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Iran-Contra: The President's Side

Recent controversies about President Bush's possible "involvement" in the Iran-contra scandal add up to a big nothing. To see how, one must examine the extensive public record of the activities that formed the tangled web of Iran-contra. These include the so-called "Iran initiative," efforts to support the Nicaraguan contras and the contra resupply network run by Oliver North and supported in part by the diversion of funds from the Iran initiative.

Once you untangle these strands and examine the president's statements about them, the "new revelations" degenerate into stale hokum. They contain absolutely, positively nothing new.

■ **The Iran Initiative:** President Reagan in January 1986 approved an initiative seeking to improve long-term relations with Iran. The United States would demonstrate its goodwill toward elements in Iran more sympathetic toward U.S. interests than the Khomeini regime by, among other things, transferring arms to them. This would enhance these Iranians' credibility inside their country, which was at war with Iraq and feared Soviet intervention.

Proponents of the initiative plainly contemplated that the Iranians would demonstrate their good faith by helping obtain the release of hostages. But neither these proponents nor President Reagan intended to trade arms for hostages. They hoped to establish a strategic relationship that would serve our national interests. President Bush consistently has said he supported President Reagan's decision, with some reservations.

■ **The Contra Support Efforts:** The then vice president also was generally aware that there were private efforts to aid the contras in 1985—a fact reported repeatedly in 1985-86.

■ **Iran-Contra:** Although George Bush knew the general outlines of the Iran initiative and that private parties were

assisting the contras, he did not know of the diversion of Iran-related funds to the contras until just before it was revealed

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publicly in November 1986. Similarly, he knew that Oliver North was the focal point on the National Security Council staff for matters regarding the hostages, counterterrorism and the contras. But he did not know that North was directing a contra arms resupply network utilizing secret bank accounts and shell corporations.

This lack of knowledge should not surprise anyone. The Iran-contra scheme unfolded amid extraordinary secrecy. Unlike most significant covert actions, it proceeded on an ad hoc basis—not through the formal NSC process. Organizers called Cabinet-level principals together hastily, with no prior notice of the agenda. No one took or circulated formal minutes of the gatherings or formally recorded most of the decisions made by President Reagan. As the Tower Commission reported, the issues were never subjected to rigorous staff review or a full debate with all the NSC principals present.

The then vice president criticized these failures in his interview with the Tower Commission and has repeated the critique publicly. He has acknowledged that the flawed process led to very serious mistake in policy. In particular, it hindered Vice President Bush and others in appreciating that the concept they supported originally would

deteriorate in practice into trading "arms for hostages"—something they never would have endorsed.

Frankly, it is difficult to imagine finding anything new with regard to the Iran initiative. Few public policy issues ever have been as thoroughly investigated and chronicled as Iran-contra and the then vice president's role in administration decision making in 1985-86. The events have been put under a microscope by the Tower Commission; a yearlong, \$10 million congressional investigation; a six-year, \$31 million independent counsel investigation; a private lawsuit that involved days and days of depositions going over the same ground; and intensive questioning from the media throughout this period, including the 1988 campaign.

And in fact, nothing new has surfaced. Consider the recent charges against President Bush:

■ **The Shultz Note:** Bill Clinton and others have tried to cast doubt on the president's credibility by citing a 1987 note dictated by George Shultz after a phone conversation with Caspar Weinberger. The note mentions Weinberger's surprise at the then vice president's comment, reported on Aug. 6, 1987, by David Broder, that he had been unaware of how strongly Shultz and Weinberger opposed the proposed sale of arms to the government of Iran. It also notes that George Bush was "on the other side."

The then vice president was indeed "on the other side"—as he has always acknowledged—and over the years he has paid a huge political price. Neither the fact that he does not recall the two secretaries' strongly objecting to the initiative, nor their recollection that they did, is news in 1992. These differences in recollection were precisely the point of the David Broder article—and thus have been matters of record ever since.

So the Shultz phone note adds nothing new to the record.

These differences cannot be resolved definitely, but they can be understood easily. Here's the key: George Bush was not present at most of the several meetings where Shultz and Weinberger recall expressing their strong objections. Indeed, he attended only one of these meetings—on Jan. 7, 1986.

President Reagan has stated that George Bush was not present when Shultz and Weinberger voiced their objections to the initiative. The two secretaries have indicated that they did not raise their

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concerns with the vice president privately. In short, the splintered process employed in the initiative may well have created a classic failure to communicate.

President Bush has said that he might have judged the initiative differently if he had heard that the initiative had provoked a "raging fight," especially in light of his work as chairman of the Reagan administration's Task Force on Terrorism. But he had no operational role in the Iran initiative and in that sense, as he once explained to Dan Rather, was "out of the loop."

■ **The Teicher/Secord Testimony:** Former NSC staffer Howard Teicher asserts that he briefed the vice president on the Iran initiative three times during the spring and summer of 1986. These briefings, he implies, contradict past statements by Mr. Bush.

They do no such thing, and the account doesn't demonstrate that Bush knew more about the initiative than he has acknowledged. 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 of arms or money who was doing what to whom." Indeed, such details had never fully disclosed to Teicher. So Teicher's account, far from contradicting the president, is consistent with what George Bush has said publicly for more than five years.

Richard Secord also has hinted that the president played a different role in the Iran initiative than he has acknowledged. The details betray him as well. Gen. Secord's new memoir provides no new facts, no new firsthand recollections, not even any new hearsay, to demonstrate that George Bush played any greater role in the initiative or in Iran-contra than has been documented by the Tower Commission and the congressional committee. In fact, Secord's book contains only four brief references to George Bush in its 360 pages.

In short, today's "news" is old stuff—or in Secord's case, no stuff at all. One can describe it as news only by misrepresenting the record, implying that the president at some point disavowed any knowledge of the initiative or involvement of the hostages. His critics have distorted the meaning of his comment that he was "out of the loop" in just this way. But again: George Bush has not said that he had no general knowledge of the initiative. He said he had general knowledge of the initiative and supported it based on that knowledge, despite some reservations.

As we get the facts straight, let's also keep our perspective. It would be an outrage if a recycled non-scandal pushed aside the president's real record and diverted attention from the crucial fact that our next president must be able to lead not only the United States. He must lead the world.

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