

## Teaching the Iran-Contra Affair

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The Congressional investigation of the Iran-*contra* scandal in the summer of 1987 failed as a long-term replacement for daytime game shows and soap operas. However, the scandal itself remained a political issue even after lame-duck President Bush pardoned all participants in the affair, thus clearing the way for Oliver North's unsuccessful bid for the U.S. Senate. The story of covert arms sales, hostages, and Nicaraguan rebels still has something for almost every interested observer to talk about. For some, the congressional hearings demonstrated the strength and self-confidence of the American constitutional system as the legislative branch probed the policy failures of, and the potential violations of legal statutes committed by, the executive branch. Others condemned the investigation. The political right (including some members of the Joint Committee) asserted that the hearings went too far and exposed the United States to international ridicule. At the other extreme, the political left accused the House and Senate Committees of not delving deeply enough into various allegations of misconduct by the Reagan administration. Finally, for political scientists the revelations of key Administration officials in the congressional hearings, in criminal trials, and in "kiss-and-tell" memoirs provide an excellent source of material to test the explanatory power of various conceptual models intended to describe the foreign policy-making process.

The wealth of information about the scandal can overwhelm the teacher of political science preparing an undergraduate American foreign policy syllabus. Several possible approaches lend themselves to teaching the scandal as part of a course on American foreign policy. Over several years, I have taught the scandal from several viewpoints, highlighting different conceptual models each time. These attempts did not succeed as I had hoped. Students

seemed confused by the three-ring circus of events surrounding the scandal which took place simultaneously in Central America, the Middle East, and Washington, DC.

I have developed a six-week case study unit for my semester-length introductory American foreign policy class. Like Allison's (1971) analysis of the Cuban missile crisis, I encourage students to consider the Iran-*contra* scandal as a puzzle which they should piece together using different models of the American foreign policy process. By the end of the six weeks, my students have taken very specific aspects of the Iran-*contra* affair and examined them in the light of such models as presidential leadership style, Congress-Executive tensions, bureaucratic politics within the executive branch, and public opinion. This Iran-*contra* case is more extensive than, for example, some of the Pew Case Studies in International Affairs (1995), but shares the goal of creating a setting in the classroom for "interactive learning."

### Changing Classroom Dynamics

Two converging forces drove me to include this Iran-*contra* unit in my course. First, I grew tired of the lecture-discussion format of my classes. The American foreign policy class has no formal prerequisites and is open to majors and non-majors alike. I enjoy the mix of students that this creates but unfortunately, many students lack the knowledge of domestic and international politics, or the scandal itself, that would allow them to analyze events intelligently. As a result, I found that I lectured too much and became bogged down in basic material.

Second, there is a growing awareness that college students have different learning styles and needs, many of which go unaddressed in the traditional college classroom. At the start of each semester, for in-

stance, I receive at least 3 memos from the Dean's office telling me that certain students have problems that I need to address. These usually include requests for an extended test period, for using an audio tape to record class, or for using a lap-top computer for in-class exams.

In developing this case study, I sought to engage as many students as possible. To do this, I combined elements of various teaching methods, the principles of writing across the curriculum, and the guidelines of helping students with learning disabilities. My goal was to make the course more inclusive, more "student centered."

### Course Materials

The first step was to take some of the economic pressure off the students. Given the steeply escalating price of textbooks, I ask students to buy only one book, usually Kegley and Wittkopf (1991). Recently I have added Deese (1994). In the past I put on reserve a selection of primary sources like *The Tower Commission Report* (1987) and *Testimony at Joint Hearings* (1987). To get some of the flavor of the "kiss-and-tell" literature I include the memoirs of Washington and scandal insiders like Bush (1987), Cohen and Mitchell (1988), Cruz (1989), Deaver (1987), Ledeen (1988), Menges (1988), Reagan (1989), Reagan (1990), Regan (1988), Speakes (1988), and Weinberger (1990). Finally, to supplement the primary textbook, I place some of the "classic" and recent scholarly work on the foreign policy process on reserve, works such as Armstrong (1987), Destler (1972), Draper (1991), Halperin (1974), Hamilton, Madison and Jay (1961), Hilsman (1987), Janis (1982), Krasner (1972), Mann (1990), Neustadt (1960), Ripley and Lindsay (1993), and Rourke (1972).

## Course Requirements

Next I modified my grading procedures. There are three formal requirements for this case study.

1. Weekly three-page reading response papers.
2. An exam at the end of the unit.
3. An exercise requiring students to write a three-page position paper addressed to President Reagan trying to persuade him to act in a particular manner regarding the arms-to-Iran portion of the affair.

The final exam also includes a question on the Iran-*contra* affair.

Noticeably absent from the above is a formal reading list. Initially I did include a “required” reading list but students—especially those with certain kinds of learning disabilities—found this to be daunting, and so did very little reading. Even some of the best students confessed that they occasionally did not do the reading and bluffed during class discussions. At the same time, however, I did not want to dilute the course content. I ask students to read between 100 and 150 pages per week but ultimately it is up to them how much they complete.

To keep the students’ feet to the fire I require the response papers mentioned above. These papers force the students to do at least one twenty- to forty-page selection of reading each week. If they do not, their semester grade suffers. I provide a list of possible questions to answer in the paper. These include:

- What was the main point of the reading?
- What sorts of arguments did the author make? (Were these normative, or empirical, or a mixture?)
- What information is the author providing?
- What is the author’s perspective on American foreign policy?

A frequent complaint about this writing-intensive approach is that it creates more work for the professor. I do not grade each response paper. Rather, I read or skim them to be sure it is on the week’s material and not on Mandelstam’s poetry—as one student attempted to get away with. At the end of the semester, I add up the number of papers the student

has completed, divide by the number I expect them to complete (usually ten), and this becomes a quarter of the semester grade.

## The Unit’s Progress

As one mentor once told me, “Stop trying to stuff their heads full of facts—give the kids time to think.” With this in mind, I give the students the first week of the unit to begin the reading. I begin with a few preparatory remarks about the Iran-*contra* affair and try to set the mood for the coming weeks by showing a video tape of excerpts from the Iran-*contra* hearings.

The next weeks are spent discussing the readings and the issues the students raise. I usually begin with brief comments about the reading and writing assignments and then the students assemble into groups of three people and consider a particular question. These questions might include

- Was the Boland Amendment constitutional?
- Who was Bretton G. Sciaroni and how is his role in the affair instructive of Oliver North’s attitudes toward intelligence oversight?
- Was President Reagan a good leader?
- Is the bureaucratic politics paradigm “undemocratic”?
- What is “plausible deniability”? (Poindexter 1987)
- How well does Nordlinger’s (1981) discussion of state autonomy Type 1 describe the Reagan administration’s actions in support for the *contras*?
- Give three reasons why the Iran-*contra* affair was a success for the Reagan administration.

I give the small groups five to ten minutes to find collective answers. As they are working, I move from group to group to make sure they are on the topic but I do not answer any questions at this time. Then we reconvene as a full class to hear the groups’ answers. Group work is an effective way to involve all the students. The “shy” students seem less intimidated in the smaller circles. As the groups make their reports all

students usually seem interested in what their classmates have to say.

## Conclusions

I think my success with this Iran-*contra* unit stems from its combination of proven pedagogic methods: case studies, student-centered cooperative learning, and writing across the curriculum.

It is my impression that the pay-offs of using the student-centered approach are not well-known among political science teachers. Obviously, the combination of cooperative learning and writing across the curriculum should not be limited to a study of the Iran-*contra* affair. I use the teaching methods in all my classes and I am developing other case studies to use in them as well. Like the use of case studies, there is extensive literature documenting the effectiveness of cooperative learning and writing across the curriculum. If you are interested, books by Barbara E. Fassler Walvoord (1986) and Toby Fulwiler (1987) are good places to start. Both have extensive bibliographies.

The greatest strength of the approach is that it gives more responsibility to the students—they are not mere passive bodies sitting in front of the lectern; they are active participants in the process of learning. During the group exercises in class, the students are involved with the material, thinking, and hearing the ideas of others.

Though students might complain about the reading response papers, these papers give students practice in writing analytical work for political science without the fear of being graded. I offer comments on the arguments and occasionally correct grammar and style. I also track those students who need more help with all aspects of writing. It is gratifying to see improvement by the end of the semester.

I especially like this method of teaching because it lets me avoid preaching—instead, the students reach their own conclusions, then argue amongst themselves.

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