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At a critical stage in the Reagan administration's covert dealings with Iran, then-Vice President Bush became an influential "advocate" of sending arms to Tehran each time a U.S. hostage in Lebanon was released, according to Richard V. Secord, chief logistics officer for the operation.

Secord's allegation appears in his autobiography, "Honored and Betrayed," released yesterday, and challenges Bush's repeated claims that he did not participate in shaping the Iran initiative.

White House spokesman Judy Smith dismissed Secord's assertions as "absolutely false," adding "there's no truth to them whatsoever."

But Democratic presidential nominee Bill Clinton sought to focus yesterday on questions about Bush's involvement in the Iran-contra affair. "I've answered a hundred times more questions on the draft than he has on Iran-contra," Clinton told reporters.

Secord's account dates to a meeting Bush had in Jerusalem on July 29, 1986, with the late Amiram Nir, then chief counterterrorism adviser to the Israeli prime minister and a key player in the arms-for-hostages deals with Iran. Bush at the time was winding up a trip to Europe and the Middle East.

By then, there had been three previous covert U.S. arms shipments to Iran in 1986 that failed to gain the promised release of the four U.S. hostages held in Lebanon by Iranian terrorists. As a result, President Reagan decided in June 1986 there would be no more secret arms deliveries until all Americans were released.

Faced with a shutdown of the operation, Nir and Iranian middleman Manucher Ghorbanifar arranged with Tehran for the release of the Rev. Lawrence Jenco, and promised a resumption of U.S. arms shipments.

When Jenco was freed on July 26, 1986, Nir went to then-White House aide Oliver L. North, who was managing the operation, to arrange for the United States to ship arms and abandon its "all-or-nothing" policy.

North wrote a memo to Reagan supporting the arms shipment, saying without it the other hostages might be killed. He also enlisted the support of then-CIA Director William J. Casey for an immediate shipment.

Additionally, North arranged the unusual 25-minute breakfast meeting between the U.S. vice president and the Israeli counterterrorism expert in Bush's suite at Jerusalem's King David Hotel.

When questioned about that meeting in December 1986 by the Tower Review Board investigating Iran-contra, Bush said the dis-

ussion was primarily about counterterrorism. But a Bush aide's notes of that briefing, made public in February 1987, show that Nir outlined for Bush the history of the arms-for-hostages initiative and the need for "sequencing" future arms shipments with hostage releases.

Bush, asked by reporters later in 1987 about his involvement in the Iranian arms operation, said, "I don't know that I had a specific role in making any determinations of it." Asked if he had taken any action following his meeting with Nir, he replied, "Not that I can tell you about."

On July 30, 1986, the day after Bush's meeting in Jerusalem, Reagan approved an arms shipment to Iran.

Secord, a former Air Force major general, based his account of Bush's role on a meeting with Nir in Tel Aviv two days after the Israeli had briefed Bush and subsequent conversations Secord had with North.

Secord writes that North told him over the phone the "big news" was that Bush had "relayed the Israeli proposal to President Reagan" for abandoning the "all-or-nothing" policy and shipping arms.

At a meeting with reporters here yesterday, Secord added that North told him in a face-to-face meeting "that the V.P. had briefed the president" about his session with Nir.

"Since the president had been so adamant before," Secord writes, "Nir's briefing must have been a doozy, moving Bush from note-taker to advocate, but that appears to be what happened."

Secord's evidence that Bush influenced the decision is circumstantial. Secord reports that Nir told him in Tel Aviv that "things could not have turned out better!" in Nir's meeting with Bush and that Bush had been "very attentive, very interested in everything," but "noncommittal in his response."

Secord quotes Nir as saying Bush "indicated only that he would take the proposal for sequential release back to President Reagan for final judgment." But Nir's "gut feeling," Secord told reporters yesterday, "was that Bush would be helpful."

While Bush has said he was "out of the loop" in Iran-contra, Secord said yesterday Bush "was not out of the loop, he was in the loop."

"He clearly was not running the show [but] he was a close adviser to the president. To me, that's 'in the loop'... I think President Reagan relied on him a lot in these dealings," Secord said.

At the White House, Smith charged that Secord's account was "a political maneuver to help his book get sold." Secord, however, told reporters that he intended to vote for Bush.

Secord Book: Bush Became Arms-for-Hostages Advocate

Vice President Was 'in the Loop' on Iran-Contra