Guest Column/Pankaj Vaish

Reagan misjudges Iranian arms deal

The room was packed, his first press conference in three months and the old man had been at it again: quipping about a "certain fellow from Massachusetts" as the Senate elections campaign, striking no deal in Reykjavik and making a big deal about it at home; raising hell about Nicholas Daniloff and yet "making no deal" with the Soviets about his release; and doing something fishy with the Iranians — a deal or not, nobody knew, not even the man himself. Well, here he was to attempt an explanation and set the record straight. However, the attempt seemed to be headed for a disaster. The journalist's guild was puzzled and a bit incredulous. Within the past few days we had heard stories of admittances by officials and denials by officials. Was it 1000 missiles? Two thousand missiles? A cargo plane full of missiles? A militant in command of his own thoughts by himself. Well, here he was to attempt an explanation and set the record straight.

Did the operations last 17 months or were they carried on for the last ten years? We heard emotional and vague statements by the President of the United States and letters, outright and outrageous rebellion from the President of Iran. What were we to make of all this confusion? For the moment, at least, all we could do was wait and get it straight from the horse's mouth. I must admit though that I couldn't get over the apparent absurdity of the whole "secret initiative."

How could we send weapons to the midriffs under whose auspices the students held American citizen hostages for 444 days? Have we forgotten the pictures of people carrying trash in American flags and chanting anti-American slogans?

But then, I suppose a journalist isn't supposed to procrustate himself with such extreme observations. So I "closed" up my mind from all the biased Democratic nonsense, just as George Will would have me do. What follows is a collection of the President's remarks in the press conference and observations that come from an unprecedented mind:

"You don't own or have authority over the Hezbollah. They cannot order them to do something."

"Mr. President, don't you know that the Hezbollah is a Pro-Iranian Party and its head is widely believed to be a member of the Iranian Islamic Republican Party — the ruling party in Iran. Are you suggesting that he will turn a deaf ear to the Ayatollah Khomeini?"

"I don't see where the kidnappers or the hostages holders joined anything. They didn't get anything. They let the hostages go."

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