

Editorial

Hostages for sale

Virtually on the same day that the last of the U.S. hostages were released, the United States government *just happened* to make a \$278 million payment to the government of Iran. This was to reimburse the Iranians for U.S. failure to meet a weapons contract undertaken when the Shah was in power, and subsequently blocked. Of course, as State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler said, this was not a payment for the release, since it is U.S. policy not to make such deals!

Former Assistant Secretary of State for Middle East Affairs Richard Murphy called the release of Iran's frozen assets on Dec. 3 just a coincidence. Oliver North at first refused to "speculate" on the timing of the two events, then proceeded to underscore administration cynicism. North told CBS reporters: "Historically, there's only three ways that hostages get freed. . . . They either are released or they escape—or rescued—or die in captivity, or there is some kind of deal made. And that's happened since the dawn of recorded history." North's English may be a bit incoherent, but his point is clear.

Most cynical of all is the lauding of Iran for its so-called positive role in facilitating the freeing of the remaining terror victims, considering that Iranian control of the terrorist groups is hardly a secret. Thus, Iran and Syria are now portrayed as desirous of rejoining the international community and strengthening their ties with the West—despite the fact that they openly sponsored a conference for Arab radicals in October.

While no one can be anything but happy that these victims of terrorism are finally free of their barbaric captors, the cynicism of the Bush administration is disgusting. Much more than money was involved in this latest administration deal with Iran. The cover-up of the Iranian and Syrian involvement in the downing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland was clearly a crucial part of the hostage settlement.

Remember the coverage of Iraq's alleged mistreatment of downed American fliers? Bruises, black eyes, puffy features—all of which could have been caused by

their forced landing—were attributed to Iraqi brutality. Now we find that two of the released hostages are brain-damaged as a result of torture meted out to them during their captivity.

Recently released hostage Alan Steen is afflicted with periodic seizures as a result of having been repeatedly kicked in the head by his captors. Joseph Cicippio was also under medical care in Wiesbaden, Germany.

The recent, escalating spate of attacks against Libya serve to take the heat away from Iran and Syria for the terror bombing of the Pan Am passenger plane, but, of course, they also indicate that George Bush is toying with a rerun of the war against Iraq as a way of bolstering his failing support in the United States. Fear of just such a resumption of the Gulf war by Washington was recently registered in the Egyptian press.

On Dec. 4, the semi-official newspaper *al-Ahram* was quoted by Reuters to that effect. It read: "Election year has begun in the United States at a time when internal affairs are seeing an economic decline. To raise the issue of terrorism now, which touches the core of the people . . . can be a prop in the elections."

The Egyptian newspaper identified that the same vectors are operative in the United Kingdom and France as well—the new Entente Cordiale—and they point out that Prime Minister John Major is in a delicate political position at home due to the failure of the moribund British economy. In France, there is an emergence of ugly anti-Arab racist sentiment. The editorial urges against any rash military action by the three governments as a way of deflecting attention from internal domestic crises.

Certainly, in the United States, it is not a foregone conclusion that Bush could replay the Iraq scenario by butchering yet another small nation, to his political advantage. Americans may have cheered him on to victory the first time, but few remain untouched by the economic mudslide which is now being felt in every aspect of daily life.