

The Iran/Contra Affair:

Ragged Hole in

By John Peters*

This November marked a year since the beginning of the Iran/Contra affair — the most severe political crisis within the ranks of the U.S. bourgeoisie since Ronald Reagan took office in 1981 and a major episode in current history.

Prior to the eruption of the Iran/Contra crisis, the Reagan administration had achieved certain successes in pushing forward the bourgeoisie's overall programme of preparing for war with the Soviet bloc and seemed to be riding high. It had overseen the most massive military buildup in U.S. peacetime history and had succeeded in putting the Soviet Union on the political defensive on a number of occasions. The U.S. had escalated its international bullying — from the invasion of Grenada, to the bombing of Libya, to the Contra terror campaign against Nicaragua — with seeming impunity. It had also taken certain initiatives to bolster the unity of the Western alliance around a prepare-for-war agenda. Domestically, the Reagan team managed, ever precariously, to hold the U.S. economy together, orchestrated an outpouring of jingoism and neanderthal-like reaction, and systematically beefed up the repressive powers of the state.

The bourgeoisie crowed that America was "back" and "standing tall." Reagan was applauded by the imperialist press as the most powerful U.S. president in recent memory, and for them, at least, he was virtually beyond criticism.

But the Iran/Contra crisis ripped some gaping holes in the fabric of this so-called "resurgent America." Reagan was knocked off his high horse and his administration was left seriously weakened. And the sharp divisions within the ranks of the U.S. bourgeoisie have by no means been resolved (the congressional investigating panel couldn't even agree on a unified summation

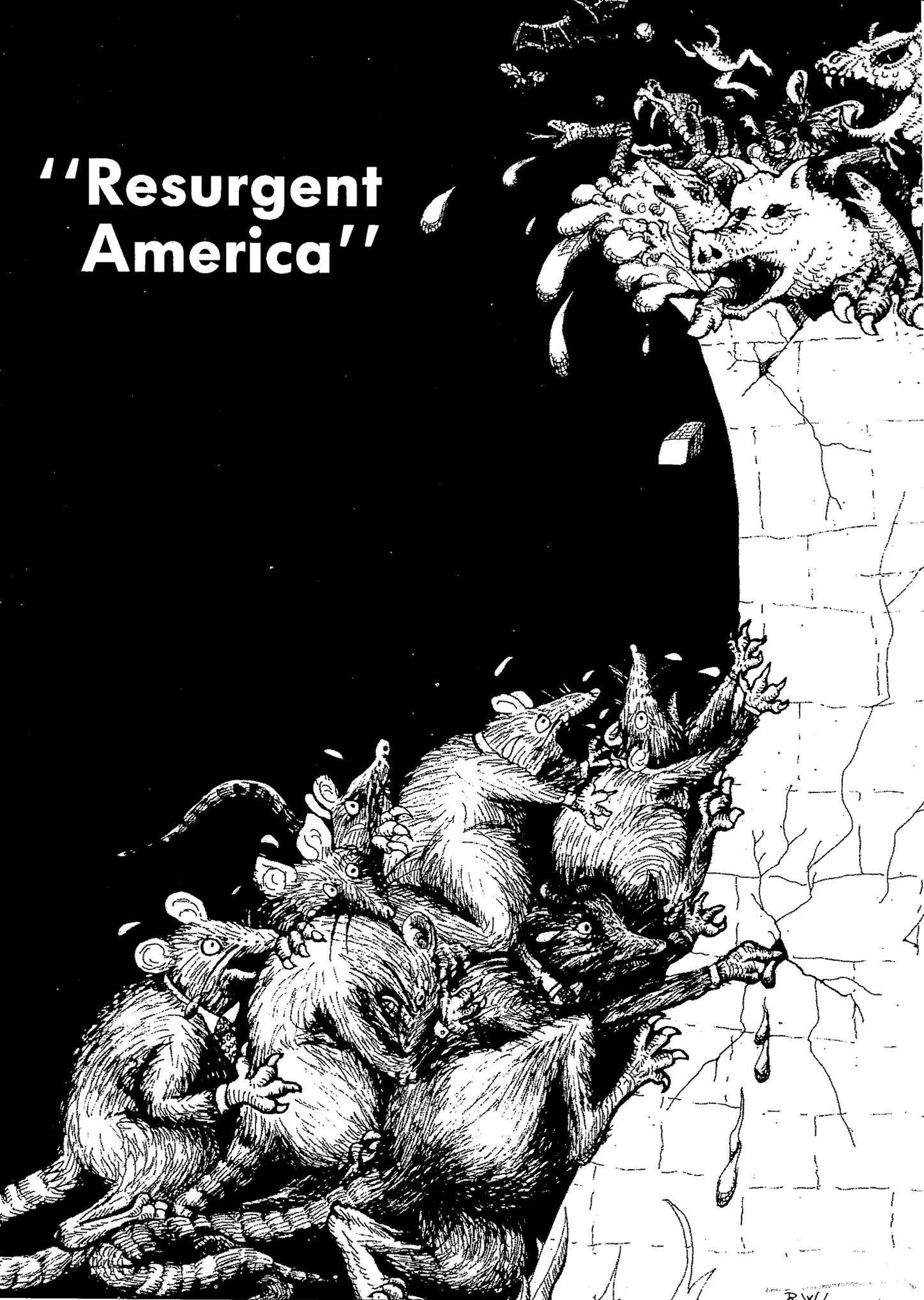
of the affair and had to issue two separate reports).

The scandal was touched off by revelations in a Lebanese magazine that high-ranking U.S. officials had secretly traveled to Iran — an inscribed Bible and key-shaped cake in one hand and TOW missiles in the other — to try and cut a deal with the Khomeini regime. Initially the U.S. government strenuously denied having had anything to do with the Islamic Republic. But these denials quickly came unraveled, and it was soon revealed that the U.S. had been secretly shipping arms to Iran, via Israel, for over a year. Within weeks it was also disclosed that the U.S. had been using the proceeds of these arms sales to fund a secret network of terror directed against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. Over the course of the past year, instance after instance of murderous — and global — U.S. skullduggery has come to light.

The ensuing ruling class debate, conducted through three government investigations, four months of public Congressional hearings, hours of media coverage and commentary, and a continuing criminal investigation, have revealed a U.S. bourgeoisie united on the essentials of the Reagan/resurgent America agenda, but seriously divided over certain aspects of how to carry it out. That is, the basic tenets of holding the U.S.'s global empire together while feverishly preparing to wage war against the Soviet bloc were never questioned. What was being sharply debated, however, were some very sticky problems in advancing that agenda, in Central America and the Persian Gulf in particular, and how U.S. initiatives in these regions affected its global contention and prewar positioning vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. The scandal also involved debate over

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''Resurgent America''



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some aspects of the institutional functioning and decision-making processes of the bourgeois state apparatus.

The fact that such sharp struggle and debate erupted within imperialist ranks is a reflection of the tautness of the world situation overall. In this situation, even regional machinations by either bloc can potentially have a major impact on the overall global balance of power and thus assume enormous strategic significance. Given this, failed policies or differences over imperialist strategy can quickly spark fierce battles within the ruling class of any of the major powers.

Regional Initiatives and Prewar Positioning

A focal point of this crisis was U.S. policy toward Iran and Nicaragua. Both countries are located in regions considered strategically vital to the U.S. empire and its war plans. Both were also dislodged from their former puppet positions in the U.S. bloc by revolutions in 1979, with Nicaragua now ensconced in the Soviet bloc and with Iran, though in the grip of reactionary rule and tilting to the West, now a wildcard of sorts. Over the past decade, both regions have been convulsed by crisis, mass upheaval, and intensified inter-imperialist contention. All this has been a source of great consternation for U.S. ruling circles and prompted various efforts, including those under scrutiny during the Iran/Contra affair, to reassert American dominance.

Shipping arms to Iran was part of an effort by the U.S. imperialists to increase their influence within the Iranian government and, while the full details of this operation have not yet come to light, perhaps even to make a grab for predominance by engineering a more favourable realignment within the regime — and head off Soviet efforts to do the same. (To the degree the much discussed question of freeing U.S. hostages held in the Middle East was even a concern, it was largely to secure the release of a high-ranking CIA official held in Lebanon.)

Numerous editorials and the comments of leading U.S. officials

and ex-officials from both the Democratic and Republican parties have made it clear that no one in the U.S. ruling class had any problem with opening up a channel to the Khomeini regime and trying to strengthen U.S. influence. (In fact, U.S. dealings with the Tehran regime had been reported in the press over a year before the eruption of the scandal.) What was of concern, however, was the reliability of the forces with whom the U.S. was dealing, a concern highlighted by the exposure of these secret contacts and the unraveling of the initiative. Further, important voices in the U.S. ruling class worried aloud that the administration's dealings with Tehran, in particular the shipment of arms, coupled with the continuation of the Iran/Iraq war, could end up destabilising some of the U.S.'s firmest and most important clients in the Gulf region, as well as create openings for the Soviet Union there. These concerns were at the heart of the U.S. decision to reflag Kuwaiti tankers and dispatch a massive armada to the Persian Gulf.

The debate over U.S. policy toward Nicaragua was similar. The U.S. ruling class spoke in unison on the intolerability of a pro-Soviet beachhead in Central America, the need to bludgeon the Sandinista regime into submission, and the importance of having a pro-U.S. military force like the Contras as a tool in that effort. The question that emerged quite sharply was precisely how to accomplish that shared goal of bullying Nicaragua into the American orbit. Of great concern was whether the tactics pursued by the Reagan team might have had the effect of creating more instability in the region and thereby provided revolutionary openings to the masses.

While the exact contours of the debate are not entirely clear, it seems that there were — and are — sharp differences over the timetable for U.S. action against Nicaragua and the precise mix of political, economic, and military pressure to be applied. It is possible that the Reagan team may have been preparing for a more dramatic near-term move, relying heavily on military

force; others, perhaps even within the administration, may have argued for a longer-term view, utilising a broader mix of pressures. It can't be ruled out that there may have been a view in the Reagan team for a direct U.S. invasion of Nicaragua in the near future.

If this were in fact under serious consideration, there were perhaps fears in the ruling class that such an invasion could backfire by becoming not the lightning success that some U.S. military planners hoped for, but a protracted battle that would destabilise near-by pro-U.S. regimes and tie down U.S. forces in one region to the detriment of its overall global positioning and rivalry against the Soviet Union. Concern also seems to have been expressed within the ruling class that the Reagan administration was focusing too single-mindedly on the situation in Nicaragua and not paying sufficient attention to other issues in the region — for instance, the possibility of economic collapse and/or social crisis in Mexico.

While U.S.-Soviet policy in particular did not seem to be under debate during this crisis, the overall contention between these imperialist powers and their headlong rush toward a Third World War clearly set its context. Domination of the Third World is certainly a crucial pillar of both the American and Soviet empires. But such regional moves, like the U.S. initiatives toward Iran and Nicaragua, are tightly bound up with the contention and prewar positioning of these rival empires.

The Debate Over Institutional Functioning and the Character of U.S. Democracy

These policy differences were linked to other questions being thrashed out within U.S. ruling circles concerning the institutional functioning and decision-making processes of the executive branch. The question under scrutiny here was not the "preservation of democracy," the "restoration of constitutional rule," the "faithful execution of the law," or the proper "balance between the executive and legislative branches of government," as the

bourgeois media and the Congressional legislators put it. Rather the imperialists were concerned with issues such as the relationship between intelligence gathering and decision-making, between overall policy management and policy implementation, and there appears to have been a criticism leveled at Reagan for using the state machinery to circumvent and oppose a ruling-class consensus, specifically on the question of the role and level of support to the Contras. In other words, these gentlemen were debating how best to fine tune the decision-making processes of the bourgeois state in order to be able to advance the interests of U.S. imperialism at a very complex, tumultuous, and, for it, dangerous point in history.

Nonetheless, the crisis, the subsequent investigations, and the Congressional hearings did reveal much about the true character of democracy. The fact that the Reagan administration had carried out some of its most strategically sensitive operations in secret, without the knowledge of Congress, and in contravention to numerous laws, underscored Lenin's observation that in bourgeois democracies "the real 'business of state' is performed behind the scenes and is carried on by the departments, chancelleries and General Staffs," while "Parliament is given up to talk for the special purpose of fooling the 'common people.'" (*State and Revolution*) The cavalcade of professional assassins, anti-communists, arms merchants and mercenaries who were the core operatives implementing U.S. policy were living proof of the fact that the rule of the American bourgeoisie is based not on the supposedly hallowed principles of democracy and decency, but on a worldwide network of violence and terror.

Government officials competed to outdo each other in praising democracy; meanwhile, not a word of criticism was voiced about U.S. support for ruthless dictatorships from South Africa to Chile. Nor were objections raised about U.S. support for vicious Central American tyrannies that have slaughtered some 200,000 people over the last

decade.

The Congressional hearings in particular were designed, in part, to demonstrate the vitality of the U.S. political system — that problems and mistakes could be corrected through open debate. (The final Congressional report argued that the evils exposed by Iran/Contra did not result "from deficiencies in... our system of government.") They were also supposed to convince the masses that if the Republicans and Reagan couldn't be trusted, there was still the Democratic party or other bourgeois figures. Instead, the hearings demonstrated the bankruptcy of placing one's hopes on any segment of the bourgeoisie.

The debate at these hearings was always framed by what was in the interests of U.S. imperialism; its right to dominate and brutalize in pursuit of its global interests was never questioned. The ruling class preparations for a third world war were never discussed. Instead, all the Congressmen, Democrats and Republicans alike, felt compelled to declare their patriotism and their desire for a stronger America. Transparently false statements by various administration officials, such as Admiral Poindexter's declaration that he never told Reagan of the diversion of Iran arms sales funds to the Contras, went unchallenged. Discussion of many of the most sordid details that emerged from the scandal, including the international drug smuggling used to finance the Contra operation, was simply suppressed.

The hearings were also turned into a platform for Lt. Colonel Oliver North, a key Reagan administration official and a central figure in both the Iran and the Nicaraguan Contra operations, to spew out some of the most reactionary swill heard in the U.S. in a decade (and that is saying something given the overall atmosphere of resurgent America). North not only turned the hearings into a testimonial in support of the Contras, but lent the proceedings a distinctly fascist and warlike tone, declaring, for example, that "this nation is at risk in a dangerous world," and that the normal workings of democracy

could not always apply. He repeatedly boasted that he was proud of the crimes he had committed on behalf of U.S. imperialism, from Vietnam to Nicaragua, and would gladly commit them again.

The seriousness of U.S. war preparations and the real danger of a police state were underscored by revelations that North had been involved in organising a plan for the suspension of the Constitution and implementation of martial law "in the event of a national crisis, such as nuclear war, violent and widespread internal dissent or national opposition to a U.S. military invasion abroad."

North's performance at the hearings and his promotion into an instant national hero were particularly significant. They illustrated that while the U.S. ruling class had undercut the Reagan presidency, it was still fully committed to the resurgent America, prepare-for-war agenda that Reagan has embodied.

The Dénouement — for Now

The conclusion of the Congressional hearings in August represented a certain dénouement of the scandal, at least for the time being. Their outcome was both contradictory and inconclusive. Great care was taken not to cripple the current administration or force Reagan from office. The leaders of the U.S. were quite open about not wanting to trigger another Watergate, given the tenseness of the world situation and the intensity of the rivalry with the Soviet Union. Nor was the executive branch ever paralysed; witness the dispatch of ships to the Persian Gulf and the flurry of political manoeuvring leading up to the December 1987 Reagan-Gorbachev summit.

At the same time, however, the administration has been seriously weakened: two successive Reagan nominees for the Supreme Court failed to win confirmation; the Reagan team has yet to come up with a decisive plan of economic action in the wake of the October 19th Stock Market shock; and in Washington D.C., Reagan is increasingly called "irrelevant." None of the thorny issues that triggered the

scandal have been thoroughly resolved, something that has been quite evident in the continuing debate over U.S. Central American policy.

The Iran/Contra crisis and the continued turmoil within the U.S. ruling class doesn't reflect Reagan's "easy-going" management style, as the President's Tower Commission argued, his senility, or that a "cabal of zealots" had taken control of foreign policy, as the Congressional report put it. This crisis sprang from the fact that the U.S. imperialists are plagued with profound and multifaceted crises throughout their global empire and face minefields of contradictions wherever they turn. Any action they take in the Persian Gulf, Central America, or a dozen other theatres throughout the world threatens to create new problems, even catastrophes; yet inaction is impossible as well.

In the days ahead, as new economic, political, or military crises burst forth and the stakes and risks for the U.S. empire are raised, there will be tremendous pressures both toward closer ruling class unity as well as ever more vicious infighting.

The Iran/Contra events illustrate how the developments toward world war and revolution are closely linked. The Iran/Contra crisis pierced the suffocating atmosphere of resurgent America, politically jolted millions in the U.S., provided important openings for doing revolutionary work and exposure, and revealed the fundamental vulnerability of U.S. imperialism. And beyond the U.S., too, what came to light here is more evidence of the vulnerability of imperialism and its various allied reactionary forces all over the world.

At the same time, this crisis has by no means derailed the U.S. war machine. Rather it has aggravated the desperation and weakness propelling the imperialist powers toward war, in particular their difficulties in holding their empire and their various alliances together. In the future, such a crisis could be the trigger for all-out military conflict. All this points to the necessity of seizing upon such openings to step up preparations for revolution, which is the only road to preventing a third world war. □