



Arms and the Nan: Iranian soldiers at the front, and (inset), President Reagan

Reagangate

When the Iranian arms sales story broke in Beirut at the time of the US mid-term elections, President Reagan's reaction was to copy Richard Nixon and blame the media for refusing to suppress it. To a press corps that had tried and failed for six years to scratch the celebrated Teflon coating, it was an invitation to attack the presidential pedestal with hammers and chisels.

For once Washington reporters went to work in a body. The Watergate analogy has been criticised as faulty and in some respects it is. But it's useful as a way of measuring the decline in Reagan's fortunes. The differences between then and now are as instructive as the more obvious similarities.

As in Nixon's time, it is the media that has made the running, leaving Congress and the judiciary far behind. But in the summer of 1972, only two reporters, Woodward and Bernstein, pursued the story with vigour, and their newspaper, the *Washington Post*, reached out no further

than the suburbs of the District of Columbia. Most other papers played the story down until well after the presidential election in November.

As for television, the only medium with potential impact from coast to coast, the national networks all but ignored the Watergate story until the public hearings of the Senate Watergate committee made compulsive viewing in the spring of 1973; intimidated by a barrage of abuse from Vice-President Agnew, they had simply given up criticising the Nixon government.

This time television has been a potent force from the start. That's partly because the old actor can't resist using it, even to defend the scarcely defensible, and even to the point of going before the cameras without careful coaching or a script.

But it's also because the networks are less timid than they used to be - for example, they have revived the practice Agnew persuaded them to drop: the technique of 'instant analysis', in which

television journalists dissect the president's message immediately after delivery. With some justice, Agnew called it 'telling the people what to think'.

Thus prompted, or not, a surprisingly large number of Americans have told the pollsters they don't accept the president's attempts to explain himself. In less than a month his approval rating has dropped from 67% to 46%, a steeper and swifter fall than any of his predecessors ever suffered.

Compare it with Nixon's ability to hold the line: six months after Woodward and Bernstein had shown that several of Nixon's men had conspired to break the law, his own approval rating was steady at 68%. Not for another three months, until after he had defended himself on television, did his rating fall to 45%.

There were other factors, of course - factors that helped Nixon then and which are doing nothing for Reagan now. In Nixon's day Americans still believed that the

presidency somehow ennobles an incumbent. Also, few Americans found dirty tricks at election time, even burglaries and bugging, especially upsetting.

Sadly for Ronald Reagan, Americans loathe and detest the Ayatollah (the 'Great Satan' syndrome cuts both ways) and have ambiguous feelings at best about the Contras, who are widely seen as losers who just might one day drag American boys into a fruitless, unwinnable war.

Ronald Reagan, whose policies have never been as popular as his personality, is fighting on difficult ground: even if he were now to admit mistakes and expose whatever is left to expose, that might not be the end of the matter; his competence would still be in question.

His advisers, however, may be telling the president to play for time. In the first place, Christmas is coming. Secondly, following changes in the law, the Independent Counsel is likely to be considerably less independent than the Special Prosecutor of Richard Nixon's day: Archibald Cox, in particular, was a free spirit with unrestricted terms of reference who kept Watergate boiling with a series of dramatic, highly publicised moves. To date, all five Independent Counsels have had to work within a brief drawn up by the Justice Department; not one has brought a prosecution.

And third, full-scale, public congressional committee hearings cannot begin until well into January, when the lawmakers return from their recess. By then the leaders of Congress may be having anguished thoughts about the need for damage limitation and the danger of following trails to the Oval Office; even the Democrats are wary of crippling another president two years before the end of his term.

But whether the media would go along with self-imposed restriction is quite another question: in Reagan's words, the sharks are circling in the water, and smelling blood. •

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