

## George H. W. Bush's many lies – Part Four

By Carla Binion

[Author's note: This is the fourth and final part 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 20, 2000—The hundreds of millions of dollars in U. S. weapons Ronald Reagan and his team sold to Iran made the Iranian military more dangerous to U. S. naval forces stationed in the Persian Gulf after 1987. Those weapons gave aid to a sworn U. S. enemy. Reagan and Oliver North told the committees investigating Iran-Contra that the world is a dangerous place. They defended their right to conduct secret operations by claiming they were protecting the U. S. from foreign enemies. In reality, they were aiding foreign enemies, making the world an even more dangerous place for American soldiers and civilians.

When Reagan came to office, Iranian fanatics had already 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, Ronald 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 Reagan quotes from: Tim Weiner, "Blank Check," 1990.)

Ronald Reagan repeatedly promised the American people he was being tough on terrorism. However, behind our backs, he kept selling weapons to the terrorist nation Iran, in violation of U. S. law. Regarding the Iranian assault on our embassy in Beirut, Reagan said, "Let me further make it plain to the assassins in Beirut and their accomplices wherever they may be, that America will never make concessions to terrorists." Reagan was lying. He continued to make concessions and sell arms to Iran.

Oliver North supported Reagan's lies. When North eventually went before the Senate committee, he told committee members he would have done anything the president told him to do. Senator and World War II combat hero Daniel Inouye told North, "The uniform code makes it abundantly clear that it must be the lawful orders of a superior officer [one obeys]. In fact [the military code] says that military officers have an obligation to disobey unlawful orders."

Some of Oliver North's fellow Marine Corps officers agreed with Senator Inouye. "Frontline" interviewed George Gorman, former Captain, U. S. M. C. Gorman said that when North spoke he "literally wanted to throw things at my TV set."

Gorman added, "I was seriously considering mailing my ring back to the Naval Academy and denying ever having gone there. I was so embarrassed and humiliated that a professional military officer would stoop to the dishonor and disgrace and warmongering that Oliver North and Poindexter and McFarlane and the rest of the crew did – selling arms to the Iranians after they blew up the Beirut barracks, after they blew up the Beirut embassy. That's the most immoral thing. That's like selling xyclon-B to the Germans after you've found out the Holocaust is underway."

Reagan and North were complicit in the terrorism of Iran. They were also complicit in the terrorism in Nicaragua. Ronald Reagan, Oliver North and their team claimed the Contras were "freedom fighters" and champions of democracy. When they made that claim, they lied to the American people again. The Contras were primarily led by members of the national guard that helped keep the tyrannical Somoza family dictatorship in power. They were not interested in promoting democracy, but instead cared only about reclaiming the power they had when they worked for the Somoza dictatorship. The Contras murdered and tortured innocent civilians in Nicaragua, and both Reagan and North knew it. (William D. Hartung, "And Weapons For All")

Oliver North knew something additional about the real nature of the Contras. North's contact man on the Contras, Robert Owen, wrote from the field that certain Contra leaders were running drugs. Owen also wrote, "part of the crew had criminal records." In February 1986, Owen advised North that a re-supply plane was being used for shipping drugs. After denying the drug running for years, (and only after they were forced to admit it) the Reagan Administration finally admitted they knew about the drug trafficking all along. Then they pretended they had never denied the drug running in the first place.

In a November 10, 1986, letter to "The New Republic," Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams wrote regarding Contra drug charges, "This is hardly something we have been unaware of or covering up." Abrams added, "We made those charges." (Robert Parry, "Fooling America," 1992). Journalist Bob Parry points out that when he and fellow AP reporter Brian Barger first disclosed the Contra drug running, the State Department and others in the Reagan Administration denied the charges.

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. Representative David Bonior was correct 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."

Reagan and Company also claimed they wanted to help stop the spread of communism in Central America. Bill Moyers asked, "How does it happen that to be anticommunist we become undemocratic, as if we have to subvert our society to save it?" Professor Edwin Firmage, University of Utah, told Moyers, "The whole fight is over means, not ends. Every president with every good intention, and every tyrant with whatever his intention has used precisely the same argument. [The argument is] 'Don't constrain me by means, and I will get you there safely and well.' I think every time we accept [such an argument] to justify means that are totally incongruent with the values of our state, we are on the high road to tyranny."

The means by which Reagan and his team tried to whip up support for their Central American policies included CIA Director William Casey's "public diplomacy" campaign. Reagan wanted to "manage" and manipulate public opinion. Bob Parry says that when Congress and the public did not support Reagan's policies, Bill Casey met with five top advertising executives to decide how to "sell" the public on those policies. As a former member of the CIA's forerunner, the Office of Special Services, Casey had run disinformation programs aimed at foreign countries in the past, but never ones aimed at the American people – until now.

The Casey public diplomacy team wanted to convince the American people they were in constant danger from threats outside our borders. (They did not bother to mention the threat from within caused by Reagan's sale of arms to terrorists.) Bob Parry writes that J. Michael Kelly, deputy assistant secretary for the air force for force support, gave a 1983 address to a National Defense University forum. Kelly told the conference, "The most critical special operations mission we have...today is to persuade the American people that the communists are out to get us." Oliver North attended Kelly's conference, where Kelly also said, "If we win the war of ideas, we will win everywhere else." (Parry, "Fooling America," 1992.)

The Reagan Administration agreed that the American people needed to be convinced "the communists are out to get us." Though Nicaragua is a small country with an agricultural economy, the Reagan team tried to portray Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government as a serious threat to U. S. interests in the region. Bob Parry points out that while the Sandinistas had their faults, they were more moderate than Castro and had gained international credibility.

Parry says the Sandinistas "left a large percentage of the country's economy in private hands. They sought to maintain trade and other commercial relations with the United States and Latin neighbors," and the flow of arms was "light and intermittent, based at least on U. S. intelligence findings." The Sandinistas (made up of a mix of Marxists, Social Democrats, and "romantic reformers") had just overthrown a brutal dictator and were struggling to put their country back on its feet. The Reagan Administration had exaggerated the Sandinista's threat to the region.

The World Court and the Congress later determined that in seeking to overthrow the government of Nicaragua, the Reagan Administration was in violation of both international law and American law. (Weiner, "Blank Check") However, when anyone stood in the way of Reagan's public diplomacy team's spin on Central America, the team went on the offensive.

When Congressman Michael Barnes, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, took a critical look at Oliver North's activities, Reagan "diplomacy" man Carl Channell decided to punish Barnes. Bob Parry says notes taken by a participant at Channell's strategy sessions reveal the intent was to "destroy Barnes [and] use him as [an] object lesson to others." The notes also say, "Barnes wants [to] indict Ollie....Put Barnes out of politics. If we get rid of Barnes we get rid of the ring leader and rid of the problem."

One of Channell's assistants told Iran-Contra investigators, "We all, of course, wanted to nail Barnes' ass." Barnes ran for the Senate in the 1986 Maryland Democratic primary. Channell ran a series of TV ads in the Washington area claiming Barnes was a Sandinista sympathizer, and

Barnes lost his campaign. As Parry says, the TV ads broadcast throughout the Washington area sent an intimidating message to other members of Congress.

The Reagan diplomacy team did not limit their attacks to out-of-step members of Congress. They also attacked journalists who wrote anti-Contra stories. The team smeared Bob Parry and other reporters. Parry says an official from the State Department's Latin American Office of Public Diplomacy claimed that Parry's AP colleague, Brian Barger, was a Sandinista agent. Parry asked the public diplomacy official for proof, but the official could not give proof of the allegation. Barger's stories on the Contras had always proved to be true. The baseless smears and charges were typical of the Reagan public diplomacy team's bullying disinformation tactics.

The Reagan team tried to justify their secrecy and tyrannical tactics by claiming they were trying to protect the country from impending dangers. Bill Moyers said, "The people who wrote the Constitution lived in a world more dangerous than ours. 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."

Moyers added, "To put aside these basic values out of fear, to imitate the foe in order to defeat him, is to shred the distinction that makes us different. 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 methods that produce them. An open society can not survive a secret government."

Reagan, Bush, North, Poindexter, and the others used methods and means that were undemocratic, illegal and arguably treasonous. Scott Armstrong, Director of the National Security Archive, a public interest group dedicated to more open government, told Bill Moyers, "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." So would the selling of arms to a sworn enemy of the U. S. – if our national leaders had been speaking the language of democracy during the Reagan era.

Robert Colclasure, a former U. S. Marine Corps captain told Bill Moyers that one of his drill instructors taught his troops that a Marine's oath of loyalty is not to a president, as Oliver North claimed, but to the Constitution. Colclasure said, "I don't think Oliver North had that drill instructor."

Senator John Kerry told Moyers that Reagan and Company "were willing to literally put the Constitution at risk, because they believed somehow there was a higher order of things – that the ends do in fact justify the means. That is the most Marxist, totalitarian doctrine I've ever heard in my life. 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."

The Reagan Administration set the stage for future presidents to get away with other similar misdeeds. William D. Hartung (“And Weapons For All”) says: "As for Congress, after abdicating its responsibility to call Ronald Reagan to task for hatching the unconstitutional scheme that was Iran-Contra, years later congressional leaders have yet to enact one significant reform that would prevent another Iran-Contra scandal from occurring."

We have not even begun to understand what happened to our country during Iran-Contra. We still have not explored the extent of the Reagan Administration's attack on our constitutional protections and civil liberties, and the many dangerous precedents set. Bill Moyers said, "The frightening thing is not that it almost worked, but that it could happen again. The state of democracy almost guarantees it will." Moyers added that most of the people involved in Iran-Contra managed to get away with their misdeeds.

Not only did most of the people involved in Iran-Contra escape accountability for their wrongdoing, but some of those same people (and their ideological heirs) remain in politically powerful positions, waiting patiently to take even more power. They can do that only because so many Americans have been lied to, manipulated, and still remain in the dark about the meaning and ramifications of the Reagan-Bush coup – the coup commonly known as the Iran-Contra scandal.

The Iran-Contra affair cries out for public debate on the constitutional implications, but that debate has never fully taken place. Oliver North and other like-minded individuals might claim that their loyalty should go first to people (such as President Reagan) and only second to a document (such as the Constitution). However, the real question is not a contest between loyalty to a government leader and loyalty to a mere piece of paper. The Constitution is not simply a dead, static abstraction. It is a living, dynamic set of laws that can protect the American people from potential abuses by government officials. Loyalty to the Constitution means loyalty to the health and safety of the American people and our democratic values.

The methods used by the Reagan team were not limited to abstract ideas. The Reagan team's actions caused many gallons of blood to flow. Their methods affected human nerve endings and caused great pain. Those methods put American lives in danger, caused American deaths, and endangered and killed many of the Nicaraguan people and people of other countries. As Bill Moyers concluded, "Constitutional democracy, you see, is no romantic notion. It is our defense against ourselves, the one foe who might defeat us."