

# Iran-Contra Data, Disclosures Shed

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On Sept. 20, 1985, the families of U.S. hostages still being held in Lebanon met in Washington and complained to then-Vice President Bush about the Reagan administration's apparent failure to do anything to get their loved ones out.

The occasion for the special meeting in the Old Executive Office Building was the release of the Rev. Benjamin Weir, the first hostage freed by the Reagan administration's secret arms dealings with Iran, although neither Weir nor the public knew it at the time.

As Weir recently recalled, Bush was obviously irritated that day by the hostage families' criticisms. The vice president took aside the former hostage, who had been freed six days earlier in Beirut after more than a year in captivity, and cryptically told him who was responsible for his release.

Bush "told me I had been released through the efforts of the American government, but that he could not explain what [those efforts] were," Weir said.

Two secret shipments totaling 508 U.S.-made TOW antitank missiles had been made by Israel to Iran in August and September 1985 to buy Weir's freedom. Bush has never discussed what he knew about the 1985 arms-for-hostage shipments.

"The vice president [in 1985] said only I ought to be grateful to the government," Weir said in a recent interview.

The exchange between Bush and the freed minister illustrates the problem that dogs Bush today in the presidential campaign, as it has over the years since the Iran-contra affair began unfolding: Bush has always known more than he was able or wanted to tell.

A former CIA director and United Nations ambassador, Bush as vice president made a particular effort to keep track of Reagan administration foreign policy initiatives, particularly sensitive covert actions. Each morning he had a CIA intelligence briefing and sat in on President Ronald Rea-

gan's own 9:30 a.m. national security briefing (NSB) by the national security adviser.

The hostages or the arms sales were discussed at more than three dozen of these morning NSB meetings in 1985 and 1986 and gave Bush broad knowledge of the Iran initiative.

But from the time the Iran-contra scandal began to unfold in fall 1986, Bush has kept his public remarks fragmentary. Over the intervening six years, Bush said this month, he has answered some 450 questions about the scandal and his staff another 3,500.

As presidential candidate and president, he has had to thread his way through the contradictions between what he has said, what has been newly disclosed and what he knows to be true but not yet made public.

Leonard Garment, a Washington lawyer and GOP insider whose clients have been involved in a number of government scandals from Watergate to Iran-contra, describes Bush as engaging in "an innocent coverup" where not telling the whole truth has been "a requirement of his position."

New bits of information and facts gleaned from a review of old investigative documents add to what is known about Bush's role in several areas: his interest in trying to suppress disclosure of events when the scandal first surfaced; his contacts with American hostage families for the White House; his extensive working relationship with the major White House Iran-contra operator, Oliver L. North; and his key meeting in July 1986 with North's Israeli colleague in the arms-for-hostages dealings.

Bush has never described what he did when the scandal began to surface on Nov. 3, 1986, with a news story published in Beirut that the United States had sold arms to Iran to gain release of American hostages then held in Lebanon.

There was an internal "battle royal," as then-Secretary of State George P. Shultz later put it, as White House aides worked to keep the lid on what had occurred and Shultz tried get Reagan to tell the full story.



REV. BENJAMIN WEIR

... cryptic message about his release

According to a Nov. 5, 1986, cable from then-national security adviser John M. Poindexter to Shultz, Bush had agreed with Poindexter that it was not "the time to give the facts to the public..." The cable is among formerly classified documents released by congressional investigating committees in 1987, but it received no notice at the time because Bush's role in Iran-contra operations was not a focus of attention.

Shultz later went to Bush directly to press for full disclosure and return control of Iranian affairs to the State Department. Again, the then-vice president refused to intervene with Reagan, according to sources familiar with the events. Shultz declined a request to discuss the matter, although sources said it may be described in his book scheduled for publication in January.

The Reagan administration confirmed on Nov. 13, 1986, that it secretly sold arms to Iran, but it was not until Nov. 25 that it disclosed that proceeds from the arms sales had been diverted to help buy arms for Nicaraguan contra rebels. Also on Nov. 25, control of U.S. policy toward Iran was returned to Shultz.

# Light on What Bush Hasn't Told

Another area Bush has avoided talking about was his relationship with North, the Marine lieutenant colonel and National Security Council staff member who managed the covert arms-for-hostages dealings with Iran and worked to keep the contras going when Congress had barred all U.S. military aid to them.

Bush became the White House point man for hostages after Reagan's aides decided to keep the president from direct contact with their families because they would have too great an influence on the president's judgment.

"The next highest level was George Bush," Craig L. Fuller, then Bush's chief of staff, recalled in a recent interview, "so the assignment fell to him."

"The vice president worked very closely on the hostage situation, and the families visited often, and Colonel North handled that issue," Fawn Hall, North's secretary, told the Senate and House committees that investigated the Iran-contra affair in 1987. "So, he was involved with the vice president on that subject."

In 1984, when North's father died, Bush took time out to send him a personal note. As North recalled it to House-Senate investigators in 1987, "When my father [Clay North] died . . . there were three people in the government of the United States that expressed their condolences. One was Admiral Poindexter, one was the vice president of the United States, and the other one was [then-CIA Director] Bill Casey."

In July 1986, when the arms-for-hostages deals were at a crossroads, North played a main role in setting up an unusual Jerusalem meeting for Bush, who was on a Middle East trip. The person Bush met was Amiram Nir, an Israeli official who was working with North on the secret arms sales.

Three days before the Bush-Nir meeting, the Rev. Lawrence M. Jenco, an American hostage, was released after Nir and an Iranian mid-

dleman, Manucher Ghorbanifar, had promised Iranians that the U.S. shipments, which had been suspended earlier in the year, would be resumed.

The next day in Frankfurt, Germany, North and Nir met with Ghorbanifar. The three phoned Tehran and learned that the Iranian government had a new proposal: For each American hostage that Tehran would help free, the United States would have to deliver an arms shipment.

Until earlier this month, it was not clear why North wanted Bush to meet with Nir. The motive was revealed by Nir's account of the meeting in a memo obtained by ABC's "Nightline" and prepared in February 1987 for Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in response to U.S. disclosures about the meeting. Nir died in a late 1988 plane crash, and reports have circulated that he left papers describing his role in the arms-for-hostages dealings.

According to ABC's copy of Nir's memo, North had intended to meet with Bush in Frankfurt to explain Iran's new arms-for-hostages proposal, but because the then-vice president had to go to Israel, North was asking Nir to deliver the message.

On July 28, North called Fuller in Israel and asked him to set time aside for Bush to meet Nir. Although Bush has said he was not certain what the meeting was to be about, Fuller told congressional committees in 1987 that Bush talked by phone with North, who was in Washington, and then instructed Fuller to take "thorough notes" at a breakfast meeting the next morning with Nir and "provide a brief report as soon as possible to Ollie North."

Fuller's notes of the Bush-Nir meeting were made public in 1987. They track with ABC's newly disclosed Nir memo. Both show that Nir urged Bush to support arms deliveries to Iran following Jenco's release and to continue shipping arms after each remaining hostage was freed.

Nir, according to ABC, wrote: "We relayed the Iranian demand and we

clarified the deviation from the [earlier arms] agreement while we left the decision to the United States."

"We have no real choice than to proceed," Fuller wrote, summing up Nir's detailed rundown of Iran's demand for more arms.

"Bush," Fuller added, "made no commitments nor did he give any direction to Nir." But immediately after the meeting, Fuller called North to report on it. One day after the Bush-Nir meeting, Reagan approved the sending of Hawk missile parts to Iran.

On Bush's first day back in Washington following the Nir meeting, the vice president met at noon with North, according to North's Aug. 6, 1986, notebook entry.

Four months later, Bush told the Tower board, appointed by Reagan to investigate the Iran-contra affair, that the Nir meeting "was generally about counterterrorism" and "there was no discussion of specifics relating to arms going to the Iranians," according to the board's report.

Bush has maintained that he knew arms were being sold to Iran and hostages were being released, but that he did not view the administration's dealings with Iran as arms for hostages until he was briefed by the chairman of the Senate intelligence committee on Dec. 20, 1986.

On Nov. 25, 1986, then-Attorney General Edwin Meese III announced that profits from the arms sales to Iran had been diverted to aid the contras without the knowledge of the president or his top advisers. Meese announced that North had been transferred from the White House and that a special prosecutor would be named to investigate whether there had been criminal violations.

Later that day, it was Bush, not Reagan, who first called North to offer condolences, according to congressional testimony by North's colleague, retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord. The then-vice president was "laudatory" in a "very short call."