leaked a copy to the *New York Times*. After careful study of the document, (which was kept in a safe in a guarded hotel room), the *Times* ran the first of nine summaries of the Pentagon Papers, even running, as is its tradition, the full text of some of the actual papers themselves.

President Nixon, who had recently taken office, was furious, and his Attorney General, John Mitchell, immediately sought to halt publication. Both knew the effect the Papers would have on public opinion, and claimed that their publication constituted “a threat to national security”. A court battle ensued, and a temporary restraining order kept the *Times* from publishing any more installments until a verdict was reached. It was the first time in history that a newspaper was ordered by the government not to publish a specific story. But by that time, the *Washington Post* and other papers had picked up the story, and some began running their own summaries of the Pentagon Papers. In the end, the Supreme Court ruled for the *Times*, but the issue of prior restraint – and what information is sensitive enough to require it – was never fully resolved.

Nixon was earnest in his secrecy even before the Pentagon Papers incident. He had ordered wiretapping of the phones of reporters and even his own National Security Council staff two years earlier, when the press obtained information on a secret bombing mission in Cambodia. After the Pentagon Papers, Nixon hired two former agents from the CIA and FBI as “plumbers” to stop any more leaks from the White House. In trying to discredit Daniel Ellsberg, Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy went so far as to break into Ellsberg’s psychiatrist’s office to look for damaging information. Hunt and Liddy then began taking orders from John Mitchell as part of the Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP). Their underhanded methods abruptly ended when five of their men were caught installing wiretaps at Democratic Party Headquarters. What followed was a series of events that are eerily similar to ones in the next decade. Nixon immediately ordered the FBI not to get involved with what he said was a national security matter. He formed an elaborate cover-up to avoid being implicated, and told aides to lie under oath if necessary. Hunt and Liddy kept their mouths shut, even after being convicted, but James McChord, one of the five burglars arrested at the Watergate, broke down. After he told of money and the promise of a presidential pardon, a Congressional investigative committee was formed.

John Dean, who directed the White House cover-up, finally revealed Nixon’s involvement. Nixon’s taped conversations were discovered, and his invocation of Executive Privilege only delayed their release to the court. The president was charged with obstructing justice, abusing his power and contempt of Congress, but resigned before the impeachment process was completed. Instrumental in exposing the entire affair were the *Washington Post*’s Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. By the time their book, *All the President’s Men*, became a movie, they were journalism superstars, and journalism school attendance had begun a rise that would continue throughout the decade.

Without a doubt, with these two incidents, press coverage of the president made a sharp turnaround from the days of Walter Cronkite reading presidential statements verbatim, (which don’t always reflect “the way it is”). After Watergate, the Ford and Carter administrations progressed under the close scrutiny of the press’s new microscope, which may be why they were so uneventful compared to those before and after.

Unfortunately for journalists, Watergate and the Pentagon Papers didn’t turn the press into heroes in the eyes of most of the American public. In fact, the impact was quite the opposite. After enduring an investigation and subsequent trials that were long, complicated with minor details, and had preempted prime time T.V., the public was weary.

Mark Hertsgaard, whose 1988 book, *On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency* is already well-known among reporters, notes, “I think what had an effect was the backlash to Watergate and Pentagon Papers. The backlash was very strong in the mid-’70’s to say to the press on the part of other establishment institutions and strong voices from the right-wing side of the political spectrum, ‘Enough!’...the press did respond to [Watergate] and we pulled back too much... they were still pulling back when Reagan came to power.”<sup>1</sup>

He supports this view in an interview, published in *On Bended Knee*, with Ben Bradlee, the *Washington Post* editor who directed the Watergate expose. Bradlee told him, “The criticism was that we were going on too much, and trying to make a Watergate out of everything. And I think we were sensitive to that criticism much more than we should have been, and that we did ease off.”<sup>2</sup>

President Carter proved to be idealistic, honest and plain, and seemed to many to lack charisma and the ability to lead his people. His term was fraught with trouble in the Middle East, culminating with the Iranian Revolution and the taking of American hostages in 1979. The hostages were taken in protest against Carter’s letting the exiled Shah into the U.S. for medical treatment.

Press coverage of the hostage situation was relentless; the crisis even spawned a new television news program, ABC’s *Nightline*. Because coverage of the hostage crisis focused heavily on freeing the hostages, (many shows and papers began counting the days the hostages had been held), the public increasingly blamed Carter. Despite diplomatic efforts, and a failed rescue attempt in April, 1980, he failed to gain the hostages’ release, and it cost him re-election.

It is now believed by some that the election and the hostage situation were more closely linked than previously thought. Barbara Honegger, a policy analyst in the Reagan administration who worked on his 1980 campaign, reported that Reagan aides, including George Bush, made an agreement with the Iranian government to hold the hostages until Reagan took office, in exchange for a promise of unlimited arms to fight Iraq, who had just initiated a war against Iran.<sup>3</sup>

Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, President of Iran at the time, later told Alfonso Chardy of the *Miami Herald*, “I don’t know why the timing of the release was so important to the Reagan apparatus, but it seems to me that his aides were trying to prepare the American public psychologically and symbolically for the era of Reaganism.”<sup>4</sup>

On the day of Ronald Reagan’s inauguration, all 52 hostages were released. So began the most ingenious campaign of media manipulation by the most corrupt administration in American history. And so too began that administration’s secret dealings with the Iranian government.

**T**he Reagan administration effected profound changes all over the world. There are two main themes running through almost every policy and action of the Reagan White House: money and arms. The two are closely tied to each other, to the Iran-contra scandal, and indeed to the entire decade. A third issue emerged as well: media manipulation. This was such an extensive part of the Reagan White House that it alone has been the subject of several books already. Together, the three issues literally define the eighties. In the following – and any – discussion of Reagan-era media manipulation, the arms and money issues will naturally arise.

What happened to the press during the Reagan decade? Apparently most journalists were, along with the general public, swept up in the euphoria created by Reagan’s mastermind public relations team. David Gergen, Reagan’s first Director of Communications, and Michael Deaver, the first-term Deputy Chief of Staff, knew the public was hungry for a strong figurehead. They saw the press as the means to sell their product and satisfy the hunger.

Gergen, appropriately, had learned about media manipulation while working in the Nixon administration; his first choice for President in 1980 was George Bush. But Reagan, the former actor, got the nomination, and became the product. Unlike Nixon, Reagan had both the media machine and the face; unlike Carter, he was able to put politics before substance. Reagan

was Horatio Alger with a shot of Hollywood glamour, and the public loved him. *U.S. News and World Report* Senior Editor Donald Baer made an interesting comparison: “Ronald Reagan and Madonna. On the surface, he stood for the fundamental American values that she parodied. But underneath, they conveyed the same Horatio Alger myth: Self-image over reality. Say it or sing it enough, and any dream of yourself might come true, at least in the public’s perception.”<sup>5</sup>

Reagan spoke in anecdotes, and gave simple answers to complex questions. He made things easy for the American public and the press. In return, he received adoration. Several colorful monikers were bestowed on Reagan by both his imagemakers and the press like Hollywood roles, each projecting a certain aura. He was all-American as the “Gipper” and as a cowboy on his ranch; he was “Ronbo” when he took on Libyans, terrorists, Cubans, Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, or the “Evil Empire”; he was “Teflon Ron” when no blame could stick to him and no criticism could pierce his hide; to his aides he was the “Four-Star General,” leading them into battle against the press, (military jargon was rampant in the White House); and he even became “Rappin’ Ron Reagan” to court the urban poor. Indeed, there was a name to appeal to every target market. This four-star general even munched on jelly beans – he was human, and he was likable, which was perhaps his greatest asset. His speeches were packed with glittering, patriotic abstractions, as Hertsgaard observes:

On May 9, 1984, for example, Reagan delivered a nationally televised speech about Central America filled with enough accusations of Communist subversion to make one wonder if the White House had hired Joe McCarthy’s ghost as a speechwriter. The President charged that “Sandianista rule is a Communist reign of terror” and that Nicaragua was engaged in an unjustified military buildup in order to “export terror to every other country in that region.” All this was part of a “bold attempt by the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua to install Communism by force through out the hemisphere.” While the United States wanted only “to promote democracy and well being” in Central America and would “never be the aggressor,” the Communists were shipping tons of weapons to guerillas in El Salvador who “want to shoot their way into power and establish totalitarian rule.” If the United States did not act, quickly and resolutely, “our choice will be a Communist Central America with additional Communist military bases on the mainland of this hemisphere and Communist subversion spreading southward and northward.”<sup>6</sup>

By repeating such assertions over and over, whether they were true or not, Reagan made them believable, and they eventually became accepted as facts. The above speech was covered by the press uncritically.

This was only one of the techniques used by Gergen and Deaver. To them, the press was not just a means to sell Reagan, but a potential enemy. They drew up precise battle plans to take on the press. Their main guiding principles were: (1) plan ahead, (2) focus on specific goals, (3) stay on the offensive, (4) control the information flow, (5) limit reporters’ access to the president, (6) talk about the issues you want to talk about, (7) speak in one voice, and (8) repeat the same message many times.<sup>7</sup>

The last principle can be seen at work in the above anti-Communist speech, which was just one of many. The seventh one, speaking in “one voice,” was evident in the “line of the day” that was to be repeated by all staff members for each particular day. (Incidentally, it was a lack of a common White House voice that led reporters to clues regarding Iran-Contra, as shall be seen later.)

The first four principles can be seen in the prepackaged stories that were given to the press. The fifth, limiting reporters’ access, was especially used on “bad news days”, when the president should be especially sheltered from the press, for fear of potentially giving wrong information, as Reagan was apt to do. That principle was also implemented in the sweeping changes Reagan made in the Freedom of Information Act, making it harder for reporters to get public records; and in the Executive Orders Reagan used to make FBI and CIA information harder to obtain. The fourth, controlling the information flow, was evident in calls to television stations to get Reagan coverage on the evening news, and in directly contacting “grass-roots” media in cities where support was falling. (T.V. was the preferred medium for manipulating, because of its emphasis on the visual, and its wide dispersion to the general public.) Innumerable other examples can be found to support all of the principles embraced by the Reagan media team.

**T**he press, instead of protesting the obvious manipulation, openly accepted it. “Jimmy Carter you felt sorry for, but he was aloof and hard to get to know,” said Susan Zirinsky, CBS News Washington producer. “But Reagan always made you laugh. It was hard not to like him.”<sup>8</sup> ABC’s David Burke agreed, “You just can’t get the stomach to go after the guy. It’s not a popularity thing, it’s not that we’re afraid of getting the public mad at us. I think it is a perception that the press has in general of Reagan, that he is a decent man.”<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the limited access and strict control of information made the press’ job harder; the prepackaged stories made it easier. The press didn’t complain, and were rather content simply to compete for the prepackaged stories, because more stories keep salaries up.

Money was probably the strongest motivator. In 1981, 50 corporations owned most media in the U.S.; by 1987, after heavy industry deregulation, there were only 29. Deregulation was probably the White House's most effective weapon against the press.

The press' business is selling information, and Deaver's strategy of "manipulation by inundation" kept them fat and happy. Also, unlike previous administrations, the Reagan White House made the press feel like it was in the "inner circle", and parties and luncheons at the White House helped achieve that end.

Hertsgaard notes that the venerable *New York Times* has become so intent on getting stories first, that it sometimes throws its ethics out the window. Fawning profiles appear in the *Times* of White House staffers in exchange for exclusive leaks and tidbits of information.

The media manipulation strategy worked like a charm. In 1984, Gergen declared an early victory: his goal "to correct the imbalance of power with the press so that the White House will once again achieve a 'margin of safety'" had been met.<sup>10</sup> Like the Japanese method of self-defense, jujitsu, the enemy's own strength had been used against him.

The few reporters who tried to overcome the White House barriers were often barred, or worse, labeled as Communist sympathizers. Because the mainstream press was so accepting of the manipulation, the few exceptional reporters were relegated to the liberal pages of *The Nation* and *The Progressive*.

Before Iran-Contra surfaced, coverage of Reagan scarcely resembled the Watergate days. Gergen, determined that the first 100 days set the tone of a presidency, urged Reagan to concentrate solely on the economy for his first three months in office. When stories about possible intervention in El Salvador began to appear, Reagan's image started to slip.

Then, in March, 1981, he was shot. Ironically, this gave the Reagan P.R. team the boost it needed. In his "comeback speech" before Congress, he asked for approval of his controversial trickle-down economic program. The speech was carried live by all three networks, and resulted in both the passage of his plan and a resurgence of public support.

Later that year, U.S. planes shot down two Libyan fighters. Reagan came out with words of courage and patriotism. His press secretary revealed later that Reagan had slept through the incident. Here emerged the issue of his competence, and his knowledge what was happening in his own government.

The following December, *Time* magazine ran a cover story on "How Reagan Decides" that Reagan didn't like. *Time's* editor, Steve Smith, realized the implications of such a story: "For the press to say the President of

the United States is out to lunch is quite a statement.... It's one thing to say the Emperor has no clothes. It's another to say the Emperor is out to lunch."<sup>11</sup>

Several flubs by the President led to speculation whether he was a dunce or a liar. But, as Hertsgaard points out:

Fathoming the inner workings of anyone's mind was risky business, and in Reagan's case it was an especially dubious endeavor. Who could say? Perhaps Reagan really did believe that the Russian language had no word for freedom, just as he later seemed to convince himself that he had not traded arms for hostages with Iran... Reagan had a long history of inane statements – who could forget his claim that 80 percent of the nation's air pollution was caused by trees – yet a viewer of the next day's or week's network White House stories would never have guessed that there was any special reason to doubt this President's knowledge or abilities; his subsequent pronouncements and actions were reported with all the courteous respect customarily accorded the leader of the Western world. It was as if after each glimpse of the unteleprompted Reagan, reporters simply purged their brains of all memory of the presidential simplemindedness they had just witnessed.<sup>12</sup>

The press lost interest in correcting Reagan. The *New York Times* even acknowledged this in 1983, with the headline, "Reagan Misstatements Getting Less Attention."

Later that year, the Grenada invasion provided the press with an opportunity to redeem itself. Reagan violated the War Powers Act and the Organization of American States Charter, and skirted Congressional approval before dispatching troops by issuing an Executive Order. In addition, the press had been barred from viewing any of the invasion and had to rely on government-issued information.

All this on the eve of the 1984 campaign had all the makings of a political disaster. And the press agreed. But Hertsgaard points out that the invasion was instead a well-orchestrated pseudo-event. "[Michael] Deaver dreamed up the whole thing. It was a P.R. coup. You know why? Because the day before that invasion, the Marine barracks was bombed in Beirut. We had just gotten the crap kicked out of us, and election time was just around the corner. Reagan needed a serious P.R. boost, and what the hell was the point of kicking the shit out of some little island? It didn't have any strategic value."<sup>13</sup>

Deaver, interviewed by Hertsgaard, denied planning the event, but admitted that he supported it:

There were a lot of discussions by some White House people about what the British had done in the Falklands. [The Falklands invasion had boosted Margaret Thatcher's sagging reputation.] It was obvious to me it had a very good chance of being successful and would be a good story... I think this country was so hungry for a victory, I don't care what the size of it was, we were going to beat the shit out of it. You know, two little natives some place, if we had staked the American flag down and said, "It's ours, by God," it would have been a success.<sup>14</sup>

The press largely failed to connect Grenada with events in the Mideast, and although there was much noise made about the "press black-out", it became quiet when the White House promised to include reporters in the next invasion. (The next would be in Panama in December, 1989, when several journalists were flown to Panama and locked in a room until the invasion was over.)

The Grenada invasion was largely successful; public support remained high going into the election year. Reagan was portrayed in the press as the clear favorite. While Walter Mondale, the Democratic contender, received mostly fair treatment, Reagan appeared a giant, thanks to his media image. In addition, the press focused mainly on the race itself, and not the issues. In coverage that would be repeated and intensified in 1988, the nightly news was filled with the candidates' staged "photo ops" and "sound bites." Reagan, naturally, had the advantage, because he was the incumbent and had the consummate media team. The culmination of media events was Reagan's opening of the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles.

After the election, the Reagan era continued unimpeded, buoyed by positive press coverage. Subsequent military actions were backed up with patriotic, anti-Communist or anti-terrorist assertions. When U.S. fighters forced down an airliner carrying the Achille Lauro hijackers in 1985, for example, Reagan told the American public he sent a message over the plane's loudspeaker as it was brought down: "You can run, but you can't hide."<sup>15</sup> The bombing of Tripoli the next year was portrayed similarly.

It was in the election year that reports surfaced about the CIA's involvement with the Nicaraguan Contras. In March of 1984, William Buckley was seized by an Iranian-backed terrorist group. From 1984 to 1986, more and more evidence surfaced, but no connection was made regarding arms-for-hostages or money from arms sales going to the contras. It wasn't until November, 1986, when Attorney General Edwin Meese announced the connection. Even after that, the press did much blaming and speculating, but failed to make any startling connections.

**A**t this point, some background of the Iranian situation is in order. William Buckley was the CIA's station chief in Beirut, and he knew every other agent in Lebanon; he also had a vast knowledge of terrorism. The kidnapping was particularly painful for the U.S. because the bombing of the embassy had destroyed the CIA station, and the U.S. was left with few resources in the area.

The CIA's involvement in Iran dates almost to the agency's creation in 1947. In 1953, it engineered the coup that placed the Shah in power, giving U.S. oil companies generous concessions. The CIA cooperated with Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad, to establish the Shah's secret police. Israel, like the U.S., exchanged arms for oil with Iran, which kept both countries alive during the 1970's oil embargoes.

The Shah's overthrow and the onset of the Iran-Iraq war in 1979 marked a setback for the U.S. Iraq was, and is, a common enemy with Iran and Israel. Israel supported Ayatollah Khomeini for the sake of defeating Iraq, and continued to supply Iran with arms, which, from the beginning, included U.S. parts. But the Ayatollah was an enemy to the U.S. When Israel asked for U.S. help in shipping arms to Iran, the Reagan administration flatly denied, and even discouraged Israel from sending its own weapons.

But when Buckley was captured, the Reagan administration was desperate to get him back, and turned to Israel for help in negotiating with

the Iranian government. National Security Council consultant Michael Ledeen went to Israel in 1985 to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres. Peres brought together a group of arms dealers, including Jewish-American Al Schwimmer and Saudi Adnan Khashoggi. This group's link to the Ayatollah was Manucher Ghorbarbifar, a former commander of the Shah's secret police, then an arms dealer living in exile. Ghorbarbifar was a known troublemaker to the CIA, yet after a TWA airliner was hijacked in June, 1985, CIA director William Casey apparently endorsed a deal with Iran.

After a visit by Israeli counterterrorism chief Amiram Nir, NSC staffer Oliver North prepared a memo for President Reagan, delivered by National Security Adviser John Poindexter, that outlined offering "limited assistance from the U.S.... selling military material to Western-oriented Iranian factions." "This approach through the government of Iran," the memo said, "may well be our only way to achieve the release of American hostages held in Beirut." Casey, Meese and Poindexter together convinced Reagan to authorize arms shipments to Iran, without the approval of Congress, according to the Tower Commission Report.

There were several "action" memos which included boxes at the end for the President to check off his approval or disapproval, an NSC staffer would later testify. He told of a figure of \$12 million in one memo, that was clearly set aside for the Nicaraguan contras.<sup>16</sup> North would testify that he prepared five or six such documents.

The money from the arms sales was controlled by North's agents, Albert Hakim and Richard Secord, both of whom had Swiss bank accounts. The Tower report shows that Iran was grossly overcharged for the arms to generate large profits.

In addition to the Nicaraguan Contras, more than \$1 million also went – illegally – to Israel, for covert operations in the Mideast. Some may have also gone to anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan and Angola. Many millions, however, are still unaccounted for.

In July, 1986, then- Vice President George Bush met with Amiram Nir regarding an arms shipment, according to a Bush aide's notes. Nir told Bush that the shipment was an effort to free the hostages, and there was a fixed price. The next day, an arms shipment was approved to Israel. Bush, incidentally, also sat in on at least fifteen briefings with Reagan regarding arms deals.<sup>17</sup> (In November, 1988, Nir was killed in a plane crash in Mexico.)

**T**he creation of the Contras began in the mid-1970's. Several ex-CIA members were in contact with anti-Sandinista forces, and assured them

that once Reagan was elected, they would receive help in fighting the government. The ex-CIA men didn't want to lose Nicaragua to Communism as China had been "lost" in 1953. The Reagan administration set up a formal agency under the NSC to make decisions on the contras. Initially in charge were William Casey and Robert McFarlane. Oliver North was a member. Financial backing originally came from generous campaign contributions.

Three foreign countries also backed the contras: Taiwan, Argentina and Guatemala. These countries hired as their voice then-lobbyist Michael Deaver. One of Deaver's contacts in Guatemala was Texas lawyer John Trotter, whose Coca-Cola bottling plant there was terminated by the company after some employees were murdered by death squads. Trotter managed to raise \$10 million in Guatemala for Reagan's 1980 campaign.

In the U.S., the main lobbying group for contra aid was the American Security Council, a military-industrial organization headed by oilmen who also financed Reagan's launch into politics in 1964. The ASC was also a backer of the World Anti-Communist League, which had prominent chapters in Guatemala, Argentina and Taiwan. Israel, meanwhile, had been supplying most of the arms to anti-Sandinista dictator Anastasio Somoza, who was killed in 1981. Israeli military and ex-CIA members formed and trained the contras.

U.S. aid flowed freely to the contras, even "as Congressional opposition mounted to the contra record of raping peasants and torturing social workers to death."<sup>18</sup> John Stockwell, a former CIA covert specialist, describes the contra's tactics as such:

The target is the people; the social and economic infrastructure is what you're hitting at. It's not a blood bath... you go into a village and you kill a few people to make your point. The purpose is to disseminate terror – to traumatize the people. We're not killing Sandinistas in the capital; we're not blowing up their houses. We're hitting at people within the interior of the country.<sup>19</sup>

North's office issued phony press releases to drum up support, according to Patricia Hynds, an American missionary working in Nicaragua.<sup>20</sup>

In 1984, a bomb exploded in La Penca, on the Nicaraguan border with Honduras. It was intended for Eden Pastora, leader of a contra faction that refused to cooperate with the CIA-run faction. Pastora escaped without major injury, but an American journalist, Linda Frazier, was killed. Several people were charged in the bombing, including an anti-Quaddafi Libyan, a handful of Cubans, and John Hull, an American rancher living in Costa Rica. But most of the blame was placed on the Sandinistas, apparently to build public support for the contras. Pastora maintains that the bombing was mas-

terminated by the CIA and NSC. Hull, who has also been charged with using his ranch as a base for drugs and arms smuggling, fled Costa Rica for the U.S. In a recent interview, he confirmed that he took orders from the U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua, and assumed the orders came “all the way from the top.” He also said he supported the contras, and received \$10,000 a month from the U.S. government for his efforts. “My only crime was trying to help sick and wounded people, [contras losing battles after Congress stopped funding them], and to take them from the Communist government in Nicaragua to a hospital in Costa Rica.”<sup>21</sup>

In October, 1984, Congress halted aid to the contras in what were to become the Boland Amendments, but that didn’t stop the flow of U.S. and Israeli money. According to a 1988 ABC News report, the Reagan administration and Israel worked with Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega and members of the Medellin cocaine cartel of Columbia on an illegal operation that “provided arms to the contras, and then... smuggled drugs into the United States.”

A July, 1989 report by the Costa Rican Congress concluded that Secord, North, Poindexter, Hull, and U.S. Ambassador Lewis Tambs concocted a scheme to use the contras as drug runners. This plan certainly would have been feasible: planes landing on U.S. bases didn’t generally go through the same stringent customs procedures as at public airports, and high officials could maneuver shipments past customs. The venture would not only be easy, it would be profitable: drugs, as well as arms, rank among the most profitable commodities in the world.

Reports surfaced in 1984 of CIA and NSC activity in Nicaragua. Bits and pieces came in the next two years, but few connections were made. In August, 1986, North lied to a House Intelligence Committee, then the same day met with Bush and Donald Gregg (Bush’s main liason with the contras), and spoke to Amiram Nir on the telephone.

In October, the Sandinistas shot down a plane carrying Eugene Hasenfus, an American mercenary. The plane was bringing supplies to the contras, but President Reagan assured reporters there was no U.S. connection. Nevertheless, Casey warned North to prepare for public disclosure. North later said, “I began shredding [documents] in earnest.”<sup>22</sup> Then on November 2, an American hostage, David Jacobsen, was released. His captors said they had acted in response to U.S. “overtures.” The very next day, a Lebanese newspaper reported that U.S. officials had visited Iran to discuss trading arms for hostages.

On November 13, under mounting pressure, Reagan told the nation, “I authorized the transfer of small amounts of defensive weapons and spare parts for defensive systems to Iran... These modest deliveries, taken together, could easily fit into a single cargo plane. We did not, repeat not, trade

weapons or anything for hostages, nor will we.” Congress summoned Casey and Poindexter to clarify details, and both lied to Congress.

Reagan put Ed Meese in charge of damage control. Meese revealed to the press on November 25 that money from the arms sales went to the contras. Both Congress and Reagan appointed committees to investigate the case. Reagan’s commission, headed by John Tower, released its report the following February. It detailed the activities of North, Casey, MacFarlane and Poindexter, and exonerated Reagan, Secretary of State George Schultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger. On March 4, 1987, Reagan told the nation, “A few months ago, I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it’s not.”

Congressional hearings began in May, and set a deadline of August 7, in order to finish their work before the election year. In November, a report was issued that concluded, “The concept of an off-the-shelf covert company to conduct operations with funds not appropriated by Congress is contradictory to the Constitution. The decision to use the enterprise to fight a war with unappropriated funds was a decision to combine the power of the purse and the power of the sword in one branch of government.”<sup>23</sup> But the report left action to an independent counsel.

One issue the committee didn’t publicly address was the administration’s fears of “the enemy within.” Most of North’s official duties involved preparing contingency plans for incarcerating people in the event of a war. A 1984 operation by North, CIA director George Bush and Louis Giuffrida, director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), (and an old Cold-Warrior from Reagan’s California days), proposed turning FEMA into an instrument of domestic anti-terrorism. In the event of a full-scale U.S. invasion of Central America, the scenario went, the Constitution would be “officially suspended,” and some 400,000 illegal aliens from Central America would be interred in prison camps.

When Democratic Representative Jack Brooks brought this up during the hearings, he was suppressed by chairman Daniel Inouye, who said the matter was not for the public’s ears. Peter Dale Scott, University of California, Berkeley professor and author of *The Iran Contra Connection*, warns that this type of planning hasn’t ceased: “It would be very, very wrong to think that these kinds of illegal operations will stop just by North’s disappearing, because the motives to generate these kinds of agendas are still there, and the powers that were collected in his name, his office, as far as I know, they are still there.”<sup>24</sup>

Pursuance of the assassination and drug smuggling charges could very well have brought impeachment proceedings. The committees also failed to make use of Reagan’s calendars or phone logs. They decided early

on that impeachment wasn't an option they were willing to pursue. (One reason, cites Seymour Hersch, was that committee members feared another Watergate at a time when Reagan was making inroads with the Soviets.<sup>25</sup>) The committee went into "executive session" to discuss information it thought might endanger national security or the lives of the hostages still in Lebanon.

Oliver North's trial began in February 1989. North appeared to be as competent as Reagan in using the media. North testified, "Mr. Ghorbarnifar took me into the bathroom, and... suggested several incentives to make [the] transaction work, and the attractive incentive was the one he made that residuals could flow to support the Nicaraguan resistance."<sup>26</sup>

But classified documents released in the trial clearly show that Bush and others were also involved in using money appropriated for Congress as aid to the contras, without Congressional consent. In May, 1989, North was convicted on three minor charges. Meanwhile, Bush, who had taken office, appointed several figures involved in the scandal to high-level posts: Donald Gregg, Bush's top national security aide and main liason with the contras, would become ambassador to South Korea; Richard Armitage, who managed the secret delivery of arms to Iran, was nominated for Secretary of the Army, but later withdrew; and John Negroponte, who is believed to have known about the contra money, is now ambassador to Mexico. Bush maintains that while he approved the sale of arms to Iran, he, like Reagan, didn't know of the diversion of funds to the contras.

Poindexter's trial took place in March and April, 1990. In video-taped testimony, Reagan recalled a 1984 meeting in which Bush raised the possibility of third-country assistance, provided that no quid pro quo was offered. Then Reagan told of providing "incentives" to Honduras to aid the contras.

In Oliver North's notebooks, released in May, Bush's trips to Honduras and Guatemala in 1985 were described as part of a "Third country solicitation plan."<sup>27</sup> Poindexter was convicted on six criminal charges, and sentenced to six months in jail. His is so far the only jail term imposed. (Secord received one year probation on one conviction). Both Poindexter and North are appealing their convictions. The release of North's diaries spurred a renewed Grand Jury inquiry into the affair, which is continuing.

**P**ress coverage of the entire affair has been sporadic and largely unrevealing, mostly because of the press' history of favorable coverage of Reagan, and because of the extensive cover-up of data. When leads first emerged, a few journalists picked them up and stayed with them. Robert Parry of the Associated Press first reported on the CIA providing training manuals to contras in 1984. Although his story attracted little attention, he and his partner, Brian Barger, pursued it. The next year, they reported that Reagan approved aid to the contras, that North was supporting the contras, and that contra leaders were involved in cocaine smuggling. After a bureau chief discouraged any more contra reports, Parry and Barger resigned. They found that no other organizations were interested in the story either, until the Hasenfus plane crash.<sup>28</sup>

The *Miami Herald's* Alfonso Chardy and the *New York Times' Joel Brinkley* and *Shirley Christian* were also on to the story relatively early. A *Times* report in August, 1985 shed new light on Parry's findings. It revealed that not only was the NSC helping the contras raise money, it was also running the contra war, in part, from the White House. This alone went against the Boland Amendment passed the previous October, which had prohibited any U.S. intelligence agency from assisting the contras.

On the other side of the scandal, the other side of the world, Jack Anderson and Dale Van Atta made inroads on the arms-for-hostages deals. They reported in April, 1986 that the U.S. was approving Israeli arms shipments to Iran. Then John Wallach of the Hearst Newspapers reported in July that the U.S. and Iran were secretly negotiating. These leads generated some interest, but no other reporters could confirm the details, and no one linked the two sides of the scandal. Even Watergate star Bob Woodward, who had close ties to William Casey, failed to uncover any details. For the most part, the press didn't know much, and didn't take an interest in the story, until the Hasenfus incident and Meese's press conference in November, 1986.

There are many reasons the press was slow to pick up the story. The connection wasn't very clear, initially, and nothing could be confirmed; the administration shut the lid tightly and effectively; Congress, (a main source for Washington reporters), was also in the dark and the Democrats didn't offer any criticism of Reagan, so there was no one to quote for opposition; the story was an effect, not a cause, and it had no clear beginning, middle or end; it was too complex; news organizations were beset by corporate cutbacks, and could scarcely afford to send correspondents overseas; many stayed away from it because it was a "national security matter"; Reagan was immensely popular, and spewed mounds of rhetoric denouncing the Sandinistas; mostly, no one could imagine Reagan selling arms to the Ayatollah, his arch enemy.

Meanwhile, the White House was keeping an eye on the press, as Scott Armstrong notes:

Thanks to the inadvertent preservation of Oliver North's memos and electronic mail, on the so-called PROF system, the Iran-contra record is now replete with examples of the White House tracking which reporters were making what advances on the story, even reporters from the foreign press. Often the White House was able to keep Iran-contra revelations from resonating simply by denying and trying to discredit stories by such reporters as Wallach, Van Atta, the AP's Parry, and the *Miami Herald's* Chardy.<sup>29</sup>

The White House quickly closed up. Dale Van Atta confirmed the arms for hostages deal in an interview with Reagan in February, 1986, then he exposed NSC members and a former CIA official in June; he was getting close. On July 11, the AP's Michael Putzel noticed the eroding access to Reagan. His article described how the Secret Service began barring the Presidential press pool, how photographers were often admitted without reporters, how Reagan took to slipping in and out side entrances, and even how press secretary Lawrence Speakes had a chain-link fence erected in the driveway of the White House.<sup>30</sup>

After Meese revealed the connection, the press suddenly, albeit briefly, jumped onto the story. It swarmed on Meese's every inconsistency and checked several other officials' stories against verifiable facts. Between that press conference and the release of the Tower report, it was open season on Oliver North. During those few months, reporters actually read and corrected each other's stories, and succeeded in uncovering North's "Enterprise" with Richard Secord and Albert Hakim. They pursued Reagan, even after the Tower report exonerated him.

But this may be where the press got sidetracked. Everyone began focusing on Reagan – "What did he know? When did he know it?" – and lost sight of the fundamental issues involved, like the White House's covert operations, the accounts of drug running and assassination, and the constitutional questions about taxpayers' money going to terrorists. There was instead excruciating detail on a few relatively minor points. Coverage of the hearings focused on the show put on by the various speakers, and because the speakers tended to talk in roundabout ways or suddenly had bad memories, the press lost interest. Consequently, so did the public, and so too did Congress. No one scrutinized the rush job the investigative committees were doing, and few continued on the trail of Reagan or Bush. Herstgaard remembers covering the Poindexter trial:

They ended up being more fair to Poindexter than to the rest of us... Sitting in the courtroom was very bizarre, because here's Poindexter pleading innocent to charges that everyone in the room, except the jury, knows he's guilty of. Not because we're bad people, not because we're not Republicans, but because he *admitted* to it on national television in the Summer of 1987 – "I tore it up, the buck stops here with me," and so on... But the press acted like the public at large was the jury, and that we had to be immunized from that testimony too, we had to be immunized from the truth. The truth was that John Poindexter was changing his story to beat the rap. [The press] felt that to say that Poindexter was changing his story would be biased, would be advocacy. But the press being more fair to Poindexter – that was not what the Founding Fathers had in mind when they talked about a free press.<sup>31</sup>

There were a few exceptions to the lax coverage. CNN covered the entire hearings live, while the networks declined. CBS News producer Howard Rosenberg, however, staked out North's house for days. When he wondered where North got the money for his security system, Congress caught on, and this led to one of North's three convictions.

CBS's Dan Rather also deserves credit for his infamous on-air debate with Presidential candidate Bush. A lead-in story before the interview seemed to imply that Bush knew more than he was saying. Rather asked of Bush's involvement, and Bush countered with an attack on Rather in a well-planned strategy, citing the time he walked off the set during a broadcast. But Rather failed to follow up, and Bush was portrayed as the victor. The effect worked: the rest of the press was essentially scared off, and reporters generally stayed away from Bush after that.

ABC News had its drug smuggling investigation, but even they didn't follow up on it, mostly because it was unfathomable to most Americans. As David MacMichael, a former CIA analyst, points out,

This administration is impossible to embarrass... they rely on the old rule of deny, deny, deny, despite the vast amounts of evidence that have built. There is a tendency within the Congress, and in large sections of the establishment media, simply to reject this sort of thing – “It can't be happening.” If Nancy Reagan is saying just no to drugs, how can drugs be running by the same freedom fighters that she embraces at various banquets?<sup>32</sup>

Some of the best leads came from non-press organizations. Public-interest groups like the Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, the International Center for Development Policy, the Washington Office on Latin America, the Christic Institute, and the National Security Archive supplied reporters with details and contacts. The Christic Institute, for example, identified the secret network of people used by North and Poindexter, and the National Security Archive obtained North's notebooks through a Freedom of Information Act request. The documentary *Cover Up* provided startling revelations to the public, and former White House aide Barbara Honegger's book *October Surprise* detailed the 1980 deal between the Reagan campaign and Iran.

**B**esides these and a few other exceptions, coverage of the affair was spotty. However, recent attacks on the lax press coverage and new evidence has led to a renewed journalistic effort. For instance, investigative journalist Seymour Hersch recently published a report uncovering new leads, and on KPFA-FM in Berkeley, Dennis Bernstein continues to produce a weekly show on cover-ups and national security matters. KPFA's Larry Bensky has also provided comprehensive coverage of the affair.

On the whole, it remains to be seen whether this type of initiative will catch on. It is understandable that investigating affairs of this scale requires months, if not years, which is why such reports often appear in books and magazines. But there are several ways the press can improve its

investigative reporting. For one, reporters must be able to place stories in proper social and historical context, instead of focusing on what may be only a tangent. They must also beware of events that may be planned to purposefully divert attention from other events, and be mindful of the events not being covered. Journalists must read each other's work, and utilize public interest groups more. Exaggerated rhetorical claims must be scrutinized, like Reagan's "Evil Empire" comments, and any use of the words "terrorist," "freedom fighters," "left-wing," "democracy," or "humanitarian aid."

Also, it is a journalist's job to make complex stories understandable, not to ignore them. (The S&L scandal is another story that seems to be suffering along these lines.) Instead of always striving to "balance" reports with official views or only two sides, journalists need to do more interpretation: they must know motives, facts; they must know candidates' supporters, goals and rank in the party. The 1947 Commission on Freedom of the Press ruled that it is more important for citizens to have the right of access to information than for the press to achieve complete freedom of speech; in short, the press must serve society. The press has the biggest job in politics.

Unfortunately, the present state of the press isn't conducive to good government reporting. As communications professor Daniel Hallin says, "Like politicians, journalists scramble to follow the latest wave of public sentiment."<sup>33</sup> In the mid-eighties it was patriotism, then it was anti-drugs, and now it seems to be the environment. This method of reporting raises passion at the expense of full understanding, and can trivialize or overlook important issues. It is certainly not a new way of reporting, but it was heightened during the Reagan decade.

While the "journalistic center" drifted to the left in the seventies, it shifted far to the right in the eighties. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* both came out against a nuclear test ban proposed by the Soviets; the *Times* even backed the neutron bomb; both backed "humanitarian aid" to the contras. On the leading network public affairs show, *Nightline*, the overwhelming majority of guests were white, male conservatives, a survey found. The three most frequent guests, in fact, were Reagan sympathizers Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig and Jerry Falwell. The *MacNeil/Lehrer Report* proved to be even more right-wing in this fashion. It is no wonder the administration wasn't criticized more sharply. *Spy* magazine's Richard Stengel describes the relationship between reporters and politicians thusly: "No one in Washington is just a friend, and no one is just a professional acquaintance. The reporter and the congressional staffer are pals, and the fact that each can be helpful to the other adds a Machiavellian fillip to their 'friendship.'"<sup>34</sup>

Another factor contributing to the press' failure is the myth of objectivity. The press feels a need to present "balanced" reports. As with the

Nicaraguan conflict, “much violence in Third World countries and elsewhere is presented as innocent civilians caught in the crossfire between two equally repugnant forces – even in the face of clear evidence of greater levels of abuse by one side,” according to Patricia Hynds. “Another version of the distorted idea of balance requires that every quote that contradicts previous norms, assumptions – or U.S. policies – must be countered with a quote from the administration or a ‘Western diplomat’ or ‘high official source.’ This appearance of balance usually leaves the reader [or viewer] hopelessly lost.”<sup>35</sup>

Another problem with the press today is new technology. With new “video-imaging” technology now available to any personal computer owner, pictures as well as words can lie, at the stroke of a computerized pencil. The White House has even used the new technology itself, as when it deleted Oliver North from publicity photos. Nowadays, “computers could easily concoct a tale of a presidential candidate smiling and chatting with men wearing Klan robes or Dan Quayle on a shadowy street corner whispering to a prostitute,” muses freelance writer Bennett Daviss.<sup>36</sup> As National Public Radio’s Susan Stamberg accurately summarizes, “We see everything, but know almost nothing.”<sup>37</sup>

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