

Iran-Contra redux: Bush White House ran “off-the-books” covert operation for Iraq elections

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26 July 2005

An article by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh last week in the *New Yorker* magazine reveals that the Bush White House authorized a highly classified covert program to funnel financial and material aid to its favored slate in the January 30 Iraqi elections, an operation that may have included ballot-stuffing and other means of directly manipulating vote totals.

Hersh's exposé underscores both the bogus character of the “democracy” which the American government has established in Iraq and the severely eroded character of democratic forms of rule in the United States itself, where the Bush administration feels free to override legal restrictions, congressional oversight and even objections from within the military-intelligence apparatus itself.

According to the *New Yorker* account, the White House decision to intervene covertly in the election was driven by concerns that the Shi'ite religious parties would so thoroughly dominate the vote—because Shi'ites comprise a majority of the Iraqi population, and the minority Sunnis were boycotting—that Washington would have no choice but to acquiesce in the installation of a regime in Baghdad heavily influenced by Iran. The Shi'ite religious parties have extensive ties to Iran, which is predominantly Shi'ite, and many of the leaders of these parties, including the new prime minister, Ibrahim Jafaari, went into exile in Iran during the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

The decision on covert aid came after an extensive internal debate within the Bush administration, in which the State Department was deeply divided over whether to provide direct financial and material aid to then-prime minister Iyad Allawi. Thomas Warrick, an official at the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, proposed to use \$40 million in funds appropriated by Congress to support the electoral process and divert it into the coffers of Allawi's party, the principal secular opposition to the Shi'ite religious front.

The State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, however, opposed the plan, as did three front organizations long financed and directed by the CIA to conduct political operations overseas: the National Democratic Institute (associated with the Democratic Party), the International Republican Institute (associated with the Republican Party), and the National Endowment for Democracy (which works closely with the AFL-CIO).

According to Hersh, the three quasi-governmental groups and their State Department allies believed that crude manipulation of the election would be both ineffective, because the Shi'ite parties were sure to win anyway, and dangerous, since it would almost certainly be exposed and discredit the official US propaganda about bringing

democracy to Iraq.

Warrick's plan for support to Allawi was abruptly dropped in the early fall of 2004, Hersh claims, but was replaced by a covert program that was kept secret, not only from the Iraqi and American people, but from the State Department as well.

Hersh writes: “former military and intelligence officials told me, the White House promulgated a highly classified Presidential ‘finding’ authorizing the CIA to provide money and other support covertly to political candidates in certain countries who, in the Administration's view, were seeking to spread democracy. ‘The finding was general,’ a recently retired high-level CIA official told me. ‘But there's no doubt that Baghdad was a stop on the way. The process is under the control of the CIA and the Defense Department.’”

Hersh continues: “A former senior intelligence official told me, ‘The election clock was running down, and people were panicking. The polls showed that the Shi'ites were going to run off with the store. The Administration had to do something. How?’”

First there was extensive material support for the Allawi slate. Hersh quotes Les Campbell, regional director of the National Democratic Institute for the Middle East and North Africa, describing this support: “It became clear that Allawi and his coalition had huge resources, although nothing was flowing through normal channels. He had very professional and very sophisticated media help and saturation television coverage.”

Then came Election Day, universally hailed in the media as a triumph of democracy. Citing “current and former military and intelligence officials who spoke to me about the election operation,” Hersh writes that his sources “said they heard reports of voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, bribery, and the falsification of returns, but the circumstances, and the extent of direct American involvement, could not be confirmed.”

Polls conducted in the fall of 2004 showed the Allawi slate at only three percent, but with US financial support and media coverage, he stood at nine percent on the eve of the vote. The US-backed slate jumped to 14 percent in final returns, just enough to deny the Shi'ite coalition a clear majority and thus diminish its control of the assembly.

Hersh notes at least one eye-opening discrepancy in the returns: in the eight provinces where Allawi's party ran provincial as well as national candidates, his list received only 177,678 provincial votes, compared to 452,629 national votes, even though voters cast ballots for both races at the same time. With considerable understatement, Hersh writes: “Most election experts I spoke to found the deviation

surprising and difficult to explain.”

Under federal laws enacted after the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s, presidential findings authorizing covert operations must be submitted to the House and Senate intelligence committees, or at least to the Republican and Democratic leaders of those committees, as well as the Republican and Democratic leaders of the House and Senate. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat, reportedly objected to the covert operation, and her opposition stalled its implementation for several months.

However, according to Hersh, “Sometime after last November’s Presidential election, I was told by past and present intelligence and military officials, the Bush Administration decided to override Pelosi’s objections and covertly intervene in the Iraqi election. A former national-security official told me that he had learned of the effort from ‘people who worked the beat’—those involved in the operation. It was necessary, he added, ‘because they couldn’t afford to have a disaster.’”

The operation was run “off the books,” Hersh adds. It was “conducted by retired CIA officers and other non-governmental personnel, and used funds that were not necessarily appropriated by Congress. Some in the White House and at the Pentagon believed that keeping an operation off the books eliminated the need to give a formal briefing to the relevant members of Congress and congressional intelligence committees, whose jurisdiction is limited, in their view, to officially sanctioned CIA operations.”

Hersh comments: “In my reporting for this story, one theme that emerged was the Bush Administration’s increasing tendency to turn to off-the-books covert actions to accomplish its goals. This allowed the Administration to avoid the kind of stumbling blocks it encountered in the debate about how to handle the elections: bureaucratic infighting, congressional second-guessing, complaints from outsiders.”

The US manipulation of the Iraqi election has many parallels to the circumstances leading up to the Iran-Contra affair. In the early 1980s, congressional Democrats enacted a series of legal restrictions on US covert operations against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua (the two Boland amendments, named after their House sponsor, Congressman Edward Boland).

In order to evade congressional oversight, the Reagan White House and then-CIA Director William Casey organized what they described as an “off the shelf” program of supplying arms to the contras, using retired CIA and military personnel and Cuban fascists—including the convicted terrorist bomber Luis Posada Carriles—and directed by Lt. Col. Oliver North of the National Security Council. Financing came from sympathetic foreign governments—US client states such as Saudi Arabia, the sultanate of Brunei and Taiwan.

When word of this operation finally reached Congress, and Oliver North was asked to testify about his relations with the Nicaraguan “Contras,” as the right-wing guerrilla terrorists were called, he lied under oath, declaring he was involved only in obtaining “humanitarian aid” for the Contras and that the White House was scrupulously observing the strictures of the Boland Amendment.

This perjury was only exposed after two events overseas: the crash of a CIA-chartered airplane flying arms to the Contras from a US base in El Salvador, with the capture of an American crewman, Eugene Hasenfus; and the report in a Lebanese newspaper about secret US arms shipments to Iran in exchange for the release of US hostages seized in Lebanon by Shi’ite militants allied with the Iranian regime.

A damage control operation mounted by Reagan’s attorney general,

Edwin Meese, focused on a relatively minor aspect of the Iran and Contra operations—North’s decision, backed by National Security Adviser Admiral John Poindexter, to use profits from the sale of weapons to Iran to pay for weapons shipped to the Contras in Nicaragua.

This “diversion” of funds was played up by the Reagan administration, the media and the congressional Democrats as the major offense committed by North and Poindexter, although it actually represented only an incidental connection between two covert operations—the Contra arms shipments and the arms-for-hostages swaps with Iran—each of which involved massive violations of US and international law.

The Iran-Contra affair also brought to light evidence of secret preparations by the Reagan administration to impose martial law in the United States in the event of a decision to carry out an open US military intervention in Nicaragua or El Salvador, then the principal areas of concern to Washington. Oliver North had participated in the drafting of plans for an exercise, Operation Rex ’84, to test the readiness of the Pentagon to round up hundreds of thousands of Central American immigrants, as well as others expected to oppose a US war in that region, and incarcerate them in mothballed US military bases.

The current Bush administration carries forward the tendencies revealed in the Iran-Contra affair—reckless military adventurism and conspiracies against democratic rights—in a much more advanced form. It also incorporates among its leading personnel many of those who played important roles in Iran-Contra.

Elliott Abrams, convicted of perjury before Congress in the Iran-Contra affair while serving in the State Department, is now a deputy director at the National Security Council—the position held by Oliver North. Admiral John Poindexter, the former national security adviser, served for two years in the Pentagon running a special program to accumulate data on the American people. Otto Reich, who ran a State Department disinformation program as part of Iran-Contra, was Bush’s top Latin American adviser.

The latest Iran-Contra recruit to surface is Robert Earl, an Army lieutenant colonel who admitting stealing and shredding secret documents while working for Oliver North at the National Security Council during Iran-Contra. He was appointed earlier this month as chief of staff to Gordon England, Bush’s nominee as deputy secretary of defense, who is to replace Paul Wolfowitz, a principal architect of the Iraq war. After the Iran-Contra conspiracy was exposed, Earl was granted immunity from prosecution in return for his testimony against North and other superiors.



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