

## George H. W. Bush's many lies: Part Three

By Carla Binion

[Author's note: This is Part Three of a series. Except where I specify other references, the sources for all of the following information are the "Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair," published by the New York Times (Times Books, 1988), and two "PBS Frontline" broadcasts with Bill Moyers, one aired in 1987 and another in 1990.]

January 18, 2000—During Iran-Contra, our system of checks and balances failed us, but how? Our checks and balances failed us because of, in a word, secrecy. Government secrecy may be necessary at times to protect national security. For example, we would not have given the Nazis the secret to the atomic bomb. However, in Iran-Contra, secrets were used to cover up dirty dealings of the scandal's participants, not to protect national security. Here are four things that went wrong:

(1) Congress did not do its job. (2) The media did not do its job. (3) The White House, the Justice Department, and the CIA, stalled, stonewalled, destroyed evidence, and basically served as their own judge and jury, and (4) The American people could not play a meaningful role, because we were kept in the dark. Those four conditions will be explained in what follows.

(1) Congress did not do its job when the time came to investigate and resolve the constitutional issues surrounding Iran-Contra.

One of the congressional committee's investigators, Pamela Naughton, a former Assistant U. S. Attorney, told Bill Moyers: "Clearly from the outset there were many decisions made that hampered the investigation. The initial one was obviously setting an unrealistic deadline for the ending of the investigation. You can not begin, especially such a complex and international investigation as we did, and then say, 'but we are going to finish it on this date.' You don't know when you are going to finish it. You don't know where the investigation and the evidence is going to lead."

Naughton added, "The minute you tell a subject of the investigation, 'Don't worry. We are all going to go away in another few months,' there is every incentive then to simply stall and stonewall and wait until we indeed go away. That is unfortunately what happened."

Naughton also told Moyers, "Many of the documents...were [received] long after the witnesses had testified. Then you would get hand written notes showing that what they told you in testimony and what was in their notes were two different things. Then where could you go?...There was a conscious decision not to do certain things that would have revealed more about the president's activities. It became clear that we had not taken the steps that we should have taken to get to the whole truth."

Bill Moyers asked Congressman Lee Hamilton, Chairman of the House Select Committee investigating Iran-Contra, why Congress set a deadline. Hamilton told Moyers, "It is a political decision to keep the time down. A president was in danger of being crippled by these events, and we did not think this was in the country's benefit to extend this out for a long period of time."

Hamilton and some other members of Congress cared more about protecting Reagan and his secrets than they did about informing the American people. The decision to go easy on Reagan did not serve the American people's best interests. Because Congress helped Reagan keep his secrets, many Americans have made important political decisions, including how to cast their votes, based on the Reagan Administration's secrets and lies.

(2) The Reagan Administration deliberately and systematically intimidated journalists and leaders of news media organizations when those news people criticized Administration policy. As a result, many journalists backed down and did not do a good job scrutinizing and reporting on Iran-Contra.

PBS "Frontline" interviewed journalist John Wallach, Hearst Newspapers, who said, "In the summer of 1983, I wrote the first story that the United States was planning to mine the harbors of Nicaragua. At the time when my story appeared, I was called a liar. The story was flatly denied at the State Department and the White House." When "Frontline" asked who called him a liar, Wallach answered, "Bill Casey. Bill Casey had some communications with my superiors and went out of his way to deny the story."

Journalist Robert Parry (FOOLING AMERICA, 1992) says that Reagan diplomacy man, Otto Reich, made a trip to CBS's Washington office to pressure a CBS correspondent and his bureau chief to stop their critical coverage of Reagan's Nicaraguan policies. Reich also leaned on National Public Radio's Paul Allen when NPR criticized the Contras. Allen said, "We understood what Otto Reich's job was. He was engaged in an effort to alter coverage. It was a special effort." Parry says that in 1986, ABC News's Karen Burnes met resistance from network management when she tried to report on Contra misdeeds, including Contra drug smuggling. Parry and many other reporters were also pressured to stop doing anti-Contra reports.

Some members of the Washington press corps did not have to be coerced to go easy on the Reagan Administration. Many journalists simply reported what the administration said as fact.

Bill Moyers showed footage of a White House press conference where Reagan lied, and several members of the press corps laughed at the deception. A reporter asked, "Mr. President, why don't we openly support those 7,000 guerillas that are in rebellion rather than giving aid through covert activity?" Reagan said, "Well, because we want to keep on obeying the laws of our country, which we are now obeying." Reagan was lying. At the time of the press conference, he was in fact giving the guerillas covert aid in direct violation of the law, and the journalists attending the press conference knew it. A few of them laughed when Reagan claimed he was obeying the law.

The reporter asked a follow-up question, "Doesn't the United States want that government replaced?" Reagan again lied, "No, because that would be a violation of the law." Again, the

members of the press corps knew Reagan was lying, and this time larger numbers of them laughed. Moyers said, "Deception had become an inside joke."

(3) The White House, Justice Department, CIA, and others involved in Iran-Contra, were allowed to stall, stonewall, destroy important evidence, and essentially serve as their own judge and jury.

Thomas Folgar, an Iran-Contra Committee investigator and veteran of 34 years with the CIA, told Bill Moyers, "It was ridiculous that the de facto objects of the investigation -- CIA, Justice Department, and the White House -- were made the judges of what they should release and what they should sanitize." The White House, Justice Department, and CIA declared large amounts of essential evidence to be sensitive secrets. Most of the alleged secrets had already been published in the press.

Reagan's Attorney General Richard Thornburgh falsely claimed that important evidence, such as names and locations already published, were too sensitive to reveal in court. Journalist Tim Weiner says, "The Justice Department drove a stake into the heart of the criminal cases against North, Poindexter and Secord. It effectively prevented the independent prosecutor appointed to try the cases from functioning independently. Judge Gerhard Gesell was forced to dismiss the central charges against North: stealing profits from the Iran arms sales and spending them on the Contras." (Weiner, BLANK CHECK, 1992.)

The Reagan-Bush team delayed releasing critical records and hid personal notes. When Oliver North was asked during the Iran-Contra hearings, "Where are the memoranda you sent up to Admiral Poindexter seeking the president's approval," North answered, "I think I shredded most of that." North then asked sarcastically, "Did I get all of them?" When the story of illegal U.S. dealings with Iran first started to unravel, North shredded documents for a day and a half.

To complete the cover-up, George H. W. Bush pardoned his political colleagues after he became president. As CNN political analyst William Schneider said, Bush pardoned his allies "for illegal activities in which he himself may have been implicated." (Walsh, FIREWALL, 1997.)

(4) The American people were not able to help with checks and balances during Iran-Contra, because they did not have all the facts before them.

The reason our system of government includes checks and balances is so that governmental power will not concentrate in only one hand. For example, the power of the president is balanced by the power of Congress. A president who does not share power with Congress, other governmental officials, and the American people, becomes more king or emperor than president.

Bill Moyers interviewed members of a small citizen's watchdog group in Minneapolis – a group that monitored the Iran-contra hearings to increase public awareness. One member of the group said, "The American people are part of the checks and balances. The people have a role, too."

The people can not play a meaningful role in the country's political life unless they have all the facts. When a president, vice president, and their allies hide their dirty dealings behind bogus national security secrets, the people are shut out of the political process.

Bill Moyers talked with dairy farmer Pete Edstrom. Edstrom told Moyers he grew up thinking the system we have is good, and that all we have to do is admire and respect it and that we will always have freedom, democracy, and free elections. He said he questions whether those things will continue since Iran-Contra. Edstrom said he wants his children to understand that in order to keep democracy, it is important that the people stay involved and informed. He adds, "I think the [Iran-contra] hearings are a classic example ... are clearly a case of the people not being involved."

Bill Moyers says, "Our nation was born in rebellion against tyranny. We are the fortunate heirs of those who fought for America's freedom and then drew up a remarkable charter to protect it against arbitrary power. The Constitution begins with the words, 'We the People.' The government gathers its authority from the people, and the governors are as obligated to uphold the law as the governed."

A national poll taken in 1984 showed that 70 percent of the people disapproved of Reagan's Central American policy. Because 1984 was an election year, the Reagan team kept the war a secret. Reagan adviser Michael Deaver told Bill Moyers that Reagan did not want the '84 campaign to be fought around the issue of Central America. When Moyers asked why, Deaver said, "because if we had fought the campaign on Central America, we might have lost."

If the American people had known all the facts surrounding Iran-Contra, larger numbers of them might have lobbied Congress and the media to do a better job exposing and resolving the scandal. If Reagan adviser Michael Deaver is right, Reagan might not even have been re-elected in 1984 except for the fact that the Reagan PR team kept his Central American activities secret.

If the whole truth about Iran-Contra were widely known, would anyone think of Reagan, Bush, and Oliver North as heroes? Would George H. W. Bush have been elected president? Would North have his own radio and TV talk shows where he continues to promote lies about the Reagan-Bush legacies? Would there have been serious public debate about allowing Reagan's image to grace Mt. Rushmore? Would George W. Bush be the Republican front-runner today?

Richard M. Nixon resigned in disgrace over the Watergate scandal. Bill Moyers asked Professor Edwin Firmage, University of Utah, whether Iran-Contra is on a par with Watergate. Firmage said, "The substance of it is far above Watergate. You have the sale of armaments to terrorists 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."

Would the public accept one of Richard Nixon's offspring as Republican front-runner? Would most of us not think it odd if the GOP chose such a candidate? We do not take pause at a George W. Bush candidacy because the elder Bush's own "Watergate" remains cloaked in secrecy to this

day. Today the younger Bush often publicly praises his father's foreign policy. That policy includes Iran-Contra. The November 20, 1999, Fort.Worth Star Telegram said Iran-Contra participant George Schultz is now a George W. Bush adviser. The old saw, "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it," is now coming true – clearly and vividly – right before our well covered eyes.

More on government secrecy and the Reagan Administration's violations of law and ethics will be the subject of the next article in this series.

Copyright © 1998–2002 Online Journal™. All rights reserved.