

TROL in American Govt: Constitutional or Border Crisis?

DOCUMENT 10

The Iran-Contra affair

Reagan's administration was embroiled in scandal when it came to light that the United States had sold weapons to Iran and funneled the money to Nicaraguan rebels.

Overview

- In the Iran-Contra affair, the Reagan administration secretly sold weapons to Iran to effect the release of American hostages held in Lebanon.
- Money from the Iran weapons-sale then was used to fund the Contras, a group of guerrilla “freedom fighters” opposed to the Marxist government of Nicaragua.
- Both the sale of arms to Iran and the military aid to the Contras were illegal, and Colonel Oliver North and others in the president’s administration were dismissed and charged with breaking the law.

The Iran-Contra affair

Issues of Central American communism and Middle Eastern terrorism combined in the Iran-Contra affair to cast a shadow over President Reagan's second term in office.

The first stage of the events involved a weapons-for-hostages exchange in which officials in the Reagan administration sold antitank missiles to Iran. In exchange, Iran worked to have American hostages released from Lebanon. Reagan administration officials, including Colonel Oliver North, then used the money from the missile sales to fund US military support for the Contras, anticommunist guerrillas who were fighting against the Marxist government in Nicaragua.

The problem with all this was that President Reagan had vowed that his administration would never negotiate with hostage-takers, on top of the fact that Congress had placed an embargo on the sale of weapons to Iran. Congress also had passed the Boland Amendment, limiting US assistance to the Contras in Nicaragua, citing evidence that they had tortured and murdered civilians. Therefore, both the sale of arms to Iran and the use of money from that sale to aid the Contras was illegal.

The scandal began to unravel after an C-123 supply plane over northern Nicaragua was shot down in October 1986. An American who survived the crash described how he had been hired by the CIA to load and drop weapons cargoes to the Contras, and, soon, investigative reporters and Congress were uncovering the various elements of the scandal.

By late 1986, the US Attorney General announced that between \$10 and \$30 million of the money received from Iran in the missiles-for-hostages deal had been diverted to fund military aid to the Contras, though later it was found that US funding for the Contras—with Iranian and other monies—amounted to more than \$70 million.

Reagan and Iran-Contra

Although it is certain that Reagan condoned the sale of missiles for hostages in Iran, there is no evidence that the president knew that Oliver North was diverting money from the missile sales to the Nicaraguan Contras.

Some people blamed Reagan’s hands-off administrative style as a contributing factor in Iran-Contra. For, while Reagan concerned himself with big-picture strategy in domestic and foreign policy, he assigned others responsibility for carrying out the details. But this administrative approach seemed to lead to serious—some said impeachable—consequences in the Iran-Contra affair. Reagan earned another nickname, the “Teflon president,” since scandals never seemed to stick to him and his popularity with the public remained unchanged.

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