

The Bushes & the Truth About Iran

by ROBERT PARRY

Having gone through the diplomatic motions with Iran, George W. Bush is shifting toward a military option that carries severe risks for American soldiers in Iraq as well as for long-term U.S. interests around the world. Yet, despite this looming crisis, the Bush Family continues to withhold key historical facts about U.S.-Iranian relations.

Those historical facts – relating to Republican contacts with Iran’s Islamic regime more than a quarter century ago – are relevant today because an underlying theme in Bush’s rationale for war is that direct negotiations with Iran are pointless. But Bush’s own father may know otherwise.

The evidence is now persuasive that George H.W. Bush participated in negotiations with Iran’s radical regime in 1980, behind President Jimmy Carter’s back, with the goal of arranging for 52 American hostages to be released after Bush and Ronald Reagan were sworn in as Vice President and President, respectively.

In exchange, the Republicans agreed to let Iran obtain U.S.-manufactured military supplies through Israel. The Iranians kept their word, releasing the hostages immediately upon Reagan’s swearing-in on Jan. 20, 1981.

Over the next few years, the Republican-Israel-Iran weapons pipeline operated mostly in secret, only exploding into public view with the Iran-Contra scandal in late 1986. Even then, the Reagan-Bush team was able to limit congressional and other investigations, keeping the full history – and the 1980 chapter – hidden from the American people.

Upon taking office on Jan. 20, 2001, George W. Bush walled up the history even more by issuing an executive order blocking the scheduled declassification of records from the Reagan-Bush years. After 9/11, the younger George Bush added more bricks to the wall by giving Presidents, Vice Presidents and their heirs power over releasing documents.

Impending War

But that history is vital today.

First, the American people should know the real history of U.S.-Iran relations before the Bush administration launches another preemptive war in the Middle East. Second, the degree to which Iranian officials are willing to negotiate with their U.S. counterparts – and fulfill their side of the bargain – bears on the feasibility of talks now.

Indeed, the only rationale for hiding the historical record is that it would embarrass the Bush Family and possibly complicate George W. Bush’s decision to attack Iran regardless of what the American people might want.

The Time magazine cover story, released on Sept. 17, and a new report by retired Air Force Col. Sam Gardiner – entitled “[The End of the ‘Summer Diplomacy’](#)” – make clear that the military option against Iran is moving rapidly toward implementation.

Gardiner, who taught at the National War College and has war-gamed U.S. attacks on Iran for American policymakers over the past five years, noted that one of the “seven key truths” guiding Bush to war is that “you cannot negotiate with these people.”

That “truth,” combined with suspicions about Iran’s nuclear ambitions and Tehran’s relationship with Hezbollah and other militant Islamic groups, has led the Bush administration into the box-canyon logic that war is the only

Secret Republican & CIA contacts with Iran’s Islamic regime more than a quarter century ago are relevant today because an underlying theme in the current President Bush’s rationale for war is that direct negotiations with Iran are pointless. But Bush’s own father may know otherwise.

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answer, despite the fact that Gardiner's war games have found that war would have disastrous consequences. In his report, Gardiner also noted that Bush's personality and his sense of his presidential destiny are adding to the pressures for war.

"The President is said to see himself as being like Winston Churchill, and to believe that the world will only appreciate him after he leaves office; he talks about the Middle East in messianic terms; he is said to have told those close to him that he has got to attack Iran because even if a Republican succeeds him in the White House, he will not have the same freedom of action that Bush enjoys.

"Most recently, someone high in the administration told a reporter that the President believes that he is the only one who can 'do the right thing' with respect to Iran. One thing is clear: a major source of the pressure for a military strike emanates from the very man who will ultimately make the decision over whether to authorize such a strike – the President."

A Made-up Mind

Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer, who reflects the thinking of influential neoconservatives, reached a similar conclusion – that Bush had essentially made up his mind about attacking Iran.

Krauthammer noted that on the day after the fifth anniversary of 9/11, Bush responded to a question about Iran by saying: "It's very important for the American people to see the President try to solve problems diplomatically before resorting to military force."

"'Before' implies that one follows the other," Krauthammer wrote. "The signal is unmistakable. An aerial attack on Iran's nuclear facilities lies just beyond the horizon of diplomacy. With the crisis advancing and the moment of truth approaching, it is important to begin looking now with unflinching honesty at the military option."
[Washington Post, Sept. 15, 2006]

Yet, before making such a fateful decision, shouldn't Bush at least ask his father to finally level with him and with the American people about what happened in 1980 when the country was transfixed by Iranian militants holding 52 American hostages for 444 days?

At Consortiumnews.com, we have a special interest in that history because it was my discovery of a trove of classified documents pointing to the secret Republican negotiations with Iran that led to the founding of this Web site in 1995 and the publication of [our first investigative series](#).

In the mid-1990s, the U.S. news media was obsessed with issues such as the O.J. Simpson trial and the so-called "Clinton scandals," so there was little interest in reexamining some historical mystery about Republicans going behind Jimmy Carter's back to strike a deal with Iran's mullahs.

[The fullest account of this history can be found in Robert Parry's [Secrecy & Privilege](#), which was published in 2004.]

But that history now could be a matter of life or death for thousands of people in the Middle East, including Iranians, Israelis and American soldiers in Iraq.

False History

The false history surrounding the Iranian hostage crisis also has led to the mistaken conclusion that it was only the specter of Ronald Reagan's tough-guy image that made Iran buckle in January 1981 and that, therefore, the Iranians respect only force.

The hostage release on Reagan's Inauguration Day bathed the new President in an aura of heroism as a leader so feared by America's enemies that they scrambled to avoid angering him. It was viewed as a case study of how U.S. toughness could restore the proper international order.

That night, as fireworks lit the skies of Washington, the celebration was not only for a new President and for the freed hostages, but for a new era in which American power would no longer be mocked. That momentum continues to this day in George W. Bush's "preemptive" wars and the imperial boasts about a "New American Century."

However, the reality of that day 25 years ago now appears to have been quite different than was understood at the time. What's now known about the Iranian hostage crisis suggests that the "coincidence" of the Reagan

Inauguration and the Hostage Release was not a case of frightened Iranians cowering before a U.S. President who might just nuke Tehran.

The evidence indicates that it was a prearranged deal between the Republicans and the Iranians. The Republicans got the hostages and the political bounce; Iran's Islamic fundamentalists got a secret supply of weapons and various other payoffs.

State Secret

Though the full history remains a state secret, it now appears Republicans did contact Iran's mullahs during the 1980 campaign; a hostage agreement was reached; and a clandestine flow of U.S. weapons soon followed.

In effect, while Americans thought they were witnessing one reality – the cinematic heroism of Ronald Reagan backing down Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini – another truth existed beneath the surface, one so troubling that the Reagan-Bush political apparatus has made keeping the secret a top priority for a quarter century.

The American people must never be allowed to think that the Reagan-Bush era began with collusion between Republican operatives and Islamic terrorists, an act that many might view as treason.

A part of those secret dealings between Iran and the Republicans surfaced in the Iran-Contra Affair in 1986, when the public learned that the Reagan-Bush administration had sold arms to Iran for its help in freeing U.S. hostages then held in Lebanon.

After first denying these facts, the White House acknowledged the existence of the arms deals in 1985 and 1986 but managed to block investigators from looking back before 1984, when the official histories assert that the Iran initiative began.

During the 1987 congressional hearings on Iran-Contra, Republicans – behind the hardnosed leadership of Rep. Dick Cheney – fought to protect the White House, while Democrats, led by the accommodating Rep. Lee Hamilton, had no stomach for a constitutional crisis.

The result was a truncated investigation that laid much of the blame on supposedly rogue operatives, such as Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North.

Many American editors quickly grew bored with the complex Iran-Contra tale, but a few reporters kept searching for its origins. The trail kept receding in time, back to the Republican-Iranian relationship forged in the heat of the 1980 presidential campaign.

'Germs' of Scandal

Besides the few journalists, some U.S. government officials reached the same conclusion. For instance, Nicholas Veliotes, Reagan's assistant secretary of state for the Middle East, traced the "germs" of the Iran-Contra scandal to the 1980 campaign.

In a PBS interview, Veliotes said he first discovered the secret arms pipeline to Iran when an Israeli weapons flight was shot down over the Soviet Union on July 18, 1981, after straying off course on its third mission to deliver U.S. military supplies from Israel to Iran via Larnaca, Cyprus.

"We received a press report from Tass [the official Soviet news agency] that an Argentinian plane had crashed," Veliotes said. "According to the documents ... this was chartered by Israel and it was carrying American military equipment to Iran. ... And it was clear to me after my conversations with people on high that indeed we had agreed that the Israelis could transship to Iran some American-origin military equipment.

"Now this was not a covert operation in the classic sense, for which probably you could get a legal justification for it. As it stood, I believe it was the initiative of a few people [who] gave the Israelis the go-ahead. The net result was a violation of American law."

The reason that the Israeli flights violated U.S. law was that no formal notification had been given to Congress about the transshipment of U.S. military equipment as required by the Arms Export Control Act – a foreshadowing of George W. Bush's decision two decades later to bypass the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

In checking out the Israeli flight, Veliotes came to believe that the Reagan-Bush camp's dealings with Iran dated

back to before the 1980 election.

"It seems to have started in earnest in the period probably prior to the election of 1980, as the Israelis had identified who would become the new players in the national security area in the Reagan administration," Veliotes said. "And I understand some contacts were made at that time."

Q: "Between?"

Veliotes: "Between Israelis and these new players."

Israeli Interests

In my work on the Iran-Contra scandal, I had obtained a classified summary of testimony by a mid-level State Department official, David Satterfield, who saw the early arms shipments as a continuation of Israeli policy toward Iran.

"Satterfield believed that Israel maintained a persistent military relationship with Iran, based on the Israeli assumption that Iran was a non-Arab state which always constituted a potential ally in the Middle East," the summary read. "There was evidence that Israel resumed providing arms to Iran in 1980."

Over the years, senior Israeli officials claimed that those early shipments had the discreet blessing of top Reagan-Bush officials.

In May 1982, Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon told the Washington Post that U.S. officials had approved the Iranian arms transfers. "We said that notwithstanding the tyranny of Khomeini, which we all hate, we have to leave a small window open to this country, a tiny small bridge to this country," Sharon said.

A decade later, in 1993, I took part in an interview with former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in Tel Aviv during which he said he had read Gary Sick's 1991 book, *October Surprise*, which made the case for believing that the Republicans had intervened in the 1980 hostage negotiations to disrupt Jimmy Carter's reelection. With the topic raised, one interviewer asked, "What do you think? Was there an October Surprise?"

"Of course, it was," Shamir responded without hesitation. "It was." Later in the interview when pressed for details, Shamir seemed to regret his candor and tried to backpedal somewhat on his answer.

Lie Detector

Iran-Contra special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh also came to suspect that the arms-for-hostage trail led back to 1980, since it was the only way to make sense of why the Reagan-Bush team continued selling arms to Iran in 1985-86 when there was so little progress in reducing the number of American hostages in Lebanon.

When Walsh's investigators conducted a polygraph of George H.W. Bush's national security adviser Donald Gregg, they added a question about Gregg's possible participation in the secret 1980 negotiations.

"Were you ever involved in a plan to delay the release of the hostages in Iran until after the 1980 Presidential election?" the examiner asked. Gregg's denial was judged to be deceptive. [See Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Vol. I, p. 501]

While investigating the so-called "October Surprise" issue for PBS "Frontline" in 1991-92, I also discovered a former State Department official who claimed contemporaneous knowledge of an October 1980 trip by then vice presidential candidate George H.W. Bush to Paris to meet with Iranians about the hostages.

David Henderson, who was then a State Department Foreign Service officer, recalled the date as October 18, 1980. He said he heard about the Paris trip when Chicago Tribune correspondent John Maclean met him for an interview on another topic.

Maclean, son of author Norman Maclean who wrote *A River Runs Through It*, had just been told by a well-placed Republican source that Bush was flying to Paris for a clandestine meeting with a delegation of Iranians about the American hostages.

Henderson wasn't sure whether Maclean was looking for some confirmation or whether he was simply sharing an interesting tidbit of news. For his part, Maclean never wrote about the leak because, he told me later, a GOP campaign spokesman had denied it.

Faded Memory

As the years passed, the memory of that Bush-to-Paris leak faded for both Henderson and Maclean, until October Surprise allegations bubbled to the surface in the early 1990s.

Several intelligence operatives were claiming that Bush had undertaken a secret mission to Paris in mid-October 1980 to give the Iranian government an assurance from one of the two Republicans on the presidential ticket that the GOP promises of future military and other assistance would be kept.

Henderson mentioned his recollection of the Bush-to-Paris leak in a 1991 letter to a U.S. senator, which someone sent to me. Though Henderson didn't remember the name of the Chicago Tribune reporter, we were able to track it back to Maclean through a story that he had written about Henderson.

Though not eager to become part of the October Surprise story in 1991, Maclean confirmed that he had received the Republican leak. He also agreed with Henderson's recollection that their conversation occurred on or about Oct. 18, 1980. But Maclean still declined to identify his source.

The significance of the Maclean-Henderson conversation was that it was a piece of information locked in a kind of historical amber, untainted by subsequent claims from intelligence operatives whose credibility had been challenged.

One couldn't accuse Maclean of concocting the Bush-to-Paris allegation for some ulterior motive, since he hadn't used it in 1980, nor had he volunteered it a decade later. He only confirmed it when asked and even then wasn't eager to talk about it.

Bush Meeting

The Maclean-Henderson conversation provided important corroboration for the claims by the intelligence operatives, including Israeli intelligence officer Ari Ben-Menashe who said he saw Bush attend a final round of meetings with Iranians in Paris.

Ben-Menashe said he was in Paris as part of a six-member Israeli delegation that was coordinating the arms deliveries to Iran. He said the key meeting had occurred at the Ritz Hotel in Paris.

In his memoirs, *Profits of War*, Ben-Menashe said he recognized several Americans, including Republican congressional aide Robert McFarlane and CIA officers Robert Gates, Donald Gregg and George Cave. Then, Ben-Menashe said, Iranian cleric Mehdi Karrubi arrived and walked into a conference room.

"A few minutes later George Bush, with the wispy-haired William Casey in front of him, stepped out of the elevator. He smiled, said hello to everyone, and, like Karrubi, hurried into the conference room," Ben-Menashe wrote.

Ben-Menashe said the Paris meetings served to finalize a previously outlined agreement calling for release of the 52 hostages in exchange for \$52 million, guarantees of arms sales for Iran, and unfreezing of Iranian monies in U.S. banks. The timing, however, was changed, he said, to coincide with Reagan's expected Inauguration on Jan. 20, 1981.

Ben-Menashe, who repeated his allegations under oath in a congressional deposition, received support from several sources, including pilot Heinrich Rupp, who said he flew Casey – then Reagan's campaign director – from Washington's National Airport to Paris on a flight that left very late on a rainy night in mid-October.

Rupp said that after arriving at LeBourget airport outside Paris, he saw a man resembling Bush on the tarmac. The night of Oct. 18 indeed was rainy in the Washington area. Also, sign-in sheets at the Reagan-Bush headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, placed Casey within a five-minute drive of National Airport late that evening.

Other Witnesses

There were other bits and pieces of corroboration about the Paris meetings. As early as 1987, Iran's ex-President Bani-Sadr had made similar claims about a Paris meeting between Republicans and Iranians. A French arms dealer, Nicholas Ignatiew, told me in 1990 that he had checked with his government contacts and was told that Republicans did meet with Iranians in Paris in mid-October 1980.

A well-connected French investigative reporter Claude Angeli said his sources inside the French secret service confirmed that the service provided "cover" for a meeting between Republicans and Iranians in France on the

weekend of Oct. 18-19, 1980. German journalist Martin Kilian had received a similar account from a top aide to the fiercely anti-communist chief of French intelligence, Alexandre deMarenches.

Later, deMarenches's biographer, David Andelman, told congressional investigators under oath that deMarenches admitted that he had helped the Reagan-Bush campaign arrange meetings with Iranians about the hostage issue in the summer and fall of 1980, with one meeting held in Paris in October.

Andelman said deMarenches ordered that the secret meetings be kept out of his biography because the story could otherwise damage the reputation of his friends, Casey and Bush. "I don't want to hurt my friend, George Bush," Andelman recalled deMarenches saying as Bush was seeking re-election in 1992.

Gates, McFarlane, Gregg and Cave all denied participating in the meeting, though some alibis proved shaky and others were never examined at all.

Lashing Out

For his part, George H.W. Bush lashed out at the October Surprise allegations. At a news conference on June 4, 1992, Bush was asked if he thought an independent counsel was needed to investigate allegations of secret arms shipments to Iraq during the 1980s.

"I wonder whether they're going to use the same prosecutors that are trying out there to see whether I was in Paris in 1980," Bush snapped.

As a surprised hush fell over the press corps, Bush continued, "I mean, where are we going with the taxpayers' money in this political year?" Bush then asserted, "I was not in Paris, and we did nothing illegal or wrong here" on Iraq.

Though Bush was a former CIA director and had been caught lying about Iran-Contra with his claims of being "out of the loop," he was still given the benefit of the doubt in 1992. Plus, he had what appeared to be a solid alibi for Oct. 18-19, 1980, Secret Service records which placed him at his home in Washington on that weekend.

However, the Bush administration released the records only in redacted form, making it difficult for congressional investigators to verify exactly what Bush had done that day and whom he had met.

The records for the key day of Sunday, Oct. 19, purported to show Bush going to the Chevy Chase Country Club in the morning and to someone's private residence in the afternoon. If Bush indeed had been on those side trips, it would close the window on any possible flight to Paris and back.

Investigators of the October Surprise mystery – including those of us at "Frontline" – put great weight on the Secret Service records. But little is really known about the Secret Service's standards for recording the movements of protectees.

Since the cooperation of the protectees is essential to the Secret Service staying in position to thwart any attacker, the agents presumably must show flexibility in what details they report.

Few politicians are going to want bodyguards around if they write down the details of sensitive meetings or assignations with illicit lovers. Reasonably, the agents might have to fudge or leave out some of the facts.

Bush's Alibi

As it turned out, only one Secret Service agent on the Bush detail – supervisor Leonard Tanis – claimed a clear recollection of the trip to the Chevy Chase Country Club that Sunday. Tanis told congressional investigators that Mr. and Mrs. Bush went to the Chevy Chase club for brunch with Justice and Mrs. Potter Stewart.

But at "Frontline," we had already gone down that path and found it to be a dead end. We had obtained Mrs. Bush's protective records and they showed her going to the C&O Canal jogging path in Washington, not to the Chevy Chase club.

We also had reached Justice Stewart's widow, who had no recollection of any Chevy Chase brunch. So it appeared that Tanis was wrong – and he later backed off his claims.

The inaccurate Tanis account raised the suspicions of House International Affairs Committee counsel Spencer Oliver. In a six-page memo urging a closer look at the Bush question, Oliver argued that the Secret Service had

withheld the uncensored daily report for no justifiable reason from Congress.

"Why did the Secret Service refuse to cooperate on a matter which could have conclusively cleared George Bush of these serious allegations?" Oliver asked. "Was the White House involved in this refusal? Did they order it?"

Oliver also noted Bush's strange behavior in raising the October Surprise issue on his own at two news conferences.

"It can be fairly said that President Bush's recent outbursts about the October Surprise inquiries and [about] his whereabouts in mid-October of 1980 are disingenuous at best," wrote Oliver, "since the administration has refused to make available the documents and the witnesses that could finally and conclusively clear Mr. Bush."

Secret Flight

Unintentionally, Bush's eldest son poked another hole in the assumption that the government would never doctor official records to help cover up international travel by a protected public figure.

For Thanksgiving 2003, George W. Bush wanted to make a surprise flight to Iraq. To give Bush's flight additional security – and extra drama – phony flight plans were filed, a false call sign was employed, and Air Force One was identified as a "Gulfstream 5" in response to a question from a British Airways pilot.

"A senior administration official told reporters that even some members of Bush's Secret Service detail believed he was still in Crawford, Texas, getting ready to have his parents over for Thanksgiving," Washington Post reporter Mike Allen wrote. [Washington Post, Nov. 28, 2003]

Besides falsely telling reporters that George W. Bush planned to spend Thanksgiving at his Texas ranch, Bush's handlers spirited Bush to Air Force One in an unmarked vehicle, with only a tiny Secret Service contingent, the Post reported.

Bush later relished describing the scene to reporters. "They pulled up in a plain-looking vehicle with tinted windows. I slipped on a baseball cap, pulled 'er down -- as did Condi. We looked like a normal couple," he said, referring to national security adviser Condoleezza Rice.

Though the melodramatic deception surrounding Bush's flight to Baghdad soon became public – since it was in essence a publicity stunt – it did prove the ability of high-ranking officials to conduct their movements in secrecy and the readiness of security personnel to file false reports as part of these operations.

Collapsing Alibis

By the late 1990s, other elements of the Republicans' October Surprise alibis were collapsing, including pro-Reagan-Bush claims cited prominently by some news organizations, such as the New Republic and Newsweek. [For more details, see Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege* or Consortiumnews.com's "[The Bushes & the Death of Reason](#)."]]

With the Republican defenses falling apart and with many documents from the Reagan-Bush years scheduled for release in 2001, the opportunity to finally learn the truth about the pivotal election of 1980 loomed.

But George W. Bush got into the White House via a ruling by five Republicans on the U.S. Supreme Court to stop the counting of votes in Florida. Then, on his first day in office, his counsel Alberto Gonzales drafted an executive order for Bush that postponed release of the Reagan-Bush records.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, Bush approved another secrecy order that put the records beyond the public's reach indefinitely, passing down control of many documents to a President's or a Vice President's descendants.

Thus, the truth about how the Reagan-Bush era began in the 1980s – and what was done to contain the Iran-Contra investigations in the late 1980s and early 1990s – might eventually become the property of the noted scholars, the Bush twins, Jenna and Barbara.

The American people will be kept in the dark about their own history, like the subjects of some hereditary dynasty. Without the facts, they also face the possibility of being more easily manipulated by emotional appeals devoid of informed debate.

That moment has come sooner than many expected. The United States appears to be on the brink of a war with Iran, while many government officials and the citizenry are operating on historical assumptions derived more from fiction than fact.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq*, can be ordered at secrecyandprivilege.com. It's also available at Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth.'* This article is republished in the *Baltimore Chronicle* with permission of the author.

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