The Iran-Contra Affair: Analyzing Reagan’s Foreign Policy
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Setting the Stage

President Jimmy Carter’s approach to Foreign Policy shifted to a more humanitarian focus.

Focus on Détente by previous presidents had given the impression that the U.S. and U.S.S.R. had developed more amicable relations.

This approach seemed to be problematic from the start due to several reasons:

- Communist involvement in global revolutions from Angola to Latin America
- Soviet interests in Afghanistan and Iran
- Rising Anti-American sentiments by Fundamentalist Islamic Leaders in the Middle East
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Setting the Stage


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Hardline Conservatives Demanded Change

From the beginning, President Reagan’s Foreign Policy was reminiscent of earlier Cold War Policies
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Hardline Conservatives Demanded Change

President Reagan identified the Soviet Union as the “Evil Empire”

He questioned the actual intentions of the Soviet approval of SALT I & II

He fostered the American belief that the Soviets were secretly building up their arsenal for Nuclear War

He promoted the new Strategic Defense Initiative as a plan for defending against the perceived Soviet threat

He solidified Soviet insecurities about U.S. global intentions
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Hardline Conservatives Demanded Change

President Reagan’s anti-Soviet stance caused Leonid Brezhnev and his followers to increase deficit defense spending.

When Mikhail Gorbachev became the new Soviet President, he advocated Glasnost & Perestroika ultimately removing Reagan’s “Evil Empire”.

President Reagan portrayed the change in Soviet policies as a result of pressure from the U.S. and its allies.

As a result, Reagan was credited with the Fall of the U.S.S.R.
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“Mr. Gorbachev, Tear Down This Wall!”

- President Reagan, Brandenburg Gate June 12, 1987
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Reagan’s Containment extends to the Periphery

President Reagan sought to actively defeat communist elements without reverting to large-scale military intervention.
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Reagan’s Containment extends to the Periphery

It appeared that Reagan’s policy for “Dealing with the Devils” in Iran and Nicaragua included problematic actions involving:

- Decisional Autonomy by CIA Operatives
- Secret negotiations with known terrorists
- Illegal Arms Deals with Foreign Nations
- Unconstitutional actions by high ranking White House officials
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Setting the Stage

Contra Rebels in Honduras were waging a war against the (Communist backed) Sandinistas.

Lebanon’s Islamic Jihad (Hezbollah) waged war against the United States by taking several American Hostages.

Iran and Iraq were waging war over Islamic differences and the control of Middle East Oil (1979 – 1989).
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Setting the Stage

Brutal Somoza dynasty of dictators ruled Nicaragua from 1934 – 1979 (Backed by U.S.)
(led by Somoza Garcia who died in 1956)

Contested control of Nicaragua was being fought by two factions

The Sandinistas National Liberation Front took control of Nicaragua in 1979 (Communist Backed)
(Led by Daniel Ortega)
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Setting the Stage

Contested control of Nicaragua was being fought by two factions.

President Reagan ordered CIA Director William Casey to plan the overthrow of the FSLN in Nicaragua.

William Casey created a fund of $19 Million in 1981 to arm a small guerilla force called the Contras.
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Setting the Stage

U.S. funding of the Contras insurgency into Nicaragua was made illegal by the Boland Amendment in 1984 due to some unacceptable tactics.

“No funds available to the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, or any other agency or entity of the United States involved in intelligence activities may be obligated or expended for the purpose or which would have the effect of supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua by any nation, group, organization, movement, or individual.”
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Setting the Stage

In 1984 Iran had been designated a State Sponsor of Terrorism making it illegal for the U.S. to sell them weapons. Iran was in the middle of the Iran-Iraq War and was looking for a Western Nation willing to supply it with weapons against Iraq.

National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane asked Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres to help broker the sale.
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Setting the Stage

The United States would ship arms to Israel.

The U.S. would then ship more weapons to Israel for monetary benefits.

Israel would then ship the weapons through an intermediary to Iranian Moderates wanting to build an alliance with the United States.

Iranian Moderates agreed to broker the release of U.S. Hostages in Lebanon as a sign of their intension to oppose the spread of terrorism.
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Setting the Stage

Between Aug 1985 and Oct 1986 the U.S. supplied Iran with 2,500 TOW Anti-Tank Missiles & 18 Hawk Anti-Aircraft Missiles

Iranian moderates coordinated the release of Rev. Benjamin Weir (15 Sep 1985) and Father Lawrence Martin Jenco (July 1986) from the Islamic Jihad in Lebanon

TOW anti-tank Missile System

Hawk anti-aircraft Missile System
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Problems with Reagan’s Containment Policy Arise

4 Dec 1985: National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane Resigned

Lt. Col. Oliver North, military aide to the National Security Council suggested a new plan

Sell the arms directly to the Iranians and give a portion of the proceeds to the Contras

Newly appointed National Security Advisor, Admiral John Poindexter, approved the new plan without notifying President Reagan
Problems with Reagan’s Containment Policy Arise

Both the sale of weapons directly to the Iranians, and the funding of the Contras, circumvented the Boland Amendment & Congress

Both John Poindexter and Oliver North continued to keep Reagan shielded from the true nature of their covert operation

Poindexter (and McFarlane) had convinced the President that these dealings were preventive measures against possible Soviet incursions

Meanwhile, North suggested raising the cost of the weapons to the Iranians to raise more money to support the Contras
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Problems with Reagan’s Containment Policy Arise

In Sep & Oct 1986, three more Americans were taken hostage in Lebanon by a Terrorist Group

Oct 1986: Sandinistas captured CIA operative Eugene Hasenfus after shooting down his plane

3 Nov 1986: The Lebanese magazine *Ash-Shiraa* exposed the secret sale of weapons by the U.S. to the Iranians in exchange for U.S. hostages
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Problems with Reagan’s Containment Policy Arise

13 Nov 1986: Reagan addressed the nation

“My purpose was . . to send a signal that the U.S. was prepared to replace animosity between the U.S. and Iran with a new relationship. At the same time . . we made clear that Iran must oppose all forms of terrorism as a condition of our relationship. The most significant step which Iran could take, we indicated, would be to use its influence in Lebanon to secure the release of all hostages.”

21-25 Nov 1986: The scandal was compounded when Oliver North destroyed (shredded) or hid pertinent documents on the Iran-Contra Operations.
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Problems with Reagan’s Containment Policy Arise

25 Nov 1986: U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese admitted that profits from weapons sales to Iran were used to assist Contra Rebels

   John Poindexter resigned

Oliver North was dismissed

6 May 1787: William Casey had a stroke and eventually died on the day that Congressional Hearings on the Iran-Contra Affair began
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Investigation of Reagan’s Containment Policy


Former Senator John Tower was appointed to head the Commission.

Feb 1987: The Tower Report criticized the actions of Oliver North, John Poindexter, and others.

It also criticized Reagan for not properly supervising his subordinates and being aware of their actions, but it did not find that he was directly involved.
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Investigation of Reagan’s Containment Policy

July 1987: Oliver North was summoned to testify before the Congressional Committee on the Iran-Contra Affair

He admitted shredding and altering documents at the direction of both R. McFarlane & J. Poindexter

1988-1989: North was tried on 16 Felony counts and eventually found guilty of three

In 1990: North’s convictions were vacated by a Court of Appeals
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The Legacy of the Iran-Contra Scandal

John Poindexter and other key White House Officials were found guilty of perjury, obstruction of justice, and contempt of Congress. They were eventually pardoned by President George H. W. Bush.

Although the Tower Report weakened the power of the White House initially, many Americans saw the men involved as heroes working in the best interests for the nation’s future.

President Reagan’s willingness to take responsibility for the event seemed to satisfy the American public as his popularity recovered prior to the end of his term.