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Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy and Administration Goals

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My fellow Americans:

I've said on several occasions that I wouldn't comment about the recent congressional hearings on the Iran-contra matter until the hearings were over. Well, that time has come, so tonight I want to talk about some of the lessons we've learned. But rest assured, that's not my sole subject this evening. I also want to talk about the future and getting on with things, because the people's business is waiting.

These past 9 months have been confusing and painful ones for the country. I know you have doubts in your own minds about what happened in this whole episode. What I hope is not in doubt, however, is my commitment to the investigations themselves. So far, we've had four investigations—by the Justice Department, the Tower board, the Independent Counsel, and the Congress. I requested three of those investigations, and I endorsed and cooperated fully with the fourth—the congressional hearings—supplying over 250,000 pages of White House documents, including parts of my own private diaries.

Once I realized I hadn't been fully informed, I sought to find the answers. Some of the answers I don't like. As the Tower board reported, and as I said last March, our original initiative rapidly got all tangled up in the sale of arms, and the sale of arms got tangled up with hostages. Secretary Shultz and Secretary Weinberger both predicted that the American people would immediately assume this whole plan was an arms-for-hostages deal and nothing more. Well, unfortunately, their predictions were right. As I said to you in March, I let my preoccupation with the hostages intrude into areas where it didn't belong. The image—the reality—of Americans in chains, deprived of their freedom and families so far from home, burdened my thoughts. And this was a mistake.

My fellow Americans, I've thought long and often about how to explain to you what I intended to accomplish, but I respect you too much to make excuses. The fact of the matter is that there's nothing I can say that will make the situation right. I was stubborn in my pursuit of a policy that went astray.

The other major issue of the hearings, of course, was the diversion of funds to the Nicaraguan contras. Colonel North and Admiral Poindexter believed they were doing what I would have wanted done—keeping the democratic resistance alive in Nicaragua. I believed then and I believe now in preventing the Soviets from establishing a beachhead in Central America. Since I have been so closely associated with the cause of the contras, the big question during the hearings was whether I knew of the diversion. I was aware the resistance was receiving funds directly from third countries and from private efforts, and I endorsed those endeavors wholeheartedly; but—let me put this in capital letters—I did not know about the diversion of funds. Indeed, I didn't know there were excess funds.

Yet the buck does not stop with Admiral Poindexter, as he stated in his testimony; it stops with me. I am the one who is ultimately accountable to the American people. The admiral testified that he wanted to protect me; yet no President should ever be protected from the truth. No operation is so secret that it must be kept from the Commander in Chief. I had the right, the obligation, to make my own decision. I heard someone the other day ask why I wasn't outraged. Well, at times, I've been mad as a hornet. Anyone would be—just look at the damage that's been done and the time that's been lost. But I've always found that the best therapy for outrage and anger is action.

I've tried to take steps so that what we've been through can't happen again, either in this administration or future ones. But I remember very well what the Tower board said last February when it issued this report. It said the failure was more in people than in process. We can build in every precaution known to the world. We can design that best system ever devised by man. But in the end, people are going to have to run it. And we will never be free of human hopes, weaknesses, and enthusiasms.

Let me tell you what I've done to change both the system and the people who operate it. First of all, I've brought in a new and knowledgeable team. I have a new National Security Adviser, a new Director of the CIA, a new Chief of Staff here at the White House. And I've told them that I must be informed and informed fully. In addition, I adopted the Tower board's model of how the NSC process and staff should work, and I prohibited any operational role by the NSC staff in covert activities.

The report I ordered reviewing our nation's covert operations has been completed. There were no surprises. Some operations were continued, and some were eliminated because they'd outlived their usefulness. I am also adopting new, tighter procedures on consulting with and notifying the Congress on future covert action findings. We will still pursue covert operations when appropriate, but each operation must be legal, and it must meet a specific policy objective.

The problem goes deeper, however, than policies and personnel. Probably the biggest lesson we can draw from the hearings is that the executive and legislative branches of government need to regain trust in each other. We've seen the results of that mistrust in the form of lies, leaks, divisions, and mistakes. We need to find a way to cooperate while realizing foreign policy can't be run by committee. And I believe there's now the growing sense that we can accomplish more by cooperating. And in the end, this may be

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the eventual blessing in disguise to come out of the Iran-contra mess.

But now let me turn to the other subject I promised to discuss this evening—the future. There are now 17 months left in this administration, and I want them to be prosperous, productive ones for the American people. When you first elected me to this office, you elected me to pursue a new, different direction for America. When you elected me the second time, you reaffirmed your desire to continue that course. My hopes for this country are as fervent today as they were in 1981. Up until the morning I leave this house, I intend to do what you sent me here to do—lead the Nation toward the goals we agreed on when you elected me. Let me tell you where I'm going to put my heart and my energies for the remainder of my term.

For my entire political life, I've spoken about the need for the Supreme Court to interpret the law, not make it. During my Presidency, I've proudly appointed two new justices who understand that important principle—Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and Justice Antonin Scalia. I've now nominated a third—Judge Robert Bork. When I named him to the U.S. Court of Appeals, the American Bar Association gave Judge Bork, who is a brilliant scholar and jurist, its very highest rating. As a member of that court, Judge Bork has written more than a hundred majority opinions and joined in another 300. The Supreme Court has never reversed a single one of these 400 opinions.

His nomination is being opposed by some because he practices judicial restraint. Now, that means he won't put their opinions ahead of the law; he won't put his own opinions ahead of the law. And that's the way it should be. Judge Bork would be an important intellectual addition to the Court, and I will fight for him because I believe in what he stands for. As soon as the Senate returns from its recess next month, it should consider Judge Bork's qualifications and then vote yes or no, up or down. This nation and its citizens deserve a full bench with nine Justices when the Court convenes in October.

In the months ahead, I also hope to reach an agreement, a comprehensive and verifiable agreement, with the Soviet Union on reducing nuclear arms. We're making real progress on the global elimination of an entire class of nuclear weapons—the U.S. and Soviet intermediate-range, or INF, missiles. I first proposed this idea to the Soviets back in 1981. They weren't too keen on it and, in fact, walked out of the negotiations at one point. But we kept at it. Until recently, the Soviet Union had insisted on the right to retain some of its INF missiles. But in mid-July, General Secretary Gorbachev announced that he was prepared to drop this demand. That was welcome news, indeed.

We've come this far because in 1980 you gave me a mandate to rebuild our military. I've done that. And today we're seeing the results. The Soviets are now negotiating with us because we're negotiating from strength. This would be an historic agreement. Previous arms control agreements merely put a ceiling on weapons and even allowed for increases; this agreement would reduce the number of nuclear weapons. I am optimistic that we'll soon witness a first in world history—the sight of two countries actually destroying nuclear weapons in their arsenals. And imagine where that might lead.

We're also ready to move ahead on a START agreement that would cut intercontinental nuclear forces by 50 percent, thereby eliminating thousands of nuclear missiles. I urge the Soviets to move ahead with us. And I say to General Secretary Gorbachev, both our nations could begin a new relationship by signing comprehensive agreements to reduce nuclear and conventional weapons.

What we seek in our relationship with the Soviet Union is peace and stability. That is also what we seek in the Persian Gulf, and the Middle East more generally. And bringing stability to this troubled region remains one of the most important goals of my Presidency.

Over the next 17 months, I'll also be advocating an Economic Bill of Rights for our citizens. I believe the American people have a right to expect the Nation's budget to be handled responsibly. Yet chaos reigns in the budgetary process. For the past several months, there's been much debate about getting our fiscal house in order, but the result once again has been inaction. The congressional budget process is neither reliable nor credible; in short, it needs to be fixed. We must face reality: The only force strong enough to stop this nation's massive runaway budget is the Constitution. Only the Constitution—the document from which all government power flows, the document that provides our moral authority as a nation—only the Constitution can compel responsibility.

We desperately need the power of a constitutional amendment to help us balance the budget. Over 70 percent of the American people want such an amendment. They want the Federal Government to have what 44 State governments already have—discipline. To get things moving, I am proposing tonight: If Congress agrees to schedule an up-or-down vote this year on our balanced budget amendment, then I will agree to negotiate on every spending item in the budget. If the Congress continues to oppose the wishes of the people by avoiding a vote on our balanced budget amendment, the call for a constitutional convention will grow louder. The prospect for a constitutional convention is only two States away from approval, and one way or another, the will of the people always prevails.

And there's another area that will occupy my time and my heart: the cause of democracy. There are Americans still burning for freedom: Central Americans, the people of Nicaragua. Over the last 10 years, democrats have been emerging all over the world. In Central and South America alone, 10 countries have been added to the ranks. The question is: Will Nicaragua ever be added to this honor roll? As you know, I am totally committed to the democratic resistance—the freedom fighters—and their pursuit of democracy in Nicaragua. Recently there's been important progress on the diplomatic front, both here in Washington and in the region itself.

My administration and the leadership of Congress have put forth a bipartisan initiative proposing concrete steps that can bring an end to the conflict there. Our key point was that the Communist regime in Nicaragua should do what it formally pledged to do in 1979—respect the Nicaraguan people's basic rights of free speech, free press, free elections, and religious liberty. Instead, those who govern in Nicaragua chose to turn their country over to the Soviet Union to be a base for Communist expansion on the American mainland.

The need for democracy in Nicaragua was also emphasized in the agreement signed by the five Central American presidents in Guatemala last Friday. We welcome this development and pledge our support to democracy and those fighting for freedom. We have always been willing to talk; we have never been willing to abandon those who are fighting for democracy and freedom. I'm especially pleased that in the United States diplomatic initiative, we once again have the beginnings, however uncertain, of a bipartisan foreign policy. The recent hearings emphasized the need for such bipartisanship, and I hope this cautious start will grow and blossom.

These are among the goals for the remainder of my term as President. I believe they're the kinds of goals that will advance the security and prosperity and future of our people. I urge the Congress to be as thorough and energetic in pursuing these ends as it was in pursuing the recent investigation.

Ronald Reagan: Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy and Administration Goals

My fellow Americans, I have a year and a half before I have to clean out this desk. I'm not about to let the dust and cobwebs settle on the furniture in this office or on me. I have things I intend to do, and with your help, we can do them. Good night, and God bless you.

Note: The President spoke at 8 p.m. from the Oval Office at the White House. His address was broadcast live on nationwide radio and television.

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