

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Regan sets up Reagan for disgrace

Putting a major chink in President Ronald Reagan's armor prior to the bigger battles over the budget to come, White House Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan suckered the President into a disgraceful game of "tricking" House Speaker Tip O'Neill (D-Mass.) on the eve of the contra aid vote here June 24.

O'Neill properly blamed Regan for the set-up, which seriously hurt the credibility of the President's modus operandi of leaning, heavily and visibly, on the Congress to get his way—a talent which has gotten a lot of results to this point, and which he will need more than ever to salvage the defense budget, prevent troop withdrawals from Europe, and maintain adequate funding for the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Regan apparently talked the President into asking the impossible of O'Neill—an unprecedented opportunity to address the House on the eve of a major vote. That O'Neill would say "no" was certain. Regan then used that answer to try to embarrass O'Neill by opting for a direct speech to the nation from the Oval Office.

However, with help from the three major networks, the entire affair blew up in the President's face—not unanticipated by his own chief of staff.

Not only did O'Neill blow the whistle on the whole thing, but when Regan announced that he wanted to address the nation from the White

House, lo and behold, the major networks decided, in concert, not to carry the speech. Their noon-hour soap operas were more important than what the President had to say. Only the cable network, CNN, carried the speech live.

This disgrace to the President is also a precedent, designed to diminish his powers over the coming crucial months—and Regan probably had it all mapped out in advance.

State Department 'leak' methods justified

The fine art of greeting someone with one hand and stabbing him in the back with the other was explained to this reporter by a State Department official following recent open hearings on Panama.

The official, on the staff of Undersecretary of State Elliot Abrams, explained that there is "really no contradiction" between the "official" State Department line denying that there is any substance to drug-running charges made against Panama's Gen. Manuel Noriega at those hearings, and the State Department's refusal to denounce the allegations as "irresponsible." The charges also ran in the *New York Times*.

Officially, the staffer told me, "We cannot risk our diplomatic relations with the government of Panama by making these accusations ourselves. We have to say that, as far as we know, they are without foundation. However, the press, of course, is not bound by any such restraints, and neither is any individual congressman—although other nations sometimes have a hard time understanding this."

When asked why the State Department wouldn't settle the whole affair simply by denouncing the *New York Times*, the staffer said, "Oh, we would never do that. What if the *Times* is right?" In other words, the name of the game is to use the *New York Times*

to run a dirty operation, while maintaining relations with the people you are running the operation against.

So much for the crackdown on "leaks" imposed at the State Department recently, in which one staffer's head was sacrificed. Still, the press corps at the State Department is genuinely rattled over new security measures there which restrict the areas in the building where the press can go after hours. It's always good to remind the press that they are a security risk.

Public Health Service condemns itself

When the Public Health Service announced that 179,000 Americans would be dead from AIDS over the next five years, the generally overlooked fact was the self-condemning nature of the forecast.

Based on the average "incubation period" for the AIDS virus, the vast majority of the 179,000 people projected to die between now and 1991 are people exposed to the virus since 1983—the year the virus was discovered and an antibody test developed to identify it.

That means that if the U.S. Public Health Service had acted appropriately in accordance with the severity of the disease and implemented immediate, emergency universal screening and quarantine as soon as this test was developed, most of the 179,000 people who are going to die would have been saved.

In other words, we are talking about 179,000 "avoidable deaths" attributable to one thing only—the criminal inaction of our government. The cruel irony is that the majority of the victims of these avoidable deaths are the very people who have been duped, based on economic cost-cutting motives, into opposing such screening and quarantining on "civil rights" grounds.