

Bush Bristles at Queries On Role in Iran Initiative

Attendance at Key Meeting Still in Dispute

By Walter Pincus
and George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writers

In his latest attempt to put the Iran-contra affair behind him, President Bush said yesterday that he and his staff have answered thousands of questions about the scandal and insisted that he was not present at a key January 1986 meeting on the Iran initiative, contradicting two former Cabinet secretaries.

In an interview on NBC's "Today" show, Bush gave a confusing response on another disputed point in the complex Iran-contra story: when it was that he first realized the 1985-86 Iran initiative amounted to trading arms for hostages.

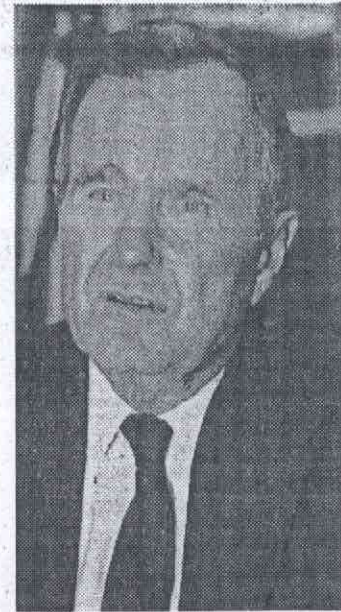
Bush said that renewed questioning about his role in and knowledge of the scandal was "a desperate attempt to level it with the failure [of Democratic presidential nominee Bill Clinton] to tell the truth" about his draft status during the Vietnam War.

"I'm sorry," Bush went on. "I think we're totally different." At another point, he said "it's a crazy thing to try to equate this with telling the truth on the draft."

Bush's offhand remarks yesterday did little to clarify lingering questions about his involvement and provided an opening for the Clinton-Gore campaign to charge that his statements "just don't add up."

Bush said he and his staff had answered 4,000 questions about the affair, "450 by me, some under oath, some to the news media, [and] 3,500 by staff." At another point, he said, "I've testified 450 times under oath."

The one time Bush testified under oath about Iran-contra was on Jan. 11, 1988, at a closed session with prosecutors for independent



PRESIDENT BUSH
... never made Tower records public



GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS
... "current story is now different"

counsel Lawrence E. Walsh. The proceeding has never been made public.

The only other official questioning of Bush about Iran-contra took place on Dec. 18, 1986, before the Tower review board, the investigating panel set up by President Ronald Reagan following disclosure that profits from the secret arms sales to Iran had been diverted to help the contra rebels in Nicaragua.

That session, which was not under oath, lasted for about an hour and, according to one participant, consisted primarily of a lecture by Bush.

No transcript was made, and the 11 pages of classified notes taken by the board's counsel are in the custody of the Reagan presidential library.

Clinton-Gore communications director George Stephanopoulos

called on Bush yesterday to make public the records of his appearances before Walsh's prosecutors and the Tower board. "Since his current story is now different from his original alibi," Stephanopoulos charged, "Bush either told the American people one thing in public and told investigators another in private—or misled both."

In the 1988 presidential campaign, Bush promised to make the Tower board records public, but never did so.

In yesterday's interview, Bush

took issue with former secretary of state George P. Shultz and former secretary of defense Caspar W. Weinberger over a key meeting on the Iran initiative that was held in the Oval Office on Jan. 7, 1986.

According to Weinberger's notes and Shultz's testimony before the Tower board, Bush attended the session, which took place immediately after a National Security Council meeting. At the later session, both Shultz and Weinberger voiced strong opposition to the secret arms sales to Iran.

Bush yesterday contended that he did not attend the meeting, one of two he described as "key meetings where they [Weinberger and Shultz] almost got into a shouting match, I'm told. . . ."

But in a 1988 interview with The Washington Post, Bush said "records indicate I probably attended an ad hoc meeting on Jan. 7, 1986 . . . but I do not recall any strenuous objection" to the arms sales to Iran.

Bush also said that he has consistently acknowledged knowing the arms sales were meant to be for the release of U.S. hostages being held in Lebanon by pro-Iranian groups. Asked yesterday, "You knew about the arms for hostages?" Bush replied: "Yes, and I've said so all along, given speeches on it."

But in his very first public statement on the scandal on Dec. 3, 1986, Bush said that Reagan was "absolutely convinced that he didn't swap arms for hostages." In a February 1987 interview, Bush said he did not realize the transactions could be considered arms-for-hostages deals until he was briefed about the scandal by then-Senate intelligence committee chairman Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.) in late December 1986.

In that 1987 interview, Bush was asked about a memo by his chief of staff, describing a July 1986 meeting in Jerusalem between Bush and an Israeli official involved in the arms sales to Tehran. The memo portrayed the Israeli as telling Bush that future hostage releases would depend on sequential shipments of U.S. arms. But Bush said he had not understood that to be the case.

BUSH ON IRAN-CONTRA

Bush on arms for hostages:

"You must remain true to your principles, and I can tell you that the president is absolutely convinced that he did not swap arms for hostages."

"I was aware of our Iran initiative, and I support the president's decision. And I was not aware of, and I oppose, any diversion of funds, any ransom payments, or any circumvention of the will of the Congress and the law of the United States of America."

—*American Enterprise Institute speech, Washington, Dec. 3, 1986*

"I could see that it got a little close but not enough to say this was arms for hostages. And I was persuaded by the president's view on that. And he said here's two tracks—one track, let's get the hostages out; two, try to establish contact with the so-called contacts in Iran."

—*News conference in Des Moines, Jan. 8, 1988*

"I have said over and over again that the original proposal was not presented as an arms-for-hostages swap. The president has so stated many times. This has been exhaustively looked at by Congress and the Tower commission."

—*Interview with Mary McGrory, Washington Post, Jan. 14, 1988*

"I didn't say I didn't know anything that was going on. I said it never became clear to me, the whole arms-for-hostages thing, until it was fully debriefed, investigated and debriefed by Durenberger."

—*Interview, ABC's "Nightline," June 9, 1988*

Katie Couric: "You knew about the arms for hostages?"

President Bush: "Yes, and I've said so all along, given speeches on it."

—*Interview on NBC's "Today," Oct. 13, 1992*

Bush on Shultz and Weinberger:

"If I'd have sat there and heard [Secretary of State] George Shultz and Cap [Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger] express it [opposition] strongly maybe I would have had a stronger view. But when you don't know something, it's hard to react. . . . We were not in the loop."

—*Interview with David S. Broder, Washington Post, Aug. 6, 1987*

"In retrospect there were signals along the way that gave fair warning that the Iran initiative was headed for trouble. As it turned out, George Shultz and Cap Weinberger had serious doubts, too. If I'd known that and asked the president to call a meeting of the NSC, he might have seen the project in a different light, as a gamble doomed to fail."

—*"Looking Forward," Bush autobiography, 1987*

"I was not at meetings in 1985, especially the Dec. 7, 1985, meeting, when objections were apparently forcefully stated. Records indicate I probably attended an ad hoc meeting on Jan. 7, 1986, which was not an NSC meeting—but I do not recall any strenuous objection. Had there been any strenuous objection, I am sure I would have remembered it."

—*Interview with Mary McGrory, Washington Post, Jan. 14, 1988*

"I knew that Caspar Weinberger and Shultz, how strongly they opposed it. And I said to that, there were two key meetings where they almost got into a shouting match, I'm told, that I did not attend. But I said all along that I knew about the arms going, and I supported the president."

—*Interview on NBC "Today," Oct. 13, 1992*

Ex-CIA Official's Lawyers Seek to Oust Prosecutor

Defense attorneys in the upcoming Iran-contra retrial of former CIA spymaster Clair E. George said in federal court yesterday that they will seek removal of deputy independent counsel Craig A. Gillen as chief prosecutor.

Gordon Coffee, representing George, said he will file a motion later this week asking that Gillen be removed from the case because one false-statement count in the indictment relates to a conversation between Gillen and George and Gillen may be called to testify.

Jury selection in the retrial of George on seven counts of lying and obstruction of a grand jury is scheduled to start next week. The first trial last summer ended in a mistrial when jurors failed to reach a unanimous verdict of guilty or not guilty on any of nine counts. Yesterday, U.S. District Judge Royce C. Lamberth ordered dismissal of two obstruction counts as requested by the prosecution.

Last week, Gillen withdrew from the team prosecuting former defense secretary Caspar W. Weinberger after U.S. District Judge Thomas Hogan said he was seriously entertaining a defense motion for Gillen's removal in that case.

Weinberger's lawyers argued that Gillen might have to be called as a witness because one charge against their client involved an alleged false statement made directly to Gillen.