

Is 'moderate' Rafsanjani blackmailing Bush?

by Nicholas F. Benton

The Bush administration conceded Aug. 10 that it now wants to carry out openly the identical foreign policy fiasco that was at the heart of the last administration's Iran-Contra mess.

An interview by President Bush with the *Boston Globe* was followed up by remarks from White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater that the U.S. is now willing to deal directly with the Iranian government in an effort to secure the release of the eight U.S. hostages held by the Iranian-controlled Hezbollah organization in Lebanon.

The White House also admitted that contacts with the Iranian regime of President Hashemi Rafsanjani have already been extensive, although carried out through third parties.

While the Bush administration continued to assert that its policy on dealing with terrorism in the Middle East has not changed, has become clear that, for practical purposes, Bush began Aug. 10 to signal a willingness to negotiate with Rafsanjani for the release of the hostages.

U.S. policy on the hostage question up until that point had consistently been to demand the "unconditional" release of the hostages, and to refuse to negotiate for their release. The credibility of this policy was deeply damaged, of course, by the Iran-Contra scandal, which, according to the admission of President Reagan, "turned into an arms-for-hostages negotiation with Iran."

But, with a sanctimonious "never again" attitude, the Bush administration insisted that it would never deviate from the policy stated in the first days after the latest escalation of the hostage crisis—provoked by the claim that U.S. hostage Col. William R. Higgins had been executed in retaliation for the Israeli capture of Hezbollah leader Sheikh Abdul Karim Obeid—surfaced in late July.

The reasons for the administration's insistence on this policy were legion and obvious. In the eyes of the best experts on the Iran-Contra affair, the biggest scandal was not the fact

that the administration was acting behind the back of Congress and outside official channels, but that it thought it could gain something by dealing with Iran, at all.

It became clear that, when the Reagan administration thought it was working covertly with a so-called "moderate" faction in Iran opposed to the maniacal Khomeini regime, it was being very badly deceived.

This only became obvious to the administration when former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane traveled to Iran himself, in the infamous visit that included the presentation of a cake and a Bible signed by the President. Much to their chagrin, the McFarlane party emerged from their aircraft to discover they were dealing not with anti-Khomeini "moderates," but with staunch representatives of the regime, which included Rafsanjani.

The result of the entire episode was not only a major embarrassment to the U.S., and a political crisis for the Reagan administration, but it also became clear that Rafsanjani and friends were engaged in a massive deception operation, among other things never producing the hostage the U.S. wanted most to get out of the deal, CIA Lebanon station chief William Buckley.

Now, apparently, President Bush is acting as if he has not learned anything from that bitter experience.

The 'October surprise'

If you believe some reports, George Bush has reason to think he can deal effectively with Rafsanjani, because he did so back in October 1980, when he secretly met with the Iranian leader in Paris to block desperate efforts by then-President Carter to gain release of the Americans held hostage in the U.S. embassy in Teheran prior to Election Day. This is what Barbara Honneger writes in her recently-published book, *The October Surprise*, and, if it is true, Bush's efforts

with Rafsanjani then were obviously successful.

The "October surprise" thesis puts Bush from the beginning in the center of what subsequently evolved into the Iran-Contra scandal.

This would help explain why Bush is now going public in his willingness to deal with Rafsanjani. Not only may he think that the Iranian President can be induced to deliver, but also, in fact, Rafsanjani holds a great deal of personal leverage over Bush. In a word: blackmail.

If all this is true, Rafsanjani would be in a position to blow the cover on Bush's leading role in the Iran-Contra operation in a way that would threaten the President's very ability to retain his office. To some observers, this is the single most vital factor explaining Bush's new "openness" to enter into dialogue with Iran.

They surmise that the Israelis have been aware of this unusual "relationship" between Bush and Rafsanjani all along, and had good reason to fear that it would lead to a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement, in the context of the larger, emerging U.S.-Soviet condominium arrangement, that would spell nothing but trouble for Israel.

Is Obeid talking?

This would explain the timing of the Israeli move to abduct Sheikh Obeid. It was done the very day after the swearing-in of Rafsanjani as Iran's new President as a move to preempt a new U.S.-Iran alliance.

The move succeeded temporarily, despite expressions of outrage against Israel from surrogate spokesmen for Bush like Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.). In the longer term, the Israelis are hoping that information obtained from debriefing Obeid will prove the direct Iranian role in the orchestration of the Hezbollah and their hostage-taking activities, including a direct, personal role for Rafsanjani.

Indeed, according to reports, Obeid did reveal that a formal deal was struck between Syria and Iran less than two weeks before his abduction, aimed at giving the Hezbollah more freedom to move around Syrian-occupied areas in Lebanon.

Reports of such information coming from Obeid have been swiftly discredited by the White House. When asked by this reporter about the impact of Obeid's information of a "more direct role for Iran in controlling the Hezbollah than previously believed," White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater replied, "Let me caution you against trusting the public reports of what is coming out of the interrogation of Obeid."

While suppressing such information, Bush has sought to push ahead with his efforts at "new openness" toward Iran, just as he had planned to do all along until the Obeid-Higgins developments erupted.

According to reports, when a delegation of leaders of U.S.-based pro-Israeli organizations went into the White House to meet with the President Aug. 8, they came away so enraged that they convinced Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to place a personal call to Bush the next day.

Among other things, the pro-Israeli leaders were persuaded not to meet with reporters in the White House driveway following their meeting with the President, as is the custom with visitors to the Oval Office. This was taken by some journalists as strong evidence of the group's displeasure with what the President had said. If they had been happy with their meeting, the President would surely have encouraged them to say so to the press.

Just don't call it negotiating

Bush gave the interview to the *Boston Globe* the same day, which was published Aug. 9. In it, he said he is "willing to talk to anybody," and that he would "negotiate in a way that would not jeopardize the lives of other Americans." Asked if these remarks signaled a change in U.S. policy, Fitzwater told reporters that Bush "is not signaling a direct *quid pro quo*, if that is what you mean," and insisted that U.S. policy "has not changed."

He did repeat Bush's earlier comment, in response to a statement from Rafsanjani about Iran's willingness to assist in gaining release of the hostages, that "some statements [coming from Iran] are heartening," and refused to characterize a subsequent demand from Iran that the U.S. release frozen Iranian assets as a condition for helping free the hostages as a "step backward" by Iran.

Thus, it came as little surprise when Fitzwater suddenly began stressing the next day, Aug. 10, that Bush is "willing to meet directly" with Iranian leaders to help resolve the hostage crisis. This was ostensibly in reply to a report in the *Teheran Times* newspaper conceding, for the first time, that Iran would be open to discussions with the U.S. through a third party such as Pakistani Foreign Minister Sahabzada Yaqub Khan.

Indeed, it was confirmed later the same day that Yaqub Khan would travel to Teheran within a few days, and that he had been in the United States to meet with Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger right after the reported execution of Colonel Higgins.

Fitzwater told reporters that he was using them to "send a message" of the willingness to meet directly to Teheran. It is not uncommon, he said, for governments to communicate with each other through the medium of the press.

That having been said, Bush decided to immediately put a "lid" on the whole issue, fearing, in the view of some, that too many questions would reveal deeper consequences of the breach he had made in stated U.S. policy. Later the same afternoon, for example, Bush chose to stage the announcement of his nomination of Gen. Colin Powell to head the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Rose Garden, where the press could not ask questions, instead of in the White House press briefing room, where such announcements almost always take place.

The next day, Aug. 11, Fitzwater told reporters, "It is now time to lower our voices and let the issues play out for a few days."