

The politics of presidential illness

Ronald Reagan and the Iran-Contra Scandal

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ABSTRACT. This paper assesses the likelihood that the Iran-Contra scandal was shaped heavily by the effects of Ronald Reagan's cancer surgery in summer, 1985. During the President's hospitalization and in the period soon after, he took several actions—which he apparently did not remember—that launched a policy that was unwise, counterproductive, and a failure. These damaged both his Administration and his standing in history. The 25th Amendment afforded Reagan the means by which his involvement in these events could easily have been avoided. However, the President and his aides determined that he would resume the powers and duties of the presidency only hours after undergoing extensive cancer surgery. This decision contributed materially to the most damaging episode of Reagan's eight-year presidency.

Key words: Ronald Reagan, colon cancer, 25th Amendment, surgery, stress, anesthesia, Iran-Contra scandal

On Friday, July 12, 1985, President Ronald Reagan underwent a 43-minute colonoscopic examination during which a small, benign polyp was removed from his colon. The procedure also revealed the existence of a rather large growth in his lower right colon that perturbed his doctors since they believed that the chances of malignancy were high. Doctors told First Lady Nancy Reagan that the growth was probably cancerous or, at best, precancerous, and indicated that they were concerned about a possible spread to the surrounding areas, particularly the liver.¹ So certain was White House Physician Dr. John Hutton that the growth was malignant that he told the acting press secretary, Larry Speakes, on that Friday, "It's cancer, it's big, it's black, it's ugly."²

The President was advised that he could go to Camp David for the weekend, as he had planned, and return to the hospital on Monday for surgery or else remain in the hospital and have the surgery performed the next

day. Since Reagan abhorred the medicine that purges one's intestinal tract prior to a colonoscopy, he opted to have the surgery performed without delay.

Invocation of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment

In part because of the criticism leveled at him for not invoking the Twenty-Fifth Amendment after the 1981 assassination attempt,³ Reagan decided to delegate his powers formally to Vice President George H. W. Bush during the time he would be under anesthesia and immediately afterward. At 10:32 a.m. on July 13, he signed a letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, in which he stated:

I am about to undergo surgery during which time I will be briefly and temporarily incapable of discharging the Constitutional powers and duties of the office of the President of the United States. After consultation with my counsel and the Attorney General, I am mindful of the provisions of Section 3 of the 25th Amendment to

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the Constitution and of the uncertainties of its application to such brief and temporary periods of incapacity. I do not believe that the drafters of this Amendment intended its application to situations such as the instant one. Nevertheless, consistent with my long-standing arrangement with Vice President George Bush and not intending to set a precedent binding anyone privileged to hold this office in the future, I have determined and it is my intention and direction that Vice President George Bush should discharge those powers and duties in my stead commencing with the administration of anesthesia to me in this instance.⁴

Bush, then, was designated as acting president, but Reagan seemed strangely guarded in *formally* invoking the Twenty-Fifth Amendment. Fred Fielding, Reagan's Counsel, later said, "based on my conversations with him about the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, both that day and before, I knew there was a serious reluctance on his part to establish binding precedent on future presidents for what he deemed to be minor surgical procedures." The President had asked Fielding, for example, "What happens if I have a toothache and have to have a tooth pulled out? Are you going to tell me to transfer power? I don't think that's what the Twenty-Fifth Amendment was intended to do."⁵

There is, however, an enormous difference between a president having a tooth removed—which can be accomplished quickly on an out-patient basis and without affecting the ability to reason and to communicate—and a president undergoing a three hour surgery for colon cancer during which time he or she will be unconscious and then recovering from anesthesia and pain. Despite Reagan's statement that he did not believe that the amendment pertained to such "brief and temporary periods of incapacity" as he then faced, he was simply incorrect in this belief. As former Senator Birch Bayh, a key author of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment has said, when a president is "going to be *non compos mentis*, somebody else should be running the shop."⁶

Yet this became, in fact, the first time the amendment was actually invoked, since the President followed its provisions perfectly. Fielding writes that, "For the benefit of historians, there is no question that the President knew he was temporarily transferring the presidency."⁷ At 11:30 a.m., when anesthesia began to be administered to the President, Vice President Bush

became Acting President of the United States. To make the record complete, Reagan subsequently acknowledged that he had, in fact, invoked the 25th Amendment prior to his cancer surgery. In his 1990 autobiography, he wrote that, "Before they wheeled me into the operating room, I signed a letter invoking the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, making George Bush acting president during the time I was incapacitated under anesthesia."⁸

Major surgery and its immediate aftermath

At 11:48 a.m. surgery commenced and continued until 2:41 p.m. A large, flat tumor was removed from the President's colon, along with two small polyps and two feet of his intestines.⁹ Much later, Dr. Hutton described the tumor as "enormous, purple in color, and with a large malignant appearing crater in its middle."¹⁰ Initially, it was not known with certainty whether the large growth was cancerous but doctors clearly suspected the worst. They were pleased, however, that cancer was not detected anywhere else in Reagan's body.

Surgeons also performed an exploratory procedure involving the entire length of the President's intestines, as well as his liver, spleen, and other parts of his abdomen. The large polyp was located in the cecum, the first portion of the large intestine. Since the doctors were reasonably certain, pending the outcome of biopsy, that the growth was cancerous, they treated it as though it were.¹¹ The section of the intestine which contained the polyp was not opened while it was inside the President's body. Also, surgeons used a technique known as "no touch" and, as Dr. Dale Oller explained, did not touch the polyp until after it had been removed, to avoid any inadvertent spread of cancer cells into other parts of the body.¹²

Doctors were pleased with the way the operation had gone, how well the patient had withstood it, and the ultimate prognosis. They said the President was "doing beautifully," and Dr. Stephen Rosenberg told reporters that even if cancer was present in the polyp that had been removed, the operation that the surgeons had performed "could in and of itself be curative."¹³ Chemotherapy would not be used, since it had not been found helpful in cases of colon cancer.¹⁴

To ease his pain after surgery, Reagan was given morphine in a manner minimally affecting mental

function. According to one of his surgeons, when the anesthesia wore off, he could make any decision that needed to be made.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the President revealed that he awoke from anesthesia “feeling groggy and confused.” He had an incision that ran up past his navel to his chest, his body was “laced with tubes of various dimensions,” and his “stomach felt as if it had really been through something.”¹⁶

Shortly after 7:00 p.m., aides visited the recovery room, bringing with them the letter by which the President could reclaim the powers and duties of his office. Not surprisingly, Chief of Staff Donald Regan found Reagan looking “pale and drawn.”¹⁷ He later reported that he had asked the doctors if they believed the President was now able to resume the powers of his office and that “they saw no reason why he should not do so.”¹⁸ When Regan asked the President how he felt, Reagan responded, “Fine. Fit as a fiddle.”¹⁹

Somewhat surprisingly, aides had decided that Reagan’s ability to read the letter they had given him to sign would signify that he was sufficiently lucid to take back his powers from the Vice President. Even though this was a remarkably casual test for such a monumental transfer of power, Reagan experienced difficulty in reading the letter, giving rise to the concern that he might be seriously impaired. But then, his counsel explained, the president “reminded us that he didn’t have his glasses or his contacts on. He said, ‘I just can’t read the darn thing.’”²⁰ After putting on his glasses, he read the letter perfectly.

Nevertheless, the chief of staff, press secretary, and the President’s counsel offered to come back after several hours and ask him to sign it then. Reagan responded, “Oh, heck no. I don’t want you to wake me up later. I want to sign it now.” Reagan’s counsel later argued that, “when we offered him the alternative of additional time, the President was very convincing in saying no.”²¹

In making this comment, Fielding was perhaps overly minimizing the responsibility that he had in such circumstances, as Reagan’s counsel, to protect the President and the country. He and Reagan’s other senior aides might well have informed the President that they would not wake him again during the night but would wait at least until later in the day. They might well have invited a White House physician to join the conversation, hoping that he might be able to convince the President that the opportunity afforded by

the 25th Amendment to allow himself to be relieved of the powers and duties of his office should be fully utilized at this very sensitive time and should continue to be used until his recovery was further advanced. These courses, however, were not followed—to Reagan’s detriment and the country’s.

Dr. Hutton later commented that, “it was absurd. I mean, would you let somebody drive a car after general anesthesia? No. And to make a decision that might influence the axis of the world—at any rate, they did that. They didn’t consult with anybody. Now I was just around the corner when this happened. Why they didn’t come and ask me, I don’t know, but they probably thought I’d probably tell them no, he wasn’t ready.” Hutton told Vice President Bush at the time that, “I don’t understand why people would do something like this.” The Vice President responded, “You’d never make a politician.”²²

At 7:22 p.m., the President signed the letter, informing the Speaker of the House and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate: “following up on my letter to you of this date, please be advised that I am able to resume the discharge of the Constitutional powers and duties of the Office of President of the United States. I have informed the Vice President of my determination and my resumption of these powers and duties.”²³ Accordingly, Bush served as Acting President for less than nine hours. Had Bush’s service been extended until Reagan had *substantially* recovered from his surgery, the Iran-Contra scandal might have been avoided entirely or someone other than Reagan might have received blame for it. But Bush’s service was *not* extended and it was Reagan himself who became engulfed by Iran-Contra.

For several days the President was in considerable pain and unable to sleep properly. On Monday, he received the bad news that the large polyp, removed two days earlier, was cancerous. Although told by his doctors that they had “gotten it all,” Reagan almost surely was upset. The cancer had penetrated the muscle wall of his bowel, indicating a heightened risk of metastatic disease.²⁴ However, Dr. Rosenberg assured the President that his cancer was fully confined to the wall of his colon and had not spread beyond it; none of the lymph nodes surrounding the colon showed evidence of tumor and there was no sign that tumor had invaded any blood vessels or nerves. The President’s doctors emphasized that his long-term survival

prospect was excellent since cancer had not been found elsewhere in his body and his lymph nodes were clear. Had the cancer cells entered the colonic wall and then spread to the liver, Reagan's life expectancy would have been less than 18 months.²⁵

The prognosis Dr. Rosenberg presented was highly optimistic. He told Reagan, "I think the chances are excellent that this tumor will not occur again. . . I think the weight of the evidence would indicate that no further treatment is indicated."²⁶ Dr. Hutton agreed. Although he admitted to the President's family that he would have been happier if the cancer had been confined to the polyp, Hutton informed them that, with the involved colonic segment cleanly removed intact, he and his colleagues were "very sure they had gotten it all."²⁷

The President and members of his family were upset with the way the media treated the story of his surgery. Soon after his cancerous growth was removed, Reagan watched a "medical expert" predicting during a television interview that he would not live five years, and he was understandably distressed at the negativity of this alternative prognosis. Deputy Press Secretary Speakes revealed that Mrs. Reagan was "particularly upset by the sight of a detailed diagram of the President's intestines on national television and was appalled when CBS ran an actual medical school videotape of a proctoscopic instrument probing the insides of a colon."²⁸

The President also felt that the press incorrectly reported the nature of his condition after his operation. He complained that news stories reported that he "has," rather than "had," cancer. In his diaries, he pointed out that "my doctors said use of the present tense is a misstatement. The President had cancer—it has been removed."²⁹ Even though Reagan was correct in this assertion, he himself appeared to have developed an unrealistically dreamlike view of his physical condition at the time after his surgery. In a letter to a friend, the President pointed out that, "I'm afraid the press has been more than a little overboard in their coverage of my recent surgery. The impression has been given that I was suffering from cancer and surgery removed the cancerous tumor. A more accurate account is that in a routine physical exam, a polyp of the type that can become cancer was discovered. It was still within the colon and self-contained but since I was in the hospital and already prepped, I told them to

remove it. It had developed a few cancer cells we discovered but that was the extent of it."³⁰ Obviously, this description downplayed excessively the status of a large cancerous tumor that had already invaded locally before it was discovered and removed. But as one of the President's doctors commented, "it was Reagan's way of dealing with cancer."³¹

News releases emphasized that the President was doing extremely well after his surgery. Dr. Oller announced that Reagan was "on a postoperative course that surpasses by 99.9 percent all patients who undergo this type of surgery. That includes all patients, much less one who is 74 years old. So far, it is a spectacular postoperative course."³² On July 20, only one week after surgery, Reagan returned to the White House, dressed in a shirt and pair of pants smaller than his usual size so that his weight loss would not be noticed. Three days later, he attended a state dinner for the visiting president of China, although he did not remain afterward for the entertainment. On July 27, he was able to walk around the shallow end of a swimming pool in his bathing suit,³³ a sure sign of recovery.

Political implications of Reagan's medical emergencies

Ronald Reagan's second-term medical status had major effects on his presidency. Most important was the cancer crisis of 1985, which seems to have been inextricably linked to the Iran-Contra scandal, one of the most serious scandals to be attached to any presidential administration in U.S. history. It will likely never be known with certainty how deeply Reagan was involved in the origins and development of this unfortunate episode but his reputation as President of the United States has surely suffered from it.

Ronald Reagan's management style was generally characterized by detachment and disengagement. He saw his role essentially as "setting the overall direction of policy and drawing the 'big picture,' while his advisers filled in the details and implemented his vision."³⁴ According to one biographer, Reagan "freely delegated authority to his subordinates, viewing his own role as both a ceremonial one, in which he enacted the important public aspects of the office, and that of spokesperson and salesman for the policies agreed upon."³⁵ This style of leadership demanded that he

surround himself with strong and competent advisers and that he oversee them carefully.

During his first term, the troika of Edmund Meese, Counselor to the President, James Baker, Chief of Staff, and Michael Deaver, Deputy Chief of Staff, along with the seven cabinet councils established to analyze specific policy areas, served Reagan rather effectively. Even though his style of making broad delegations of power to subordinates carried obvious risks, the administrative structure established during the first term minimized them and kept the President substantially informed and in touch with events. Ed Meese, a member of the troika, later wrote, “particularly in the early going, there was little danger that Reagan would be isolated from things he needed to know, kept from seeing people he should see, or made dependent on sole-source briefings.”³⁶

The picture changed dramatically in the second term. Chief of Staff Baker, exhausted by his White House responsibilities, decided that he would resign his post. At the same time, Treasury Secretary Donald Regan determined that he would leave his cabinet position as well. Instead, the two men decided to “swap” jobs and in early January 1985, they presented this idea to Reagan. As was his custom, the President asked few questions and seemed not to realize the great personal stake he had in the proposed arrangement. Regan later revealed that the President was “surprisingly passive” and “seemed to be absorbing a *fait accompli* rather than making a decision.”³⁷ Within less than 30 minutes, Reagan assented to the plan. It was a serious political blunder. Years later, he remarked that if he had appointed Baker to be National Security Adviser rather than Treasury Secretary, Iran-Contra “might never have happened.”³⁸

Prior to his successful stint as Treasury Secretary,³⁹ Regan had been an executive at the investment firm of Merrill Lynch. He has conceded that his knowledge of political matters was slight.⁴⁰ Not a politician by temperament, his curt and abrasive style made enemies for him throughout the capital. Baker had been a strong Chief of Staff but had a reputation for being diplomatic and gentlemanly. Former TV news anchor Tom Brokaw wrote that Baker represented a “brilliant choice” as Reagan’s Chief of Staff and that he kept a “low profile as he fine-tuned the daily and long-term White House operations so Reagan could be Reagan, the masterful player on the big stage.”⁴¹ On the other hand, Regan

was rather imperious and enjoyed boasting that, as Chief of Staff, he was the “prime minister of the Reagan court.”⁴² In the words of Dick Wirthlin, another Reagan aide, “Don was driven, smart, linear, serious and, in my view, had the political acuity of a toaster. In many ways he was a tragic figure.”⁴³

At the time Baker and Regan were swapping jobs, the other two members of the troika were also moving on, Meese to become attorney general, and Deaver to join the private sector. Thus, the powerful team that had served President Reagan so well in his first term was no longer in place. In addition, many lower ranking aides had moved on and been replaced by inexperienced novices. Deaver later wrote that by 1985, the Reagan presidency was “being served by strangers, newcomers who brought it to a standstill through bad staffing decisions.”⁴⁴ Within months, the presidency would be in considerable disarray and the President in danger of political destruction. During the summer of 1985, only a few months after the structure of Reagan’s presidency changed so dramatically, the Iran-Contra scandal began to materialize. It proved to be, by far, the most damaging episode in Reagan’s eight-year presidency.

The scandal’s origins

A firestorm erupted when an obscure Lebanese newspaper, *Al Shiraa*, broke the story of the arms-for-hostages arrangement between the United States and Iran, and key western media outlets quickly picked up the story. The scandal apparently had its beginnings in early 1984 when Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed terrorist group, took several American hostages and then went on to capture William Buckley, the station chief of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Beirut. One team of researchers explains that, “Buckley’s encyclopedic knowledge of terrorism and familiarity with every CIA agent in Lebanon made him a priceless catch, particularly since the destruction of the CIA station in the Beirut embassy bombing had left the United States with few eyes and ears in the region.”⁴⁵ A videotape of Buckley made by his captors suggested that he was being tortured.⁴⁶ The Administration quickly began to consider “options” if Buckley should be murdered. These included developing an “accurate target list,” which could be used in the U.S. response.⁴⁷

Then, Michael Ledeen, a National Security Council consultant with very close ties to Israel, suggested to National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane that the United States might profitably explore an opening to Iran in trying to secure Buckley's release. Since Iran was then involved in a protracted war against Iraq and had a desperate need for equipment and munitions, Iranian leaders might be amenable to American overtures.⁴⁸ It was never clear, however, that Iran enjoyed "sufficient control" over Hezbollah to bring about the immediate release of all U.S. hostages.⁴⁹

Ledeen visited Israel two months after Buckley and the other Americans were taken captive in order to discuss with Israeli officials ways of contacting Iranian "moderates." He even discussed with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres how the United States could improve its relations with Iran.⁵⁰ From these talks came the idea of providing arms to Iran in return for the release of CIA operative Buckley.⁵¹ Although Reagan had vowed in the past that he would never negotiate with terrorists and that terrorists could "run but not hide," Ledeen's plan—if approved by the President—would indicate that Reagan was indeed quite willing to make deals with a terrorist state.

McFarlane apparently persuaded the President to accept Ledeen's plan and become involved in a highly classified arms-for-hostages deal. This arrangement clashed with "Operation Staunch," a program established by Secretary of State George Schultz to ensure that no U.S. allies provided any arms to Iran, long labeled a "terrorist state."⁵² Therefore, it was kept secret from several key foreign policy officials. For example, it wasn't disclosed to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William Crowe, until July 1986.⁵³ This is especially significant in that the first two shipments of arms in August and September 1985, later described by Reagan as being rather small, were, in fact, quite large, totaling as many as 500 tube-launched, wire-guided anti-tank missiles.⁵⁴

The administration was intent on achieving two goals that, unsurprisingly, became badly entangled. First, Reagan and his foreign policy team had a strong interest in getting U.S. hostages in Lebanon released and returned to the United States. As the President said at a July 1987 meeting with his aides, "the American people won't understand if four hostages died because I did not break the law; they could impeach me if they wanted; visiting hours in prison were on Thursdays."⁵⁵ The President's

concerns quickly evolved into the previously mentioned scheme in which Iran, with close ties to the kidnapers, would receive arms as a good will gesture from the United States in return for which the hostages would be released. On January 17, 1986, Reagan wrote a note in his diary that emphasized this goal: "only thing waiting was NSC wanting decision on our efforts to get our 5 hostages out of Lebanon. Involved selling TOW anti-tank missiles to Iran. I gave go ahead."⁵⁶ (In discussing the hostage situation, President Reagan mentioned different numbers of hostages at different times during the crisis. I am remaining true to the exact wording of his remarks, regardless of the variations.)

The second goal of the administration was broader. As Aquilla suggests, "the most significant aspect of [Iran Contra] was not 'arms-for-hostages' per se but rather an attempt to reduce the antipathy that had developed between Iran—a leading state sponsor of terror—and the United States since the fall of the Shah."⁵⁷ Also, not too long before, Iran had been a Cold War ally of the United States in opposition to the Soviet Union. Reagan clearly did not want Iran to drift toward the communist bloc on his watch.⁵⁸ On February 23, 1987, at an Oval Office meeting, the President had made remarks that highlighted *this* goal as well, telling his aides that he had "authorized the arms sales for the purpose of improving the U.S. relationship with Iran and *not* to trade for the hostages."

In response to some of the discussion that ensued, Reagan seemed to admit that arms had indeed been traded for hostages but insisted that "this arose out of the way the operation was handled and not as a result of his policy."⁵⁹ He offered this same rationale when he addressed the nation in March 1987: "I undertook the original Iran initiative in order to develop relations with those who might assume leadership in a post-Khomeini government." But then he admitted to the country that, "What began as a strategic opening to Iran deteriorated in its implementation into trading arms for hostages."⁶⁰

The Nicaragua connection

The most explosive aspect of the arrangement with Iran was that some of the financial proceeds from the deal were eventually passed on to "the Contras," a

group of anti-government insurgents in Nicaragua that Congress had insisted be separated from U.S. support.⁶¹ Over several years, Congress had enacted measures—known collectively as the Boland Amendments—that were aimed at curtailing Reagan’s support for the Contras. The toughest of these was the 1984 Amendment that barred “all contra funding during fiscal 1985 originating from the CIA, the Defense Department, or any other agency or entity of the United States involved in intelligence activities . . . for the purpose of which would have the effect of supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua by any nation, group, organization, movement or individual.”⁶²

This congressional action clashed with the premise of the so-called Reagan Doctrine that *all* anti-communist insurgencies, no matter where, deserved the support of the United States.⁶³ Since Reagan saw communism as “a form of modern-day slavery” and regarded the Marxist “Sandinista” government of Nicaragua as a major threat that had to be excised, covert operations to undermine the Sandinista government continued without letup.⁶⁴ Specifically, arms were sold to the anti-Sandinista Contras by various third parties, including Saudi Arabia, Taiwan and Iran.⁶⁵ In the case of Iran, there was controversial—and possibly illegal—U.S. involvement. For the President seemingly to ignore the Congressional ban on such activities put him at risk of impeachment.

On August 8, 1985, the *New York Times* carried a front-page story detailing the National Security Council’s role in actively backing the Contras.⁶⁶ Almost immediately, members of Congress began to assess whether the Boland Amendment had been violated. Attention soon focused on William Casey, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, since he was well positioned to run such “rogue operations.”⁶⁷ Casey was a strong believer in covert action and showed his intention to follow a rather proactive and aggressive course of covert action against Soviet interests around the world.⁶⁸ As CIA Director, he saw Nicaragua as the newest hemispheric battleground between the forces of good and evil and came to appreciate NSC staff member Oliver North’s efforts with regard to the achievement of various clandestine goals. Richard Neustadt suggests that Casey “cheerfully, enthusiastically helped to install and virtually directed [Oliver] North’s activities, so North has testified, including

arms sales to Iran. He did so even though the secrecy of those sales could be blown at any time by any of the factions in Tehran, as indeed it was, exposing all of North’s affairs.”⁶⁹

Whether Casey knew in advance of the diversion of funds to the Contras in Nicaragua is unclear, but North maintained that he did. He wrote, “Casey and I discussed the ‘diversion’ on several occasions and he loved the idea. He praised it effusively and called it ‘the ultimate covert operation,’ which from him was high praise indeed.”⁷⁰ North also testified that Casey particularly welcomed the opportunity to arm the Nicaraguan Contras, despite a Congressional ban on using profits from arms sold to Iran for such a purpose.⁷¹ As early as 1983 or 1984, the White House had argued that “the restrictions on using appropriated funds by the CIA or D of D [Department of Defense] did not restrict presidential conduct . . . and did not apply to the NSC.”⁷²

This position rested on the rationale that, although Congress had prohibited American agencies engaged in “intelligence activities” from operating in Nicaragua, the NSC was *not* an intelligence agency. Some analysts argued, however, that the NSC was, in fact, an “intelligence agency” because the “NSC directs intelligence activities under the NSC Act.”⁷³ But this was the minority view inside the administration. The majority view was later *explicitly* expressed by Richard Secord, who worked closely with Oliver North on the Contra effort. Secord wrote that the Boland Amendment “clearly affected neither the activities of private citizens nor the NSC, the President’s personal ‘lobby’ to Congress and the bureaucracy.”⁷⁴ So the pro-Contra effort was moved from the CIA to the NSC and placed under the direction of then National Security Adviser John Poindexter and NSC functionary Oliver North.⁷⁵

The hospital room visit

The Iran-Contra affair intensified during the period of Ronald Reagan’s surgery for and recovery from colon cancer. Throughout the President’s hospitalization, the First Lady tightly controlled access to him. Although National Security Adviser McFarlane was urgently intent on speaking with Reagan, he was denied access. For several days, Donald Regan was the only administration official to interact with the

President. On July 18, 1985, however, five days after Reagan's surgery and just three days after he had learned his polyp had been malignant, Nancy Reagan granted McFarlane an audience with the President in his hospital room. Reagan attended this meeting and the three participants had very different recollections of what actually transpired during its 23 minute duration. In fact, they even disagreed that such a meeting took place.

Months later, the President told the Tower Commission—a three-member board consisting of two Republicans and one Democrat that he appointed on December 1, 1986, to investigate the Iran-Contra scandal—that he “had no recollection of a meeting in the hospital in July with McFarlane and that he had no notes which would show such a meeting.”⁷⁶ In his diary, however, on the day *before* the meeting, Reagan had written that, “Some strange soundings are coming from some Iranians. . . Bud M. will be here tomorrow to talk about it. It could be a breakthrough on getting our seven kidnap victims back.”⁷⁷ Then, on the meeting day itself, Reagan wrote in his diary: “Bud came by—it seems 2 members of the Iranian government want to establish talks with us. I’m sending Bud to meet with them in a neutral country.”⁷⁸

Some might argue that these two diary entries “prove” that the President saw this particular meeting with McFarlane as being especially significant and that he had almost certainly lied about not remembering it. It seems more likely, however, that the meeting, no matter how important, simply vanished from Reagan's memory primarily because of the factors associated with the medical crisis that he then faced.

The others at the meeting (Regan and McFarlane) had *definite* recollections of a meeting that day but disagreed sharply about what was discussed. McFarlane, who attempted suicide while the investigation was in progress,⁷⁹ testified to the Commission that at this meeting the President approved in general an approach to Iran, telling him to “Go ahead. Open it up.”⁸⁰ McFarlane also explained to Commission members that, before being hospitalized, the President had given him permission to “explore the United States' willingness to talk with Iranians concerning hostages.”⁸¹ But this was not necessarily related to any arms-for-hostages arrangement.

McFarlane further maintained that during their important July 18 conversation, Reagan did not

explicitly approve of U.S. arms going directly to Iran but left open the possibility that Israel would supply Iran with weapons. Specifically, McFarlane insisted that when he told Reagan of the Israeli plan, the President replied, “Gee, that sounds pretty good” but that he went no further than this in giving his consent. McFarlane reported, however, that in early August, Reagan telephoned him and gave his emphatic approval to Israeli arms sales to Iran.⁸² Strangely, there was no record of such a phone call—unusual since McFarlane was rather scrupulous about such things; and the President did not remember making the call.⁸³ But around this time, McFarlane began telling some of his compatriots that the President had now given official consent to arms sales to Iran.⁸⁴

Regan testified that he had no recollection whatsoever of arms sales being discussed by the President and his national security adviser at the Bethesda Naval Hospital meeting: “There is nothing in my notes or in my memory to suggest that the idea of swapping arms for hostages was mentioned by either man on this occasion.” Regan also claimed that he later asked the President whether he had authorized the sale of arms during McFarlane's hospital visit, since the Chief of Staff did not recall any such authorization being made at the time. The President responded that he “had no recollection of ever having given verbal or written authorization for the transfer of arms to Iran.”⁸⁵

As a way of trying to resolve the conflict in recollections, at least two of Reagan's diary entries seem to have some significance. On January 17, 1986, as previously noted, Reagan wrote explicitly in his diary that he had given the “go ahead” to the sale of TOW anti-tank missiles to Iran as part of U.S. efforts “to get our 5 hostages out of Lebanon.” Ten months later, on November 24, 1986, he wrote this entry: “George S. is still stubborn that we shouldn't have sold arms to Iran—I gave him an argument.”⁸⁶ These remarks certainly seem to indicate that Reagan had approved the arms sale to Iran at some time and in some form, whether the arms would be supplied by the United States or by Israel. But he simply could not remember when or under what circumstances he had done so. Quite possibly, any “formal” approval by the President might well have violated the Arms Export Control Act of 1976, which prohibits the sale of U.S. arms to nations that sponsor repeated acts of terrorism, since Iran had been so designated in 1984. The act also

prohibits the President from allowing transfers of U.S. weapons to countries to which the United States cannot itself sell such weapons.⁸⁷ No wonder that Reagan quipped to one of his physicians around this time that, “I think I’ve caught the Iranian flu.”⁸⁸

Multiple investigations

Reagan’s behavior during the investigation of the Iran-Contra affair clearly called into question his “loose” administrative style. In late January 1987, he told the Tower Commission that he had approved the shipment of arms to Iran by Israel as well as the replenishment of those arms sometime in August 1985—but that he was “uncertain as to the precise date.” Subsequently, the President told Tower Commission members that he did not remember approving the August shipment of arms in advance, that his authorization of replenishment of the Israeli weapons could have come in September, and that since he “had been surprised that the Israelis had shipped arms to Iran...this fact caused him to conclude that he had not approved the transfer in advance.”⁸⁹ As if this backtracking were not damaging enough to his reputation, the President wrote the Tower Commission on February 20, 1987, a rather remarkable letter, in which he stated: “The only honest answer is to state that try as I might, I cannot recall anything whatsoever about whether I approved an Israeli sale in advance or whether I approved replenishment of Israeli stocks around August of 1985. My answer, therefore, and the simple truth is, “I don’t remember—period.”⁹⁰

The Tower Commission concluded that it was “unable to reach a conclusive judgment about whether the 1985 shipment of arms to Iran was approved in advance by the President. On balance, the Board believes that it is plausible to conclude that he did not approve it in advance.”⁹¹ Had the president’s diaries then been available to Commission members, their conclusion might very well have been different. In fact, it might then have dovetailed with those of the congressional committees that also investigated the scandal and whose majority Senate report concluded that Reagan must have given his approval because “McFarland had no motive to approve a sale of missiles to Iran if the President had not authorized it” and that “members of the NSC and others (including

private business people) had consciously attempted to circumvent the law through misuse of the NSC and by private means.”⁹²

The scandal had many troubling and confusing aspects, including direct participation by the United States in arms transfers, the clandestine funding of the Nicaraguan Contras from proceeds flowing from Iranian overpayments for the arms received, and the administration’s ignoring of Congress until the entire matter had burst into public notice in early November 1986. But the key questions here are these: Why did Ronald Reagan launch this sordid affair by approving arms sales to Iran, an action that even some of his closest aides viewed as paying bribes to terrorists? And, even more importantly, why did he have no recollection of the fact that he had met with his National Security Adviser in his hospital room and had almost certainly given some form of assent to the arms transfers then, by telephone shortly thereafter, or perhaps on both occasions?

The answer to the first question actually seems to have been provided by Reagan himself when he admitted that his hopes for improving relations with Iran had somehow degenerated into an arms-for-hostages arrangement. With regard to the second question, we will likely *never* have a definitive, conclusive answer. However, it is highly reasonable to attribute Reagan’s puzzling behavior and severe memory lapse in large part to the fact that the seeds of the scandal began to grow exponentially shortly after his surgery for colon cancer.

Psychological and surgical factors

McFarlane’s discussions with Reagan in his hospital room about the Iranian “initiative” came at a very bad time for the President. He was in great physical discomfort. He was 74 years old and had undergone a three-hour operation for colon cancer only five days before. He was having trouble eating and had spent several sleepless nights. He recounts, for example, that “Monday night was miserable. I kept waking up and felt I’d had no good sleep at all.” Two days later, he reports that he felt “better but still knew I’d been through something.”⁹³

Soon after this physical trauma, Reagan received the disturbing news that he had had cancer and that the

cancer had invaded locally, even though doctors said they were confident that they had “gotten it all” and that the prognosis was positive. But he almost surely realized that other cancer patients had received similarly positive assessments from their physicians, only to experience the cancer’s recurrence and their eventual death from the disease. It is logical that Reagan, usually quite optimistic in outlook, hoped—and perhaps might even have expected—that his medical team was correct in its prognosis but he likely had some nagging concerns about his survival. After all, as Dr. Robert Sprinkle points out, “if cancer cells had escaped into the portal vein or other venous structures or into the lymphatic system beyond the lymph nodes removed during surgery, the President would have had metastatic disease.”⁹⁴ To make matters worse, Reagan’s concerns must have been heightened almost immediately when he saw a medical “expert” predict during a television interview that he would be dead within five years. How could his cancer diagnosis and this dire televised prediction *not* have caused him upset?

It appears almost certain, therefore, that Reagan experienced some psychological distress around this time in addition to his physical discomfort. Dr. Norman Knorr, professor of behavioral medicine at the University of Virginia, and Dr. Daniel Harrington, a Virginia geriatric psychiatrist, have written that “when a person’s sense of security is threatened, psychic stress is felt and a psychological reaction occurs... During this reaction period, from seconds to days, the individual’s judgment may be temporarily clouded and decisions made which are not always in the best interests of the individual.”⁹⁵ These words seem to apply to Ronald Reagan at this difficult moment in his life. Dr. Daniel Ruge, senior White House physician during Reagan’s first term, has suggested that the President “may well have been emotionally upset and deeply distracted by his 1985 health difficulties and his physical problems may have come to consume the lion’s share of his attention.” Under such circumstances, Ruge said, “decision-making would become increasingly constricted.”⁹⁶

It is also important to note that Reagan’s colon cancer necessitated extensive surgery. Dr. Herbert Abrams, Emeritus Professor of Radiology at Stanford, has written that a common side effect of surgery is “confusion severe enough to disrupt clarity of thought.

Patients may not have the ability to “grasp concepts, to use deductive and inductive logic.” They may well “encounter disorientation as to time, space and people, and experience impaired memory.”⁹⁷ Abrams points out that the “elderly are especially susceptible to confusion and tend to remain bewildered longer than younger patients with comparable illnesses, even after the physiological causes are corrected... Postoperative mental impairment is a well-documented effect of surgery.”⁹⁸

Moreover, anesthesia itself can often be debilitating and have long-lasting impact, particularly for older patients. In those over the age of 60, almost 20 percent show symptoms of cognitive dysfunction a week after surgery and even after three months, some 14 percent remain impaired.⁹⁹ This is made even more problematic by the drugs typically administered before, during and after anesthesia. These have various side effects, including memory loss, diminished self-restraint and overconfidence, and may take more than a week to be eliminated.¹⁰⁰

In all, the impact of anesthesia, surgery, and drugs—with their major effects on the brain—can result in flawed and irrational decision-making by even a young person; and, in 1985, Ronald Reagan was not young. All of these factors, in addition to the cancer diagnosis itself and the televised prediction of his impending death, make it understandable that Reagan was unable to focus clearly on meeting with McFarlane and talking with him in his hospital room or on the telephone shortly thereafter, no matter what they discussed or how important the topic. Moreover, decisions Reagan made then may not have been those he would have made absent the factors present in this instance.

An active participant amidst bureaucratic turmoil

After he left the hospital, Reagan arguably again became an active participant in the arms-for-hostages arrangement. If so, his postoperative role in July and August, 1985—when his impaired consent was apparently given to McFarlane—may be excused without exculpating him in the larger Iran-Contra affair. Indeed, as one key player argued: “the president intervened as late as the winter of 1985-86 to insist,

over the objection of his Secretaries of State and Defense, that the Iran initiative continue."¹⁰¹

For Reagan, however, this would have been unusual behavior. Opposition by even one key player was invariably a serious obstacle to action in the Reagan administration, and vigorous objections by two or more high-level advisers would "almost surely kill an idea."¹⁰² Yet, in this instance, the President apparently persevered, seeming to be quite positive toward the Iranian arms deal both during the hospital room visit with McFarlane and later, during a telephone conversation with him, neither of which events he could remember. But perhaps he persevered because he regarded the policy as having been set irreversibly on its course by his own "nonofficial" words and actions *before* the period of his hospitalization.

The final objections of Secretaries Shultz and Weinberger, therefore, may have come too late to derail a policy the President regarded as "ongoing" and that was building a momentum of its own. Indeed, in December 1985, several months *after* his formal consent to the policy was apparently given, Reagan wrote this tantalizing entry in his diary: "NSC briefing—probably Bud's last. Subject was our undercover effort to free our 5 hostages held by terrorists in Lebanon. It is a complex undertaking with only a few of us in on it. I won't even write in the Diary what we're up to."¹⁰³

Weinberger later wrote that "when people ask me how the will of the secretaries of state and defense could be so easily subverted, I can say only that people with hourly access to the president, such as McFarlane, could phrase their agenda in the most favorable terms. In addition to this, they could report to the president all manner of 'hopeful indications' and generally lead a busy president occupied with many other things ... to believe that 'progress' was being made and that ultimately our hostages would be released."¹⁰⁴

With regard to the State Department, Secretary of State Schultz was the nominal foreign policy spokesperson for the Reagan Administration. A strong opponent to any arms-for-hostages deal, he went on record as describing the plan as "perverse."¹⁰⁵ Schultz wrote that, "in the late spring of 1985, I got the first smell, by accident, that NSC adviser Bud McFarlane and some of the NSC staff wanted, with Israel's involvement, to send arms to Iran in an effort to attain the release of Americans held hostage. In four major

battles between mid-1985 and fall 1986 I had fought to stop such a deal, and each time I felt—or had been assured—that my view had prevailed. But this snake never died, no matter how many times I hacked at it."¹⁰⁶

Schultz apparently was not even aware of some of the covert operations undertaken by Oliver North and other members of the NSC staff.¹⁰⁷ This led eventually to turmoil between Schultz and the NSC staff, and between Schultz and National Security Adviser McFarlane who acted as a policy advocate and carried out special assignments for the President.¹⁰⁸ This was not unusual in the Reagan Administration. Even when Alexander Haig was Reagan's Secretary of State (1981 to 1982) and despite his insistence that he be the "vicar" of the foreign policy process, Haig found himself challenged for control over the development of foreign policy by National Security Adviser William Clark. Haig later accused Clark of "conducting a second foreign policy ... and bypassing the State Department altogether."¹⁰⁹ Since Reagan's involvement in the foreign policy process waned and waxed, the chances for disaster were high. The cruel irony of the Reagan Administration was that this president had wanted initially to downgrade the NSC but the NSC ultimately became the center of the Iran-Contra disaster that most seriously threatened the Reagan legacy.¹¹⁰

Contributing to Reagan's problems was instability in the NSC itself; over two terms Reagan would be served by six National Security Advisers, one after another. Several were undistinguished. Clark had little experience in foreign policy.¹¹¹ Two, McFarlane and John Poindexter, moved the NSC staff beyond a purely policy role and into the domain of covert operations.¹¹² Also, policy clashes and personal conflicts among NSC staff were frequent and severe in the Reagan era.¹¹³ Within the Administration, therefore, there was considerable foreign policy turmoil and the National Security Council often ran amok.¹¹⁴ Reagan did little to correct the problem since, according to several of his associates, he "was both uninterested and too tolerant of incompetent subordinates."¹¹⁵

At least two of Reagan's own children grew concerned about the activities of their father's National Security Council. Ronald Reagan, Jr., writes that "nefarious characters associated with his National Security Council felt entitled to pursue their own agendas, our father be damned." The president's

daughter, Maureen, warned her father of this situation but, according to Reagan's younger son, the President was disinclined to credit her information. Ron, Jr., later wrote of his father, "if anything was really wrong, surely 'the fellas' would have let him know. Besides, this revelation of corruption within the ranks was just not something he wanted to hear under any circumstances. Dad, ever guileless and straightforward, never quite grasped, for instance, that the seemingly respectful, decorated soldier fairly beaming with flattery [Oliver North] who had, on rare occasions, been brought to meet him in the Oval Office, had, in fact, conspired with his national security adviser, among others, to violate the law."¹¹⁶ This charge of widespread law breaking by members of the NSC, raised by the President's own son, is cause for great concern.

As Hart pointed out, "at the root of the Iran-Contra affair was the arrogance, zealotry, unaccountability, and contempt for the law and the political process by presidential staffers doing things that the National Security Council staff was never intended to do and ought not to do." He further explained that, "Iran-Contra not only resulted in a disastrous policy initiative but also constituted . . . a nearly successful assault upon the constitutional structures and norms that underlie the postwar national security system."¹¹⁷ Jim Baker, Reagan's first Chief of Staff, later agreed with this statement when he wrote, "From beginning to end, Iran-Contra was wrong. . . . It is a textbook example of what can happen when the White House 'goes operational.'" He commented that, by bypassing the regular institutions and processes of policymaking, the Administration "put dangerous weapons in the hands of known terrorist sponsors, drove up the market price for hostages and weakened rather than strengthened the case for helping the Contras. Iran Contra crippled the Administration and it hurt our nation at home and abroad."¹¹⁸

The possibility of Alzheimer's Disease

In addition to his negative comments about his father's National Security Council, Ronald Reagan, Jr., has also offered an explosive personal comment about his father. In a 2011 book, he wrote rather candidly, "the question, then, of whether my father suffered from the beginning stages of Alzheimer's while in office more

or less answers itself."¹¹⁹ He is not the only observer to raise this possibility. Dr. Steven Miles, a Midwestern geriatrician, noticed around this time that the President was unable to speak lucidly outside of tightly controlled settings and contemplated jointly suggesting through the *New York Times* that he be evaluated for Alzheimer's Disease.¹²⁰

Even more telling, a number of Reagan's close aides raised similar concerns about his erratic behavior around the midpoint of his second term. As an example, several have written about a meeting that he had with members of the Tower Commission in summer 1987. At this meeting, Chairman John Tower informed the President that Donald Regan had recently testified that, in his view, the President was clearly unaware of the Israeli arms shipment to Iran. A Reagan staffer, David Abshire, describes what then transpired: "The president rose and walked to his desk, not so quietly whispering to Peter Wallison [another staffer], 'Peter, where is the piece of paper you gave me this morning?' Finding the paper, the president—to the utter shock of all present—started reading aloud, 'If the question comes up at the Tower Board meeting, you might want to say that you were surprised.'" Abshire further observed, "at that point, Tower's jaw went slack, the faces of Scowcroft and Muskie (other Commission members) drained, and my heart skipped."¹²¹

Wallison later admitted that he was "horrified" at the President's behavior at this meeting and that this had been "a terribly embarrassing moment."¹²² Indeed, Reagan's behavior around this time was perceived by some of his aides as being so faltering that his new Chief of Staff, Howard Baker (who had taken office in February 1987) reportedly contemplated invocation of section 4 of the 25th Amendment as a means of removing the president, at least temporarily, from the exercise of his powers and duties.¹²³ This would have entailed having the Vice President and at least a majority of Cabinet members certify that the President was unable to exercise presidential powers. Baker took no action, however, concluding that such a step was unnecessary.

Dr. Lawrence Mohr, a White House physician during Reagan's second term, has said that he and the other White House doctors saw "no clinical signs of Alzheimer's related dementia at any time during Reagan's presidency. Psychometric testing was normal for a man his age. I did not see *any* signs of dementia

until fall 1992, almost three years after he had left the White House."¹²⁴ In addition, Dr. John Hutton, another of Reagan's White House physicians, later commented that it wasn't until February 1994 that signs of *serious* mental deterioration became visible in the former President. He recounts, for example, that around this time, Reagan told him "That's my mother standing over in the doorway of a house across the street." Reagan's mother, of course, had died many years earlier. Hutton also recounts a situation that Nancy Reagan had confronted in her home: one day she noticed that Reagan was "rummaging around" their house, seemingly looking for something. When she asked him what he was doing, he responded, "I'm trying to find my football gear. The coach is waiting for me."¹²⁵ Although these incidents surely caused concern to Dr. Hutton and to Nancy, they did not occur until Reagan had long since become a former president.

In any event, *even if* Reagan did suffer from early Alzheimer's disease around the midpoint of his second term, it is important to remember that the Iran Contra scandal had its beginnings some two years earlier and perhaps even before that. Given the timing of Iran-Contra, near the *very beginning* of Reagan's second term, the lingering neurological effect of surgical stress seems more likely to have been the key factor. Two close associates of Reagan agree with this judgment. Defense Secretary Weinberger, who argued that the proposal to swap arms for hostages was "almost too absurd for comment,"¹²⁶ attributes Reagan's memory lapse to his physical and psychological frailty at the time: "[E]ven if McFarlane ever did raise the subject with the President, it would have been when the President was in the hospital and in the weakened condition familiar to anyone who has had major surgery."¹²⁷ Former Attorney General Meese agrees. During the hearings into Iran-Contra, he suggested that Reagan may well have approved "the arrangement but then forgot that he had approved the illegal shipments of arms to Iran when his judgment was compromised as a result of his surgery and postoperative medicines."¹²⁸

Afterthoughts and conclusions

Somewhat ironically, the arms sales policy was a failure, and the American relationship with Iran remained poor. In fact, Iranian officials went out of

their way later to disclose that the alleged "moderates" who had established contact with McFarlane and Oliver North were, in reality, "agents of the Khomeini government seeking to fleece the gullible Americans."¹²⁹ This further worsened matters by making Reagan's policies—and Reagan himself—appear naïve and foolish. In addition, the policy also "undermined the nation's strongly asserted position of refusing to trade arms—or anything else—for hostages."¹³⁰ Further, it damaged the position of neutrality taken by the United States in the Iraq-Iran war and undermined its relations with other Arab nations, such as Saudi Arabia.¹³¹

At home, the scandal was devastating. Iran-Contra became an obsession of the news media and disturbed much of the country, "forming an indelible stain on the Administration's record."¹³² Reporters referred to the matter as "another Watergate" and some expected that this scandal would destroy a presidency just as the first one had. Reagan's popularity plunged from a 67 percent approval rating to 40 percent, the sharpest one-month decline in the 50 years since such polling had begun. Another poll showed that only 14 percent of the public believed Reagan when he claimed that he had not traded arms for hostages.¹³³ Americans of all political persuasions simply no longer believed Reagan. The loss in personal credibility may have been even more serious than the strong belief that the President simply did not know what his subordinates were doing in his name.

Reagan had previously been seen as a man who said what he meant and meant what he said. But no longer. After Iran-Contra, he was known to many either as duplicitous or as confused. As one commentator wrote, during the Watergate scandal, the key question asked was "what did Nixon know and when did he know it?" During the Iran-Contra scandal, however, the key question asked was "what did Reagan know and when did he forget it?"¹³⁴ The scandal—and Reagan's inability to deal with its details—clearly damaged him as a viable political leader since it "raised doubts about the president's judgment and credibility."¹³⁵ As one observer noted, "the Reagan Administration's violation of laws that barred weapons deals with Iran and aid to the Contras arguably made Nixon's abuses seem more like the 'third-rate burglary' that Nixon's aides claimed it was."¹³⁶

Reagan and Iran-Contra

By March 1987, fully a third of the American people thought that Reagan should resign, and some White House aides feared that he would be impeached.¹³⁷ As the various investigating committees went about their business, for much of the year the nation was focused on the televised spectacle of North and Poindexter insisting that they had acted to advance Reagan's policies but kept him uninformed so that he could preserve "deniability."¹³⁸ While the Senate Majority Report ultimately asserted that "there was no evidence that the President knew of the diversion of funds," it also pointed out that "the common ingredients of the Iran and Contra policies were secrecy, deception and disdain for the law."¹³⁹ No wonder that Reagan's influence in Congress—quite high during his first term¹⁴⁰—declined steadily, until his success rate in having his programs pass virtually disintegrated.¹⁴¹ As one observer noted, "He's lost all his clout with Congress. They're not afraid of him any more."¹⁴² Even conservative Republican Congressman Newt Gingrich of Georgia commented at the time that "he will never again be the Reagan that he was before he blew it. He is not going to regain our trust and our faith easily."¹⁴³

The President's problems were further compounded at this time by his having to undergo prostate surgery by means of transurethral resection for the second time, the first having been in 1967. Reagan, now almost 76, did not bounce back quickly and had to follow a sharply reduced schedule. Donald Regan later wrote that he seemed to be "in the grip of lassitude" and "seldom, if ever, emerged from his office and wandered down the hall as he had done before. He seldom raised the subject of the Iran-Contra affair and seemed uninterested in the fact that the field had been largely left to the detractors at one of the crucial hours of his career."¹⁴⁴

The Tower Commission placed ultimate responsibility for the Iran-Contra affair directly on the President:

The President should have ensured that the NSC system did not fail him. He did not force his policy to undergo the most critical review of which the NSC participants and the process were capable. At no time did he insist upon accountability and performance review. Had the President chosen to drive the NSC system, the outcome could well have been different. As it was, the most powerful features of the NSC system—providing

comprehensive analysis, alternatives, and follow-up—were not utilized.¹⁴⁵

Although the Tower Commission found that the President had not known about the fund diversion to the Contras, one member of the group, Edmund Muskie, commented that, "we were appalled by the absence of the kind of alertness and vigilance to his job...that one expects of a President."¹⁴⁶ The *New York Times* commented that the Tower Commission Report is "a portrait of ineptitude verging on incompetence."¹⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, on the day the Report was released, Reagan was deeply upset. His Executive Assistant, Jim Kuhn, reported that it was one of Reagan's very worst days in his eight-year presidency.¹⁴⁸

Yet, despite the humiliating rebukes he had received, Ronald Reagan managed to survive Iran-Contra. He did so for several reasons. First, he appeared so completely befuddled at what had transpired that "no allegations of misconduct ever stuck to him convincingly."¹⁴⁹ Second, in response to learning of the scandal, Reagan had ordered that everything be opened for scrutiny rather than trying to engage in a cover-up.¹⁵⁰ It was Reagan who appointed the Tower Commission and, after the commission submitted its report in February 1987, it was Reagan who admitted to the country that serious mistakes had been made by his administration, even though its intentions had been good. Third, there was no conclusive evidence that he had been aware of the Nicaraguan connection.¹⁵¹ His National Security Adviser at the time testified that he had *never* told Reagan about the diversion of funds to the Contras and that instead "the buck stops here with me."¹⁵² Also, Oliver North testified that on November 21, 1986, "Admiral Poindexter told North that he had never told the President about diversion." North also stated that the President, in his telephone call to North on November 25, 1986, had said, "I just didn't know."¹⁵³

The Attorney General also reported that Reagan "showed shock and surprise when I informed him of the diversion and his astonished reaction when I informed him of this matter was completely genuine."¹⁵⁴ In a December 4, 1986, letter to a friend, Reagan expressed *his* attitude on the matter when he wrote: "So far we have only the two individuals who knew about the money transfers and didn't tell me. If the investigation reveals that there were others, they

too will go . . . The business of the money transfer was none of our doing and a complete surprise to us.”¹⁵⁵

The Final Report of the Independent Counsel, appointed to investigate the matter, indicated that, “No direct evidence was developed that the President authorized or was informed of the profiteering on the Iran-arms sales or the diversion of proceeds to aid the Contras.”¹⁵⁶ Although the report criticized Reagan for “creating the conditions which made possible the crimes committed by others,” it nonetheless concluded that “it could not be proven beyond a reasonable doubt that President Reagan knew the underlying facts of Iran-Contra that were criminal or that he made criminal misrepresentations regarding them.”¹⁵⁷

It is likely that Reagan’s standing in history will be lower because of the Iran-Contra scandal and his role in its development and unfolding. This President’s free-flowing management style allowed the scandal to fester and grow. According to one aide, Reagan was “extraordinarily trusting and not very curious about the behavior of his subordinates, characteristics that contributed to the Iran-amok affairs that seriously weakened his presidency.”¹⁵⁸

Significantly, Reagan’s cancer surgery, with its severe physical and psychological implications, likely allowed the scandal to ignite and consume his Administration. Had he not been so impaired in the summer of 1985, or had he not reclaimed his powers and duties from Acting President Bush after less than nine hours of post-surgical recovery time, the President might ultimately have rejected—or might have been spared the necessity of playing any role whatsoever in—McFarlane’s plans to swap arms for hostages, whether those arms came from Israeli stocks or from the United States. But although ill and distracted at the time, he *did* reclaim his powers and duties, and his reputation will never be able to escape the devastating consequences of what transpired. Iran-Contra resulted in the tarnishing of an American hero. And in that corrosive process, Reagan’s poor health in the summer of 1985 surely seems to have been a crucial factor.

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