

# VITAL SPEECHES

— OF THE DAY —

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## Ending Of The War In Kosovo

WE DID IT THE RIGHT WAY

**Bill Clinton**

President of the United States — Page 546

## Stand For What You Believe In

BUILDING YOUR LIFE THE RIGHT WAY

**Janet Reno**

Attorney General for the United States — Page 548

## The Five Biggest Political Mistakes Of The 90's

WE MUST SEIZE THE MOMENT WHEN OPPORTUNITY ARISES

**Pete du Pont**

Former Governor of Delaware, Policy Chairman, National Center for Policy Analysis — Page 550

## Struggling Till You Make It

CHOOSING THE FIELD THAT YOU LIKE

**Jane Bryant Quinn**

Consumer Columnist, News Week Magazine — Page 552

## Nixon, Reagan And Clinton

LEARNING FROM PAST MISTAKES

**David M. Abshire**

President-Elect, Center for the Study of The Presidency, Co-founder and Vice Chair, Center for Strategic and International Studies — Page 554

## Old Ethical Principles

THE NEW CORPORATE CULTURE

**William J. Byron**

Distinguished Professor of Management McDonough School of Business, Georgetown University — Page 558

## The Workplace Of The New Millennium

LET'S BE PREPARED

**William Y. O'Connor**

Chairman, CEO, GTECH Corporation — Page 561

## Africa In The 21st Century

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE GLOBAL CAPITAL MARKETS

**Brian C. Henderson**

Senior Vice President, Merrill Lynch International — Page 565

## All Farming Is Global

ATTUNED, TECHNOLOGICALLY ASTUTE, ENVIRONMENTALLY AWARE AGRICULTURE SECTOR

**H. W. Becherer**

Chairman and CEO, John Deere & Company — Page 571

## Solving The Health Care Dilemma

IS IT GOOD MEDICINE

**E. Ratcliffe Anderson, Jr.**

MD, Executive Vice-President, AMA — Page 571

## Work War Three

IS AMERICA LOSING THE SKILL STANDARDS STRUGGLE

**Carolyn Warner**

President of the Association for Career and Technical Education — Page 573

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THE BEST THOUGHT OF THE BEST MINDS ON CURRENT NATIONAL QUESTIONS

# Vital Speeches of the Day

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VOL. LXV

JULY 1, 1999

No. 18

## Nixon, Reagan And Clinton

### LEARNING FROM PAST MISTAKES

Address by DAVID M. ABSHIRE, *President-Elect, Center for the Study of the Presidency, Co-founder and Vice Chair, Center for Strategic and International Studies*

*Delivered to Fordham University's McNally Amphitheater at Lincoln Center, New York, New York City, May 5, 1999*

It is a great honor for me to deliver the Sievers Lecture at this historic Jesuit university. I was of course trained by Jesuits in my doctoral work at Georgetown University. From what I have learned and read, your Dean Sievers was truly a great dean and a role model.

My theme tonight is the need for our next president to learn from the successes and failures, the triumphs and tragedies of the past century of presidential experience. I will focus particularly on Presidents Nixon, Reagan and Clinton. I will also look at what the Center for the Study of the Presidency might contribute in an attempt to transmit the art and character of presidential leadership directly to the President-elect in 2000.

What strikes me about the presidency over much of the outgoing century is the enormous hubris each newly elected President brought to his transition and new office. Churchill was fond of citing the biblical quote, that pride goeth before a fall. Each new President thought he was not going to stumble or fall; he had defeated the outgoing President because the opposing candidate had fallen. The President-elect conducted an intense campaign over issues and ideas, and he won the battle, coming to the White House with the panacea for all things: It is Wilson's "New Freedom," Roosevelt's "New Deal," Kennedy's "New Frontier," Johnson's "Great Society," Reagan's "Morning in America," or Clinton's "New Covenant."

Indeed, most transitions of government tend to be high-handed, with the victors in high spirits just out of the campaign. I ran half of the first Reagan transition – the half that related to national security, foreign economic policy, intelligence, and international organizations. I remember in one transition meeting, the outspoken Ken Adelman, when his turn came, said, "Let's not set out to think we have to change everything the last administration did, just for the sake of change." It went over like a lead balloon – wisdom and competence from the past? Never! After all, Adelman, what was the campaign all about – we had the wisdom and confidence, not them!

When the Reagan Administration exited and an administration of the same party came in, the new Secretary of State-designate did not meet with the old one; the old Secretary of Defense was not needed to stay until a new one was appointed, even though the new one ran into extended confirmation problems on Capitol Hill. This from the "kinder, gentler" new Republican administration than the old Reagan one, which I might say, had been rather successful.

So what's new? Franklin Roosevelt was elected amidst financial crises. He had decisively defeated "The Great Engineer" the intellectually brilliant, but uncharismatic, unpopular Herbert Hoover. The long interregnum from November to March was crisis-ridden – especially with increasing runs on banks throughout the country and the looming danger of global cri-

ses. Despite Hoover's pleadings, Roosevelt refused any symbol of cooperation on even such things as trying to cooperate with European powers on exchange rates and stabilizing currencies. Professor Arthur Link suggested that one reason for this was that FDR did not want any of Hoover's unpopularity to rub off on him.

The point of my lecture, however, is not how or how not to run transitions. A good bit of work has been done on that already. CSIS, for one, convened in 1992 a bipartisan group of key members of Congress to talk through such matters. My point is much bigger than the transition from one administration to another, or simply learning lessons from the outgoing administration. My point is that the new President has neither the time nor the humility to learn from the great successes and great failures of past presidents. Yet, Santayana famously said that whoever does not know history is condemned to repeat it. In more sarcastic terms, Cicero said that he who does not know history would forever remain a child. Believe it or not, some presidents have done childish things.

The problem is a lack of usable institutional history, matched with humility to see the need to learn from that history. I am speaking now about the art and character of presidential leadership; whether that leadership is transforming or transactional, to use the words of the academy.

On the first score, the White House has no institutional memory, no such record. Presidential papers go to presidential libraries, many other papers to the National Archives or the Library of Congress.

In early 1987, I was called back from being NATO ambassador to serve for three months in President Reagan's cabinet as his Special Counsellor, to insure that a past cover up and a flawed process to deal with Iran-Contra were ended and due process was instituted. Upon my arrival, I asked for a copy of the Murphy Commission Report, a bipartisan Congressionally-mandated commission, concluded in 1976, chaired by the famed Ambassador Bob Murphy and including Senator Mansfield, Congressman Clem Zeblocki, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, and others. I had been privileged to serve on this three-year commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy. A large contract was given to Harvard to research past successes, failures and future trends. Ten years later, Iran-Contra was a case study of literally doing everything wrong that we had enumerated in the Murphy Commission Report, especially in terms of the organization, or should I say, disorganization of government.

Despite the fact that President Ford sent us a glowing letter about the importance of the commission, there was no copy of its very relevant report at the Reagan White House and no one

except me, the new arrival, had ever heard of it. President Reagan then set up the so-called Tower Board to do another report on the Iran-Contra affair and what changes in government organization and operations should be instituted. The Murphy Commission was relevant. The institutional memory of the White House, unlike some of the Departments, is a "void" or "vacuum," and voids and vacuums are dangerous!

I would like to see the Center for the Study of the Presidency undertake a major project to fill that void for the President-elect. Let me first say what this study would not be: it would not be a project to say what tax policy or trade policy, or social security policy, or defense policy should be. Brookings, CSIS, AEI, Cato, Heritage, and the Progressive Policy Institute are all doing that sort of thing. What we want to examine is why the failures in tax, trade, social security or defense policy, and why the successes. How does a President and his staff make the big breakthroughs and move a great agenda? Where is the vision? What is the character needed? What is the organization needed? Who are the Cabinet members that have helped produce extraordinary successes?

We will not just look at the President, but the presidency. The most important decision a president makes is whom he picks to make up that presidency. Look at the importance to the Clinton Presidency of Bob Rubin and Larry Summers who have been in such harmony with Greenspan.

I would like to see a committee of overseers, composed of great scholars and scholar-practitioners to ensure concise analysis in a form that the President-elect can read. I would like to draw from constructive leadership experiences in other areas, for example, governors and chief executives of successful businesses, as well as some involved in the information revolution.

I would like to see us form a bipartisan group of congressional advisors who have seen Presidents come and go. I think this latter aspect is very important because I believe the single greatest often-committed failure is the failure of the White House to work with the Congress.

We all know the classic case about the defeat of ratification of the Covenant of the League of Nations. James David Barber, in his book, *The Presidential Character*, has a subtitle: *Wilson Defeats the League. Not Lodge, but Wilson defeats the League*. It is true that Lodge wanted to wreck the League but there was potential majority support in both the Senate and the public. But even before going to Paris to negotiate, Wilson was high handed towards that Senate and the Republicans. There were Republican stalwarts like William Howard Taft, Elihu Root, or Charles Evan Hughes, who might have been convinced to support the League. After his return to Washington, Wilson was very much the Princeton professor lecturing Senators, uncompromising and inflexible, not listening. It is a sad story that conceivably led to World War II.

Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson once observed that the sovereign power is at a maximum when the President acts in concert with the Congress. By the way, that constitutional principle also is the first principle of strategy. It was the General of the Army, President Dwight Eisenhower, who understood better than any president in the period we are talking about the importance of unity of effort in Washington and unity of effort among allies. As President, before he made major foreign policy moves, Eisenhower got a resolution of the Congress. He conferred with the Democratic leadership, and made them a partner in his efforts. He had the best congressional relations man in the history of the presidency, Bryce Harlow. This brings me to

the importance of the President's surrogates in conducting congressional relations.

Beginning in the very late 1950's, I was lucky to have the best of those surrogates, Bryce Harlow, as a mentor. Let me dwell a minute on something I learned from him when he was with President Eisenhower. Previously, Bryce had been on Capitol Hill as chief of staff of the House Armed Services Committee, so he knew both sides of the government. In 1959, I, too, went to work on Capitol Hill in the House Minority Staff, while I was finishing my doctoral dissertation, and it was then that I first got to know Bryce over breakfasts at the White House.

Bryce's key principle in legislative-executive relations was that "trust is the coin of the realm." A president will lose out if he does not understand that coin, said Bryce. In our study, this maxim should be key, because time and again, since Eisenhower, Presidents have debased that coin of the realm: Johnson with the Congress over Vietnam; Nixon, over Watergate and other matters. Reagan over Iran-Contra; and Clinton over impeachment.

And Justice Jackson was right. The power of the sovereign was not maximized. It was diluted, even debased.

If I may be immodest, following Bryce Harlow's admonition, I had some successes as Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations from 1970 to 1973 largely because I met with, listened to, and reasoned with members of Congress. As Bryce taught, I sought trust. I came into office on the eve of the military move into the Cambodian enclaves when no one on Capitol Hill was informed before the press told them. The colleges were in an uproar and students marched. It was a classic case of how not to do things, if we wanted to keep unity in Washington. The strategy of the North Vietnamese leadership was always to break that unity.

Belatedly, President Nixon tried to offset the clamor on Capitol Hill and in the country through a speech. He met with the congressional leadership to define the limits of the action. Nixon's purpose was to hinder North Vietnamese attacks by withdrawing our grants at privileged sanctuaries while our troops were being withdrawn. Senators John Sherman Cooper and Frank Church promptly wrote these limits into authorizing legislation related to our Southeast Asian operations. But the way it was written, it would have interfered with our air operations in the protection of our troops. The Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense tried to press the Senators and failed. I went to them, listened, reasoned, and found a way to meet their concerns in a letter from the Secretary of State cleared by the President qualifying the air action in a way that satisfied us both.

In another case, a Senator moved to cut off the CIA funding to Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, and the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Senator William Fulbright, supported him. By the way, the radio funding should have been switched from covert to overt, publicly known funding, but the bill was introduced in a way that made it appear that these radios were involved in a scandalous CIA operation, rather than broadcasting in favor of human rights for Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

The cut-off proposal reached the Senate House Conference where Senator Fulbright and his House counterpart, Congressman Morgan, became so bitter over their differences on the issue that Morgan refused to meet again, and said I had to produce an agreed plan for a new alternative solution for public government funding. Meanwhile, Chairman Fulbright had taken off on vacation in the Caribbean. The radios were scheduled to die within weeks and their employees fired. I went to Majority

Leader Mansfield and said, "Senator, you believe the radios are not needed, but you surely don't want them to die this way." We talked and reasoned and he called the Staff Director of the Foreign Relations Committee to tell him to work up a one-year transition plan, which by the way, moved them out from under the CIA and over to the State Department that year. During this period, Milton Eisenhower chaired a panel, which proposed a permanent public board for international broadcasting, which still exists today. Senator Mansfield and I had listened and reasoned with each other. It was Bryce Harlow's coin of the realm in developing trust in dealing with differences.

The consequence was that these radios played a key role in the free flow of information and ideas over the iron curtain, and eventually they helped to turn the tide of the Cold War.

Now, I want to be quite clear about something. I do not mean to imply that the making of foreign policy should be a coequal function between the executive and legislative branches. Article II of the Constitution places the preeminent foreign policy role with the Chief Executive and Section 2 makes him the commander-in-chief. There cannot be over 535 Secretaries of State, and the Congress is seldom (if ever) of one mind. On a practical level to be successful, the chief executive and his representatives must go to Capitol Hill with a strong strategic sense of direction in which they should seek to have congressional participation and often accept some form of accommodation, but the President must not go too far. For example, in the Clinton Administration, when the Bosnian crisis first broke, the Secretaries of State and Defense went to the Hill to a large meeting of members and asked what they thought the administration should do.

This produced a crisis of confidence. They appeared to communicate that they didn't know what they were doing. There is an art to the White House dealings with Congress, as evidenced by many case studies that must be examined, distilled, analyzed, and presented to the President-elect.

One reason that newly installed presidents have such hubris is that they are very self-confident as to their talents – after all, they are the victors just elected – but they don't think about possible Achilles heels. Now, I want to take three dramatic examples: Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton, all of them are studies in triumph and disaster. Each of the three were or are creative men: Nixon's triumph in reordering the global balance of power with China; Reagan, in turning the tide in the Cold War; and Clinton in breaking the left wing hold on the Democratic Party and seizing the vital center.

Then, I want to take their three disasters: Watergate, Iran-Contra, and the Clinton impeachment and trial. Triumphs and disasters in each President!

Remember that we propose to study the role and character of presidential leadership. The warning is that triumphs and disasters can occur to the same individual. This should give a President-elect in 2000 pause, hopefully to say, "there but for the Grace of God may go I," and to better learn from it.

Let's take these three exceptionally talented Presidents – Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton. Nixon came to office with 540,000 troops committed in Vietnam, with 40,000 already dead. He attempted to regain freedom of action, strengthen Kissinger's negotiating hand, move from a war of attrition to one of maneuver through the incursions into Cambodia, and nine months later into Laos, and eventually to blockade Haifong. The purpose was to withdraw our troops with a negotiated settlement that did not produce the surrender or the collapse of the Saigon

government. By the way, many of those who had gotten us into this land war in Vietnam argued he should accept Hanoi's terms in the beginning of his presidency and leave rather than have any greater loss of life.

I would argue though that Nixon was an extraordinary strategist attempting to regain freedom of action not only in Vietnam but also throughout the world of the Cold War. In July 1971, Nixon secretly sent Kissinger to China and soon thereafter produced the opening to China that reordered the balance of power. Meanwhile, he opened up a new détente and arms control negotiation with the Soviet Union. It took four years, but he got the troops out of Vietnam, and he made extraordinary breakthroughs in the Middle East. He won re-election by the second largest landslide in American history.

But, let's take the other Nixon.

On June 18, 1972, Richard Nixon vacationing at Key Biscayne, over a morning cup of coffee, approvingly read the Miami Herald headline story, "Ground Combat Role Nears End for the U.S." This was certainly big news for his successful administration. He was on top of the world. He then noted a small story on the middle of the page on the left-hand side, which was to mortally alter his presidency: "Miami held in D.C. Try to Bug Demo Headquarters." Nixon dismissed the story as a prank and never brought it up when he talked later that morning with his chief of staff, Haldeman.

Back in Washington on June 20, 1973, Nixon learned of the connection of the burglars with the CRP (the Committee to Reelect the President) and with the White House. By June 23rd, he made the move to try to have the CIA block the FBI investigation and the obstruction of justice had begun. In three days, he had made the move that wrecked his presidency. Impeachment hearings began in April 1974. The tape which recorded the move to obstruct justice, the proverbial "smoking gun," was released on August 5, and Nixon resigned on August 9, the first presidential resignation in our history.

Despite his campaign scrapes over the issues of draft evasion and womanizing, Bill Clinton came to office with unusual promise. He had a greater combination of political skills than any Democratic president since Franklin Roosevelt. That is no small compliment since FDR is generally considered by historians as the third greatest president after Washington and Lincoln. Clinton was a different type of communicator than Reagan, but he especially communicated his empathy with people, as did FDR. Clinton was a leader of the Democratic Leadership Council with such outstanding Senators as Sam Nunn, Joe Lieberman and Bob Kerrey. The Council aimed to lead the party from what critics called the left's counter culture of ambiguous values, and weak foreign and national security policies towards dominating the middle with new courage and creativity. As shown by his participation in such events as Renaissance weekends, as no other president, Clinton explored the need to face the balanced budget and entitlement reform, and brought a creativity to government policy.

In Clinton's first two years in office, he became the best presidential articulator for facing and taking advantage of globalization as he argued for passage of NAFTA. However, the ill-advised Health Plan produced a negative reaction to the idea of bigger government that allowed Newt Gingrich to fashion the Contract with America, which propelled Republicans into leadership in both houses. This spectacular Republican achievement left Clinton flat on his back. This story is only equaled in political history by his comeback, swiping part of the

Republican agenda, making the Republicans responsible for closing government, and basking in a balanced budget and surplus despite the global financial meltdown. Clinton read history and wanted to leave a real historic legacy. As Nixon's legacy was to be the great peacemaker, Clinton's was to be the great reformer of social security, medicare, and education.

If Nixon's downfall came some three days after Watergate, Clinton's began when the Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky affairs crossed in the courtroom. Unlike Reagan and Nixon, only Clinton knew the truth from the beginning.

The reaction of the Clinton Administration was dominated by the fact that the president himself alone knew all the facts. As David Broder wrote on August 19, 1998, "...in one respect what Clinton has done is every bit as bad as what Richard Nixon did. Like Nixon, who knew from the moment [almost], the Watergate break-in occurred what had really happened, Clinton knew from the first moment he was questioned about the White House intern what was going on between them." Apparently, in the beginning of the crisis, Clinton confided in no one, not even his wife. He deliberately misled his own staff into making false statements, and much later, offered ambiguous and possibly perjurious testimony before a grand jury.

On July 29, 1998, the New York Times, in a lead editorial entitled, Bill Clinton's 29 Months, spoke of the "aura of loneliness" that attaches to this President. "In other days in the capital, Presidents could summon, from the legal or diplomatic worlds or from Congress, wise and disinterested elders, who as the saying goes, had heard the owl and seen the elephant. This President seems surrounded by staff people who are passing through."

If Clinton had called in an outsider and decided to get everything out, one can imagine perhaps only a footnote to history about the Monica affair. But since he didn't, we are now saddled with a deep congressional distrust of this presidency, recently articulated in the House votes on Kosovo.

Now, I turn to the achievements of Ronald Reagan before looking at his tragedy. He took over the presidency at a low point overseas and at home. In his frustration, Carter's Presidential Counsellor Lloyd Cutler wrote an article declaring that presidential leadership was too difficult and we should consider a Parliamentary System. Reagan's first 100 days, like FDR's, defied that, and in his first year, a meeting of political scientists, hardly pro-Reagan, declared he had restored the presidency. As Michael Beschloss says, he also came in with the idea that we should go on the offensive morally and politically, as well as build up militarily, to win the Cold War. Faced with an outdated and dangerous nuclear strategy, Reagan prepared a strategic defense initiative, which convinced the Soviets it could not compete with our information revolution. He called for the Berlin Wall to come down. Though he was a hawk before becoming President, he was the first to see before his Cabinet members that Gorbachev had changed, that the Cold War tide had turned and that new approaches were needed.

This was the triumphant Reagan, the leader who had the trust of the American people. Even Ted Kennedy once told a Yale audience "It would be foolish to deny that his success was fundamentally rooted in a command of public ideas. Ronald Reagan may have forgotten names, but never his goals. He was a great communicator, not simply because of his personality or his teleprompter, but mostly because he had something to communicate."

Then, there is another Reagan.

I remember in early December 1986, as NATO Ambassador, I met Defense Secretary Cap Weinberger at the military airport outside of Brussels. Cap was coming for the Defense Ministers' meeting. The Iran-Contra scandal had just broken in the press. After we got in the limousine, he put his hands over his face and said to me, "David, we saw Watergate. Can you imagine its all back!" I replied, "No, I can't imagine it."

On November 3, 1986, a Lebanese Weekly Al-Shiraa reported that the United States had secretly sold arms to Iran. This was contrary to the professed policy of our government, which had forcefully said it would not traffic with terrorists. To put it in Hollywood terms, Ronald Reagan was our John Wayne President, riding high in the saddle with his pearl-handled pistols at his side, after the bad men. He would never, no never trade arms or anything else for hostages. With the American public, on this and other things, he held the coin of the realm, TRUST. He was above all else, a straight shooter. Subsequent reports shockingly said there had been a trade of arms for hostages, and to make things worse, an unsuccessful trade at that.

After hurried meetings in the White House, where President Reagan was furnished information by the National Security Advisor, Vice Admiral John Poindexter, Reagan said in a public speech:

"We did not – repeat – did not trade weapons or anything else for hostages nor will we."

On November 19, Reagan had a disastrous press conference because he had been badly misled on the facts by Poindexter. Well, there were some arms after all. Reagan repeated what turned out to be a monstrous lie that all the arms sold to Iran "could be put in one cargo plane, and there would be plenty of room left over."

The Attorney General, Ed Meese, conducted an informal investigation. On November 25, the grim-faced Attorney General, with a depressed President at his side, announced that there had been a diversion of funds from Iranian arms sales to the Contras. There were soon rumors that this illegal diversion might be an impeachable offense, if the President knew. Senator Howard Baker's famous line during the Watergate hearing went around Washington, "What did the President know and when did he know it?"

It soon became evident that there had been a cover up involving the National Security Adviser, Poindexter, and his staff member Lt. Col. Oliver North, who was involved in shredding documents, falsifying chronologies, and other offenses. There had been so many lies going around the White House and to Congress that no one at the top could be sure what was true and what was false. The Reagan presidency was sinking fast.

But it was at this low point, I think, the President and some of his top advisors acted dramatically and differently from the Nixon and Clinton situations. It goes without saying that Poindexter and North were fired, but Nixon fired people too. The difference is this: Reagan first set up a bipartisan independent panel, chaired by former Senator John Tower and including future National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft and former Senator and Secretary of State Ed Muskie to conduct their investigation as to what went wrong and what to do about it. I was NATO ambassador at the time, and President Reagan phoned me the day after Christmas requesting that I come into the Cabinet for three months as Special Counsellor on the Iran-Contra affair. I would report directly to him and not through the chief of staff, Donald Regan, who had become controversial, and had been in office while the Iran-Contra affair took place.

My mandate was "to get everything out" in working with the Tower Board, the new Independent Counsel, Judge Walsh, and the newly formed congressional investigating committees.

I reiterate my earlier comments: Had Richard Nixon done anything like what Reagan did on December 26, 1986, Watergate would have been a footnote in history and we would have been spared our first presidential resignation. Had Bill Clinton done the same, the Monica affair would have been over in a week, and he and the nation would have been spared our first impeachment and trial since Andrew Johnson.

Within weeks, my office coordinated efforts with the White House and departments to deliver 3,000 documents to the investigators. Anyone of them could have contained incriminating evidence implicating the President in the diversion of funds to the Contras. Following Bryce Harlow's injunction about the coin of the realm, I worked closely with the two Democratic chairs of the investigating committee, Senator Inouye and Congressman Hamilton about our respective investigative process. Senator Inouye said to me, "Dave if there is anything you think we are doing wrong [jeopardizing intelligence methods or sources], I want to hear it directly from you."

I kept the President informed about this process in my over 12 meetings alone with him. He encouraged me. No evidence was ever found to implicate him in the diversion. Our process, which I cannot take credit for setting up, only faithfully executing, restored the coin of the realm, at least, for that period of time.

But the Reagan presidency suffered. The public knew John Wayne had traded arms for hostages, whether he intended it or not. The whole affair carried out against the advice of the Secretaries of Defense and State and never audited, shook an otherwise brilliant presidency and enabled skeptics to diminish the

larger accomplishments of the Reagan years. Furthermore, what I call the curse of Iran-Contra went on for seven years after my departure. It even ended up with the indictment by the Independent Counsel, Judge Walsh, of Cap Weinberger, on the charge that he had been against the initiative, not being truthful and forthcoming with regard to notes he claimed not to have had. Weinberger, ironically, had been against the entire Iranian initiative. That publicized indictment just before the Clinton 1992 election probably lost it for George Bush.

Be this as it may, the more positive lesson was that Reagan did do what Nixon and Clinton did not do: when in deep trouble, he moved dramatically and decisively "to get it all out" in cooperation with the Congress and he retired at the end of eight years with great honor despite his basic tragic mistake over Iran-Contra.

I do not want to preempt the conclusions of our project with our committees of scholars, congressmen, and others. But let me make some obvious observations to the incoming president on these three particular cases.

First, Mr. President-elect, beware of hubris when entering office. Your abilities may be great. Your political victory proved that. But remember the requirement in Roman history for the conquering hero returning to the capital: The slave at his side saying "You too are mortal."

Second, remember that in great endeavors, Congress must be your partner. This builds the true strength of the sovereign as well as power and influence overseas.

Third, if things go wrong, get outside objective advice and institute a system of integrity to "get it all out." Covering up inevitably debases the currency of power. And the Coin of the Realm, a truly great golden one, is TRUST. Don't debase the coin.

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