



Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power

Malcolm Byrne

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Everything began to unravel on October 5, 1986, when a Nicaraguan soldier downed an American plane carrying arms to "Contra" guerrillas, exposing a tightly held U.S. clandestine program. A month later, reports surfaced that Washington had been covertly selling arms to Iran (our sworn enemy and a state sponsor of terrorism), in exchange for help freeing hostages in Beirut. The profits, it turned out, were going to support the Contras, despite an explicit ban by Congress.

In the firestorm that erupted, shocking details emerged, raising the prospect of impeachment, and the American public confronted a scandal as momentous as it was confusing. At its center was President Ronald Reagan amid a swirl of questions about illegal wars, consorting with terrorists, and the abuse of presidential power.

Yet, despite the enormity of the issues, the affair dropped from the public radar due to media overkill, years of legal wrangling, and a vigorous campaign to forestall another Watergate. As a result, many Americans failed to grasp the scandal's full import.

Through exhaustive use of declassified documents, previously unavailable investigative materials, and wide-ranging interviews, Malcolm Byrne revisits this largely forgotten and misrepresented episode. Placing the events in their historical and political context (notably the Cold War and a sharp partisan domestic divide), he explores what made the affair possible and meticulously relates how it unfolded—including clarifying minor myths about cakes, keys, bibles, diversion memos, and shredding parties.

Iran-Contra demonstrates that, far from being a "junta" against the president, the affair could not have occurred without awareness and approval at the very top of the U.S. government. Byrne reveals an unmistakable pattern of dubious behavior—including potentially illegal conduct by the president, vice president, the secretaries of state and defense, the CIA director and others—that formed the true core of the scandal.

Given the lack of meaningful consequences for those involved, the volume raises critical questions about the ability of our current system of checks and balances to address presidential abuses of power, and about the possibility of similar outbreaks in the future.

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