

The White House cover-up that no one wants you to understand

by Robert Parry

Mother Jones, Jul/Aug 1993

As Lawrence Walsh ends his six-year Iran-contra investigation, Washington insiders are busy judging how big a failure the independent prosecutor has been. "The truth is that when Walsh finally goes home, he will leave a perceived loser," concluded Marjorie Williams in a recent *Washington Post* profile.

"Loser" is only one of the epithets that the D.C. press corps has hurled at Walsh since he indicted former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger a year ago. In journal after influential journal, the eighty-one-year-old ex-federal judge has been likened to Captains Ahab and Queeg, Victor Hugo's Inspector Javert, Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, and even the Inquisition's Torquemada. The trashing of Lawrence Walsh has become a journalistic cottage industry--and has put the press in the disturbing role of objecting to discovery of the truth.

Washington's overt hostility to the investigation, as evidenced in commentaries by liberals as well as conservatives, has even contributed to the success of the Reagan-Bush administrations' long-running cover-up. The assaults on Walsh have served as a kind of peer-group enforcement mechanism that has limited his investigation's options.

James Brosnahan, the San Francisco trial attorney who moved to Washington last fall to prosecute Weinberger (before Bush pardoned him), came to see the unrelenting attacks against Walsh as part of the obstruction of justice. "It was all so transparent that I was disappointed more people didn't pick up on the fact that all they were really trying to do was obstruct the trial of Weinberger," he says.

"It was going to be a hell of a trial. The full story would have been told, as it pertained to the [obstruction] counts of the indictment. They [senior Reagan-Bush officials] couldn't have a trial. The cross-examination of Caspar Weinberger was going to be an event."

Walsh's team had discovered that Weinberger's handwritten notes disproved Bush's claim that he had been "out of the loop" and proved that Weinberger knew full well about \$25 million in Saudi contributions to the contras, even as he told Congress in 1986 that the charge was "so outlandish as to be unworthy of comment."

According to Brosnahan, the trial would have shown that Weinberger knew as early as summer 1985 that President Ronald Reagan had personally authorized missile shipments to Iran in violation of the Arms Control Export Act, and that this potentially impeachable act was concealed by constructing a false record. "The August [1985] meeting [of Reagan's

National Security Council] discussed having Israel send the missiles to Iran and replenishing them out of U.S. stocks," says Brosnahan. "Weinberger is responsible for all missiles. The secretary of defense is the guy."

Another guy who stood to lose his exalted standing in Washington if the trial took place was General Colin Powell, who was Weinberger's principal aide in 1985. In an affidavit, Powell said he "saw virtually all the papers that went in and out of [Weinberger's] office" and thus would have had direct access to the evidence of missile replenishment. Early in the investigation, Powell gave conflicting accounts of his knowledge of Weinberger's extensive personal notes, denying knowledge of their existence (when Weinberger was claiming he didn't take any), and then saying in 1992 that the notes were no secret and describing them in detail (after Weinberger was forced to cough them up).

One of the prosecution's star witnesses would have been White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, who finally would have recounted the frantic Oval Office scrambling to contain the scandal in November 1986, Brosnahan says. "Regan would say that when it broke, he denied things. But there came a point when he knew it was out of control. At some point, in December [1985] or January [1986], he wanted to get the whole thing out."

But the deafening drumbeat against Lawrence Walsh drowned out any honest telling of the truth. As his days in the White House drew to a close, Bush tested the waters for a pardon. Weinberger's defense team floated trial balloons before influential media groups, including editors and writers for the *Washington Post*, and consulted with top Democrats, including House Speaker Thomas Foley and then-Representative Les Aspin (now defense secretary). It was clear that reaction to a Weinberger pardon would be mild. Bush subsequently killed the Weinberger trial (scheduled to start last January) by pardoning him and five other Iran-contra figures.

This past spring, emboldened by anti-Walsh sentiment, former President Bush balked at an earlier understanding that he would submit to unrestricted Iran-contra questioning after the 1992 election. Having been pummeled in the media over the length and cost (\$36 million-plus) of his investigation, Walsh shrank from the ugly battle that would have ensued if he'd tried to drag Bush before a grand jury.

Walsh lost the public-relations battle, even as he finally exposed the lies that protected the Oval Office from the consequences of President Reagan's illegal acts. Though Walsh could finally prove initial crimes and the obstruction of justice, official Washington didn't want to hear about it. Iran-contra was too old, too complicated.

The *Washington Post*'s Williams spoke for many colleagues when she criticized Walsh's "anachronistic sense" of outrage in the face of the "silent political referendum" against pursuing the Iran-contra crimes. This was a Washington consensus that, Williams wrote, "Walsh alone ignored."

With an irony no less destructive for its sophistication, she criticized Walsh as a man out of step with expediency. "In the utilitarian political universe of Washington, consistency like Walsh's is distinctly suspect," Williams explained. "It began to seem . . . rigid of him to care so much. So un-Washington. Hence the gathering critique of his efforts as vindictive,

extreme."

But in the context of helping to pry loose proof of White House wrongdoing, Walsh has accomplished a remarkable feat: he has salvaged an important part of American history, so that future generations might understand the strange events that occurred inside the U.S. government in the 1980s. It's clear that the full truth on Iran-contra will never be told. But considering White House dishonesty, congressional timidity, and the press corps' complacency, Lawrence Walsh did his best. He wrested from a determined White House cover-up a substantive if incomplete accounting of history. He has proven himself no loser.

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