

George H. W. Bush's many lies – Part One

By Carla Binion

January 14, 2000—George W. Bush is the Republican party's confident front-runner and a "pet" of certain mainstream TV journalists. Chris Matthews of CNBC's "Hardball" said recently that Bush's father had a clean presidency, and commentator Cokie Roberts said on ABC's "Sunday Morning" that Bush comes from a nice family.

Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and other members of the Reagan Administration participated in a cover-up of Iran-Contra during the 1980s, and the cover-up continues to this day. In their glowing praise of the Bush family, Matthews and Roberts did not mention George Herbert Walker Bush's many lies to the American people regarding Iran-Contra.

During Iran-contra, Republicans undermined the Constitution in ways Democrats have never done. Many people say Democrats and Republicans are both owned by large corporations. They say there is little difference between the parties, and that neither represents the people. That is true to an extent, but, on the whole, it is only Republicans who have aggressively threatened the Constitution.

Americans often either wince or yawn at the mention of Iran-Contra, a scandal lost to memory for most of us. However, the story is important now because the son of one of the Iran-Contra participants is running for president. The elder Bush lied to the public when he claimed he was "out of the loop" on Iran-Contra.

People might find Iran-Contra interesting if it were more accurately named. An apt name for Iran-Contra would be the "Republicans-Undermine-the-Constitution" scandal. If the public fully understood that George W. Bush's father participated in a forceful assault on the Constitution, George-the-Younger would not likely be the GOP front-runner today.

One reason Iran-Contra is lost to the American memory is that television news commentators did not do a good job explaining it to the public. The problem is not that mainstream media censored the story. They did not. Print journalists ran detailed accounts, and the Iran-Contra hearings were televised. The problem is, many Americans get all their news from television. Many people believe a news story is important only if TV journalists discuss it on news talk shows day after day.

Television journalists did not repeatedly dissect Reagan's and Bush's behavior and explain the constitutional implications of Iran-Contra. Journalists did manage to set aside enough air time to saturate the public with detailed explanations of the Clinton scandal. If TV commentators had spent an equal amount of time sifting through and explaining Iran-Contra, most Americans would now fully understand why the scandal mattered and how it threatened our constitutional

system. If journalists understood Iran-Contra, they would not say George W. Bush's father had a "clean presidency."

This week I replayed 1987 and 1990 broadcasts of "PBS Frontline" with Bill Moyers on the subject of Iran-Contra. I also re-read substantial portions of the "Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair" published by the New York Times (Times Books, 1988.) The Moyers broadcast and the Congressional Report are the sources for all the information which follows, except where I specify other sources.

Moyers says that Congress's report on the Iran-Contra affair shows "the common ingredients of the White House policies were secrecy, deception, and disdain for the law." Moyers is right. The Congressional Report does show the Reagan White House deceived the American people and expressed contempt for the Constitution and the law.

The Congressional Report says: "The President did know of the Iran arms sales, and he made a deliberate decision not to notify Congress. ... As a consequence of the President's decision not to notify Congress, the operation continued for over a year through failure after failure, and when Congress finally did learn, it was not through notification by the Administration, but from a story published in a Beirut weekly."

President Ronald Reagan repeatedly told the American people he would not negotiate with terrorists. That was a lie. A November 3, 1986 report in a Lebanese magazine broke the story that Reagan was bargaining with the Ayatollah Khomeini for release of American hostages. Moyers shows footage of Reagan looking straight into TV cameras denying it. Reagan lied to the public again during a news conference the following week, claiming there were no U. S. sales of arms to Iran.

Reagan also lied to the American people about the nature of the Contras and the purpose of their operations. Reagan and CIA director William Casey created the Contras. Reagan portrayed them as democratic "freedom fighters," but the Contras' ultimate goal was the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government, a government legally recognized by the United States.

The Contras were not interested in promoting democracy, as Reagan claimed. A March 1986 report by the human rights monitoring group America's Watch said: "The testimony we obtained frequently showed gratuitous brutality: the Contras not only murdered their victims; they also tortured and mutilated them. In some cases they also killed members of the families of their targets." (William D. Hartung, AND WEAPONS FOR ALL.)

Around 70 percent of the American people disapproved of Reagan's Central American policy, but he zealously (and secretly) pursued it anyway. When CIA agents under Reagan's CIA director Casey mined Nicaraguan harbors and blew up fuel tanks, Congress cut off Contra funds. Reagan then secretly and illegally turned to foreign governments for money to keep the Contras going. He lied about that to the American people, too.

The Reagan White House enlisted a group called the "Enterprise" to help get around the law. General Richard Secord defined the Enterprise during the Iran-Contra hearings. He said, "The

Enterprise is the group of companies that Mr. Hakim formed to manage the Contra and the Iranian project. ... I exercise overall control." Secord admitted to the Congressional Committee that he sold arms to the Contras for a profit.

The Enterprise included, in Moyer's words, "a shadowy network of arms dealers, fraudulent companies, and secret bank accounts." Senator Daniel K. Inouye, chairman of the Senate Select Committee, described the Enterprise 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."

Enterprise leader Richard Secord purchased 1,000 missiles from the CIA for \$3.7 million. He sold them to an Iranian middle man for \$10 million. The Enterprise made millions of dollars of profits from sales to Iran, and most of the money did not reach the Contras. Around \$8 million remained in a private Swiss bank account at the time of the Moyers broadcasts.

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."

Bill Moyers says, "While profits were being made, lives were being lost. ... 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." Lt. Col. Oliver North learned the Contra leaders were not noble "freedom fighters." North's liaison with the Contras, Robert Owen, told North in a memo that the people surrounding Contra leader Adolfo Calero "are not first-rate people. They are liars, greed and power motivated. This war has become a business to many of them."

Moyers interviewed a disillusioned former Contra officer. The officer said of Contra leaders, "They bought shoddy goods and sold them at hiked up prices. They bought low-grade grains...and put them up for sale or billed them to themselves at the highest prices. They did the same with ammunitions. They did the same with rifles."

"All this," says Moyers, "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 stand the light of day. Secrecy is the freedom zealots dream of. No watchman to check the door. No accountant to check the books. No judge to check the law. The secret government has no Constitution. The rules it follows are the rules it makes up."

The Reagan Administration repeatedly lied to the American people throughout the Iran-Contra scandal. In fact, Reagan, Bush, and the other Iran-Contra participants managed to get away with their wrongdoing precisely because they lied, stalled, stonewalled, and participated in a cover-up -- not because they were innocent, as many of their supporters still believe.

The many lies of both President Ronald Reagan and Vice President George Bush, and further details of the Iran-Contra operations, will be the subject of the next article in this series.

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