

Small Change

The Iran-contra hearings have thus far contained many absurdities, perhaps none more spine-chilling than Robert McFarlane's invocation of Oliver North's overwhelming concern for human liberty in Nicaragua. But one of the most obviously preposterous claims thus far attracted no comment.

In the midst of McFarlane's testimony Sen. Daniel Inouye suddenly announced that the strange affair of the missing \$10 million had been solved. He was referring to one of the dollar transfers from the Saudi royal family to a bank account in Switzerland controlled by Oliver North. Inouye explained that North had given the wrong account number to the donors, transposing two of the digits. The money had ended up in the account of a shipping tycoon in Switzerland and had now been frozen. Mystery solved, with laughs all around.

Thus we are asked to believe that at a time when North courier Robert Owen was cashing traveller's checks worth only a few thousand dollars and hand-carrying the money down to Central America, no one—neither North nor the contras—noticed that their funds were \$10 million short. And since this is precisely what we are asked to believe, we therefore have to accept the proposition that either (a) there was too much money in the account for \$10 million to be a significant item, or (b) so much was being stolen from the account that \$10 million was just one more drop from a constantly leaking bucket.

The Smoking Gun That Doesn't Smoke (Continued)

The hearings are frustrating—much more so than their Watergate equivalent—because their structure permits no sustained offensive. On his first day of testimony Richard Secord revealed that North had told him of the good laughs he, North and President Reagan had enjoyed at the notion of the Ayatollah Khomeini arming the contras. Secord added that he had not taken North's disclosure as a joke. But there was no immediate follow-up and when Secord was asked about the matter the next day, he was able to back-track and say that he had felt "skeptical" of this report.

Similar missed opportunities occurred in McFarlane's testimony. His revelation that North had invited him to "a shredding party" was not immediately pounced upon, nor was his casual remark that President Reagan's interpretation of the Boland Amendment was much more "liberal" than his own. In both instances McFarlane was allowed time to prepare his defenses before undergoing serious interrogation on either of these matters.

These failures are indications of the real effect of the hearings. The supposition is that they constitute an investigation, rolling along the twin rails of deduction and induction toward an answer to the question: did President Reagan personally authorize the Iran-contra shuttle and did he maintain hands-on supervision of the scheme? Thus, at the end of each bout of interrogation of each witness the press solemnly concludes that, as yet, no "smoking gun" has been unearthed.

What is actually going on is something

ASHES & DIAMONDS

By Alexander Cockburn



akin to vaccination against disease. Vaccination is essentially a process of habituation, in which the patients are inoculated with safe doses of the disease against which they are to be protected. Thus, in the case of the Iran-contra scandal the public has to be inoculated against the idea that the president is a liar who knowingly broke the law over a protracted period. Inoculation takes the form of revealing that the president is indeed a criminal liar while at the same time stoutly maintaining that no proofs are available for this conclusion.

The first stage in this particular program of vaccination was the report of the Tower Commission. It published abundant material showing that the president had day-to-day knowledge of the illegal activities and authorized them. Simultaneously the commissioners and the press announced that the report showed that the president did

not have day-to-day knowledge of the illegal activities and did not authorize them. Thus we have the familiar spectacle of the politicians, editorialists and commentators examining a gun from whose barrel smoke is visibly extruding while unanimously announcing that the weapon has not been fired in years.

So Secord's and North's testimony, seeing between frank admission and coy retraction, slowly habituates the public that, although the president knew everything, he yet knew nothing. The end result will be a conditioned response wherein North will say he spent 10 minutes a day with the president getting authorizations for each weapon and dollar transfer. The White House will issue a denial and the Congress and the press will agree that the S.G. is nowhere in sight.

This is what happened in the Watergate

investigations, and by midsummer of 1974, after an avalanche of evidence of Nixon's guilt, *Time* solemnly asked the question: is the press going too far? and answered yes. Then a tape surfaced that was so incriminating, so palpably the S.G., that all normal vaccination procedures were useless and Nixon had to resign. But this time it is unlikely that such a tape exists, and the public has already been inoculated against the idea that Reagan's written authorizations might have been physically destroyed. McFarlane's disclosure of the "shredding party" which did precisely this destruction, can now be dismissed as not another S.G.

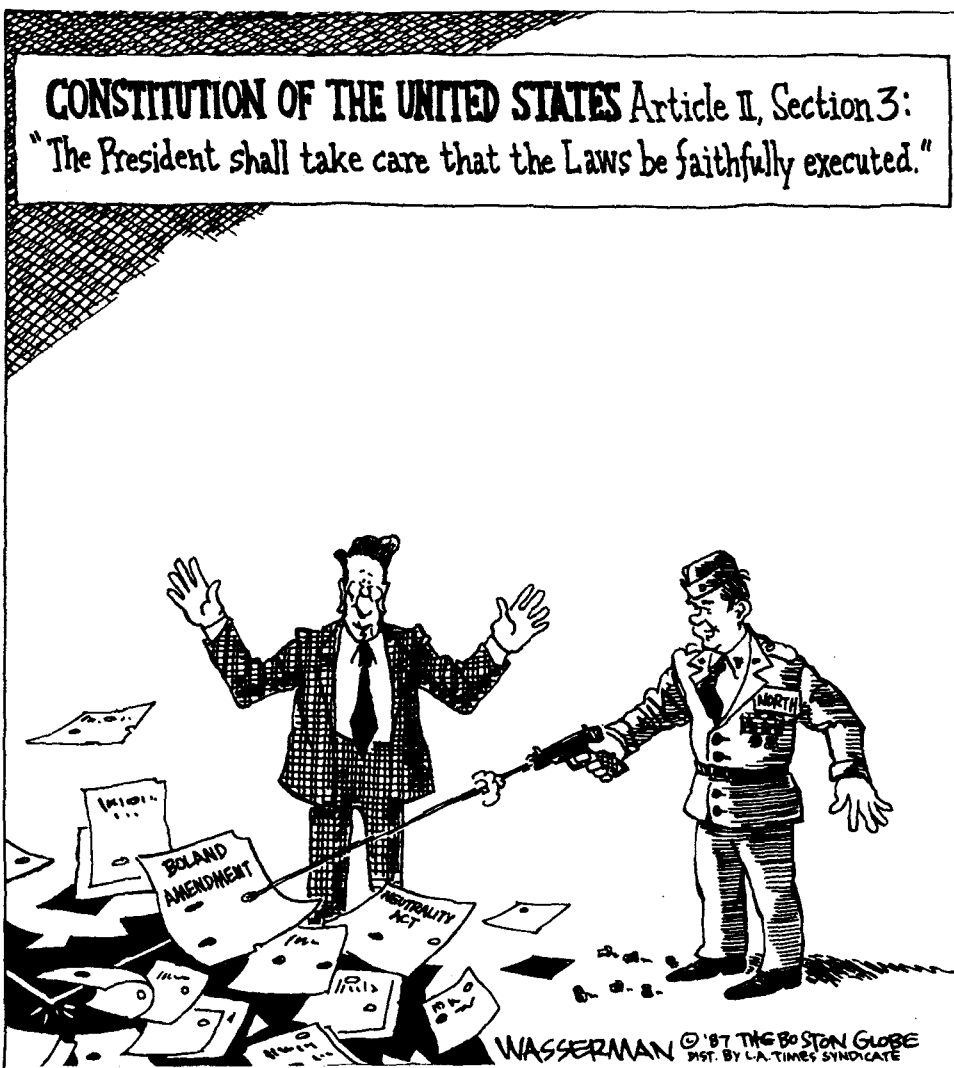
The Reagan administration has always had a particularly sophisticated grasp of these procedures. Consider the degrees by which the press was conditioned to accept the idea that President Reagan is hoping to "restore" democracy in Nicaragua, even though the press would also concede, if passed, that democracy never existed in Nicaragua prior to the revolution of 1979 and the elections of 1984 and therefore by definition cannot be "restored"; and, furthermore, that Reagan wants to return a bunch of former National Guardsmen to power.

In the *New York Times* for May 14 Elaine Sciolino solemnly reported that "in a discussion of a plan drafted by President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica... President Reagan expressed concern about whether it could guarantee a process of democratization in Nicaragua." She asserted later in the same story that the Arias plan "calls for an end to American aid for the contras in return for the creation of a democratic system in Nicaragua" and that Guatemala "favors re-establishment of a democratic system there." All of this is untrue, but Sciolino would probably react angrily to the charge that this is a piece of shameless publicity for the White House on the occasion of a visit by President Cerezo, though this is exactly what it was.

Another piece of classic inoculation was the Reagan administration's assault on the ABM Treaty, with claims that a piece of treaty language outlawing the testing of space-based systems, could in fact be broadly interpreted as permitting the testing of space-based systems. There are innumerable other examples that propel us toward the inevitable conclusion that almost all reporting, whether about the Iran-contra scandal or the ABM Treaty or the homeless or the unemployed is both inoculation against reality and reassurance that despite all appearances the world is not what it seems.

The Best Revenge

The network correspondents reporting the trial in Lyons of Klaus Barbie look flushed and swollen. During one of his reports I thought that ABC's Pierre Salinger would explode. The fact is that to the great joy of network teams, fortified with vast expense accounts, Lyons is one of the foremost guzzledromes of France. After a courtroom session chronicling the deeds of the Nazi butcher, the teams hurry forth to three-star establishments such as that owned by Paul Bocuse, or La Tour Rose or the restaurant a few miles outside Lyons owned by Alain Chapel, reckoned to be the best in France. This last is also a small hotel so the swag-bellied correspondents can even complain that so crowded are conditions inside Lyons that they are having to rough it in a rural pension.



By Bruce Elliot Johansen

AS OUR NATIONAL PRESS HAS CONCENTRATED on the debate over private and public funding of the Nicaraguan contras, the seven-year-old civil war in El Salvador has slipped from the front pages, past the canyons of type between the department-store advertising, back from behind the classified ads, and largely out of our media's mind's eye.

So, it should not come as a surprise that few here have thought much about the fact that El Salvador today seems closer to a fundamental change of government than ever before. Most of us likely think the war in El Salvador pits a few bands of rag-tag guerrillas against a popular centrist government—that is, after all, what the media told us, when it told us anything at all.

North American visitors to the "front" and Salvadorans visiting the U.S. now tell us otherwise—the Duarte government and its armed forces have alienated large portions of the urban middle and lower-middle classes, setting the stage for its probable eventual collapse. The reports sound like those coming out of Nicaragua in 1977 or 1978—back when Anastasio Somoza was telling the U.S. press corps the Sandinistas were on the run.

Events in El Salvador ought to be news—after all, the U.S. has been pouring an average of \$500 million a year into El Salvador during the past several years in an attempt to keep Duarte & Co. in power, an amount of money that makes aid to the contras look like spare change.

El Salvador is close to fundamental change

Then again, the U.S. press has never been very good at covering the roots of the conflict in El Salvador. Just why has a protracted civil war cost 60,000 lives since 1980 in a country barely half as large as Iowa? Sixty thousand dead in a country of five million people would equal three million dead in the U.S.

The only time we have been treated to a display of "pack journalism" in El Salvador was during the elections early in this decade which put Duarte in power. The balloting was treated largely as an exercise in high-octane democracy by legions of U.S. correspondents.

Much of the political opposition refused to take part in those elections, and they were treated mainly as crybabies and spoilsports by our media. Little attention was paid to certain details that deterred many people from voting, such as the fact that votes were cast in see-through ballot boxes under the watchful eyes of troops who often doubled by night as members of the "dead squads" that killed more than 100 civilians during the month of the election alone.

During the election, little attention was paid to the fact that many villages in the countryside were targets of the most intense aerial bombing in the history of the



Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte.

Despite massive American aid, opposition to the Duarte regime has grown in size and intensity.

Americas. El Salvador is so small that the bombs literally rattled the hotels occupied by the international press in San Salvador, the capital. Yet, the bombing usually was defined as outside the "assignment," which was the election, and therefore usually outside the "news." Correspondents who mentioned the bombing at all seemed to deem it Muzak for embryonic democracy.

Displaced persons: In more recent years little attention has been paid to the fact that the war has made refugees of a quarter of the country's population at one time or another—on a scale of our country, that would mean 60 million people displaced from their homes.

Many of the refugees have been displaced by the bombing, one more example of our tax money at work.

A similarly small amount of media emphasis has followed detailed reports of torture in Salvadoran prisons. According to the country's non-governmental human rights commission, 99.5 percent of Salvadorans detained for political crimes at Mariona Prison in 1986 were tied, blindfolded and beaten. Nearly half were

strangled while being questioned. In some cases, U.S. military personnel acted as advisers during interrogations. The *National Catholic Reporter* published these reports, but few other U.S. press outlets have.

Advocating human rights in El Salvador is not something one does without thinking twice. Eight persons founded the non-government human rights commission in 1978. Since then seven of them have been killed by the "death squads" or have vanished without a trace. The eighth lives in exile in Mexico.

If such abuses had taken place in Nicaragua, we'd all know about them. Regarding El Salvador, one must look long and hard in our press, to the religious newspapers, small newsletters published by community groups or magazines such as *The Nation*, the *Progressive* and *Mother Jones*.

Anyone who has the slightest interest in Central American issues knows, of course, that Nicaraguan officials last year closed *La Prensa*, the only opposition newspaper in Managua. Few people here know that El Salvador's only two opposition newspapers were closed even earlier. They weren't just closed. They were firebombed. One of their editors was disemboweled in a public restaurant—and all without one peep of protest from the Reagan administration.

What's newsworthy? Is any of this news? Or do our mainstream editors regard yet another attempt to dress up tyranny as "democracy" as worth only a non-newsworthy yawn? After all, this is hardly the first time the U.S. government has tacitly approved of terror by governments that invoke the proper ritualistic anti-Communist buzzwords.

Why has the opposition grown in size and intensity despite massive U.S. aid and assistance? Are we owed an explanation, or at least a few probing questions by a press corps that seems to be belatedly rediscovering that it can be a "watchdog" of government, after years as lapdog?

Or will we wake up some cold morning to a new set of headlines suggesting once again that all the gold in Fort Knox can't defuse the desires of a country's impoverished majority? Or that the billions of dollars spent bought nothing, in the end, except tens of thousands of early deaths and the ill will of those who will survive? Is it news? It all has, after all, happened many, many times before.

Bruce Elliot Johansen is the author of *Forgotten Founders*.

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