

Howard R. Teicher

In the Loop

In their column regarding President Bush's knowledge of the Iran initiative [op-ed, Oct. 16], Rowland Evans and Robert Novak make several false and misleading statements that I want to correct for the record.

On May 29, 1986, I participated in an Oval Office briefing of President Reagan, Vice President Bush, Chief of Staff Donald Regan and national security adviser John Poindexter on the trip to Iran from where Robert McFarlane, Oliver North, myself and others had returned that morning. In addition to the May 29 meeting, I participated in two

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other meetings with Bush at which the core elements of the Iran initiative were discussed. The essence of Ronald Reagan's decision was that the U.S. government would secretly sell weapons to the Iranian government in exchange for Tehran using its influence to free Americans hostages in Lebanon. This would lead to a dialogue between American and Iranian leaders that would enhance the U.S. position in the gulf.

Evans and Novak misrepresent what was said in the Oval Office during the May 29 briefing and ignore the two other meetings. Instead, they rely on my summary memorandum of the May 29 briefing and argue that absence of the phrase "arms for hostages" somehow proves that Bush was out of the loop, unaware that the United States was trading arms to Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages.

In support of their assertion, Evans and Novak state, "Current White House aides disagree" with my statements. Relying on these anonymous sources, they write that "neither McFarlane's Oval Office briefing nor any other meetings Teicher says he and other participants had with Bush directly informed the president what Teicher insists Bush knew."

The president's special review board, the Tower Commission, was chaired by Gen. Brent Scowcroft, now the national security adviser, and Sen. Edmund Muskie, in addition to the late Sen. John Tower. Legal counsel for the review board was provided by Clark McFadden and Nicholas Rostow. Rostow is now responsible for legal matters at the NSC.

These sources and Evans and Novak ignore Page B-127 of the Tower Commission Report, which states, "On May 29, McFarlane, North and Teicher reported on the Tehran trip to the President, accompanied by Poindexter, Regan and the Vice President. They informed the President that the Iranians had asked for the delivery of all HAWK spare parts before hostages would be freed." Are there White House officials who participated in the Iran initiative or the Tower Commission who now recall different facts?

With regard to my alleged six-year silence, for years a photograph has hung on my office wall taken in the Oval Office the morning we returned from Tehran. This official White House photograph shows our briefing of Reagan, Bush and Regan on the mission's results. After the scandal broke, I was interviewed by the FBI and the independent counsel. I testified under oath before two Senate select committees, the Tower Commis-



sion, a House select committee and the grand jury. In my testimony, I reported on Bush's involvement, but none of these bodies nor the media paid much attention to the vice president.

After the Iran-contra scandal erupted, a sudden epidemic of forgetfulness spread through the offices of the president, vice president and the departments of State and Defense. No one could remember anything, except that the NSC staff had somehow been running the world behind everyone's backs for many of the preceding years. No one present during the May 29 meeting was out of the loop. But as in all the afflicted principals, Bush's knowledge of the Iran initiative declined as the scandal unfolded.

On Oct. 4, C. Boyden Gray, counsel to President Bush, wrote in this space, "Teicher has stated that his briefings to the then vice president concerned 'the basic framework for the Iran initiative: Arms, hostages, leading to a strategic dialogue'—not 'the operational details. . . ." So Teicher's account, far from contradicting the president, is consistent with what George Bush has said publicly for more than five years." The president's own lawyer confirmed the veracity of my statements. He just drew his own conclusions about their significance.

On the "Today" show Oct. 13, President Bush was told, "Howard Teicher, who is an official with the National Security Council, came on our program a few weeks ago and said he fully briefed you." Bush answered, "He did." Then he was asked, "About everything?" The president replied, "I don't remember Howard doing it, but I remember—but not about the contra part of it. He didn't say that. Please, be careful. He did not say that." Bush was later asked, "You knew about the arms for hostages?" He replied, "Yes, and I have said so all along." The White House subsequently "clarified" the president's remark, suggesting that he had not understood the question.

Soon after the Iran affair evolved into the

Iran-contra scandal in December 1986, George Bush told the American people that he was aware of the Iran initiative and supported the president's decision to secure the release of American hostages. In December 1987, Bush lamented that he never really heard George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger express their opposition, "clearly," because the "key" players weren't ever called together. The decisions were, instead, made at a "lower level" and were not reviewed.

Bush could never have had doubts about the attitudes of Shultz and Weinberger toward the administration's Middle East policies. Although the two men were generally at odds on every Middle East issue, they were united in their opposition to the president's initiative, although they reluctantly went along with it. The importance Reagan attached to finding a way to freeing the hostages, however, was equally obvious. Indeed, Bush was offering his help at least as late July 1986.

"Attacks on my credibility by anonymous White House officials trying to cling to their jobs will not change the facts."

Evans and Novak also got it wrong about my resignation from the NSC staff in December 1986. They write that "the real explanation of Teicher's unexpected attack is his anger that he was eventually fired."

Frank Carlucci and I had agreed that I would stay at the NSC through the end of March, and I announced my resignation from the NSC staff on Dec. 16, 1986. White House spokesman Larry Speakes announced my resignation, effective March 31, 1987, a fact that was reported in numerous publications, which I pointed out to Evans.

As agreed, I worked in an office in the Old Executive Office Building and continued to receive my NSC paycheck. However, the day after the Tower Commission issued its report, I was summarily informed by Carlucci's aides that I had four hours to clear out of my office, although I would continue to be paid through the end of March. Clearly, it would have been improper, if not illegal, for the White House to continue to pay me if I had been fired. All that changed was that I was told that my "physical presence in the White House was a political embarrassment" and that I should work from home for the final 30 days that I would remain on the NSC payroll.

After Attorney General Edwin Meese announced that there had been a diversion of funds to the contras, President Reagan directed that everyone should tell the truth about this matter. I have, and politically motivated attacks on my credibility by anonymous White House officials trying to cling to their jobs will not change the facts.

The writer was a member of the National Security Council staff from 1982 to 1987.