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A Self-Inflicted Shiner

George Bush got two black eyes in a week: one was delivered by a snowball-throwing grandchild; the other was self-administered, his Christmas Eve pardon for Caspar W. Weinberger and company.

Bush, who is chasing posterity like a man in pursuit of a train pulling out of the station, is touchy on the subject. He wanted to talk about nuclear treaties and trips to Somalia—and someone asked him if the pardons showed that government officials “are above the law.” He flared up, complained of “stupid comment” and “rather frivolous reporting.” To him, apparently, what some regarded as a constitutional crisis was a game which the Democrats lost in congressional hearings, and which independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh lost again in court. He thinks they are being poor sports. He is trying to make it official that the whole Iran-contra thing never really happened—just as Ronald Reagan said as the story exploded in his face.

It is easy to see why Bush felt he had to pardon the former secretary of defense. It would have been awkward for him to go skipping off into retirement while a notable Republican, who is 75 and sick and has a sick wife, was pinioned in federal court, by a scandal that never would have happened if his advice had been taken. We don't know what Bush really thought about the cockamamie idea of trading arms for hostages with Iran. By his code, he would not have said it was wrong, even if he thought so. In Establishment circles, resignation over principle is considered bad form. Loyalty is all. It was important to Weinberger, too. He called the policy illegal, but did his little part when called upon. Then-Secretary of State George P. Shultz, who also opposed it, kept silent, too.

Bush's problem is that he took so little care to convince the country that he was trying to avert discomfiture for an old friend rather than for himself. By including five others in his mercy, he made sure that no embarrassing disclosures about his own role are likely to be made in open court under oath. There remains the possibility that his 80-year-old nemesis, independent counsel Walsh, roused now like a lion in winter, will haul him into some forum where protests that he is a “man of integrity” and was “out of the loop” will not do. Walsh is seeking Bush's notes on the scandal.

A large crack in Bush's facade

opened up when it was announced that he is retaining Griffin B. Bell, President Jimmy Carter's attorney general, as his lawyer. Bell is to represent him in the matter of the notes—and possibly to negotiate for him yet another swap, the papers in exchange for release of the deposition he gave in January 1988. If the urgent seeking of publication is a bluff—Bush acts as if it will exonerate him—we will know sooner than we have known anything else in the case.

Bush lost any chance for widespread acceptance by the pardon proclamation he issued, an unimaginably fatuous and spurious document. He makes much of Weinberger's patriotism, which was never an issue. He notes several times that Weinberger and the others—Robert C. McFarlane, Elliott Abrams, and the CIA trio of Duane R. “Dewey” Clarridge, Alan D. Fiers Jr. and Clair E. George—are all splendid fellows who love their country and they did not do what they did not out of greed but patriotism. This must ring ironically with some members of Congress who had their patriotism questioned by a snarling, glaring Abrams when they took exception to his “better dead than red” policy for El Salvadoran peasants.

But several prominent members of Congress were ready to overlook being lied to. In advance of the pardon, Bush agents sought out House Speaker Thomas S. Foley (D-Wash.) and Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.), President-elect Clinton's designated secretary of defense. House Majority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.) and Senate Majority Leader George J. Mitchell (D-Maine) voiced objections, but Foley and Aspin said they would not make a fuss. Clinton is getting his first taste of congressional Democratic solidarity and of what life will be like with Aspin in the Cabinet.

Rep. Les AuCoin (D-Ore.), who lost a bid for the Senate seat of Bob Packwood, saw it this way: “What the pardon says is that people in the Executive Department can carry out a policy in secret, lie like hell about it to Congress and then expect the big guy to take them off the hook.”

Bush sees no moral problems. You might think the leader of the “family values” party might come out against lying, although it is clear that he and the pardonees think it's no big deal if it's Congress.

He may end up wishing that he had at least come out with Reagan's minimalist, passive-voice Iran-contra formulation, “Mistakes were made.”