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**Strength
Is
Weakness**

BOSTON

Nothing Ronald Reagan has done as President has so troubled Americans as his bargaining for the release of hostages in return for arms shipments to Iran. That, at least, is the feeling I get from conversations with people who have admired and supported the President.

Here, after all, is a politician whose central image is one of strength and confidence. Here is the President who made us proud again, the man who can stand up to the Russians. And here is the candidate whose overwhelming victory in 1980 was due in good measure to the asserted "weakness" of Jimmy Carter in dealing with the hostage situation in Iran.

The Iran affair is full of puzzles. But at the center is the puzzle of Ronald Reagan. His firmly declared policy was not to negotiate with terrorists for hostages. Why would he violate that principle? Why would he invite more hostage-taking by people who will see a chance to exchange hostages for arms or some other quid pro quo?

Of course there are humanitarian interests here. Of course the President wants to see the Americans still held in Lebanon set free. But everyone can understand that no humane object is served by a deal that makes other Americans potential targets.

The first reaction of the White House when the story came out was to blame the press for printing it.

Publication might endanger hostage lives, it was said.

Editors are almost always ready to withhold or delay stories that might endanger a life — in a kidnapping, for example. But it was impossible to suppress this story, because it had already broken into the open in Beirut.

Moreover, unlike a kidnapping, paying this ransom would involve larger consequences. Here are just some of them:

1. The consequence for the terrorist problem as a whole. The United States has been calling for worldwide action against governments that support terrorism; President Reagan's decision to bomb Libya signaled a tough line.

Yet now the President takes a soft approach to Iran, the very model of inspiration to terrorism. Even the Rev. Benjamin Weir, a former hostage, said last weekend that he regretted the "trading of arms for hostages."

2. The consequence for relations with our allies. Britain, seemingly following Mr. Reagan's Libyan policy, took decisive action when it found evidence that the Syrian Embassy was behind the plot to blow up an El Al airliner flying from London. The British broke relations with Syria.

Britain spent much diplomatic capital urging its colleagues in the European Community to join in a united stand against Syria. When the French held back, many Americans were critical of what they called France's shortsighted and selfish position. But Mr. Reagan's deals are of the same kind as France's, and leave our friends in Britain embarrassed and angry.

3. The consequences in Iran. The larger reason for the secret contacts in Iran, White House apologists explain, was that the succession to Ayatollah Khomeini is now starting to be disputed. The United States wants to get in touch with more moderate elements and help them. Whether one element in Iran is more moderate than another remains to be seen. In any case, the United States is not very good at maneuvering its favorites into power. In the zealotry of Iran, any party seen to have America on its side would be a sure loser.

4. The consequences for the Middle East. If American arms tilted the Iran-Iraq war toward Iran, the interests of the United States and its friends could be disastrously damaged. A victorious Iran would very likely try to overthrow existing governments in Kuwait, the Persian Gulf sheikdoms, even Saudi Arabia.

5. The consequences for our governmental processes. President Reagan has often gone around the regular channels of government in order to avoid constraints and accountability. He has supplied and encouraged secret wars in Nicaragua and Angola through the C.I.A.

This adventure went around the C.I.A., avoiding even that modest bureaucratic safeguard against folly. Secretary of State Shultz and Secretary of Defense Weinberger were ignored or overridden. The President and a handful of his personal aides, not subject to Senate confirmation or Congressional control, were on their own.

That last consequence may be the worst. We have had Presidential adventurism before in our history. But in the nuclear age, for a President to skirt all the assumptions of our constitutional system — the checks and balances — is a frightening precedent. □