

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

'Out of the Loop'

IT BECOMES harder to believe that, as he still insists, President Bush was "out of the loop" in the Iran-contra affair. This is the phrase he used to argue that he was unaware of and uninvolved in the Reagan administration's secret efforts in the mid-1980s to (1) buy out the American hostages trapped in Lebanon by selling arms to Iran, although Ronald Reagan had ruled out arm-for-hostages dealings, and (2) apply the proceeds to buying arms for the Nicaraguan resistance, although Congress had outlawed such aid.

The assertions now being made of then-Vice President Bush's involvement in the issue are not all equally weighty. But disinterested statements attributed to George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger, Reagan Cabinet members, have had an especially telling effect in shredding Mr. Bush's repeated denials of having been fully aware of the affair and of the internal opposition to it. And Richard Secord, a participant in it, has now leveled a charge that Mr. Bush became an influential "advocate" of trading arms to Tehran.

As a result of the accumulation of so far un rebutted statements—and, of course, with the prompting one would expect from Mr. Bush's challenger, Bill Clinton—the president's credibility in Iran-contra has become a central issue in his reelection campaign. Mr. Bush is in an unenviable squeeze. If he maintains his denials, he exposes himself to sharpening challenges to his credibility—and this at a moment when he has sought to make "trust" a

principal issue on which to attack Bill Clinton. But if under the mounting pressure he changes his story, he opens himself up to a whole range of charges bearing on his personal integrity and conceivably his culpability in dubious and even illegal activities.

Unless, of course, he has a convincing explanation that has not yet been offered to the public. Perhaps he does. Mr. Bush has been (briefly) officially interrogated in Iran-contra before much of the subsequent material came out. But he has not given a broad account publicly. In particular, he has not responded in detail since the disclosure of a damaging note from former defense secretary Weinberger; it confirmed earlier testimony by former secretary of state Shultz placing the supposedly out-of-the-loop Mr. Bush at a key meeting where Mr. Weinberger spoke against covert arms sales to Iran.

So what? some say—it was a tough situation and another day. But Iran-contra was not just a little failed stunt. It was, in its practical consequences, a major diplomatic and political disaster; in its wielding of secret executive powers an assault on constitutional government, and in its demands on involved officials a far-reaching test of judgment and integrity. In short, few other experiences could be more relevant to the measuring of presidential capacity. Not just for the president but for the country, it is embarrassing to have questions raised about a chief executive's stand. But a full and honest accounting is due. But not by the

Post, which makes no mention of a lead item or the day before, which needs to be mentioned. That is, there has a classified Israeli memo saying Bush was involved personally.