

Government Coverups: The Iran-Contra Affair

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

This episode is the result of learning from my mistakes. The insomniacs voted for “government coverups” as the topic this week, so I immediately began listing out a bunch of classic examples that I wanted to research and my younger, dumber podcast-hosting self would’ve stubbornly tried to include them all. Like even when the research for the first one on my list ballooned into a full episode’s worth of notes, I still would’ve tried to cram in everything else and it would’ve turned into another hour-and-a-half long marathon like the “killer beasts” fiasco. But I am much older and wiser now—that Killer Beasts episode was like three weeks ago...podcasting weeks are like dog years, I think we’ve been doing this show for about two decades, right?—but anyway, you’re sick and I’m busy, no one’s got time for a 90-minute episode today. I have two shows tonight in Sunnyvale so we’re got to try to keep this recording session somewhat reasonable. We’ll probably fail, we are all about the

tangents lately, but it will be an honest attempt. So all of this is to say that this will not be the last entry in the government coverups series, but today we're sticking with *one*, and it is possibly the most famous example of a government cover-up of all time: the Iran contra affair.

This is the granddaddy of government scandals and attempted coverups. And by the way, we can only report on *attempted* coverups. Obviously the greatest examples of government deception would be the ones that were successfully covered up—and by definition we don't know about those. So while this episode is going to make the government look bumbling and incompetent AF, let's remember that for every botched coverup by our shady ass government there are dozens more that they probably got away with. The conspiracy theorist inside me wants to believe that some of the scandals that we know about were actually just diversions to keep us from learning the really bad stuff. That is definitely not true except for those times when it totally might be true. But probably not this time. But maybe.

So the extremely complicated, completely botched and embarrassingly boneheaded scandal that was the Iran/Contra affair directly involved at least four countries along with multiple facets of the American government, and it resulted in a dizzying quagmire of conflicting accusations and excuses and I'd be

willing to bet that 99% of Americans couldn't give you even a sketchy overview of these highly publicized events if asked. Even the Americans that lived through them. This was a complicated web to untangle. But the fundamental details of the scandal were relatively simple: The Reagan administration sold weapons to Iran in exchange for money and also the release of some hostages (even though doing business with Iran and negotiating with terrorists were both explicitly illegal activities) and then the administration diverted some of the money that they had earned from the weapon-sale and used it to fund a bunch of terrorists in Nicaragua called the contras that were battling against the communist Sandinista government, even though providing arms to the contras was also highly illegal...I guess it's still kind of complicated even in the simplest possible terms, but I'll parse it all out. Notice I've implicated the Reagan *administration* rather than President Reagan himself, because no one was ever able to prove that Reagan was aware of the worst of the wrongdoing, even though—as we will see—the idea that he was completely innocent and had no idea that all of this was going on is so unlikely as to be unimaginable. But I guess take your pick, he was either spectacularly stupid and incompetent or a criminal. You choose. Honestly I think it was a little of both but you can decide for yourself.

So here are some undisputed facts,

and then we'll get into the controversial stuff.

President Ronald Reagan as many of you will know, had been a Hollywood actor, and in a bit of career foreshadowing had served as President of the Screen Actor's Guild during the infamous Blacklist era. This was Hollywood's version of McCarthyism aka the red scare, when the movie-going public had been whipped into a frenzy over the possibility that communists were infiltrating the silver screen. I don't know about you but I cannot enjoy a film if there's a possibility that any of those bleeding-heart liberal actors believes that workers should control the means of production. I won't even buy popcorn unless I'm confident that the profits are going directly to a bloodless corporation and not being distributed equally among the staff. The guy who sold me snacks better not be making a living wage, dammit. I kid...in all seriousness, communism is trash. We've covered this. I'm a fan of communism conceptually, but in practice and on large scale it is a disaster. However I don't hate communism the way Reagan did. He acted like communism personally slapped his wife. It seemed personal. He loathed and reviled Marxism, and as far as I can tell his reasons mostly boiled down to a few very specific beefs with communist philosophy. First, Reagan was very religious, and classic Marxist communism: less so. In fact, you might say that traditional

communism is virulently anti-religion. You'll probably remember that Karl Marx famously referred to religion as the opiate of the masses. It turns out *fentanyl* is actually the opiate of the masses, and it's way worse...I mean not if you compare them historically I guess, religion is still the ultimate champ when it comes to death tolls. At least there's Narcan for someone who ODs on drugs; there's no nasal spray that will save you if you get blown up by a suicide bomber. But as a result of Reagan's Christian upbringing he viewed the spread of communism as an existential threat to his religion. And of course politically Reagan would come to identify as a staunch right-wing conservative. Though interestingly, he was initially a democrat, until he started making some serious money. Weird. Probably a coincidence. Speaking of which, and this is also reason number three that Reagan opposed communism: the man became fabulously rich; he had always been extremely photogenic and also extremely caucasian and had benefitted from an entertainment industry that has traditionally rewarded those two characteristics. For Reagan personally, capitalism had worked out quite well and he wasn't enthusiastic about any economic model that threatened his comfortable status quo.

Not only did Reagan support the blacklist, he was one of the few Hollywood figures to testify at the House un-American Activities Committee hearings, alongside Walt

Disney. While more-established stars like Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, and Gene Kelly signed a petition denouncing the communist witch-hunt, Reagan went a different route, lending his at-the-time very minor celebrity status to the cause of ratting out his coworkers. TBF, he didn't name names publicly...as reported by the LA Times in 1985, "President Reagan and his then-wife, actress Jane Wyman, during the 1940s provided the FBI with *confidential* information on suspected communist activities of their Hollywood colleagues." So he wasn't a brazen snitch; he had enough of a sense of self-preservation to snitch in private like a sneaky coward. So the point of all of this biographical info is to explain why Reagan would make a series of fateful decisions that in retrospect seem pointless, dangerous, and were clearly illegal: The man was a zealot. He didn't get into politics because he had always wanted to be a public servant; he wasn't scholarly nor educated nor particularly intelligent; he was just a telegenic actor with solid people skills who was obsessed with a singular cause. He was a hater, and a fearer, and what he hated and feared was communism. And of course he also hated and feared anyone who didn't hate and fear communism as much as he did.

So Reagan dipped his toes into politics in 1967 by becoming the 33rd governor of California, providing hope and inspiration to Americans all across the country who are completely unqualified for their jobs. I think it

would would be fair to say that Reagan's election to the post of governor in 1967 and his eventual presidency paved the way for a rogues gallery of wrestlers and movie stars and batshit crazy randos like Marjorie Taylor Greene to enter politics—because why the hell not, apparently anyone can do it—and would eventually culminate in the election of one particular reality TV star who shall not be named. It's Donald Trump. But Reagan was stymied in his political ambitions when in 1976 he competed to be the Republican presidential nominee but lost to incumbent Gerald ford, who himself would go on to lose the presidency to jimmy carter. It's like a human centipede of losing. In 1980, Regan ran again, this time winning the nomination and beating carter by a wide margin, triumphing in 44 of 50 states. That's...decisive. In his 1984 reelection he would win 49 of 50 states. How pissed off was he at Minnesota. That's a Seinfeldian Newman moment. *MINNESOTA*. Actually, the only reason he lost Minnesota was because it was his opponent Walter Mondale's home state, so I guess they were just voting for the local boy, but still, you gotta respect those Minnesotans for not succumbing to peer pressure. Big props to the Gopher State. That's one of minnesota's official nicknames, incidentally. We have the California Golden bear, they have large, burrowing rodents. I'm not saying that we are obviously better in every way, I'm just stating some facts here. We

love you Minnesota. You frigid bastards. So now that he was president, Regan believed he had been chosen by God to protect America, and he was finally in a position to confront the communist menace head on. He dedicated his time in office to stomping out Marxism around the globe. One part of the globe in which he was particularly focused on stomping was central America, because in Nicaragua, the Sandanista National Liberation Front had recently ousted the US-backed Samoza dictatorship. For over forty years the corrupt Samoza family had been consolidating power, and by the 1970s their wealth equaled almost 1/3 of Nicaragua's GDP and they personally owned almost a quarter of the country's land. This was like a feudal lords-and-serfs scenario. Even when members of the family weren't directly in power due to term limits they still controlled the government through puppet regimes. As you can imagine they were not particularly beloved in their home country, but guess who did beloved them? That's right, the good old U S of A. Because hey, at least they weren't filthy communists. Also, "Samoza" sounds like a delicious Latin pastry. I said we would try to minimize the tangents. Minimization fail.

So the course of history in Nicaragua changed in 1972 when a massive earthquake rocked the capital city of Managua, killing over 10,000 people and bringing an influx of foreign aid, which the Samoza family was more than happy to pocket for their own

benefit. Their exploitation of the crisis was so severe that even wealthy Nicaraguan party-elites began to reevaluate their support for the US backed government. Enter the Sandonistas. Originally a loose affiliation of Marxist students and revolutionaries founded in the 1960s, the Sandinistas had been waiting for an opportunity to rise up against the Samozas, and they recognized the fallout from the earthquake as their big moment. It was all very Eminem "lose yourself." A Mom's spaghetti situation. They began actively organizing and recruiting and raising capital, and eventually initiating military clashes. The Samosa regime reacted by essentially declaring martial law and cracking down on the press. So you know, a reasonable and evenhanded response calculated to engender goodwill among the population, with no potential for backlash. Normally the samozas knew that they could simply turn to the United States to help them quell any rebellion, but at this point Jimmy Carter was president of United States and his administration had begun insisting on human rights reforms as a condition of any financial support. The Samozas didn't have much of a choice, and eased up on censorship of the press. Which was great timing for the Sandinistas, who leveraged these additional freedoms to rev up their organizing and recruitment. After multiple clashes and skirmishes, the Sandinistas would finally take control of the country in February of 1979.

Meanwhile, America was experiencing its own political realignment. As we've covered, Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, representing a massive shift from the liberal Carter administration. So the Sandinistas were coming to power just as the United States was electing an administration that was extremely hostile to their cause.

Ronald Reagan wanted to undermine the Sandinista government, and his strategy was to send funding and arms to their sworn enemies, a group called the contras. The name "Contra" stood for Counterrevolutionaries and referred to a dispersed, ragtag group of butthurt supporters of the Somoza regime who were unthrilled by the new political leadership. They would eventually dub themselves the Nicaraguan resistance, essentially adopting the role of underdog revolutionaries...basically they took on the role that had previously been played by the Sandonistas. It's funny how any group that is fighting against the government can be described as scrappy revolutionaries battling for freedom, or cold-blooded terrorists, depending on who is doing the describing. Also, it's easy to claim that you're fighting for the benefit of the *people* when you have nothing to lose; every revolutionary group promises to implement a utopia that will benefit all citizens, but it's a lot tougher to stick to your vow to redistribute the wealth when the wealth that is going to be redistributed is now in your bank account. I'm not saying that the Contras were comparable to the

Sandinistas; sincerely fuck those guys; I'm just saying that I'm suspicious of any group that promises prosperity for all, because there has yet to be a government that could actually deliver. However, I do prefer to support political groups that at least delusionally believe in the unobtainable goals that they're fighting for, and the Sandonistas seem to have been true believers, while the Contras just wanted their shiny stuff back. There is certainly no disputing the fact that the Contras were ruthless; they used classic terrorist tactics like kidnapping and murder and burning of villages. They had zero chill. I would describe them as vicious hooligans, because I am 76 years old, but to Reagan they were very *useful* vicious hooligans. The Reagan administration began funding the hell out of those helpful terrorists, and didn't stop even when it became clear that the contras were smuggling cocaine into the United States, fueling the crack epidemic in inner cities. There have been allegations that the government actually facilitated drug smuggling in order to lock up African Americans, and this is something I would not find hard to believe but I have found hard to prove. There just isn't any concrete evidence that this ever happened, despite the persistent urban legends. However, the Reagan administration did specifically advise its covert agents to turn a blind eye to drug trafficking by the Contras, even though this was during the height of Nancy Reagan's "just say no" anti-

drug campaign. Just a little mild hypocrisy, nothing to see here. So for the first couple years of his presidency Reagan's strategy worked just fine, but in 1982 he suddenly faced a problem. The Democrats swept the midterms and took control of Congress, and this changing of the political guard coincided with the American press uncovering evidence of shady dealings between the United States government and the contras and it all erupted into a firestorm of controversy that culminated in the passage of the Boland Amendment, a unanimous congressional resolution forbidding the American government from sending aid to the contras. When the Reagan administration took advantage of loopholes in the amendment to continue funding the Contras, Congress took it personally, and they quickly passed two more loophole-closing amendments just to make their intentions crystal clear. Reagan signed the Boland amendment into law, he didn't even attempt a veto and now we know why: he wasn't worried about congressional oversight because he planned to ignore it entirely.

So at first the Reagan administration resorted to soliciting private donations for the contras, because if you can't use official taxpayer money, just start a go fund me. It was pretty successful, Saudi Arabia donated a ton of money, lots of prominent rich Republicans donated as well just to get on Reagan's good side. The contras soon had like \$30 million but in reality these

supposed freedom fighters were a bunch of fumbling amateurs who had no idea how to stage a revolution. And this was before the Internet so there weren't any discord servers and telegram channels and dark web communities where you could connect with shady arms dealers in other countries, this was a time when you basically just had to...I don't know, use classified advertisements in newspapers? "tall, dark, handsome revolutionary seeks rocket launcher. Will provide crack cocaine." so even though the Contras were flush with cash, they were also getting their asses whupped because they sucked at life and had no reliable source of weapons. And Reagan was in a bind because he had been able to set up the primitive version of a go-fund-me for cash, but it's pretty tough to set up a go-fund-me for weapons of mass destruction.

The solution that the Reagan administration came up with was to quietly put the contras in touch with shady foreign arms dealers, resulting in weapon transactions facilitated by a sleazy ex CIA operative named Richard Secord, and then the administration set up shell corporations and money laundering organizations to hide the money trail. This operation would be dubbed "The enterprise" and frankly I resent the Reagan administration for dragging Star Trek into this. How dare you, sirs. I don't even watch Star Trek but just on general principle, solidarity with my nerdy sci-fi brethren. The operation known as The Enterprise

was obviously not ok from a moral standpoint and was extremely shady but what it was not was provably illegal. This was a *violating the spirit of the law and not the letter of law* situation.

However, throwing money and even weapons at the contras wasn't going to accomplish any of their goals because money and missiles are pointless if they aren't being utilized effectively. The contras didn't just need financial and military support, they needed tactical training and lessons in fiscal responsibility. They need it home-ec, basically. As far as I can tell these were some of the most bumbling, incompetent, incredibly well-funded idiots you could imagine. I picture them like the keystone cops of terrorists, riding around hanging out of jeeps with hundred dollar bills flying out of their pockets, accidentally shooting each other in the ass, it was a mess. Nothing was going according to plan, and so at this point the Reagan administration just decided screw it, we're going all in, we're going to literally take control of the money, we're going to handle the transactions, transport the weapons, and air drop them to your soldiers. Basically spoon-feeding them missiles. It's like my mama always said, if you want an armed insurgency done right, you need to do it yourself. Enter Oliver north, the decorated Vietnam veteran and member of Reagan's national security council who would become the face of the Iran contra scandal. I remember vaguely some snippets of

Ollie North testifying, it was a big deal. Oliver North is the kind of square jawed, red blooded douchebag who only cares about the military chain of command, and his testimony would basically boil down to a giant middle finger. He essentially said, "I knew I was breaking the law, I chose to break the law, I don't feel bad about breaking the law, and on a related note, suck it." And the American public absolutely ate it up, they adored him, because wow, what an honest and forthright and brave and handsome traitor he was. As we will soon see, Oliver North would spearhead the diversion of funds from Iran to Nicaragua, and as a result of his thoroughly despicable actions would become a beloved celebrity who is still celebrated fondly by many Americans today, and in 2017 was appointed head of the national rifle association. Let that sink in. A guy who illegally facilitated weapons sales to terrorists was elected head of America's premier gun lobby. His reign over the NRA didn't last long because of drama and internal squabbling, but still. What a country.

So now you have the Regan Administration illegally arming the contras, but that apparently wasn't evil enough, so they decided to also vilify the Sandinistas. they launched a disinformation and smear campaign that involved using known drug traffickers to set up sting operations with the goal of catching Sandinista officials smuggling drugs...or a better term for this operation might be "framing" or "entrapment" rather than

catching. And let me remind you that this is the same period of time during which the Reagan administration was intentionally ignoring the drug trafficking of the contras. A veteran drug-smuggler-turned-informant named Barry Seal eventually produced one single blurry photo that supposedly depicted a Sandonista official helping load cocaine into HIS plane—a plane supplied by the Americans—and Reagan personally trumpeted this photo all over the news, despite the fact that the DEA denied that there was any evidence that the Sandinista government was involved with narcotics trafficking. So now you had the Reagan administration involved in illegal arms trading while simultaneously attempting to frame the government of a sovereign nation for drug smuggling, all while intentionally turning a blind eye to actual drug trafficking into America. Just a standard Tuesday for the American government. The Reagan administration also began accusing journalists who seemed sympathetic to the Sandonistas of being bribed with sex workers. So if you were a journalist writing stories about Nicaragua that didn't tow the party line, you were a whore mongering terrorist and you hated America. It's a good thing we had an upstanding Christian in the White House.

So we have laid the groundwork for the Contra piece of the Iran contra scandal, but for the other piece of the

puzzle we have to travel all the way to the opposite side of the world. (do any puzzles have only two pieces? That's a crappy puzzle, honestly. This is for the puzzle novice. It doesn't take long to solve. This is one of those wooden jigsaw puzzles, it's a yin yang symbol, you snap it together.)

So you will be shocked to learn that in the 1980s there were multiple wars raging in the Middle East. Two conflicts in particular pertain to this story: the war between Iraq and Iran and the civil war in Lebanon. Let's begin with Iraq-Iran war; the source of the conflict was the fact that the names of the two countries are only separated by a single letter...Iraq had demanded that Iran add at least a couple vowels to distinguish the two nations... no, the war was the result of a much more valid dispute: the inability of the two countries to agree on tiny insignificant religious details. So, for some backstory, America had been the number one arms supplier to Iran until the late 1970s. When the American-backed Shah of Iran was overthrown by revolutionaries in 1979, America was extremely miffed. We were like hey, why does this keep happening, all of you foreign countries are supposed to be cool with the leaders we chose for you, maybe stop overthrowing our puppet dictators, it's very inconvenient. Relations between America and Iran had degraded even further when Iranian revolutionaries seized 7 American hostages in 1979, during the Carter administration.

Jimmy carter made a tactical error by

attempting to re-kidnap the kidnapped Americans and it ended disastrously with the death of eight service members and an Iranian civilian. This was the doomed operation eagle claw...and I really think if an operation fails we should retroactively rename it to something less badass. Operation hasty ineptitude. Operation Doh! This was one of the first operations ever carried out by the famous Delta force, and its members probably don't bring that up very often. It's not in any of the recruiting flyers. I promised fewer tangents, but I think it's worth a quick detour to explain the absolute clusterfuck that was operation eagle claw. The rescue mission involved eight helicopters, one of which was immediately caught in a sandstorm, another suffered a broken rotor blade, and a third experienced hydraulic issues. President Carter aborted the mission, but during the retreat, one of the helicopters crashed into a transport aircraft. Both of the aircraft were lost and eight service members perished, plus an innocent civilian. Delta force managed to be thoroughly defeated without discharging a single weapon. This was like the emu war except instead of large flightless birds we were beaten by faulty equipment and sand. The debacle has been credited with ending Carter's presidency. There's no way to know if he would still have lost to Reagan in 1980 had things that turned out differently with eagle claw, but an embarrassing public failure right before the election certainly didn't

help. So in the wake of the Iranian revolution and all of the hostage-taking, Iran collectively became nation-non-grata to the US. and Carter implemented a zero-trade policy. Which meant Iran was stuck with an arsenal of American weapons that they could no longer service or get parts for. This would become a much bigger problem when Iraq attacked Iran to kick off the aforementioned Iraq/Iran war in 1980; Iran desperately needed weapons and parts and had to figure out a way to get them. America's response was to launch operation staunch, an all out propaganda campaign to convince the nations of the world not to deal arms to Iran. This would end up being a not-so-great good look later down the line when it became clear that the United States had been secretly supplying arms to Iran while lecturing the entire world on the dangers of arming Iran. Again, another example of an operation doh! During the Iraq/Iran war, America's stated policy was to support Iraq, and the American government was providing Iraqis with funding and Intel, but privately they began trying to shore up damaged relations with Iran. This was in part because we didn't want Iran getting too cozy with the Soviet union, and also because Iran had a nasty habit of kidnapping Americans and making presidents look bad.

So now you've got the Iraq/Iran war in full swing, and meanwhile up in Lebanon there's been a bloody conflict for the last five years between various

religious and ethnic factions, including the Islamic terrorist organization known as Hezbollah. Hezbollah consists of Shia Muslims, and as a result has close ties to the country of Iran, which is a majority Shia nation (as opposed to Iraq which is majority Sunni and now you understand the basis of the Iraq/Iran war, again: petty religious squabbling. I'm going to refer to every bloody religious war as a squabble just because it makes me feel better to mock and minimize pointless carnage. It's fine if you're religious and you want to feud with some other religion, that's your prerogative, and it's my prerogative to shame and mock you relentlessly. Take that, religion. You've been told off by a reasonably successful podcast.

So during the first years of Reagan's presidency Hezbollah took another 7 hostages...I don't know why the seven is the magic hostage number, maybe switch it up for kicks, Hezbollah, take a bonus hostage just for the hell of it. Don't actually do that. Now Reagan wasn't stupid, or at least he was smart enough to have learned from Carter's mistake. Rather than attempt to use the military to free the hostages, he began looking for less risky methods of securing their release. The problem was that Reagan had campaigned as a tough-talking American cowboy with a grandfatherly vibe, his public persona was like if John Wayne wasn't a dick, and that meant Reagan could not appear to go easy on terrorists. He had repeatedly insisted that his administration would *never* negotiate

with terrorists. And by "never" he meant secretly and sneakily. He left out the words "admit to"; I think he meant to say we will never *admit to* negotiating with terrorists.

The workaround he devised initially was to use Israel as a hostage-negotiating intermediary. Israel had plenty of experience when it came to negotiating with hostile neighbors, and in this case it seemed like a win-win. If Israel negotiated on America's behalf Reagan gained plausible deniability, and meanwhile Israel had a vested interest in keeping both sides of the conflict well armed, because two Muslim countries battling it out took the focus off of Israel and left their enemies weaker in the long run.

It was also a win-win for Iran, because they knew that America had been supplying financial, logistical, and tactical support to Iraq, so for them this seemed like a chance to level the playing field. They were like listen America, we know you're arming Saddam Hussein and that seems like a really great idea with no future downside, so why not also provide weapons to another country that believes America is a diseased cesspool of infidels that should be wiped off the map? These are sensible decisions.

The man who would end up brokering this deal was the shadiest of shady characters, a guy named Manucher Ghorbanifar, a double agent variously working for Israel and Iran who seems to have been solely preoccupied with his own best interest. He had a history

of planting fake stories with news organizations to inflame tensions between nations, he was not a good guy; Ghorbanifar is the only figure in the story about whom no one seems to have conflicting opinions, Oliver North called him "a liar," Reagan called him "a devious character," national security advisor Robert MacFarlane called him "one of the most despicable characters I have ever met." And then they all gave him money, it's almost as if you're all revealing that you are terrible judges of character.

So I had always wondered how selling arms to Iran was supposed to get the Lebanese to release American hostages, I mentioned that Hezbollah is a Shia organization with close ties to Iran, but it's a stretch to assume that selling arms to one country is going to guarantee that a radical faction of another country will do what you want. It seems that America was relying in particular on a powerful Iranian government official named Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was viewed as moderate and potentially sympathetic to the United States. This would turn out to be a miscalculation. That could be the tagline for this entire episode.

The first missile shipments reached Iran in August of 1985, followed by another shipment the following month. After the second delivery, a single hostage was released: Reverend Benjamin Weir. Feeling encouraged that everything was going according to plan, Oliver north engineered

another arms delivery consisting of 18 Hawk anti-aircraft missiles.

On December 4, 1985 national security advisor Robert "Bud" MacFarlane resigned. The official reason was that he wanted to spend more time with his family, but behind the scenes he had become disillusioned with the direction the Reagan administration was moving in the Iran contra affair. Even though McFarlane had initially been an advocate and one of the architects of the early versions of the strategy, he had later tried to dissuade his colleagues from working with Manucher Ghorbanifar but was unsuccessful. He would eventually attempt suicide when the truth came to light, but would survive and receive a full pardon.

He was quickly replaced by John Poindexter, and if you've heard that name before it's because this guy was probably the second most famous character in the Iran contra saga. He would give the green light to pretty much every shady dealing that was proposed. Now around this time Oliver North was cruising around the world trying to drum up more funds for the contras, at one point traveling to Europe under the alias William P Good. L Will P Good. Genius. Were they even taking this seriously? Did he travel to Nicaragua as I.P. Freely? When you've reached the wink-wink nudge nudge, rimshot level of aliases, there's no more hope of success. I think it's worth noting that this entire fiasco is

populated with idiots. Another example: at one point, Oliver North had succeeded in securing funds from the sultan of Brunei, but his secretary transposed the wrong account number of North's Swiss bank account and a random swiss dude suddenly found himself \$10 million richer. That secretary will reappear later in the story, btw. It was around this time that sneaky snake Manucher Ghorbanifar gave Oliver North the idea of inflating the prices of Iranian weapons and diverting funds to the Contras. So North added 15 million to the price tag and Ghorbanifar added a 41% markup to line his own pockets. Those weapons just got a lot more pricey. The Iranians initially balked but faced with a lack of other options, they eventually caved and more shipments were sent, with the extra funds going directly to Nicaragua. In late 1986 one more hostage was released...which coincided with Hezbollah kidnapping three additional hostages. Oops. So now the entire operation has resulted in a net total of minus-1 hostage. The entire ridiculous house of cards would come crashing down in 1987—sort of literally—as the result of two events. One, a plane carrying weapons for the contras was shot down over Nicaragua—that's the "crash" I was referring to—and the captured pilot immediately sang like a bird. This was Eugene Hasenfus, and he is quite a character. The guy was the only survivor of a three person crew, he jumped out of the plane and parachuted to safety, but was later

captured in the jungle while using his parachute as a hammock. This dude gave zero F's about patriotism or loyalty, he implicated pretty much everyone and spilled his guts with very little prompting. He would be released by the Nicaraguans and return to America only to be repeatedly locked up in the early 2000s for indecent exposure. He ended up in the Green Bay correctional institution after violating his parole after he exposed himself in a Walmart parking lot in 2005. In an amazing little random coincidence, he would be released from Green Bay prison on the 19th anniversary of the date that he was released by the Nicaraguans. What an adorable little twist of fate. It's kismet. I don't regret this tangent one bit. That is good stuff. I am unrepentant.

Simultaneously, on the other side of the world, a member of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard named Mehdi Hashemi, who was morally opposed to his government negotiating with Israel and the United States, exposed the entire scheme to a Lebanese news magazine. The press had an absolute field day as both of these stories broke within a three week stretch; this was a good month to be a journalist.

With pressure ramping up, Oliver North went into ass-covering mode. In November 1986 he and his secretary Fawn Hall—remember her?—collaborated on the famous “shredding party” in which they spent an entire day destroying documents to the point that they actually clogged the

shredding machine. Fawn Hall later testified that she had also been instructed to smuggle classified documents out of the office by stuffing them in her dress and boots. I didn't look up any pictures of her so I'm not sure how she got away with this, maybe she was already kind of lumpy to begin with? I don't know how you smuggle documents in your dress. Maybe she taped them flat to her stomach or something? Anyway, these are definitely the actions of innocent people who feel they have done nothing wrong. During that same week according to Oliver North's later testimony, Poindexter destroyed the only signed copy of a presidential authorization for an arms shipment to Iran that could have proved Reagan's involvement.

Speaking of the president, as the press dug up more and more incriminating information, Reagan had to act quickly to save his own butt. Poindexter was promptly forced to resign, and Oliver North was terminated. Reagan then created a three person "special review board" to investigate any wrongdoing. You heard that correctly. Reagan created a commission to investigate the Reagan administration. All three members of the so-called Tower commission were appointed by Reagan himself. And wouldn't you know it, it turns out that Ronald Reagan was completely innocent! The only blame pointed at Reagan was that he hadn't sufficiently controlled his rogue staff, he hadn't paid enough attention to the

shenanigans in which they were involved. Because obviously if he had known that his lackeys were supporting the contras in all of the ways that Reagan had publicly stated he wanted them to he would've been livid and put a stop to that nonsense immediately.

In early 1987 Congress began an inquiry into the scandal. Thanks to Oliver North's paper-shredding party and Poindexter's evidence-destruction, Congress wasn't able to directly implicate the president, instead writing, "if the president did not know what his National security advisers were doing, he should have." That's the Congressional equivalent of a sick burn. "You really should've known better. That's right, I said it." I said good day!" Your mother smells of elderberries.

Faced with increasing pressure, Reagan finally made a public statement on march 4 of 1987. PLAY CLIP

That is my favorite way to admit guilt. "A few months ago I told the police that I did not strangle my wife. My heart and my best intentions tell me that's true. However, the evidence appears to indicate that my wife was indeed strangled by someone who is me. I was not aware of the strangling while it was going on, and I promise that I will try to pay more attention in the future because I do feel really bad about this whole wife strangling situation. Also, I should definitely be allowed to have more power than any other human on planet earth."

So Oliver North's televised testimony transfixed America. He was unrepentant and defiant, and when asked why he flouted the law and shredded documents and concealed information from the American public he said, "you can't handle the truth." no, what he actually said was "Americans are a bunch of pansy ass weaklings who need to be protected by big strong guys like me and you should be kissing my boots you goddamn commie sympathizing libtards." I'm paraphrasing here. And America loved it. We are nothing if not gluttons for punishment, as long as the person dispensing the punishment is good looking and authoritative and confident. It's an abusive BDSM relationship, there's no Safe Word. North didn't pull any punches, and I have to say that to his credit he threw Reagan under the bus immediately saying "Ronald Reagan knew of and approved a great deal of what went on with both the Iranian initiative and private efforts on behalf of the contras and he received regular, detailed briefings on both...I have no doubt that he was told about the use of residuals for the Contras, and that he approved it. Enthusiastically." Oh snap. While Oliver North became an instant celebrity, Reagan's popularity dropped for a brief time, and then quickly recovered. He ended the final term of his presidency with overwhelming support and unprecedented popularity.

Before we finish up here, let's look at

the fallout for the rest of the key figures of the Iran contra affair. Robert MacFarlane, who had attempted suicide after his misdeeds were exposed, was sentenced to two years of probation and later pardoned by Reagan's successor, George W. Bush, who had been vice president under Reagan and was absolutely part of the Iran contra cover-up. Bush was never charged or convicted of anything, and he denied any involvement or even knowledge of the operation, but his diary would beg to differ. "On the news at this time is the question of the hostages... I'm one of the few people that know fully the details, and there is a lot of flak and misinformation out there. It is not a subject we can talk about..." By which he obviously meant that he had no knowledge of the operation and was completely innocent.

Oliver North was indicted on 16 charges and convicted of three; all three convictions were promptly overturned on a technicality, because some of the evidence used against him was apparently protected by his assertion of the fifth amendment.

Fawn Hall, the document-shredding and boot-stuffing secretary was given complete immunity for her cooperation. That's the only part that feels fair. I doubt it was her idea to stuff a bunch of papers up her dress. I'm pretty sure she wasn't calling any of the shots here. I'm surprised they didn't try to blame everything on *her*,

actually. It's usually the lowest person on the totem pole. "we have thoroughly and investigated ourselves and found that president Reagan specifically instructed his administration to cease all contact with the Iranians but Oliver North's secretary immediately opened back channel communications with Hezbollah and secured the delivery of rocket launchers and hawk missiles. She is absolutely diabolical, Your Honor. In fact we're pretty sure she personally smuggled all of the missiles in her boots and underwear."

John Poindexter ended up being the primary fall guy; every scandal needs a patsy. he was convicted on five counts including defrauding the government, conspiracy, perjury, and destruction of evidence. The convictions were all overturned for the exact same reason as Oliver North. And by the way, hot take incoming, I think the fifth amendment is bullshit. "I choose not to answer questions because telling the truth might get me in trouble" is not a valid defense, try that one on your parents.

The only participant who did any jail time was a guy named Thomas G Clines, who had earned about \$800,000 assisting Richard Secord in the Enterprise Operation and failed to disclose the full amount of his profits. And yeah, that's the real crime here. You can break the law and defy Congress and deceive the American people, but don't lie to the IRS. He

spent 16 months in jail basically for tax evasion. So, Justice served!

Secretary of defense Caspar Weinberger had charges pending throughout the four years of George Bush's presidency. After Bush was defeated by Bill Clinton, however, during the lame duck session before Clinton took office, Bush went ahead and pardoned pretty much everyone involved in the scandal including Weinberger, erasing even the mild hand slaps that had been doled out, like MacFarlane's probation etc. Upon learning of the pardons, independent counsel Lauren Walsh, who had headed up the Iran Contra investigation, quipped bitterly, "the Iran contra cover up, which has continued for more than six years, has now been completed."

So, another happy ending. you're welcome.

We have new minions!

Meet Maddi Crees, from Australia I think. I might be completely bundling that name so I apologize in advance. Or in retrospect. Whatever.

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