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History 142

Dr. Wertheimer

11/22/24

I Disagree: [Iran]-Contra Affair

I disagree with the claim in the American Yawp that, “The president’s underlings had not only violated the Boland Amendment but had also, by selling arms to Iran, made a mockery of Reagan’s declaration that “America will never make concessions to the terrorists.” But while the Iran-Contra affair generated comparisons to the Watergate scandal, investigators were never able to prove Reagan knew about the operation.¹ Although this statement pertains to the Iran-Contra Affair, I will only address Reagan’s potential violations in regards to Iran because there are too many contested facets in need of addressing, to cover both the Iranian, and Nicaraguan aspects of this matter. Due to information from Reagan’s diary, I take issue with the insinuation that Reagan’s “underlings” acted without Reagan’s knowledge, in their sale of weapons to Iran during 1986. I argue that Ronald Reagan knowingly acted to subvert legal restrictions of Presidential power, and directly approved the sale of illegal weapons to Iran.

Reagan was primarily motivated by the desire to have American hostages returned in a timely manner, and opted to use back channels due to the uncondusive political atmosphere of his Congress. During the Carter Administration, in 1979, Islamic militants, who were friendly with the Ayatollah during the Iranian Revolution, kidnapped American Diplomats in Tehran.²

Reagan capitalized on Carter’s failed hostage recovery efforts during his 1980 Presidential

¹ Joseph L. Locke and Ben Wright, eds., *The American Yawp, Volume 2: Since 1877* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), <https://www.americanyawp.com/text/29-the-triumph-of-the-right/>.

² Geoffrey Kemp, *U.S.-Iranian Strategic Cooperation Since 1979: Checking Iran’s Nuclear Ambitions* (Strategic Studies Institute: US Army War College, 2004), pg 101, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11958.10>.

campaign, and so even when Iran released the hostages, moments after Reagan took office in 1981, he declared Iran a terrorist state and continued Carter's hardline policies against Iran.³ To complicate things further, Iraq and Iran began an 8 year long war that, while claiming to be neutral, the U.S. hoped would end in an Iranian defeat.⁴ However, the Iranians expelled the Iraqi army from Iran in mid-1982, and followed the Iraqi forces into the Arabian Peninsula.⁵ In light of the new threats which the Iranian war posed to oil-rich neighbors of Iraq on the Peninsula, the U.S. organized an international arms embargo, Operation STAUNCH, which weakened the Iranian air force, and missile capabilities.⁶ The massive blow which the Iranians suffered through the U.S. arms embargo, is arguably the reason why Iran was open to doing business with the U.S.⁷ The Reagan Administration also came to believe, through a "highly controversial intelligence analysis," that there were moderate officials in the Ayatollah's government who would normalize the U.S.-Iranian diplomatic relations if they were to come to power.⁸ In response to the U.S. subversion of the Iranian war effort, more hostages were taken by pro-Iranian militants, and Reagan had a special onus to prove he was better at hostage negotiations than his predecessor.⁹ Additionally, the partisan divide in Congress posed a real problem for Reagan; he had a Republican Senate until 1986, but a Democratic House throughout his tenure.¹⁰ His frustration with Congressional oversight can be seen in a description of an interaction he had with Republican Congressional leaders from his diary, in which he told them

³ Ray Nichols, *Of Arms and The Man: The Iran-Contra Affair as 'Representative Anecdote'* (UC Santa Barbara: Australasian Journal of American Studies 11, no. 2, 1992), pg 21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41053647>.

⁴ Kemp, *U.S.-Iranian Strategic Cooperation Since 1979*, pg 101.

⁵ Kemp, *U.S.-Iranian Strategic Cooperation Since 1979*, pg 102.

⁶ Kemp, *U.S.-Iranian Strategic Cooperation Since 1979*, pg 102.

⁷ Kemp, *U.S.-Iranian Strategic Cooperation Since 1979*, pg 102.

⁸ Kemp, *U.S.-Iranian Strategic Cooperation Since 1979*, pg 102-103.

⁹ Nichols, *Of Arms and The Man*, pg 21.

¹⁰ Nichols, *Of Arms and The Man*, pg 21.

that he had grown tired of “foreign policy by a committee of 535.”¹¹ Reagan’s frustrations with the bureaucracy, and mounting pressure he felt from the extended captivity of U.S. citizens by a sworn enemy of the U.S., compounded in his establishing private and Israeli intermediaries to negotiate with Iran.¹² Through these intermediaries, weapons were sold to Iran, by Israel and the U.S., from September of 1985 through October of 1986, and resulted in the release of 3 hostages, although more hostages were quickly taken.¹³ When hostages started returning, rumors swirled that Reagan had done a weapons-for-hostage exchange, to which Reagan declined to respond on the basis that it was an ongoing matter of national security.¹⁴ The Senate’s Tower Commission was appointed by Reagan to investigate the matter, and after two months they concluded that while minor adjustments should be made in the attitude of N.S.C members, “[T]he NSC process did not fail, it simply was ignored.”¹⁵ The subsequent Congressional Investigation provided a more comprehensive, but equally unremarkable verdict: that there needs to be more coordination between the Executive and Legislative Branches during covert operations in the future.¹⁶ Although these investigations did not result in the impeachment proceeding for Reagan, it would be incorrect to assume that Reagan was blameless.

In his diary, Reagan described conversations with his N.S.C. advisors, in which he explicitly authorized weapons sales Iran, and proposed methods to circumvent potential procedural and legal challenges. Reagan appointed Robert “Bud” McFarlane as his National

¹¹ Ronald Reagan, *White House Diaries: May 21, 1985* (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute)

<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/white-house-diaries/diary-entry-01201981/>.

¹² Nichols, *Of Arms and The Man*, pg 21.

¹³ Nichols, *Of Arms and The Man*, pg 21.

¹⁴ Reagan, *November 11, 1986*.

¹⁵ Nichols, *Of Arms and The Man*, pg 27.

¹⁶ Nichols, *Of Arms and The Man*, pg 27.

Security Advisor, in October of 1983.¹⁷ Despite tendering his resignation in late October of 1985, and having been replaced by his deputy, John Poindexter, they were both present for N.S.C. briefing on December 5, 1986.¹⁸ Reagan described the contents of the meeting as “a complex undertaking with only a few of us in on it,” before he ominously states, “I wont even write in the diary what we’re up to.”¹⁹ Considering the content which he had included up to this point, and also the content he would reveal during the coming days, I cannot even imagine what he was referring to, or why he would say something so guilt ridden. Two days later in another N.S.C. meeting, Reagan outlined a plan to, “return our 5 hostages & help some officials in Iran who want to turn that country from it’s present course,” by “selling some weapons to Iran” through Israel.²⁰ This suggestion was met with concerns from various members of the Council, legally, they were concerned that “Cong. has imposed a law on us that we cant sell Iran weapons or sell any other country weapons for re-sale to Iran,” and morally, that “this violates our policy of not paying off terrorists.”²¹ However, Reagan argued, “No direct sale would be made by us to Iran but we would be replacing the weapons sold by Israel”, and because the money is not going to the Ayatollah, it did not qualify as a ransom payment.²² Reagan then toys with the idea that Britain could serve as a better intermediary, because, as he wrote, “Britain has no embargo on selling to Iran.”²³ In his recollection of this meeting, Reagan displays clear forethought towards

¹⁷ Ronald Reagan, *White House Diaries: October 18, 1983* (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute)

<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/white-house-diaries/diary-entry-10181983/>.

¹⁸ Ronald Reagan, *White House Diaries: December 5, 1985* (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute)

<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/white-house-diaries/diary-entry-12051985/>.

¹⁹ Reagan, *December 5, 1985*.

²⁰ Ronald Reagan, *White House Diaries: December 7, 1985* (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute)

<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/white-house-diaries/diary-entry-12071985/>.

²¹ Reagan, *December 7, 1985*.

²² Reagan, *December 7, 1985*.

²³ Reagan, *December 7, 1985*.

the laws prohibiting his desired course of action, and also to the technicalities which could be exploited to circumvent those laws. Additionally, a comparison between the second provision of the potential legal issues raised by members of the N.S.C, and Reagan's explanation for dismissing them, surfaces no fundamental difference. Reagan reveals his attitude toward laws which restrict him, as well as larger regulatory bodies through this sentiment; that the character of laws which are meant to serve as Constitutional guardrails can be intentionally misinterpreted when it is convenient. Although Reagan states that this plan failed during negotiations, he describes the later stages of a very similar plan in another N.S.C. meeting exactly one month later.

Reagan describes a "highly secret convoluted process," in which Israel releases 20 Hezbollah prisoners, and sells Iran TOW anti-tank weapons, in exchange for 5 hostages.²⁴ The U.S. would then sell the Israelis replacement weapons, and "sit quietly by & never reveal how we got them [hostages] back."²⁵ 10 days later, Reagan states, "I gave a go ahead," on a plan that involves, "selling TOW anti-tank missiles to Iran."²⁶ It can be inferred that Reagan's "go ahead" in regards to the weapons sale to Iran, was in reference to the planned prisoner release and weapons sale through the Israelis which he had described 10 days prior. In spite of legal loopholes, Reagan's explicit description of his intention to sell the weapons to the Iranians, could not more clearly indicate that he was intending to break the law. Even though he had explicitly planned for the weapons sale to be done in a way which did not directly violate the letter of the law, he expressed the intent to directly violate the letter of the law, and through a course of

²⁴ Ronald Reagan, *White House Diaries: January 7, 1986* (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute)

<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/white-house-diaries/diary-entry-01171986/>.

²⁵ Reagan, *January 7, 1986*.

²⁶ Ronald Reagan, *White House Diaries: January 17, 1986* (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute)

<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/white-house-diaries/diary-entry-01171986/>.

actions which he initiated, broke the letter of the law (the Iranians purchased and received U.S. weapons). After Reagan's plans became public, Congress opened an investigation into the matter, and John Pointdexter was asked to testify. Reagan wrote that he met his Deputy Chief of Staff's attorney, who would attempt to find out from Pointdexter's lawyer if Pointdexter was "taking the 5th" thinking he was protecting Reagan.²⁷ Reagan ambiguously stated that if Pointdexter's, "answers are right," he may ask the Congressional committees overseeing the proceeding to grant Pointdexter immunity, so he could, "tell the whole story."²⁸ Reagan's reflections on his own actions are very telling because they do not capture the exact legalese being used between parties, but they do capture Reagan's intended sentiments. In Reagan's description of his conversation with the lawyer, he carefully avoids discussing anything that they spoke about, only revealing the final result of the conversation. While this does leave gray room as to what was actually said during a given interaction, it can be inferred that this discussion pertained to Reagan's curiosity about Pointdexter's intentions for his testimony. In addition, the result of the conversation was that this lawyer would ask Pointdexter's lawyer about Pointdexter's private thoughts about trying to protect Reagan by asserting his freedom from self-incrimination. Finally, the implication that Pointdexter could answer this inquiry incorrectly, in some manner, could be factored into Reagan's consideration as to whether he would appeal to the Committee on Pointdexter's behalf, sounds particularly unscrupulous. As with all of the evidence which I have presented from Reagan's diary, it is curious that he transcribed decisions which he made that could even be perceived as illegal. Even without Reagan explicitly admitting to utilizing back-channels to offer a material witness to an investigation into his administration's

²⁷ Ronald Reagan, *White House Diaries: December 14, 1986* (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute)
<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/white-house-diaries/diary-entry-12141986/>.

²⁸ Reagan, *December 14, 1986*.

actions, immunity; throughout his diary he has in his own words, admitted to planning and approving an arms sale, which circumvented the law.

In the face of domestic political division, a feeling of personal debt to the American hostages overseas, and rising tensions in the Middle East, Ronald Reagan enlisted his closest advisors to construct a plan which would allow him to deal with multiple issues he was facing at once. Although his actions are not unprecedented, in that other Presidents lie about their intentions and the results of their programs, Reagan intentionally violated the law, and publicly brought the integrity of the U.S. into question. Unfortunately, the findings stemming from investigations done by the governmental bodies which are meant to regulate and maintain the functioning of our democracy failed to emphasize the role which our President played deceiving the Legislature, and subsequently, the American people. The American people deserve to know about the true breadth of the violations which a President carries out in their tenure, and the failure to characterize the Iran-Contra Affair as such, both by the Congress and the American Yawp, constitute a wrong which should be righted. In displaying clear evidence that the President knowingly committed violations of the law, and thought of his right to do so, as so absolute that he recorded it in his official journal, has shed light on an issue that is fundamental to all Americans: nobody can be above the law.

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