

IN PRINT

The old man and Iran-Contra

By Robert Parry

In crucial ways, Watergate, the signature scandal of the '70s, and Iran-Contra, the signature scandal of the '80s, were opposites. Watergate showed how the press and constitutional institutions of American democracy—Congress and the courts—could check a gross abuse of power by the executive branch. A short dozen years later, the Iran-Contra scandal demonstrated how those same institutions had ceased to protect the nation from serious White House wrongdoing.

Watergate, the scandal that undid Richard Nixon's presidency, started a quarter century ago as a case of political skullduggery, in Nixon's phrase, a "third-rate burglary" at the Democratic National Committee's headquarters in the Watergate complex. But it sparked a brief national awakening, which exposed Cold War abuses—government spying on dissidents, lies about the Vietnam War and assassination plots hatched at the CIA.

Watergate and Nixon's resignation in 1974 also startled conservatives, who responded by constructing a new political infrastructure. With vast sums from right-wing foundations and anti-Communist foreign interests such as the South Korean-based Unification Church, conservatives started magazines, newspapers, television networks and aggressive political operations.

In 1986, a secret scheme surfaced to finance the Contra war in Nicaragua against the elected leftist Sandinista government by selling weapons to Iran. These crimes were arguably more serious than those of Watergate. Iran was a declared terrorist state, and the Contras had earned a reputation for slaughtering civilians, a major factor in the congressional decision in 1984 to cut off U.S. assistance. Ronald Reagan circumvented the Constitution and operated clandestine foreign policy in defiance of Congress.

The Iran-Contra cover-up marked the restoration of a Cold War status quo in which crimes, both domestic and

international, could be committed by the executive branch while the Congress and the press looked the other way. It was a victory of weakness and deceit. On one front, the Washington media want to perpetuate the myth that they remain the heroic Watergate press corps of *All the President's Men*. On another, the national Democratic establishment wants to forget how it crumbled in the face of pressures from the Reagan-Bush administrations. And the Republicans want to protect the legacy of their last two presidents.

Those combined interests likely will lead to few favorable reviews of a book by a man who put himself in the way of that cover-up—Iran-Contra independent counsel Lawrence Walsh. In his remarkable book, *Firewall: The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-up*, Walsh details his six-year battle to break through the "firewall" that White House officials built around President Reagan and Vice President George Bush after the Iran-Contra scandal exploded in November 1986.

For Walsh, a lifelong Republican who shared the foreign policy views of the Reagan administration, the Iran-Contra experience was life-changing. His investigation penetrated one wall of lies only to be confronted with another and another—and not just lies from Oliver North and his cohorts but lies from nearly every senior administration official who spoke with investigators.

According to Walsh, the cover-up conspiracy took formal shape at a meeting of Reagan and his top advisers at the White House on November 24, 1986. The meeting's principal point of concern was how to handle the troublesome fact that Reagan had approved illegal arms sales to Iran in the fall of 1985. The act was a felony—a violation of the Arms Export Control Act—and possibly an impeachable offense.

Though Iran-Contra documents and testimony would eventually establish that virtually everyone in the room knew that Reagan had approved those shipments through Israel, Attorney General Edwin Meese announced what would become the cover story:

[Meese] told the group that although [NSC adviser Robert] McFarlane had informed [Secretary of State George] Shultz of the planned shipment, McFarlane had not informed the president. ... [White House chief of staff Don] Regan, who had heard McFarlane inform the president and who had heard the president admit to Shultz that he knew of the shipment



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of Hawk [anti-aircraft] missiles, said nothing. Shultz and [Defense Secretary Caspar] Weinberger, who had protested the shipment before it took place, said nothing. [Vice President George] Bush, who had been told of the shipment in advance by McFarlane, said nothing. [CIA Director William] Casey, who ... [had] requested that the president sign the retroactive finding to authorize the CIA-facilitated delivery, said nothing. [NSC adviser John] Poindexter, who had torn up the finding, said nothing. Meese asked whether anyone knew anything else that hadn't been revealed. No one spoke. When Shultz returned to the State Department, he dictated a note to his aide, Charles Hill, who wrote down that Reagan's men were "rearranging the record." They were trying to protect the president through a "carefully thought out strategy" that would "blame it on Bud [McFarlane]."

As part of that strategy, virtually all of Reagan's top advisers, including Shultz, gave false and misleading testimony to Congress and prosecutors. Their accounts essentially blamed the illegalities on Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North and his bosses at the National Security Council, McFarlane and Poindexter. Pretty much everyone else—at the CIA, the Defense Department, the Vice President's office and the White House—claimed ignorance.

Even though Oliver North testified in 1987 that he was the "fall guy," the Democrats and much of the press corps

fell for it. Later, leading congressional Democrats, including House Speaker Jim Wright, acknowledged that they decided early in the inquiry that Reagan would not be implicated—regardless of the facts—to avert a politically wrenching impeachment battle. By the fall of 1987, the "men of zeal" cover story that placed a few underlings as initiators of the illegal arms sales had been enshrined as the official history of the Iran-Contra affair.

The story might have stopped there but for the work of Walsh and his small team of lawyers. Yet Walsh's investigation was hampered from the start by congressional rashness and criticism from the media. Congress was so ready to accept the theory of a rogue operation that it rushed ahead with televised hearings designed to make North and his NSC superiors, McFarlane and Poindexter, the primary culprits. Without even questioning North ahead of time, the Iran-Contra committee granted the charismatic Marine officer and his pipe-smoking boss, Poindexter, limited immunity.

Three years later, that immunity came back to haunt Walsh's hard-won convictions of North and Poindexter on cover-up charges. Conservative judges on the federal appeals court, particularly Reagan loyalists Laurence Silberman and David Sentelle, exploited the immunity opening to reverse North's conviction in 1990. Sentelle, a protégé of Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC), also joined in the decision to wipe out Poindexter's conviction in 1991. (Since then, Sentelle has taken over the three-judge panel that selects independent counsels.)

Still, Walsh's investigation had broken through the White House cover-up in 1991-92. Almost by accident, as Walsh's staff double-checked some long-standing document requests, the lawyers discovered hidden notes belonging to Weinberger and other senior officials. The notes made clear that there was widespread knowledge of the 1985 illegal shipments to Iran and that a major cover-up had been orchestrated by the Reagan and Bush administrations.

The belated discovery led to indictments against senior CIA officials and Weinberger. Congressional Republicans, led by Sen. Bob Dole, reacted by angrily denouncing Walsh and calling for an end to his investigation. The Washington press corps also had grown hostile, complaining that Walsh's probe had taken too long and had cost too much. The conservative *Washington Times* and the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page fired near-daily barrages at Walsh, often over trivial matters, such as first-class airfare and room-service meals. Key columnists and editorial writers for the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*—along with television pundits David Brinkley and Christopher Matthews—joined in Walsh bashings. Walsh was mocked as a modern-day Captain Ahab.

In his book, however, Walsh compared his experience to another maritime classic, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. In that story, an aging fisherman hooks a giant marlin and, after a long battle, secures the fish to the side of his boat. On the way back to port, sharks attack the marlin, devouring its flesh and denying the fisherman his prize. "As the independent counsel, I sometimes felt like the old man," Walsh writes. "More often, I felt like the marlin."

More seriously, the congressional and media attacks effectively limited Walsh's ability to pursue what appeared to be other false statements by senior administration officials. Those perjury inquiries could have unraveled other national-security mysteries of the '80s and helped correct the historical record. But Walsh could not overcome the pack-like hostility of official Washington.

For instance, the Walsh team suspected that Bush's national security adviser, ex-CIA officer Donald Gregg, had lied when he testified that he was unaware of North's Con-

tra resupply operation. Gregg's close friend Felix Rodriguez worked with North in Central America and called Gregg after each Contra delivery. There already had been problems with Gregg's story, including the discovery of a vice-presidential office memo describing a planned meeting with Rodriguez about "resupply of the Contras." Gregg bizarrely explained the memo away as a typo that should have read, "resupply of the copters."

Gregg failed a polygraph test when he denied knowledge of the Contra supply operation. The polygraph again indicated that Gregg was lying when he denied participating in the so-called October Surprise operation, an alleged secret CIA-GOP operation in 1980 to undermine President Carter's Iran hostage negotiations and secure Reagan's election.

Walsh felt compelled to set aside allegations about Gregg as he struggled to finish several pending perjury cases against Weinberger and CIA officials Clair George and Duane Clarridge. As those cases moved haltingly forward, anti-Walsh attacks multiplied in Congress and in the Washington media.

The Republican independent counsel also infuriated the GOP when he submitted a second indictment of Weinberger on the Friday before the 1992 elections. The indictment contained documents revealing that President Bush had been lying for years when he had claimed that he was "out of the loop" on the Iran-Contra decisions. The ensuing furor dominated the last several days of the campaign and sealed Bush's defeat at the hands of Bill Clinton.

Walsh discovered, too, that Bush withheld his own notes about the Iran-Contra affair, a discovery that elevated the president to a possible criminal subject of the investigation.

But Bush had one more weapon in his arsenal. On Christmas Eve 1992, Bush destroyed the Iran-Contra probe once and for all by pardoning Weinberger and five other convicted or indicted defendants. "George Bush's misuse of the pardon power made the cover-up complete," Walsh writes. "What set Iran-Contra apart from previous political scandals was the fact that a cover-up engineered in the White House of one president and completed by his successor prevented the rule of law from being applied to the perpetrators of criminal activity of constitutional dimension."

But the cover-up likely could not have worked if other Washington institutions—Congress, the courts and the press—had not helped. Those institutions aided and abetted the White House both directly, through decisions that undermined the cases or reversed convictions, or indirectly, through incessant heckling of Walsh's investigators over trivial complaints.

Like the cover-up, the historic reversal—from the constitutional protections of Watergate to the flouting of law in Iran-Contra—was complete. ◀

Robert Parry broke many Iran-Contra stories for *The Associated Press*, *Newsweek* and PBS' *Frontline*. He now edits *I.F. Magazine* and *The Consortium*, where a version of this review first appeared.

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Cracking myths about crack

By Jeffrey L. Reynolds

Crack first appeared in late 1984 and found a home in the minority-populated, inner-city neighborhoods of New York, Los Angeles and Miami. With its low cost and quick high, the cocaine derivative was a perfect match for those looking to escape the realities of impoverished urban life—and for those looking to escalate America's war on drugs. Madison Avenue and Pennsylvania Avenue spin doctors conjured up lurid images of predatory dealers, crazed whores and struggling, tube-filled babies. Proclaiming crack evil, they warned well-off suburbanites about its purported instantly addicting properties.

"By and large, the media and politicians' pronouncements about drugs spread exaggerations, misinformation and simplistic theories of cause and effect. They taught bad pharmacology, bad sociology, bad criminology, bad urban anthropology and even bad history," write sociologists Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine in the first chapter of *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*. The editors pull no punches in setting the record straight. They have assembled an impressive team of veteran lawyers, physicians and academics to write the definitive book on crack.

Though *Crack in America* offers a scathing indictment of current drug policy similar to last year's landmark *Drug War Politics* by Eva Bertram, Kenneth Sharpe, Morris Blachman and Peter Andreas, this book's singular focus is among its strengths. The 17 essays put the drug in historical, political, economic, legal and social context.

Despite the splashy headlines and tabloid TV shows that fueled '80s crack hysteria, a widespread epidemic never materialized, according to research by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Among adults queried in a 1992 national household survey, only 3 percent had ever tried crack. Of these, one-third had used it in the previous month and another third in the previous year. An even smaller fraction, the editors argue, have become addicted, instantly or otherwise. They do concede that "crack use may have been an epidemic ... among impoverished young African Americans and Latinos. However, crack use was never spreading fast or far enough among the general population to be termed

an epidemic there."

Crack in America sharply refutes the "just say no" simple-mindedness that characterizes much of the discussion about illegal drugs. "From the beginning," Reinerman and Levine write, "crack was a drug of escape from poverty and despair of inner-city men and women"—not only a psychopharmacological escape but an economic one as well. It's a well-worn assertion, but it bears repeating, especially when politicians blame unemployment, poverty and racism on drug use rather than the other way around.

Anthropologist Phillippe Bourgois echoes this point of view in his chapter, "In Search of Horatio Alger." He recounts his observations on the streets and in the crack houses of Spanish Harlem. "For many people I met, the underground economy and the culture of terror are seen as the most realistic routes to upward mobility," he writes. Crack dealers are, in a sense, the "ultimate 'rugged individualists,' braving an unpredictable free-market frontier where fortune, fame and destruction are all just around the corner."

Since male dealers dominate the drug marketplace, gender, like race and class, becomes part of an unbalanced equation that leaves women of color at a particular disadvantage. Researchers Sheigla Murphy and Marsha Rosenbaum spent two years interviewing 125 crack and cocaine users. Their case study of Monique, a young African-American woman who performs oral sex in a burnt-out public housing apartment in exchange for \$20 rocks, speaks volumes—especially in contrast to the experiences of another typical drug user, Becky, a white, middle-class, suburban teenager who works in a nightclub coat check on Saturday evenings. Becky and her co-workers pool their tips to score a few lines of cocaine from the bartender at the end of the night. Becky eventually heads off to Hawaii with her father, abandons her habit and succeeds in college. Monique stops using crack only to wind up miserably depressed in a homeless shelter with no job prospects.

Though such stereotypical extremes will make some readers cringe, the authors maintain that these case studies accurately portray a broader social reality. They use the two examples to highlight key differences that extend beyond the crack-vs.-cocaine debate. Import-

CRACK IN AMERICA

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