
What's Behind Iran/Conragate?

A Talk With Raymond Lotta

The following interview was conducted in the early fall of 1987.

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Question: A little over a year ago, in the early fall of 1986, the Reagan administration really seemed almost invincible to many. Then in October 1986, when a Lebanese newspaper revealed that top Reagan aides had traveled to Iran to negotiate an arms deal, things began to suddenly unravel. And events since then have been unexpected and certainly interesting. I've got an overall question on what it all means, but the first question I want to ask is, why did this secret initiative by Reagan cause such a storm? Why did something that had been rumored and batted about months before, even by Jack Anderson in his columns, explode on the scene with such an impact? What led up to that? What were the factors that fueled the explosion?

Raymond Lotta: Well, it's true that this scandal seems to have come out of nowhere. There were some early warning signs of difficulties: the mid-term elections in the fall of 1986, when the Republicans lost control of the Senate, the Daniloff affair leading up to the Reykjavik Summit, and the Reykjavik Summit itself, all of which indicated that things were somewhat amiss, at least at some levels. But by and large Reagan seemed to be firmly in the saddle. And most important, there appeared to be a broad ruling-class consensus around the reactionary agenda that the ruling class has dubbed "resurgent America."

And then, like a lightning bolt, we have these embarrassing disclosures of the Iran dealings and the Contra connection, followed by a train of resignations and dismissals from the administration. Reagan is cut down from his mythic proportions. And this sends shock waves throughout the Western alliance.

The Tower Commission presented a certain assessment or analysis of what was going on. From their standpoint, or at least according to the official findings that were put forward, the issue was really a certain loss of control. A picture was painted of petty corruption, bureaucratic competition,

and rogue elephants. In the Commission's view, the problem was essentially one of management style. More specifically, it was suggested that Reagan was neither sufficiently involved in nor in control of policy decisions. This "loss of control" was compounded, according to the Commission, by some overzealous cowboys who got a bit too eager.

At the congressional hearings that took place in the spring and summer of 1987, we were basically treated to a cavalcade of revelations, titillations, sermons, and all kinds of deceptions. So the question is whether there is some rhyme or reason to all this, some logic underlying it.

To answer that, I think we have to understand Iran/Contragate as a very profound development, as a very, very important historical episode; and I think we also have to understand that the dust has by no means settled.

Objectively, Iran/Contragate resulted from two inter-related sets of contradictions. First, there are the strains and the difficulties, the high risks and the high stakes, associated with the prepositioning for world war. The world economy and international political relations are very taut, very precarious. As Bob Avakian, Chairman of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, has emphasized, "we are already in a period now where . . . war could break out at any time and out of any particular so-called local conflict where the interests of the two sides, the two imperialist blocs, come directly and sharply into conflict."¹

So the ruling class is trying to deal with some very sticky contradictions. But in trying to deal with those contradictions and in trying to take certain initiatives and angle for momentary advantage, the imperialists uncork new contradictions; they create new problems for themselves. The extensive use of covert actions is itself testimony to the delicate and tense situation that they face in the world.

The second, and very closely related, set of contradictions involves the debate and differences within the ruling class. These disagreements, I would think, revolve around two major types of questions. First, there are specific policy questions, such as Nicaragua and the Middle East. Second, there is debate and struggle around certain factors of institutional functioning. These are questions concerning the decisionmaking processes within the executive branch, interagency coordination and management, and the relation of covert actions to the gathering — through covert means — of intelligence. So I think Iran/Contragate involves two basic areas: policy disputes and some questions pertaining to institutional affairs.

But we should be very clear about what the scandal and the investigation represent. The revelations and the exposures, the hearings and the postmortems — these reflect neither the vitality of the system nor some bizarre tendency to self-flagellation that is somehow unique to the American body politic.

In fact, there are some very key questions that have not been fully thrashed out, and the hearings, the criminal investigations, and the shuffling of personnel within the administration are important arenas for resolving some of these problems. Certain sides have been taken, certain lines

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have been drawn. At the same time, having pointed to the existence of such differences and the existence of particular problems, I think it's important to emphasize and to understand that these disagreements are not over the general program of resurgent America, a program that Reagan has presided over and come to symbolize, but are rather differences and disagreements over the methods for implementing it.

Q: At the beginning of your response you touched on a few early signs, like the Reykjavik Summit and the Daniloff affair, that all was not well with the Reagan administration. But overall, what has been the scorecard, so to speak, of the Reagan team? How has it been implementing this program of resurgent America that you referred to?

RL: I think it's undeniable that, from the standpoint of the interests of the ruling class, Reagan has accomplished some things. Notably, he's played an important role in restoring what is called American self-confidence and in helping to overcome this so-called Vietnam syndrome. The last seven years have seen the most massive military buildup in U.S. "peacetime" history. At certain points, the Reagan team was able to put the Soviet Union on the defensive. It carried out some low-risk, high-payoff actions in key regional theaters, for instance the invasion of Grenada. And the Reagan years have seen certain significant attempts to bolster the unity of will and unity of action of the Western alliance in relation to this general program of war preparation. Military spending in the NATO countries and Japan has increased. And, most recently and most dramatically, there has been unprecedented military cooperation outside of Europe — I'm speaking of the Persian Gulf maneuvers orchestrated by the U.S. and involving Western Europe and Japan. Still, the question of the unity of the alliance is a sticky one.

Q: On the domestic front you can point to Reagan's short-term success in holding the economy together and his program of domestic repression.

RL: The Reagan team was able to engineer a recovery of sorts from the 1980-81 recession, a perverse recovery, and was able to sustain some growth. But while one can point — from the standpoint of the ruling class — to those accomplishments, certain criticisms have been raised in certain quarters. For example, on international affairs criticisms have been raised by people like Brzezinski, even Kissinger, and other veterans of previous administrations. Some critical opinions have appeared in influential policy-oriented journals as well. Some of these criticisms seem to involve a view that the Reagan team's Middle Eastern policy is incoherent. There are also questions about the way in which the Star Wars program is being pursued: while there is agreement on the basic orientation of strengthening the first-strike nuclear capability of the U.S., some, like Brzezinski, feel that perhaps Reagan has put too many eggs in the basket of Star Wars and has elevated it into a grand strategy, when it can't become fully operational in the time frame and in the sense that is being suggested. (Some specialists in the field of Soviet military capabilities, like David Holloway, have even suggested that the Star Wars program may invite or accelerate more cost-effective Soviet moves to counter such a program, with perhaps more short- or medium-term operational benefits for the Soviets.*)

There is some concern about the economy as well. The military buildup and the means to finance it have run up enormous costs and caused incredible distortions with destabilizing consequences.† And then of course there is the whole issue of the Third World debt crisis and how to manage it. This debt crisis is a time bomb ticking away. So perhaps there are ruling-class forces objecting to a certain "inattentiveness" on the part of the administration to those aspects of the overall program of strengthening the hand of the Western alliance for confrontation with the Soviet bloc.

Q: But some of these problems are long-standing. Why should they come to a head when they did, in such a dramatic fashion, and over particular U.S. initiatives in Iran and Nicaragua?

RL: I think this is the point. It's a very dicey situation that the imperialists face. Every move, every countermove, every regional initiative — all of these things can have very severe and serious consequences for them if they result in blunders, if they result in setbacks, if they result in short-term defeats. So for that reason, any of these moves is going to be subject to very intense scrutiny and evaluated in view of the general program of moving towards confrontation with the Soviet Union.

*On Soviet necessities and capabilities with respect to Star Wars, see Raymond Lotta, "Star Wars and the Soviet Economy," *Revolutionary Worker* No. 393 (16 February 1987).

†This was before the stock market shock of October 19, 1987 — ed.

Q: Maybe we should look at the question of the precipitating move, which was really the famous trip to Iran with the cake/Bible. If you think about it, there were two extremely high-level operatives in the administration going with a very elaborate, and uncharacteristic, personal message from Reagan to Khomeini. You would think that it was a major initiative.

RL: At the outset, it's necessary to emphasize that while we have some sense of the issues in dispute, we can really only speculate about the positions that may have been taken and advanced and some of the differences over the specific aspects of these policies. But I do think we have something to go on. I agree with you completely that this Iran initiative was obviously a big thing. I mean it does say something about the functioning of the executive branch when you have Lt. Col. Oliver North and Robert McFarlane, the former National Security Adviser, on the scene in Iran.

So was there anything to this Iran initiative? I think there was a certain logic to it. And Reagan is not totally dissembling when he says that there were attempts and efforts made to seek out what are described as moderates. I think that the Iran initiative can be seen as working on three distinct but interrelated levels. One, the U.S. imperialists were probing and feeling about to increase their leverage in the Iranian government, increase their ability to foster divisions. In short, they wanted to use the sale and transfer of arms to put themselves in a stronger position — not just for the post-Khomeini period but even right now. I believe that the U.S. hoped to use these arms sales to strengthen its influence in Iran, without at the same time allowing these arms, at least the volume shipped, to lead to an Iranian victory or decisive advantage in the Iran-Iraq war. So I think that was one aspect of what they were trying to do.

It's pretty clear that, despite its rhetoric, the regime in Iran tilts towards the West and that the U.S., for a number of reasons, sees the necessity of working with and through this regime. But another question in terms of what might have been going on with the Iran initiative, and this is something that is not entirely clear and about which we can only

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speculate, is whether the U.S. may have been trying to force an even more favorable realignment within the regime. It's possible that the U.S. was trying to solidify a more pro-U.S. consensus within the regime. And this might have been linked to efforts to engineer some form of coup. The Palestinian scholar Edward Said has suggested this.² But if such moves were part of what was going on, and again we have no concrete evidence, they most likely would have involved forces centrally positioned in the regime, who knows, maybe even including Khomeini.

The third aspect of the Iran initiative did involve, it seems fairly clear, securing the release of some hostages. But I think this flowed mainly from the need to get some very high-level CIA operatives out of the hands of certain people in the Middle East, and perhaps secondarily it involved some questions of the "prestige" of U.S. imperialism as a world power — its ability to get its hostages freed.

Q: In a certain sense Reagan himself laid out some of the crucial geostrategic interests the U.S. faces in bringing Iran back more firmly into its bloc. So why should there be such objection to this in the ruling class itself? It's obviously in their interests. And by sending Khomeini a personally inscribed Bible, Reagan himself pointed out the ideological convergence between the brutal fundamentalism of Khomeini and the brutal fundamentalism that Reagan has sponsored in this country. Just one other thing, McFarlane compared the Iran initiative to Kissinger's China opening. I don't think this is correct, but perhaps it reflects that they saw themselves as attempting a grand strategic stroke. So again, why should ruling-class forces object to that? Why was there such an uproar over this seemingly "well-meaning" initiative?

RL: It seems there was general agreement within the administration and within the ruling class as a whole on the need to seek openings in Iran. But I think there were qualms over this particular initiative because (a) it potentially may have tipped the scales too much in favor of the Iranian government in the Iran-Iraq war and (b) some of the forces they were seeking out as allies, or identifying as potential allies, might not have been all that reliable.

Another area of concern, and this has come to light more recently, was that seeking this kind of opening in Iran — while it was intended to fortify the regional position of the West in the Middle East — may have had the more short-term effect of damaging the alliances with, and even undermining, some of the other regimes in the area, notably Saudi Arabia and Egypt. I believe there was concern that the continuation of the Gulf war together with this initiative might have created some tensions within and put some pressures on those governments.

And finally, there was some apprehension within the U.S. ruling class that the upshot of all this might have been to create new opportunities for the Soviets in the Persian

Gulf and the Middle East. (And in fact, these latter two concerns have actually surfaced more explicitly during the last two months and were important factors behind the U.S. decision to reflag Kuwaiti tankers.) So that was kind of how this thing was playing itself out. Again, we don't have exact confirmation of the lines of dispute on this, but I think that while there was agreement to seek out these openings, there was also concern over how all of this was being prosecuted and what its immediate fallout would be, especially for the "stability" of the region.

Q: Certainly something that can be drawn from the experience of the demise of the Carter administration and now the problems encountered by the Reagan administration is the incredible importance of the Persian Gulf region to the strategic concerns of the U.S. imperialists, the serious difficulties the U.S. imperialists face in trying to hold all their disparate interests together there, and how cracks and fissures can rapidly open up for both inroads by their Soviet rivals and revolutionary initiatives as well.

But continuing in this area of policy disputes, from the content of the hearings it seems that there's some discord and wrangling going on in their ranks over Nicaragua as well. Are there disagreements over this? And what exactly are the terms of this?

RL: I think the debate over Nicaragua is similar to what we discussed concerning Iran. Essentially, there's basic unity within the ruling class that the U.S. cannot tolerate another pro-Soviet regime in the Western hemisphere; it can't tolerate an expanding Soviet base of operations or sphere of influence in the Western hemisphere. And there's also unity that it's necessary to weaken and to destabilize the Sandinista regime.

All this, in the eyes of the ruling class, calls for a multipronged approach. It means ringing Nicaragua with military encampments, a major reason for the militarization of Honduras. It means putting economic and political pressure on the Sandinista regime, making it more difficult for the regime to sustain popular support. I think there's also unity within the ruling class in assessing the stakes of the situation. Again, it's very dicey: while such a regime cannot be tolerated, it's also the case that the U.S. can't afford to get bogged down in a prolonged military action in Nicaragua, and Central America in general, in the context of international contention with the Soviet Union. So I think those broad outlines and contours of policy define a certain consensus within the leading circles of the ruling class.

On the other hand, there does seem to be some dispute over how exactly to go at the Sandinista regime. And, while we can't say for sure that there are two clearly defined policy poles as to how to deal with the Nicaraguan government, there do seem to be two general approaches. First, there seems to be a view, which might be called the political transition model — one can take Mozambique as a possible

example — of applying economic, political, and military pressure as part of a long-term effort to force a more pro-Western tilt to a regime and to force the incorporation of pro-Western, anticommunist elements into that regime.

Q: But not necessarily to overthrow the regime itself?

RL: Not to directly overthrow it, but to create the conditions whereby further penetration becomes possible, leading either to a direct military takeover or to further internal disintegration and fragmentation of the pro-Soviet forces. So I think this is one view. And that view carries with it the recognition of the need for military pressure — which explains, in part, the on-again, off-again approach to the Contras. Even from this viewpoint, the U.S. cannot afford to disband a pro-American military force in the region. This "political transition" model has always figured as one possible avenue for dealing with the Sandinista regime. Aspects of this approach are embodied, at least in part, in the Arias peace plan.

The other approach — and I have to point out that these are not so completely unrelated or divorced from one another — sees the Contra operations as a direct prelude to, if not a pretext for, direct U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. In other words, the Contras are seen as a kind of advance contingent for the direct intrusion of U.S. military strength.

Q: And they're an element that can cause a provocation which could be the pretext for a U.S. invasion.

RL: Precisely. In other words, a retaliatory raid by the Nicaraguan government could be construed, as we've seen over the past few years, as an incursion into a neighboring country, and that, in turn, could become the stuff of an international incident — prompting a direct U.S. invasion.

So I think one can identify two different approaches. In some ways these are variations on the same themes; in other ways they carry with them different implications in terms of immediate military and logistical support for various Contra operations. Now it is possible — and this can only be offered up as creative guesswork — but it is possible that the Reagan team, operating according to this second model, had developed a plan for military action in the short run — military action up to and including a full-scale invasion of Nicaragua. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Miami Herald* carried stories — I believe in late July 1987 — which disclosed that the National Security Council and North had, under their direct control, a group of elite fighting forces, U.S. fighting forces, that were engaged in direct combat with the Sandinistas — in Nicaragua. So it's possible, it's very possible, that the Reagan team saw an invasion as being imminent.

Q: You're saying that the Reagan team may have been planning an imminent invasion?

The scandal may have been deliberately provoked as a means of staying the Reagan team's hand in Nicaragua in order to prevent what was viewed in some circles as a precipitant of wider military action, and to derail a plan that was perhaps seen by some as having fiasco written all over it.

RL: Right. They may have seen the viability and tenability of an invasion in the near term. I think this is something for us to seriously consider. It may also mean that the scandal, if you want to call it that, was deliberately provoked, so to speak, as a means of staying the Reagan team's hand in order to prevent what was viewed in some circles as a precipitant of wider military action and to derail a plan that was perhaps seen by some as having fiasco written all over it. This may have been a big part of the scandal.

Q: So you're arguing that the lines of demarcation were not support versus nonsupport for the Contras — in fact there seems to be some unity around not abandoning or disbanding that operation in any case. Instead, the debate appears to have been over a more dramatic near-term move versus a more protracted view of what was going to be necessary.

RL: Right, that's a reasonable description. I also think that were an invasion to take place, the optimistic projections of the planners saw it as being a lightning strike, as being in some respects a surgical operation that would result in the fairly short-term toppling of the Sandinistas. And I think that was something that was a matter of grave concern to others, who saw it more as a reckless gamble, as a gamble that would not only destabilize the surrounding governments and perhaps other regimes in Central America but one that might also have very negative results in terms of the U.S.'s positioning vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

Q: I think there's room for dispute as to whether the United States could accomplish a short-term, decisive victory over the Sandinistas.

RL: Right, that's exactly the point. In all likelihood, direct U.S. military action, were it to happen, would not be a Grenada-like affair; it would be a war and it would not be

something that could be fought in an enclave fashion, as was the case in the early stages of the Vietnam War. So it was a very, very risky proposition — or is a very, very risky proposition — and one that's cause for great consternation in the ruling class.

I think there's something else that's involved in the Nicaraguan issue, beyond the question of the military posture toward the regime. It has to do with the Reagan team's approach to Nicaragua and how this relates to the general situation in the Western hemisphere. There may have been high-level concern that the Reagan team was too wholly preoccupied with the question of Nicaragua, absorbed with it to the exclusion — obviously not to the absolute exclusion — but absorbed with it to an extent that may have lessened U.S. preparedness for dealing with other hemispheric issues. In particular, there seems to have been some concern that the Reagan team was not paying enough attention to the question of the potential for economic collapse or social upheaval in Mexico and to the larger implications of the debt crisis in Latin America as a whole.

On this matter of the preoccupation of the Reagan team with Nicaragua, there's the joke that goes around Washington that Reagan might not have known anything else, but he did know just about every member of the Contra fighting forces by name. And he had made those statements about how he would make the Sandinistas "cry uncle." Not that there's anything contrary to the interests of the ruling class in saying those things, but was there perhaps a too single-minded obsession with the Sandinistas?

Q: Let me pose what I hope might be a provocative question. Really since 1979, but then developing and deepening it in the first few years of the '80s, the RCP has predicated its analysis on the understanding that the rivalry between the imperialist blocs headed by the U.S. and the Soviet Union is the principal contradiction or the overall determining factor, if you will, in the political affairs of the day. And yet, we see the Reagan administration come to the major crisis of its term in office over what seem to be contradictions in two Third World theaters. So how do you see the relationship between the U.S.-Soviet rivalry and this Iran/Contra crisis? And a secondary element of the question is whether specific questions over U.S.-Soviet policy entered into the whole eruption of this affair as well?

RL: There's been ample analysis produced by the RCP showing that at present the most vexing problem before the U.S. imperialist ruling class and the imperialist ruling classes of the world, and the most defining feature of the current situation, is the antagonisms between the two rival imperialist blocs. I think there's essential unity within the ruling class that this is a contradiction that can only be resolved through war against the other bloc, that such a war can and must be won, and that this is a question of sooner

rather than later. This is the objective contradiction that has to be resolved if either of the two imperialist blocs is to surmount the various problems and hurdles in the way of overcoming the many and the multidimensional crises that they face. And this assessment is a stark reminder of just how dangerous these times are.

But having said all that, it's very important to note that the Third World remains the site of tremendous upheaval, upsurge, and insurgency. The Third World is still very much the center for various struggles against oppression and exploitation. In Azania, South Korea, and Haiti mass struggles pummel reaction. In Peru the armed struggle led by a Maoist party continues to gain strength. And at the same time, the Third World is a focal point of contention between the two imperialist blocs, and their moves and counter-moves vis-à-vis one another there play a pivotal role in their positioning for a global military confrontation.

So this understanding and analysis of the centrality of the contradiction between the two imperialist blocs by no means suggests that the Third World has somehow dropped out of the equation or is only a matter of concern to the two imperialist blocs in relation to their strategic parrying and blocking in getting ready for showdown. The deepest needs of empire, of internationalized accumulation, critically involve control over the Third World.*

I think the fact that so much of this controversy turned on the various initiatives pursued by the Reagan team toward Iran and Nicaragua, and the problems it faced in pursuing them, can't be divorced from the so-called Reagan Doctrine of rolling back Soviet influence in the Third World, of undertaking various levels of intervention, meddling, subversion, and sabotage in numerous Third World countries. All that tells us something about how these different contradictions are interlocked and interacting with one another.

I want to return to Bob Avakian's interview, "Questions for These Times," where he spoke directly to some of the ways that regional concerns, or contention over particular hotspots, intersect with the imperialists' larger global strategizing — particularly at a moment in history when, as we discussed earlier, any of these local conflicts could escalate into world war:

The point is, when I speak of a scenario where there's a move and then a countermove and then they're in each other's face, that serves to indicate that there isn't much room for maneuver on the part of the one side or the other. The rival blocs don't have much room to maneuver before they are directly up against each other. Now sometimes it's possible to be fooled by the appearance of things, ironically exactly because there is so little maneuvering room. What I mean by this is that because they don't have much maneuvering room sometimes they deliberately hold back from making

*This is a point that is extensively addressed in *America in Decline*.

a particular move because if they do make that move it will start the process going which, with only one or two more steps, will lead directly to such a conflict.³

This speaks directly to the point I was making earlier about why some ruling-class forces may have been gravely concerned about a possible U.S. invasion of Nicaragua, and more generally about some of the concerns evidenced during the course of the Iran/Contra crisis.

When we step back and look at the Iran and Nicaragua situations and some of the criticisms that have been voiced about administration policies, I believe that a major question and probable cause of worry within the ruling class is how well the Reagan team has been juggling subregional interests in relation to regional interests (for instance, the relation between the Persian Gulf and the general situation in the Middle East, or the relation between managing things in Central America and hemispheric issues) and also how well they've been juggling regional interests in relation to global strategic interests. This is clearly an issue of concern, if not contention, within the ruling class.

There is the question of how the U.S. imperialists weigh the acceptable and necessary levels of military risk and military action in those particular regions and how that relates to generalized military conflict with the Soviet Union — that is, the relation between risks on a military level in any given area of the world and more generalized military conflict. Then there's the question of the relationship between the use of force and the use of diplomacy in particular regions, and how that too dovetails with larger global strategic concerns. And finally, there's a great deal of concern within the ruling class over the problem of preparing for multiple or simultaneous crises, including armed conflicts, in different regional theaters — and that too has military and political implications.

So these are some of the ways in which questions and issues pertaining to the handling of insurgencies in the Third World, unfriendly governments in the Third World, and rocky and turbulent situations in the Third World interact with the larger strategic matrix of factors that they face. The bottom line for the U.S. imperialists is this: how can they both hold their empire together and put themselves in the best position for an all-out confrontation with the Soviet Union. And handling that contradiction, juggling these regional and global factors, is a problem that bristles with the potential for debacles and for triggering that all-out confrontation with the Soviet Union.

Q: Getting to the second part of the question, were there differences over the handling of U.S.-Soviet relations specifically? You mentioned the Daniloff affair and the Reykjavik Summit earlier as perhaps having fed into the eruption of this particular crisis.

RL: As I indicated, U.S.-Soviet rivalry provides the

backdrop and the basis for understanding these other questions. But as to whether particular aspects of the U.S. posture toward the Soviet Union were really at the heart of Iran/Contra, this is very hard to determine. Yes, Reykjavik obviously sprung U.S.-Soviet relations onto the political landscape in a way that was not the case before and highlighted some problems in the way in which the Reagan team was handling U.S.-Soviet relations. But there is very little evidence to suggest that U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union was, or is, at the heart of the scandal and the debate that has taken place, although all the hubbub coming off of Reykjavik should tell us that it was certainly an element of the debate.

At this point, it seems as though the major differences within the ruling class focus on questions related to policies and activities in the Third World. Now, of course, this rather clearly involves U.S.-Soviet relations, since the clashing interests of these two imperialist powers get played out very sharply in the Third World.

But getting back to Reykjavik itself, there were probably two areas of concern with respect to how things were being handled by the Reagan team. First, it has been suggested that the administration was going over the heads of its NATO allies at this summit. It hadn't sufficiently consulted them. This caused a lot of confusion and resentment, especially since American nuclear weapons, and America's willingness to use them in defense of Western Europe, are in some ways the glue of the Western alliance. Second, the Reagan team was criticized from just about every quarter for its lack of preparation in going into the summit. Reagan's performance was a real embarrassment, and the Soviets scored some propaganda points.

As I mentioned, there is general unity within the ruling class about what time it is in the world, about what the needs and necessities are. I feel that what's principally facing the U.S. ruling class in terms of U.S.-Soviet relations is the question of how to deal with a changing, evolving situation in the Soviet Union and a somewhat more vigorous and aggressive international offensive on the part of the Soviet Union — politically, militarily, and economically.

Q: And even ideologically.

RL: And ideologically as well, right. The Soviet Union is showing the world a new sort of a profile — the *glasnost*. But this not just a clever public relations ploy. There are obviously some new realities that exist in the Soviet Union, and there is the question of how the U.S. should respond to those new realities. I'm talking about the fact that the leadership succession crisis seems to have been resolved in the Soviet Union, at least for the near term. There are also efforts underway to revitalize the Soviet economy and overcome certain aspects of crisis. This reorganization and restructuring is very much tied to efforts to further rationalize and integrate the Soviet-led COMECON economic alliance, in part on the basis of deeper linkages with the

world market. None of these measures can be dissociated from the Soviet Union's general need to increase its technological and economic capabilities in order to increase its military potential to carry through with its version of space offense and space defense.

So I think the question that the ruling class in this country is debating is how to probe and, at the same time, deal with the fact that the Soviets have clearly gained some initiative in international relations.

Q: So in summation, it seems that things came to a head over regional contradictions that the United States was trying to deal with — specifically in Iran and Central America — and their relationship to the U.S.'s more overall interests. Earlier, you said that the crisis had been triggered by both policy differences and differences over institutional functioning. What are the institutional questions that are under dispute or up for resolution?

RL: I think some of the central institutional issues involved in this debate and scandal turn on what is viewed by some analysts, people like Brzezinski and Kissinger, for instance, as excessive fragmentation and decentralization in the decision-making processes of the executive branch and some downgrading of the National Security Council or the National Security Advisor. Some in ruling circles apparently feel that the various policy strands — military and economic — have not been woven together as perhaps they should; and that, in turn, touches on the whole way in which various agencies are being coordinated and managed. So that, it seems, is one range of issues.

Another area of concern involves intelligence. There may be a criticism that the planning and evaluation of the risks inherent in various covert actions were inadequate. As I indicated earlier, I think that there was some concern that covert actions were being unduly combined with the gathering of intelligence by covert means. I also think there was — and is — some worry that intelligence has been unduly biased and tailored towards justifying certain policy initiatives rather than providing policy makers and policy executors with a full body of knowledge with which to act.

There may also be some sentiment that the Reagan team had cut itself off too much from what has been described as the "institutional memory" — that is, the expertise and the experts from different levels of government and from previous administrations. Another focus of concern is whether the policy makers and high-ranking officials, for instance people attached to the National Security Council, were tending too much to the details of certain policy initiatives — involving everything from bribery to gunrunning — and not enough to the more general contours of policy evaluation and formulation. Any administration, particularly at this juncture of history, must be able to act quickly on every level, especially the military level. But it must do so on the basis of the most informed judgement.

So those seem to me to be some of the institutional questions that were tied into this controversy.

Q: Certainly a major motif, if not the major motif of the congressional hearings was exactly these institutional issues — they were phrasing it as checks and balances.

RL: On the question of checks and balances, Bob Avakian put it very succinctly and very powerfully when he said that the so-called three branches of government — the executive, the legislative, and the judicial — are part of the same tree, and that tree is the system of global exploitation. That really cuts to the quick of the myth of checks and balances.

The conduct of these hearings should teach us much about this myth and its actual substance. First of all, these hearings had their crude, farcical quality. Representative Lee Hamilton, who played a very leading and instrumental role in convening and overseeing these hearings, bragged, or "proudly acknowledged" if you will, that in his capacity as a member of the congressional oversight committee dealing with covert actions he approved 90 percent of the requests for such actions coming from the executive branch. It's also interesting that the chief investigator on the Senate staff in these hearings was one Thomas Polgar, who happened to be the CIA station chief in Vietnam when Saigon fell. Another investigator attached to the Senate staff involved with these hearings was Joel Lisker, who worked with none other than Oliver North in 1985 in attempting to shuttle aid to the Contras.

Q: So you're in good hands with all-state.

RL: All this was no "travesty of justice," but rather a reflection of underlying realities. There are three basic points that should be made about these so-called checks and balances. First, there is a cohesiveness and a unity to institutionalized political power in general and to political power in this imperialist society in particular. We're dealing with a series of highly centralized hierarchies and bureaucracies. But the imperialist state apparatus is a structure of structures, a network of networks, that derives its internal unity from the production relations of society. It's very interesting that the imperialist affairs of state never ceased being carried out and attended to, even when they were under intense scrutiny during these hearings. In fact, the administration made a major, and provocative, military push in the Persian Gulf right in the midst of these hearings.

The second point is that the fulcrum of this political power is not Congress, nor some special, unique relationship between Congress and the executive branch. It is the executive branch which is the locus of the important and key decision making; this is the ruling team of the ruling class.

Behind all the parliamentary pieties and the so-called constitutional constraints lies a vast and ugly network of organized violence.

Q: So the idea that the heart of the Iran/Contra affair was some sort of "secret junta" or "illegal government within the government," as some have put it, is wrong?

RL: Well, this is a complicated issue. To begin with, the ruling class has always made use of shadowy, irregular, and seemingly parallel power networks to "get things done" under certain conditions. But there is a more specific history to the existence of so vast an apparatus of covert terror. And that has to do with the emergence of the United States as the top-dog imperialist after World War 2 and the fact that it would be "the policeman of the world." Dirty tricks, dirty operations, and dirty wars were, and remain, a basic method of safeguarding Pax Americana, especially in the Third World. And whether it's Iran in 1953 or Nicaragua in 1986, it's the CIA that has been at the core of these operations, with the National Security Council playing a pivotal initiating and "watchdog" role. And given today's volatile and dangerous world situation, hidden commitments, covert actions, and, yes, the principle of "plausible deniability" are that much more the order of the day... and have that much more potential to backfire.

But it is true that during the congressional hearings there was a lot of talk about people breaking the law and operations getting out of control. This became a big deal. So what was this really signifying? I think the Reagan team was really being criticized not for breaking the law but for breaking the rules. In other words, it was bypassing the established and agreed-upon procedures by which covert actions are reviewed and evaluated by congressional oversight committees. Now if these operations had actually succeeded, this wouldn't have been a big sin. But things were not going well in Nicaragua and were showing no sign of improving. Yet administration officials and operatives were pushing harder and harder, scheming, lying, diverting funds, and so on. No one in Congress was against covert actions — how many times were we reminded of that during the hearings? It was just that things were not going well, not subject to informed reevaluation, and in that sense getting out of hand. And then there were the "jolting revelations" about dealings with Iran. So these operations finally got reined in. In effect, major policy differences over Nicaragua and Iran were coming to a head and getting debated out over the question of covert operations and procedures.

And this brings us to the third point that has to be em-

phasized and that one could gain some insights into, or at least a glimpse of, through the course of these hearings. Behind all the parliamentary pieties and the so-called constitutional constraints lies a vast and ugly network of organized violence. Maybe we could visualize this as a kind of a carousel, like the one on *Let's Make a Deal*. We can see, on the one hand, the politicians holding forth, politely exchanging their views, holding press conferences, orating, issuing reports. We can see visits of foreign dignitaries and such statesmen being welcomed at the White House. And then this idyllic scene swivels around and what do we see, what is revealed? We see political operatives, arms merchants, secret armies, death squads, assassination teams, and logistical support systems under the direct guidance of the National Security Council and the CIA. We can look at Oliver North's so-called "Operation Democracy." Who was involved in Operation Democracy? There was the Vietnam connection: General John Singlaub, who was the on-site commander of Operation Phoenix, which was a program to exterminate anywhere from 20,000 to 60,000 NLF ("Vietcong") cadre during the war in Vietnam. We see anti-Castro Cubans, involved historically in various assassination attempts and sabotage. And we see operatives from the World Anti-Communist League, issuing forth from places like South Korea and Taiwan and staffed with many ex-Nazis.

Q: I think one other thing that has to be added is the work the Christie Institute has done exposing the financial links of all this to the international drug trade, and the ways in which the CIA has overseen the divvying up of certain drug turf areas to finance different operations.

RL: Maybe we can describe these as "off-shore" drug and arms enterprises under the coordination and guidance of the CIA.

But back for a minute to this notion of checks and balances: it is also used, obviously, to promote many an illusion and myth of democracy. During the hearings we heard endless rhetoric from the likes of North about "democracy" and "democratization" in Nicaragua — the hearings themselves became a pep rally for the Contras. But all this talk of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion — it really means nothing in the abstract, because these same people like North have absolutely no problems with the regimes in Chile, Paraguay, or Guatemala that rule through death squads and midnight knocks on the door; they have no problems with South Africa, one of the most draconic and repressive regimes in human history. In fact, administration officials had approved a plan in 1984 that would have had South Africa pay for the training and equipping of the Contras in Nicaragua. How fitting! North was up to his neck in the El Salvador operation during the years that death squads were killing 300 people a week! And the real question for them is not democracy. Or, more accurately, the objective content of

democracy, so far as the relations between the imperialist countries and the oppressed countries go, is this: are these countries within the U.S. geopolitical orbit, and are these countries open to U.S. foreign investment? That's the essence, the litmus test if you will, of the democracy that was being hailed at these hearings.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about the limits of permissible dissent that were etched out in the Irangate hearings. You kind of got hit by the fact that every committee member felt compelled to prove his anti-Sandinista bona fides at length and his patriotic bona fides overall.

RL: The congressional investigators were very deferential, bordering on the obsequious, in dealing with these witnesses. Those who have been involved in gunrunning and drug-smuggling, assassinations and bombings of villages and babies, were always, always praised for their dedication to their country — this was a running thread throughout the hearings. And the hearings themselves were absolutely obscene in the sense that there was never a single mention of the fact that since 1979, 200,000 people have died in Central America as a result of U.S.-sponsored hostilities and perhaps a million people have been uprooted from their homes. The drug connection, to which you referred, was hardly touched on.

Plans for martial law in the U.S., which we can talk about later, were never dug into; discussion about this was quashed as out of order. Joint U.S.-Israel covert actions were ruled out of order. Very importantly, never once did these hearings stray from the universe of discourse of how best to safeguard and extend U.S. international interests. The bottom line here was the reaffirmation of the global interests of U.S. imperialism.

Q: I know we'll get into the Ollie North phenomenon in a minute, but I do have to mention one thing here. There was a point in the hearings when North invoked his eleven-year-old daughter in some fashion, as if the defense of his eleven-year-old daughter and other eleven-year-old daughters like her is the rationale for all the dirty, foul deeds that he has been a part of — only a fraction of which were even indicated in the hearings. A lot of people were spontaneously very outraged by such hypocrisy from someone with the blood of so many children on his own hands. And it just seems to me that if what you really want — and what I think a lot of people really did want — is for the Ollie Norths of this world to stand in the docket accused by all the eleven-year-old children that they've slain, directed others to slay, and had a part in slaying — if that's what you want, then you're going have to have a different class holding state power to get it. That's not going to come when this class holds state power. It's similar to the Nixon thing; the crimes that

Nixon was sent packing for never included the turning of Indochina into a butcher shop.

This leads us to the promotion of North as a hero. The persona of Reagan has been very, very key to the whole resurgent America offensive. Yet today there's a joke going around among right-wingers in Washington and finding its way into the major newspapers that as far as the current Central America peace plan goes, "If Ronald Reagan were alive, it never would have happened." So you've got this kind of open mocking of Reagan now for some of the very things he was applauded for before. And yet at the same time, there was this rather stunning, and unexpected I think, mass promotion of Oliver North — at least the television networks moved very quickly in unison to make this man a major icon. What's going on with this?

RL: Well, it's certainly true that Reagan was knocked down a peg, or several pegs, one might say. But the knocking down of Reagan is linked to the kinds of questions of geopolitical positioning and specific policy initiatives that we've been talking about. He was not knocked down a peg or two — or several more as this situation continues to unfold and unravel — because America somehow no longer needs a program of reaction. On the contrary, I think there was a strong whiff, a strong scent, of fascism that came off of these hearings. This alarmed and outraged millions throughout this country who realized what was really being said, what all this implied about where this country is heading, and what that means in terms of people's futures and their lives.

If anything, these hearings signaled a continuing commitment to the reactionary and repressive domestic agenda that Reagan has been pushing through, which has been implemented at all levels of government, and which has a profound ideological kernel to it as well. I think that Ollie-mania was a critical feature of these hearings. I thought it was very telling that North was given a platform, in fact even goaded into offering his view of the world. And that was a view that America is under siege, that it is already at war, that a communist, anti-American contagion is spreading and must be stopped now, and it's only a matter of time before we'll be fighting in Arizona.

And there was an image projected about North that says something about how fascism is being packaged and marketed for America. This was an image of noble suffering; this was an image of a dedicated patriot, a true patriot, who'd been vilified for doing nothing more, for committing no other crime, than serving his country and serving his country with a great deal of passion. This was an image of someone who was facing down, staring down his tormentors, the congressional investigators — who, it should be pointed out, bent over backward to give him that platform to speak. This was a man who embodied and extolled the virtues of blind discipline and obedience. Oliver North was saying that if you love your family and you love your country, then anything is permissible — whether it's lying or

whether it's murder. And this does say something about one of the motifs of the fascist current in America today.

Q: It's not only that anything is permissible, but that the lies, the murder, and the dealing in slime becomes noble, and anything short of that is contemptible, degrading, and weakening.

RL: Exactly. And one of the most enduring and pernicious themes of America's national mythology is that whatever cruelty is perpetrated by America — that cruelty, that injustice, that heinous, heinous crime flows from the purest and most innocent of motives. This was, again, part of why North was brought forward in the way that he was and part of the reason that he was allowed to hold forth in the way that he did. The journalist Alexander Cockburn put it well; he described the North phenomenon as "fascism with a human face." And we also have to see that North was built up not only to regain some lost ground, because it is true that Reagan was cut down somewhat, at least from superhuman proportions, but to reignite the social base for reaction in this country and to demoralize and intimidate others. So I think that was an important element behind these hearings, although the principal aspect of what was going on at the hearings (and their longer-term effect) was more a matter of the debate within the ruling class.

Q: Another good characterization of Ollie-mania that I heard from someone was, "They're saying North for President, but really it's North for Colonel." This was in reference to the Colonels all over the world that the U.S. has installed at various times to directly run the affairs of different states.

RL: Yes. And very related and very apt are the revelations which have come out in the past year, thanks in large part to the efforts of people from the Christic Institute and others, linking Oliver North to plans for the imposition of martial law in the U.S. — martial law that was openly viewed as a way to repress domestic opposition to an invasion of Nicaragua. A very elaborate contingency plan has been worked up, and exercises have been carried out under the rubric of Rex 84 to test out certain aspects of that contingency plan, which involved everything from the suspension of the U.S. Constitution and the appointment of military commanders to run state and local governments, to rounding up and detaining dissidents and potential dissidents, including many, many immigrants. When this was raised by someone on the congressional panel as a rather shocking affair, that was ruled out of order by Senator Inouye, the panel co-chair.

Q: Stepping back from all this, from everything we've summed up, it's been some months now since

this crisis erupted on the scene. It was, as you put it, a very profound historical moment, and we're still in it. Can we sum up what the results have been so far, and can we project anything about the future from this?

RL: I think at this point what's clear is that the dust has not settled and that the outcome of these hearings was both inconclusive and contradictory. On the one hand, Reagan was punctured, though not totally disgraced and discredited in the way that Nixon was during the Watergate hearings. On the other hand, a certain picture emerges from these hearings of the Reagan team: they're basically a pack of fools and scoundrels — this is sort of your immediate take on it. So here, too, we see a contradictory outcome. We also see a massive shake-up in the administration, and the National Security Council has been reorganized. But for all those changes, the executive branch is weak and has been seriously weakened by these disclosures and what has gone on over the last year. What we find, then, is a somewhat crippled and increasingly symbolic presidency, which is not the fundamental situation U.S. imperialism wants and needs to be in in these times.

Another feature of the post-hearings situation is that there are still very serious disputes over the direction of policy in all the theaters and over all the issues that we discussed earlier in the interview, including Central America and the Middle East. There's still not only continuing debate over those questions, but there's bound to be debate over those questions taking the form of struggle over the succession — the presidential succession.

I think what this suggests is that things might very well flare up again and erupt perhaps even more dramatically and dangerously, for the ruling class, in the coming period. We might see a renewal of such open discord in conjunction with a major international crisis. So this is something that we have to watch very closely.

Q: What about the overall character of these splits within the ruling class? How deep are they? And do definite factions now exist within the state apparatus?

RL: I want to speak briefly to this question of the nature of splits within the ruling class and, in particular, how the differences are falling out in terms of factions within the ruling class now. To begin with, it's important to point out that all the principal fractions of finance capital are represented at the highest levels of government; none of them are frozen out as such. The national security and fiscal and monetary bureaucracies, for instance, are not monopolized by any one section of the ruling class; I mean they are not answering to one section of finance capital.

Now it's true that there may be shifts, sometimes very sharp shifts, in policy emphasis from one administration to another, and this is concretely embodied in personnel changes. But how are we to understand these splits and shifts? First, they have to do with the pressures and chang-

ing requirements of the objective situation — in the world economy, world politics, and the class struggle. It's not some sort of abstract power trip. And, second, high-level debate and struggle within the ruling class fundamentally turns on the strategic interests and needs of U.S. imperialism. It's not like some section of finance capital is just narrowly looking after its own investments. The role of the imperialist state is precisely to define, defend, and advance these larger interests. Now, of course, defining these strategic interests and their policy consequences is hardly a neat and clean, or cut and dried, process — these things do get fought out and can get very messy, even bloody. But what I'm trying to emphasize is that what defines state power is its objective *class foundation* and the common national interests of an imperialist bourgeoisie.

Getting back to this crisis, I want to stress again that we can't discern clear, fixed camps, pitting one set of forces against another. We can't say that there are two distinct and opposed factions; this is a shifting and fluid situation in which various spokesmen and representatives have their feet in different camps, which themselves are subject to rapid change. This also suggests that it would be wrong to see this as a conflict between Congress and the executive — that is not the nature of the drawing of lines, that is not how they are drawn. These differences and these factions cross party boundaries and they cross institutional boundaries.

Q: And they get reflected and concentrated within the Reagan team itself.

RL: Right, and that's the last point: these differences exist within the Reagan team itself; this has been evident both on the question of Nicaragua and on the question of Iran.

Q: Part of the point here is that political analysis is not a question of searching for esoteric, hidden conspiracies; we have the telescope and the microscope of Marxism, which together can be used to penetrate the reality and get to the essence of what is going on.

RL: And while, overall, we can't say for certain how deep these divisions are, we do know that they are not so deep that they have brought about a crisis that has basically stymied the functioning of this government, at least not to this point.

It also has to be stressed that as they move closer to direct and immediate confrontation with the Soviet Union, there's going to be a dialectic where closer unity is being demanded and forged while at the same time very sharp differences and disagreements erupt over particular aspects of what has to be done. And again, it's just part of the general situation of carrying the U.S. war juggernaut forward.

The conduct and the outcome of these hearings also emphasize that the U.S. imperialists are facing a minefield of contradictions. Wherever they turn in the world there are

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booby traps in their path. But having seen all that and having grasped the difficulties they face, I think it's critical to recognize that the war juggernaut has not been derailed and that they are pressing full speed, full steam ahead.

The hearings and the way in which they were prosecuted, the raft and welter of problems and contradictions, and the real possibility that these things can lead to all kinds of difficulties, perhaps debacles, for them — all this gives renewed emphasis to and demonstrates the lucidity of Bob Avakian's observation that the driving compulsion to world war is not just a question of resolving the many strands of crisis and resolving this essential antagonism — the inter-imperialist contradiction — that is faced. The need to go to war is also linked to the need to hold the whole enterprise, the whole alliance, together in the face of these profound centrifugal forces that are unleashed exactly as they press ahead with their plans.

And I think this should be an object lesson for all of us. What these hearings basically did was, from the standpoint of the ruling class, reaffirm — not question, not call into doubt, and not at all upend — the basic and fundamental orientation.

Q: Let's go back to the point you were making earlier on the weakened presidency. Lenin made the point that every minor crisis, meaning every crisis before an actual revolutionary one, contains rudiments of an all-out revolutionary one. Now, on one hand, one can imagine how such future splits, infighting, and fissures within the ruling class could create openings for revolutionary initiatives from below. In fact this current crisis did create openings for doing revolutionary work and exposure, did shock and stir millions politically, and helped pierce the suffocating atmosphere of resurgent America.

But on the other hand, one could also conceive of a situation in which a divided ruling class, faced with tremendous domestic opposition from below and serious, serious mishaps and accidents in its conduct of foreign affairs, was driven to war out of desperation. In other words, weakness can be as compelling a motive to move toward war, and it would be very, very unwise to assume that the weakening of Reagan somehow lessens the danger in the international situation.

RL: Right. This is this point about the driving compulsion

to war involving the need to hold the whole alliance and enterprise together, and that just pushes them ever more resolutely forward along this path towards war. And this analysis should be contrasted with two other views. One, there is the view that somehow democracy has reasserted itself, that this system of checks and balances has shown its vitality in that Reagan will be monitored more closely, and people can now breathe a sigh of relief. What I'm saying can be contrasted with that erroneous notion of what's going on. And it should also be contrasted with a position, advanced by some on the left, that the substance and upshot of this crisis is that Reaganism is at an impasse, that Reaganism is paralyzed because what all this goes to show is that there are limits to the application of military force. According to this view, Reagan would want to solve everything through military means, through the buildup of conventional and nuclear weapons systems, through various attempts at low-intensity conflicts in various parts of the world — but this crisis shows that you cannot resolve contradictions that way. Nuclear war is obviously unthinkable, unwinnable, and untenable from the standpoint of the rival ruling classes — according to this viewpoint — and therefore what we see is the growing paralysis of a regime which could not pursue its logic, the logic of force and brutality, to the very end. And I think what the Iran/Contra crisis shows is quite the opposite.

Q: In other words the notion that the events of the last year have finally brought the U.S. imperialists to

their senses is a bit Pollyannaish, to say the least.

RI: Right. In sum, I think that these hearings and their ideological fallout have, as I said, reaffirmed the basic policy orientation; they are part of and must be situated within this larger, geopolitical global setting that we've been discussing. There is perhaps a final lesson for revolutionary and progressive-minded people, for those who yearn to see the Oliver Norths put in the docket, for those who are repulsed by the revelations of the crimes and atrocities committed in the name of democracy. All of what we have learned about how in fact the imperialists are preparing for their multiple contingencies and for their ultimate showdown with the Soviet bloc — all of this emphasizes even more that most essential Marxist-Leninist dictum that without state power, all is illusion. Without tearing down and shattering the whole edifice and network of imperialist political power, it will not be possible to solve any questions that are of concern to the broad masses of people, including the prevention of world war. □

Notes

1. "Questions for These Times: An Interview with Bob Avakian," *Revolution*, Winter/Spring 1986, Number 54, p. 4.
2. Edward Said, "Irrigate: A Many-Sided Crisis," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Volume XVI, Number 4 (Summer 1987), pp. 27-49.
3. Avakian, op. cit., p. 4.