

The ghost of Irangate stalks the Bush presidency

by Jeffrey Steinberg

When most people think about George Bush's role during the Reagan administration, they invariably recall the South Florida Anti-Drug Task Force, formally known as the National Narcotics Border Interdiction Service (NNBIS). Few among even the best-informed Irangate specialists in the media and Congress have focused much attention on the vice president's most important role during the Reagan years: his chairmanship of the Special Situation Group (SSG) and its subsidiary Crisis Pre-Planning Group (CPPG).

This oversight has so far allowed President Bush to sidestep some of the most important questions about his role in Irangate and in other Reagan-Bush regime covert operations-gone-foul.

With the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence now postponing until at least Sept. 16 the confirmation hearings of CIA director-designate Robert Gates, and with Irangate special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh apparently moving rapidly toward perjury indictments of prominent CIA and White House officials, George Bush's fortunes may be turning. Despite the President's whirlwind summer schedule of summits and international goodwill tours, the Bush presidency could wind up in deep trouble by Labor Day.

NSDD 3

It was early in his first administration that Ronald Reagan signed a pair of National Security Decision Directives, which in effect placed his vice president in charge of all covert operations—through the SSG and CPPG. NSDD 2, which is still classified, spelled out the administration's policy toward Central America—i.e., the Nicaraguan and El Salvadoran situations, where expensive counterinsurgency programs would be mounted against Soviet- and Cuban-backed movements. NSDD 3, which created the SSG and CPPG, specifically assigned Bush to oversee the implementation of NSDD 2.

It was a natural decision for a President with little experi-

ence in foreign affairs and less experience in the shadow world of CIA and Pentagon clandestine activities. Bush, the ex-United Nations ambassador and ex-CIA director, was the logical choice to oversee all the administration intelligence operations. While Bush was director of Central Intelligence during the Gerald Ford presidency, William Casey and Leo Cherne both sat on the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, Cherne serving as its chairman. Under Reagan, Casey ran the CIA and Cherne returned to the PFIAB, this time as its vice chairman.

All of this well-documented history has been buried with the passage of time. Among the most buried aspects of the Contra fiasco and Bush's role, is the frequent use by the CIA and Lt. Col. Oliver North's "Enterprise" of Ibero-American narcotics traffickers in providing logistics and cash for the Contras.

All this could, however, become very public once again, particularly if Irangate prosecutor Walsh does go forward with an anticipated indictment of Donald Gregg, Vice President Bush's chief national security adviser during the Reagan presidency and his current ambassador to South Korea. According to records in the possession of both Walsh and the Senate Intelligence Committee, Gregg was Bush's frequent representative at the CPPG meetings. North was at most of those meetings too.

'Quail under the Bush'

President Bush is thus more aware than anyone else about the trouble now brewing at the special prosecutor's office and at the Senate Intelligence panel. At a July 12 press conference at Kennebunkport, Maine, prior to his departure for Europe, Bush went into a tirade over the fact that his nominee as CIA director, Robert Gates, had not yet been confirmed. Linking the Gates nomination to the ongoing Walsh probe, Bush ranted:

"What is this system where we hear through some leak

in some newspaper that behind closed doors somebody has said something, and thus a lot of people run for cover? I have confidence in Gates. And if somebody wants to accuse him of something, the Senate is absolutely right in getting that determination made and asking for the evidence, but they ought not to have it obscured by some testimony that's been going on for four years. . . . They ought not to panic and run like a covey of quail under a bush."

Reportedly, Bush's anger was particularly directed at Senate Intelligence chairman David Boren (D-Okla.), who is a fellow member with Bush of the Yale University secret society, "The Order of Skull and Bones." According to sources close to the panel, Boren had given Bush his word as a fellow Bonesman that the Gates nomination, announced in April, would breeze through the Senate before July.

The three-month or more delay in the Gates hearing has strategic implications for the administration, particularly in light of contingency plans for a new military onslaught against Iraq, perhaps as early as July 26. New allegations, beyond the Gates role in Irangate, have been surfacing on an almost daily basis, and some of these could directly affect the Iraq crisis.

For the past few weeks, Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) has been calling for the Bush administration to clarify what he sees as "very great variance" between former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie's congressional testimony last spring, and official diplomatic cables on Glaspie's July 1990 meeting with Saddam Hussein. Pell is charging that Glaspie "misled Congress," and is holding hearings to determine what role the Bush administration might have played in encouraging Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait.

The *Financial Times* of London and ABC-TV's "Nightline" have both charged that Gates was involved in covert arms transfers to Saddam Hussein during the Reagan administration, and that he was the head of an administration task force overseeing that program. According to "Nightline" on July 10, Gates's role in that effort was perfectly legal because, in 1982, President Reagan had signed a Presidential Intelligence Finding authorizing the covert transfer of half a billion dollars in high-tech arms to Iraq.

While Gates may not have been guilty of wrongdoing in that particular effort, further exposés would likely reveal that the Reagan-Bush administration was engaged in a criminal policy of secretly arming both Iran and Iraq through much of the Persian Gulf war.

In yet another Gates-related scandal, the *Financial Times* charged July 15 that the CIA had covert dealings with the renegade Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI), and that Gates had covered up this information. The story was based on a recent interview with former U.S. Customs Service Commissioner William Von Raab, who singled out Gates as the man who had covered up for BCCI after Customs had made a drug money-laundering case

against the bank's Tampa, Florida branch.

The Senate Intelligence panel has already announced that it will subpoena former CIA officials Clair George, Allan Fiers, and Jerry Gruner to testify at the Gates hearings. Fiers early in July pled guilty to two perjury counts in a plea agreement with special prosecutor Walsh which is predicated upon his "telling all he knows" about the role of top CIA officials—including Gates and George—and the White House in the Iran-Contra mess.

And House Speaker Tom Foley (D-Wash.) is edging closer to an official probe of allegations that the 1980 Reagan-Bush campaign organization, led by William Casey, schemed to delay the release of American hostages in Tehran to prevent Jimmy Carter from winning reelection via an "October Surprise."

The 'health thing'

With all of these allegations clearly getting under Bush's skin, the July 16 *Chicago Sun Times* took a stab at another sore spot: "the health thing." The story, headlined "Hectic Pace Seen Taking Toll on Bush," featured two photographs, one showing Bush in August 1988 and a second showing him in mid-July of this year. In the three-year period, Bush looks like he aged 20 years.

The text was no more flattering: "Still fighting the debilitating effects of his thyroid medication, President Bush has begun to show physical signs of the strain imposed by the burdens of his office and the non-stop pace he has made a hallmark of his presidency. . . . He appeared tired and drawn as he arrived Sunday in London. . . . The mountain of business on his plate is daunting enough, but Bush continually adds to the burden. On the eve of the trip that will take him from France and Britain to Greece and Turkey in nine days, he was on the golf course in Kennebunkport, Maine by 6:10 a.m. Saturday, proudly racing through 18 holes in one hour, 24 minutes, 37 seconds. . . . 'He is compulsive about it,' said a Washington associate who has watched Bush for a decade."

The story cited White House officials acknowledging that the Gates flap had further strained the President's nerves and aggravated his thyroid condition. "Bush has become extremely angry about the issue."

There are no signs that the pressures on Bush will diminish. By fall, he will be ducking the scandals, trying to administer a new world order that has fallen into disrepute, and launching a reelection campaign. Those are heady tasks for someone with nothing to hide and in perfect health.

If Walsh and the Senate Intelligence panel decide to begin inquiring about the Special Situation Group and Crisis Pre-Planning Group, among other sensitive issues untouched in the original Irangate probes, things could get rough for George Bush. It is perhaps premature to be talking about Watagate analogies, but it is impossible to ignore the fact that the last time the Democratic Party won the presidency, it was over the political corpse of a sitting President, Richard Nixon.