

Irangate still hangs over Bush, as Gregg squeaks in

by William Jones

On June 21 the nomination of Donald Gregg as ambassador to South Korea squeaked by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in a 12-7 vote. Up until the final bell it was clear to most of the observers in the hearing room that Gregg was lying through his teeth—indeed, it was even obvious to most of the senators who voted for Gregg, who had been George Bush's vice presidential national security adviser under Reagan. In fact, the vote was really not a vote on the truth or falsity of Donald Gregg's statements; rather, it was a vote on how prepared the Senate was to really expose the whole truth behind the Iran-Contra affair, in particular the involvement of President Bush. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee clearly decided, with something of a divided mind, to let sleeping dogs lie—at least for the moment.

If the White House thinks that Gregg's nomination will finally put to rest the ghost of the Iran-Contra scandal, it is going to be sorely disappointed. Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh announced on June 13 that he will be pulling together another grand jury hearing on the Iran-Contra affair, and that this time it will include an investigation of the role of Donald Gregg—even though Gregg is not officially a "target." Already on June 24, four days after the Gregg nomination passed the committee, the Senate Intelligence Committee announced that they had uncovered a Reagan White House file which had never been searched during the congressional hearings. The files contain key memoranda relating to a secret plan to reward Honduras for its support of the Nicaraguan Contras—an angle that involves George Bush directly.

Moreover, two of the defendants in the Walsh investigations, Adm. John Poindexter and Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, still have to stand trial. Both have been "hung out to dry"—

and neither of them seems to like the idea. Secord has been totally isolated by the "old boy network" in the CIA, and it appears that somebody there wants to drive him to desperation. It can't be excluded that Secord will try to get even with the people who forced him to "take the rap" by exposing everything about the Iran-Contra affair. Poindexter looks as if he is going to fight the charges, and his defense attorney has already indicated that he will subpoena both Ronald Reagan and President Bush.

The Senate lineup

Aside from the Republican loyalists who would have voted for Gregg regardless of what would have been exposed during the hearings, the administration succeeded in pulling three Democrats behind the Gregg nomination. Sen. Charles Robb (D-Va.) was the first Democrat on the committee to declare himself in favor of it. Robb was one of the few Democrats who had been a longstanding supporter of the Contra operation.

The vote of Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, was of course the biggest boost that the Gregg nomination could have gotten. Pell's support will undoubtedly help to swing a number of votes behind Gregg when the nomination reaches the Senate floor. Pell and Sen. Terry Sanford (D-N.C.) said that they voted for Gregg because of their concern that a vote to reject Gregg would reflect a lack of confidence in Bush's own statements that he was also unaware of the secret Contra resupply operation. Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) commented that Sanford "just did not want to pursue a matter that could lead to the White House . . . that could implicate the President." Sanford himself commented, "If Gregg was lying,

he was lying to protect the President, which is different from lying to protect himself.”

Another element which undoubtedly played a major role in the refusal of the Democrats to go after Gregg was the sobering thought that if Irangate turns into Bushgate, with the possible resignation or impeachment of Bush, the country would be left with President Dan Quayle. Cranston said that one of the gibes he was getting while attempting to mobilize votes against Gregg was, “Are you trying to get us Dan Quayle, Cranston?”

But the major element in pulling together a slim majority of the committee around the Gregg nomination was the bludgeon of threats and thuggery. Those who wanted to continue the investigation of Gregg were told to either lay off, or face the same treatment meted out to Jim Wright, who was forced to abandon his post as Speaker of the House along with his House seat, on unproven charges of ethics violations. At one point, when House Majority Whip Tony Coelho’s name was floated in the press in relation to similar ethics violations, Cranston’s name was also circulated—perhaps as a warning that his neck would be on the chopping block next, if he persisted with questions about Gregg.

As things developed, the truth and falsity of Gregg’s testimony became matters of minor import in a vote which concerned whether or not to proceed with the investigation of George Bush. As Senator Robb put it, Gregg’s statements, made under oath, were “as reasonable and believable as I think we could expect under the circumstances.” Even Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), a Gregg supporter, admitted that part of Gregg’s story “strains belief.” So the senators chose to live with the Big Lie for the sake of political expediency—not an unusual compromise for these paragons of pragmatism who inhabit the hallowed halls of the nation’s Capitol.

Gregg’s testimony

The Gregg testimony was so vacuous and contradictory that no one can come from the hearings believing anything but that Gregg and Bush were up to their ears in the Iran-Contra affair. A number of key episodes were hammered at during the second day of hearings on June 15. Gregg claims that he saw the “tip of the iceberg” of the Contra resupply operation first on Aug. 8, 1986, when the issue was brought to his attention by a key player in the operation, Felix Rodriguez. Rodriguez was thoroughly grilled during the Contra hearings, and there is no doubt about the role that he played. And yet Rodriguez was introduced into the Central American operation by none other than Donald Gregg.

Ostensibly Rodriguez was deployed to El Salvador to assist the Salvadoran government in fighting the rebels, although February 1985 cables from Gen. Paul Gorman, then head of the U.S. Southern Command, state that Rodriguez actually had the Contra operation as his top priority. Rodriguez and Gregg were personally quite close: Rodriguez served under Gregg as a CIA operative in Asia. Rodriguez was close

enough to Gregg to pour his heart out to him, and yet Gregg would have the Congress believe that Rodriguez had said nothing during that whole period concerning his involvement Contra resupply. That in itself “strains belief.”

Gregg also claims not to have gotten a full picture of the Contra operations prior to December 1986, after the shooting down of the plane of Eugene Hasenfus over Nicaraguan territory. It was the Hasenfus affair which first brought the possible role of Gregg in the Contra operation into the public domain. When the role of Richard Secord and Oliver North became clear, Gregg was forced to change public testimony he had previously given regarding his knowledge of Contra operations.

During the course of the trial of Oliver North, the notebooks of North reveal an entry on Sept. 10, 1985 indicating a meeting with Gregg and Col. James Steele regarding Contra resupply operations. Steele has admitted that he was present at the meeting, and originally said that Gregg also was there. But now, Steele has apparently changed his story, and Gregg denies he was present. He was, however, forced to admit in the hearings, somewhat reluctantly, that he had “probably” introduced Steele to North.

Other damning evidence involves Col. Sam Watson, Gregg’s aide in the vice president’s office. On Feb. 4, 1986 Watson wrote a memo about the need for more logistical support for cross-border attacks into Nicaragua. The memo passed Gregg on its way to Bush, with Gregg noting on it, “Felix agrees with this. It is a major shortcoming.” Watson clearly was on top of the Contra operation at an early stage, and was fully knowledgeable about what was going on, at one point even referring to North as “chairman of the board” of the Contra resupply effort. And yet, Gregg claims his aide never told him anything about what he clearly did know about the Contra resupply.

With the role of Gregg sticking out like a sore thumb, the question is raised as to why Bush risked taking him into the government, dragging him along, continually casting the shadow of Contragate over the Bush administration. In December 1986, as the Gregg role broke into the open, Gregg had offered to resign as Bush’s national security adviser. Sen. Paul Sarbanes (D-Md.) offered some possible explanation as to why Bush refused to accept his resignation. Had he done so, Sarbanes explained, it would have undoubtedly heightened suspicion that Bush was making Gregg the scapegoat for the vice president.

On the other hand, if Bush had taken Gregg directly into the government after the election, as the President’s national security adviser, or in some other post not subject to Senate confirmation, and something were uncovered further down the road concerning Gregg’s role in Iran-Contra, Bush would immediately be targeted as the one who had cleared Gregg for the post. If, however, Gregg were appointed to a post requiring Senate confirmation, then the Senate would become co-responsible for the Gregg appointment.