The Vice President’s Men

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<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n02/seymour-m-hersh/the-vice-presidents-men?fbclid=IwAR1XYjnUKRjPGXIALY91Tmm69UhTp1gV75wPj3AeXaLT4C6FNzwiIf2cm80>

When George H.W. Bush arrived in Washington as vice president in January 1981 he seemed little more than a sideshow to Ronald Reagan, the one-time leading man who had been overwhelmingly elected to the greatest stage in the world. Biography after inconclusive biography would be written about Reagan’s two terms, as their authors tried to square the many gaps in his knowledge with his seemingly acute political instincts and the ease with which he appeared to handle the presidency. Bush was invariably written off as a cautious politician who followed the lead of his glamorous boss – perhaps because he assumed that his reward would be a clear shot at the presidency in 1988. He would be the first former CIA director to make it to the top.

There was another view of Bush: the one held by the military men and civilian professionals who worked for him on national security issues. Unlike the president, he knew what was going on and how to get things done. For them, Reagan was ‘a dimwit’ who didn’t get it, or even try to get it. A former senior official of the Office of Management and Budget described the president to me as ‘lazy, just lazy’. Reagan, the official explained, insisted on being presented with a three-line summary of significant budget decisions, and the OMB concluded that the easiest way to cope was to present him with three figures – one very high, one very low and one in the middle, which Reagan invariably signed off on. I was later told that the process was known inside the White House as the ‘Goldilocks option’. He was also bored by complicated intelligence estimates. Forever courteous and gracious, he would doodle during national security briefings or simply not listen. It would have been natural to turn instead to the director of the CIA, but this was William Casey, a former businessman and Nixon aide who had been controversially appointed by Reagan as the reward for managing his 1980 election campaign. As the intelligence professionals working with the executive saw it, Casey was reckless, uninformed, and said far too much to the press.

Bush was different: he got it. At his direction, a team of military operatives was set up that bypassed the national security establishment – including the CIA – and wasn’t answerable to congressional oversight. It was led by Vice-Admiral Arthur Moreau, a brilliant navy officer who would be known to those on the inside as ‘M’. He had most recently been involved, as deputy chief of naval operations, in developing the US’s new maritime strategy, aimed at restricting Soviet freedom of movement. In May 1983 he was promoted to assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Vessey, and over the next couple of years he oversaw a secret team – operating in part out of the office of Daniel Murphy, Bush’s chief of staff – which quietly conducted at least 35 covert operations against drug trafficking, terrorism and, most important, perceived Soviet expansionism in more than twenty countries, including Peru, Honduras, Guatemala, Brazil, Argentina, Libya, Senegal, Chad, Algeria, Tunisia, the Congo, Kenya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia and Vietnam.

Moreau’s small, off-the-record team, primarily made up of navy officers, was tasked with foreign operations deemed necessary by the vice president. The group’s link to Bush was indirect. There were two go-betweens, known for their closeness to the vice president and their ability to keep secrets: Murphy, a retired admiral who had served as Bush's deputy director at the CIA; and, to a lesser extent, Donald Gregg, Bush’s national security adviser and another veteran of CIA covert operations. Moreau’s team mostly worked out of a room near the National Military Command Centre on the ground floor of the Pentagon. They could also unobtrusively man a desk or two, when necessary, in a corner of Murphy’s office, which was near Bush’s, in the Old Executive Office Building next to the White House.

The Reagan administration had been rattled by a wave of Soviet expansionism and international aggression that had begun before the president took office. In 1979, even before their incursion into Afghanistan, the Soviets had taken over the old airbase at Cam Ranh Bay in the former South Vietnam, which had been extensively rebuilt and updated by the US during its losing war. It was a base heavy with symbolism for the American and British navies – in December 1941, three days after Pearl Harbor, Japanese dive bombers operating from Cam Ranh sank two of Britain’s premier battleships – and the Soviet decision to expand there was seen by some senior admirals as an alarming affront. And a revolutionary increase in America’s capacity to intercept and decode Soviet signal traffic in the year before Reagan came to power led to the discovery by analysts at the National Security Agency of a ring of Soviet sleeper agents inside the United States, many of them working in federal jobs with – the Carter White House feared – access to national security data.

A former military officer who worked closely with Moreau recalled the early tensions that prompted Bush to increase the targeting of Soviet operations. Moreau’s actions were aimed at limiting Soviet influence without provoking a confrontation. ‘We saw the Russians sorting out their internal politics and expanding economically,’ the officer recalled. ‘Its military had become much more competent, with advances in technology, nuclear engineering and in space. They were feeling good about their planned economy and believed that their state control of education from cradle to grave was working, and it seemed as if the Russians were expanding everywhere. We were in descent; our post-Vietnam army was in shambles; morale was at rock bottom, and the American people had an anti-militarist attitude. There was a sense of general weakness, and the Russians were taking advantage of it. They had developed the MIRV’ – the multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle, a missile carrying several nuclear warheads – ‘and were putting ICBMs on wheels and hardening nuclear silos. This was at the time when it became clear that the president was drifting, and was not an effective leader.’



By 1983, it was plain to those who worked on national security for the White House that Reagan wouldn't or couldn't engage with intelligence or counterintelligence matters. Bush had emerged, by default and very much in private, as the most important decision-maker in America's intelligence world. ‘He controlled the strings,’ the officer said. ‘We ran small, limited operations that were discreet, with a military chain of command. These were not long-term programmes. We thought we could redouble our efforts against the Soviets and nobody would interfere. And do it in such a way that no one could see what we were doing – or realise that there was a masterplan. For example, the published stories about our Star Wars programme were replete with misinformation and forced the Russians to expose their sleeper agents inside the American government by ordering them to make a desperate attempt to find out what the US was doing. But we could not risk exposure of the administration’s role and take the chance of another McCarthy period. So there were no prosecutions. We dried up and eliminated their access and left the spies withering on the vine.’ Once identified, the Soviet sleepers who worked inside the federal bureaucracy were gradually dismissed or moved to less important jobs, in the hope that the low-key counterintelligence operation would mask the improvements in the US’s capacity to read sensitive Soviet communications. ‘Nobody on the Joint Chiefs of Staff ever believed we were going to build Star Wars,’ the officer said, ‘but if we could convince the Russians that we could survive a first strike, we win the game.’ The aim of the game was to find a way to change the nuclear status quo of Mutual Assured Destruction, or seem to do so. ‘We wanted the Russians to believe that we had removed the M from MAD.’

In the beginning, the officer told me, ‘there was a great fear that the Russians were ten feet tall. What we found was total incompetence.’ Moreau’s team were amazed to find how easy it was to reverse Soviet influence – often with little more than generous offers of American dollars and American arms. Across the Third World – in countries such as Chad, Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire – the offer of advanced American electronics and communications equipment was also invaluable. ‘The Russians simply were not liked abroad,’ the officer said. ‘They were boors with shoddy clothing and shoes made out of paper. Their weapons were inoperative. It was a Potemkin village. But every time we found total incompetence on the part of a Soviet mission, the American intelligence community would assume that it was Soviet “deception”. The only problem was that it was not deception. We came to realise that the American intelligence community needed the threat from Russia to get their money. Those of us who were running the operations were also amazed that the American press was so incompetent. You could do this kind of stuff all over the world and nobody would ask any questions.’

Congress, and the constitution, were at first no more of an obstacle to Bush and Moreau’s covert operations than the press. The one member of Congress who knew what was going on was Dick Cheney, a close friend and confidant of Bush’s from their days together in the Ford administration. In 1976, in the aftermath of the Church Committee’s inquiry into CIA abuses, standing intelligence committees had been set up in both the Senate and the House, charged with holding the CIA and other intelligence agencies to account. But it was understood by all those involved in the vice president’s secret team that these committees could be bypassed, even though the laws governing covert intelligence activities had been stiffened: there was now a legal requirement that all covert CIA and military intelligence operations had to be made known to the committees through a formal, written document known as a ‘finding’. But there was a big loophole in the legislation, in the view of the vice president’s men. ‘There was no requirement for a finding for merely asking questions,’ the officer said, ‘and so we’d make routine requests for intelligence assessments from the CIA through the Joint Chiefs and the National Security Council. Our basic philosophy was that we were running military’ – not intelligence – ‘operations and therefore did not have to brief Congress. So we could legally operate without a finding.’ He was describing an ingenious procedure for getting around the law: one that would be put into use again after 9/11, when Cheney, by then vice president, triggered the unending war on terror. ‘The issue for Moreau was how do we take advantage of what the CIA has to offer – its people, with their language skills and its networks and assets overseas,’ the officer said. ‘The disadvantage was if we used the CIA in an intelligence context, we had to get a finding. We decided to get around the law by using agency people in what we claimed was a “liaison capacity”.’ The next step was ‘to attach the CIA operators to military units as liaison who were working for Moreau. Casey knew his CIA was being cut out and so he became more active where he could – in Latin America.’ As a precaution, the team prepared written findings when CIA men or information were being made use of – but they were put ‘in a safe’, to be produced only if anyone in Congress found out what was going on.

Moreau was contemptuous of Casey and ‘thought the CIA was a crazy organisation that had no concern about the consequences of its covert actions’, according to the officer. He remembered Moreau telling his subordinates on the secret staff: ‘I’m accountable to the vice president and you motherfuckers are accountable to me. The agency is not accountable to anybody – not the president, not Congress, not the American people. They will do whatever they want to support their mission, which is defined by them.’ Cutting out the CIA leadership – though using their resources where needed, partly through the good offices of Dan Murphy, who had many connections inside the agency – was key to Moreau’s operations. ‘From the beginning our philosophy was no publicity,’ the officer said. Enlisting the agency formally would involve findings, and relying on ‘the CIA’s knuckle-draggers’ – paramilitary units – ‘who were seen as too dumb and too incompetent. But by using only the military we inadvertently laid the groundwork for what we have now – a Joint Special Operations Command essentially out of civilian control.’

One of Moreau’s confidants was Alfred Gray Jr, a marine who rose from enlisted private to general. He was someone who could be trusted to do the dirty jobs that were seen as inevitable in combating the spread of communism in the Third World. By the early 1980s, Gray was a two-star major general commanding a division of the marines; he would be made commandant of the Marine Corps in 1987. If there were people to hurt, he would get it done and leave no footprints. ‘Gray was profane and tough as nails,’ the officer said. ‘He tells us: “I can do that. We’ve got guys who can do stuff.” And the marines are organised, unlike the navy. Whenever there are two marines together, one is senior to the other.’ As the team’s activity stepped up, the officer told me, they began compiling ‘hit lists’. ‘The CIA would provide us with lists of bad guys from the files of the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Justice Department and the National Security Agency, much of it focused on the drug war and anti-communist operations. A lot of it was in Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and of course Nicaragua. We were doing the same thing then that the administration is doing now – only now it’s institutionalised with JSOC. Back then we used the marines and Delta Force, and there was no reason, as today, to say anything to the Joint Chiefs. Moreau’s strategy was to act in advance to pre-empt terrorism. “Why wait for it to take place?”’

Moreau’s activities have remained secret, and, as I learned while reporting on this aspect of history, those who knew of his activities at the time remain sceptical that they can be written about today. ‘I’m aware of what you’re referring to,’ one senior defence official told me. ‘And Art Moreau *was* just like “M”. But you are working in an area that remains highly classified, and even today it may be too sensitive to reveal the rudiments of our intelligence networks. I doubt if any records still exist.’

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Over the course of 1983, Moreau’s team was given a target that would prove much tougher than the Soviets – terrorism in the Middle East. Sixty-three American diplomats, intelligence experts and military personnel, along with civilian employees, were killed when the US embassy in Beirut was bombed in April 1983, and six months later 241 military personnel, most of them marines, were killed in an attack on a barracks at Beirut airport. The US embassy in Kuwait was bombed in December that year, and there was a wave of kidnappings of Westerners – among them William Buckley, the CIA station chief in Beirut, who would die in captivity.

A particular target was Muammar Gaddafi. ‘By 1981 Gaddafi was beginning to get more and more bizarre,’ the officer said. ‘He was making a lot of moves into our hemisphere: selling air-to-surface missiles to Argentina, selling Hind attack helicopters to Nicaragua, supplying aid to Peru, supporting the government in Venezuela, and even dealing with the Popular Front in Palestine. He also closed the Gulf of Sidra to our 6th Fleet. We had to take care of Libya. Gaddafi was a primary military and oil threat, and he became a strategic target.’

An assassination was planned, using Casey’s CIA assets in Libya, the officer said, and because of the CIA’s involvement the administration was required to inform the congressional leadership about aspects of the plan via a highly classified finding. This was promptly leaked by someone in Congress, so Moreau’s team thought, and the operation called off – allegedly. Moreau’s people continued to support the Libyan opposition. In May 1984, the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, an opposition group that would later be clandestinely supported by the CIA, failed in an attempt on Gaddafi’s life. Eight rebels were killed along with eighty government soldiers, according to published reports. Gaddafi responded by executing three members of the Muslim Brotherhood and arresting and torturing thousands of others. One of the Americans involved in the plot was Major-General Richard Secord, who had resigned from the air force in 1983 after being accused of improper dealings with a former CIA officer. Secord, who had a long career in special operations, pleaded guilty in 1989 to a felony count for lying to Congress about his role in the Iran-Contra affair, but never came close to spending a day in jail. His sentence of two years on probation was reversed the following year.

Moreau’s operations were described, indirectly, in *The Reagan Imprint* (2006) by John Arquilla, who teaches in the special operations programme at the United States Naval Postgraduate School. Arquilla wrote about a secret 1984 White House memorandum – NSDD 138 – that authorised ‘sabotage, killing … pre-emptive and retaliatory raids, deception and a significantly expanded [intelligence] collection programme, aimed at suspected radicals and people regarded as their sympathisers’. Arquilla reported that the memorandum (which wasn’t declassified until 2009) triggered intense controversy inside the government, and the directive was never implemented in full. He added that Bush ‘was initially cool to the idea as well, though he eventually warmed to it’.

It seems likely, from the suggestive reference to Bush, that Arquilla knew more than he could write, or wanted to write. The officer remembered the bitter internal dispute over the memorandum, which was promulgated well after Moreau’s team began its activities. ‘The irony was, of course,’ the officer said, ‘that as we racked up some amazing successes, the administration took credit and defence and the agency each thought the other was responsible.’

There were a few hints of Moreau’s real authority in the early Reagan years. A 2010 US army history of the 1983 decision to invade the Caribbean island of Grenada includes a paper by Edgar Raines of the US Army Centre of Military History. It recounts a series of secret planning meetings in which Moreau, while junior to others present, ‘was in many ways the most influential person in the room … Moreau’s ideas thus had a way of reaching the very highest echelon of government. It made him a force with which to reckon.’ Raines notes that Moreau had managed to direct the most sensitive operational decision-making to the Special Situation Group, a committee of the most senior policymakers chaired by Bush. None of this was made public at the time.[​＊](https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n02/seymour-m-hersh/the-vice-presidents-men#fn-asterisk)

A memorandum declassified in 2008, written in April 1984 by Richard Kerr, then deputy director of the CIA, noted that the agency’s ‘products’ – its intelligence reports and estimates – were being cut off by Moreau and his team, and not reaching the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. ‘I have the feeling,’ Kerr wrote plaintively, ‘that if we are going to get something past Admiral Moreau we will need to send it via the briefer with a note . . . asking that it be called to the attention of the chairman.’ Moreau himself received the full range of CIA products. ‘Admiral Moreau’s interests,’ Kerr added, ‘are all subjects, worldwide.’

Another hint came in Colin Powell’s 1995 autobiography – he was military aide to the secretary of defence, Caspar Weinberger, at the time of the Grenada invasion. Powell wrote that Moreau

came to me one morning with an odd revelation. The secretary’s office was not getting some of the most curious traffic that the NSA plucked out of the air. On his own hook, Art had decided to share this withheld material with me. What I read enraged me … The content of the messages was startling enough, but what troubled me just as much was why the secretary’s office should be cut out of the loop.

Powell, who shared his boss’s scepticism about the value of a war on terror, showed the intercepts to Weinberger. Weinberger – equally furious – asked where they had come from. ‘I explained,’ Powell wrote, ‘that they were bootlegged to us by Admiral Moreau, who got them from the NSA.’ ‘And don’t I control the National Security Agency?’ Weinberger asked. There was no suggestion in Powell’s book that either he or Weinberger challenged Moreau’s access to intercepts deemed too sensitive for the secretary of defence.

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‘Bush was petrified that the president would say the wrong thing to outsiders about what was going on, and he was hanging around the Oval Office,’ the officer said. ‘You never knew whether the president might start talking about an operation in China or into Vietnam.’[​†](https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n02/seymour-m-hersh/the-vice-presidents-men#fn-dagger) Reagan was kept out of trouble at important national security meetings by being given a script. ‘My colleagues and I would write a talking paper for the president before meetings that resembled movie scripts, because the Old Man knew scripts as a reference. We were constantly updating the script, because if we made a dumb mistake, he would read it. We’d talk among ourselves about where to put the emphasis for certain words and phrases.’ In *Deadly Gambits*, his 1984 study of arms control, Strobe Talbott showed what happened when Reagan didn’t have a script. During a conversation about arms control with a group of congressmen, the president suddenly proclaimed: ‘Land-based missiles have nuclear warheads, while bombers and submarines don’t.’ ‘Even as he said these words,’ Talbott wrote, ‘his voice dropped and wavered, as though he had forgotten his lines and knew there was something not quite right about his attempt to improvise.’



Casey was another source of tension, the officer said. He ‘was going around giving the impression that he was a super spook, but nobody on the inside cared because he had no juice. We knew he was over the hill and living on his past glory with the OSS’ – the Office of Strategic Services, the CIA’s wartime predecessor. He may have run Reagan’s election campaign, he may have been controlling the US operation in Afghanistan, but the military men working with Moreau saw him as ‘bizarre, unpredictable, out of control and dishonest’. Murphy made sure to be kept up to date on what Casey was up to. The CIA’s director got his chance of glory in Nicaragua, whose Sandinista government was inordinately feared by Reagan and Casey as a dire threat to the United States. Casey was able to get his way because of a rare error of judgment by Moreau, who had brought Marine Lieutenant Oliver North onto the secret team. The Iran-Contra story, as seen from inside the Moreau operation, has little in common with the public record. Bush, known to his friends and aides as ‘Poppy’, was also worried about Nicaragua and Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista leader, and was instrumental in the decision to give clandestine American support to the Nicaraguan opposition force known as the Contras. Moreau’s team inevitably became involved: a high-risk proposition for the group because Congress had passed an amendment barring the use of American funds for support of the Nicaraguan opposition. There was no question about Bush’s part in what would become the Iran-Contra scandal. ‘Dan Murphy and Poppy would sit down and work it out about the Contras,’ the officer said. ‘They saw Ortega as turning Nicaragua into a Russian puppet state. “We can’t have that. This is our turf. We have to protect Guatemala and Honduras and Panama.” So I and my colleagues on Moreau’s team wrote findings about covert actions going after Daniel Ortega.’

But it was important to keep Casey out of the way, the officer said, in order ‘to protect our real operations’. Unfortunately, the person charged with protecting the vice president’s inside team was Ollie North, then on the staff of the National Security Council. ‘We were in different parts of the White House’ – where conspiracy was a constant – and ‘North’s job was to keep Moreau up to date on all NSC operations. North was a plant.’ It became clear to the Moreau team that the CIA’s Casey-led operations in support of the Contras were veering out of control. Casey had been busy illegally raising millions of dollars for the Contras from ‘concerned’ American citizens and foreign countries, including Saudi Arabia and Brunei, whose leaders were seeking favour with the White House. ‘Moreau thought that Casey’s actions in support of the Contras were stupid and a time bomb,’ the officer said. ‘What had begun as a quiet op designed by Moreau to influence public opinion inside Nicaragua was becoming a political football. So Moreau calls on his boy Ollie and tells him to get involved with the Contra issue and keep it from getting out of control. He picked the wrong guy. North was loyal and enthusiastic, but he was fucking dumb.’ North saw a career path through keeping in with Casey – but then the operation took a ludicrous turn after Buckley’s kidnapping in Beirut in March 1984 by members of the group that would soon call itself Hizbullah.

A plan developed to sell anti-tank and surface-to-air missiles to Iran, via the Israelis, in return for Iranian help in releasing Buckley and the other prisoners (the government of the Ayatollah Khomeini, who had overthrown the shah in 1979, was viewed with great hostility by the Reagan administration). Profits from the arms sales would then be used to finance support for the Nicaraguan opposition – in direct violation of the congressional ban. ‘Ollie brings in Dick Secord and Iranian dissidents and money people in Texas to the scheme, and it’s gotten totally out of control,’ the officer said. ‘We’re going nuts. If we don’t manage this carefully, our whole structure will unravel. And so we’ – former members of Moreau’s team who were still working for Bush – ‘leaked the story to the magazine in Lebanon.’ He was referring to an article, published on 3 November 1986 by *Ash-Shiraa* magazine in Beirut, that described the arms for hostages agreement. He would not say how word was passed to the magazine, nor did he acknowledge that with this leak Moreau’s group was acting with as much self-interest, and as little regard for the consequences, as Moreau had accused the CIA of doing. The officer explained that it was understood by all that the scandal would unravel in public very quickly, and Congress would get involved. ‘Our goals were to protect the Moreau operation, to limit the vice president’s possible exposure, and to convince the Reagan administration to limit Bill Casey’s management of covert operations. It only took a match to light the fire. It was: “Oh my god. We were paying ransom for the hostages – to Iran.”’

Moreau was gone by the end of 1985: at the recommendation of Bush, he had received his fourth star and was rewarded for his high-pressure double duty in the White House by being appointed commander of US naval forces in Europe and Nato forces in southern Europe. There was another factor: on 1 October 1985, Admiral William Crowe replaced John Vessey as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The formidable Crowe had been filled in, up to a point, on the clandestine operations inside the vice president’s office. ‘He got a whiff of what was going on,’ the officer said. Crowe quickly disbanded Moreau’s secret team and returned its officers to navy duty. There would be no undeclared operations on his watch. The roof could have fallen in the following November, when the Iran-Contra scandal became public. The congressional inquiry that followed focused on Reagan, and what he did and didn’t know. Bush was mostly out of the line of fire, and so was Moreau. Casey, meanwhile, was diagnosed with a brain tumour in December 1986, and left office within days. He died five months later.

If Casey had not taken ill, the officer assured me, ‘he would have been the fall guy, and taken one for the Boss’ – the president. Bush, with his seemingly secure run for the presidency in 1988 under threat, flew into a panic about the burgeoning scandal. He had played a major role in the sure-to-fail scheme; a comprehensive inquiry might well discover the 35 or so earlier covert operations – many of them successful – that he and the Moreau group had conducted. The team’s carefully prepared findings, none of which had been given to Congress, were destroyed, as were any other records of the extraordinary operations unit. Moreau suffered a major heart attack in December 1986, while on duty, and died soon afterwards at a military hospital in Naples.

Secrecy, internal rivalries and illegality had doomed Moreau’s project but, for all its flaws, there were some in the defence establishment who felt, as Moreau did, that extraordinary efforts were needed to combat international terrorism. ‘How ironic it is,’ a senior defence official told me, ‘given all the interest now in waging covert warfare, that the very real opportunity to pre-empt al-Qaida, and launch a war decades before 9/11, was squandered by a mix of overzealous, sometimes misguided operators and bickering administration officials.’

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In 1986, as the Iran-Contra scandal turned toxic, the immediate problem for Vice President Bush was political survival. Too many outsiders – men like Oliver North – knew too much. The vice president began keeping a diary – with notable fake elements – late in 1986, as the scandal was being investigated by the special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh. The diary wasn’t turned over to Walsh’s inquiry until after Bush’s defeat in the 1992 presidential election, despite relevant subpoenas dating back to 1987. It begins with the sentence: ‘This is November 1986, the beginning of what I hope will be an accurate diary, with at least five and maybe 15 minutes a day on observations about my run for the presidency in 1988.’ But Bush was unable to restrain himself, repeatedly wondering whether North and his close associate on the National Security Council, Admiral John Poindexter, would ‘do the right thing’ when testifying before Congress. The ‘right thing’, of course, was for North and Poindexter to lie and not say what they knew about Bush’s involvement. At one point, Bush refers to allegations in the media that he has not come clean on his part in the scandal, and adds: ‘The implication being that I was some way linked in to the diversion of funds to the Contras or that I was running a secret war’ – which, of course, was precisely what he had been doing. Later, writing about the arms for hostage agreement, he says: ‘I’m one of the few people that know fully the details, and there is a lot of flack and misinformation out there. It is not a subject we can talk about.’

Bush’s unconscious seemed to spin out of control again when he was summoned in December 1986 by the Tower Commission, a three-member investigating group put together by the White House in a failed attempt to head off the Walsh inquiry. ‘The testimony before the Tower Commission, I think went well,’ Bush wrote. ‘I made several suggestions to them … [and] they include no more operations by the NSC; CIA to conduct covert operations; formalise process of the NSC staff; clearly [no more] oral findings, and failure to follow up on these covert operations was wrong. Nobody had any dream that these kinds of things were going on.’ He was once again describing what Moreau’s group had been doing. The diary, had it been turned over earlier, as Bush’s team of lawyers certainly understood, would have led to a great deal of further questioning, and possibly to an indictment.

Walsh reluctantly ended his far from satisfactory inquiry in 1993. Convictions his staff won at trial were later overturned or suspended, as in North’s case; others were pardoned by Bush before he left office. One of Walsh’s last acts was to determine whether there was a case against Bush for his initial refusal to turn over the diary. He decided against it after concluding that there was little likelihood of a successful prosecution. The same general conclusion had been reached two years earlier, before the existence of the diary became known, by Christian Mixter, a senior attorney on Walsh’s staff. While there was much evidence that Bush had attended most of the important meetings on Iran-Contra, Mixter wrote, his role as ‘a secondary officer’ to the president made him less likely to be criminally liable for the actions he took. Mixter’s analysis was not made public until 2011.

There is no evidence that Walsh or any of the lawyers on his staff found out about the existence of Moreau’s special operations group, though it was clear to some that there was more to know. John Barrett, who now teaches at St John’s University School of Law in New York, spent five years working for Walsh and came away, as he told me, with ‘a very strong sense that the water was way deeper than we could see. And who knew what was below. I concluded that we were at the mercy of the executive branch.’ He added that Archibald Cox, the Harvard law professor who was in charge of the Watergate investigation in 1973, had been able to turn for help to John Dean – the White House counsel who testified in public about the presidential cover-up. Unlike Cox, ‘we didn’t have an intelligence insider.’

The Washington press corps was equally in the dark. Scott Armstrong, a Washington journalist who spent years researching US policy on Iran, recalled a pleasant lunch he had long after the Iran-Contra inquiry with Don Gregg, Bush’s national security adviser. The conversation inevitably turned to the Iran-Contra days and Armstrong told Gregg that he and other journalists had always been interested in his role. Gregg’s answer, as Armstrong recalled it, was crude and mysterious: ‘You guys [in the press] were always sniffing around my ass, and Dan Murphy passed right by you.’

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Letters

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I was surprised by Seymour Hersh’s account of Ronald Reagan which, in the course of making the case that George H.W. Bush was really in charge (‘Unlike the president, he knew what was going on and how to get things done’), echoes contemporary accusations that he was lazy, ignorant, unwilling to learn ([*LRB*, 24 January](https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n02/seymour-m-hersh/the-vice-presidents-men)). The reason I am surprised is that Reagan’s diaries have been published, and in them he often comments on the way people like Hersh, State Department officials and many in Congress thought of him as ignorant and ineffectual, and how very useful that was in providing cover for his hugely ambitious agenda.

As it happens, I was in the room when Reagan was given his very first State Department briefing on the need to ‘work up’ to a meeting with Gromyko, the Soviet minister of foreign affairs, at the September ‘ministerials’ in New York, in preparation for his first summit with Brezhnev, as co-existence required. Reagan cut them off, telling them very pleasantly to relax: there was no need for a September meeting with Gromyko because he had no intention of meeting Brezhnev; he did not want to coexist with the USSR, which had no right to exist. Even his own newly installed secretary of state, Alexander Haig, was sure that once the election vapours had dissipated Reagan would go down the same path as his predecessors and arrange the summit. All but Reagan and a handful of others, myself included, accepted coexistence as the basic axiom of world politics, rooted in the certainty that nuclear war was unwinnable and that the USSR was the other superpower that would endure into the future.

But Reagan was in charge, not Bush or the likes of Vice Admiral Arthur Moreau, and Reagan held no summits with Brezhnev, or his successors Andropov and Chernenko. He was happy to meet Gorbachev, already at work to dismantle the USSR.

It was the same with El Salvador. Reagan didn’t want another Vietnam, he wanted victory, and relied heavily on his CIA director, William Casey, because he didn’t want the military chiefs involved – for them the allocation of roles for every branch of every service would be the first order of business. Instead, the army was confined to training Salvadorean soldiers in the US, while a civilian at the Pentagon, Fred Iklé, under-secretary for policy, used Pentagon funds for a brilliantly effective programme using contractors to arm and train Salvadorean villagers to protect the lands they had just acquired under land reform. Reagan gave the programme his full support, and even the ever incompetent CIA helped out by digging up the ideal weapon in one of its forgotten warehouses: M2 carbines, ‘too light’ for the army, just right for the campesinos. (I too did a bit of training down in Morazán.) According to Hersh, Moreau ridiculed Casey. But Casey, who had been in charge of OSS operations out of London in the Second World War, knew the difference between uniformed popinjays in the Pentagon and individuals who would go out there (on TACA airlines) and get things done. The guerrillas were defeated and gave up war to enter politics.

Hersh contrives not to mention what horrified Bush, the Joint Chiefs and no doubt Moreau: Reagan did not believe in Mutual Assured Destruction. He would not press the button, period, not even if they bombed Washington DC (‘What’s the point ?’). When first briefed on Nato plans, according to which nuclear weapons would have to be used when the ammo ran out, he said: ‘Buy more ammo.’ He promised – and delivered – a huge increase in the defence budget, but made it clear that he would not press the button. Instead he embraced ballistic missile defence, with new technology: the Strategic Defence Initiative. The likes of Hersh and Moreau called it ‘Star Wars’. It did divert Pentagon funds from the further embellishment of the usual tanks, fighters and carriers, and much of the new technology failed. But much succeeded too, and is now in use. What terrified Bush and the Joint Chiefs was the prospect of the Soviets finding out that the US president had given up even on a Second Strike option, thereby ruining the principle of nuclear deterrence. I can’t blame them: who, by the same token, could have imagined the KGB was so far gone it accepted the *Washington Post* view, according to which Reagan was a John Birch Society fanatic intent on a First Strike policy? For more than two years, KGB officers were tasked with watching USAF airfields everywhere day and night, ready to report the feared mass take-off of nuclear-armed bombers.

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I held a national security position in the US government at the time of the events described by Seymour Hersh in ‘The Vice President’s Men’ ([*LRB*, 24 January](https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n02/seymour-m-hersh/the-vice-presidents-men)). Hersh’s principal thesis, that much of President Reagan’s foreign policy, including the Iran-Contra debacle, was controlled by the office of Vice President George H.W. Bush, is highly plausible. Lawrence Walsh, the independent counsel directing the Iran-Contra investigation, found substantial evidence leading to the vice president’s office, and Bush, by then president in his own right, pardoned virtually every conspirator while misleadingly denouncing Walsh’s indictment of felonious activities as merely ‘the criminalisation of policy differences’.

But Hersh makes at least three sensational claims that beg for evidence. First, that the Washington bureaucracy was riddled with Soviet sleeper agents who, when detected, were not prosecuted but allowed to ‘wither on the vine’. Second, that ‘Star Wars’ (otherwise referred to as ‘SDI’ or ‘missile defence’) was known to be unachievable or impractical: ‘Nobody on the Joint Chiefs of Staff ever believed we were going to build Star Wars.’ Third, that the Iran-Contra affair was made public by an article in a Lebanese magazine, *Ash-Shiraa* – an article based on a leak provided by the very US government that was conducting the operation, in order to shut down an out of control caper.

With respect to Star Wars, more than $200 billion dollars has been spent since Reagan initiated the programme, and it continues today under a different name. According to Hersh, it was intended as a ruse to tempt the Soviet sleeper agents to expose themselves in their efforts to discover technical details about the programme. If SDI were merely a false flag, why wasn’t it terminated after the collapse of the Soviet Union? Independently confirmable evidence is as yet nowhere in sight.

Second, what about those sleeper agents? Exposing and prosecuting them would supposedly also expose SDI’s role as a ruse, a contention which is credible only if we believe the entire programme was designed with deliberate errors intended to mislead the Soviets (again, the programme continues in 2019). An anonymous source’s contention that ‘we’ (meaning the Reagan administration) ‘could not … take the chance of another McCarthy period’ is risible on its face. My entire career’s association with Republican politicians suggests to me that they would have bounded like spring lambs at the chance to tar their political opponents, or opponents of SDI, as communist sympathisers.

Who were all those sleeper agents? How far up in the bureaucracy did they go? Any names? When I asked Hersh these questions at a recent public event in Washington, he said he didn’t know anything about them.

Finally, the leaked information about the arms for hostages deal that appeared on 3 November 1986 in *Ash-Shiraa* magazine in Beirut. Hersh’s contention that a cell within the US government blew its own secret operation out of the water, an action with unforeseeable and uncontrollable criminal consequences leading to potential presidential impeachment, is surely a blockbuster. The leak was allegedly orchestrated by former members of a ‘secret team’ assembled by Vice Admiral Arthur Moreau, an operative apparently more formidable in his capacity for mischief than Ernst Stavro Blofeld. But an alternative explanation exists. On 5 October 1986, a month before the *Ash-Shiraa* leak, the C-123 cargo aircraft piloted by the CIA-connected Eugene Hasenfuss crashed in Nicaragua, blowing open the Central American end of the Iran-Contra affair. The story was already unravelling, and the *Ash-Shiraa* story was just one more dangling thread, whatever its source.

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