Iran Contra Essay, Research Paper

Iran Contra: Hidden Policy

In 1922 President Franklin Roosevelt introduced the “Good Neighbor” Policy. This policy was created to keep the United States from getting involved in problems that could and would occur in Central America. This policy, however, did not stop many government agencies from interfering and creating a few new problems for United States neighbors. Of course, all of this was done in an aim to better the political position of the United States. In 1953, the Central Intelligence Agency created a rumor of an assassination attempt in Guatemala to run the corrupt government out of the country. This is a perfect example of the United States sidestepping policy and becoming entangled in Latin American affairs. History of course, was destined to repeat itself. Only this time, it would be a scandal that would shake the very foundation of a nation.

When President Reagan was elected in 1980, he came into office promising to restore America’s military and moral prestige in the world. Voters responded when he pledged to be tough on terrorists, a vow he repeated time and time again: “Let me further make it plain to assassins in Beirut and their accomplices, wherever they may be, that America will never make concessions to terrorists.“ Was this vow strictly a campaign promise made that he never intended to honor?

In 1970 in Nicaragua, President Anastasio Somona Debayle fled the country. A civil war had been devastating the nation’s economy. The Nicaraguans were tired of the Somonzas ruling their tiny country. They wanted change. They wanted the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas promised free enterprise but what they brought was political oppression. The United States tried to form an alliance with them but the Sandinistas grew closer to the USSR. Many Nicaraguans rejected this government. They decided to fight back. The rebel Nicaraguans groups that formed was known as the contras. The largest of these rebel groups were the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (NDF). President Reagan had long ago taken a stand against the Sandanistan regime. He “embraced “ the opponents of the Sandinistas. Originally; they received aid from the Argentinean government. The rebels, however, eventually needed “big money” and it was then that they turned to the United States. In 1981, the United States began to fund the contras. The Central Intelligence Agency, which was headed by William Casey at the time, was the agency most involved. However, public protests over this aid were very vocal. Many Americans were uneasy about this aid because they were concerned the situation might develop into another Vietnam.

Deep divisions within Congress over the civil war in Nicaragua led to the passage of the Boland Amendments to the United States Constitution. Boland I was legislation that essentially “prohibits the CIA from supplying money, arms, training, or support to individuals or organizations seeking to over throw the Nicaraguan government or to provoke a military exchange between Nicaragua and Honduras” . In October 1984, the Boland II Amendment passed ending all U.S. assistance to the contras. This amendment was very carefully worded because of the dissention in Congress. It states:

During fiscal year 1985, no further funds available to the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, or any other agency or entity of the United States involved intelligence activities may be obligated or expended for the purpose or which would have the effect of supporting directly or indirectly, military or para-military operations in Nicaragua by any nations, group, organization, movement, or individual. (Document 5, Publich Law 98-473, [Boland II], Section 8066 [A}, 10/12/84

Funding would have a limit of twenty four million in 1984. The Administration would have the option to request additional funds from Congress at a later date. Although this cap was a compromise of sorts between the Reagan Administration and Congress, it would definitely put the contra program in jeopardy. In compliance with the law, large numbers of staff from the CIA and the Defense department were withdrawn from Central America.

In the wake of the Boland I Amendment and the cap on spending, Robert C. McFarlane, Reagan’s National Security Advisor, suggested soliciting support from other third world countries. CIA director, William Casey agreed and made several suggestions as to who should be approached. Contact was then made to solicit said funds. When a one million-dollar contribution was received in 1984, McFarlane turned to Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North of the National Security Council to set up bank accounts to move these monies into contra hands. Later when the Reagan’s Administration was unable to convince Congress to do away with the twenty-four million-dollar cap on contra aid, North was informed that President Reagan wished “the NSC staff had to keep the contras alive body and soul.” North was instrumental in setting up a covert network, which provided support to the contras.

Initially these efforts, were merely a broadening of the efforts to solicit funds from other sources. North also provided the contras with counsel and support. He was instrumental in bringing the retired United States Air Force Major General Richard V. Secord in this operation as an arms broker. North worked with McFarlane to obtain the cooperation of Honduras. Honduran support was essential as many of the contra encampments were in Honduras. Later support from Costa Rica would be gotten on the behalf of the contras. Also, it was North along with Fernandez and Fiers who engineered the plan to use Enterprise to transport secrete shipments to the contras.

The sale of arms to Iran was initiated with the dual goal of bettering relations with Iran and obtaining the release of the American hostages being held in Lebanon by pro-Iranian terrorists. This was a direct violation of the Boland Amendment. Nevertheless, a clandestine plan was devised within the United States National Security Commission to arrange the support. Profits from these sales were then channeled to the Nicaraguan contras for use against the leftist Sandinistas government. The chief negotiator of these deals was Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North. North reported his activities initially to National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, the council’s head, and subsequently to his successor Vice Admiral John M. Poindexter.

These illegal activities all came to light in 1986, causing the Reagan administration much embarrassment. On October 5, 1986 an Enterprise C-123K plane with lethal supplies carrying three Americans was brought down by Sandinistas ground fire. The only survivor, Eugene Hasenfus was captured. He claimed to be working for the CIA. The Sandinistas confiscated documents connecting the plane with the Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office, which President Reagan had established within the State Department in 1985. Immediately Administrative officials denied Hasenfus claims to be working for the CIA. They were truthful in this matter. However, the deception continued as they denied having any knowledge concerning this shipment.

There was confusion and disarray at the highest levels of government. McFarlane embarked on a dangerous trip to Tehran under a complete misconception. He thought the Iranians had promised to secure the release of all hostages before he delivered arms, when in fact they had promised only to seek the hostages’ release, and then only after one planeload of arms had arrived. In November 1986, an article about McFarlane’s trip to Tehran appeared in a Lebanese newspaper. On November 25, 1986, President Reagan and Attorney General Edwin Meese announced that indeed proceeds from the Iran arms sales had been diverted to support the contras. Poindexter resigned and North was dismissed.

The United States Constitution specifies the process by which laws and policy are to be made and executed. Constitutional process is the essence of democracy. A democratic form of Government is the basis of the strength of the United States. Time and again it has been proven that a flawed process leads to bad results, and that a lawless process leads to worse. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that “A lawless government is a contradiction in terms .” This particular Administration’s departure from democratic processes created the conditions for policy failure, and led to contradictions which undermined the credibility of the United States.

The United States simultaneously pursued two contradictory foreign policies during the 1980’s. The public policy was to observe the “letter and spirit” of the Boland Amendment’s proscriptions against military or paramilitary assistance to the Contras. The United States was not to make any concessions for the release of hostages lest such concessions encourage more hostages taking. Arms shipments to Iran were banned and other Governments were urged to observe this embargo. Measures were to be taken to improve relations with Iraq. The United States was urging all Governments to punish terrorism and to support, indeed encourage, the refusal of Kuwait to free the Da’wa prisoners. These prisoners were Muslim extremists who had bombed the U.S. Embassy and attempted to assassinate our embassy personnel in Kuwait in 1983. In 1985 this same group of terrorists had hijacked a TWA jet in Beirut and executed two Americans. Finally, the public policy, which was embodied in Executive Order 12333, was to conduct covert operations solely through the CIA or other organs of the intelligence community specifically authorized by the President.

While promoting the public policies previously mentioned, certain parties were secretly trading weapons in an attempt to get the American hostages released from Iran. The United States was secretly selling sophisticated missiles to Iran and promising more. It was during this time that the United States covertly shared military intelligence on Iraq with Iran. North told the Iranians, (in contradiction to United States policy) that the United States would help promote the overthrow of the Iraqi head of government. Senior officials secretly endorsed a Second-Hakim plan to permit Iran to obtain the release of the Da’wa prisoners. The NSC staff was secretly assuming direction and funding of the Contras’ military effort. The CIA and the White House were secretly withholding from Congressional Committees all information concerning the Iran initiative and the Contra support network. Although the NSC was not so authorized, the NSC staff secretly became operational and used private, non-accountable agents to engage in covert activities.

It was these contradictions in policy inevitably resulted in policy failure. The United States armed Iran, including its most radical elements, but attained neither a new relationship with that hostile regime nor a reduction in the number of American hostages. The arms sales did not lead to a moderation of Iranian policies. Moderates did not come forward, and Iran to this day sponsors actions directed against the United States in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere.

The United States opened itself to blackmail by adversaries who might reveal the secret arms sales and who, according to North, threatened to kill the hostages if the sales stopped. The United States undermined its credibility with friends and allies, including moderate Arab states, by its public stance of opposing arms sales to Iran while undertaking such arms sales in secret. A ten million-dollar contribution to the contras from the Sultan of Brunei was lost by directing it to the wrong bank account – the result of an improper effort to channel that humanitarian aid contribution into an account used for lethal assistance. Members of this covert operation sought illicit funding for the Contras through profits from the secret arms sales. A substantial portion of those profits ended up in the personal bank accounts of the private individuals executing the sales – while the exorbitant amounts charged for the weapons inflamed the Iranians with whom the United States was seeking a new relationship.

Undoubtedly, the record of the Iran-Contra Affair also shows a seriously flawed

policy making process. The President first told the Tower Board that he had approved the initial shipments to Iran through the Israelis. Later he told the Tower Board that he had not. Finally, he told the Tower Board that he did not know whether he approved the initial Israeli arms shipments, and his top advisers disagree on the question.

The President claimed he did not recall signing a Presidential Finding which authorized November 1985 HAWK shipments to Iran. But Poindexter testified that the President did sign a Finding on December 5, 1985, approving the shipment retroactively. However, Poindexter also testified that the Finding was prepared without adequate discussion and stuck in his safe for a year. He claimed he forgot about it. The White House asserts the President never signed it. When events began to unravel, Poindexter claims he ripped it up.

One National Security Adviser understood that the Boland Amendment applied to the NSC; another thought it did not. Neither sought a legal opinion on the question. The President incorrectly assured the American people that the NSC staff was adhering to the law and that the Government was not connected to the Hasenfus airplane. His staff was in fact conducting a “full service” covert operation to support the Contras, which they believed he had authorized. North says he sent five or six completed memorandums to Poindexter seeking the President’s approval for the diversion. Poindexter does not remember receiving any. Only one has been found.

Pervasive dishonesty and secrecy characterized the Iran-Contra Affair. North admitted that he and other officials lied repeatedly to Congress and to the American people about the Contra covert action and Iran arms sales. North testified before Congress “I will tell you right now, counsel, and all the members here gathered, that I misled the Congress.” He admittedly altered and destroyed official documents. North’s testimony demonstrates that he also lied to members of the Executive branch, including the Attorney General, and officials of the State Department, CIA and NSC.

As new details of the scandal came to light, investigations began. Reagan created a board of inquiry headed by former Texas Senator John Tower. Congress initiated an investigation by independent counsel. President Reagan and his cabinet were chastised for their lack of control over the National Security Council. In the end, it was decided that President Reagan was in the long run responsible for his Administration’s actions. However, there was no concrete evidence that he was aware of the diversion of funds to the contras. Despite several inconsistencies in comparing his own stories with that of his staff, Ronald Reagan himself never really faced any charges.

When Reagan took office, his pledge to restore America’s military and moral prestige in the world reestablished the confidence of the American people. The Iran Contra Scandal seriously weakened his Administration. This scandal undermined the balance of power between Congress and the President of the United States. This balance of power is a safeguard. It guards against individuals whose lust for power overrides their moral wisdom. The Constitution is “our defense against ourselves, the one foe who might defeat us.”

Notes

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