

# Bush 'Out of the Loop' on Iran-Contra?

Record Indicates He Attended Meetings Involving Arms Sales, Rebel Aid

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Buried among 1,700 pages of notes written by then-Secretary of State George P. Shultz during the Iran-contra affair is one referring to a January 1986 meeting at which Weinberger voiced opposition to covert arms sales to Iran in the presence of George Bush, then the vice president.

The note, which appears to contradict Bush's repeated assertion that he was never present when either Weinberger or then-Secretary of State George P. Shultz objected to the arms sales, is among classified documents being reviewed for possible use in Weinberger's upcoming trial, according to

informed sources. The note is important because it confirms earlier testimony by Shultz placing Bush at the January meeting.

Questioned again lately by reporters about Iran-contra, Bush sought to distance further discussion of his role in the worst political scandal of the Reagan administration. But new information emerging from court cases and congressional records since Bush left Iran for president has cast great doubt on his assertions that he was "out of the loop," generally uninvolved in the largely unpublicized and controversial Iran-contra operations.

There are numerous indications in the documentary record that Bush was at meetings where deci-

sions were taken in the mid-1980s about both the secret sale of arms to Iran and some of the covert efforts to aid the contra rebels in Nicaragua.

Polls have shown that the public is skeptical of the president's denial of involvement. A USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll reported last week that 55 percent of the respondents were dissatisfied with Bush's explanation of his involvement in the Iran-contra arms deal when he was vice president.

Earlier this month, Democratic presidential nominee Bill Clinton questioned Bush's credibility on Iran-contra, citing another note that had just turned up in the court

See IRAN-CONTRA, A12, Col. 1

# Iran-Contra Evidence Indicates That Bush

IRAN-CONTRA, From A1

papers of the Weinberger perjury and obstruction case. That note, written by a Shultz aide, described a 1987 phone conversation between Shultz and Weinberger in which the two Cabinet members expressed disbelief at public comments by Bush that he had been unaware of their strong opposition to the arms sales to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's government.

When Bush was asked about the Shultz aide's note during an NBC interview Sept. 6, he replied that "this seems to me to be just a late smoke screen out of that dead old saw out there. And I have nothing to explain. . . And nobody has suggested that I've done anything wrong."

In the almost six years since the scandal surfaced, records and testimony from congressional and legal proceedings reveal that Bush, while vice president, watched Iran-contra unfold from a front-row seat in the White House.

In 1984, 1985 and 1986, Bush regularly attended key Reagan administration meetings on secret aid to the contras, some of it meant to circumvent a congressional ban, or meetings on covert arms sales to Iran, intended to gain release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon and create an opening to the Tehran regime.

He also attended three White House meetings in November 1986 that Iran-contra prosecutors working for independent

counsel Lawrence E. Walsh have concluded set the stage for an attempted coverup of one particular set of Hawk missile shipments to Iran in 1985.

Moreover, Bush while vice president developed a working relationship with Oliver L. North, the National Security Council aide who was the key mover-and-shaker in Iran-contra. North's daily diary notes of that period contain numerous references to Bush and Bush's aides in the context of Iran-contra operations. Hundreds of pages of North's notebooks were released in 1990 in response to a lawsuit brought by the National Security Archive, a nonprofit research institute, and Public Citizen, a public interest group.

The relationship between Bush's national security adviser at the time, Donald P. Gregg, and a former CIA employee who became an operative in the secret contra resupply operation, Felix Rodriguez, has never been fully explained. While Gregg has acknowledged learning of Rodriguez's role in the resupply operation months before it became public, he has said he did not inform Bush about it even after Rodriguez's name was publicly linked to the operation.

Bush told NBC's Tom Brokaw earlier this month that he had "given every bit of evidence I have to these thousands of investigators" who have looked into the matter. But Bush has never provided a comprehensive explanation in public of what he heard and did in Iran-contra.

The House and Senate committees that investigated Iran-contra in 1987 did receive records from the vice president's staff, but Bush himself never testified before Congress about the affair.

Bush appeared in December 1986 for about an hour before the Tower board, which was appointed by President Ronald Reagan to investigate the scandal, but the session took place without a stenographer

*Although Bush has spoken to Iran-contra investigators, he has never provided a comprehensive explanation in public of what he heard and did.*

present, and the 11 pages of notes taken by the board's counsel remain classified.

One participant at the session said Bush "lectured them almost nonstop." His appearance occurred shortly after the board and its staff were named and before any of them had time to acquire much background in the affair. As a result, those present es-

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## Bush Attended Key Meetings

essentially listened to Bush's presentation rather than questioned him, the source said.

Bush was questioned under oath by Walsh's investigators for two hours on Jan. 11, 1988, and afterward told reporters the session "went well." The results of that session have not been made public.

Since the 1988 presidential campaign, Bush has asserted that he has answered all Iran-contra questions posed to him by reporters. But during the 1988 campaign, The Washington Post supplied Bush aides with 30 questions about Bush's and his staff's involvement in Iran-contra and, after several weeks, received word that Bush would decline to provide answers.

Bush's first major public address on the arms sales to Iran and the diversion of profits to support the contras came on Dec. 3, 1986, eight days after the diversion was publicly disclosed by then-Attorney General Edwin Meese III.

Bush acknowledged "mistakes" were made but described the "Iran initiative" as an attempt "to begin a dialogue with Iran"; the arms sales were "a signal" to the Iranians with whom the United States was dealing because they "were taking enormous personal risks by just talking with us"; and "the president is absolutely convinced that he did not swap arms for hostages."

Bush summed up saying, "I was aware of the Iran initiative, and I support the president's decision to approve it."

In the summer of 1987, Bush was a full-

fledged candidate for the GOP nomination to succeed Reagan, and the Iran-contra scandal was affecting his chances. During an August 1987 interview with David S. Broder of The Washington Post, Bush said he failed to oppose the selling of arms to Iran because he never heard the objections of Shultz and Weinberger.

"Maybe I would have had a stronger view," he told Broder. "But when you don't know something, it's hard to react. . . . We were not in the loop."

In his campaign biography, "Looking Forward," published later in 1987, Bush wrote that his "first real chance to see the picture as a whole" did not come until Dec. 20, 1986, when he was briefed by Sen. Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, which had held a set of closed-door hearings on the affair.

After that meeting, Bush wrote, he was "left with the feeling . . . that I'd been deliberately excluded from key meetings involving details of the Iran operation." He felt that he had been "out of the loop."

It was not until January 1988, when a Washington Post story disclosed that Bush had attended nearly three dozen morning presidential briefings during 1986 at which Iran and the hostages were discussed, that he first acknowledged he had participated in

See IRAN-CONTRA, A13, Col. 1

# Record Casts Doubt on Bush's Assertion

IRAN-CONTRA, From A12

the decision-making process on the arms sales.

Bush has faced criticism about his repeated declaration that he was unaware of the opposition to the Iran arms sales by Reagan's two senior Cabinet members.

Shultz in congressional testimony placed Bush at an Aug. 6, 1985, White House meeting where Reagan, just out of the hospital, sat in his pajamas as his top advisers argued over an Israeli plan to send arms to Iran to gain release of the hostages.

Shultz also recalled to the Tower board that he said: "I thought this was a very bad idea. That I was opposed to it, that we were just falling into the arms-for-hostages business and we shouldn't do it."

At a Dec. 7, 1985, White House meeting, Shultz and Weinberger again strongly voiced their objections to the arms deals. Bush was attending the Army-Navy football game that Saturday, and was not present for the discussion. National security adviser John M. Poindexter, according to testimony, reportedly always briefed Bush on major meetings he missed.

Bush was at a Jan. 7, 1986, meeting in the Oval Office where Reagan and his aides discussed Weinberger's and Shultz's doubts about direct U.S. involvement in the sale of arms to Iran. Some U.S.-made arms were delivered to Iran in 1985 by Israel with White House approval.

The Weinberger note, which was classified by the Pentagon along with the former defense secretary's other notes after they were discovered more than a year ago by Iran-contra prosecutors, refers to this January meeting. Weinberger objected to the proposed direct sales on legal grounds, and Shultz maintained such U.S. involvement would be seen as trading arms for hostages.

Shultz told the Tower board about that January meeting: "It was clear to me by the time we went out that the president, the vice president, the director of central intelligence [the late William J. Casey], the attorney general, the chief of staff [Donald T. Regan], the national security adviser all had one opinion, and I had a different one and Cap shared it."

Bush was present at another White House meeting on the morning of Jan. 17, 1986, when Reagan signed the presidential authorization called a "finding" to permit the covert transfer of U.S. arms to Iran and the withholding of that information from Congress.

Poindexter's memo to Reagan justifying the Jan. 17 finding notes the opposition of Shultz and Weinberger. Such memos were normally sent also to Bush. Poindexter's notes about that meeting indicate that the Cabinet members' opposition was mentioned.

On Feb. 1, 1986, Poindexter sent a note to Robert C. McFarlane, his predecessor as national security adviser who had left gov-

ernment but was still involved in the Iran arms operation, saying: "The hostage plan is still working, and it calls for the hostages to be released on 9 Feb. . . . Most importantly, president and VP [vice president] are solid in taking the position that we have to try. . . ."

Information disclosed by court hearings and Congress over the past few years indicates Bush also may have known more about the contra resupply operation than he has publicly stated.

Bush, according to documents, was present at a June 1984 meeting when Reagan gave McFarlane, then national security adviser, the task of keeping the contras together "body and soul" in the face of the impending congressional prohibition of U.S. military assistance to the rebels.

Bush attended another White House meeting in June 1984 at which discussion took place on soliciting third countries for funds for the contras. He was also told that month by McFarlane about secret payments from Saudi Arabia to support the contras.

The North trial in 1989 provided the first documents indicating the Reagan administration also had a secret plan to reward Honduras in 1985 with arms in return for support of the contras. The White House and State Department documents produced at the trial listed Bush as a recipient of a February 1985 presidential decision paper to provide "incentives" to Honduras. A March 1985 trip by Bush to Honduras was

## He Was 'Out of the Loop'

arranged to deliver a personal message from Reagan about the delivery of aid.

Bush and other Reagan administration officials denied that the incentives plan amounted to a quid pro quo. But additional documents released at a June 1989 Senate hearing showed the Honduran armed forces commander requested increased U.S. aid as the price of continued support for the contras.

Bush has continued to deny there was any quid pro quo.

Questions about the link between Bush and Rodriguez, the onetime CIA operative involved in the contra resupply operation, date from October 1986 when the American survivor of the crash of a C-123 cargo plane shot down over Nicaragua identified Rodriguez as part of the effort.

Bush described Rodriguez as "a patriot" but denied knowing of his activities on behalf of the contras. He also echoed the general administration position at that time that the suddenly exposed resupply network was not associated with the U.S. government.

In May 1990, a provocative note relating to a meeting between North and Bush on Aug. 6, 1986, surfaced with the release of hundreds of pages of North's notebooks. The note shows that before meeting Bush on Aug. 6, North received a call from a member of his secret contra resupply team who was complaining about Rodriguez.

North then met with Bush's aide Gregg and, after two more phone calls with government officials associated with Central

America, North recorded in his notebook a meeting "w/V.P." The note does not reveal what the two men discussed.

Two days later, Gregg met Rodriguez in Washington and has said he learned then of Rodriguez's involvement with North's resupply operation. Gregg's notes of that Aug. 8 meeting read in part: "A swap of weapons for \$ was arranged to get aid for the contras."

Congressional investigators read that sentence to mean that Gregg was told then of the diversion of profits from arms sales to Iran to purchase military aid for the contras. But neither Gregg nor Rodriguez has offered an explanation for the notation.

Rodriguez has said he complained to Gregg on Aug. 8 that North's associates were overcharging the contras. Four days later, Gregg called a meeting of administration officials dealing with the contras to try to clear up Rodriguez's allegations.

Gregg testified that he never told Bush about the meeting or what he had learned from Rodriguez, saying the information "was not very presidential."

Bush's relationship with North appears to have reflected a confidence in North's abilities. He picked North for a key role on his vice presidential anti-terrorism task force. On Nov. 27, 1985, he sent North one of his famous handwritten notes expressing particular appreciation for North's "dedication and tireless work with the hostage thing and with Central America."

## Kissinger Ambushed by Vietnam

It was like old times: the guttural bass, the self-pity laced with wry quips, the senators purring and fawning, the talk of the "Vite" House and the moans about libelous leaks from anonymous enemies. He could not imagine what had happened to our country when people accused him of failing to "move heaven and Earth" to get American prisoners back. He had met with the families constantly.

It was vintage Henry A. Kissinger, but it didn't work. He had been ambushed the day before by his peers, former CIA director and defense secretary James R. Schlesinger and former defense secretary Melvin R. Laird, who testified they believed the United States had left prisoners behind. The awful equation had been put succinctly by Winston Lord, a Kissinger disciple of such fidelity that he had accepted his master's wiretapping: "The president decided not to scuttle the agreement over the MIA issue. . . . It was a very tough decision."

There were awkward, newly declassified documents. They made extremely difficult Kissinger's plaint that the reason for all the confusion and ugliness was that Congress had withheld from him the power to enforce the treaty—they had cut off the bombing. "It ill becomes" he began several jeremiads about clumsy Congress butting in on his webs. Would that they had had to negotiate with the North Vietnamese, as he did for four years. Could they have done better?

Sen. Robert C. Smith (R-N.H.), who has been the loudest voice calling for an investigation, collapsed into jovial exchanges with the doctor. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who had the greatest grievance, having been held by Hanoi for 5½ years, was the soul of understanding. Chairman John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) was not.

Kerry is a decorated Vietnam veteran who led a notable peace demonstration in 1971. He was neither impressed nor intimidated by the doctor's huffing. He said the families of the missing could not imagine what had happened to our country that it took 20 years for the subject of their dear ones to be discussed. All the documents are still not declassified.

Kissinger is not accustomed to resistant chairmen. In the old days, if he was upset, appeasement was immediately applied. When reporters asked rude questions about his taps, Kissinger had a tantrum in Salzburg, Austria, and threatened to resign. The

Senate quickly passed a resolution telling him he was wonderful.

Kerry was mannerly but "politely and nicely" adamant. The hearings were not about the treaty—Kerry thought it was good, if maybe four years late. And Kissinger was not being accused by mouthy staff members, but by senior officials of his own administration. And if Kissinger wanted to bomb the North Vietnamese into honoring the accords on the prisoners, why hadn't he said so? Why hadn't he told Congress?

"Why are we torturing ourselves?" Kissinger asked melodramatically. People who question his judgments he has always accused of inhuman acts. "Self-flagellation" he called criticism of his conduct of the war at the time.

The fact is that Kissinger, while he has unbounded confidence in his own considerable powers, is deeply distrustful of democracy. He knew Congress would do silly things, such as stop the war. He did not trust the public to support more bombs even for the prisoners—even though, he told the senators, the people understood the barbaric 1972 Christmas bombing of Hanoi better than the press.

Kissinger and Richard M. Nixon are now being mauled by a monster they created. When he was elected to "end the war and win the peace" in 1968, Nixon was desperate for an alibi to keep the war going. He could not admit he had lost or abandoned our Saigon allies. He and Kissinger hit upon the notion of using the prisoners and the missing as a reason for fighting on. The families were organized, invited to the White House, visited regularly by Kissinger. Vietnamization was introduced. Kissinger began his night flights to the peace table, mesmerized the news media, dazzled Congress, talked the years away—and 20,000 Americans and God knows how many Vietnamese died in the fighting.

In a session with Hanoi in May 1972, Kissinger asked Le Duc Tho for "a sentence . . . saying no prisoners are being held in Laos." In August, to Saigon friends, he said of the North Vietnamese, "I prefer that they don't return the prisoners of war, that there is no cease-fire before the election."

In the end, with Watergate seeping into the Oval Office, when it came to a choice between the politically attractive signing and persevering to "move heaven and Earth" for the prisoners, on whose behalf the war had presumably been prolonged for four years, it was no contest.