

Inside the October Surprise Cover-up

Special Report: The George H.W. Bush Library in Texas has just released thousands of pages of documents on the October Surprise mystery, revealing how Bush's inner circle handled allegations that the Reagan-Bush campaign in 1980 struck a treacherous deal with Iran. It was a textbook case of controlling the narrative, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

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In 1991-92, when President George H.W. Bush's reelection campaign was threatened by interlocking national security scandals, his White House staff and Republicans in Congress went into partisan battle mode determined to discredit not investigate allegations of wrongdoing, newly released documents from Bush's presidential library reveal.

The documents show that GOP anger boiled over in 1991 when the long-running Iran-Contra scandal opened another front with allegations that secret Republican contacts with Iran extended back to 1980 when Ronald Reagan was seeking to unseat Democratic President Jimmy Carter and Bush was Reagan's vice presidential running mate.

Republicans were alarmed that Bush might be implicated in a secret arguably treasonous deal with Iran, struck behind President Carter's back when Carter's own reelection in 1980 hinged on whether he could gain freedom for 52 American hostages being held by Iranian radicals.

The archived White House documents, which were released in response to a Freedom of Information Act request, reveal a coordinated strategy between Bush's Executive Branch and congressional Republicans to disrupt, delay and destroy the so-called October Surprise investigation.

As assistant White House counsel Ronald vonLembke, put it, the goal was to "kill/spike this story."

To achieve that desired result, the Republicans coordinated the counter-offensive through the office of White House counsel C. Boyden Gray, under the supervision of associate counsel Janet Rehnquist, the daughter of the late Chief Justice William Rehnquist.

On Nov. 6, 1991, Gray explained the stakes at a White House strategy session.

"Whatever form they ultimately take, the House and Senate 'October Surprise'

investigations, like Iran-Contra, will involve interagency concerns and be of special interest to the President,” Gray declared, according to minutes. [Emphasis in original.]

Among “touchstones” cited by Gray were “No Surprises to the White House, and Maintain Ability to Respond to Leaks in Real Time. This is Partisan.”

White House “talking points” on the October Surprise investigation urged restricting the inquiry to 1979-80 and imposing strict time limits for issuing its findings.

“Alleged facts have to do with 1979-80 no apparent reason for jurisdiction/subpoena power to extend beyond,” the document said. “There is no sunset provision this could drag on like Walsh!” a reference to Iran-Contra special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh.

However, the key to understanding the October Surprise case was that it appeared to be a prequel to the Iran-Contra scandal, with the release of the American hostages immediately after Ronald Reagan’s inauguration on Jan. 20, 1981, followed by mysterious U.S. government approval of secret arms shipments to Iran via Israel. In other words, the two scandals blended together as one narrative; they were not two separate stories.

Winning the Battle

The overriding impression one gets from examining the newly released documents is that Reagan-Bush loyalists were determined to thwart any sustained investigative effort that might link the two scandals. So, as the GOP counterattack unfolded against the October Surprise case, the documents reveal that the strategy included:

Delaying the production of documents;

Having a key witness dodge a congressional subpoena;

Neutralizing an aggressive Democratic investigator;

Pressuring a Republican senator to become more obstructive;

Tightly restricting access to classified information;

Narrowing the inquiry as it applied to alleged Reagan-Bush wrongdoing while simultaneously widening the probe to include Carter’s efforts to free the hostages;

Mounting a public relations campaign attacking the investigation’s costs; and

Encouraging friendly journalists to denounce the story.

Ultimately, the GOP cover-up strategy proved highly effective, as Democrats grew timid and neoconservative journalists then emerging as a powerful force in the Washington media took the lead in decrying the October Surprise allegations as a “myth.”

The Republicans benefited, too, from a Washington press corps, which had grown weary of the complex Iran-Contra scandal. Careerist reporters in the mainstream press had learned that the route to advancement lay more in “debunking” such complicated national security scandals than in pursuing them.

It would take nearly two decades for the October Surprise cover-up to crumble with admissions by officials involved in the investigation that its exculpatory conclusions were rushed, that crucial evidence had been hidden or ignored, and that some alibis for key Republicans didn't make any sense.

Yet, despite the cover-up's short-term success, there were senior Republicans even in 1991-92 who opposed the obstruction strategy, favoring instead a good-faith effort to respond to investigative questions.

One of the released documents reveals that Secretary of State James Baker favored quicker production of documents and viewed “the delay/filibuster strategy of the House and Senate Republicans as counterproductive.”

Nevertheless, Bush's White House stayed in charge of coordinating Republican obstruction of the October Surprise probe, much as it did other related scandals such as the broader Iran-Contra Affair and the Iraq-gate scandal involving secret weapons sent to Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

The White House cover-up also had the advantage of having self-interested parties in key jobs inside the federal government.

For instance, on May 14, 1992, a CIA official ran proposed language past associate White House counsel Janet Rehnquist from then-CIA Director Robert Gates regarding the agency's level of cooperation with Congress. By that point, the CIA, under Gates, was already months into a pattern of foot-dragging on congressional document requests.

Bush had put Gates at the CIA's helm in fall 1991, meaning that Gates was well-positioned to stymie congressional requests for sensitive information in the CIA's vaults about secret initiatives involving Bush, Gates and Donald Gregg, another CIA veteran who was implicated in Reagan-era national security scandals.

Pursuing Gates

The records, just released by the Bush library, reveal that one of the targets of the October Surprise probe was Gates himself.

On May 26, 1992, Rep. Lee Hamilton, chairman of the House Task Force, wrote to the CIA asking for records regarding the whereabouts of Gregg and Gates from Jan. 1, 1980, through Jan. 31, 1981, including travel plans and leaves of absence.

The Bush administration's document delays finally drew a complaint from Lawrence Barcella, chief counsel to the House Task Force which had been created to investigate the October Surprise case. He wrote to the CIA on June 9, 1992, that the agency had not been responsive to three requests on Sept. 20, 1991; April 20, 1992; and May 26, 1992.

Gregg and Gates also were implicated in the broader the Iran-Contra scandal. Both were suspected of lying about their knowledge of secret sales of military hardware to Iran and clandestine delivery of weapons to Contra rebels fighting Nicaragua's leftist government.

A former CIA director himself, Bush also had been caught lying in the Iran-Contra scandal when he insisted that a plane shot down over Nicaragua in 1986 while dropping weapons to the Contras had no connection to the U.S. government (when the weapons delivery had been organized by operatives close to Bush's vice presidential office).

And, Bush falsely claimed that he was out of the "loop" on Iran-Contra decisions when later evidence showed that he was a key participant in the policy discussions.

From the newly available record, it's apparent that the October Surprise cover-up was essentially an extension of the broader effort to contain the Iran-Contra scandal, with Bush personally involved in orchestrating both efforts.

Iran-Contra special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh discovered in December 1992 that Bush's White House counsel's office, under Boyden Gray, also had delayed production of Bush's personal notes about the arms shipments to Iran in the 1985-86 time frame.

Though Gray's office insisted that the delay was unintentional, one of Bush's s Iran-Contra diary entries, dated July 20, 1987, described then-Secretary of State George Shultz's detailed notes on meetings with Reagan. In the Iran-Contra report, Walsh wrote that Bush's phrasing about Shultz's notes suggested that the withholding of Bush's own documents was willful.

"I found this almost inconceivable," Bush wrote about Shultz. "Not only that he kept the notes, but that he'd turned them all over to Congress. I would never do it. I would never surrender such documents."

Following those sentiments, Bush's White House sought to frustrate not just Iran-Contra investigators but those assigned to examine the October Surprise issue.

Sly Game

Rather than any commitment to openness regarding the October Surprise case, the documents reveal a cat-and-mouse game designed to block any serious pursuit of the truth.

Beyond dragging its heels on producing documents, the Bush administration maneuvered to keep key witnesses out of timely reach of the investigators. For instance, Gregg, who was Vice President Bush's national security adviser in the 1980s, used his stationing as U.S. Ambassador to South Korea in 1992 to evade a congressional subpoena.

Like Gates and Bush, Gregg had been linked to secret meetings with Iranians during the 1980 campaign. When asked about those allegations by FBI polygraph operators working for Iran-Contra prosecutor Walsh, Gregg was judged to be deceptive in his denials. [See Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters, Vol. I, p. 501]

And, when it came to answering questions from Congress about the October Surprise matter, Gregg found excuses not to accept service of a subpoena.

In a June 18, 1992, cable from the U.S. Embassy in Seoul to the State Department in Washington, Gregg wrote that he had learned that Senate investigators had "attempted to subpoena me to appear on 24 June in connection with their so-called 'October Surprise' investigation. The subpoena was sent to my lawyer, Judah Best, who returned it to the committee since he had no authority to accept service of a subpoena.

"If the October Surprise investigation contacts the [State] Department, I request that you tell them of my intention to cooperate fully when I return to the States, probably in September. Any other inquiries should be referred to my lawyer, Judah Best. Mr. Best asks that I specifically request you not to accept service of a subpoena if the committee attempts to deliver one to you."

That way Gregg ensured that he was not legally compelled to testify, while running out the clock on the Senate inquiry and leaving little time for the House Task Force. His strategy of delay was endorsed by Janet Rehnquist after a

meeting with Best and a State Department lawyer.

In a June 24, 1992, letter to Gray, Rehnquist wrote that “at your direction, I have looked into whether Don Gregg should return to Washington to testify before the Senate Subcommittee hearings next week. I believe we should NOT request that Gregg testify next week.”

The failure to effect service of the subpoena gave the Bush team an advantage, Rehnquist noted, because the Senate investigators then relented and merely “submitted written questions to Gregg, through counsel, in lieu of an appearance. . This development provides us an opportunity to manage Gregg’s participation in October Surprise long distance.”

Rehnquist added hopefully that by the end of September 1992 “the issue may, by that time, even be dead for all practical purposes.”

Protecting the Campaign

Beyond pushing the investigation later into 1992, the Republican delaying tactics also ensured that an interim House report, scheduled for the end of June, would not break any new ground that might torpedo Bush’s reelection hopes.

The GOP made it a top goal to have the interim report clear Bush of allegations that he had joined a secret trip to Paris in mid-October 1980 to meet with Iranian representatives, the newly released documents show.

On June 24, 1992, Rehnquist prepared “talking points” for a Boyden Gray phone call with Republican Sens. Jim Jeffords of Vermont and Richard Lugar of Indiana stressing that “it must be said clearly for the record” that Bush was not in Paris.

“We cannot let something this important left hanging,” Rehnquist wrote.

The key to that success was to prevent the congressional investigators from thoroughly examining Bush’s supposed alibis for the date of Oct. 19, 1980, when his account had him returning to his Washington home for a day off but when some October Surprise witnesses alleged he snuck off for a quick overnight flight to Paris.

The newly released records reveal that the White House had a hand in limiting what the Secret Service released to the investigators regarding Bush’s supposed activities during the day of Oct. 19.

The partially redacted Secret Service records, which were given to Congress, showed a morning trip to the Chevy Chase Country Club and an afternoon visit to a private residence. But the redactions impeded efforts by

congressional investigators to corroborate that those supposed movements by Bush, the then-vice presidential nominee, actually took place.

Under questioning, only one of the Secret Service agents, supervisor Leonard Tanis, had any memory of Bush's supposed trip to the Chevy Chase Country Club. Tanis claimed that George and Barbara Bush attended a brunch with Supreme Court Justice and Mrs. Potter Stewart.

However, Barbara Bush's records showed her going somewhere else that morning and, when questioned, Mrs. Stewart said she and her late husband did not have brunch with the Bushes. No one at the Chevy Chase club recalled the supposed brunch either. Tanis, a Bush favorite among the Secret Service detail, soon backed off his account.

With the Chevy Chase trip having verification problems, attention turned to the afternoon visit to a private residence. However, the Secret Service refused to release the name and address of the person visited, claiming that to do so would somehow endanger the agency's protective strategies. [For details, see Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege*.]

A Mysterious Liaison

What the newly released records reveal, however, is that the White House was involved in keeping the name of the person secret, and that a key Republican senator involved in the October Surprise inquiry was under intense pressure from the GOP to act more aggressively in Bush's defense.

On June 24, 1992, Rehnquist wrote a memo for the file describing a meeting that she and Gray had with Sen. Terry Sanford, D-North Carolina, chairman of the subcommittee in charge of the Senate's October Surprise inquiry, and Jeffords, the ranking Republican.

The senators complained about the "GOP thrashing Jeffords," Rehnquist wrote. "The Senators urged that we seek to stop the GOP from criticizing Sen. Jeffords' handling of the minority interests in the investigation. They said that they were irritated by the continued GOP bashing and that it wasn't doing any good."

But the pummeling appears to have softened Jeffords's readiness to ask tough questions.

Rehnquist wrote, with apparent relief, that there was "discussion concerning whether the investigators needed to see the names and addresses of private individuals whom the VP visited on a particular occasion" and the two senators "were not interested in the names and addresses of private individuals whom the VP may have visited on a particular day."

So, the White House was spared publicly having to identify Bush's alibi witness for the afternoon of Oct. 19, 1980.

In summer 1992, Republicans were suggesting that they wanted to protect the host's name because Bush may have been visiting a woman friend and that the Democrats might have been hoping to stir up a sex scandal to counter some of the salacious rumors about their own nominee, Bill Clinton.

However, when Secret Service records for Barbara Bush were released they showed her going to the same unidentified residence, deflating suggestions of a sexual liaison involving her husband. The question that remained was whether George H.W. Bush actually was part of the afternoon visit or whether his wife's day trip was used as a cover for his absence from Washington.

Without questioning the afternoon host, it was impossible to verify Bush's alibi.

However, in one of the many strange alibi deals that pervaded the October Surprise investigation, the House Task Force agreed to clear Bush of taking a secret trip to Paris in exchange for the White House privately giving the name of Bush's host to a small number of the congressional investigators.

But they were barred from interviewing the alibi witness or releasing the name, which remains secret to this day.

The peculiar arrangement being told the name of an alibi witness but never questioning the witness was typical of Bush's White House imposing bizarre rules on the inquiry and the badgered investigators acquiescing.

Evidence of a Secret Trip

The House Task Force stuck with its decision to clear Bush regarding the alleged Paris trip despite subsequent evidence suggesting that Bush, indeed, had flown to Paris and had created a false record to conceal the trip.

For instance, I informed the Task Force about contemporaneous knowledge of the Bush-to-Paris trip provided by Chicago Tribune reporter John Maclean, son of author Norman Maclean who wrote *A River Runs Through It*. John Maclean said a well-placed Republican source told him in mid-October 1980 about Bush taking a secret trip to Paris to meet with Iranians on the U.S. hostage issue.

After hearing this news in 1980, Maclean passed on the information to David Henderson, a State Department Foreign Service officer. Henderson recalled the date as Oct. 18, 1980, when the two met at Henderson's Washington home to discuss another matter.

For his part, Maclean never wrote about the Bush-to-Paris leak because, he told me later, a Reagan campaign spokesman officially denied it. As the years passed, the memory of the leak faded for both Henderson and Maclean, until the October Surprise story bubbled to the surface in the early 1990s. Henderson mentioned the meeting in a 1991 letter to a U.S. senator that was forwarded to me.

Though not eager to become part of the October Surprise story in 1991, Maclean confirmed that he had received the Republican leak. He also agreed with Henderson's recollection that their conversation occurred on or about Oct. 18, 1980. But Maclean refused to identify his source.

The significance of the Maclean-Henderson conversation was that it was a piece of information locked in a kind of historical amber, untainted by later claims and counter-claims about the October Surprise dispute.

One could not accuse Maclean of concocting the Bush-to-Paris allegation for some ulterior motive, since he hadn't used it in 1980, nor had he volunteered it a decade later. He only confirmed it and did so reluctantly.

And, there was other support for the allegations of a Republican-Iranian meeting in Paris.

David Andelman, the biographer for Count Alexandre deMarenches, then head of France's Service de Documentation Exterieur et de Contre-Espionage (SDECE), testified to the House Task Force that deMarenches told him that he had helped the Reagan-Bush campaign arrange meetings with Iranians on the hostage issue in summer and fall of 1980, with one meeting in Paris in October.

Andelman said deMarenches insisted that the secret meetings be kept out of his memoir because the story could otherwise damage the reputations of his friends, William Casey and George H.W. Bush.

Night Flight

The allegations of a Paris meeting also received support from several other sources, including pilot Heinrich Rupp, who said he flew Casey from Washington's National Airport to Paris on a flight that left very late on a rainy night in mid-October 1980. Rupp said that after arriving at LeBourget airport outside Paris, he saw a man resembling Bush on the tarmac.

The night of Oct. 18 indeed was rainy in the Washington area. And, sign-in sheets at the Reagan-Bush headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, placed Casey within a five-minute drive of National Airport late that evening.

There were other bits and pieces of corroboration about the Paris meetings.

A French arms dealer, Nicholas Ignatiew, told me in 1990 that he had checked with his government contacts and was told that Republicans did meet with Iranians in Paris in mid-October 1980.

A well-connected French investigative reporter Claude Angeli said his sources inside the French secret service confirmed that the service provided "cover" for a meeting between Republicans and Iranians in France on the weekend of October 18-19. German journalist Martin Kilian had received a similar account from a top aide to intelligence chief deMarenches.

As early as 1987, Iran's ex-President Bani-Sadr had made similar claims about a Paris meeting, and Israeli intelligence officer Ari Ben-Menashe claimed to have been present outside the meeting and saw Bush, Casey, Gates and Gregg in attendance.

Finally, the Russian government sent a report to the House Task Force, saying that Soviet-era intelligence files contained information about Republicans holding a series of meetings with Iranians in Europe, including one in Paris in October 1980.

"William Casey, in 1980, met three times with representatives of the Iranian leadership," the Russian report said. "The meetings took place in Madrid and Paris."

At the Paris meeting in October 1980, "R[obert] Gates, at that time a staffer of the National Security Council in the administration of Jimmy Carter, and former CIA Director George Bush also took part," the report said. "The representatives of Ronald Reagan and the Iranian leadership discussed the question of possibly delaying the release of 52 hostages from the staff of the U.S. Embassy in Teheran."

Requested by Rep. Hamilton, the Russian report arrived at the House Task Force, via the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, in January 1993, after the Task Force had already decided to dismiss the October Surprise allegations as lacking solid evidence.

The Russian report was kept hidden by the Task Force until I discovered it after gaining access to the Task Force's raw files.

Though the report was addressed to Hamilton, he told me last year that he had never seen the report until I sent him a copy shortly before our interview. Barcella then acknowledged to me that he might not have shown Hamilton the report and may have simply filed it away in boxes of Task Force records.

Blackballing a Democrat

The newly released documents from the Bush library shed some additional light on how far the Republicans were prepared to go to protect Bush on the issue of his whereabouts on Oct. 19, 1980. The GOP members of the Task Force insisted that the one Democratic investigator who had the strongest doubts about Bush's alibi be barred from the inquiry altogether.

The suspicions of the investigator, House Foreign Affairs Committee chief counsel Spencer Oliver, had been piqued by the false account from Secret Service supervisor Tanis. In a six-page memo, Oliver urged a closer look at Bush's whereabouts and questioned why the Secret Service was concealing the alibi witness' name.

"Why did the Secret Service refuse to cooperate on a matter which could have conclusively cleared George Bush of these serious allegations?" Oliver asked. "Was the White House involved in this refusal? Did they order it?"

Oliver also noted Bush's odd behavior in raising the October Surprise issue on his own at two news conferences.

"It can be fairly said that President Bush's recent outbursts about the October Surprise inquiries and [about] his whereabouts in mid-October of 1980 are disingenuous at best," wrote Oliver, "since the administration has refused to make available the documents and the witnesses that could finally and conclusively clear Mr. Bush."

From Janet Rehnquist's memo on the meeting with Jeffords and Sanford, it appears that Oliver's suspicion was well-founded about the involvement of Bush's White House in the decision to conceal the name of the supposed afternoon host.

Even 20 years later, the Bush library continues to withhold the complete Secret Service documents that would contain the identity of the alibi witness.

However, one of the released documents reflected how angry the Republicans were about Oliver, who had been a dogged investigator during the congressional Iran-Contra probe in 1987. He also was asking touchy questions about Iraq-gate and October Surprise in 1991-92.

Thomas Smeeton, a former CIA officer who served as Republican staff director for the House Intelligence Committee and had been Rep. Dick Cheney's appointee to the congressional Iran-Contra committee, sent Rehnquist a memorandum prepared for Republican members regarding Oliver.

Entitled "October Surprise The Ubiquitous Spencer Oliver," the memo said Republicans had "been told repeatedly that Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman [Dante] Fascell does not want his Chief Counsel, Spencer Oliver, to participate

in the 'October Surprise' probe.

"Yet, we continue to get reports that he's as active as ever. For example, the GAO [General Accounting Office], in congressional testimony last year [1991] indicated that he attended an October Surprise meeting with Senator Terry Sanford."

The Republicans also were angry that Oliver interviewed convicted South African arms dealer Dirk Stoffberg about his knowledge of secret Iranian arms transactions. Oliver had sent a letter to the sentencing judge praising Stoffberg's cooperation on the October Surprise issue.

Keeping Oliver off the October Surprise investigation became a high priority for the Republicans. At a midway point in the inquiry when some Democratic Task Force members asked the knowledgeable Oliver to represent them as a staff investigator, Republicans threatened a boycott unless Oliver was barred.

In a gesture of bipartisanship, Rep. Hamilton gave the Republicans the power to veto Oliver's participation. Denied one of the few Democratic investigators with both the savvy and courage to pursue a serious investigation, the Democratic members of the Task Force retreated further into passivity.

Restricting Documents

Meanwhile, Bush's White House kept up the pressure, restricting congressional access to key documents pertinent to the investigation.

In a "top secret" memo dated June 26, 1992, to the State Department about cooperation with the October Surprise probe, National Security Council executive secretary William F. Sittmann demanded "special treatment" for NSC documents related to presidential deliberations.

Regarding the House Task Force, Sittmann recommended that only Republican counsel Richard Leon and Democratic counsel Barcella be "permitted to read relevant portions of the documents and to take notes, but that the State Department retain custody of the documents and the notes at all times."

Though Republicans kept insisting that the October Surprise allegations were a myth, the Bush administration was going to extraordinary lengths to control the evidence.

Beyond restricting access to documents, the White House staff and Capitol Hill Republicans sought to limit the inquiry's scope as it related to the Reagan-Bush team while expanding it to include Carter's own hostage negotiations. Then, the GOP attacked the overall cost of the investigation.

In White House counsel Gray's inter-agency meeting, Gray was already instructing administration officials to keep track of the costs for document searches so the inquiry could be challenged as a waste of money.

Again and again, the newly released documents reveal a near obsession with the estimated costs of the probe as well as the close collaboration between Rehnquist's office and Republican congressional staff, especially John Mackey, the minority staff director on the October Surprise Task Force.

When another Bush legal adviser, Lee Liberman, helped coordinate a P.R. attack on the cost of the October Surprise investigation, Mackey sent his business card with the note, "Lee: FYI How to hit back! Best, John"

Bush's White House also kept close track of press stories, especially those attacking the credibility of anyone who made October Surprise allegations. That was especially true about Carter's former NSC aide Gary Sick, whose New York Times op-ed in April 1991 had given important impetus to the long-held suspicions regarding a GOP-Iranian deal in 1980.

On May 21, 1991, President Bush dashed off a personal note to conservative columnist William Rusher, thanking him for "rallying 'round in that article challenging Gary Sick to apologize. I doubt it will happen."

However, at least one White House official privately held a different view of Sick's book, *October Surprise*. On June 23, 1992, after reading it, Ash Jain wrote a memo to Janet Rehnquist, noting that "Sick presents a seemingly compelling account of [William] Casey's participation in secret meetings with the Iranian Government."

Winning Strategy

In the end, the Republican "delay/filibuster strategy," which Secretary of State Baker had criticized early on, proved successful. The impact of the October Surprise scandal on Campaign 1992 was minimized, although Bush still failed to win reelection.

It wasn't until December 1992 a month after Bush lost to Bill Clinton that the floodgates on October Surprise evidence finally began to open.

Years later, Task Force chief counsel Barcella told me that so much new evidence poured in that final month implicating the Republicans that he asked Hamilton to extend the investigation three more months. But Hamilton, recognizing how nasty the Republican reaction would be, turned down the extension request, Barcella said.

For his part, Hamilton told me that he had no recollection of Barcella's request. Hamilton also said he had no memory of Barcella ever showing him the Russian report which arrived in January 1993 and corroborated allegations of meetings between Iranians and Republicans in Europe, including Bush, Gates and Casey in Paris.

The documents from the George Bush Library in College Station, Texas, don't provide a smoking gun on the October Surprise mystery at least not the material so far released.

On June 17, 2011, the Bush library's archivists informed me that they had located about 4,800 pages of documents identified as relating to the October Surprise case, in response to a Freedom of Information Act request that I filed on April 17, 2007.

However, about one-quarter of the total documents were still being withheld, with 1,160 pages protected for national security reasons. Another 313 pages, including Bush's Secret Service records for mid-October 1980, also were kept secret.

Though the congressional October Surprise inquiry of 1991-92 overall was a failure and Bush enjoyed similar successes in containing Iran-Contra and Iraq-gate the cumulative effect of the scandals was to raise doubts about his honesty before Election 1992, arguably stripping him of his strongest trump card as a trustworthy global leader.

But the larger consequence of the Democrats letting Bush off the hook was that they spared the Bush Family legacy.

Instead of Americans understanding how deceptive and possibly treacherous George H.W. Bush was, they were left with a pleasant memory of a well-meaning patrician, and that warmth carried over to his two political sons, George W. and Jeb.

Only eight years after George H.W. Bush left office, George W. Bush became President of the United States, bringing back with him many of the neoconservatives and partisan operatives who had cut their teeth on manipulating information during the Reagan-Bush-41 years.

Soon, they were back in business deploying clever propaganda and frustrating inconvenient investigations.

For her part, Janet Rehnquist, who oversaw the White House counterattacks against the October Surprise story, ran into a similar controversy over a politically motivated cover-up after the second President Bush appointed her to

be inspector general of the Department of Health and Human Services.

When Florida Gov. Jeb Bush was running for reelection in 2002 and faced a scandal over a possible \$571 million overpayment by the federal government to the state, an aide to Bush got Rehnquist to agree to postpone an audit, which was eventually pushed back five months guaranteeing no findings until after Bush had secured reelection.

After CBS News [reported](#) on Rehnquist's apparent cover-up and Congress began to investigate, Rehnquist abruptly resigned, citing a desire to spend more time with her family.

The Democrats also have continued the pattern of giving the Bushes a free pass. At the end of George W. Bush's eight years in office, the Democrats again chose to look the other way when it came to Republican national security scandals.

[For more on these topics, see Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a two-book set for the discount price of only \$19. For details, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.

Blockades from Boston to Gaza

American leaders have a different view of punishing blockades today than they did after the British authorities imposed one on Boston in retaliation for the Boston Tea Party. Then, collective punishment of Massachusetts spurred the Revolutionary War; but now, Israel's blockade of Gaza draws little more than a yawn, as Nima Shirazi notes.

By Nima Shirazi

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On March 30, 1774, in response to the Boston Tea Party, the British Parliament enacted the *Boston Port Act*, effectively shutting down all commerce and travel in and out of Massachusetts colony.

The law, known as one of the *Intolerable Acts*, was enforced by a British naval blockade of Boston harbor. These punitive acts, which collectively punished an entire colony for the acts of resistance and frustration of a few, served to unite the disparate colonies in their fight for self-determination, sovereignty, and natural and constitutional rights.

Colonies as far away as South Carolina sent relief supplies to their compatriots in Massachusetts.

As a result of British imperial overreach, the First Continental Congress was convened on Sept. 5, 1774. The Congress, in turn, established the Continental Association, a solidarity pact among the colonies to boycott all British goods and, in the event of continued British aggression, to stand as one in their fight for independence.

Now, 237 years later, the so-called “Middle East Quartet” – that is, the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia – has issued a “Statement on the Situation in Gaza.”

It is a brief and unsurprising document. No mention of a “siege” or “blockade,” of course.

While it states that the “conditions facing the civilian population in Gaza” are “unsustainable,” it provides absolutely no indication of the extent of the humanitarian crisis (i.e. 80 percent aid dependency, 95 percent of water is undrinkable, a mere 20 percent is food secure, 36 percent unemployment 47 percent among Gaza’s youth – and 38 percent living below the poverty line).

The statement ignores all of this. Instead, it “notes that efforts have improved conditions over the last year, including a marked increase in the range and scope of goods and materials moving into Gaza, an increase in international project activity, and the facilitation of some exports.”

Yet, these “improved conditions” are illusory.

For instance, a recent report found that while, since June 2010, there has been “improved access to formerly restricted goods, including some raw materials, the increased imports of construction materials (cement, gravel and steel bar) through the tunnels from Egypt, and the improved volume of imports of construction materials for Palestinian Authority-approved projects implemented by international and UN organizations helped reactivate the local economy in Gaza,” this “[e]conomic growth has not translated into poverty reduction.”

More importantly, “Israeli restrictions on access to markets (imports on a range of raw materials and exports) and access to natural resources (land and water),

as well as the increasing transport costs due the closure of Karni crossing” make it virtually impossible for real economic sustainability – through private sector growth – to occur.

Furthermore, the recent decrease in unemployment in the Gaza Strip is mainly linked to the construction and agricultural sectors which have some of the lowest wages and employ mainly unskilled/casual laborers.

The new access regime allowed for an increasing number of construction projects under the UN or international umbrella, but failed to trickle down the benefits to the private sector. The latter is still relying on tunnels for the supply of construction materials.

The agricultural sector is seasonal and more than half of the labor force is composed of unpaid family members.

Ongoing restrictions on the movement of goods and artificially-inflated food prices and transport costs continue to impact the economy even after the new access regime, and thereby the June 2010 decision failed to impact the viability of the tunnel economy.

The new access regime did not translate into a tangible relaxation of exports despite the Dec. 8, 2010, cabinet decision by the GoI [Government of Israel], and the consecutive agreement with the Quartet Representative in February 2011.

The blockade is still in place. Apart from a very low rate of cash crops exported, no other goods have been exported out of the Gaza Strip under the new access regime.

The unpredictability of the crossing, frequent power cuts, as well as increased transportation costs do not ensure sustained exports of agricultural goods. Moreover, the exports are cut from their market of origin.

Nevertheless, the Quartet Statement *commends* Israel for the recent approval of \$100 million in construction material to be allowed into Gaza and used to build 18 schools and 1,200 houses. Distraction accomplished.

But then things get even more ridiculous.

The statement reads: The Quartet recognizes that Israel has legitimate security concerns that must continue to be safeguarded. Members of the Quartet are committed to working with Israel, Egypt and the international community to prevent the illicit trafficking of arms and ammunition into Gaza and believe efforts to maintain security while enabling movement and access for Palestinian people and goods are critical.

Naturally, Palestinians in Gaza – y’know, the ones who keep getting murdered by Israeli bullets, tank shells, mortars, missiles, cluster bombs and flechettes – are not entitled to the same kind of security guarantees.

While the U.S. continues to supply the occupying power with the latest killing machines and heavy-duty artillery, the occupied are denied their own right to resist brutality and slaughter.

One wonders, if “illicit trafficking of arms and ammunition into Gaza” is to be avoided, what channels are available for the legal transfer of weaponry and mechanisms for self-defense? Oh right, there are none.

The Quartet Statement then goes on to voice its opposition to the 2011 Flotilla – without mentioning its stance on international law and whether or not the blockade is legal (hint: it’s not) and blah blah blah “established channels” blah blah “established land crossings.”

The disconnect is staggering. While the Quartet condemns the Flotilla, it has already acknowledged the slight benefits of Israel’s “new access regime” implemented in June 2010 as a direct consequence of the 2010 Flotilla.

So, while calling for an end to that tactic, they already understand full well that it is the only thing that has worked so far to bring attention to the blockade and to force Israel to act (even meagerly) on its obligations.

And then the kicker: The Quartet regrets the injury and deaths caused by the 2010 flotilla, urges restraint and calls on all Governments concerned to use their influence to discourage additional flotillas, which risk the safety of their participants and carry the potential for escalation.

Read that again. “Injury and death caused **by** the 2010 flotilla.” Not by the heavily-armed and armored Israeli commandos who illegally stormed the ships in international waters and shot nine innocent people to death. No, no, the “flotilla” is to blame.

Just for the record, here’s what the United Nations – a member of the Quartet! – had to say about last year’s Mavi Marmara massacre:

The conduct of the Israeli military and other personnel towards the flotilla passengers was not only disproportionate to the occasion but demonstrated levels of totally unnecessary and incredible violence. It betrayed an unacceptable level of brutality. Such conduct cannot be justified or condoned on security or any other grounds. It constituted grave violations of human rights law and international humanitarian law.

It also found “clear evidence to support prosecutions of the following crimes within the terms of article 147 of the Fourth Geneva Convention: willful killing; torture or inhuman treatment; willfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health.”

And it stated that Israel had seriously violated its obligations under the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including the “right to life ... torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment ... right to liberty and security of the person and freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention ... right of detainees to be treated with humanity and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person ... [and] freedom of expression.”

Based upon “forensic and firearm evidence,” the UN fact-finding panel concluded that, of the nine murders, the killing of Turkish-American citizen Furkan Dogan and that of five Turkish citizens by the Israeli troops on the Mavi Marmara “can be characterized as extra-legal, arbitrary and summary executions.”

Also, from whom is the Quartet “urg[ing] restraint”? They never say. Clearly not Israel!

Maybe they’re wishing 86-year-old Hedy Epstein should calm the hell down. Maybe Alice Walker should chill out. But Israeli soldiers executing civilians on the high seas? Whatever.

The statement concludes with a single sentence: “The Quartet also calls for an end to the deplorable five-year detention of Gilad Shalit.”

Deplorable. The capture and detention of a single Israeli Occupation soldier receives the deepest condemnation of the entire document. But what were the “conditions facing the civilian population in Gaza” – 1.6 million people – again? Oh right, “unsustainable.”

Obviously, were the siege simply more sustainable and less of a burden, it wouldn’t be an issue. But since it’s “unsustainable,” it should probably be addressed somehow since the Quartet is “concerned.”

But does the Quartet call for an end to the four-year naval blockade or the five-year siege or the 44-year occupation or the airstrikes or kidnappings or buffer zone sniper shootings or drone attacks or collective punishment? Nope.

But they sure do “call for an end to the deplorable five-year detention of Gilad Shalit.”

Because, after all, it’s clear that the life of one Israeli soldier is more

important than a million and a half Palestinians any day of the week.

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