

Congressman Jack Brooks, Rex '84 and the Iran-Contra affair

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Former congressman Jack Brooks, a liberal Democrat who represented an east Texas district centered on the city of Beaumont for 42 years, died Tuesday at the age of 89.

Obituaries by the *New York Times* and the Associated Press detailed his long political career, including his role as one of a handful of pro-civil-rights southerners in the Democratic Party, but passed over in silence the most critical episode in his four decades in Washington.

Brooks was one of the House members of the joint House-Senate committee established to investigate the Iran-Contra affair, a major political crisis of the Reagan administration. It erupted in November 1986, when Reagan was compelled to acknowledge that a group of White House aides had been conducting secret arms sales to Iran and using the proceeds of the arms sales to buy weapons to supply the right-wing Contra guerrillas fighting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The arms sales to Iran violated the official policy of the US government towards the Iranian regime. It demonstrated the cynicism of American policy in the Persian Gulf, since Washington was thus aiding both sides in the bloody Iran-Iraq War to fight each other, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives.

The secret financing of the Nicaraguan Contras was brazenly illegal, since the US Congress had barred such aid under successive versions of the Boland Amendment, named after its House sponsor, liberal Democrat Edward Boland of Massachusetts.

Reagan had personally authorized a series of expedients to sustain the Contras, who were engaged in bloody terrorist attacks on the bourgeois-nationalist Sandinista government, which had allied itself with Cuba. He explicitly ordered Lt. Col. Oliver North, a member of the National Security Council staff in the White House, to run these operations, with covert

assistance from the CIA and a network of ex-CIA and ex-military operatives.

The gun-running to the Contras came to public notoriety in October 1986, when a plane loaded with weapons crash-landed and was captured by the Sandinistas, and a surviving American, Eugene Hasenfus, was paraded before news cameras to tell his story. Shortly afterwards, a Lebanese newspaper revealed the arms sales to Iran, conducted initially to obtain the release of US hostages in Lebanon held by the pro-Iranian Hezbollah group. Then the connection between the two illegal operations was revealed, and a full-scale political crisis broke upon Washington.

A series of efforts were undertaken to contain the scandal and prevent an exposure of government criminality on the scale of Watergate. The Democratic Party, then in control of both houses of Congress, sought to block any effort to impeach Reagan or expose the full extent of the crimes of his administration.

The joint House-Senate committee, co-chaired by Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii and Congressman Lee Hamilton of Indiana, was the most important vehicle for the cover-up. Its sessions aired many aspects of the tangled web of illegal and off-the-books operations, both in the Middle East and in Central America. But the decisive moment came when Oliver North was appearing as the star witness.

At one point during North's testimony, Congressman Brooks, a member of the joint committee, sought to raise the issue of the officer's work at the National Security Council on a project that pre-dated Iran-Contra. This had been described in an article in the *Miami Herald*, the only newspaper to report it, as Operation Rex '84, a plan to suspend the US Constitution, declare martial law, establish a "parallel government" of US military and intelligence

operatives, and round up potential opponents of a US war with Nicaragua. The plan was to be activated in the event that the Reagan administration decided to invade the Central American country.

In the jargon of the military-intelligence apparatus, this plan to establish a military dictatorship in America and jail hundreds of thousands of people because of their political views was known as an exercise in ensuring “continuity of government.”

On July 13, 1987, Brooks tried to question North about Rex '84 and the *Miami Herald* article. He was immediately cut off by the Democratic co-chairman, Senator Inouye. The exchange went as follows:

BROOKS: Colonel North, in your work at the N.S.C., were you not assigned, at one time, to work on plans for the continuity of government in the event of a major disaster?

BRENDAN V. SULLIVAN, counsel for Colonel North: Mr. Chairman?

SENATOR DANIEL K. INOUE, Democrat of Hawaii: I believe that question touches upon a highly sensitive and classified area so may I request that you not touch upon that.

BROOKS: I was particularly concerned, Mr. Chairman, because I read in Miami papers, and several others, that there had been a plan developed, by that same agency, a contingency plan in the event of emergency, that would suspend the American Constitution. And I was deeply concerned about it and wondered if that was the area in which he had worked. I believe that it was and I wanted to get his confirmation.

INOUE: May I most respectfully request that that matter not be touched upon, at this stage. If we wish to get into this, I'm certain arrangements can be made for an executive session.

The video of the exchange shows that when the question was asked, Oliver North was visibly stunned and turned to his lawyer, who then intervened to prompt the chairman to stop the questioning. Inouye did so, and Brooks backed down. The committee never returned to the subject.

Only the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, called the attention of the American and international working class to this event. We pointed out the implications for American democracy. Only 13 years

after the Watergate scandal had forced an American president to resign, to be followed by the exposure of CIA assassination plots and the general discrediting of the American apparatus of spying and repression, the Democratic Party had acted to block any exposure of an even more ominous threat to democratic rights.

The significance of this event today is even greater. In the years since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the preparation of police-state operations against the American people has greatly intensified, using the pretext of the “war on terror”—even while the US government utilizes the very same reactionary Islamic fundamentalist forces, its supposed enemy, to attack regimes like those in Libya and Syria, which have fallen afoul of Washington.

There is no doubt that the mass detention program in which Oliver North was involved not only is still in existence, but has been made far more sweeping in its scope and powers. Operation Rex '84 is child's play compared to the PATRIOT Act, the Department of Homeland Security, the Pentagon's Northern Command (the first ever headquarters for military operations inside the continental United States), the establishment of military tribunals, Guantanamo Bay, pervasive domestic spying and surveillance of all communications, and the assertion of a presidential right to order the assassination of any person, including American citizens, anywhere in the world.

It is not only a matter of detaining potential opponents of an American war of aggression overseas. It is a matter of suppressing mass social unrest within the United States itself, generated by the catastrophic crisis of American and world capitalism.



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