

# REAGAN'S BAND OF TRUE BELIEVERS

By Frances FitzGerald

**S**OON WE WILL know more about the Iran-contra affair. Witnesses before the special prosecutor's grand jury, and before the Congressional committees that began hearings last week, will expose the operations in much greater detail. They will delve into the underworld of arms dealers and financial brokers into which Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North and his fellow National Security Council staff members descended. They will tell of Manucher Ghorbanifar, the main intermediary with the Iranians and the Scheherazade of polygraphs. They will enumerate the secret arms deals and try to account for the millions of dollars gone astray on their way to the contras. In the end, we may discover what the President and his Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, knew and what they did. But the Tower Commission report has already made the style of the operations quite clear — and it has given us important clues to the central question of how such a thing could have occurred.

From one perspective, as a number of commentators have noted, the affair could be seen as merely the latest in a series of attempts by American Presidents to concentrate power in the White House and to make their foreign policy independent of the Congress and the State Department. (Robert C. McFarlane, after all, thought of his role in the Iran initiative as analogous to Henry A. Kissin-

ger's in the secret negotiations with Beijing.)

Yet seen from another angle, the affair belonged to a pattern quite specific to the Reagan Administration: It was not just a matter of the President's "management style," or the arrogance of those whose President had been re-elected in a landslide. It was a particular philosophy of government shared by many Reagan appointees, a strain of home-grown radicalism that has deep roots in American history and that carries with it a disrespect for institutions and rules. The radical strain had surfaced repeatedly in the struggles

over domestic policy as well as in the conduct of foreign affairs. The Iran-contra affair merely exemplified it at its most extreme.

In the conclusion of its report, the Tower Commission denounced all those involved in the operations for ignoring "the constraints of orderly process" and for failing to address "significant questions of law." In tone, these Latinate phrases suited the commission's solemn purpose, but contrasted sharply with the events described in its narrative — for the story is bizarre.

As the Tower report shows, the atmosphere in the White House was quite different

from that in the Nixon White House during the secret bombing of Cambodia and the Watergate break-in. In the first place, Reagan staff members were extraordinarily credulous. Not only did they believe Ghorbanifar's stories, but they never even suspected that Iranian officials might be manipulating them, rather than vice versa. While the Nixon people knew their actions were illegal and did their best to conceal them, Reagan's men hardly seemed to have asked themselves where the statutory limits were. They believed in what they were doing, they believed in the authority of the President, and that was that — even though what the President knew or remembered of their doings was often unclear to them. In general, they calculated little but *felt* a great deal. Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter once accused North of "getting emotional again," but when the contra operation came to light, he told Donald T. Regan, the White House chief of staff, that he had done nothing about his suspicion that funds were being diverted because he was "so damned mad at Tip O'Neill."

To read the computer-transmitted conversations between North, Poindexter and McFarlane is to see that a certain strangeness had come over the group by 1986. Those involved were completely alienated from the rest of official Washington, including the rest of the Reagan Administration. They hated "the libs," as they called the liberal Democrats in Congress; they despised the career C.I.A. and they suspected all the N.S.C. principals who were not involved. North told the Iranians fantastic stories about the President. In the end, wearing himself out, getting only two or

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three hours' sleep a night, North began to imagine the contras would win a great victory and that the President would go down in history for ending the Iran-Iraq war. McFarlane told North that North should be Secretary of State — and later that he should join him at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, where the two would "continue to work the Iran account as well as to build other clandestine capabilities so much in demand here and there."

**B**Y 1986, THOSE INVOLVED in the Iran and contra operations were behaving rather less like national-security officials than like a bunch of Keystone Cops. But there is a more precise analogy for what was happening among them, a more apt parallel for the strange behavior of this small group of Government officials. The analogy lies, oddly enough, in the sociology of contemporary religious "cults." The so-called cults, after all, New Age or Christian, commonly have a charismatic father figure and enormous assets raised by contribution (assets that have a tendency to disappear). And those that are self-destructing tend to go through a very particular form of group dynamics.

In such groups the process of unraveling begins when the charismatic father figure, who once had much contact with his followers, retreats within an inner circle of guardians and goes into silence. What he does (if anything) is known only to a few intimates; what he knows becomes a metaphysical, or at least an epistemological, problem. Yet the ordinary members still believe that they have — on some level — a direct, personal relationship with the leader.

The problem is that they have no institutions or rules governing relations among themselves; the group is an anarchy held together by his charisma. (Thus N.S.C staff members put together an ad hoc group drawn from various agencies with a shifting

cast of characters and no clear lines of authority.) Since the father figure refuses to intervene, even the smallest argument has the potential to explode and destroy the group. To preserve itself, the group projects its hostility onto outsiders, and a we-they relationship develops in which group members come to believe that they are entirely good — indeed superior — beings, while all outsiders are entirely bad, inferior and untrustworthy. Now the group cannot accept outside advice or criticism; its members at the same time lose all normal skepticism about those who profess to support their cause — even those who look, speak and act like crooks or con artists.

At some point, the inner circle, sensing hostility from the outer members, withdraws into itself. (North once told McFarlane that Poindexter's job was much harder than his, since "I only had to deal with our enemies. He has to deal with the Cabinet.") Its members set themselves "above" the ordinary members and develop secret policies that are the very opposite of the stated policies of the group. The more they develop and carry out their policies, the more they lose touch with even that reality the ordinary members could give them. Once exposed, their activities appear to outsiders as quite mad — and possibly they are criminal. The ordinary members express shock at the behavior of the inner circle. But, in fact, all along they have sensed something strange going on within it, and evidence of wrongdoing — such as a rattlesnake in the mailbox of an opponent — has appeared in more or less plain sight.

The question is, of course, how this sort of dynamic could establish itself at the center of the United States Government.

**R**EAD THE EIGHTH Beatitude of Matthew 5," Colonel North told a reporter through the window of his truck the day after the Tower Commission report came out. On the evening

news, Peter Jennings reported that the verse read, "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven," adding that the Tower Commission had chosen as one epigraph a quotation from the Roman satirist Juvenal, "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes," "Who shall guard the guardians?" The juxtaposition of the two quotations was pure poetry, for the texts pointed to two very different views of human nature. That Christian and classical texts should be invoked on either side of a political conflict in 1987 seems on the face of it extraordinary; yet the texts pointed directly to an important aspect of the Iran-contra affair — to the particular conflict fought out within the Reagan Administration.

In the United States, the secular, Roman tradition is embodied in the Constitution, with its checks and balances, and in the public architecture of Washington, notably in the Capitol building. More than in Europe, where national traditions predate the Enlightenment, secular rationalism is the foundation of the state and the law of the land.

The Judeo-Christian tradition plays no parallel role in government, yet one particular strain of it, evangelical Protestantism, has profoundly colored American civic culture. It underlies the notion of American exceptionalism: the idea of America as a redeemer nation, a people charged with a divine mission in the world. Beyond that, it has been the engine for most social-reform movements on the left and on the right, and it has sustained the idealistic, even visionary, quality in American life. Abolitionism, civil rights, women's rights, pacifism and internationalism have historically grown out of left-wing evangelical movements with their optimistic millenarianism. Social conservatism, nativism and jingoistic nationalism have grown out of conservative evangelical movements and pessimistic millenarianism. Both millennial traditions look forward

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to an end to human history, an end to politics and government. In a sense, the secular and the religious traditions cluster about the two names for the country: "the United States" being the secular, constituted Republic, "America" being the organic mythic or moral land. In the Reagan Administration, this latter tradition was strong.

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., in his recent book, "The Cycles of American History," proposes a regular, cyclical alternation in American life between periods of concern for the public interest and periods where private interests come to the fore — the first bringing government controls and democratic reforms, the second a relaxation of controls, a greater role for the market and a retreat into private life. This alternation, he maintains, is a natural, systolic-diastolic movement. While each phase normally brings a corrective to the one before, both contain dangers; for as too much government can stifle and restrict, too much "privatization" invites corruption, injustice, even tyranny. In Schlesinger's terms, the last six years represent a rightward swing of the pendulum: a period of lower taxes and looser regulations, and a period of some public apathy about injustice and the problems of the society.

But there was another element in the national mood, one that was clearly reflected in the makeup of the Reagan coalition. Arriving in Washington in 1981 with the new President were not just the genial Republican businessmen that such periods usually bring in, but a great many people inflamed with a passionate desire for reform. These people believed not simply that the government had become too big and too burdensome, but that it had become a moral evil infecting American society. Many believed the free market would create the promised land of milk and honey. Yet outside the economic domain they believed fiercely in the importance of government, not the government that existed but the one they themselves would create: a government that would bring America back to morality and make it

a tower of military might — a fortress invulnerable. Many of these people commonly spoke of "America," and not of "the United States" and saw the country as a Babylon they would remake into a New Israel.

The "movement conservatives," as these people called themselves (once the term "New Right" had aged), were virtual strangers to Washington when they arrived in 1981; yet they had an ideological lineage as old as any extant party or movement in the United States — their antecedents lying in anti-Masonry and in a certain nativist strain of Populism. Even with all this history behind them, however, and with all their nostalgia for an earlier age, they were not a conservative party in the usual sense, for, whether Catholics or Protestants, they were, intellectually speaking, evangelicals.

Theologically, and as a habit of thought, evangelicals put the emphasis on direct experience rather than knowledge of doctrine or ritual practice: the individual, once born again, becomes a regenerate being, free of the past. Evangelicism is thus by its nature anti-intellectual, ahistorical and wholly democratic. It is also highly individualistic and disposed against institutions. It focuses on the future and the quality of will or intention rather than on the record of past deeds, good or bad. The "movement conservatives" were thus temperamentally impatient, and, as pessimists of the right, they looked forward to impending national destruction if they did not succeed. What made them different from previous right-wing evangelical parties was their numbers, and the great many activists brought to Washington on the Reagan tide.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, evangelical movements of the left and the right had appeared and disappeared many times — but without the temporal regularity of the Schlesingerian cycle. They seemed to appear in times of profound economic change and social dislocation: in times (and in places) where the old order

was crumbling, creating uncertainty, insecurity and the need for new standards around which to organize life.

These reform movements appeared in a more or less secularized or ecumenical form in the 1960's — and then in the late 1970's. Before 1980, however, right-wing evangelical movements, important as they were in the country, made relatively small inroads into national politics. In part, it was that their largest constituency — white Southern Baptists — was politically immobilized for more than a century by the issues of slavery and segregation. In part, it was that until the late 1950's the economy of the South was that of an underdeveloped country compared to the North. In the 1960's, the civil-rights movement freed pastors, such as the Rev. Jerry Falwell, from their self-imposed silence. In the 1970's, the movement of new industries to the South and Southwest created the Sun-Belt phenomenon. In this newly rich region, freed by its affluence from the Democratic Party, most voters had strong roots in conservative evangelicism.

As candidate in 1976 and in 1980, Ronald Reagan drew his strength from the new Republican Party of the Sun Belt, and as President he brought a good many of its leaders to Washington. This party included both "movement conservatives" and laissez-faire businessmen, and the two had a good deal in common. When it came to the threat of international Communism or the role of the Federal Government in domestic affairs, men like Jesse Helms and Edwin Meese 3d saw eye to eye. On these and other issues the movement conservatives found a variety of natural allies in Washington: the "sagebrush rebels" on Federal land use; the supply-siders on taxes; the neoconservatives on the Soviet threat, and conservative Catholics on abortion and aid to religious schools. On each of these issues the movement conservatives and their temporary allies — people such as James G. Watt in the Department of Interior, William

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Bennett in the Department of Education and William Bradford Reynolds in the Justice Department — formed as it were a radical party in contradistinction to the traditional conservative party of men like Paul A. Volcker, George P. Shultz and William E. Brock. Many of them held high positions in agencies throughout the Government — including those agencies they most wished to destroy.

But in matters of domestic policy, the radicals experienced a good deal of frustration. There were so many regulations, so many statutes on the books, and when they tried to hack away at them, they were set upon by public-

interest groups. They could trim their departments and deregulate as the conservatives saw fit, but, generally, they could not go further — for their strength lay in the Administration, not on the Hill: in Congress they lacked the votes to change the laws as they wished. In frustration, some of them took actions which liberals and conservatives construed as law-breaking. The Environmental Protection Agency, for example, suspended most hazardous-waste regulations; the Justice Department ignored or defied civil-rights legislation; the Department of Health and Human Services dropped thousands of people from the Social Security disability-insurance rolls and adopted a "policy of non-acquiescence" when the action was judged illegal. In practice, the courts found these and a great many other such radical actions illegal.

At the same time, and for reasons not unrelated, an astonishing number of Reagan appointees had personal collisions with the law or the Ethics in Government Act. There was a simple "sleaze factor" in the Administration that reflected the general laxity in fiduciary standards across the land; in addition, there was sleaze complicated by ideology. Some of the radicals had, after all, grown up believing that all government

regulations were unjust restrictions on their personal freedom; others purely and simply felt that government was the enemy. In the E.P.A. scandals, for example, ideology was a factor — as it clearly was in the Iran-contra affair.

While the radicals were constricted in the domestic arena, they had more room for maneuver in foreign affairs, where the executive held greater sway. (Here, as they saw it, their main impediments were the career diplomats and the bureaucrats at the C.I.A.) As it happened, the primary passion of many movement conservatives was foreign and military policy. This was true from the beginning — and even for many people best known for raising "the social issues" and injecting them into the 1980 campaign. In the 1960's and 1970's, Phyllis Schlafly, for example, wrote five books on nuclear strategy with a retired rear admiral — all designed to show that Robert S. McNamara, Paul H. Nitze, Henry Kissinger and their co-conspirators at the Council on Foreign Relations were Soviet dupes plotting the unilateral disarmament of the United States.

In truth it was not precisely foreign policy that interested such people. In his speeches, the Reverend Falwell never used that word at all, but spoke about Nicaragua and South Africa under the heading of "defense policy." This was no idiosyncrasy. In the international arena, right-wing evangelicals see politics not as the collision of differing self-interests but as the expression of a transcendent power struggle between good and evil. For them, the enemy is a free agent, not one caught up in history or confined by geography and local politics. Thus, on the global battlefield there can be no stable balance of power and no agreement to disagree: the threat to national security is everywhere at once.

In foreign policy, the movement conservatives found that President Reagan spoke their language. In March 1981, the President described

American aid to El Salvador as an attempt "to try to halt the infiltration into the Americas by terrorists, and by outside interference and those who aren't just aiming at El Salvador but, I think, are aiming at the whole of Central America and possibly later South America — and, I'm sure, eventually North America."

Actually, the President was far more optimistic than most movement conservatives, but he shared their nostalgia for a simpler time and their notion that international institutions, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, were meaningless, or even vehicles for some general conspiracy against "America." On most foreign-policy issues the Administration was divided, as it was in domestic affairs, between traditional conservatives and radicals. The divide was nowhere more explicit than in nuclear strategy and arms control. While negotiators — including, indeed, Paul Nitze — labored away at interminable arms talks in Geneva, the radicals — such as Richard Perle — blocked all potential agreements in the conviction that the Russians

could not be trusted and could not be dealt with until the United States had built up a commanding lead in nuclear weapons. Surprising everyone, the President took the radicals off the hook by proposing that the Strategic Defense Initiative would soon unfurl a vast, invulnerable umbrella over the country — thus rendering the arms talks moot. Many did not actually credit his belief in this form of salvation from nuclear war until Reykjavik, when he toyed with the idea that the abolition of ballistic missiles might be just as good.

WHEN THE IRAN initiative came to light and news reports indicated that some in the White House had seen it as a geopolitical gambit and some as an effort to free the hostages, it was not hard to guess where the President stood. Over the years Ronald Reagan had made it plain that he conceived the world in terms of individuals. He ended most speeches with a story about some one person: a gallant lad who had saved someone's life, a Vietnamese refugee made good, Baby Doe or a welfare cheat who bought vodka with food stamps. As the Tower Commission discovered, the President, who had spent some time with the victims of the T.W.A. hijacking of June 1985, asked his staff almost every day about the fate of the hostages and the plans to get them out. What he thought about the political situation in Iran, the Iran-Iraq war and the problem of maintaining stability in the Middle East remains unclear even now.

As the White House focused on the hostages, so it focused on two other categories of individuals: "the freedom fighters" on one hand and "the terrorists" on the other. For movement conservatives, both groups were generic. In a speech to a group in Nashville in May 1986, Colonel North (who also ran the counterterrorism unit in the National Security Council) linked both groups with a syllogism. The Russians, he maintained, supported terrorists around the world (from the I.R.A. to Abu Nidal); therefore, the United States had to help "the freedom fighters" to "go after the Soviet model" in Nicaragua. Quite possibly North and his fellow movement conservatives connected these two groups in metaphorical ways as well. When they spoke of "freedom fighters," their vision was, as North put it, "young men and women who have taken up the cause of democracy against a government that is cruelly repressive."

It was also, perhaps, a vision of guerrillas, irregulars, who went into the jungles into an area of freedom — freedom, that is, from civilization itself. "The terrorists" did the same: they were evil, but they, too, lived beyond the law fighting governments — indeed all civilized institutions. "The terrorists," too, were free. What was more, the cause of "the freedom fighters" and the cause of antiterrorism — like the cause of the hostages — permitted North and his associates to go beyond "legal constraints" and institutions into the same realm of freedom Ramboesque derring-do.

In fact, the Rambo story could stand for both the Iran arms deal and the contra operation. Rambo, after all, bucked the United States Government to go rescue his buddies from prison camps and torturers; the lone warrior then came back from the jungle to take revenge on the bureaucrats who had so cynically left American soldiers to die. The Rambo story is the same story of justifiable, violent revenge against evildoers and "the system" that runs through so many American movies, notably those starring Charles Bronson and Clint Eastwood. Rambo, however, is a narcissistic fantasy figure: a larger-than-life hunk of gorgeous oiled muscles who performs impossible feats. But then there seems to have been some element of narcissistic fantasy at work in both the Iran and the contra operations. At the very least there was a certain solipsism.

THE RAMBO STORY and religious "cult" behavior both involve anarchic freedom from rules and responsibilities. To use the cult model to help understand what happened in the

Iran-contra affair is to see that if those directly involved constituted an inner circle, then the outer circle included not just other Administration officials but, at some metaphorical remove, a large part of the American public as well. Those who now feel deluded or lied to had all the clues they needed. When he was speaking to us, the Great Communicator told us all about his particular world view. More specifically, by 1985 the news media and the intelligence committees in Congress had all the information they needed to start an investigation of Colonel North's activities on behalf of the contras. Here as elsewhere clues to the dark side of the Reagan Administration lay in plain sight.

Not only Reagan's popularity but the enduring appeal of such movies as "Rambo" and "Death Wish" suggest that there is in the American psyche some deep sense that civilization is intolerably repressive. These movies offer us fantasies in which our anarchic urges are fulfilled and go unpunished, but the great American novels show us the reality of what we are about: the reality is Gatsby, Huck Finn and Clyde Griffiths; it is also Ahab, who creates his own enemy and pursues him to the death.

But happily that is not all there is. The members of the Tower Commission chose their language well. Their Latinate phrases signified that the Iran-contra affair should end as a comedy in the classical tradition: after a period of mayhem the social order is duly restored. In his response to the report, the President acquiesced, promising to start a new life in which he would act responsibly and obey the rules. After the hearings, the Congress may adopt stricter legal constraints on the Presidency — or take other measures. But the arrival of Frank Carlucci and Howard Baker in the White House signified that the Romans had already won. ■

*Frances FitzGerald is the author of "Fire in the Lake," "America Revised" and, most recently, "Cities on the Hill."*