

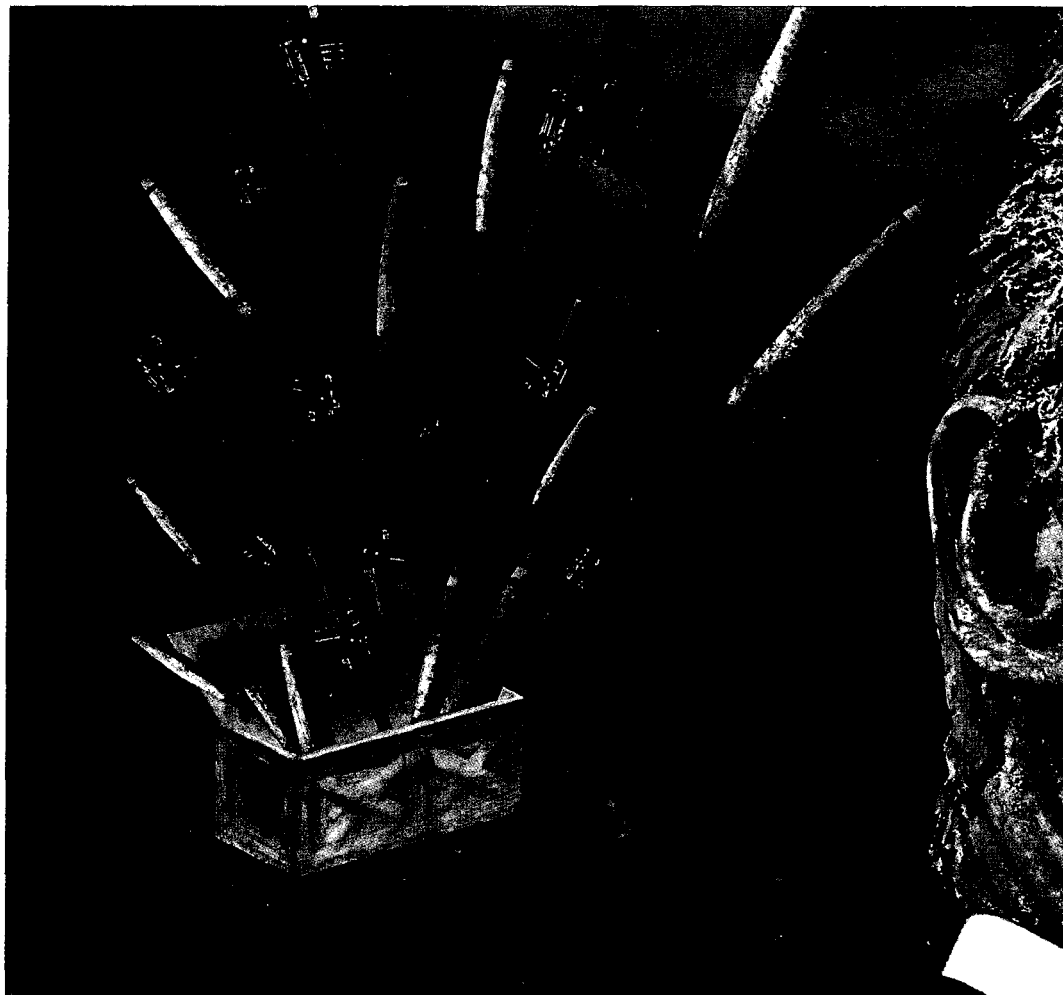
During the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton repeatedly vowed that, if elected, he would lift the arms embargo on Bosnia. Accusing George Bush of “coddling” dictators from Iraq to China, Clinton declared that he would act unilaterally to avoid another Holocaust on European soil if his administration was unable to get the U.N. or its allies in Europe to go along with him.

Once in office, Clinton discovered overwhelming support on Capitol Hill for his position. As Richard Perle, a former undersecretary of defense during the Reagan administration who has worked as an unpaid consultant to the Bosnian government on policy issues, puts it, “Congress was breathing down their necks to lift the embargo.” Clinton thus dispatched Secretary of State Warren Christopher to Europe in May 1993 on a mission intended to drum up support for the proposed policy shift.

But somewhere, somehow, something went wrong: Perhaps, as has been speculated repeatedly in the Western press, Christopher was personally opposed to lifting the embargo. Or it may have been that he lacked the necessary force to sell the policy abroad. In any event, our allies were not persuaded by Christopher’s pitch, and threatened to pull their own peacekeeping troops out of Bosnia if the U.S. acted unilaterally to lift the embargo.

Thus rebuffed, the Clinton administration then embarked on a cynical—and quite possibly illegal—course that has had ripple effects on U.S. credibility overseas. It okayed an Iranian

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IRAN - BOSNIA

Campaign promises notwithstanding, President Clinton found himself unwilling to defy European allies by ending the Bosnia arms embargo. Nor was

arms pipeline to Bosnia, in explicit defiance of our allies, the U.N. embargo, and Congress. Furthermore, the administration took unusual steps to keep the pipeline a secret—even going so far as to keep CIA director R. James Woolsey uninformed of its existence.

Now, as presidential election season rolls round again, Bill Clinton may be facing a more serious problem than Whitewater, Travelgate, or any of the other myriad scandals that have plagued his time in the Oval Office. The Iranian secret arms pipeline



BLAIR BRAYSON

described it, Clinton's policy has been "the height of insanity."

Iran's involvement in the affair began in May 1991, when Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic made the first of several trips to Tehran asking for aid. Iran quickly became friendly, championing Bosnia's plight as a "Muslim" cause and becoming the first Muslim nation to recognize Bosnia as an independent state just one year later. Iranian military advisers, along with several hundred Muslim fighters from various nations, soon began trickling into Bosnia. Many of them were veterans of the Afghan war, and had been trained by the CIA.

In September 1992, the Bush administration received intelligence reports that an Iran Air cargo plane had defied the U.N. arms embargo and landed in Croatia with a shipment of arms for Bosnia. President Bush and Secretary Eagleburger strongly believed that the problem in the region was too many weapons, not too few—their support for the embargo was unwavering. When they heard of the cargo plane, says Eagleburger, "We raised hell." Vigorous diplomatic protests convinced the Croatian government to

GREEN LIGHT

he willing to indulge the Senate's desire to lift it. The result was another Clinton classic: Iran does the dirty work—and we get the blame. **by Kenneth R. Timmerman**

to Bosnia may well turn out to be Clinton's own Iran-contraband debacle—and, as with so many other of the president's foreign-policy mishaps, no one can seem to figure out what Clinton hoped to gain by his actions. Why did Bill Clinton give the perennially hostile Iran the green light to become a major player in the Bosnian crisis, when Congress had signaled its approval to arm the Bosnian Muslims directly? And why did the administration, as has become its wont, then lie about what it was doing? As former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger

seize the weapons. But for the Iranians, the arms shipments were a two-fer: they earned the gratitude of their Muslim brethren, while tweaking the nose of the Great Satan, the United States.

Though Clinton had promised to reverse Bush's policies, his early tenure in the White House did not suggest much of a change in official policy toward either Iran or the Balkan crisis. Warren Christopher's failure to convince American allies of the wisdom of ending the embargo underscored the administration's

foreign-policy ineffectiveness. And while Christopher used harsher language against the Iranian regime than anything said in the Bush administration, calling them terrorists and “international outlaws,” nobody seemed to pay very much attention. On March 20, 1993, the very same day that Christopher called publicly on the World Bank to cut off new monetary credits to Iran, the bank approved new loans to Tehran worth several hundred million dollars.

Meanwhile, U.S. companies continued to do a booming business with the Islamic republic. Licensing officials in Ron Brown’s Commerce Department disregarded several hundred million dollars of hi-tech exports to Iran during the first year of the Clinton administration, despite concerns that these sales might enhance Iranian weapons programs. And perhaps more than anything else, the administration’s high-rolling, freewheeling attitude toward business with Tehran—while the secretary of state was haranguing our allies for selling machine-tools and computers to Iranian weapons plants—convinced our European allies that Christopher was simply out of tune with the administration’s real policy toward Iran. Talk loudly, the U.S. tactic seemed to be, and then deal quietly with Tehran through the back door.

After the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the administration had approved the pipeline, Congress commenced hearings to investigate just what had gone on. However their “policy” had appeared to the rest of the world before, administration officials now claimed that it was their intention all along to subvert the U.N. embargo on Bosnia. “[We] felt that the embargo was fundamentally wrong,” Ambassador Peter Galbraith told the House International Relations Committee on May 30, 1996. “It resulted in a situation where the aggressors—the Bosnian Serbs who had all the weapons—were able to attack cities, villages, engage in ethnic cleansing with impunity, while the victims were left undefended because they didn’t get the arms of the old Yugoslav army. So, the position of the administration was, in fact, to be against the arms embargo. And...from January 20, 1993, we were not urging—we were not urging other countries to enforce it.”

Indeed, according to a preliminary report by the Senate Select Intelligence Committee, based on closed-door testimony by many of those involved, Galbraith “was thinking about covert U.S. help to the Bosnians by December 1993 and encouraging others to propose covert actions by March 1994.” Yet despite increasingly vocal bipartisan support to end the embargo, Clinton took no steps to fulfill his campaign promise. And then came the first of his large Bosnian blunders.

As one senior intelligence official deeply involved in the case puts it, “They should have issued an intelligence finding, informed the Congress, and then initiated a covert operation to re-arm the Bosnians. If there is one thing the U.S. knows, it is how to smuggle arms. After all, we have a whole branch of the government that does just that.”

The official
response?
“No instructions”—the
diplomatic
equivalent of a
green light.

Intelligence findings are drafted by the White House and signed by the president in order to authorize covert operations by U.S. intelligence agencies. These usually obscure instruments of government burst into the limelight during the Iran-contra affair, when President Reagan signed a “finding” authorizing the arms-for-hostages deals.

But the last thing the administration wanted was CIA involvement in its Bosnia operation. The White House mistrusted CIA Director Woolsey, holding him responsible for the bad publicity the administration had received after the arrest of KGB mole Aldrich Ames. Instead of going along with White House wishes to close the books on the case by designating a scapegoat, Woolsey ordered a thorough investigation of the Ames affair. Thereafter he was regarded as “politically unreliable” by the Clinton White House, which may have feared that

Woolsey would initiate a legal review of the Bosnian gambit and bring about its exposure.

And so the Clinton foreign policy team—apparently led by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, and national security adviser Anthony Lake—decided it would take advantage of the Iranians’ eagerness to arm the Bosnians, lacking the courage or the wherewithal to do it directly. If questioned, the United States would simply feign ignorance of the entire operation. For a man who is no stranger to deceit, the gambit must have seemed a natural choice. Not only would the arms shipments help to stop the horrible spectacle of Bosnians being massacred live on CNN, it would also take the wind out of the sails of Clinton’s congressional foes, who were clamoring for a mature response to the crisis and had been highly critical of his foreign policy performance until then.

As Strobe Talbott would testify before the Senate in May of this year, the administration then believed that openly arming the Bosnians in defiance of the embargo “would have caused severe strains with our allies, who had troops on the ground...[and] could have required a substantial U.S. troop deployment as part of a very dangerous and costly NATO extraction effort.” If the secret pipeline should ever come to light, the administration reckoned, they would have to hope that allies and foes alike would believe that the nation with the largest and most sophisticated intelligence-gathering apparatus in the world had somehow not noticed that the Bosnians suddenly had a means to defend themselves.

Before coming to work in the Clinton administration, Talbott had been a journalist with *Time*. Perhaps more than anybody involved in the decision-making process, he recognized that the administration was running a terrible risk by announcing one policy in public (a grudging support for the embargo) and conducting another policy in private. It was shades of Iran-contra, when blatant contradictions in U.S. policy devastated the administration’s—and the nation’s—credibility. To avoid such pitfalls, Talbott told the Senate committee this spring that the covert operation was to leave “no paper trail” that could spawn leaks to the press. On the explicit orders of Anthony Lake, no written reports

on the pipeline were prepared or transmitted. And there would be absolutely no record that the U.S. had given the arrangement its stamp of approval.

That approval came in April 1994, when the already hopeless Bosnian situation took a sudden, dramatic turn for the worse. Bosnian Serbs stormed the Gorazde safe haven and were threatening to overrun other U.N.-protected areas. The administration's top Bosnia negotiator, Ambassador Charles Redman, was shuttling between Sarajevo, Pale (the Bosnian Serb "capital"), Zagreb, and Washington, but failed to negotiate a ceasefire. In Europe, U.S. allies refused to allow NATO warplanes to launch anything but token airstrikes. The Bosnian army was on the verge of collapse.

Congress began clamoring for action. Bob Dole, then Senate minority leader, pressed loudly for an end to the embargo. Clinton ally Sen. Joseph Biden sponsored legislation to allocate \$50 million to ship U.S. weapons to the beleaguered Bosnian army. The weapons were to be provided free of charge from U.S. war reserves, "provided that... United States allies are prepared to join in such a military assistance effort." The allies wanted no part of such an effort, of course, but the wholesale slaughter of the Bosnians could no longer be ignored. At the State Department there was real concern that the Bosnian government would collapse without immediate assistance. The United States, and specifically Bill Clinton, would thus have presided over Europe's greatest genocide since the Holocaust—exactly what candidate Clinton had pledged to avoid. Whatever the administration was going to do, it had to do right away.

When Ambassador Redman returned to Zagreb on April 29, Galbraith asked to meet with him privately before seeing the Croatian government. Franjo Tudjman, the president of Croatia, was going to ask the United States for an official response to the possibility of allowing the Iranians to funnel arms secretly to the Bosnia Serbs, Galbraith said.

As Redman described these events in testimony before the House International Relations Committee this spring, Galbraith appeared to be the man in charge. "[Galbraith] briefed me on the question that had been posed by the Croatian government concerning the transshipment of arms for the Bosnian government, and then placed a call to Washington to ascertain the response to that question. The responsible Washington official provided the no-instructions guidance"—diplomatic speak for "go right ahead."

There is no evidence, at least in the public record of these events, that the Clinton administration made any secret contacts with the Iranians to establish the arms pipeline. According to a senior intelligence source, no such consultations were held through intelligence channels either. "If there were contacts," the source says, "the CIA was not aware of them." Given that James Woolsey had been kept out of the loop all along, this revelation is in itself not surprising. (The CIA boss would not

The White House says the pipeline arrangement was Franjo Tudjman's idea.

learn of the shipments until U.S. satellite photographs spotted Iranian aircraft landing in Zagreb a few weeks later. His persistent questions as to what was going on prompted a six-month review by the Intelligence Oversight Board.)

It remains unclear who actually initiated the Iranian arms shipments through Croatia: Tudjman, the Bosnians, or Clinton administration officials. The administration contends it was Tudjman's idea. Listening to Warren Christopher's hot rhetoric about the "international outlaws" in Tehran must have made him nervous about allowing the Iranians to come in—which is why American approval of the plan would have been so crucial. But did Galbraith or someone else weigh in with Tudjman, prompting him to "pop the question" in such a way that the U.S. could appear to be acquiescing to a *fait accompli*? At any rate, once the green light

had been given, the arms started flowing, and U.S. officials became heavily involved in the pipeline operation.

In early May 1994, only a few days after the "no instructions" thumbs-up, a Bosnian convoy was held up by Bosnian Croats. According to the Senate Intelligence Committee report, "the Bosnians appealed to U.S. diplomats to help get the Croatian government to intercede with the Croats. While no U.S. diplomat recalls assisting in this effort, the Intelligence Oversight Board concluded that Ambassador Redman probably did so—but there is no evidence he thought he was aiding a possible arms convoy."

According to both intelligence sources and public testimony that emerged from the Congressional hearings, U.S. officials in Croatia got directly involved with the Iranian arms deliveries on at least two other occasions. On May 3-4, 1995, an Iran Air cargo jet landed at Zagreb airport and was surrounded by Croatian Interior Ministry troops, eager to take their "cut" of the booty. American embassy officials actively intervened with the Croatian government to get the cargo released. According to the *Washington Times*, the cargo on board consisted of sixty tons of explosives and other raw materials for Bosnian weapons plants.

In September 1995—just two months before the U.S. convened peace talks at Dayton—Croatian officials alerted the U.S. Embassy in Zagreb about a shipment of Iranian tactical missiles bound for Bosnia. The Croats feared the missiles could contain chemical warheads; after Croatian Defense Minister Gojko Susak seized them, he allowed embassy officials to inspect the shipment. Those American officials assured Susak that the missiles did not contain chemical warheads, and the shipment went on to its destination.

Of all the sloppy and tangled relationships in the administration's confusing Bosnian policy, this incident may be the one that comes back to haunt them most. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "some U.S. officials believe that the decision to inspect the Iranian missiles and then permit them to be delivered represents direct U.S. involvement in arms shipments in violation of the U.N. arms embargo." If true, that involvement constitutes covert action. And since the administration neglected to get an intelligence finding to authorize

covert action, that involvement also becomes illegal—the raw ingredients for Bill Clinton’s very own Iran-contra scandal.

Whatever the ultimate cost of their secret policy, the Clinton administration now surely has more headaches on its hands than it anticipated. Compounding the difficulties of the pipeline scheme—or, in the eyes of many, proving its ultimate foolishness—is the fact that turning a blind eye to the weapons shipments amounted to nothing less than an engraved invitation to the Islamic republic to expand its sphere of influence. Needless to say, that influence is intractably anti-Western, and very specifically anti-American. As Lawrence Eagleburger puts it, the policy has “invit[ed] Bosnia-Islamic connections with a terrorist state that wishes us as much damage as they can possibly inflict on us.”

To help inflict that damage, Iran has been sending waves of elite forces into Bosnia ever since Galbraith’s green light. Intelligence sources told *Los Angeles Times* reporter James Risen that in 1994, “a different kind of Iranian was showing up in Bosnia, military and civilian advisers who appeared to have been sent by the Tehran government on well-defined missions.” These included members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). One highly placed intelligence source says, “We saw the Iranians equipped with all sorts of sophisticated electronic eavesdropping equipment, casing out U.S. positions” in the region.

Their presence infuriated top members of the U.S. military, who surmised (correctly) that American troops would soon be on Bosnian soil. Even Ambassador Galbraith has told Congress that, as a result of the increased Iranian presence in Bosnia and Croatia, his embassy in Zagreb faces serious new security threats and an increased risk of terrorist attacks.

Those risks—and Tehran’s anti-American sentiment—seem to have been exacerbated virtually in direct proportion to Clinton’s foreign-policy indecision. In the early days of his White House tenure, with Ron Brown’s Commerce Department turning a blind eye to U.S. business dealing with the Islamic republic, Clinton was loath to be anything but friendly with Tehran. But after pro-Israeli lobbying groups began working intensively with Sen. Alfonse D’Amato to push legislation to cut off U.S. trade with the Islamic republic, Clinton issued an executive order on May 6, 1995, prohibiting all U.S. trade with Iran. (Ever the politician, he even announced the measure in a speech before the American Jewish Congress in New York—a core constituency he is not eager to lose to the Republicans.)

Within a week after sanctions were announced, the Iranian currency became virtually nonconvertible—the kind of heavy economic pressure that cannot fail to weaken the Tehran regime. Yet rather than boldly standing his ground, Clinton has tried to act as if relations with Iran were perfectly normal, even going out of his way earlier this year to ask the Emir of Kuwait to pass along a friendly hello. According to one source, “The

The daily
Kayhan com-
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to “a drunk
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the street.”

president asked [the Emir] to make sure the Iranians understood the U.S. was not seeking a conflict with Iran, and wanted to avoid any form of military confrontation in the Gulf.”

In yet another “private” gesture intended for the Arab world and Tehran but not for a domestic U.S. audience, the president recently told a reporter from *As Sharq Al Awsat*, a Saudi magazine published in London, that the U.S. is “prepared at any time to have a full and frank dialogue” with the Islamic Republic of Iran and is “not seeking to topple” the Tehran regime. The only precondition for talks, Clinton said, was that they be held “with an authoritative, official representative of the Iranian government,” a formula dreamed up by the State Department to avoid the pitfalls that so bedeviled the Iran-contra negotiations.

The reaction in Tehran was immediate—and devastating. Most daily newspapers carried the full text of the interview the next day with violent commentaries. The state-owned daily *Kayhan* compared Clinton to “a drunk bastard shouting in the street... [who] should be treated like a thug.” Quoting an “unnamed observer,” the paper concluded that Clinton’s remarks showed that the United States “has accepted this important fact, that sanctions have had no impact” on Iran.

Far from mollifying the factions in Tehran who advocate terrorist strikes against U.S. interests in the Middle East, the president’s comments have instead led the Iranians to believe he has backed down from a tough policy. Counter-terrorism experts say privately that Iran may well respond with renewed terrorist attacks or even a military adventure, comfortable in their belief that a weak president will not respond. And they were making this prediction before the truck-bombing that killed nineteen U.S. servicemen in Dhahran, an attack that Iran called “revenge” for the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia.

In the meantime, Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) is soon to lead hearings on Capitol Hill into the secret arms pipeline debacle. Those hearings will investigate the possible illegality of the unauthorized covert action in Bosnia—and they are the last thing Clinton wants hanging over his head in this election year. As in other political scandals that have faced this administration, the early evidence is that their defense will begin with self-righteous claims of innocence. Already, Peter Galbraith has told a congressional committee, “It was the war, not the arms pipeline, that gave the Iranians the opportunity to fish in troubled Balkan waters.” Galbraith even went so far as to argue that, by allowing the Iranians to ship arms into Bosnia, the U.S. reduced the need for its own presence, “because it enabled the Bosnians to defend themselves, to survive, and then, in conjunction with the Croatians, to roll back some of the Serb gains, thus paving the way for the Dayton agreement.”

But with nearly 20,000 American troops still on the ground in Bosnia, and the threat of Iranian terrorism mounting in the wake of the Saudi Arabia bombing, one wonders what will be the ultimate price of Clinton’s foreign flip-flops. ❧



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BILL'S ERRAND BOYS

by James Ring Adams



GLYNIS SWEENEY

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