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“The Most Marketable Political Commodity”: Oliver North, Iran-Contra, and American Domestic Politics

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From Oliver North’s congressional testimony in 1987 to his near-successful Senate run in 1994, this article assesses the significance of the Iran-Contra scandal to the American domestic political landscape. It positions Iran-Contra at a transitional moment in right-wing politics, torn between loyalty to Reagan on one hand and the combativeness of the 1990s’ New Right on the other. In four stages—denial, fame, fundraising, and forgetting—defenders of North set forth a model of how ascendant forces in the New Right would, post-Reagan, transform scandal into political capital. Iran-Contra provided grist for media outlets that demonized the mainstream media, voters and members of Congress who excused criminality, and two White Houses who longed to forgive and forget. Thus can the historiography of American conservatism, currently in full bloom, begin to reckon with Iran-Contra’s place in domestic politics.

In 1990, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, the face of the Iran-Contra scandal, found himself in the unusual position of being a convicted felon as well as a prodigious political fundraiser. Of sixteen original counts, a jury had convicted him of three: accepting an illegal gratuity, obstructing justice, and destroying documents. While awaiting sentencing and appealing, North traveled the country, charging \$25,000 per speech to rapt audiences. Much of the money paid for his legal defense, but he also raised funds for conservative causes, and conservatives used his likeness and story to bolster their own fundraising. In April, one Republican operative dubbed him “the most marketable political commodity that I know of in the whole United States.”¹ In July, an appeals court vacated North’s conviction on a technicality, and the divisive National Security Council official went on nearly to win the 1994 Virginia Senate race.

North remained popular among conservatives and Republicans not despite his legal persecution but because of it.² From the moment he walked into Congressional hearings in 1987, North embodied a novel, winning New Right populist formula for turning potentially negative scandals into partisan political power.³ The formula consisted of fashioning a narrative of victimization and shamelessness in four overlapping steps: first, denying the scandalous nature of

¹Howard Phillips, head of the Conservative Caucus, cited in B. Drummond Ayres Jr., “For North, Missions That Have One Goal,” *New York Times*, Apr. 21, 1990, 6.

²I use the terms “Republican” and “conservative” mostly interchangeably because of their considerable overlap while recognizing that they are not synonymous, and “Republican” to refer specifically to a party member. As Leonard Weinberg writes of the two terms, “in recent times they seem close enough.” Leonard Weinberg, *Fascism, Populism and American Democracy* (New York, 2019), 24.

³Robert Busby examined “presidential recovery” after the Iran-Contra crisis but focused on the weeks and months immediately after the revelations in fall 1986 and not the years of criminal trials and fundraising that followed. Robert Busby, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair: The Politics of Presidential Recovery* (London, 1999).

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Republican behavior and instead blaming the mainstream media and Democrats for “politicization”; second, fabricating “grassroots” support for a public figure and equating that figure’s celebrity with impunity; third, community building and fundraising off martyrdom and demonization; and fourth, pardoning any offenses and erasing the memory of the scandal once it stopped reaping benefits.

The Oliver North saga marked an early manifestation of the post-Ronald Reagan New Right’s political power within the Republican Party and American politics more generally. While North was a champion of President Reagan, his followers and handlers, in beliefs and methods, moved beyond his mainstream Republican appeal and instead foreshadowed the attack-driven, mass-marketed, and mendacious nature of the post-Reagan era pioneered by figures such as House Speaker Newt Gingrich in the 1990s and brought to full fruition by President Donald Trump in the 2010s. North’s political ascent fed off the still-nascent political power of tools of mass outreach such as television and mass-mailing. The zealous man met the moment of Republican desperation for unadorned heroism in a seemingly immoral world, and the means to create, protect, and turn that moment into political capital helped define a new era of populist Republican politics marked by opportunism and denial. Understanding this New Right populist model helps explain how the party, since the 1980s, has remained a viable national entity despite its undemocratic practices and unpopular policies.⁴

Historians have not yet fully explored the domestic political implications of the Iran-Contra episode, for instance its contribution to Republican Party methods. Scholars of the scandal—few of them historians—have struggled to sift through its mountainous paper trail and untangle its mystifying details of Swiss bank deposits, secret meetings, and violations of criminal statutes. In truth, the scandal’s offenses were relatively simple. From 1984 to 1986, the Reagan administration, flouting the Boland Amendment passed by Congress, used government resources to fund and help direct the military strategy of the Contra forces against the leftist Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. Concurrently, in violation of U.S. laws and contrary to the president’s stated policy of not negotiating with terrorists, the executive traded arms to Iran in hopes of freeing hostages held by Iranian-controlled terrorists and moderating the regime in Tehran. In late 1986, the press revealed these two covert schemes, and the White House discovered a diversion of funds by the National Security Council from the latter to the former, thus giving birth to the hyphenated Iran-Contra scandal.

This three-pronged scheme, which was investigated over the following years by a presidential commission, both houses of Congress, and Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh and hashed out in a dozen court cases, confounded and quickly bored mass American audiences. Most of the indictments that Walsh filed were not for Iran-Contra itself but for the lying to Congress and investigators and the obstruction of justice that followed, causing the scandal to recede even more in the public consciousness. As the scandal dissolved in 1992, journalist Richard Cohen feared “that the American public will continue to see Iran-Contra as the policy equivalent of quantum physics—hopelessly complicated and of interest only to specialists.”⁵

⁴On the unpopularity of Republican policies, see Yphtach Lelkes and Paul M. Sniderman, “Democrats’ Policies Are More Popular. But Republicans Are More Ideologically Unified,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 16, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/16/democrats-policies-are-more-popular-but-republicans-are-more-ideologically-unified/>, (accessed Feb. 28, 2023). I use the term “New Right” to refer to the post-Goldwater, post-1964 combination of activist foreign policies, social “wedge” issues, and small government rhetoric that, using new political marketing tools, brought Ronald Reagan to power in 1980. The New Right distinguished itself from the Old Right and the neoconservatives, and, unlike the Radical Right, proved willing to vie for power through elections. See Richard Viguerie, *The New Right: We’re Ready to Lead* (Falls Church, VA, 1980); Paul Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, rev. ed. (New York, 1993), 97–117; and Matthew Continetti, *The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism* (New York, 2022), 230–63.

⁵Richard Cohen, “What Did Bush Know?” *Washington Post*, Sept. 22, 1992, A21.

Scholars who trudged through the minutiae of Iran-Contra drew valuable lessons, but ones unrelated to electoral politics. A first school, led by Harold Hongju Koh, wrote about its impact on national security policy formulation.⁶ A second school, much more populous, focused on the constitutional tug of war between the legislative and executive branches, largely warning of the decreasing power of the former over the latter after gains by Congress in the 1970s.⁷ Other historians have looked at other foreign policy facets of Iran-Contra—its origins and failures, its fit within the Cold War, its illustration of Reagan’s style, and more.⁸

The intersection of the domestic political aspects of Iran-Contra and the historiography of modern right-wing political movements thus remains underexplored. To be sure, that latter literature has grown rich and varied in the last decades, beginning with grassroots and social histories of conservatism.⁹ Another trend has been to focus on individuals who galvanized public opinion, such as Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Reagan.¹⁰ Historians have also charted the impact of the Right, new and old, on U.S. foreign policy.¹¹

Among other insights, historians of conservatism have chronicled the increasing sophistication of Republican arguments and tools for swaying American voters. Among those arguments was the accusation that liberal elites dominated policy making and the media, of which conservative causes were allegedly victims rather than beneficiaries.¹² The growing scholarship on Republican-led direct mail techniques, fundraising machines, and control over media and

⁶Harold Hongju Koh, *The National Security Constitution: Sharing Power after the Iran-Contra Affair* (New Haven, CT, 1990); Laura Dickinson, “Outsourcing Covert Activities,” *Journal of National Security Law & Policy* 5, no. 2 (2012): 521–37; Scott Glabe, “The Original Privatization of Intelligence: Iran-Contra Revisited,” *American Intelligence Journal* 28, no. 1 (2010): 113–20; Jonathan Marshall, Peter Dale Scott, and Jane Hunter, *The Iran Contra Connection: Secret Teams and Covert Operations in the Reagan Era* (Boston, 1987).

⁷Marshall et al., *The Iran Contra Connection*; Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York, 1991); James T. Currie, “Iran-Contra and Congressional Oversight of the CIA,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence* 11, no. 2 (1998): 185–210; Malcolm Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan’s Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power* (Lawrence, KS, 2014).

⁸See perhaps the only historiographical article of the scandal, James F. Siekmeier, “The Iran-Contra Affair,” in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, ed. Andrew Johns (Malden, MA, 2015), 321–38. See also Chester A. Newland, “Faithful Execution of the Law and Empowering Public Confidence,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 673–86; Dennis Thompson, “Democratic Secrecy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 181–93; and Sandra Jordan, “Classified Information and Conflicts in Independent Counsel Prosecutions: Balancing the Scales of Justice after Iran-Contra,” *Columbia Law Review* 91, no. 7 (Nov. 1991): 1651–98.

⁹Rebecca Klatch, *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia, 1986); John Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1997); Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, MA, 1999); Ronald Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004); Mary Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Rise of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ, 2015).

¹⁰Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York, 2001); Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York, 2008); Kenneth J. Heineman, *The Rise of Contemporary Conservatism in the United States* (New York, 2019); Brian M. Conley, *The Rise of the Republican Right: From Goldwater to Reagan* (New York, 2019); Amy E. Ansell, ed., *Unraveling the Right: The New Conservatism in American Thought and Politics* (New York, 2019); Rick Perlstein, *Reaganland: America’s Right Turn 1976–1980* (New York, 2020).

¹¹For instance, Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York, 1986); John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs 1945–1994* (New Haven, CT, 1995); Francis H. Marlo, *Planning Reagan’s War: Conservative Strategists and America’s Cold War Victory* (Washington, DC, 2012); and Laurence Jurdem, *Paving the Way for Reagan: The Influence of Conservative Media on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Lexington, KY, 2018).

¹²See, for example, Leonard Weinberg, *Fascism, Populism and American Democracy* (New York, 2019), 17; and Charles J. Holden, Zach Messitte, and Jerald Podair, *Republican Populist: Spiro Agnew and the Origins of Donald Trump’s America* (Charlottesville, VA, 2019), 5.

law belies this narrative, yet it cries out for specific episodes in which novel techniques drew on current events to jockey for electoral advantage.¹³ The Oliver North story is one such episode.

The increasingly bountiful literature on the rise of the Right in America has yet to situate Iran-Contra within its core narrative of a successful political movement transforming charismatic but flawed characters into political assets. Many surveys on Reagan-era conservatism do not even mention Iran-Contra or North.¹⁴ Histories of specific conservative institutions such as think tanks and of technologies such as talk radio also fail even to mention Iran-Contra.¹⁵ Those that do mention the scandal do so in passing, as an embarrassing aberration delaying the otherwise steady triumph of the Right.¹⁶ Such silences unwittingly reproduce the forgetting of Iran-Contra's scandalousness that Republicans wished for in the 1990s. Other histories briefly include North as a representative of the New Right, noting that his supporters were well to the right of Reagan and that avid conservatives faulted the Republican president for his "abandonment of the Nicaraguan Contras in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal," as Marcus Witcher writes.¹⁷ But there remains no appraisal of North's significance to either Republican or New Right politics.

Yet the North domestic political story presaged how the Republican Party, especially its New Right factions, would embrace scandal as a political strategy. In the Reagan years, the party had a lot of practice. Even absent Iran-Contra, the Reagan administration stands among the most scandal-ridden in American history. Major disgraces marred the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Savings and Loans industry, and the world of lobbyists. Once 1987 was over, the *New York Times* passed a damning judgment on the Reagan White House as "one of the most corrupt administrations ever." In 1988, the Subcommittee on Civil Service counted over 225 Reagan appointees accused of criminal wrongdoing. "The amount of sleaze is awesome," wrote the *Times*. "Precise comparisons to the [Ulysses] Grant, [Warren] Harding and Nixon Administrations aren't possible or necessary. The Reagan Administration rivals them all for official lawlessness, contempt for law, and playing loose with the truth."¹⁸ One journalist tallied 138 Reagan administration officials

¹³See, for example, Richard Viguerie and David Franke, *America's Right Turn: How Conservatives Used New and Alternative Media to Take Power* (Los Angeles, 2004); Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York, 2016); Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2018); Reece Peck, *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class* (Cambridge, UK, 2019); Jack Jackson, *Law Without Future: Anti-Constitutional Politics and the American Right* (Philadelphia, 2019); and Amanda Hollis-Brusky and Joshua C. Wilson, *Separate but Faithful: The Christian Right's Radical Struggle to Transform Law and Legal Culture* (New York, 2020).

¹⁴Gottfried, *Conservative Movement*; Mallory Factor, ed., *Big Tent: The Story of the Conservative Revolution—As Told by the Thinkers and Doers Who Made It Happen* (New York, 2014); Charles J. Sykes, *How the Right Lost Its Mind* (New York, 2017).

¹⁵Jason Stahl, *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture since 1945* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016); Brian Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America: How an Industry Took Over a Political Party That Took Over the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 2019); Paul Matzko, *The Radio Right* (New York, 2020); Kristopher Holt, *Right-Wing Alternative Media* (New York, 2020).

¹⁶Busby, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair*, calls such a tendency that of the "aberrationists," 15. See E. J. Dionne, *Why the Right Went Wrong: American Conservatism—from Goldwater to the Tea Party and Beyond* (New York, 2016); Max Boot, *The Corrosion of Conservatism: Why I Left the Right* (New York, 2018); D. J. Mulloy, *Enemies of the State: The Radical Right in American from FDR to Trump* (Lanham, MD, 2018); and Continetti, *The Right*.

¹⁷Marcus Witcher, *Getting Right with Reagan: The Struggle for True Conservatism, 1980–2016* (Lawrence, KS, 2019), 141.

¹⁸Editorial, "A Year of Shame," *New York Times*, Jan. 3, 1988, sec. 4, p. 14; Busby, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair*, 17. For a more contemporary appraisal, see Mike Rothschild, "Trump or Clinton: The Winner of the Election Won't Be as Corrupt as These U.S. Presidents," *attn.com*, Sept. 30, 2016, <https://archive.attn.com/stories/11743/most-corrupt-american-presidents-in-history> (accessed Feb. 28, 2023).

investigated, indicted, or convicted “for official misconduct and/or criminal activity. In terms of numbers of officials involved, the record of his administration was the worst ever.”¹⁹ The actions of North and his collaborators in Central America and Iran dwarfed the outrages of other Reagan scandals.

The late 1980s–early 1990s stand as a transitional era partly because Republicans were not as unified in denying their own moral turpitude as they later would be. Iran-Contra acted as a bridge between less and more partisan eras. Before North’s appearance, he was a divisive figure among Republicans as well as between the parties. His popularity was not pre-ordained. Reagan removed him from his National Security Council post, after all. A staunch conservative such as Representative Henry Hyde (R-IL) admitted feeling “very disappointed” in North, for instance in his petty crime of accepting a security gate for his house. “I am making a special effort to hear his side of it,” said Hyde, “but some of these things appear to be indefensible.” *Washingtonian* magazine named North “the No. 1 villain of the year” and “the leading hero of 1987.”²⁰ A closer look at the rhetorical and political strategies of Iran-Contra clarifies how the indefensible became a good offense.

Step 1: Denial

A first component of the Republican strategy for mitigating the political damage from the scandal—and maybe benefiting from it—emerged clearly in the summer of 1987. Several scholars have noted the prevalence of government lies during the Iran-Contra scandal years, yet none sees them as part and parcel of a larger partisan strategy.²¹ A pattern existed: on one hand, denying the importance of Iran-Contra crimes and lesser departures from policy and, on the other, blaming the Democrats and media for overlooking officials’ good intentions and inflating their sins.

Oliver North grew to hate the press, more so when it began to report his inappropriate contacts with the Contras in Central America in 1985 and 1986. In testimony, he bitterly recalled leaks to the media by members of congress that “seriously jeopardized” covert operations.²² In his memoirs, he likened journalists to “a crowd of jackals.” “I try to read two things every morning,” North told reporters. “The Bible and the *Washington Post*. That way I know what both sides are thinking.” He was convinced that the threats his family received from terrorists were due to press attention.²³ His superior, National Security Advisor John Poindexter, also saw the press as not only adversarial but also a tool for Democratic ideologues. He suggested that North call top Washington journalists “and tell them to call off the dogs.... I just want to lower your visibility so that you wouldn’t be such a good target for the Libs.”²⁴

In early November 1986, the Iran portion of the scandal came to light when a publication in Beirut revealed secret negotiations to sell arms for hostages. In response, the White House was rife with denials. On November 6, Reagan promised journalists that reports out of Lebanon had

¹⁹Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York, 1991), 184.

²⁰Cited in John Walcott, “Which Col. North Will Tell His Story to Nation: The Villain Who Deceived or Hero Who Obeyed?” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 1987, 58.

²¹Michael Landon-Murray, Edin Mujkic, and Brian Nussbaum, “Disinformation in Contemporary U.S. Foreign Policy: Impacts and Ethics in an Era of Fake News, Social Media, and Artificial Intelligence,” *Public Integrity* 21, no. 5 (2019): 512–22; Michael J. Robinson and Andrew Kohut, “Believability and the Press,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 174–89; Ann Wroe, *Lives, Lies and the Iran-Contra Affair* (London, 1992).

²²*Continued Testimony of Oliver North and Robert C. McFarlane: Joint Hearings Before the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition and the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran: July 10, 13, and 14, 1987*, 100th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 100-7, Part 2 (Washington, DC, 1988), 132.

²³Oliver L. North and William Novak, *Under Fire: An American Story* (New York, 1991), 351, 334.

²⁴Cited in Draper, *A Very Thin Line*, 336.

“no foundation.”²⁵ He seemed to believe it. The next day, his diary entry was all about “handl[ing] the press who are off on a wild story.... Our message will be ‘we can’t and won’t answer any Q’s on this subject because to do so will endanger the lives of those we are trying to help.’”²⁶ In his 1990 memoirs, the former president insisted that his White House had never done business with the government of Iran. “We had never had any contacts with the kidnapers, had seen to it that the defensive weapons that went to Iran never got into the hands of the people who held our hostages. But the press took the word of the Beirut paper over ours.”²⁷

Reagan increasingly blamed the press for informing the public accurately, and he imagined partisan motivations. “The media looks like it’s trying to create another Watergate,” he wrote in his diary on November 12. “I want to go public personally & tell the people the truth.” He set a press conference for the following day, at which his powers of persuasion failed him. Twelve days later, he described reporters at Attorney General Ed Meese’s press conference “like a circle of sharks.”²⁸ He admitted to a *Time* magazine reporter that he had “a bitter bile in my throat these days.” “This whole thing boils down to a great irresponsibility on the part of the press,” he fumed.²⁹

Somewhat contradicting Reagan’s beliefs, conservatives at the time already enjoyed a press network in sync with their proclivities. Before the Internet and political talk radio, the printed press set the tone on the Right, led by the *Wall Street Journal*, *Commentary*, and *Human Events*. This last weekly, a mouthpiece for Reagan since before his presidency, defended the secrecy of covert operations, denied any evidence of law breaking, and blamed Congress for leaking and thus forcing the executive to lie to it.³⁰ The conservative editors of the *Wall Street Journal* perceived in Congress and the mainstream press “a gleefully destructive reaction wholly out of proportion to any errors that have been alleged.”³¹

Denying the truth inevitably harmed bipartisanship. During the largely televised hearings held jointly by House and Senate committees, Democratic Senator David Boren of Oklahoma pleaded, “For the sake of this country we have to stop being Republicans and Democrats, Members of Congress, or members of the Executive Branch, and all be Americans, and we have to rebuild trust.” To no avail: Republicans tried to deflect from their party’s failings by painting the hearings as a partisan witch hunt. Representative Hyde, for instance, bemoaned “the throwing of raw meat to the Reagan haters that abound at least inside the Beltway.” “Some people no doubt gleefully hope for another Watergate,” said Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT), echoing Reagan’s diary.³²

Repeated allusions to Watergate suggested that what Republicans feared most out of the Iran-Contra scandal were adverse electoral consequences. In 1974 and again in 1976, Republicans worried about losing seats and the presidency over the Nixon scandal. With good reason: Democrats picked up four Senate seats and a whopping forty-nine House seats in 1974 and took the White House two years later.³³ Harold Koh found that each element of the Iran-Contra scheme “repeated historical events that had first occurred during the Nixon Era,” including selling arms, funding secret wars, operationalizing the NSC staff, and organizing secret operations.³⁴ Early on in Iran-Contra, therefore, Republicans worried about

²⁵Lawrence E. Walsh, *Firewall: The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-Up* (New York, 1997), 8.

²⁶Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York, 2007), 448.

²⁷Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York, 1990), 528.

²⁸Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, 450, 454.

²⁹“An Interview with the President,” *Time*, Dec. 8, 1986, 18.

³⁰“North Eloquently Defends Iran-Contra Policy,” *Human Events*, July 18, 1987, 1.

³¹Editorial, “Something More Serious?,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 19, 1986, 22.

³²*Testimony of John M. Poindexter: Joint Hearings Before the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition and the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran: July 15, 16, 17, 20, and 21, 1987*, 100th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 100-8 (Washington, DC, 1988), 279, 210, 288.

³³Garrett M. Graff, *Watergate: A New History* (New York, 2022), 605.

³⁴Koh, *National Security Constitution*, 49.

the echoes of Watergate and acted to insulate the president from accusations that he knew about the diversion of funds—the one issue that could get him impeached.

Some Republicans learned the lesson of openness. As the scandal broke, Pat Buchanan, Reagan's director of communications, turned to Nixon for advice. The ex-president told his former speechwriter, "Admit you made a mistake—you tried something, and it turned out badly. But don't cover it up."³⁵ Secretary of State George Shultz, who had been Nixon's man at Treasury, warned his staff about cover-ups: "They get in and can't get out, so they stonewall and get in deeper."³⁶ En route to Vienna, he wrote to Poindexter from his plane that the story was about to break. "The best way to proceed is to give the key facts to the public."³⁷

"I do not believe that now is the time to give the facts to the public," answered Poindexter the next day. There were still hostages to free and intelligence committees to brief, and Iranian politics were allegedly in a state of flux. Vice President George Bush, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Casey agreed with the national security adviser.³⁸ From that day forward, and especially when Reagan's popularity declined faster than that of any other president in the history of poll-taking, the order of the day was to protect the president against impeachment or any other political consequences.³⁹ North testified that a similar message trickled down to him: "Nobody from the administration *ever* asked me to tell the truth," he said. "The only message I heard was: exonerate the President."⁴⁰ When Casey died of a brain tumor in early 1987, there were sighs of relief in the CIA and White House. "The secrets would be buried with him," said Reagan's deputy chief of staff, Michael Deaver. "And the President would be protected."⁴¹

Republicans aimed to avoid the mistakes of Watergate and minimize the political impact by not only deflecting blame toward the media but also underscoring Republican good intentions and ends versus means. "Mistakes were made," said Dick Cheney (R-WY), then on the House committee. He enumerated the obvious ones, then quickly pivoted to "mitigating factors" such as the president's compassion for hostages and the "vacillations" in Democrats' various Boland Amendments. Senator Warren Rudman (R-NH) agreed, using the same passive phrase, "mistakes were made." Representative Mike DeWine (R-OH) concluded not only that Reagan did not authorize the diversion but also that "with very few exceptions, most of the witnesses and really most of the actors in this story were motivated by good intentions."⁴²

Ordinary American conservatives watching these proceedings on television made a few common arguments equally dismissive of Iran-Contra's implications. George Kehler of Tennessee advanced the conservative case of Cold War ends justifying criminal means. "The danger is so great that any means is right and legal in this instance in order to stop communism.... This is

³⁵Cited in Robert Busby, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair*, 76.

³⁶George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York, 1993), 787.

³⁷George Shultz to John Poindexter and Nicholas Platt, Department of State, cable, Nov. 4, 1986, Digital National Security Archive Collection: Iran-Contra Affair.

³⁸Poindexter, memo to George Shultz, White House Situation Room, Nov. 5, 1986, in *Testimony of George P. Shultz and Edwin Meese, III: Joint Hearings Before the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition and the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran: July 23, 24, 28, and 29, 1987*, 100th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 100-9 (Washington, DC, 1988), 566.

³⁹Busby, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair*, 7.

⁴⁰North and Novak, *Under Fire*, 15.

⁴¹Joseph E. Persico, *Casey: The Lives and Secrets of William J. Casey: From the OSS to the CIA* (New York, 1990), 557.

⁴²*Testimony of Donald T. Regan and Caspar W. Weinberger: Joint Hearings Before the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition and the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran: July 30, 31, and August 3, 1987*, 100th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 100-10 (Washington, DC, 1988), 260, 267, 209.

not a case of law or congress, but *survival*.”⁴³ Owen Cain of Texas, meanwhile, implied that popularity trumped criminal responsibility. North, Poindexter, and Secord “have already been tried before the Iran-Contra Committee Inquisition and the National Television Media.” They were “found innocent by reason of patriotism and ... by virtue of the outcry of millions of citizens.” He warned of a “reservoir of frustration rising among the great body of patriotic, God fearing, law abiding citizens of our nation.”⁴⁴

Republicans also insisted on including a minority report in the committees’ final analysis, and it seemed to emerge from their reading of the majority’s analysis as partisan. “[Democrats] tried as desperately as they could to besmirch the administration, to put the worst light on everything,” said Representative Jim Courter (R-NJ). Hatch was offended that “they do not accept the incontrovertible facts that the president did not know [about the diversion].” One Republican committee source summarized, “We felt the Democrats had overdone it.”⁴⁵ The very inability of Congress to produce a unified report spoke to the partisan divisions undermining the body.

A year later, when presidential candidate Bush’s involvement in Iran-Contra became a campaign issue, he turned to the Republican playbook and deflected by attacking the media. In an interview one scholar dubbed “the day the politicians began to win the war against the media,” Bush confronted legendary CBS News anchorman Dan Rather. On January 25, 1988, Rather began by asking about Bush’s Iran-Contra contradictions and the Vice President cut him off, reading off a cue card held by none other than Roger Ailes, a campaign manager who would go on to be CEO of Fox News. “It’s not fair to judge my whole career by a rehash on Iran. How would you like it if I judged your career by those seven minutes when you walked off the set in New York?” he added, referring to when Rather had stormed off his own show when a sports event preempted it.⁴⁶ Bush explained in his diary that “Ailes ... helped me on how to respond.... We had several scenarios for going after Rather if he got out of hand.” Among these was the *ad hominem* pivot about the seven minutes.⁴⁷

After the interview, Bush knew he had a victory. “He didn’t lay a glove on me,” he said of Rather, demeaning him with what one journalist described as “an off-color slang term for the female anatomy.” (In his diary, Bush denied the term was sexist: “I meant pussycat, the way he came on like a tiger.”) “It’s going to help me,” Bush told supporters about the interview. To make sure it did, Bush’s campaign telephone banks poured calls in to CBS stations complaining of Rather’s impetuosity, creating the impression of one-sided public outrage.⁴⁸ Bush seemed unaware that his own campaign manufactured the response. He called CBS “dirty fuckers in their approach” for releasing a tape of Bush berating the producer after the interview. “There is an arrogance in the media, and the American people know it. The support for me was amazingly strong ... and it was grassroots, strong support. It transcended being for me: it was anti-Rather.”⁴⁹ In an early example of fabricating a public reaction to a political controversy, Bush had successfully deflected the effort to clarify his role by attacking the “liberal media.” He won the election.

⁴³Emphasis in original, George Kehler, letter to Gerhard Gesell, Johnson City, TN, Dec. 3, 1988, folder 5, box 53, Gerhard Gesell Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC [hereafter GGP].

⁴⁴Owen E. Cain, letter to Gerhard Gesell, Joshua, Tex., Jan. 31, 1989, folder 7, box 53, GGP.

⁴⁵Cited in Walter Pincus, “Iran-Contra Panels Approve Report; Republicans to Publish Own View,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 6, 1987, A6.

⁴⁶Transcript, *CBS Evening News with Dan Rather*, Jan. 25, 1988, folder 3, box II: 883, Anthony Lewis Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁴⁷Jan. 25–26, 1988, entry, “Extracts from Vice President Bush ‘Diary’ Transcripts 1 January–1 February 1988,” prepared by Paul Beach, folder Files of the Office of the Vice President Bush—VP Diary, box 2, Records of John Q. Barrett Attorney Files, RG 449 Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, National Archives, College Park, MD [hereafter Bush diary transcripts].

⁴⁸Craig Crawford, *Attack the Messenger: How Politicians Turn You Against the Media* (Oxford, UK, 2006), 4, 5, 10.

⁴⁹Jan. 27, 1988, entry, Bush diary transcripts.

There is next to no evidence that Republicans planned this denial formula in advance. Certainly, the precedent of Watergate shaped the Republican response to be consciously protective of the president. But more generally, denial seemed a political instinct that fed off conservative anger at the mainstream media and Democrats' congressional power over the executive as it also seized on the surprising popularity of North as a witness.

Step 2: Fame

The televised hearings of 1987 transformed Oliver North, theretofore an obscure middling official, into a cause célèbre of the Right, and the Republican Party helped manufacture and inflate his celebrity. On July 7, 1987, North strode into the Senate Caucus Room with his last favorability rating a 6 percent against a 35 percent unfavorability rating.⁵⁰ By his third day of testimony, he drew 55 million viewers, and the three television networks dropped their soap operas to air the hearings instead. More than seven out of ten Americans watched.⁵¹ By North's fourth day, his favorability rating climbed to 43 percent and his unfavorables sank to 14 percent.⁵² North described himself as going from being a "household name" to a "household face."⁵³

"Olliemania," a term coined on July 10 by *USA Today* reporter Stephen Stern, gripped part of the nation.⁵⁴ Enterprising merchants sold Oliver North buttons, dolls, boxer shorts, and cocktails, "North for President" bumper stickers and t-shirts, and Ollieburgers—made of shredded beef, shredded lettuce, and shredded cheese, references to North having fed government documents to a shredder.⁵⁵ There were look-alike contests. Someone wrote a rock 'n' roll parody called "Ollie B. Goode."⁵⁶

All this attention altered the public's opinion of Iran-Contra. While a majority of Americans had long opposed aid to the Contras, a White House poll said that a 60/40 against/for split on the eve of the hearings transformed into 46/48 after North's week on American TV screens.⁵⁷ These numbers were on the optimistic side, but a shift had still occurred.⁵⁸

Republican emotions ran high. Many commented on North's traditional appearance—his crew cut, broken nose, flaring ears, and crooked teeth, all of which combined with his upright bearing, occasionally quivering voice, pressed uniform, and apparent earnestness to render him a compelling witness.⁵⁹ While the camera aimed up at him—the "hero angle," in movie parlance—it looked down at the two rows of committee members, led by the frizzy-haired Jewish Arthur Liman and long-haired John Nields. The cultural contrast was sharp and loaded.⁶⁰ One North supporter wrote in horror: "To have a long-haired, draft dodging little prick like John Nields Junior question the Colonel in the manner in which he was allowed to question him was more than this and all Marines could stand."⁶¹

Fifty-eight percent of viewers considered North believable, while 70 percent saw him as "performing well."⁶² A no-doubt-skewed poll by *USA Today* had 58,863 of its readers in agreement

⁵⁰Busby, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair*, 144.

⁵¹David Thelen, *Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television: How Americans Challenged the Media and Seized Political Initiative during the Iran-Contra Debate* (Chicago, 1996), 18.

⁵²Busby, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair*, 162.

⁵³North and Novak, *Under Fire*, 344.

⁵⁴Thelen, *Becoming Citizens*, 26.

⁵⁵Wroe, *Lives, Lies and the Iran-Contra Affair*, 51.

⁵⁶Amy Fried, *Muffled Echoes: Oliver North and the Politics of Public Opinion* (New York, 1997), 116.

⁵⁷Tom Wicker, "Don't Count on Ollie," *New York Times*, July 22, 1987, A27.

⁵⁸Most polls from 1983 to 1988 measured pro-Contra aid sentiment between 20 and 40 percent; Thelen, *Becoming Citizens*, 39. After the hearings, 72 percent still opposed military aid to the Contras; Ben Bradlee, *Guts and Glory: The Rise and Fall of Oliver North* (New York, 1988), 519.

⁵⁹North and Novak, *Under Fire*, 345; Walsh, *Firewall*, 135.

⁶⁰Arthur L. Liman with Peter Israel, *Lawyer: A Life of Counsel and Controversy* (New York, 1998), 336.

⁶¹Kenneth G. Paynter, letter to Gerhard Gesell, San Antonio, TX, Feb. 22, 1989, folder 9, box 53, GGP.

⁶²Busby, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair*, 161.

that North was “honest,” against just 1,756 who considered him “a liar.”⁶³ Pat Buchanan concluded that the hearings “‘exposed ... how far the national media is out of touch with America.”⁶⁴

But public attention waned. Immediately after North, John Poindexter’s first day of testimony seemed to confirm that there existed no evidence linking Reagan to the diversion. Viewership of the hearings melted.⁶⁵ Historian David Thelen read the 5,000 letters that ordinary Americans wrote to House committee chair Lee Hamilton and concluded that they were far more skeptical of the administration than the stacks of supportive telegrams that North piled next to him during the hearings suggested. “Most did not write about North at all, and the majority of those who mentioned him were critical of him,” reported Thelen. More poll respondents considered North a “victim” rather than a “hero,” and letters to newspapers from the *Chicago Tribune* to the *Louisville Courier-Journal* tended to be unfavorable. The maker of the famous Ollie dolls projected sales of 450,000. He sold 200.⁶⁶ “Whatever happened to Olliemania?” asked one broadcaster on Labor Day 1987.⁶⁷

Little-known at the time was that conservatives mobilized their formidable letter-writing and lobbying machine, pioneered in the 1970s by religious groups, to inflate and sometimes fabricate North’s fame during the hearings. By the end of the summer, Americans appeared to have sent the two congressional committees a half-million communications—letters, telegrams, and telephone calls. One scholar called it “perhaps the largest spontaneous popular response to a congressional activity in American legislative history.”⁶⁸ North reported that he received “tens of thousands” of favorable telegrams and eventually “over a million pieces of mail. From people who had been watching us on television,” including a “surprising amount” from “people who described themselves as liberals.”⁶⁹ Lawyer Liman, meanwhile, received “thousands of threatening letters, including a number of anti-Semitic ones, and for several days, [Senate Chair Daniel] Inouye and I had to be given special police protection.”⁷⁰

It turned out that political machines churned out many of those letters. The Conservative Caucus arranged for thousands of letters and telegrams to flood Congress, timing the deluge with North and Poindexter’s much-anticipated testimony. The Legal Affairs Council, Young Americans for Freedom, and the Unification Church of Reverend Sun Myung Moon were behind spontaneous-looking demonstrations.⁷¹ Those missives may have expressed the politics of their signers. But, as anyone who has responded to the call of a mass mailing on the Right or the Left knows, the process required little actual labor of their authors. If they were telegrams, they typically used the exact same language so that senders only had to add their names, and organizations may have paid for the transmission of telegrams and signed them while only obtaining members’ permission to do so—if that.⁷² Postcards, meanwhile, often also used standardized language penned by mass-mailers and only maybe signed by senders. Mass mailings were only effective in high numbers, clogging the inboxes of congressmembers or piled up next to North’s witness desk in the Iran-Contra hearings. While “letter-writing” campaigns had a

⁶³Michael Lynch and David Bogen, *The Spectacle of History: Speech, Text, and Memory at the Iran-Contra Hearings* (Durham, NC, 1996), 30.

⁶⁴Busby, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair*, 540–1.

⁶⁵Wroe, *Lives, Lies and the Iran-Contra Affair*, 53.

⁶⁶Thelen, *Becoming Citizens*, 8, 39–40.

⁶⁷Fried, *Muffled Echoes*, 119.

⁶⁸Thelen, *Becoming Citizens*, 19.

⁶⁹North and Novak, *Under Fire*, 364.

⁷⁰Liman with Israel, *Lawyer*, 339.

⁷¹Fried, *Muffled Echoes*, 139, 140.

⁷²Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, for instance, received at least 4,300 telegrams of support individually authored but with the exact same wording, in box 6, Bulk Mailing, Sept. 22, 1992, Master Public Correspondence, RG 449 Records of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, National Archives, College Park, MD.

political effect, therefore, they likely did not unearth the groundswell of outrage that Republicans claimed.

Step 3: Victim Fundraising

A third step in rehabilitating Iran-Contra from a political liability into an asset was to leverage North's celebrity and the enthusiasm and outrage that his and other trials generated into Republican partisan solidarity, and, more specifically, into funds for various New Right groups. Much of the fundraising occurred to pay the very real and steep legal bills incurred as the Office of Independent Counsel (OIC) brought forth indictments of North and others. But a significant fundraising effort spun out from a desire to monetize North's polarizing celebrity. Fundraising also provided an avenue for Republicans to articulate arguments that again minimized the crimes of the defendants and reinforced the narrative of victimization that would become core to Republican identity in the following decades.

Private businessman Richard Secord, who managed weapons sales to Iran, called Walsh's prosecution "financially ruinous for me," despite congressional investigators finding he had pocketed a few million dollars in commissions.⁷³ Friends, including at least one retired Air Force brigadier general, organized a fundraising campaign on Secord's behalf. In June 1989, they claimed he had \$170,000 in unpaid bills, which would probably mount to \$600,000.⁷⁴ In February 1990, the *Miami Herald* totaled his debts at \$800,000.⁷⁵

Fundraisers for Secord excused his crimes while never denying them. First among their arguments was that those accused of criminal activity somehow did not deserve to be tried because they had served honorably: "These men had dedicated their lives to serving our nation and fighting communism—why was Congress treating them like a bunch of criminals?" Second were attacks on "the libelous media." Secord's wife, Jo Ann, wrote that "reporters and newsmen camped out on our doorstep for weeks on end. We could not move outside of our home without the cameras on us and obnoxious reporters hollering and yelling at us. We even had camera crews come up to our home and put their cameras to our windows to take pictures. They were like vultures." A third argument was to catalog the alleged \$42 million of "waste" in Walsh's office, an emblem of big government spending that included twenty-eight lawyers, thirty-five FBI agents, and, "almost unbelievably, a staff historian!"⁷⁶ (In July 1989, the OIC countered that it had spent only \$15.9 million; by October 1990, \$22.1 million.)⁷⁷

John Poindexter, to feed his own legal fund, painted his trial as a partisan persecution. "I stand, one man, alone against the massive onslaught of liberal special interests who want to imprison me for serving my country," one of his fundraising letters said.⁷⁸ Poindexter was found guilty and sentenced, but in November 1991, an appeals court reversed his conviction on the same technical grounds as North's.⁷⁹ Poindexter beamed, saying he knew he did not

⁷³Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views, U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and U.S. Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, 100th Congress, 1st Session, S. Rep. 100-216 (Washington, DC, 1987), 15-6.

⁷⁴Harry Aderholt, fundraising letter, Rockville, MD, June 1989, folder 9, box 117, George Lardner Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC [hereafter GLP].

⁷⁵Sandy Grady, "Stand by His Man? Reluctant Reagan Pulls a Nixon," *Miami Herald*, Feb. 10, 1990, 31A.

⁷⁶Harry Aderholt, fundraising letter, Rockville, MD, June 1989, folder 9, box 117, GLP; Jo Ann Secord, fundraising letter, June 1989, folder 9, box 117, GLP.

⁷⁷OIC, fact sheets, Sept. 1989 and Oct. 1990, both in folder 11, box 178, GLP.

⁷⁸John Poindexter, fundraising letter, folder 2, box 115, GLP.

⁷⁹David Johnston, "Poindexter Wins Iran-Contra Case in Appeals Court," *New York Times*, Nov. 16, 1991, 1.

“commit the crimes that were charged.”⁸⁰ The panel’s decision had not declared him innocent; it merely found witnesses against him to be “tainted” by immunized congressional testimony.

As for the CIA’s accused, the agency’s policy was not to pay for its employees’ legal costs. So, in what the *New York Times* called “a highly unusual move,” former intelligence officials banded to pay the legal expenses of colleagues indicted by Walsh.⁸¹ By the time of the trial of Clair George, chief of the Latin American Division, the CIA defense fund had grown to \$250,000. In the courtroom, the two rows reserved for the audience were filled with retired CIA employees.⁸² Five prominent lawyers who expanded the fundraising also argued that service somehow exempted prosecution. “They are persons who have spent a substantial part of their lives serving their country as members of an exacting and frequently dangerous profession,” said the lawyers about defendants such as George and Duane Clarridge, the CIA liaison to the Contras, suggesting that service generated not merely mitigation but impunity. The lawyers added an anti-big government arrow to their quiver: “Each of us has served in government and we are acutely aware of the overwhelming power of the government when it is arrayed against an individual.”⁸³

The defendant who most garnered Republican outrage through his legal case was Caspar Weinberger, Reagan’s secretary of defense, whom Walsh indicted in October 1992 for making false statements, perjury, and obstruction of justice for not producing notes when asked.⁸⁴ Weinberger was the first Reagan cabinet member charged with an Iran-Contra crime. At 74 and the then-publisher of *Forbes* magazine, he had refused to plead to a misdemeanor. Nor would he give what he claimed Walsh wanted—“statements which were not true about myself or others.”⁸⁵ The judge threw out the obstruction charge, but four counts remained. Weinberger’s trial was set for January 5, 1993.⁸⁶

Republicans were up in arms about the coming legal battle. “Absolutely outraged,” former Attorney General Ed Meese pronounced himself.⁸⁷ Not only did Weinberger’s indictment reach up into the Reagan cabinet, but it targeted a public servant revered for his ethics. Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, signed an affidavit insisting that Weinberger made an honest mistake in not linking his notes to Iran-Contra investigations and called him “one of the true heroes of the Iran-Contra matter” for opposing the arms sales. Weinberger was a “straight arrow” and “one of the most honest men I have ever known.”⁸⁸

Bob Dole (R-KS), the Senate leader, turned defense into offense. He called Walsh and his aides “paid assassins.”⁸⁹ Senator Hatch called the indictment of Weinberger “criminalizing policy differences.” “We’re going to wreck this country,” he warned, “if we keep allowing these politically oriented and politically motivated young prosecutors to run amok without anybody having any control over them.”⁹⁰ In his memoir, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American

⁸⁰Cited in Tracy Thompson and George Lardner, Jr., “Appeals Court Reverses Poindexter Conviction,” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 16, 1991, A1.

⁸¹David Johnston, “Ex-C.I.A. Officials Start Legal Fund,” *New York Times*, Aug. 14, 1991, A10.

⁸²Neil A. Lewis, “At C.I.A. Trial, Some Say Loyalty Is in the Dock,” *New York Times*, Aug. 3, 1992, A12.

⁸³Cited in Benjamin Weiser, “5 Lawyers Seek Donations for Iran-Contra Defendants,” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 26, 1992, A2.

⁸⁴Indictment, Oct. 30, 1992, folder Iran-Contra Affair, box 106, Papers of Robert L. Bartley, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA.

⁸⁵Cited in David Johnston, “Weinberger Faces 5 Counts in Iran-Contra Indictment,” *New York Times*, June 17, 1992, A1.

⁸⁶David Johnston, “Crucial Charge Is Dismissed in Weinberger Perjury Case,” *New York Times*, Sept. 30, 1992, A14.

⁸⁷Both cited in Walsh, *Firewall*, 440.

⁸⁸Colin Powell, affidavit, Apr. 21, 1992, folder Iran Contra Documents, box 36, Papers of Jim Mann, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, CA.

⁸⁹Cited in Stuart Taylor, Jr., “Keep the Special Counsel,” *New York Times*, June 22, 1992, A17.

⁹⁰Cited in Walsh, *Firewall*, 417.

Affairs Elliott Abrams bitterly accused the OIC of being “primarily liberal Democratic, and motivated by a nasty mix of personal ambition, ideology, and animus. They were after scalps.” Abrams made arguments spreading among opponents of the OIC: that its budget was unlimited; its caseload out of control; and its deadlines, competition, and oversight nonexistent.⁹¹ Weinberger himself accused the OIC of election-season partisanship. Outside the courthouse, after pleading not guilty, he said, “I have become a pawn in a clearly political game as is shown by the return of the indictment only days before the Presidential election.”⁹²

Some Republicans had long been aghast at Walsh’s prosecutions. In its first years, they aimed their fire at his allegedly uncontrolled spending. In 1987, the *Wall Street Journal* observed that, while the \$1.3 million Walsh had spent in six months was “car-service money for Wall Street lawyers,” it was more than the budget of six other special prosecutors that year.⁹³ The party was now united against Walsh. “Enough is enough,” Representative William Broomfield (R-MI) of the congressional investigative committee wrote to the attorney general.⁹⁴ Senators Inouye (D-HI) and Rudman, who had headed the inquiry back in 1987, stated that it was “inconceivable to us” that Weinberger “would intentionally mislead or lie to Congress.”⁹⁵ After the Weinberger indictment, one group of Republicans asked the attorney general—William Barr, whom President Trump would return to the position—to appoint an independent counsel to investigate the existing independent counsel. It argued, with no hint of irony, that the institution should be abolished.⁹⁶

Also following the Weinberger indictment, Republicans began seriously fundraising. One group, led by Mike Burch of McDonnell Douglass, piggybacked on the newest political fundraising methods. The group used a 50,000-person database to reach out to Republican Party contributors, sent 1,000 personal letters, and prepared a mass mailing to 20,000. The *Washington Times* and *Wall Street Journal* obliged with editorial attacks on Walsh, as did William F. Buckley. The Heritage Foundation think tank also sent a letter to its members. About seven weeks after the indictment, Weinberger’s defenders had raised \$60,000, but the legal bill even before the indictment ran up to \$145,000.⁹⁷ (One invoice from lawyer Robert Bennett charged Weinberger over \$300,000 for one month or 1,721 hours of legal work—an average of \$175 per hour or \$373 in 2023 dollars.)⁹⁸ While many deplored the “waste” incurred by Walsh, few noted how defense lawyers padded their bank accounts.

An associated group, led by Richard Delgaudio, president of the Legal Affairs Council, called itself “Friends of Caspar Weinberger” and set up a legal fund for what they assessed would be over \$1 million in legal bills.⁹⁹ On September 23, 1992, they hosted a fundraising dinner at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington. They raised seed money through “defense industry contacts, *Forbes* and *Bechtels*”—everywhere Weinberger had worked. The group invited all former Reagan and Gerald Ford cabinet officers, all former secretaries of defense, joint chiefs, and other military dignitaries.¹⁰⁰

⁹¹Elliott Abrams, *Undue Process: A Story of How Political Differences Are Turned into Crimes* (New York, 1993), 12, 212.

⁹²Cited in David Johnston, “Weinberger Calls His Indictment a Political Move,” *New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1992, A14.

⁹³Editorial, “The Costs of Independence,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 17, 1987, 26.

⁹⁴Cited in David Johnston, “Iran-Contra Prosecutor Faces Agonizing Choice,” *New York Times*, Oct. 4, 1990, A24.

⁹⁵Cited in Walter Pincus and George Lardner, Jr., “Weinberger Passes Lie Detector Test,” *The Washington Post*, May 21, 1992, A4.

⁹⁶Author unknown, title unknown, *California Lawyer*, Jan. 1993, 39–42, 91.

⁹⁷Mike Burch, letter to William Clark, Arlington, Aug. 7, 1992, folder 6, box III: 144, Caspar Weinberger Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC [hereafter CWP].

⁹⁸Robert S. Bennett, invoice to Weinberger, Washington, DC, Nov. 25, 1992, folder 6, box III: 144, CWP.

⁹⁹“Weinberger Friends to Help Pay Legal Fees,” *New York Times*, Sept. 24, 1992, A19.

¹⁰⁰“Notes of Meeting at Heritage Foundation,” Cap Weinberger Reception, July 28, 1992, folder 4, box III: 144, CWP.

A thousand guests showed up to the dinner, where Republicans unleashed their ire at Walsh. Senator Malcolm Wallop (R-WY) called the indictment “the revenge of a petty, small-minded man, trying to find something to salvage his career.” Others called Walsh a “sleazy bounty hunter,” a “witch hunter,” and a “stumbling, bumbling independent counsel who couldn’t keep up with his own ego.”¹⁰¹ “This is the rottenest, son-of-a-bitchin’est thing that ever happened,” roared Senator Alan Simpson (R-WY). The crowd roared back.¹⁰² Many who attended, besides forking over the \$35 for dinner, wrote out checks for \$5,000 or \$10,000.¹⁰³

In the end, Weinberger’s hefty bills seemed not to affect his lifestyle. He remained publisher at *Forbes* and the owner of Windswept, an estate in Maine. Like almost every Iran-Contra figure, he also wrote books.

Overshadowing the “friends” of Weinberger were those who either rallied around Oliver North during his testimony, trial, and political campaign; paid to attend his appearances; or leveraged his political fame for their own financial or political goals. North also certainly had stiff legal bills, which, he alleged, rose to \$5 million.¹⁰⁴ (Others tallied them at \$1 million to \$3 million; another estimated \$380,000 per month.)¹⁰⁵ He paid for much of it by capitalizing on his fame and going on the lecture circuit. He took as many speaking engagements as he could, usually at \$25,000 per gig—\$5,000 more than former president Ford.¹⁰⁶ Some political candidates paid North to campaign for them.¹⁰⁷ In 1988–1989, he delivered five to twelve speeches per month, making more money in a year than he had in his entire military career.¹⁰⁸ In 1989, North created his own organization called the Freedom Alliance, which took political positions and worked with Persian Gulf War families. It raked in \$7 million in donations by 1991. In 1992, North created V-PAC, and through V-PAC, the Freedom Alliance, and his legal defense fund, he raised almost \$21 million by the end of that year.¹⁰⁹ He paid himself \$46,720 per year from Freedom Alliance revenue.¹¹⁰

North’s public appearances solidified the Republican base. He arrived at a typical speech to chants of “Ol-lie! Ol-lie! Ol-lie!” by crowds “whipped up by a Dixieland jazz band and an inspirational video,” as one journalist reported. Groups who hosted him ranged from the Oklahoma Young Republicans to the Christian Businessmen of Silicon Valley. Their members came by the thousands and usually paid \$20 each. North traveled like “a movie star,” wrote a reporter. “Flight attendants swoon over his boyish good looks; little old ladies love his choirboy demeanor. Hard-boiled cops turn soft in his presence. Corporate fat cats pay \$250 for the privilege of shaking his hand and local politicians encourage him to run for office.”¹¹¹

Conservative activists also profited from North’s popularity. “There’s a lot of people out there who took advantage of Ollie North,” said a friend and conservative activist. “It goes from T-shirt vendors to whoever.”¹¹² Most were not apparel purveyors but rather big-money

¹⁰¹Cited in Anne Gowen, “Weinberger Friends Tip Caps, Dip into Wallets,” *The Washington Times*, Sept. 25, 1992, E2.

¹⁰²Cited in Lloyd Grove, “The Parties Politic; Republicans Come to the Defense of Cap Weinberger,” *The Washington Post*, Sept. 24, 1992, C1.

¹⁰³Paul Weyrich, letter to Caspar Weinberger, Washington, DC, Oct. 5, 1992, folder 4, box III: 144, CWP.

¹⁰⁴Oliver North, interview with George Lardner, 1991, folder 6, box 177, GLP.

¹⁰⁵Mary Belcher, “Oliver North,” *The Washington Times*, Aug. 30, 1988, E1, E12; Robert Parry, “Whittling Away for Ollie,” *Newsweek*, Feb. 20, 1989, 20; Joe Pichirallo, “North’s Secretive ‘Defense Trust,’” *Washington Post*, Apr. 18, 1989, A27.

¹⁰⁶Mary McGrory, “A Second Opinion on North,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 1988, A2.

¹⁰⁷Fried, *Muffled Echoes*, 144.

¹⁰⁸Peter Meyer, title missing, *Life*, Feb. 1989, 22–27; Thomas M. DeFrank, “Ollie North’s Road Show,” *Newsweek*, Aug. 1, 1988, 24.

¹⁰⁹Fried, *Muffled Echoes*, 148.

¹¹⁰“Under Fire, Again,” *Legal Times*, Dec. 16, 1991, 1, 15.

¹¹¹Cited in DeFrank, “Road Show,” 24; Harry Rosenthal, “North on the Stump, at \$25,000 a Speech,” *Associated Press*, May 13, 1989.

¹¹²F. Andy Messing, Jr., cited in Pichirallo, “Defense Trust,” A27.

fundraisers, who would continue pulling New Right strings for their own benefit while claiming a populist mantle. During North's 1987 testimony, publisher and direct-mail pioneer Richard Viguerie sent out 5 million letters for conservative groups and Ann Stone, 1 million for four organizations. As a result, the National Conservative Political Action Committee saw its pledges double.¹¹³ Thus North fed a well-oiled machine that built political fiefdoms off others' political charisma. Viguerie, for instance, had established his Richard A. Viguerie Company (RAVCO) in 1965 with the names of 12,500 contributors to Barry Goldwater's political campaign. By the early 1980s, he controlled a computerized database of 20 million names, earning a fortune by raising millions every year for conservative political candidates.¹¹⁴

For the years of North's trial, the American Freedom Coalition and the Christian Broadcasting Network used North not only to sell photos and videos but also to grow their mailing lists—the holy grail of political fundraising at the time. Mailing lists were the real goal of getting millions of signatures on petitions. As one fundraiser explained, “We ended up with a half-million people on our mailing list that were sympathetic, obviously identified with North and the issue of the defeat of the Marxist regime in Nicaragua, and you could conclude from that they would be interested in other anticommunist type of issues and then that became part of the money machine to keep this organization going.”¹¹⁵ One telemarketing team made 350,000 calls mentioning North and raised \$2 million.¹¹⁶

North criticized some conservatives for using him in their fundraising without giving back to him.¹¹⁷ Yet he did the same in 1991, slipping into one appeal a color photo of General Norman Schwarzkopf, the then-uber popular commander of Operation Desert Storm. Schwarzkopf sent North a cease-and-desist order.¹¹⁸

Step 4: Forgiving, Forgetting, and More Fundraising

The last step in the Republican transformation of Iran-Contra into political capital was, paradoxically, the ability to forget it. The forgetting of Iran-Contra was its greatest political triumph. While Reagan's polling tanked in 1987, the very fact of Bush's 1988 election following Reagan's eight years in the White House was evidence that enough voters considered Iran-Contra to be an aberration in Republican foreign policy making. In late 1992, the Bush pardon of every Iran-Contra defendant still in legal jeopardy was the crucial move in relegating the scandal to history by imbuing it with impunity for his party. No doubt many conservatives were sincere in calling for Iran-Contra pardons because they considered Walsh's indictment unjust. Yet Republicans also used the campaign for the pardon of North, especially, to fundraise for other causes and otherwise solidify the New Right Republican base.

Reagan himself considered pardoning North. In the middle of the Iran-Contra hearings in summer 1987, the lieutenant colonel was so popular a witness that it seemed a no-brainer for the president to pardon him eventually. Senator Hatch said he would support a pardon for North and Poindexter. Dick Cheney, also on the Iran-Contra committees, agreed that Reagan “may have to consider” a pardon even though he thought it premature since no criminal charges were forthcoming at the time. Rumors of a presidential pardon proved baseless. Thanksgiving 1987—supposedly “a time for forgiveness and healing,” said the

¹¹³Fried, *Muffled Echoes*, 144.

¹¹⁴Mulloy, *Enemies of the State*, 92–3.

¹¹⁵Cited in Fried, *Muffled Echoes*, 148, 146.

¹¹⁶Meyer, *Life*, 22–7.

¹¹⁷Pichirallo, “Defense Trust,” A27.

¹¹⁸“Under Fire, Again,” 1, 15.

New York Times—seemed like an opportunity, but it came and went without a word from Reagan.¹¹⁹

“Mr. President, Pardon Oliver North Today,” read a full-page ad in the *Washington Times* on Veterans Day 1988, as North, Poindexter, and Iran-Contra entrepreneurs Richard Secord and Albert Hakim awaited trial. Its sponsor was the Legal Affairs Council, a conservative research group that had flooded the Iran-Contra hearings with telegrams and would fundraise for Caspar Weinberger’s legal fees. The council’s president, Michael Boos, recounted walking up to Reagan. “Mr. President, please take care of Ollie North, please don’t leave him hanging,” Boos allegedly said. The president looked back at Boos, winked, smiled, and said, “I will.” Thanksgiving 1988 saw intensified calls for pardoning North and company. Republican strategists had advised Reagan to avoid pardons during his vice president’s campaign to succeed him, but now the election was over. The *Wall Street Journal* called for a pardon. So did thirty retired admirals and generals.¹²⁰

More than justice for North motivated the campaigns for a pardon. Reagan himself noted in his diary on November 29, 1988, that the Reverend Jerry Falwell, leader of the New Christian Right organization Moral Majority, had submitted to the White House a petition of 2 million signatures “demanding a pardon for Ollie.”¹²¹ What he failed to mention was that Falwell used his petition to fundraise for himself, selling \$25 videotapes of “the inspiring Ollie North story” and \$15 color photographs of North alongside his calls for signatures.¹²² On his weekly TV broadcast, the evangelist would flash a toll-free phone number for viewers to add their names to the “Master Pardon Petition.” As chancellor of Liberty University, he turned its graduation into a political rally for North. He compared the lieutenant colonel to Jesus Christ, both “indicted and convicted and crucified.”¹²³

Others followed suit. Beverly LaHaye of Concerned Women for America tied her fundraising among its 500,000 members to a pardon for North. The American Freedom Coalition—on whose board sat John Singlaub, a private Contra fundraiser—planned a TV program, newspaper ads, and pro-North rallies in all fifty states. Within twenty minutes of North’s indictment, the Conservative Victory Committee, led by Brent Bozell, launched a pardon drive.¹²⁴

For the Christian Right, Iran-Contra seemed to serve as a touchstone, combining anti-communism with a charismatic, persecuted witness who spoke openly of his faith and linked it expressly with his patriotism and government position. It may have been one of the first episodes that thrust the Christian Right into attempting to influence American public opinion on a foreign policy matter while also achieving domestic political aims. Outside of missionary work, most historians who have looked at evangelicals’ or the Christian Right’s impact on foreign policy have focused mostly on the twenty-first century. That literature has identified a few themes in the Christian formula for success: an openness to secular allies, a boldness in adopting new methods and new technologies, and appeals to

¹¹⁹Nathaniel C. Nash, “Some in Congress Express Support on Pardons for Ex-Reagan Aides,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1987, A1; Philip Shenon, “Iran-Contra Affair; Rumors Abound of Thanksgiving Pardons,” *New York Times*, Nov. 23, 1987, A18.

¹²⁰Philip Shenon, “The Presidency: Time Is Running Out for a Decision on Pardons,” *New York Times*, Nov. 23, 1988, B5; Henry Hyde and George Mitchell, “Pardoning Ollie North: Was Reagan Wrong Not to Grant a Pretrial Pardon?” *ABA Journal* 75, no. 2 (Feb. 1989): 42–3.

¹²¹Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 671, 670.

¹²²Jerry Falwell, mass mailings, 1988, folder 3, box 53, GGP.

¹²³Cited in Beth Tuttle, letter to “Dear Journalist,” June 16, 1988, folder 12, box 90, Mary McGrory Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC [hereafter MMP].

¹²⁴Tuttle, letter to “Dear Journalist,” MMP.

emotions rather than abstractions.¹²⁵ Almost none of these works have included Iran-Contra.¹²⁶

Calls for North's pardon were drowned out by Walsh's indictment of Weinberger, the Friday before Election Tuesday 1992. The indictment quoted a note from Weinberger that said the "VP favored" the swap of hostages for arms during a January 7, 1986, meeting that Bush, now running for president, long denied attending. The Democratic Bill Clinton campaign called the note "the smoking gun that George Bush lied to the American people about his role in the arms-for-hostages affair."¹²⁷

Bush denied that there was any news in this item and claimed "a big witch hunt" by Walsh timed to hurt his reelection chances. Bush was right that the January 7 meeting was public knowledge, but the Weinberger note was its first documentary evidence. As he had done in 1988, Bush deflected by attacking the media. When a host on CNN pressed him on the revelations, Bush charged back, "Do you plan to spend the whole time on Iran-Contra? Because I don't." Even some Republicans claimed that the news was costing Bush votes.¹²⁸ From a dead heat, after the indictment, the polls nudged Clinton's way.¹²⁹ The indictment may have decided the election. Bush supporters thought so, beginning with Vice President Dan Quayle, who called Walsh's move "the last nail in the coffin."¹³⁰

Republicans were angriest at Walsh after the election. Senator Dole led a group of colleagues in their contradictory call for an independent counsel to investigate the independent counsel.¹³¹ They also demanded that both the Senate judiciary committee and Attorney General Barr investigate the OIC, alleging improper ties to the Clinton campaign.¹³² Dole's central accusation was that the OIC was "a hotbed of Democratic activists lawyers" because one of them and his firm had donated to the party before he joined Walsh's team. (Dole made no mention of his own campaign having accepted contributions from Weinberger's attorneys.)¹³³

Like Reagan, President Bush long resisted pardoning Iran-Contra defendants, and the country, too, was of two minds. Early in Bush's tenure, in May 1989, only 51 percent of respondents supported a pardon for North.¹³⁴ When a jury convicted Poindexter in April 1990, the pressure once again mounted on Bush to pardon him and North.¹³⁵ Dole came out publicly in favor of pardons, and Walsh rebuked him: "I can recall no case where a Senate leader has so directly

¹²⁵For instance, Esther Kaplan, *With God on Their Side* (New York, 2004); David Domke, *God Willing? Political Fundamentalism in the White House, the "War on Terror," and the Echoing Press* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2004); Jennifer Butler, *Born Again: The Christian Right Globalized* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2006); Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York, 2006); Lee Marsden, *For God's Sake: The Christian Right and U.S. Foreign Policy* (London, 2008); Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of Evangelicals* (New York, 2018); and Lauren Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations* (Ithaca, NY, 2020).

¹²⁶One partial exception is Theresa Keeley, *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflict over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America* (Ithaca, NY, 2020), which discusses the impact of Catholics on the scandal.

¹²⁷Cited in Robert Pear, "Candidate's Record; '86 Weinberger Notes Contradict Bush Account on Iran Arms Deal," *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1992, 1; Clinton-Gore campaign, press release, Oct. 30, 1992, folder Iran-Contra Affair Weinberger, Caspar W. General, box 430, GLP. See also Ann Devroy and Walter Pincus, "GOP Calls Release of Weinberger Papers a Political 'Low Blow,'" *The Washington Post*, Nov. 3, 1992, A10.

¹²⁸Cited in Dan Balz, "Bush, Perot Lash Clinton," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 2, 1992, A1.

¹²⁹Devroy and Pincus, "GOP Calls," A10.

¹³⁰Cited in Walsh, *Firewall*, 463.

¹³¹Bob Dole, press release, Nov. 11, 1992, folder Iran-Contra Affair Weinberger, Caspar W. General, box 430, GLP.

¹³²Bob Dole, press release, Nov. 20, 1992, folder Iran-Contra Affair Weinberger, Caspar W. General, box 430, GLP.

¹³³Cited in Walsh, *Firewall*, 470, 471, 483.

¹³⁴"51% Support North Pardon," *New York Times*, May 7, 1989, A30.

¹³⁵Daniel Schorr, "Pardon North, Poindexter and the Rest," *New York Times*, Apr. 23, 1990.

intruded himself in a pending lawsuit.”¹³⁶ The *New York Times* warned of the obvious: “A pardon now would prompt widespread suspicion that Mr. Bush was shielding himself as well as others.”¹³⁷

Days after Bush’s loss to Clinton, however, momentum built toward a pardon. Rumors flew that Weinberger’s well-connected attorney, Robert Bennett, was in discussions with Quayle, White House aides such as William Kristol, and senior Republicans. Still, 59 percent of Americans considered a pardon a bad idea.¹³⁸

Yet it came on December 24, no doubt timed to hit the news cycle on Christmas Day, when few watched TV news or read papers.¹³⁹ In a stroke of his pen, Bush annulled one conviction (of George), three guilty pleas (Abrams, Alan Fiers, and Robert McFarlane), and two pending cases (Clarridge and Weinberger).¹⁴⁰ His statement mostly noted Weinberger’s long and distinguished service to the United States and his and his wife’s age and illnesses. The others he pardoned were, according to Bush, all patriots who had “already paid a price—in depleted savings, lost careers, anguished families.” He also decried “a profoundly troubling development in the political and legal climate of our country: the criminalization of policy differences.”¹⁴¹

The pardon canceled the trial of Weinberger, making Bush the first president to pardon someone on the eve of a prosecution. For the former secretary of defense, the Christmas Eve news was a godsend. “For the first time in nearly a year,” he recalled, “I slept well and awoke happily. That Christmas was one of the best I could remember.” Weinberger’s legal bills still totaled \$2.3 million, of which his legal defense fund paid only \$600,000.¹⁴²

The 1994 campaign of Oliver North for the Virginia Senate confirmed not only the New Right’s fundraising power but also its ability to set aside the notoriety of Iran-Contra while retaining its celebrity. As many wished during North’s speaking tour, the Virginian threw his hat in the ring. Now living on a million-dollar estate dubbed “Narnia” and paid for by \$1.7 million in book royalties and speaking fees in 1992 alone, North proved the heavy favorite against a more moderate Republican.¹⁴³

As in his fundraising speeches, North spent much of his campaign using the media as a foil. He targeted its “poison pen ink” for distorting his role in Iran-Contra. He railed against “cultural elites” and “media jackals.” He bandied about nicknames for major news outlets: the *Washington Compost*, the Nasty Broadcasting System, the *New York Crimes*. On the late-night news program “Nightline,” North withstood an assault from host Ted Koppel, who called him an “accomplished liar” and a “shameless self-promoter.” “Someday, somebody in the media will get it right—even you,” retorted North. When the cameras stopped rolling, the men chatted amicably. Koppel remarked, “I bet you that interview will get you 30,000 votes.” “I think he was short,” North said later, “by a factor of 10.”¹⁴⁴

North raised massive amounts for his campaign, attracting 90 percent of his large contributions from outside the state.¹⁴⁵ His campaign took in money from all fifty states. Of the \$20.3

¹³⁶Cited in AP, “Prosecutor in Iran-Contra Case Rebukes Dole,” *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1992, D20.

¹³⁷Editorial, “A Bush Pardon Now: Unforgivable,” *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 1992, A24.

¹³⁸Ann Devroy and Walter Pincus, “Bush Urged to Grant Pardons,” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 7, 1992, A1; Walsh, *Firewall*, 476.

¹³⁹R. W. Apple, Jr., “The President as Pardoner: A Calculated Gamble,” *New York Times*, Dec. 25, 1992, A23.

¹⁴⁰David Johnston, “Bush Pardons 6 in Iran Affair, Aborting a Weinberger Trial,” *New York Times*, Dec. 25, 1992, A1.

¹⁴¹“Text of President Bush’s Statement on the Pardon of Weinberger and Others,” *New York Times*, Dec. 25, 1992, A22.

¹⁴²Caspar W. Weinberger and Gretchen Roberts, *In the Arena: A Memoir of the 20th Century* (Washington, DC, 2001), 369, 370.

¹⁴³B. Drummond Ayres Jr., “Iran-Contra Isn’t Over for Oliver North,” *New York Times*, Jan. 20, 1994, A16; Philip Weiss, “Oliver North’s Next War,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 4, 1993, 15.

¹⁴⁴Cited in Lynn Rossellini, “Oliver North’s New Crusade,” *U.S. News & World Report* 116, no. 22 (June 6, 1994): 26, 7p.

¹⁴⁵Rossellini, “New Crusade,” 26.

million he raised in total, about \$16 million came from direct mail alone, more than any other political fundraiser in the country in 1994. This haul resulted from sending out 13 million letters from September 1993 to November 1994 through not the usual single direct mail vendor but no fewer than six, each with a different specialty. One reporter noted that, years after his 1987 testimony, North “remained a rallying point for true believers, positioning himself as a power broker for populist conservatives in the future.” He retained legal ownership of all his donor lists—“the largest ever compiled in history.” His former press secretary and deputy manager explained that “there were two goals involved here—obtaining the actual money and obtaining the donor names. Those names can be rented or mailed to for a long time.”¹⁴⁶

North won the Republican nomination easily but faced some headwinds in the general election. He was up against a formidable Democratic incumbent. Equally important, moderate Republicans such as Colin Powell and columnist George Will opposed his nomination.¹⁴⁷ After North clinched the nomination, Poindexter and Ronald and Nancy Reagan spoke out against him. Fifty-three percent of voters still believed his behavior in Iran-Contra was “morally wrong.”¹⁴⁸ Bush never spoke against North publicly, but as Vice President he confided to his diary that both North and Poindexter were “much more popular outside than inside the beltway.”¹⁴⁹

A rift in the Right was growing. Republicans who did support North, including Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum and budding cultural warrior Pat Buchanan, saw in him a moral man precisely because he used whatever means were necessary to fight evil. These were standard bearers of the post-Iran-Contra emboldened New Right who felt Reagan had compromised too much during his presidency. They now criticized the president for negotiating with Soviets and Democrats. The Heritage Foundation, founded by New Right activist Paul Weyrich, called Reagan “a prisoner of his optimism.”¹⁵⁰ Buchanan perceived that “Americans of Left and Right no longer share the same religion, the same values, the same codes of morality; we only inhabit the same piece of land.”¹⁵¹ North polled neck and neck with his Democratic challenger up to election day, when he lost by only 2.6 percent. Sidney Blumenthal, as early as 1987, perhaps best summarized North’s impact on American politics: “He left a tincture of authoritarian populism on conservatism that might yet spread in a troubled future.”¹⁵²

Just as they were willing to not only forgive North but also champion him, Republicans also fell in line behind the myth of Iran-Contra as an honest slip-up. In his memoirs, Weinberger called the series of deliberate, long-debated decisions by dozens of top-level officials “the one serious mistake the Administration made during the several years I worked as Secretary of Defense.”¹⁵³ A Republican report from Congress dismissed the affair as “mistakes” by “Reagan and his staff.”¹⁵⁴ In parallel, most of the Iran-Contra defendants absorbed the narrative of the Reagan administration’s—and their own—innocence. In early 1994, the *New York Times* reported that, among those charged, convicted, and/or pardoned in the scandal, “almost all are unrepentant.” If anything, they grew bitter at being abandoned by the administration and investigated by Walsh. Clair George of the CIA said that “the lesson” from the scandal “is that your

¹⁴⁶John F. Persinos, “Ollie, Inc.: How Oliver North Raised over \$20 Million in a Losing U.S. Senate Race,” *Campaigns & Elections* 16, no. 6 (June 1995): 30.

¹⁴⁷Rossellini, “New Crusade,” 26.

¹⁴⁸Fried, *Muffled Echoes*, 5.

¹⁴⁹July 22, 1987, entry, Bush diary transcripts.

¹⁵⁰Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s* (New York, 2022), 47.

¹⁵¹Cited in Keeley, *Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns*, 197.

¹⁵²Sidney Blumenthal, “Dateline Washington: The Conservative Crackup,” *Foreign Policy* 69 (Winter 1987–1988): 166–88, 184.

¹⁵³Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York, 1990), 353.

¹⁵⁴*Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*, 437.

government will not stand behind you when trouble comes your way.” Also of the agency, Donald Gregg recalled Iran-Contra as akin to “living with snakes in the cellar for seven years,” even though the OIC never charged him. Poindexter judged himself “upset with the hypocrisy of Congress.” “If I had it to do over again,” he reflected, “I would probably do things just about exactly the same way I did then.” The most bitter U.S. official was likely Elliott Abrams of the State Department. In his memoirs, he called OIC prosecutors “filthy bastards” and “bloodsuckers.”¹⁵⁵

Conclusion

The domestic political aspects of Iran-Contra, and especially of the Oliver North saga, help to flesh out what Nicole Hemmer describes as the Republican move “away from Reaganism and toward a more pessimistic, angrier, and even more revolutionary conservatism not long after his presidency.” In the mid- to late-1980s, that move remained in its initial steps. The Cold War lingered, which helped keep some conservatives wedded to democratic norms and practices, including bipartisanship. The media environment had also changed little in decades: newspapers, magazines, and network news still largely set the tone of public debate. Soon, however, the ending of the East–West conflict and the flowering of new media such as talk radio and the Internet would unleash the most combative and fact-averse conservatives to take over the Republican Party. The Contras became obsolete. New Right institutions that did not adapt quickly enough to the new politics and media, such as the Moral Majority, the *Conservative Digest*, and the National Conservative Political Action Committee, closed their doors.¹⁵⁶

The partial fabrication of “spontaneous” support for North during his testimony returned in the “astroturf” nature of Newt Gingrich’s Contract with America in the 1990s and Tea Party activism in the 2000s.¹⁵⁷ Just as North’s stacks of telegrams and letters and Bush’s complaints against newscasters were ginned up by political mass marketers, the movement against Barack Obama-era healthcare reforms that first appeared to grow spontaneously from the grassroots turned out to be the fruit of large donors such as Charles and David Koch and Republican Party operatives who cared most about lowering the tax bills of their corporations.¹⁵⁸

North became an avatar for these overlapping, competing trends. He claimed to hold fast to the virtues of democracy, and he certainly was a sincere anticommunist and a proven war hero. Yet he and many of his colleagues championed a secretive and partisan version of their foreign policy, viewing opponents of it as traitors to the nation. More important, he embraced the new methods of fundraising, messaging, and campaigning that demonized the press, distorted the truth, and disconnected policies and politicians from the people they were meant to serve. In domestic politics as in foreign policy, Iran-Contra made America less democratic.

North soon made a living from the emerging media entrancing conservative audiences. In the 1990s and 2000s, he became a talk radio personality, hosting nationally syndicated programs called the “Oliver North Radio Show” and “Common Sense Radio with Oliver North.” He hosted and cohosted cable television programs and documentaries into the 2010s and became a frequent commentator on Fox News Channel shows. Meanwhile, he authored or coauthored six books of fiction. In 1996, he spoke at a “Tribute to Patrick

¹⁵⁵All cited in Joel Brinkley and Tim Weiner, “The Cast; Soldiers, Secretaries and Politicians, Now United in Bitterness,” *New York Times*, Jan. 19, 1994, A8.

¹⁵⁶Hemmer, *Partisans*, 6, 53.

¹⁵⁷Hemmer, *Partisans*, 127; David Corn, *American Psychosis: A Historical Investigation of How the Republican Party Went Crazy* (New York, 2022), 257–74.

¹⁵⁸Lee Fang, *The Machine: A Field Guide to the Resurgent Right* (New York, 2013), 22–41; Dionne, *Why the Right Went Wrong*, 246–54.

J. Buchanan” along with Schlafly.¹⁵⁹ In short, he contributed to tightening the relationship between talk radio, cable news, and the Republican Party. His role in the Iran-Contra scandal helped cement what E. J. Dionne calls “the complete fusion of the culture of celebrity with politics” in the Trump era.¹⁶⁰

No scandal exactly like Iran-Contra has recurred since, but the New Right has nevertheless succeeded in minimizing several of its scandals through denial, opportunism, and forgetting. Countless Republicans in the 1990s—notably those who persecuted Bill Clinton for an extramarital affair—admitted to affairs of their own, yet the party forgave and forgot. The scandalous behavior of the Trump years—for instance the president’s pressure on the Ukrainian president to help Trump’s campaign or the president’s fomenting of an insurrection on January 6, 2021—enjoyed the backing of loyal congressional and media troops who denied the obvious improprieties, raised funds from deluded voters, and moved to put the episodes behind the party. Much more needs to be done to trace patterns linking scandal, political institutions, and memory. The Iran-Contra might well serve as a partial model.

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¹⁵⁹Hemmer, *Partisans*, 221.

¹⁶⁰Dionne, *Why the Right Went Wrong*, 2.