Keeping a Curious Bush Secret

Exclusive: One of the strange mysteries from the Reagan-Bush era is where did George H.W. Bush go on one Sunday in October 1980 when some witnesses placed him meeting with Iranians in Paris. More than three decades later, Bush’s supposed alibi remains a state secret, Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

More than three decades ago, on Oct. 19, 1980, then-Republican vice presidential candidate George H.W. Bush supposedly took an afternoon trip to visit a family friend in Washington, an alibi that could prove he could not have traveled secretly to Paris for treacherous meetings with Iranians.

But Bush’s White House in 1992 and his presidential library now have refused to release the name of this alibi witness or even the address where Bush allegedly went. The insistence on keeping this secret has just been reaffirmed by Debra Steidel Wall, deputy archivist of the United States.

So, rather than release what theoretically should be a fact the Bush Family would want out proof that the elder George Bush did not engage in secret talks with Iranians behind President Jimmy Carter’s back regarding 52 Americans then being held hostage in Iran the U.S. government is saying that only a costly federal court lawsuit can dislodge this historical detail.

Or, perhaps the reason that this secret has been so zealously guarded for so long is that Bush never took the afternoon trip, that it was just part of a cover story to conceal his mission to Paris, and that the host — if questioned — would discredit Bush’s alibi.

Whatever the truth, as long as the Bushes and the government prevent the corroboration of his purported afternoon visit, it remains impossible to disprove contrary evidence that Bush did sneak off for the alleged Paris meeting and simply arranged with friends in the Secret Service to concoct an alibi.

Another part of Bush’s alibi for Oct. 19 a morning trip to the Chevy Chase Country Club previously collapsed when no one at the club recalled the visit and the account from Secret Service supervisor Leonard Tanis, who described a brunch also involving Barbara Bush and Justice and Mrs. Potter Stewart, turned out to be false.

Disproving Tanis’s account, Mrs. Bush’s Secret Service records showed her taking a morning jog along the C&O Canal, and Mrs. Stewart told me that she and her late husband never had brunch with the Bushes at the Chevy Chase club. When
questioned by congressional investigators, none of the other Secret Service agents on the detail recalled going to the Chevy Chase club at all.

After his Chevy Chase story was debunked, Tanis a Secret Service official who was known to be personally close to Bush withdrew it

A Mysterious Alibi

That left Bush’s supposed afternoon trip on Oct. 19 as his key alibi. But there were problems with that story as well.

In 1992, when allegations of Bush’s secret trip to Paris in 1980 were being investigated, Republicans suggested that Democrats were simply trying to embarrass the then-President because the afternoon trip might have involved a rendezvous with a woman.

Since Bush’s reelection campaign was matching up against Democrat Bill Clinton, who was under fire for his own womanizing, the GOP complaint boiled down to that the Democrats were looking for dirt against Bush to counter the dirt against Clinton.

However, that Republican argument also fell apart when Mrs. Bush’s Secret Service records showed her participating in the afternoon trip. Given Barbara Bush’s presence, the idea of a romantic tryst certainly didn’t make much sense.

So, either Mrs. Bush had gone together with her husband or a sympathetic Secret Service official had used Mrs. Bush’s visit to a family friend to create another false cover story for George H.W. Bush.

Yet, two decades ago, with Bush in the White House and the Democrats almost as timid as they are today, it proved relatively easy for the President to quash requests from federal prosecutors, congressional investigators and journalists for release of the details about his whereabouts on Oct. 19, 1980.

While keeping these details from the public, Bush angrily insisted that he be cleared of the Paris allegations. Congressional investigators looking into the 1980 suspicions were eager to comply, but there remained this peculiar refusal of the Bush administration to supply a confirmable alibi.

In June 1992, a compromise of sorts was struck. A few senior congressional investigators were given the identity of Bush’s mysterious host but only under the condition that they would never interview the alibi witness nor disclose publicly who it was.

The deal may have represented the first time in investigative history that a suspect provided authorities an alibi witness with the proviso that the alibi
Evidence of a Paris Trip

Contradicting the shaky Secret Service records were several accounts of a Bush trip to Paris on the night of Oct. 18, 1980, and into the day on Oct. 19.

For instance, I informed the congressional investigators in 1992 about contemporaneous knowledge of the Bush-to-Paris trip provided to me 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 so-called 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.

The significance of the Maclean-Henderson conversation was that it was a piece of information locked in time 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.

French Intelligence

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 Exterieure et de Contre-Espionage (SDECE), testified to congressional investigators 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.

The allegations of a Paris meeting also received support from several other sources, including pilot Heinrich Rupp, who said he flew Casey (then Ronald Reagan’s campaign chief and later CIA director) 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 Oct. 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 and other Americans in attendance.

A Russian Report

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.


At the Paris meeting in October 1980, “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. Lee Hamilton, D-Indiana, who was in charge of the lackadaisical congressional inquiry into the October Surprise mystery, the Russian report arrived via the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in January 1993. But Hamilton’s task force had already decided to dismiss the October Surprise allegations as lacking solid evidence.

The Russian report was kept hidden 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 not seen the report until I sent him a copy shortly before our interview.

Lawrence Barcella, the task force’s chief counsel, 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. [For more on Casey’s European travels, see Consortiumnews.com’s “October Surprise Evidence Surfaces.”]

A Cover-up

Though the Bush library continues to withhold the details about Bush’s purported afternoon trip on Oct. 19, 1980, thousands of other records were released to me this summer under a Freedom of Information Act request.

The documents shed some additional light on how far the Republicans were prepared to go to protect Bush on the October Surprise issue. The records reveal that GOP members of the congressional task force were collaborating, behind the scenes, with Bush’s White House on a strategy for shielding Bush from the accusations.

For instance, Bush’s White House and Capitol Hill Republicans worked hand in glove to blackball from the task force one Democratic investigator who had the strongest doubts about Bush’s alibi. 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 the newly released White House documents, it is clear that Oliver’s suspicion was well-founded about the involvement of Bush’s White House staff in the decision to conceal the name of the supposed host.

Keeping Oliver off the October Surprise investigation also 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 inquiry, the Democratic members of the task force retreated. [For more, see Consortiumnews.com’s “Inside the October Surprise Cover-up.”]

A Never-ending Cover-up

Now, nearly two decades after the congressional investigation and three decades after the events in question this strange cover-up continues.

In June 2011, the archivists at the Bush library in College Station, Texas, denied release of these Secret Service files, citing an exception for law-enforcement procedures, such as the number of Secret Service agents assigned to a detail or routes they might use for transporting a protected person.

However, I didn’t want that information. I only wanted the location of where Bush went on that Sunday afternoon three decades ago. So I appealed.

In a July 26 letter to me, deputy national archivist Wall rebuffed my appeal.
She wrote that the relevant U.S. Secret Service logs “contain the identities of USSS agents. Based on the numerous court decisions upholding the withholding of agents and third person names, I affirm our initial determination that releasing these names could endanger the life or physical safety of the agents of the USSS.”

My first reaction was to assume that Wall must not have understood what I was after. How on earth could an address supposedly visited by George H.W. and Barbara Bush on Oct. 19, 1980, endanger the lives of Secret Service agents today?

I tried to reach Wall by phone two weeks ago without success. I then sent an e-mail to Robert Holzweiss, chief archivist at the Bush library, and noted that “Ms. Wall did not seem to address the central point of my request. “All I was after was the address where Mr. Bush purportedly went on the afternoon of Oct. 19, 1980. Ms. Wall does not specifically deal with that point and I fear she may have misunderstood the purpose of my appeal.

“Frankly, it stretches credulity that where a vice presidential candidate might have gone on an afternoon more than 30 years ago would somehow put Secret Service agents or those they protect in any jeopardy.

“This information also is something that a number of other interested parties have sought in the past. Twenty years ago, there were requests for this one fact from federal prosecutors, defense attorneys, congressional investigators and other journalists.

“The irony is that this information could put to rest, once and for all, suspicions that Mr. Bush took part in a scheme to contact Iranian officials behind President Carter’s back. So, this detail does have historic significance, which should be weighed against any countervailing concerns, especially given how far-fetched those concerns appear to be.”

In my e-mail, I requested that officials at the National Archives rethink their response. However, they have not gotten back to me.


[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.