

Jim Hoagland

Engulfed

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Deep, unrelenting conflict between Iran and Iraq has poisoned not only the Persian Gulf but also American politics. Iran helped doom the Carter presidency and shatter the authority of the Reagan White House. Iran and Iraq now reach out to destroy the honor, the credibility and the presidency of George Bush.

That Bush is tolerating a coverup on Iraq conducted by others on his behalf can no longer be seriously doubted. That Bush has lied about his knowledge of shipments of U.S. arms to Iran can no longer be seriously disputed. If his dismal economic record were not enough, Bush has come to the point of disqualifying himself for reelection through his involvement in the gulf.

I write these words with considerable regret. In foreign affairs, Bush has achieved notable successes. His leadership in combating Saddam Hussein in Kuwait was inspired, effective and politically courageous. His analysis of the stakes involved in Kuwait was remarkably well informed and intelligent.

I expressed those sentiments to the president in a letter thanking him for a gracious note of congratulations he sent when I won a journalism prize last year for columns, among others, that supported Operation Desert Storm. I noted, as he already knew, that I nonetheless disagreed with his pre- and post-war policies toward Iraq.

The rising flood of revelations of misconduct, stupidity or deception by the Justice Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department and the White House on Iraq now stain irrevocably Bush's greatest triumph. These government institutions have been politicized beyond recognition by and for George Bush's political ambitions.

The final straw is the forced disclosure by the CIA that it misled a federal judge and prosecutors in Atlanta on what it knew about the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro scandal. The Atlanta branch of BNL provided fraudulent loans to Iraq that helped Saddam build up his military machine, as I wrote in 1990 and as William Safire of the New York Times has written, with admirable diligence, as well.

Under the angry prodding of Sen. David L. Boren and Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez, the CIA's chief lawyer admitted on Tuesday that the agency did not provide the court with cables from its Rome station chief that were essential to the case. "Some mistakes have been made," said counsel Elizabeth Rindskopf, repeating almost word for word Ronald Reagan's passive, buck-passing defense on the Iran arms scandal.

She then claimed in a statement to the New York Times that "human error" was the



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problem—that the world's best equipped, most expensive spy agency, which spends \$30 billion a year of taxpayers' money to discover the world's most sensitive secrets, could not find cables written in 1989 that were in its own files.

But on Thursday, CIA officials told a closed Senate committee hearing that they had deliberately withheld the information from federal prosecutors because the Justice Department leadership urged them to do so. We are not stupid, the CIA seemed to be saying the second time around, we are cowardly.

The gulf consistently inspires highly implausible gaps in efficiency and memory for the president's men and women. The people who could not find the papers on Iraq are the same people who could not find crucial papers on Iran or remember the conversations they had on Iran when questioned in court and in Congress.

The spreading stench of coverup angers Boren, the capable Oklahoma Democrat who personally navigated the confirmation of Robert M. Gates as head of the CIA through the Senate. Boren rejected strong doubts expressed by others about Gates's claims not to remember conversations about the Iran arms-for-hostages scandal. There were also accusations from former agents that Gates would "politicize" the agency.

Boren has given the country a CIA chief who presides over a spy agency that can't remember or can't find facts that have one common denominator: They would embarrass the sitting president. We need no longer to wonder if Gates would politicize the agency. The returns are in.

The same is true—only more so—at the

Justice Department. Attorney General William P. Barr refused to name an independent counsel to probe the Iraq scandal. Other decisions by his department inhibited the Atlanta prosecutors from gathering data on BNL abroad. Barr seems to have a good idea of what needs not to be investigated, a surprising disposition for a man who once worked at the CIA, where he drafted congressional testimony for then-Director George Bush.

At State, spokesman Richard Boucher, presumably steeped in the traditions of his previous bosses, Jim Baker and Margaret Tutwiler, invited inquiring reporters last week to ask the FBI if the bureau was investigating irregularities in Bill Clinton's passport files. Boucher's remark was not hasty or inadvertent. Asked at his daily briefing about an item that had appeared in Newsweek's Periscope column, he read the "ask the FBI" answer from a carefully drafted "guidance" paper.

Baker and Tutwiler are now at the White House, being paid by the taxpayers to run Bush's campaign. Bush told Larry King on Oct. 4 he expected Baker back at State after a Bush election victory. Baker "has made quite a sacrifice to come over and do this job" as White House chief of staff, Bush said.

When I hear the president admit that the State Department has been put on hold to serve Bush's political ambition, it is not Jim Baker's sacrifice that I think of first.

George Bush's finest hour was in the Persian Gulf. He used his office to protect America and its allies. But his love of that office has undone the glory of a brilliant accomplishment. The gulf way of life, complete with cover-up and corruption, has come calling for another presidential victim.