

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #581
Missiles, Rebels, and Swiss Bank Accounts: The
Iran–Contra Affair
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Transcript

[00:00:04] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:20] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about the Iran-Contra Affair.

[00:00:27] It's the American [scandal¹](#) involving Ronald Reagan, missiles, revolutions, [rebels²](#), [hostages³](#), [dodgy⁴](#) arms dealers, the US Constitution, [covert operations⁵](#), Swiss bank accounts, and the [seemingly⁶](#) unrelated countries of Nicaragua and Iran.

[00:00:47] It's a particularly long and complicated one, but it is fascinating, so let's not waste a minute and get right into it.

¹ a shocking event that made people angry

² people who fought against their government or leaders

³ people kept as prisoners to make others do what the captors wanted

⁴ dishonest or not trustworthy

⁵ secret actions, usually done by the military or government

⁶ appearing to be

[00:00:57] If you are the sort of person who [yearns](#)⁷ for power, you can't do much better than becoming the president of the United States. You are essentially the chief executive of the world's richest and most powerful country. You can do what you want.

[00:01:16] Of course, you can't do everything you want.

[00:01:20] The US Constitution has a [rigid](#)⁸ set of [checks and balances](#)⁹, in the form of the other branches of government: Congress and the Judiciary.

[00:01:31] Pretty much every president in American history has found themselves blocked in some way by the laws and wishes of these other branches, some more than others.

[00:01:44] Ronald Reagan [was no exception](#)¹⁰.

[00:01:48] He had been elected in a [landslide](#)¹¹ victory in 1980, partly due to the unpopularity of his opponent, the [sitting](#)¹² President Jimmy Carter, and partly on a platform to bring back conservative values.

⁷ strongly wants or wishes

⁸ strict and not easy to change

⁹ rules that make sure no part of government has too much power

¹⁰ was not different from others; followed the same rule

¹¹ very big and easy (victory)

¹² currently holding the position

[00:02:06] And one of Reagan’s big personal beliefs was in the danger of communism, not just in the United States, but all over the world.

[00:02:18] A big part of this was the concept known as “domino theory”, the idea that if one country fell to communism, it would **spread**¹³ like a **virus**¹⁴, infecting all the neighbouring countries before continuing all over the world.

[00:02:35] And Reagan, despite plenty of evidence to suggest that communism wasn’t as **viral**¹⁵ as its greatest critics suggested, well, he wasn’t prepared to take any chances.

[00:02:49] His **staunch**¹⁶ belief was that communism was one of the great dangers facing the world, and he was prepared to do whatever it took to stop it, especially if it showed signs of approaching the American border.

[00:03:05] And this was hardly a Reagan invention; the CIA had spent decades secretly **financing**¹⁷ groups opposed to communism, everywhere from Latin America to Africa.

¹³ move or grow over a larger area

¹⁴ a tiny organism that causes disease and spreads easily

¹⁵ spreading very quickly

¹⁶ very strong and loyal

¹⁷ giving money to support

[00:03:18] One of the groups the US had been financing was called the Contras. It was a right-wing [guerrilla](#)¹⁸ group fighting against the communists that had come to power in Nicaragua after the Sandinista Revolution.

[00:03:33] Now, Nicaragua isn't particularly close to the United States; you have Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Belize and Mexico which act as a [buffer](#)¹⁹.

[00:03:45] But it was still too close to home.

[00:03:49] So the CIA provided financial and military support to this group that would [stir up](#)²⁰ trouble in Nicaragua, doing everything it could to [disrupt](#)²¹ the left-wing Sandinistas.

[00:04:02] Now, we'll press pause on the Contras, as we now need to move right over to the other side of the geopolitical chessboard to a region in which the United States had other interests, interests that seemed to be completely unrelated to Nicaragua, but would [turn out](#)²² to be more related than initially thought.

¹⁸ engaging in irregular warfare as an independent group

¹⁹ something that separates or protects one thing from another

²⁰ cause or provoke

²¹ stop them from working normally

²² happen or end in this way

[00:04:26] In 1979, the Iranian Revolution led to the [overthrow](#)²³ of the Shah of Iran and the [swift](#)²⁴ transition from a Western-leaning monarchy to an Islamic Republic [hostile](#) [to](#)²⁵ Western influence.

[00:04:42] Later that year, a group of students [stormed](#)²⁶ the US embassy and took 66 Americans [hostage](#)²⁷. This would come to be known as the Iran [Hostage](#) Crisis, and would last from November 1979 to January 1981, with the last [hostages](#) being released on the day of Ronald Reagan's [inauguration](#)²⁸ as president.

[00:05:08] As a result of the [hostage](#) crisis and of the Republic of Iran's stated aim of [spreading](#)²⁹ Islamic fundamentalism through the Middle East, the United States [cut off](#)

²³ removal from power by force

²⁴ very fast or quick

²⁵ unfriendly towards; strongly against

²⁶ suddenly entered by force

²⁷ a person kept prisoner to make others do something

²⁸ the ceremony when he officially became president

²⁹ opening out, extending

³⁰ all ties³¹ with the country, even going so far as to declare it a “state sponsor³² of terrorism”.

[00:05:28] This was a perfectly reasonable assessment; Iran was and still is the largest sponsor of³³ terrorist groups in the region.

[00:05:36] But there were several problems with the United States breaking off all contact with the country, both for Iran and for the US.

[00:05:46] For Iran, it meant cutting off a vital³⁴ source of military equipment.

[00:05:53] Under the Shah, Iran had been one of America’s best customers.

[00:05:58] Billions of dollars’ worth of U.S. jets³⁵, tanks, and missiles had been shipped to Iran.

³⁰ stopped or ended

³¹ relationships or connections

³² a country that gave help or money to it

³³ a country that gave money or help

³⁴ very important or necessary

³⁵ fast military aeroplanes

[00:06:06] When relations broke, Iran was left with a [shiny](#)³⁶ [arsenal](#)³⁷ it couldn't [maintain](#)³⁸. This was a problem, and an even greater one after September of 1980, when Saddam Hussein decided to invade Iran.

[00:06:23] For the United States, on the other hand, the loss of a former [key](#)³⁹ [ally](#)⁴⁰ could mean further instability in an already [volatile](#)⁴¹ region. And in fact, selling Iran the weapons it needed to fight off the Iraqi threat was no bad thing.

[00:06:40] A little war between Iran and Iraq actually [served](#)⁴² American interests quite nicely. The US didn't want either side to [emerge](#)⁴³ completely [victorious](#)⁴⁴, and the best possible scenario was a [drawn-out](#)⁴⁵ conflict that left both parties weaker.

³⁶ bright, polished and reflecting light

³⁷ a large collection of weapons

³⁸ keep in good condition

³⁹ very important

⁴⁰ friend or partner

⁴¹ likely to change suddenly; not stable

⁴² was useful for

⁴³ come out or appear

⁴⁴ having won the fight

⁴⁵ lasting a long time; longer than expected

[00:07:01] And there was a third interested party: Israel.

[00:07:06] Israel had similar goals to the US when it came to supplying Iran with weapons: keep Iran and Iraq busy fighting amongst themselves, so that both emerge weaker.

[00:07:18] Now, I appreciate that things are getting complicated, but let me add one more country to the mix: Lebanon.

[00:07:27] Lebanon in the 1980s was in a state of [chaos](#)⁴⁶.

[00:07:32] The country had been [torn apart](#)⁴⁷ by civil war, and in the middle of it, groups backed by Iran, including Hezbollah, had begun kidnapping Americans in Beirut.

[00:07:44] Journalists, teachers, and diplomats were taken and held for years. Even the CIA [station chief](#)⁴⁸, William Buckley, was taken.

⁴⁶ complete confusion and lack of order

⁴⁷ badly damaged or divided

⁴⁸ the person in charge of the local office

[00:07:56] Their [captors](#)⁴⁹ demanded the release of Hezbollah operatives being held in Israeli [jails](#)⁵⁰.

[00:08:03] This wasn't going to happen; Ronald Reagan had built his reputation on never [negotiating](#)⁵¹ with terrorists, and it would be a huge public [humiliation](#)⁵² to [go back on](#)⁵³ this, especially with the memory of the Iran [Hostage](#) Crisis still fresh in everyone's minds.

[00:08:22] But, he did want the American [hostages](#) home safe, and it would certainly be convenient if there were some way of making this happen.

[00:08:34] And so, by the mid-1980s, [the stage was set](#)⁵⁴.

[00:08:39] On the one side, Nicaragua and the Contras.

⁴⁹ people who took and kept them as prisoners

⁵⁰ places where the prisoners were kept

⁵¹ trying to reach an agreement by talking

⁵² great embarrassment or shame

⁵³ break his promise or change his mind

⁵⁴ everything was ready for something to happen

[00:08:43] On the other, Iran, desperate for weapons, officially America’s [sworn enemy](#)⁵⁵, but also the only country with enough [influence](#)⁵⁶ on Hezbollah to help secure the release of American [hostages](#) in Lebanon.

[00:08:59] And in the middle, Israel.

[00:09:02] Now, it’s important to stress that, even though we now talk of the “Iran-Contra [Scandal](#)”, the Iranians had nothing to do with the Contras, at least directly.

[00:09:15] And there wouldn’t have been any “[scandal](#)” were it not for Congress getting in the way.

[00:09:21] Bringing it back to the three branches of government we talked about at the start, starting in 1982, Congress passed a series of laws that would come to be known as the Boland Amendments, which [prohibited](#)⁵⁷ United States intelligence agencies from providing funding for the Contras.

[00:09:42] Now, there was a series of amendments because each one went slightly further in terms of what was [prohibited](#); we won’t go into the details of each one, but

⁵⁵ one who was completely against them

⁵⁶ power to change or affect what they did or thought

⁵⁷ did not allow; banned by law

the important thing was that the clear **intention**⁵⁸ was to stop U.S. involvement in Nicaragua’s war.

[00:10:01] There were several reasons for this, from the documented human rights **abuses**⁵⁹ committed by the Contras through to a general public **weariness**⁶⁰ of US involvement in the domestic affairs of other countries.

[00:10:15] And on paper, that was the end of it. The United States was now legally forbidden from funding the Contras.

[00:10:23] Now, to understand the next chapter of this story, we need to understand a bit more about the power dynamics within the Reagan administration.

[00:10:35] Ronald Reagan was very much a “big picture” man.

[00:10:39] He had strong **convictions**⁶¹ — fight communism, support freedom fighters, **stand tall**⁶² against America’s enemies — but he wasn’t a details person.

⁵⁸ aim or plan

⁵⁹ cruel or wrong treatment of people

⁶⁰ feeling of tiredness

⁶¹ strong beliefs or opinions

⁶² be proud and not afraid

[00:10:51] He liked to set the general direction, then let his advisers work out the details of how to actually [implement](#)⁶³ it. He would be brought [memos](#)⁶⁴ to read or documents to [sign off on](#)⁶⁵, but he wouldn't always read them, even before adding his signature.

[00:11:09] Remember this, as it'll be important later on.

[00:11:13] What this meant was that his administration was filled with people who understood their role as [interpreting](#)⁶⁶ what Reagan wanted and translating it into action.

[00:11:25] As long as they were [executing](#)⁶⁷ his broad wishes, they [had the green light](#)⁶⁸ to get creative.

[00:11:33] The first “creative” project was to do with getting the US hostages back, and this conveniently [tied in with](#)⁶⁹ the problem of how to continue supplying the Iranians with weapons, despite Iran having become a [sworn enemy](#) of the United States.

⁶³ put into action

⁶⁴ short written messages

⁶⁵ officially approve

⁶⁶ understanding it in a particular way

⁶⁷ doing or carrying out

⁶⁸ had permission to do it

⁶⁹ was connected or related to

[00:11:52] How it went was something like this.

[00:11:56] The Americans were approached by an Iranian named Manucher Ghorbanifar.

[00:12:03] He was a [shady⁷⁰](#) individual, a “[devious⁷¹](#) character” according to Ronald Reagan and “one of the most [despicable⁷²](#) characters I have ever met”, according to Robert MacFarlane, a National Security Advisor who we’ll meet again in a few minutes.

[00:12:19] He was a [dodgy fellow⁷³](#), but he claimed to have influence within the Iranian regime.

[00:12:27] He told the Americans that if they supplied Iran with missiles, Iran would put pressure on Hezbollah to release the [hostages](#) held in Lebanon.

[00:12:40] Ghorbanifar wasn’t doing this out of the goodness of his own heart, of course; he stood to collect a healthy commission on the sale.

[00:12:50] The trade would all be [facilitated⁷⁴](#) through Israel, so the US would transfer the weapons to Israel, which would then secretly send them to Iran. In practice, Israel

⁷⁰ secretive and possibly dishonest

⁷¹ clever but dishonest

⁷² very bad and not deserving respect

⁷³ man or person

⁷⁴ made easier to happen

supplied some missiles from its own [stocks](#)⁷⁵, with U.S. approval, and would later be [replenished](#)⁷⁶ by the United States.

[00:13:11] The Iranians would pay the agreed price, and the hostages would be released.

[00:13:17] It all went to plan, apart from the small detail that not all the [hostages](#) were released.

[00:13:24] In fact, what happened was almost the opposite.

[00:13:28] Yes, the Iranians got their missiles. Yes, Ghorbanifar [pocketed](#)⁷⁷ his commission. But instead of releasing all the American [hostages](#), Hezbollah freed one and then [promptly](#)⁷⁸ [kidnapped](#)⁷⁹ another.

[00:13:42] It became a [grim](#)⁸⁰ game of [hostage](#) musical chairs: one out, one in.

⁷⁵ supplies kept for future use

⁷⁶ filled up again after being used

⁷⁷ took or kept it for himself

⁷⁸ quickly and without delay

⁷⁹ took and kept as a prisoner by force

⁸⁰ unpleasant or sad

[00:13:49] Now, this was all very much done behind closed doors; it wasn't public knowledge. And there was debate within the White House about what to do next.

[00:14:01] Ghorbanifar said that the Iranians needed more missiles, and they would make sure the [hostages](#) were released if they were only sent a new [batch](#)⁸¹, but this time of more sophisticated HAWK missiles.

[00:14:16] Despite the obvious reservations about Ghorbanifar's [trustworthiness](#)⁸², his clear financial incentive to [broker](#)⁸³ as many deals as possible, and his claims to have influence, which may have been [exaggerated](#)⁸⁴, the Americans decided to go ahead.

[00:14:33] They had opened the door to Iran, and there were people inside the Reagan administration who thought that, despite the obvious risks, this was still worth [pursuing](#)⁸⁵.

[00:14:44] Robert McFarlane, the National Security Adviser, and his successor John Poindexter, they believed that engaging Iran could be part of a longer-term strategy, not

⁸¹ group or quantity

⁸² being honest and reliable

⁸³ arrange between people

⁸⁴ made to seem bigger or more important than they were

⁸⁵ trying to achieve or get it

just to free hostages, but to [build bridges with](#)⁸⁶ so-called “moderates” inside the Iranian regime, moderates that Ghorbanifar promised existed.

[00:15:09] But, again, the same thing happened.

[00:15:12] Iran got its weapons, Ghorbanifar got his fat commission for [brokering](#)⁸⁷ the detail, and all but one of the [hostages](#) remained in Lebanon.

[00:15:24] In fact, there is another character in this story you might remember from another episode: the Saudi arms dealer, Adnan Khashoggi.

[00:15:32] He was a key associate of Ghorbanifar and provided connections and financing for the deals. If you’d like to hear more about his fascinating and very [dodgy](#) life, episode number 466 is the one for you.

[00:15:48] Now, the man on the American side tasked with running the day-to-day details of this operation was a Marine lieutenant colonel called Oliver North.

[00:16:01] North worked in the National Security Council staff, the NSC, and he was the sort of officer who [prided himself](#)⁸⁸ on “getting things done.”

⁸⁶ improve relationships with

⁸⁷ arranging between others

⁸⁸ felt proud of it

[00:16:14] One of the things he was **tasked with**⁸⁹ was finding creative ways to get around the Boland Amendment, the legal amendment prohibiting the US from providing federal funding for the Contras.

[00:16:27] One thing he did was make it clear to American allies that if they provided funding for the Contras, this could get them favourable treatment from the US.

[00:16:39] And several countries were perfectly willing to donate, giving money to the Contras, essentially on behalf of the United States.

[00:16:48] There was \$32 million from Saudi Arabia.

[00:16:52] The Sultan of Brunei, on the other hand, transferred \$10 million to a Swiss bank account, which was intended to be transferred to the Contras.

[00:17:03] Funnily enough, North made a mistake with the account number, and it was transferred to a 60-year-old Swiss businessman instead.

[00:17:13] And perhaps even more bizarrely, the man who received this \$10 million transfer from the Sultan of Brunei didn't question it, but instead transferred the money to a different account, and would later say he didn't think anything of this large transfer, as he was expecting a big deposit anyway.

⁸⁹ given (a job or duty) to do

[00:17:33] He wasn't [prosecuted](#)⁹⁰ for this, so I guess the lesson there is that if you accidentally receive \$10 million into your bank account from the Sultan of Brunei, just say you were expecting it and it'll all be ok.

[00:17:47] Now, North might have had a [mix-up](#)⁹¹ with the Sultan of Brunei, but he was pretty efficient when it came to everything else.

[00:17:56] One of his responsibilities was moving the money around from the Iranian weapons sales.

[00:18:04] And some time around 1985, it's thought, he noticed something interesting: there was \$850,000 sitting in a Swiss bank account, profit left over from the weapons sales to Iran.

[00:18:21] It turned out that Ghorbanifar, [true to](#)⁹² Reagan's assessment of being a "[devious](#) character", had been massively [overcharging](#)⁹³ the Iranians for the weapons, charging them 600% more. This had meant a much bigger commission for Ghorbanifar, but it also meant that with each trade, the US government would make a significant profit.

⁹⁰ officially accused of it in court

⁹¹ a mistake or confusion between things

⁹² in accordance to

⁹³ asking for more money than was fair or correct

[00:18:46] What if this money could be [diverted](#)⁹⁴ to the Contras?

[00:18:51] It was all “[off the books](#)⁹⁵” anyway, and it seemed to provide a [neat](#)⁹⁶ solution: Iran got its weapons, which could, Ghorbanifar promised, lead to the return of the hostages, the [surplus](#)⁹⁷ from this would go towards the funding of the Contras, and this wasn’t technically in violation of the Boland Amendment, because the NSC staff, as an advisory body in the Executive Office, wasn’t explicitly named like the CIA or the Pentagon.

[00:19:25] It existed in this legal grey area, this legal [loophole](#)⁹⁸.

[00:19:30] The world was a geopolitical puzzle, and this was how to solve it: [neatly](#)⁹⁹ and [tidily](#)¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁴ caused to change direction

⁹⁵ secret and not officially recorded

⁹⁶ clever and simple

⁹⁷ extra amount left over

⁹⁸ a small gap in law

⁹⁹ in a tidy or organised way

¹⁰⁰ in a clean and orderly way

[00:19:38] So, once the [principle](#)¹⁰¹ was established — that money from Iranian arms sales could be [siphoned off](#)¹⁰² to fund the Contras — the operation began to grow.

[00:19:49] More shipments, more money, more [intermediaries](#)¹⁰³. An estimated \$3.5 million [diverted](#).

[00:19:57] Swiss bank accounts multiplied, more [shady](#) middlemen were brought in, and soon there was a parallel foreign policy running out of the basement of the White House.

[00:20:09] It was complex, it was secret, and it was completely outside the reach of Congress.

[00:20:16] It also didn't really work.

[00:20:19] The more Americans dealt with Ghorbanifar and his Iranian contacts, the more obvious it became that this was a disaster in the making.

[00:20:28] [Hostages](#) weren't really being freed. New ones were being taken.

[00:20:33] The Iranians, via Ghorbanifar, kept asking for more weapons, always promising that the next deal would be the last one needed.

¹⁰¹ basic idea or rule

¹⁰² secretly taken from a larger amount

¹⁰³ people who helped communicate or make deals between others

[00:20:43] And inside the White House, not everyone even agreed on what the point of it all was.

[00:20:50] Was this about [hostages](#)? About opening a channel to Iran? Or just about keeping the Contras alive?

[00:20:58] The confusion was only just beginning.

[00:21:01] And what about Reagan himself?

[00:21:04] To this day, historians debate exactly how much he knew. He was [briefed](#)¹⁰⁴ in [vague](#)¹⁰⁵ terms, he [nodded at](#)¹⁰⁶ [memos](#), he [signed off on](#)¹⁰⁷ [broad](#)¹⁰⁸ directions. But he never seemed to focus on the details.

[00:21:22] This gave his advisers room to run, and run they did.

[00:21:28] Later, when the whole affair [came to light](#)¹⁰⁹, Reagan would insist he hadn't authorised arms for [hostages](#).

¹⁰⁴ given the main information about it

¹⁰⁵ not clear or exact

¹⁰⁶ moved his head to show he agreed or understood

¹⁰⁷ approved or agreed to them officially

¹⁰⁸ general; not detailed

¹⁰⁹ became known or discovered

[00:21:36] But even so, even if you believe this statement and that he wasn't [leaning on](#)¹¹⁰ his previous career as a Hollywood actor, it's clear that his style of leadership — big on vision, [light on](#)¹¹¹ detail — this was what allowed this all to happen in the first place.

[00:21:54] So, what happened next?

[00:21:56] Well, it might have all been [kept under wraps](#)¹¹², never revealed to the public, had it not been for an American aeroplane getting shot down over Nicaragua in October of 1986.

[00:22:10] The plane was carrying "60 AK-47 rifles, 50,000 AK-47 bullets, several dozen [grenade launchers](#)¹¹³ and 150 pairs of jungle boots", not exactly hand luggage for a romantic weekend away.

[00:22:27] All but one of the crew were killed. The sole survivor was a man named Eugene Hasenfus, who jumped out of the plane and activated his parachute.

[00:22:39] He was captured with flight logs, phone numbers, and documents that pointed to an extensive operation. He was questioned, and there was a press

¹¹⁰ depending on or using it for support

¹¹¹ having little of

¹¹² kept secret

¹¹³ weapons that shot grenades (small bombs)

conference in which he stated that these flights into Nicaragua were the work of the CIA.

[00:22:56] Washington denied it, of course, but the crash [blew open](#)¹¹⁴ the Contra side of the story: the US government, in direct violation of the Boland Amendments, was still interfering in Nicaragua.

[00:23:12] And then, less than a month later, [the other shoe dropped](#)¹¹⁵, this time from the Middle East.

[00:23:20] On 3 November 1986, a Lebanese newspaper published a [scoop](#)¹¹⁶: the United States had secretly shipped missiles to Iran. The details were [startling](#)¹¹⁷: anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, [routed](#)¹¹⁸ through third countries, all supposedly to win influence with “moderates” and help free [hostages](#) in Lebanon, influence that had no signs of being won, and [hostages](#) that were not released.

¹¹⁴ made it become public

¹¹⁵ the next bad event happened, as expected

¹¹⁶ a special news story before anyone else had it

¹¹⁷ very surprising or shocking

¹¹⁸ sent along a particular path or route

[00:23:53] Importantly, the two stories weren't initially connected; they were two different [scandals](#)¹¹⁹, and were both addressed separately.

[00:24:04] But from that point on, events moved quickly.

[00:24:09] On 13 November, Ronald Reagan addressed the nation. He insisted it hadn't been "arms for [hostages](#)." He spoke of reaching out to Iranian moderates.

[00:24:21] But the press and Congress [smelled blood](#)¹²⁰.

[00:24:26] And behind the scenes, there was panic. An internal investigation was launched.

[00:24:32] In the NSC offices, as investigators approached, Oliver North and his secretary [shredded](#)¹²¹ incriminating documents and memos. Notes were pulled, files disappeared.

[00:24:45] Unfortunately for them, and fortunately for justice and my ability to tell this story, some paperwork survived.

¹¹⁹ shocking and shameful events

¹²⁰ sensed weakness or vulnerability in the situation

¹²¹ cut or torn into very small pieces

[00:24:55] There was an internal review led by the Attorney General, and his team found what no one had admitted in public: profits from the Iran missile sales had been **diverted** to the Contras.

[00:25:11] In that instant, two separate **scandals snapped together**¹²² into one: Iran–Contra.

[00:25:20] The **cover**¹²³ was gone. Congressional hearings followed in 1987; Oliver North, with his **crisp**¹²⁴ uniform, tidy hair, and **unflinching**¹²⁵ **tone**¹²⁶, became the public face of the **scandal**.

[00:25:35] Appearing in his Marine uniform, Lt. Col. North **defiantly**¹²⁷ defended his actions, **portraying**¹²⁸ them as **patriotic**¹²⁹.

¹²² were joined suddenly

¹²³ attempt to hide the truth

¹²⁴ neat and clean in appearance

¹²⁵ not showing fear or weakness

¹²⁶ the sound or feeling in his voice

¹²⁷ in a bold way that showed resistance

¹²⁸ showing or describing

¹²⁹ showing love and support for his country

[00:25:45] An estimated 55 million Americans watched his first day of testimony, and “Olliemania” broke out across the country. Shirts and [bumper stickers](#)¹³⁰ were sold, supportive prayer vigils were held, and hundreds of thousands of dollars were collected for his legal fees.

[00:26:05] The jury found North guilty on 3 of the 12 counts against him. He was sentenced to a three-year suspended prison term, two years probation, \$150,000 in fines, and 1,200 hours of community service, convictions that were all [overturned](#)¹³¹ the following year.

[00:26:27] In terms of the others implicated, John Poindexter [resigned](#)¹³². His predecessor, Robert McFarlane, was pulled back in for questioning.

[00:26:36] The independent counsel opened years of investigations.

[00:26:40] There were more convictions, but some were [overturned on appeal](#)¹³³.

[00:26:46] And in December 1992, then President George H. W. Bush issued [pardons](#)¹³⁴ that closed the legal book if not the historical one.

¹³⁰ small signs stuck on car bumpers (protective bars) with short messages

¹³¹ officially changed or cancelled

¹³² left his position by choice

¹³³ after asking a higher court to change the decision

¹³⁴ official forgiveness for the crimes

[00:26:59] As for the legacy of the affair, well, you would be [hard-pressed](#)¹³⁵ to argue that it's the worst crime committed by a sitting American president.

[00:27:09] Historians to this day disagree on the extent of Ronald Reagan's involvement, or even the extent to which he was aware of the details.

[00:27:19] And even if he knew, there are plenty of people who agree with the [intention](#): it did, after all, seem like a [neat](#) solution to several problems. “[Neat](#)” was indeed the adjective North used to describe the idea.

[00:27:36] But it was in clear violation of US law, in terms of the financing of the Contras, and in contradiction to [stated](#)¹³⁶ US policy, in terms of the sale of arms to Iran.

[00:27:50] To its critics, and Reagan's critics, it was both illegal and [hypocritical](#)¹³⁷, as well as [corrosive](#)¹³⁸ to constitutional [checks and balances](#).

[00:28:00] And did it work? Well, the answer to that is more [clear-cut](#)¹³⁹: it did not.

¹³⁵ finding it difficult

¹³⁶ said or expressed clearly

¹³⁷ pretending to have good beliefs while doing the opposite

¹³⁸ causing slow damage or harm

¹³⁹ definite and easy to understand

[00:28:08] US-Iran relations are still [frosty](#)¹⁴⁰, Iran is still designated as a major [sponsor](#)¹⁴¹ of terrorist groups in the region, Daniel Ortega, the then-leader of the Sandinistas, is still President of Nicaragua, and for Hezbollah, taking [hostages](#) hasn't exactly [gone out of fashion](#)¹⁴².

[00:28:29] And as for the question of whether [subsequent](#)¹⁴³ US Presidents learned any lessons from it, well, I'll let you be the judge of that.

[00:28:39] OK, then, that is it for today's episode on the Iran-Contra scandal.

[00:28:44] I know it was quite a complicated one, with lots of moving parts and people to keep track of, but I guess that's what happens when you conduct a game of geopolitical chess, involving Swiss bank accounts, American missiles, [sworn enemies](#)¹⁴⁴ and Central American [guerrillas](#)¹⁴⁵.

[00:29:01] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

¹⁴⁰ cold or unfriendly

¹⁴¹ supporter or helper

¹⁴² been no longer popular or common

¹⁴³ following, future

¹⁴⁴ countries that completely hate each other

¹⁴⁵ members of small groups fighting a larger army

[00:29:05] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Scandal	a shocking event that made people angry
Rebels	people who fought against their government or leaders
Hostages	people kept as prisoners to make others do what the captors wanted
Dodgy	dishonest or not trustworthy
Covert operations	secret actions, usually done by the military or government
Seemingly	appearing to be
Yearns	strongly wants or wishes
Rigid	strict and not easy to change
Checks and balances	rules that make sure no part of government has too much power
Was no exception	was not different from others; followed the same rule
Landslide	very big and easy (victory)
Sitting	currently holding the position
Spread	move or grow over a larger area

Virus	a tiny organism that causes disease and spreads easily
Viral	spreading very quickly
Staunch	very strong and loyal
Financing	giving money to support
Guerrilla	engaging in irregular warfare as an independent group
Buffer	something that separates or protects one thing from another
Stir up	cause or provoke
Disrupt	stop them from working normally
Turn out	happen or end in this way
Overthrow	removal from power by force
Swift	very fast or quick
Hostile to	unfriendly towards; strongly against
Stormed	suddenly entered by force
Hostage	a person kept prisoner to make others do something
Inauguration	the ceremony when he officially became president

Spreading	opening out, extending
Cut off	stopped or ended
Ties	relationships or connections
State sponsor	a country that gave help or money to it
Sponsor of	a country that gave money or help
Vital	very important or necessary
Jets	fast military aeroplanes
Shiny	bright, polished and reflecting light
Arsenal	a large collection of weapons
Maintain	keep in good condition
Key	very important
Ally	friend or partner
Volatile	likely to change suddenly; not stable
Served	was useful for
Emerge	come out or appear

Victorious	having won the fight
Drawn-out	lasting a long time; longer than expected
Chaos	complete confusion and lack of order
Torn apart	badly damaged or divided
Station chief	the person in charge of the local office
Captors	people who took and kept them as prisoners
Jails	places where the prisoners were kept
Negotiating	trying to reach an agreement by talking
Humiliation	great embarrassment or shame
Go back on	break his promise or change his mind
The stage was set	everything was ready for something to happen
Sworn enemy	one who was completely against them
Influence	power to change or affect what they did or thought
Prohibited	did not allow; banned by law
Intention	aim or plan

Abuses cruel or wrong treatment of people

Weariness feeling of tiredness

Convictions strong beliefs or opinions

Stand tall be proud and not afraid

Implement put into action

Memos short written messages

Sign off on officially approve

Interpreting understanding it in a particular way

Executing doing or carrying out

Had the green light had permission to do it

Tied in with was connected or related to

Shady secretive and possibly dishonest

Devious clever but dishonest

Despicable very bad and not deserving respect

Fellow man or person

Facilitated	made easier to happen
Stocks	supplies kept for future use
Replenished	filled up again after being used
Pocketed	took or kept it for himself
Promptly	quickly and without delay
Kidnapped	took and kept as a prisoner by force
Grim	unpleasant or sad
Batch	group or quantity
Trustworthiness	being honest and reliable
Broker	arrange between people
Exaggerated	made to seem bigger or more important than they were
Pursuing	trying to achieve or get it
Build bridges with	improve relationships with
Brokering	arranging between others
Prided himself	felt proud of it

Tasked with	given (a job or duty) to do
Prosecuted	officially accused of it in court
Mix-up	a mistake or confusion between things
True to	in accordance to
Overcharging	asking for more money than was fair or correct
Diverted	caused to change direction
Off the books	secret and not officially recorded
Neat	clever and simple
Surplus	extra amount left over
Loophole	a small gap in law
Neatly	in a tidy or organised way
Tidily	in a clean and orderly way
Principle	basic idea or rule
Siphoned off	secretly taken from a larger amount
Intermediaries	people who helped communicate or make deals between others

Briefed	given the main information about it
Vague	not clear or exact
Nodded at	moved his head to show he agreed or understood
Signed off on	approved or agreed to them officially
Broad	general; not detailed
Came to light	became known or discovered
Leaning on	depending on or using it for support
Light on	having little of
Kept under wraps	kept secret
Grenade launchers	weapons that shot grenades (small bombs)
Blew open	made it become public
The other shoe dropped	the next bad event happened, as expected
Scoop	a special news story before anyone else had it
Startling	very surprising or shocking
Routed	sent along a particular path or route

Scandals	shocking and shameful events
Smelled blood	sensed weakness or vulnerability in the situation
Shredded	cut or torn into very small pieces
Snapped together	were joined suddenly
Cover	attempt to hide the truth
Crisp	neat and clean in appearance
Unflinching	not showing fear or weakness
Tone	the sound or feeling in his voice
Defiantly	in a bold way that showed resistance
Portraying	showing or describing
Patriotic	showing love and support for his country
Bumper stickers	small signs stuck on car bumpers (protective bars) with short messages
Overtaken	officially changed or cancelled
Resigned	left his position by choice
On appeal	after asking a higher court to change the decision

Pardons	official forgiveness for the crimes
Hard-pressed	finding it difficult
Stated	said or expressed clearly
Hypocritical	pretending to have good beliefs while doing the opposite
Corrosive	causing slow damage or harm
Clear-cut	definite and easy to understand
Frosty	cold or unfriendly
Sponsor	supporter or helper
Gone out of fashion	been no longer popular or common
Subsequent	following, future
Sworn enemies	countries that completely hate each other
Guerrillas	members of small groups fighting a larger army

Language spotlight

1. The stage was set

- **Meaning:** The situation was ready for something to happen.
- **Synonyms:** prepared, ready, arranged
- **Antonyms:** unprepared, not ready
- **Examples:**
 - After months of planning, **the stage was set** for the final operation.
 - When the new president took office, **the stage was set** for big changes.

2. Go back on (something)

- **Meaning:** To break a promise or change your decision.
- **Synonyms:** break (a promise), withdraw, change your mind
- **Antonyms:** keep (a promise), stick to
- **Examples:**
 - The government **went back on** its promise to lower taxes.

- She never **goes back on** her word — you can trust her.

3. Kept under wraps

- **Meaning:** Kept secret or hidden.
- **Synonyms:** secret, concealed, hidden
- **Antonyms:** revealed, made public
- **Examples:**
 - The project was **kept under wraps** until the official launch.
 - They **kept the deal under wraps** to avoid media attention.

4. The other shoe dropped

- **Meaning:** When the next problem or bad event finally happens after a warning or delay.
- **Synonyms:** the bad news came, the next problem happened
- **Antonyms:** relief came, problem ended
- **Examples:**

- Everyone knew more scandals were coming — and then **the other shoe dropped**.
- We were waiting for **the other shoe to drop** after the first mistake.

5. Smelled blood

- **Meaning:** Realised someone was weak or in trouble and decided to attack or take advantage.
- **Synonyms:** sensed weakness, saw an opportunity
- **Antonyms:** showed mercy, ignored
- **Examples:**
 - The press **smelled blood** and started investigating the scandal.
 - Once his rivals **smelled blood**, they tried to take his job.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. The U.S. saw Iran as important because:
 - a) It was rich in oil
 - b) It had influence over groups holding American hostages
 - c) It supported democracy in the region
 - d) It was fighting against the Soviet Union directly

2. Oliver North's role in the affair was to:
 - a) Plan and organise the secret operations
 - b) Negotiate peace with Iran
 - c) Spy for the CIA
 - d) Stop the arms sales

3. The money from the arms sales was used to:
 - a) Help rebuild Nicaragua

- b) Pay government debts
- c) Fund schools in Central America
- d) Support the Contras fighting in Nicaragua

4. Congress had banned support for the Contras because:

- a) They were communists
- b) They were considered terrorists
- c) They committed human rights abuses
- d) They refused U.S. aid

5. What happened to many of the officials involved in the Iran-Contra Affair?

- a) They were found guilty but later pardoned
- b) They were sent to foreign embassies
- c) They were executed
- d) They escaped to Central America

True or False

6. The U.S. was openly selling weapons to Iran during the war with Iraq.
(True/False)
7. Oliver North worked for the CIA. (True/False)
8. The Contras were rebels fighting against the Sandinista government.
(True/False)
9. Reagan personally ordered the transfer of money to the Contras. (True/False)
10. Several officials were charged but later pardoned. (True/False)

Fill-in-the-Blank

11. He would be brought memos to read or documents to sign ____ on, but he
wouldn't always read them.
12. As long as they were executing his broad wishes, they had the _____ light to get
creative.
13. They believed that engaging Iran could be part of a longer-term strategy, not
just to free hostages, but to _____ bridges with so-called “moderates” inside
the Iranian regime.

14. North worked in the National Security Council staff, the NSC, and he was the sort of officer who _____ himself on “getting things done.”
15. North might have had a ____-up with the Sultan of Brunei, but he was pretty efficient when it came to everything else.

Vocabulary Practice

Choose the correct definition of the word or expression from the podcast.

16. **Dodgy**

- a) Honest and clear
- b) Risky or dishonest
- c) Expensive
- d) Friendly

17. **Hostages**

- a) People kept somewhere against their will
- b) Soldiers fighting in a war
- c) Political leaders

d) Volunteers

18. **Overthrow**

a) To take control of a government by force

b) To throw something very far

c) To make peace with another country

d) To rebuild a government

19. **Covert operations**

a) Public and open activities

b) Military training exercises

c) Secret government missions

d) Peace talks

20. **Guerrilla**

a) A kind of tropical animal

- b) A government official
- c) A person who helps build roads
- d) A member of a small, independent fighting group

Answers

1. b) It had influence over groups holding American hostages
2. a) Plan and organise the secret operations
3. d) Support the Contras fighting in Nicaragua
4. c) They committed human rights abuses
5. a) They were found guilty but later pardoned
6. False
7. False
8. True
9. False
10. True
11. off
12. green
13. build
14. prided
15. mix
16. b) Risky or dishonest
17. a) People kept somewhere against their will
18. a) To take control of a government by force
19. c) Secret government missions
20. d) A member of a small, independent fighting group