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THE LEADERSHIP THING

*Why Americans
Flip-Flop
On George Bush
By Marjorie
Williams*

*Plus: Richard
Ben Cramer on
The Scandal That
Almost Brought
Bush Down*



What We Know About **GEORGE**

We've read his lips, deciphered his sentence fragments, cheered him and scorned him and sent him to the White House. But as MARJORIE WILLIAMS reports, we still don't get it: We can't see that, for better or for worse, George Herbert Walker Bush is the same guy he was before we projected the leadership thing onto him. And speaking of knowing: On Page 11, in an excerpt from his new book, RICHARD BEN CRAMER takes us back to those tension-filled days in 1986 when Bush was terrified that he'd *never* be president because of what he knew—or didn't know—about the Iran-contra affair.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TIM GABOR

It would take a marriage counselor—someone, at any rate, versed in the realm of the irrational—to understand.

In the 17 months since the end of America's war in Iraq, public opinion about George Bush has touched not one but two outer edges of the known galaxy of presidential popularity. First, in March of last year, he scored the highest approval ratings of any president since World War II. Then, in June of this year, he plunged to the lowest level of public esteem ever measured, in the same postwar era, for a president late in his first term. (Worse than Ford, that means. *Worse than Carter.*)

First he was the cool customer who had taken on Saddam Hussein; who had banished the ghost of Vietnam; who had restored America's faith in itself. To read the papers or watch TV, you'd have thought that words like "resolve" and "firm" were actually part of his name. He was unbeatable.

Now he is, in the words of Time magazine, "the incredible shrinking president." Mired in an endless recession, he is widely said to offer no domestic vision, no articulable plan for his second term; he is derided, by the conventional wisdom that emanates from inside the Beltway, as a fearful ditherer who hasn't even been able to assemble a competent political campaign. In the definitive formulation of Arsenio Hall, he has become "George Herbert irregular-heart-beating, read-my-line-lipping, slipping-in-the-polls, do-nothing, deficit-raising, make-less-money-than-Millie-the-White-House-dog-last-year, Quayle-loving, sushi-puking Bush!"

Surely there's something crazy about a political culture that can take such a massive shift of perception in stride. Granted,

there are identifiable reasons—notably the recession—why America has soured on its president. But could anyone conceivably deserve *both* these reputations?

It's not as if either of these extremes was the result of a dramatic new development in the character of George Bush. At least since he was nominated to head the CIA, in 1976—in other words, for as long as it has been important to know who George Bush is and what he's really like—he's been pretty much a known quantity. The positive and negative attributes his friends and critics described back then are more or less the same ones voters cite today. These qualities have made their bows, in regular cycles, in 1980, 1984 and 1988; and his behavior in office, for good and ill, has been clearly related to them.

It may be comforting to President Bush, from his vantage point down there in the 35 percent approval range, to recall how often he has been written off in the past, only to have his putative virtues rediscovered. But as a comment on our political maturity, it should give the rest of us pause.

On the eve of George Bush's final general election campaign, it is worth taking stock of how often and how radically we have changed our minds about this man, rejecting and then discovering, again and again, the same basic reality that has been there all along.

OF COURSE, BUSH HAS GIVEN US LOTS OF HELP IN BLURRING his basic outlines.

This son of Greenwich, Conn., started out, after all, in the camouflage of a Goldwater conservative, outfitted to blend into the landscape of his adopted Texas. When he ran for the Senate in 1964 he opposed the nuclear test ban treaty, called Medicare "socialized medicine" and hammered Democrat Ralph Yarborough for favoring the public accommodations section of the 1964 Civil Rights Act—positions that got him nicely through a bruising primary. (By the fall campaign, however, when it was clear that the national ticket was going down to epic defeat, the name Goldwater rarely crossed candidate Bush's patrician lips.)

Two years later, running for the House, he eased to the left; he wooed his district's black vote, and in 1968 he cast a vote in favor of open housing. But as a presidential candidate in later years, he would follow the southern strategy that Richard Nixon pioneered in 1968—luring white southerners from the Democratic Party by playing on racial tensions, notably with the specter of Willie Horton.

During his four years in Congress, Bush devoted so much time to family planning policy that House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Wilbur Mills gave him the nickname "Rubbers." But when Ronald Reagan invited Bush to be his running mate in 1980, Bush's profile as a Planned Parenthood Republican swiftly changed. He was now flatly opposed to abortion rights, and in favor of a constitutional amendment to end them.



"I'm not going to get nickel-and-dimed to death with detail," he said, when reporters challenged him on this and other changes of heart. The man who had coined "voodoo economics" to describe Reagan's economic policies now said, "I'm for Mr. Reagan—blindly." And though he had criticized the massive tax cuts Reagan proposed in the 1980 campaign, he would play exactly the same note in his own 1988 campaign, swearing, "Read my lips: no new taxes."

By the time he became president, then, George Bush had a long history of inviting us to redefine him. In a sensible world, this inconsistency would have made it easier, rather than harder, for voters to form a constant view of his nature: one that saw his expediency *itself* as the most consistent theme of his career.

Why have we have greeted him, again and again, with fresh surprise?

AT FIRST HE SEEMED TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE, SPANNING some of the growing fissures in our politics. In a typical comment during Bush's 1970 Senate race, columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak wrote, "Bush—young (46), handsome, a Connecticut Yankee turned Houston oilman—is a glittering exponent of the 'modern' school of southern Republicans as contrasted with the 'primitives.'" He was the future of the Texas Republicans—conservative but not *too* conservative. This was the phase in which journalists called Bush telegenic, even "articulate." Why, if he won a seat in the Senate, there was no telling what he might do. Perhaps Nixon would replace Agnew with him in '72 . . .

But he never won the Senate seat. And by the time he had done Nixon's and then Gerald Ford's bidding at the United Nations, the Republican National Committee and the U.S. Mission in China, a more quotidian view of Bush had settled in. He was competent, and loyal, as far as that went, but he had been passed over thrice for the vice presidency; he seemed to have more titles than achievements to show. "George Bush . . . may have the abilities necessary to bring off a monumentally difficult assignment," wrote the New Republic's John Osborne of Bush's nomination to be CIA director. "If he does, they have escaped the notice of acquaintances who admire him for his amiability and his competence in handling less demanding tasks."

In the 1980 campaign, Bush was rediscovered. He was a fresh face at the level of presidential politics, and his surprise victory in the Iowa caucuses made him, briefly, a media favorite. He called himself a "moderate conservative," whatever that was—but he did seem reassuringly middle-of-the-road in a race that included Ronald Reagan, Phil Crane, John Connally and Bob Dole. To eastern establishmentarians, he promised a return to sanity after the wild internecine bloodlettings of recent campaigns—an attitude summed up by Michael Kramer in New

York magazine, who gushed that Bush was "the almost perfect candidate: scholar, athlete, war hero . . . George Bush may be the one Republican for whom Republicans need make no excuse." Kramer wrote that "George Bush at his best" was "combative, confident, at ease, with a sure sense of himself and a sense of humor, unashamed of doing what he is doing, and, above all, honest."

As winter gave way to spring, however, the press took the inevitable second look. What once seemed a becoming moderation now seemed a refusal to stand for anything; he appeared to hold himself out as the one man elastic enough to appeal to everyone. "What I'm getting in my polling now is that people think he is a lightweight. They don't know where he stands," said an opponent's pollster. Momentum alone, he appeared to think, would carry him through the election; and when "the Big Mo" turned against him, he began to seem kind of . . . plaintive. He talked more about political tactics than about issues, until, finally, advisers began muttering to reporters about "putting an issues base under him"—very much the way Bush advisers talk today about surrounding their man with a domestic policy.

By campaign's end, Bush's image had returned to the workaday truth observed four years earlier by Osborne. A Washington Post editorial summarized Bush as "a center-right, traditionalist, establishment-oriented, competent government figure who showed himself to be resilient but not especially presidential in the campaign he ran in the past couple of years."

In the vice presidency his image worsened, reaching its low point in 1984, during the second Reagan-Bush campaign. In part because he was running against a woman, he seemed unnerved, shrill, "testy." He had, reporters wrote knowingly, "a high-strung side." In the words of another Washington Post editorial, "he seems to reveal himself, as all viewers of 'Dallas' will long since have noticed, as the Cliff Barnes of American politics—blustering, opportunistic, craven and hopelessly ineffective all at once."

Similar language followed him into his presidential race in 1988. He was seen as pathetically deferential to Ronald Reagan; in the vicious formulation of Garry Trudeau, he had placed his manhood in a blind trust. "Fighting the 'Wimp Factor,'" read the famous Newsweek cover that appeared the week Bush officially launched his campaign.

By the time of the Republican convention, Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis was up 17 points in the polls; all Bush offered, said Time magazine, was "a resume without a rationale." Polls showed that more than 40 percent of voters had a negative opinion of Bush.

But over the next four months, America's idea of George Bush turned its most astonishing somersault yet. By January, he was a new man: Why, in retrospect, he had been a foreordained winner. On Inauguration Day, he was seen to be a man



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of preternatural grace: sire of five fine children, husband to the Silver Fox; a cool-headed leader come to restore government by the elite; a born president.

Which brings us to the role of the press.

OF COURSE, ALL NEW PRESIDENTS ARE GRANTED HONEYMOONS: The public is eager for vindication of the vote it has just cast, and the press, eager to curry access in a new administration, is happy to oblige.

But there is a longer history to the media's fickle treatment of George Bush. The press has long been the chief vehicle by which America has invented and reinvented Bush—mostly for impersonal, even accidental reasons that are ingrained in the mechanics of political journalism.

The main thing is the need for a story: There's no heat in reporting that George Bush is pretty much the same guy he was the last time the reader or viewer checked in, deploying the same skills, acting out the same limitations. The reporter who can discover a new shade of meaning, a shift, is the reporter who has a story; the bigger the shift, the bigger the story.

In addition, the conventions of mainstream journalism make it difficult to take a steady bead on a public figure. It would have been hard, in 1988, to find a dozen journalists in Washington who believed George Bush's pledge that he would not raise taxes—not because they could prove any specific intent to deceive on his part, but because they knew the math that would confront him once he actually had to govern, and they knew him as a late, unpersuasive convert to the supply-side religion. But mainstream journalism affects a neutrality that forbids pressing an argument—however common-sensical—that a candidate is lying.

Finally, George Bush's gyrating reputation is the fruit of a fairly new fad in political journalism: an increasing tolerance for the whole idea of self-transformation.

Consider just a brief period during the 1988 campaign, in which Bush was credited more than once with reinventing himself. The GOP convention, scripted down to the sentence, was greeted by the press as a transformative event in the life of George Bush. The Washington Post, in a front-page story, described Bush as "casting aside his old identity as Reagan's vice president." Wrote Post columnist David S. Broder, "From the moment he arrived here to claim the nomination, he seemed taller, looser, funnier—and more purposeful."

At the center of the drama was what all the pundits agreed was his "crucial" acceptance speech. Never mind that all the credit for the themes and language of the speech went to writer Peggy Noonan; Bush's delivery was covered as a magnificent act of political reincarnation. The New York Times reported that "after eight often trying years, [he] became what he had always claimed he was: his own man." Added a Times editorial, "What was most striking about his speech is how firmly he grasped the wimp epithet and turned it inside out . . . Intimacy and modesty radiated from the TV screen."

This was followed, of course, by a slashing fall campaign distinctly lacking in intimacy and modesty. For a few anxious months the press wrung its hands about Bush's tactics—the Willie Horton ads, the flag factories, the stigmatization of what Bush called "the Aaaay-Cee-Elly-Yoo."

But immediately after Bush won the presidency, he was once again seen to transform himself. He disowned the divisive symbolism that had driven his campaign, and the press greeted the change not as an act of hypocrisy but as the natural move of a statesman. Under the front-page headline "BUSH'S METAMORPHOSIS: FROM LOYAL SUBORDINATE TO SELF-ASSURED LEADER," The Post observed that Bush had "recast himself as a statesman far removed from the fray of the campaign that had consumed him only days before . . . Over the next 10 weeks, he

sustained and embellished this new George Bush, as he soothed his defeated foes and assembled a Cabinet, all with confidence and a grace that startled many of those who had witnessed his campaign ferocity . . . Such is the metamorphosis of a public man."

Press enthusiasm for such narratives of personal renaissance is a recent fashion in our politics. Back in 1968, when reporters and political opponents spoke of the "new Nixon," it was an insult—meant to condemn what was seen as Nixon's calculated bid for a new image.

And can anyone imagine, say, LBJ plausibly undergoing a 10-week metamorphosis?

Can anyone imagine him *wanting* to?

BUT IT'S THE VOTERS, IN THE END, WHO CONSUME THE poses concocted by politicians and served up by the media; who have given Bush his wild ride from 90 percent down to 35. This is where diagnosis might best be made by a good marriage counselor, someone accustomed to understanding extreme feelings as part of a larger system. For it is not happenstance that Bush's new record-low popularity was preceded by a record high; the two extremes are part of a single dynamic.

It is the common, unspoken dynamic that underlies so many angry marriages, in which each partner invests in the other the responsibility for whatever it is that pains them. When things are going well, the spouse seems omnipotent, larger than life; but when things are going badly, it is all his fault.

How much easier to hold unrealistic expectations of one's mate—and then blame him when he fails to meet them—than to examine those expectations closely, and give away our fond illusions. The more blindly faith is invested, the more bitter the ultimate blame.

At the altar George Bush told us, like Reagan before him, that he could give us everything we wanted: that we deserved to pay lower taxes and get a constant flow of goodies from the government. And we have shown, again and again, that we would rather marry that sweet lie than act on a true understanding of our situation.

But it's not Bush's fault that we bought the con. It was always a sham, and the deficit—which now suffocates so many possible solutions to the problems that surround us, from the economy to the inner cities—the deficit is the enormous result of our illusions. And now that the lie is crumbling, there is something dishonest about our insistence on blaming the liar.

In reality, George Bush is the same old husband today that he was a year ago: He'd rather watch a ballgame than clean out the gutters; and he's fabulous at parties, but he's not much good with the kids.

And while he's done his best to obscure these basic facts of his nature (it takes two to tango, any marriage counselor will tell you), it's not his fault that we've never taken the responsibility of facing up to where we are, and what we need to do; and to whether he is the man who can partner us in that.

Over the next three months, you may be sure that the Bush campaign will proffer further astonishing shifts in Bush's character and fortunes; you can bet too that he and his handlers will find a willing audience in at least some segments of the media. The only unknown is what use voters will decide to make of George Bush this time: which idea of him will prove the most satisfying.

We will either find a way to become infatuated with him again, or else we will apply the age-old remedy for disillusionment, and throw the bum out. But in the absence of any effort to understand the sick dynamic of the attraction in the first place—to acknowledge how thoroughly we have been ruled by the fantasy of rescue—you know how that story ends:

We always marry another one just like him. ■

DID HE *Know*

What a question! A vice president's *job* is to know. Washington understands the verb. But when it comes to George Bush and the Iran-contra affair, nothing is as simple as that

BY RICHARD BEN CRAIG

LANGUAGE, THE FIRST AND MOST BASIC tool of culture, is also its truest mirror. Any culture worthy of consideration will have created language to reflect its special preoccupations. Eskimos, it's said, have a hundred words for snow.

In fact, the power and precision of language is the surest mark of its sway in the world. Gallic pride is engorged, with reason, when speakers of 40 languages turn to French for verbs in the kitchen and nouns in the boudoir. And it is a distinction of undying greatness that half a world may call to God with names invented by a couple of small Levantine tribes.

Alas, it is the surest sign that official Washington remains a pre-cultural swamp that it has not offered mankind any refinement of language to illumine its own constant preoccupation, the basic activity of its single industry, the work of its days and the spice of its nights, which is *knowing*. There are, in the capital, a hundred different ways to know and to be known; there are fine gradations of knowing, wherein the subtlest distinctions are enforced. But to discuss this art and passion, we have only the same bland flapjack of a verb that flops each day onto



our plates, along with the morning paper: To Know.

About this preoccupation there can be no dispute: Knowledge is power, and the capital is a city built on power, which means knowing and being known. But this is more than a business in Washington. It

is life. Only in the bars of (you hear a normal, healthy responding to the bland handsome swain with the breathy question, "You know?") Only in a half-dozen Washington restaurants can a man's reputation

enhanced (and the object of his knowing so quickly diminished) by the half-bored, half-dismissive assertion: "Oh, I know Jack . . . forget it."

This is knowing in the sense of acquaintance, of *connaissance*, but this is only the most basic way To Know. Large and lucrative careers, great firms filling many marbled floors of fine buildings are built on a combination of *connaissance* and a judicious smatter of knowing in the sense of knowledge, *scientia*, as in facts or familiarity with a branch of government endeavor. "Well, you can go ahead and file the appeal," the consultant-lobbyist says to his speakerphone, "but I know the assistant secretary is no friend to Section 289, so we might want to pursue that avenue at the same time . . ." (Men and women with *scientia* but with-

for his *connaissance* of the oil and gas interests may have no opponent in his next campaign. (Why run against a guy who'll have two million in the bank?) A man who knows the president may get invited to a couple of state dinners. A man who is well known to know the president is himself a new president—of a successful consulting firm.

Then there is another shade of the verb To Know, in the sense of *awareness*. It is about what's going on *right now*, and as such, it is Washington's highest branch of knowledge. Encyclopedic *scientia* on the theory, history and practice of progressive taxation in America is nothing, *less than nothing*, compared to knowing (a week before the vote) Chairman Rosentkowski's bottom line on depreciation of timber assets. One brand of knowing

What did he know, and who know it?

And so, there has developed, ington, a kind of knowing *with known to know*, for which the word at all. It is a nonoperat traceable knowing, which can proven or disproven. Indeed, i oriental essence can barely be. It is yin-and-yang, knowing-no. It is knowing all about the thi being culpable of knowing the. All of which brings us to th capital personage, that longt tioner of the Washington art: knowing of men, Vice Preside

Here was a man whose ver: only job, was To Know, as th derstands the verb. He starte morning, in his office in the O

*Bush was right, of course, about the preside
digging them in deeper with the press confer
Don Regan marched the old man out, and
screwed things up to a fare-thee-well.*

out *connaissance* tend to pursue less lucrative careers as policy wonks in the agencies, do-good lobbies or think tanks.)

Then there is the matter of being known, which can be more important than knowing. If a Washington man is well known as a man in the know, then his knowing is seldom tested. In fact, it is fed daily by people who come to him to see what he thinks about what they know. This new knowledge is greeted by him with nods (I know, I know . . .) that begin before the other person has finished talking. As a result of this, he ends up knowing pretty much what everybody else knows, which is usually enough. There are companies or interest groups, officeholders or office-seekers, who will hire him to be their man in the know. He is, after all, well known.

In fact, being well known is a quality as close to a bankable asset as a Washington man can have. It's what talent is in other towns. A politician who is well known as a foe of oil and gas regulation is not going to have trouble raising money for his next campaign. In fact, a man well known

(*scientia*) earns a ratty office and a shared secretary at the Heritage Foundation. The other (*awareness*) brings power, money, fame . . .

But as the highest form of capital-knowing, the quest for awareness is also the most dangerous. Clearly, the lack of this knowing can undermine reputation or power, especially if one's position, or one's *connaissance*, indicates that one *ought to know*. To be unaware, to be Out of the Loop, is allied in the tribal consciousness with impotence, inability, imbecility . . . and ultimately with the fatal affliction of ridiculousness. But there is also, in success, in wide awareness, a danger just as mortal. For this is the brand of knowing that is closest to Eating From the Tree of Knowledge, and can result in expulsion from Eden. When things foul up in a massive way; when The Washington Post, like God, is angry; when committee chairmen vie for jurisdiction of the hearings that will make them well known as the scourge of evil-doing, then this is the knowing implied in the most portentous of capital questions:

Office Building, getting to or something over breakfast for only 15 or 20 minutes ended in time for the very little man with the brief from the CIA who appeared a.m., to offer the agency awareness, not as a vice but as a courtesy, a tip cap, to the former director Bush, who liked to know had been doing for the when that was finished, the driveway to the Oval Office, there to see the president's chief of staff brief the president on the brief, to the president wanted opinion, not because to offer material on which day or ever, but simply after all, was the poor briefings were over, I mal work for the day, to know about some officials who'd convened it, or sitting in with

fine and reinforce his acquaintance with the president of Zaire or the foreign minister of Malaysia, or jetting off to meet and to know the officers and enterprise of the nation's first tall-stack-clean-coal power plant, or returning to his office for an informational briefing on the federal narcotics interdiction effort, or sitting down at his desk to work through the report on . . . no matter . . . Every meeting, every act, each step in his daily vice presidential march, down to the last skip-and-jump through the briefcase full of papers which he'd tackle in his study at home, at night, had simply to do with knowing, and knowing in the Washington Way. Here was a man, after all, who owed his job to his *connaissance*, and maintained his standing in it almost solely by one pinpoint of that *connaissance*: his knowing relationship with Ronald Reagan. At the same time, his constitutional duty required him to master the *scientia*, to "know" at least enough of the arms-control-throw-weight-multiple-reentry-warhead *scientia*

angry, and millions of Americans eagerly awaited a single, supposedly simple fact—yes or no?—and an answer was sought a thousand times, by a thousand of the nation's best journalists . . . it was sought only with the blunt tool at hand, the edge of that mealy flapjack, always with a question that came out this way:

Did George Bush know?

Now what could they possibly mean by that?

ON THE 18TH OF NOVEMBER 1986, George Bush was to host a night at the movies: "Top Gun" was on the bill, just the kind of action flick the VP liked. In fact, it should have been a perfect night: friends, mostly governors, in town for the Republican governors' do, all convened in comfort and security in the armchairs of Jack Valenti's private theater on 16th Street in the capital, a plushy screening room maintained for VIP entertainment by the Motion Picture Association of America. It was just the sort of soiree—

In fact, Kean appointed Brady to the Senate, to fill out an unexpired term. So, if it came time to announce: *Hey! Bus is leaving! Get on board or be left behind* . . . there was always someone else to do it. That left Bush as the genial host . . . such a decent guy! That's the part he liked, anyway. He'd have Kean over that night, after the movie. He could stay the night! There was plenty of room! Bar would get everything set up upstairs . . . It'd be fun!

But that was all arranged before the deal with Iran started to come out on Election Day. Since then, there was nothing else in the news: 10 minutes or more at the top of each newscast, guaranteed—they loved this crap! Ted Koppel, every night after the late news, making mincemeat out of anyone who dared say a kind word for Reagan. Turn the channel, there were Johnny Carson jokes: a cake and a Bible for the ayatollah! That was before The Post started turning over every rock in town on the question: What

The well-fed, well-pleased men with pink jowls and red ties were chuckling about him over lunch at Joe & Mo's. . . 'Oh, I know George—nice guy, but Dole could eat him for breakfast.'

to be president, today, should disaster strike. At the same time, his political standing, his sole shield against the dread and fatal ridiculousness of the job, depended on his ability to enhance the precious *awareness* . . . and yet . . . and yet! . . . He could not know, *could not afford to know*, in the full operational sense of the word, anything beyond what the administration was known to know, or anything different from what the administration Officially Knew, or anything that put the lie to any of the fond and rosy myths that swaddled, like a blessed baby, the mind of the most know-nothing president in the capital's known history.

Here was, in short, the most creative and subtle knower of knowledge in the capital.

Which brings up, again, that lamentable word: For when Iran-contra transpired, and God, like The Washington Post, was

20 or 30 people he knew, gathered for activity and no heavy talk—the VP always enjoyed. He'd have them out to the house for drinks before the film. Perfect! Then he could pick off two or three, take them off to his study for a moment—no arm-twisting, nothing like that—just a friendly word or two . . .

"Well, I feel we're doing all right . . .

"And I hope you could feel, you know, I'm qualified . . .

"If you could help . . ."

It always worked like a charm. After all he'd done for them, now he was asking, so intimately, gently . . . it was so respectful and decent. If it came to arm-twisting later, well . . . Lee Atwater did the heavy lifting with the southerners. Andy Card was working on Governor Sununu from New Hampshire. Bush's friend, Nick Brady, went back a long way with Governor Tom Kean in New Jersey.

did they know, and when did they know it? By the time the governors came to town and Bush was to host his night at the movies, nothing seemed much fun.

Kean could tell right away when he got to the residence: Bush wasn't happy. He was alternately pensive and snappish. He couldn't concentrate on what anybody said. Of course, Kean knew Bush from politics, and had for almost 15 years, ever since Richard Nixon made Bush the national GOP chairman. But Kean and Bush had also known one another in the ways that children of good families know one another. Kean's sister had met young Poppy in Connecticut. Kean's father had served with Prescott Bush in Congress. In the early years of the century, their grandfathers were classmates at a private college in New Jersey. So Kean had more than politics in mind when he took Bush aside to

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ask: "What's wrong? You just don't seem yourself."

"Aw, this thing with Iran," Bush said, when they got a chance to talk alone. Bar had gone to bed. The old, rambling house was silent, save for the quiet voices in the study.

"I don't know what the hell happened," Bush said, "and neither does the president. But they're gonna put him out there tomorrow for a news conference . . . They'll kill him out there!"

Just the thought of it . . . Bush couldn't sit still in his chair. He felt so helpless. And it was his ass out there on the line! Reagan wasn't running again. If the whole second term sank into this Iran swamp, Reagan was still going back to his ranch and horses. It was Bush whose future was ruined. Of course, that's not how he said it, wouldn't even think that way. No, it was the price of being Poppy that his first thought, in fact, all his concern, had to bend to the rescue of "this good man, who has become my friend," Ronald Reagan. The code left no options. When the deal came unglued and the papers started digging up the whole sad tale, Bush didn't call any meetings, didn't take polls, didn't even talk to his political guys. There was only one thing he could do: stand by his friend. Anything else . . . well, it'd be like rattling on a school chum.

But he could help, if they'd give him a chance. He knew something about this, sure as hell knew more than the president. Reagan didn't see what all the fuss was, thought he'd just go out there and say what he'd done. He didn't understand! That's why Bush went into the Oval Office that day—did what he'd almost never done in six long years. He went to the mat on this: went to the president to tell him to back off—just for a few days! Just until they knew what the facts were, what they were supposed to be. This was a covert operation! Shouldn't be coming out like this! George Bush had joined his first secret society at age 14. He'd been keeping secrets ever since, been director of the CIA! He knew this stuff in his bones! Just back off, till everybody knew what they were supposed to know, what it was they could admit they knew.

But they brushed him off like a fly . . . Reagan, Ed Meese, Don Regan. Bush talked into the president's face in a way he never had . . . but Reagan simply couldn't understand. Meese thought the Gipper could just deny it—make it all go away in front of the cameras. Regan was only interested in his own reputation—wanted the world to know it wasn't him dropped the ball. Bush had gone at all of them, spent the capital of loyalty he'd

been hoarding for six years, and got nowhere. It was incredible.

"Afterwards, I went at Reagan again," Bush said that night. "Believe me, I went in there . . . as hard as I could."

HE KNEW REAGAN WAS GOING TO DIG them a deeper hole. Bush knew what the president was going to say out there. (Craig Fuller's wife, Karen, helped Pat Buchanan get the statement together.) And Bush knew some of it was plain wrong, dangerously wrong. That business about the arms fitting into one cargo plane—dead wrong. Bush had taken a private meeting (at Ollie North's request) with the Israeli middleman who started the whole deal rolling. He knew they were talking about more than one plane-load, as he knew they were dealing with the genuine fanatics at the right hand of Khomeini. He never bought that "moderates" fantasy.

In fact, there were many things that George Bush knew that later emerged in the confluence of revelation that came to be known as Iran-contra. He knew, for starters, the administration shipped arms to Iran. In fact, he was for it, in a quiet, barely traceable way, not because he thought it would work, but it might . . . and the president was for it. He knew that if the deal went down as hoped ("planned" was too grand a word), the U.S. hostages would all come home. He knew Bud McFarlane, Ollie North and John Poindexter were running the show. He knew the Israelis had started the whole deal, were in it up to their eyeballs, in it for their own reasons, not necessarily those of the U.S. And he knew the president didn't quite grasp the details of the operation.

On the contra side of the ledger, he had also come to awareness of most of the pertinent facts. He knew Ollie North was a cowboy. He knew Ollie was shaking every tree in the forest for money for the contras. (In fact, he was going to speak at one of North's fund-raisers, and backed off only when his staff counsel warned him he might get into trouble.) He knew—in fact, his was the first office in the White House to learn—a former CIA op named Eugene Hasenfus was shot down while flying aid to the contras. He knew Hasenfus was not the only demispook running around on this secret, airborne, aid-the-contras operation.

In short, George Bush had come in contact, by various means, at various times, with nearly every salient fact that later emerged in The Post. But that did not mean he ever put them together. Why would he, when all he had to know, the only thing he could afford to know, was that the president was for them? Why should he commit the act of overtly in-

forming himself, when none of these matters was on his plate? And so, by a capital feat of knowing-not-knowing, of yin-and-yang Washington art, he was not informed, could not be shown to have been informed, of the scandal itself. As he later pointed out, he was *out of the loop*! He was not culpable of knowing anything.

What he was culpable of, on the great historical scoreboard, at least, was of practicing his art of Washington knowing to the end, to the exclusion of all else. George Bush was aware that the U.S. was shipping arms to Iran, and he did not say a word to derail the deal. George Bush was aware they were secretly shipping aid to the contras, and he did not say a word. The only time he went to the mat, spent his capital to affect the flow of events, was after the fact, when the only issue was what should come out and when, what they were allowed to admit awareness of, what they were going to be culpable of knowing. That's when he went in *as hard as he could* . . . But, of course, no one outside the White House knew that. They were only asking a question that meant nothing: Did Bush know?

HE WAS RIGHT, OF COURSE, ABOUT THE president digging them in deeper with the press conference, the following day. Don Regan marched the old man out, and he screwed things up to a fare-thee-well. First, Reagan denied the deal was arms for hostages—when no one in the country believed that anymore. Then he denied the U.S. had anything to do with Israel's shipments—when Regan (as reporters pointed out) had already admitted that the U.S. condoned an Israeli shipment in September of '85. Then Reagan said there were no mistakes in the deal with Iran—they'd got three hostages back and he'd continue on the same path.

It was chaos! The spokesman, Larry Speakes, had to put out a "statement from the president" within 20 minutes to correct the stuff about Israel. Don Regan was back in the Blue Room, pounding the table and swearing he wasn't gonna be hung out in the wind as the leaker on this. Goddammit, he was gonna hold his own press conference! Poindexter wrote the correction and put in the same lies about everything fitting into one cargo plane. After that performance, seven out of 10 Americans said they didn't believe Ronald Reagan anymore.

Sure enough, Bush saw the ship sinking around his ears, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do to patch the hull. He had his own small staff in an uproar, trying to do what the whole West Wing couldn't or wouldn't do: "Just get the goddam facts," Bush said. He took Craig Fuller off other business—what other business was there now?—to get to Ollie North and find out

what the hell happened. He pulled Boyden Gray, his counsel, off the next big speech, the address to the American Enterprise Institute, to find out whether any laws were broken. He told his national security man, Don Gregg, to find out what happened in Iran. Facts, he wanted. And he wanted them now. So, for days they ran around like fevered gerbils, gathering shreds of fact where they could, which they called in the same day, or they sent in memos, mostly to Fuller . . . No one wanted to get in Bush's face when he got like this. Atwater and the politics guys stayed away altogether. Bush was in a state. If he did happen to pick up a phone while they called in, they each, to a man, felt they'd better talk fast. "Yeah. Yeah. What else?" Bush would snap on the other end. They could almost hear his fingers drumming the desk.

And every day or two, reporters would call his press office with another story they were about to unleash. And his press guy, Marlin Fitzwater, would have to walk into Bush's big office and coax a statement out of him. Usually, Bush was at his desk, working through papers, and he'd push back from the desk with a deliberate shove of both hands, and slouch back in his leather chair, with his head down, fiddling with his pen. His eyes would stay on the pen, which he rotated in his fingers, while Fitzwater told him what the Wall Street Journal, or The Post, wanted to know today. And Bush would listen with his head down, quiet, with the air of a man beleaguered, a man who had to stay composed. Then, he'd say to his pen:

"This is so unfair! Don Gregg had *nothing* to do with this."

Or, simply: "Look. The president has asked Ed Meese to find out what the facts are. When we know the facts, we'll make them public."

And then Fitzwater would have to go at it again, until he got a statement he could use.

"So I can say, 'Vice President Bush was *categorically not involved in* . . .'" Fitzwater would look up from his note pad, hoping the veep would finish the sentence. But he'd always have to do it himself. "... *'directing or overseeing the contra resupply'*? . . ."

And Bush would say quietly, head down, to his pen, or off to the side, to one of his desk drawers: "Absolutely."

IT WAS THE WEEKEND AFTER THE press conference that Bush got the word: Meese wanted to see him. He waited at the residence for two days. He couldn't even sit still to read the papers. But Meese never showed up. It turned out Meese was closeted with Ollie North, to clean up "the chronology." (That was the

weekend Ollie and Fawn were so busy with the shredder.)

It wasn't till Monday afternoon that Meese finally came by to see Bush, and then only for about 10 minutes, just to drop this bombshell: The money from the Iran deal went to the contras. Swiss bank account. Ollie had the number. Poindexter had to know too. They'd both have to go. There might be others. Meese was going to tell the president that same afternoon.

Bush didn't sleep that night. He came in Tuesday, looking like a man who'd got bad news on his cancer test. His mouth was a grim, lipless line. There was no expression in his eyes, no light of recognition when the staff said good morning, like Bush was looking at his own private blank wall. He had pulled completely within himself. No one had to tell Bush what this meant: a secret trail of money, had to be laws broken somehow, investigations, a special prosecutor, hearings in Congress . . . all they'd done for six years could go down the chute, along with his campaign. It was his ass out there now. They had to do something to curtail the damage. They had to move, and move fast, before this steamroller crushed them . . .

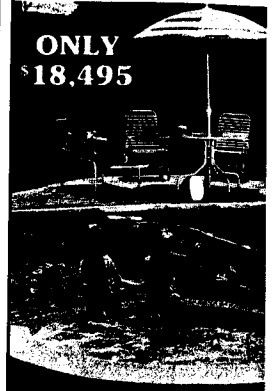
But at the 9 a.m. Oval Office briefing, it was clear the president didn't know what to do. Meese laid out what he knew of the diversion. He said it was all in memos. (Ollie put the damn thing on paper!) Poindexter said he'd known that Ollie was up to something, but no one else did. Reagan had already told Poindexter he'd have to go. Reagan wanted a commission, some kind of blue-ribbon thing . . . appointed today, announced at a press conference. They had to get out in front of this. But Ronald Reagan wasn't sure . . .

At 9:30, instead of the National Security Council briefing, Poindexter walked in, with his undertaker's face, and told the president he was sorry, he was resigning. Reagan didn't even ask what happened. He just said, "I understand . . ." Then he brightened, and with the brave smile you see at the end of war movies, he added: "But it's in the best tradition of the Navy . . . the captain accepting responsibility . . ." There was a full NSC meeting scheduled after that, so they all went in, except Poindexter. Alton Keel, his deputy, ran the meeting in his stead, and *no one said anything about it*. That's what was driving Bush crazy: They were acting so normal. At the end of the meeting, he ducked back into his West Wing office for a minute, stood at the fireplace mantel, leaned on it like it was holding him up. What the hell was going on? Was he crazy? The ship was going down and they kept on dancing!

Bush said to Fuller: "This is disaster . . . We don't even know who handled the money . . ."

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Fuller started to tell him what he'd picked up from his friend Al Keel that morning. Total weirdness! Poindexter had some early meeting, so Al ran the normal 7:30 NSC staff meeting. About 8:30, Keel walks into Poindexter's office to brief him on the staff meeting. And Poindexter's sitting there, eating a yogurt at his desk. Keel's reporting, and Poindexter just says, "Uh huh, yeah, uh huh," eating yogurt. Then he says: "By the way, Al, I'm resigning today."

Bush, still with his eyes down, withdrawn into the gloom in his own head, seemed hardly to hear the story.

"I've got to go back," Bush said. "Got the leadership meeting. Jesus. This is the worst."

So he went back to the Cabinet Room for the meeting with the leaders of Congress, and then back again, after the president's noon press conference, for a lunch with Reagan and the Supreme Court, and then to the afternoon National Security Planning Group . . . He walked through the day like the rest of them: reading off the cards in their pockets, going through the schedule, through the motions, acting like the ship was still afloat . . . But he couldn't stop the baneful monologue in his head:

Disaster . . . everything they'd done, the second term, the campaign, George Bush

out there to take the heat, they'll clobber Reagan, he doesn't understand, thinks it's a movie . . . they'll kill him! . . .

By the end of the day, it was screaming in his head. It was surreal, the way no one said anything—like it would all go away if they went to their meetings! Like the Blob That Ate Cleveland didn't exist! By the end of the day, Bush was back in his office, at his desk, his eyes on the blotter, head in his left hand, staring down, not seeing . . .

"It's like they don't realize . . . what's going on," Bush said to the desk.

Fuller said, across the room: "Or that it is going on."

And Bush looked up with his lips white, all the pain apparent now in the long lines of his face.

"Don't they realize what this means?"

WATERGATE . . . WAS THE FIRST THING that flashed through Bob Dole's mind, in the Cabinet Room, at the leadership briefing, when Meese dropped the bomb about the diversion. Dole stopped in at the White House to catch the briefing on his way to the airport. He had to get to Boston, then to Iowa, for the Other Thing . . . plane was waiting.

Meese ran through the tale, said Ollie North did the deal on his own. That fell onto the long, gleaming table with a thud

you could almost hear. The leaders, the speaker, looked at one another in silence. Lieutenant colonels didn't do deals on their own. The only thing Reagan added was that Poindexter knew about it . . . and so, in the best tradition of the Navy . . . you know, the captain taking responsibility . . .

Reagan didn't understand. There's only one captain in the White House. Only one man could take responsibility . . . **Watergate . . .** Dole remembered his friend Bryce Harlow, in an office just down the hall from this Cabinet Room. Harlow was a Washington sage, an insider, adviser to Nixon, a man Dole looked up to. "That break-in story doesn't have any legs," Harlow said, back in '72. Dole was head of the party, and he wanted to say something, to let people know the Republican Party had nothing to do with Watergate. But Harlow advised him: "It'll fade in two or three days . . ." So Dole didn't make any statements, tried to pass it off with a joke.

Dole sat up at the table now, his eyes shifting from face to face. He was trying to see the whole court. Jim Wright, leader of the House Democrats, was already on that portentous question:

Was this done with knowledge or approval of others?

Who else in the White House knew?

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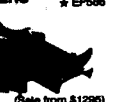
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Did the CIA know?

Meese was trying to convince him that Ollie was the only one who really knew. Poindexter only knew Ollie was up to something. Israel handled the deal, Meese said. The Israelis thought it up, did the deed without any help . . .

Dole could see Wright didn't believe it. Who *would* believe it? He looked down the line to Bob Byrd, his colleague, leader of the Senate Democrats. Byrd would have a field day, his legalistic way . . . hearings, three or four committees . . . he'd *never* let it go, the whole next Congress, it'd eat up the session, the whole campaign, the Other Thing, '88 . . . Maybe Reagan thought they'd help him, put it behind, move on. But Reagan didn't understand. Byrd always spoke with the air of the statesman, but don't get in a dark alley with him . . . Hell, he was trying to take Dole's office. Trying to throw his whole staff out! One of Byrd's guys took Dole on a tour, to show him the "new rooms" his staff might use. They were coal bins! Walked Dole down into the basement, took him through rooms he wouldn't take his dog in . . . unless it was raining, or cold, dog wouldn't go out . . . If they thought Byrd was going to cut them a break, well . . .

"Musta been my night off," Dole used to say about Watergate, back in '72. He

never did deal with the issue, head-on. Nobody did. And they paid. It drove a president from office. Almost beat Dole, two years later, back in Kansas. The whole party paid in blood, for eight years. A stain they never could wash off . . . still hadn't recovered, not all the way.

Well, nobody was going to tar Bob Dole with that brush now—no way. Sure, he'd support the president, as much as he could. That was his job, and he'd do it. But Reagan had to get the facts out. And if heads rolled, well, so be it . . . Dole wasn't going to let them shove the party down the toilet for another eight years. Not this time. This was his time.

Dole was back in his Town Car within 10 minutes. "Get the office," he snapped. And then, over the car phone, on the way to the airport and the Other Thing, he asked not for his chief of staff, not for his national security man, but for the press secretary.

"Agghh, gotta get out a statement," he said. "They took the money from Iran, for the missiles, gave it to the contras. Gaghhh, you b'lieve it? President's gonna announce it in an hour. Yeah, it's kinda bizarre . . . I wanta call it 'a bizarre twist.' Say the president's doin' the right thing, get all the facts out . . . support the president . . . yeah, point is, it's all gotta come out."

"I'M JUST NOT GONNA SAY ANYTHING now," Bush snapped. He'd been through this, explained it a million times. Why couldn't they understand? His own staff, guys who ought to know him . . . they were coming at him again on this AEI speech, the American Enterprise Institute, the perfect chance to distance himself from the whole Iranamok mess. In his office in the West Wing, Bush spoke to the speech draft that was fanned out on the desk in front of him. "Look, I've spent *six years* being loyal to this president . . ." Bush's voice was high, petulant with his sense of injustice.

"This doesn't abandon the president," Fred Khedouri said. Khedouri was writing the speech—or trying, at least. He'd been back and forth with it a half-dozen times. He'd write in a line about the Iran thing—something *innocuous*, just an acknowledgment that something *went wrong*—and Bush would balk, like a horse that saw a snake. To Khedouri, it was so obvious: If the VP stuck his head in the sand, it sent a message that he was complicitous . . . or lost in the same fog of know-nothing denial that hung over the rest of the White House. It just wouldn't play! He tried to keep his voice even: "There ought to be some recognition . . ."

The veep heard the edge under Khedouri's voice—like Bush was some thick-

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from all over the country," Bar confided in the receiving line. Bush's face twisted into his aw-shucks grin: "At least I didn't get thrown out," he said.

The world was off his shoulders. He looked terrific. Everybody said so. How did Bar keep him looking so good?

Bar said sweetly: "I beat him . . ."

Hoo hooo! Isn't that Bar a stitch?

And the next day, and the next, more wonn-derful reviews. And Larry Speakes said the president *agreed* with every word. And Lee Atwater told the networks that Republicans across the country were cheering. "The vahz pres'ent," Lee growled, "hit uh gusher!"

The Era of Good Feeling lasted 10 days, until Don Gregg, the veep's national security man, gave his first interview to the New York Times. Yes, he'd found out about the contra resupply back in August, Gregg acknowledged. His friend and fellow spook, Felix Rodriguez, had come to Washington specially to tell him how screwed up it was. Then the next day, UPI came out with unnamed White House sources, alleging that Bush's office knew the contra gambit every step of the way. Ollie North kept them posted religiously.

What did George Bush know?

By mid-December, that was the only question anybody wanted to ask him. Now Bush had to issue his *own* chronology, make public a series of contacts between his staff, Ollie North and the contras.

"Let the chips fall where they may," he'd said in his big AEI speech. Who could have known they'd fall on him?

And now, every day, Fitzwater had to march into the big office, and screw some statement out of Bush. Bush would say to his desk or his pen:

"I've answered that a million times."

Or, "That's just not true . . . I had nothing to do with that."

Or, "Salvador . . . Felix Rodriguez is a hero down there, to the people of Salvador."

And Fitzwater would persist, gingerly: "So I can say, 'Vice President Bush *never met with Felix Rodriguez*' . . ." And Bush would stare at his twisting pen, silent, while Marlin had to finish the quote. "... *except, uh, to discuss El Salvador*'? . . ."

And when, at last, Bush would glance up with that blank-wall look, even Fitzwater had to wonder what the hell was behind that stare. Was there something he was unable to say? Was he culpable of knowing? Or just heartsick?

At the moment, Bush was only waiting to see if Marlin was done. Was it over? When would this be over? . . . He'd said more than he wanted already. More than he ever should have. And what did it get him? . . . When Fitzwater didn't say any more, Bush replied, tersely:

"Okay. Say that."

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DOLE WAS NEVER OFF TV. THE ELECTION recaps rolled right into Iran-contra, and every time you flicked on the tube, or glanced at a paper, there was Dole. Dole by satellite, Dole on Koppel, Dole on "Face the Nation" . . . Top story: "Dole says . . ." "Good evening, on Capitol Hill today, the Senate majority leader . . ." Dole, Dole, Dole. No guest was supposed to be on David Brinkley's Sunday chatfest more than twice a year—they changed that policy for Dole. What else could they do? The guy made news.

Dole knew what those Sunday shows needed as well as the panelists, the host, the producers. He knew he didn't have to show up at 10, like the bookers insisted. He'd roll in at quarter-after, 20-after, and head straight for the makeup room. He knew the girls by name, always had a greeting to settle them down, make 'em forget he was late. "Agghhh, kinda hot . . . Sam must be askin' all the questions. Hegg hegg hegg." Someone would bring him a half-cup of coffee from the table set with brunch. Dole never hung around to eat. On the set, no matter what went out on the air, it was always jokes and gossip during commercials: just a few Washington white men, sitting around like it was lunch at Joe & Mo's . . . what the hell, they were all well known, in the know. Brinkley and Dole were neighbors in Florida, where Elizabeth owned a condo. Brinkley was a friend, or close enough . . . And Dole always brought a nugget of news he could drop into the chat, somewhere, enough to make the Monday Post print the sentence: "Dole made his proposal (charge, comment, remark) in an interview on the ABC television program 'This Week With David Brinkley' . . ." That, and maybe one catchy sound bite to run on CNN all day, then on the Monday "Today" show.

So, on the Sunday after the diversion was announced, Dole rolled into the studio for the Brinkley show, with just time enough. "Howdy dooonn? . . ." He looked terrific, tanned and healthy from his big vacation, two days for Thanksgiving at the condo in Florida. Makeup had him in and out in a minute—just powder. He looked fine. "Aghh, shoppin' done?" The Bobster was all holiday cheer. The music was playing in his head, the overture of the Other Thing . . . and, heyyy! . . . here's an issue plopped onto the ground before him like a Mexican sombrero, an invitation to the dance! A big beautiful Washington hat dance! No one could do it like Bob Dole. He had news to make this morning and a network to air it . . . The White House in trouble! Bush under a cloud! What did they know and . . . da dum! . . . He was ready to dance . . . the Washington Dance of Death!

He'd worked to get this nugget: While

he was in Florida, he'd had a chat with Bob Strauss, Mr. Democrat, a real insider, another condo neighbor. Bobster told Strauss he was thinking of a Special Select Committee on Iran—like Sam Ervin's Watergate committee. Of course, he knew the idea wouldn't stop with Strauss, and sure enough, when he got back, here was Bob Byrd on the telephone: Maybe they could, uh, *coordinate* . . . So they agreed, they'd both propose it, Byrd on "Face the Nation," Bobster on the Brinkley-fest. That would surely be news enough, but it might give Byrd equal billing. So that morning, the Bobster pulled the ace from his sleeve: He wanted a special committee to consolidate the hearings, the information . . . but he wanted it now, *this week!* A special session of Congress! Convened by Ronald Reagan to get the facts out! The first special session since Harry Truman called Congress back from the hinterlands, 38 years ago!

It was gorgeous, a master stroke, raised the issue to a full-scale *crisis* . . . *not since 1948* . . . Let the boys in the White House gnash their teeth. Bob Dole was *protecting* the president, making sure there weren't 10 committees holding hearings, calling for documents, witnesses, all at once. And proposing that the president start it *now*, while Republicans (i.e., Bob Dole) could still control the Senate, keep a hand on the committee. What was the matter with those guys in the White House—couldn't they see? If they went along with Dole, then the action shifted to Congress, to the wrangle over the committee. It would take the heat off the president!

And, of course, it left Bob Byrd in the dust. But how could the Democrats squawk? Dole wasn't trying to outmaneuver anyone. "Agghh, been around too long for that." No, he'd be glad to let the committee reflect the lineup in the new Senate, to convene next year, the Democratic majority . . . How could *they* oppose this? Were they trying to drag out the issue? Didn't they say they wanted all the facts out? . . . Well, let's get going!

The white men on the Brinkley set were trying not to grin, like cheap lawyers at a 10-car pileup: Uh, did that mean Senator Dole didn't think all the facts were out? Didn't he believe the White House, that North and Poindexter were the only ones who knew?

The Bobster dropped an eyebrow and rasped: "Aghh, don't think Ripley'd believe that."

Eureka! The sound bite!

The next day, The Post had the story of President Reagan's first defiant reaction to the scandal of the diversion. But that didn't lead the paper. The lead story was Dole's call for a special session, along

with a nice picture of the senator, a big one, above the fold.

And that was only the beginning. That day, as Dole emerged from the White House, a meeting with Don Regan, he called for appointment of a special prosecutor. No, it was nothing against Ed Meese. But he *was* awfully close to the president. Republicans, Dole said, were already "suffering damage" from the scandal. That's what he told Don Regan. We've got to cut our losses! It'll be good for the president! "He didn't make mistakes. The people around him made mistakes." Remember, Bob Dole was *defending* the president!

Sometimes, in the dust from the Bobster's dancing shoes, it was hard to keep track of whom he was defending.

Nothing wrong with Meese . . . but when are we getting a special prosecutor?

George Shultz, a fine secretary of state . . . "But, I must say, when people say, 'Why aren't you out there supporting the president?' . . . it's rather difficult when the secretary of state is not doing anything."

Bob Dole would certainly not be the one to tell the president to fire his chief of staff . . . "But I think right now they ought to circle the wagons—either that, or let a couple of wagons go over the cliff."

Meanwhile, lest the White House make good its intention to move on to other business, Dole was on the front page again, this time calling for a summit with European leaders, to reassure the allies about U.S. foreign policy.

Meanwhile, lest anyone else miss the point, Dole made a speech in New Hampshire, and pronounced the whole Iran-contra gambit "just plain stupid."

He left Byrd and the Democrats gasping for air. The Bobster carried the ball for both sides. As for rival candidates for the Other Thing, they could only stand by, biting their tongues. Jack Kemp's press secretary made the papers one day with a warning that Dole was "too eager to make news over the corpse of a popular president." But that weekend, when Kemp hoped to appear on "Face the Nation," Lesley Stahl wanted Bob Dole instead.

After that, the New York Times ran a Page 1 R.W. Apple analysis that began: "Bob Dole of Kansas, the Senate majority leader who will become minority leader next year, has seen his prospects of winning the 1988 Republican presidential nomination enhanced . . ." That signaled the rest of the nation's press to pile on. "Mr. Dole may be the man with the most to gain," the Wall Street Journal reported the next week. And the week after that, came The Post: "Polls and political strategists indicate that, partly because of his recent high-profile performance, he

has moved within striking distance of Bush . . .

Striking distance! It was soft-shoe on the coffin lid! Up in New Hampshire, which is where it counted, the organ of the mad-dog right, the Manchester Union Leader, was getting tired of Republicans who failed in their duty to defend the president. So the Union Leader, as it was wont, launched a foam-flecked attack on . . . George Bush! The headline: "More Mush From the Wimp."

Of course, Bob Dole couldn't focus on the primaries now, not with the White House under assault, the credibility of the U.S. at stake. He had to appoint the members of the special select committee, senators of energy and intrepid judgment who would get to the bottom of this sorry affair and restore government to its proper business. Not that there was any shortage of candidates. These hearings could make a man Well Known! So, the leader weighed probity, experience, intellect, savvy . . . and from among all the eager volunteers, he selected as the ranking Republican member . . . Warren Rudman, of New Hampshire.

No politics about it! It was well known that Rudman was lined up for '88 with his friend, the former senator from Tennessee, Howard Baker. (Everybody knew Baker was running.) And Rudman did bring to the job a fine set of qualifications: He was well informed about foreign policy, national security. And he had experience as a prosecutor, as a former attorney general of his great state. In fact, three of the five senators selected by Bob Dole had been prosecutors. Dole meant to make sure *all* the facts came out—he wouldn't have to say a thing.

That's why, in all the reams of his public comment, in November and December, about the Iran affair, there was not one mention, not one word attachable to Bob Dole's name that pointed in any way to the vice president, George Bush. It was the highest triumph of the Be Nice rule. He knew the wise guys were waiting for him to say something nasty—just one misstep in the Dance of Death . . . and it was over.

But why would he? Bob Dole never had just one source on something he wanted to know. The White House briefings and meetings with Regan were not his only avenue of inquiry on Iran-contra. And Dole was convinced: Bush was in the soup. All the connections were clear in Dole's head. The whole push on the hostages, the whole deal with Iran, had to do with the kidnapped Beirut CIA station chief, William Buckley. There was word, breathed into Dole's ear . . . the White House had a videotape: Buckley under torture . . . that's when the deal was cooked up. Buckley had worked for Bush,

the kind of guy Bush loved, a secret op with an air of action about him, came from a good family . . . made his name in Vietnam, where one of his guys, his top men, was Felix Rodriguez. He was the link . . . And when that CIA plane went down in Nicaragua, who got called? Felix Rodriguez! And where did he report? To George Bush's office, to that other spook who worked for him, Gregg!

It was so obvious! And it had to come out. Maybe not now, or even soon. But it would come out, and the committee would prove: George Bush knew all about it!

But even Dole failed to calculate the capacity for knowing-not-knowing. Even he, the most able inside player in the U.S. Congress, underestimated George Bush's Washington art. Even while Dole danced his spectacular tarantella on the White House, the Congress, his fellow candidates . . . he made one fatal error of judgment: He thought George Bush must be something like him. If Bob Dole had sat in the VP's chair every day as the little man with the briefcase retailed the covert news of the world, or as the NSC staff in the Oval Office outlined the "initiative to Iran" . . . there was *no way* Bob Dole would not commit an overt act of knowing. There would be *not one day* when Dole could maintain he was Out of the Loop. As he said, in mid-dance, to one group of admiring reporters: "Agh, m'not one to sit on the sidelines."

So, he said nothing about George Bush. Why should he? Reporters were telling him privately that Bush was dead. All Dole had to do now was beat Jack Kemp. Hah! And not just reporters. Big guys, insiders, the kind Dole listened to, were coming on to him. Looked like John Sears, the guy who started Reagan in 1980, was going to run Dole's campaign! By mid-December, the Iowa poll from the Des Moines Register had Dole, for the first time, in the lead over Bush! So Dole kept dancing.

There he was with all the cameras again, on December 16, announcing Rudman's name and the other members of the new committee. "A Watergate-style committee" is what the papers called it. And there, in the press conference, one of the young anchormen-to-be had a question for Dole, the big question now . . .

Hasn't this endless trauma destroyed the Republicans' chances in 1988? Doesn't it make the nomination . . . worthless?

Dole imperceptibly shrugged one shoulder and a little smile softened his face. He said:

"I'll take it." ■

This article is excerpted from Richard Ben Cramer's What It Takes: The Way to the White House, recently published by Random House.

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