

Reagan's health new Washington worry

WASHINGTON — The big news here has nothing to do with Iran or Nicaragua. More worrying is the revelation that President Ronald Reagan is to undergo prostate surgery right after New Year's.

Prostate trouble is a common complaint of men over 50 and is rarely in itself fatal. But there is a disturbing tendency that many older men, after prostate surgery, begin a rapid decline in their general health that often betokens the onset of graver illnesses. In women, breaking a hip marks the beginning of a similar downturn.

Reagan, now 75, may pull through the low-stress prostate surgery with ease. His physical and moral toughness are legendary here. But some observers fear he may soon enter a period of health problems that will bring further complications to his already troubled final years.

Add this concern to the news that CIA Director William Casey, 73, is suffering from a cerebral lymphoma that will have to be treated with radiation or chemotherapy. Medical reports are so far upbeat, but I would bet that the CIA will shortly need a new director. Brain disorders, chemotherapy and running the besieged CIA are too much for a man of Casey's advanced years.

.....
Catastrophes rarely look as bad from up close. Washington is not, as one must suspect from afar, about to collapse in a fiery *Gottterdammerung*. In fact, I found most political pros on the Hill to be taking the big rum-pus over Iran and the Contras with surprising calm — even unconcern. It's almost as if such events were routine fare. There are, of course, the important senators, surrounded each day by droves of fevered cameramen and newshounds. But aside from these celebrat-

Eric MARGOLIS



ties, life seems normal and serene. Clearly, the government is not going to fall and, as far as I can see today, we are not about to go through another Watergate.

.....
Savvy types here also think that most of the scandal has already come out into the open. A consensus holds that about the only remaining mystery concerns the funds realized in the sales to Iran. The money came from Iran to Switzerland but then seems to have vanished. Not very much appears to have gotten to the miserable Contras — and they are paying the price for this scandal.

The angry and delighted Democrats are threatening to cut off Contra funding and scuttle any further military operations in Central America. So where did the rest of the money go — maybe \$15 or \$20 million? My guess is in "commissions," "service charges," and "handling fees," to the fascinating collection of shady Israeli, Iranian and Saudi arms dealers who were exposed in this sordid affair. I'm not so sure we've heard the whole story yet.

.....
While the outside world thinks people in Washington are fretting day and night about Iran and the Contras, what politicos are really doing here is sharpening their

claws for the 1988 election. I visited two heavyweight contenders — off the record since they don't usually let miscreant journalists into their privy councils — and saw policy issues being shaped.

From afar, one might be forgiven for thinking that Washington is run by some pretty dim minds, especially these days. When you meet the campaign heads and issue people surrounding the candidates however, it is clear that there is an overabundance of exceedingly smart people. Everywhere I went were superbly informed staff members and resident experts on just about any topic.

The old saw about sagebrush senators, or windy Congressmen Foghorns, is a thing of the past. Sure, Washington has its share of muddled minds — from anti-fluoridation rightists to nuclear-free zone liberals. But, on the whole, there is no lack of knowledge or good sense.

So why the current fiascos? I guess the answer is that the higher you get here the thinner the air and that does something bad to the judgment.

.....
Somehow, Washington reminds me of the ancient Egyptian temple city of Karnak. Like the holy city on the Nile, Washington has temples galore — Greek, or glass and chrome instead of Egyptian — a high priest, and scads of lesser orders of holy men. Ritual, worship, raising cash and talking take up the whole day. If the rest of the world disappeared, no one would notice for a month.

It also reminds me — excuse the mixed metaphor — of one of those primeval stagnant pools, in whose murky, tepid waters primitive life forms ate and fought with each other for light, food and water.