

Eric
MARGOLIS



Mideast misadventure

In their latest battle with the Saracens, the Reagan administration's Crusaders have somehow managed to blunder into one of the major American foreign policy fiascoes of the last 20 years.

If the Iranian arms deal was not so profoundly damaging to American interests, it would become a classic of farce. Instead, Washington's latest Mideast misadventure will go down as a study in ineptitude, amateurism and gullibility.

Having proclaimed a Crusade against terrorism, the Reagan team demanded all nations boycott those miscreants Iran, Libya and Syria. European and Arab allies were roughly ordered not to deal with "terrorist states." Iraq and its frightened Arab backers were promised unwavering U.S. support in the deadly war with Iran. To underline the point, Col. Moammar Khadafy, the Beast of Benghazi, was bombed back to the Stone Age.

Then came shamefaced admissions that the administration had been lying about Libyan terrorism. Then the very embarrassing revelations that the U.S. and Israel had been secretly shipping war materiel to Iran while, at the same time, loudly denouncing it as the Mecca of world terrorism and calling for its boycott.

Next, former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane's secret mission to Tehran. McFarlane denies it, but some reports still insist he arrived with a cake and a souvenir Bible. No one important would see him. If this surreal story is true, it has got to be one of the silliest events in recent diplomacy. Anyone with even a tourist's knowledge of Iran knows you don't just show up and say "Surprise!" Particularly not with a Bible as a gift for fire-eating Muslims.

Opening links to Iran was, of course, urgent and long overdue. This nation, no matter how cranky and belligerent, is one of the world's key geopolitical points. Iran cannot be allowed to fall under Soviet control. Washington was right to seek to open communication after years of bitter hostility. Trying to buy back hostages was probably also an effective, if sleazy, move. How these efforts were done, however, could not have been more clumsy or self-defeating.

Israel and its right-wing allies in Washington apparently talked the administration into secretly supplying war stocks to Iran. Naturally, much of the arms sent to Iran came from Israeli stores. This intrigue made money for Israel and kept Iran busy fighting Iraq. But it has proven a disaster for U.S. interests.

Why? The arms deliveries were intended, Reagan claimed, to bolster "moderate" (read pro-American) elements in Iran. They are now locked in a power struggle with "radical" groups over who will succeed Iran's ailing leader, Imam Khomeini.

Once again the administration has displayed the

incredible ignorance toward the Mideast for which it has become infamous. Most Iranians, rightly or not, see Israel as the persecutor of the Palestinians, a sort of U.S. SWAT team, and a nation that helped keep the hated shah in power. True, Iran has been forced to secretly buy arms, via third parties, from Israel. In wartime you deal even with the devil.

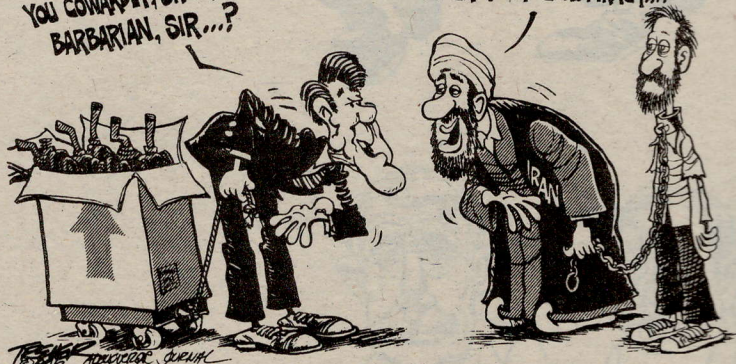
But when the U.S. also got involved, it was inevitable that news of this fact would be revealed by anti-American forces in Iran. Amazingly, the U.S. has given radical forces in Iran the ideal weapon with which to crush moderates. In Iran, being caught red-handed dealing with the U.S. and Israel is the kiss of death. Instead of helping moderates, the U.S. has just scuttled them.

Arms could have been discreetly delivered through Turkey, Pakistan or Korea. Instead, Reagan's Crusaders let the Israelis hoodwink them into a deal that has gravely damaged America's Mideast interests. Besides crippling moderates in Iran, Washington also managed to alienate Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states — an event that will please Israel. European allies have been infuriated and the secretaries of state and defence openly humiliated. The Kremlin must be awfully jolly.

Why military officers of the National Security Coun-

ONE GROSS OF F-4 OIL PUMPS,
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cil — McFarlane, Oliver North and John Poin- dexter — were allowed to run Mideastern policy remains unclear. Reagan must bear the blame. These good, decent soldiers proved painful failures as diplomats; naive rubes when it came to dealing with the Israelis and stunningly unaware of Mideast realities.

Like their Medieval predecessors, Washington's hapless Crusaders have also gotten themselves stuck deep in the treacherous Mideast sands.