

Bush, the CIA and America's future

By Carla Binion

September 22, 2001—Who are the people leading us into war? Can we trust them, and should we ask questions of them? In the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks, Fox Network's Bill O'Reilly and other TV talking heads say it's un-American to question George W. Bush's policies. However, corrupt politicians, CIA dirty tricks and wrongheaded foreign policy do not equate to "America."

When people question misguided policy, it's not the same as criticizing America. The working people of this country are America. The people who helped in the rescue efforts following the nation's recent tragedy are America. Our government leaders and their policies are not America, if and when they undermine our health and safety.

In a September 19, 2001 letter to the Washington Post, Congressman John Conyers (D-MI) says, "Historically, it has been at times of inflamed passion and national anger that our civil liberties proved to be at greatest risk . . . Unfortunately, our response in 1996 to the Oklahoma City bombing and now to the bombing of the World Trade Center and Pentagon does not portend well for today's discussions. Legislation that began in good faith as an effort to fine-tune our anti-terrorism laws turned into a legislative race to the bottom."

Conyers adds, "[The legislation] contained sweeping new limitations on habeas corpus for death-row and other inmates. The legislation also severely narrowed the ability of persons fleeing for their lives from dangerous regimes to seek asylum. I sat through the hearings on this legislation and did not hear a single shred of evidence that proved that a single terrorist act could be prevented by limiting the ability of persons convicted in state court to obtain relief from unconstitutional convictions or by denying immigrants their due process rights."

We're lucky to have Representative Conyers scrutinize anti-terrorism laws. This country was created in part because the people questioned authority and dissented from corrupt government policies. Nothing could be more un-American than suppressing dissent against government corruption, and nothing could be more American than expressing it. Government is "us" (or America) only when it serves us well, and politicians are on "our" side only when they are not corrupt enough to try to profit from our losses.

Government is meant to serve the people, not the other way around. This is fundamental to what America means. John Conyers is one political leader who seems to understand that. I might not agree with him on every issue, but I think he's an example of good leadership. If all our politicians were more like Conyers, we might have consistently good government.

It's pro-America to work toward good government and criticize bad government. Here's an example of the very bad: If the American people knew all relevant facts, most of us would probably criticize our government's support of the U. S. Army School of Americas (SOA), located in Fort Benning, Georgia. The school has long trained terrorists.

David McGowan, (*Derailing Democracy*, Common Courage Press, 2000) says Amnesty International reported in 1998 that SOA is "only one of more than 150 centers in the U.S.A. and abroad where foreign officers are trained. A number of SOA 'alumni' have been implicated in gross human rights violations."

According to McGowan, a May 22, 1998 Associated Press article, "School of the Americas = School of the Assassins," says, "Nineteen of the 26 military officers that critics cited in the murder of six Jesuit priests and two women in El Salvador eight years ago were graduates of the School of the Americas." The same article reports, ". . . it was revealed recently that the school [SOA] used manuals that included references to executions, torture and other human rights abuses."

The School of the Americas Watch web site reports the U. S. Army SOA "trains Latin American soldiers in combat, counter-insurgency, and counter-narcotics. Graduates of the SOA are responsible for some of the worst human rights abuses in Latin America."

According to the SOA Watch site, "Among the SOA's nearly 60,000 graduates are notorious dictators Manuel Noriega and Omar Torrijos of Panama, Leopoldo Galtiere and Roberto Viola of Argentina, Juan Velasco Alvarado of Peru" and many others. In addition, the site reports that "lower-level SOA graduates have participated in human rights abuses that include the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the El Mozote Massacre of 900 civilians."

David McGowan says Amnesty International reported on May 2, 1998 that "former Panamanian strongman and convicted drug trafficker Gen. Manuel Noriega graduated from [SOA]. So did Roberto D'Aubuisson, architect of El Salvador's right-wing death squad network."

On January 17, 2001 the SOA was renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC). However, though the name has changed, the organization remains basically the same, according to SOA Watch.

Even a brief look at the CIA's history demonstrates the agency consistently behaves in ways many of us might consider un-American and anti-democratic. For example, the agency routinely lies to the public, supports injustice, disregards fairness, and suppresses equality and civil liberties. And we're not talking about minor transgressions. The CIA supports terrorism around the world while claiming to denounce it.

The CIA was spawned from the National Security Act of 1947. Since its inception, the agency, has:

- Smuggled narcotics from the U. S. to Cuba (via members of Operation Mongoose).

- Directed the overthrow of democratically elected Chilean socialist President Salvador Allende and the military overthrow of that democratically elected government in 1973.
- Through the Phoenix Project, directed the assassination of various bureaucrats in Vietnam and supported the random arrest and torture of “suspected” leftists.
- Supported dictator Augusto Pinochet and his mass bloodbaths in Chile.
- Supported and trained Shah of Iran’s secret police, notorious for torture and murder.
- Supported human rights atrocities in East Timor.
- Violated U. S. law and its own charter by spying on and harassing Americans.
- Slipped drugs to unsuspecting American citizens.
- Bolstered and funded human rights violating dictator Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua and supported and trained the torturing and murderous Contras; and much more.

The U. S. government has tried to curb the CIA’s excesses in the past. During the mid-1970s the Church and Pike committees investigated CIA and FBI misdeeds.

Today the country seems to have forgotten what the CIA does when off leash. Since the recent terrorist attacks, TV talk shows have been stacked with guests who claim the Church and Pike committees weakened the intelligence community. These same guests vouch for the agencies’ need to be completely free of congressional oversight. The TV networks offer almost no opposing commentary.

Under present circumstances, the public is too frightened to question the CIA’s push for carte blanche, and Congress is afraid of both terrorism and backlash if they publicly question the conventional wisdom of the moment.

However, somebody needs to step up to the plate and ask whether it’s a good idea to give already-rogue organizations even wider latitude. History has proved that while claiming to be the good guy who strives to do the right thing, the CIA repeatedly behaves as the bad guy and shows no intention of improving.

We ignore history when we relinquish all governmental oversight of the CIA. We also ignore history when we close our eyes to the legacy of deceit shared by some members of the George W. Bush team.

If the public wants a taste of how the CIA and members of Bush’s advisory team might conduct themselves in the new war, we should revisit Iran-Contra. The purpose isn’t to compare Iran-Contra with what we face today, but to remember how the people involved conducted themselves.

Several of George W. Bush's current official and unofficial advisers participated in the Iran-Contra scandal and/or its cover-up: George H. W. Bush, Colin Powell, Dick Cheney, Caspar Weinberger, George Schultz, and a number of others, including former President Bush's many CIA friends. George W. Bush can be understood only as a member of the team that advises him.

Ronald Reagan and his CIA director William Casey created the Contras, and they portrayed them as "freedom fighters." However, the Contras didn't promote democracy as Reagan and Casey claimed. Instead, they "showed gratuitous brutality" and not only murdered but "also tortured and mutilated" their victims, according to a March 1986 report by the human rights monitoring group America's Watch. (William D. Hartung, *And Weapons for All*, Harper Collins, 1994.)

On the Iranian end, General Richard Secord, took the opportunity to cash in on the Reagan-Bush covert war. He purchased 1,000 missiles from the CIA for \$3.7 million and then sold them to an Iranian middle man for \$10 million. Secord's organization, the Enterprise, was described by Senator Daniel K. Inouye, chairman of the Senate Select Committee, as a "shadowy government with its own Air Force, its own Navy, its own fund-raising mechanism and the ability to pursue its own ideas of the national interest, free from all checks and balances, and free from the law itself." (From "Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair," New York Times Books, 1988.)

During the Iran-contra hearings, Senator Paul Sarbanes asked Secord, "If the purpose of the Enterprise was to help the Contras, why did you charge [Contra leader] Calero a mark-up that included a profit?" Secord answered, "We were in business to make a living, Senator. We had to make a living. I didn't see anything wrong with it at the time." (same source as previous paragraph.)

"While profits were being made, lives were being lost," says journalist Bill Moyers in a 1987 PBS Frontline Iran-Contra related broadcast. He adds, "In Nicaragua, the Contras use weapons from the Enterprise against civilians. It is a terrorist war they are fighting. Old men, women, children are caught in the middle."

Professor Edwin Firmage, University of Utah, tells Moyers, "The substance of [Iran-Contra] is far above Watergate. You have the sale of armaments to terrorist groups, which can only foment more kidnapping and more terror and finance it. You have the doing of this by members of the armed forces, a very scary thing. You have the government, in part at least, put in motion doing things that Congress has forbidden—direct illegality. You have constitutional abuses that are enormous."

A national poll taken in 1984 showed 70 percent of the public didn't approve of the Reagan/Bush Central American policy. Since 1984 was an election year, the Reagan team kept the war a secret. Reagan adviser Michael Deaver told Bill Moyers, "If we had fought the campaign on Central America we might have lost."

When Reagan and George H. W. Bush took office, Iranian fanatics had seized the U. S. embassy in Tehran. A year before Reagan took office, Washington declared Iran a terrorist nation.

American law then prohibited Iran from receiving U. S. arms. The Iranian regime publicly declared the U. S. an enemy and referred to America as “the great Satan.” The regime also called for “death to the great Satan, America.” On June 30, 1985, Reagan himself said Iran was part of “a confederation of terrorist states.” However, on January 17, 1986, Reagan wrote in his diary, “I agreed to sell TOWs (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided antitank missiles) to Iran.” (Both quotes from Tim Weiner’s *Blank Check*, Warner Books, 1990.)

Reagan and G. H. W. Bush told Americans they were being tough on terrorism, but behind our backs the administration kept selling weapons to terrorists. The Reagan team also lied when they claimed the reason they sold arms to terrorists and funneled the profits to the Contras was in order to help stop the arms flow to Central America. Congressman David Bonior was right when he said from the floor of the House, “This is a war against the people of Nicaragua. This is a war against the government of Nicaragua. This is not a war about stopping the arms flow.”

George H. W. Bush headed the President’s Task Force on Terrorism. A 1990 Bill Moyers PBS Frontline video shows Bush at a press conference saying, “Today I am proud to deliver to the American people the result of the six months effort to review our policies and our capabilities to deal with terrorism. Our policy is clear, concise and unequivocal. We will offer no concession to terrorists, because that only leads to more terrorism. States that practice terrorism, or actively support it, will not be allowed to do so without consequence.”

Even as Bush spoke, the administration was selling arms to terrorists. Bush knew this, because he had attended meetings on the arms shipments. According to Moyers, one arms shipment around the time of Bush’s speech netted \$800,000 in profit.

Moyers adds, “The arms sales have become big business, off the shelf and off the books, accountable only to the inside trader. The profits will wind up not in the U. S. Treasury, but in a private slush fund—what North, Casey and company now call the Enterprise.”

The deception practiced by George H. W. Bush and other Iran-Contra figures raises questions about how those same people will advise George W. Bush today. Given today’s serious, immediate terrorist threat, we all understand the need for some government secrecy. But many Americans think we also need a reasonable amount of open debate and congressional oversight.

“The people who wrote the Constitution lived in a world more dangerous than ours,” says Moyers. “They were surrounded by territory controlled by hostile powers on the edge of a vast wilderness. Yet they understood that even in perilous times, the strength of self-government was public debate and public consensus.”

“To put aside these basic [American] values out of fear, to imitate the foe in order to defeat him, is to shred the distinction that makes us different,” says Moyers. He adds, “In the end, not only our values but also our methods separate us from the enemies of freedom in the world. The decisions that we make are inherent in the method that produce them. An open society cannot survive a secret government.”

Scott Armstrong, Director of the National Security Archive, a public interest group, talks with Moyers about Iran-Contra: “This isn’t the way the Constitution was set up. This isn’t what the founding fathers intended. The founding fathers never intended for George Washington to be able to go to King George III and say, “I don’t like what Congress has done here. Give me some money. I’ll hire some mercenaries and we’ll call it American foreign policy. That would have been treason.”

Senator John Kerry tells Moyers that the Reagan/Bush administration was “willing to literally put the Constitution at risk, because they believed somehow there was a higher order of things If you can have a retired general and a colonel running around making deals in other countries on their own, soliciting funds to wage wars to overthrow governments and hide it from the American people, so you have no accountability, you’ve done the very thing that James Madison and the others feared most when they were struggling to put the Constitution together.”

In part because some members of Congress didn’t press harder to hold George H. W. Bush and other members of the Reagan administration responsible in the Iran-Contra affair, we left the door open for the same kind of thing to happen in the future.

Moyers concludes, “All this, the contempt for Congress, the defiance of law, the huge mark-ups and profits, the secret bank accounts, the shady characters, the shakedown of foreign governments, the complicity in death and destruction—they did all this in the dark, because it would never have stood the light of day.”

In today’s new war, the public and Congress have given the CIA, Bush and his Iran-Contra-participant advisers a blank check, free hands, little oversight and plenty of darkness. We have no choice but to trust them, but we can still make the choice to hold them accountable with adequate congressional oversight.

It will be interesting to see how the next few years play out. During those years, it will be pro-America to question, challenge and scrutinize our leaders.