

The Iran-Contra Affair

Jon Carroll, Ronald Reagan



OVERVIEW

On November 3, 1986, reports appeared abroad indicating that the United States had sent arms to Iran in violation of the government's policy. After many denials, President Ronald Reagan admitted the delivery of arms to Iran in the hope of obtaining Iranian help in freeing American hostages held in Lebanon. On November 25, Reagan announced that he had just discovered that money from the sale of those arms had been transferred to the contras, a rebel group, in Nicaragua. (A violation of a congressional ban on such financing.) Presented below is an article by Jon Carroll that appeared the day after President Reagan blamed the media for spoiling the plan to free the hostages. It is followed by the president's November 26 statement raising "serious questions of propriety."

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- Why does Carroll compare the Iran-contra scandal to the Watergate scandal?
 - What does Reagan accomplish in the first two paragraphs of his address?
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JON CARROLL:

REMEMBER THE PLUMBERS?

REMEMBER THE PLUMBERS? They plugged the leaks in the Nixon White House. They were both secret and secretive. They planted the bug that led to the burglary that led to the arrests that led to the payoffs that led to the coverup that led to the hearings that led to the firings that led to the resignation that toppled the house that Dick built.

Cultural fallout from that event included events as diverse as the acting debut of G. Gordon Liddy and the founding of the Betty Ford Center.

So now we have the New Improved Plumbers. They don't have a cute name anymore; they have a nice bureaucratic title: the National Security Council.

But, like the Plumbers, they deal in paranoia. They don't trust anyone but a few presidential aides. They don't trust Congress; they don't trust the CIA; they don't trust the Defense Department; they don't trust the State Department.

They lie; they sneak; they deny.

Most of all, they don't trust the Constitution. The system of checks and balances central to the American government is perceived as a nuisance. They'd rather make policy by themselves; so much easier, so much more . . . efficient.

And when they get in trouble, they blame the press. Just like the original Plumbers.

So here's what the New Plumbers did. They shipped arms to Iran, despite our policy of not dealing with terrorists, despite our support of Iraq in its war with Iran, despite everything.

Then they got found out. So Larry Speakes, designated mouthpiece, announced that "speculative" press reports "dashed our hopes" of freeing more hostages.

Why? Surely not because the government of Iran was upset. The publicity for them was golden. The revelations proved that the American government was duplicitous; that it lied to its own people.

Not only that, it proved that terrorism does in fact work; that kidnapping Americans is a great way to get weapons and money. And it strengthened Iran's position within the Muslim world as a heroic nation capable of bending the mighty American Satan to its will.

No, the only folks hurt by the press revelations were the New Plumbers. Their ability to arrange secret deals was reduced; their accountability was increased. No wonder they were upset.

The Nixon plumbers, it turned out, were a bunch of insecure, brainless creeps. The New Plumbers are the same, except more powerful and more dangerous.

They might have gotten their own way. They could have discussed the options with members of their own administration and with leading Republicans on Capitol Hill. They might even have carried the day; releasing hostages is a popular political stance.

But they were afraid of debate, afraid of dissent. Like their opposite numbers in the Kremlin, they prefer unilateral decisions and secret negotiations.

So once again, Americans are in the position of being ashamed of their own government. Once again, Americans have been betrayed by closet monarchists supported by the president.

Once again, the White House stands in voluntary isolation from its own citizens. Even as it did during the Nixon years, the presidency straddles the line between farce and tragedy. Sad but true; true but sad; either; both.

THE PRESIDENT'S PRESS CONFERENCE, NOVEMBER 25

LAST FRIDAY, after becoming concerned whether my national security apparatus had provided me with a security, or a complete factual record with respect to the implementation of my policy toward Iran, I directed the Attorney General to undertake a review of this matter over the weekend and report to me on Monday.

And yesterday, Secretary Meese provided me and the White House chief of staff with a report on his preliminary findings. And this report led me to conclude that I was not fully informed on the nature of one of the activities undertaken in connection with this initiative. This action raises serious questions of propriety.

I've just met with my national security advisers and Congressional leaders to inform them of the actions that I'm taking today. Determination of the full details of this action will require further review and investigation by the Department of Justice.

Looking to the future, I will appoint a special review board to conduct a comprehensive review of the role and procedures of the National Security Council staff in the conduct of foreign and national security policy.

I anticipate receiving the reports from the Attorney General and the special review board at the earliest possible date. Upon the completion of these reports, I will share their findings and conclusions with the Congress and the American people.

Although not directly involved, Vice Adm. John Poindexter has asked to be relieved of his assignment as assistant to the President for national security affairs and to return to another assignment in the Navy. Lieut. Col. Oliver North has been relieved of his duties on the National Security Council staff.

I am deeply troubled that the implementation of a policy aimed at resolving a truly tragic situation in the Middle East has resulted in such controversy. As I've stated previously, I believe our policy goals toward Iran were well founded. However, the information brought to my attention yesterday convinced me that in one aspect, implementation of that policy was seriously flawed.

While I cannot reverse what has happened, I am initiating steps, including those I've announced today, to assure that the implementation of all future, foreign and national security policy initiatives will proceed only in accordance with my authorization.

Over the past six years, we've realized many foreign policy goals. I believe we can yet achieve, and I intend to pursue, the objectives on which we all agree—a safer, more secure and stable world.

Sources: *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 14, 1986. Reprinted by permission.