EDITORIAL

CAP’S LITTLE SECRET

Defenders of indicted Iran/contra co-conspirator Caspar Weinberger are portraying special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh’s strike as a sleazy, last-gasp attempt to justify the three-year, $30 million investigation by defaming a decent man. Actually, the job of Walsh’s lawyers would have been a lot easier and cheaper if Weinberger had just said yes when they asked him if he had any notes of White House meetings. Judging from advance descriptions of what’s in the notes, Weinberger had a front-row seat at the unfolding conspiracy to aid the contras and sell arms to the Iranians.

There’s an aura of sleaze about Weinberger’s conduct. As a report of the Center for Public Integrity points out, he deposited all his papers, including the notes, in the Library of Congress under a deal giving him total control of access to the documents, while the taxpayers bear the expense of cataloging and storing them. It was another case of a public official sequestering private papers for profit and to control history. Cap used the information in his files (unavailable to journalists and scholars) to write his memoirs, for which Warner Books paid him half a million.

Apparently, Cap was caught between wanting to preserve his notes for research and not wanting them to fall into the hands of investigators. Hence, he lied about their existence.

But there’s a larger issue here. Weinberger’s notes should blow Reagan’s cover story that he knew nothing about Hawk missile sales and third country financing of the contras. Iran/contra stinks worse than ever, and Congress, and the punditocracy, should not brush it aside by saying the public has become anesthetized to corruption. The issues of executive misconduct and abuse of trust that Iran/contra raises should be at the center of our politics. A democratic opposition worthy of the name should be shouting them to the skies. Well, Bill? Well, Ross?

CRUEL AND USUAL

THE UNQUIET DEATH OF ROBERT HARRIS

On April 21, Robert Alton Harris was put to death in California’s gas chamber for the 1978 murder of two teenagers, John Mayeski and Michael Baker. His case — California’s first lethal gassing in twenty-five years — generated intense media scrutiny around the world. The American Civil Liberties Union filed a class-action civil rights suit challenging the use of cyanide gas as cruel and unusual punishment. A decision from U.S. District Court Judge Marilyn Patel is expected shortly.

This issue is harshly illuminated by the following astonishing eyewitness account of the execution by a close friend of Robert Harris, who met the condemned man in 1984 while writing an article about Harris’s neighbor on death row.

MICHAEL KROLL

“Ladies and gentlemen. Please stay in your places until your escort comes for you. Follow your escort, as instructed. Thank you.”

The words were spoken in the manner of the operator of the Jungle Cruise at Disneyland: well-rehearsed and “professional.” They were spoken by San Quentin’s public information officer, Vernell Crittendon, as we waited to be ushered out of the gas chamber where my friend Robert Harris was slumped over, dead, in Chair B.

When not conveying us to and from the gas chamber, our “escorts” guarded us in a small, tidy office with barred windows facing the east gate, where a circus of media lights lit up the night sky, letting us see silhouettes in the darkness. There were two desks, the exact number of straight-backed chairs needed to accommodate us, some nineteen-cent bags of potato chips.

(Continued on Page 18)
We were in the middle of something indescribably ugly.
It was nakedly barbaric.

(While we waited, unaware of the cause for the delay, prison officials were arguing fiercely about where to set up the video camera that Judge Patel had ordered to assist her in determining whether death by lethal gas is cruel and unusual punishment—an order that had been vigorously opposed by the attorney general. Just outside the entrance to the gas chamber, not ten feet from where I was pacing nervously and watching the clock, the man assigned by the defense team to operate the camera was met by San Quentin's public information officer. "How much time will it take you to set up?" Crittendon demanded. "Five minutes, or so," he was told. "We don't have five minutes," he yelled.)

And then the wait was over. Mendez spoke into his walkie-talkie. "Okay," he said, and then turned his attention to us. "Let's go!"

We, the family and friends of the condemned, were led to risers along a wall behind and to the left of the chamber. Three burly guards brought Robert in and strapped him quickly to Chair B. His back was to us. He could see over his right shoulder into the unblinking red eye of the video camera trained on his face. He peered around the room, making eye contact, smiling and nodding at people he knew. I held my breath. A guard's digital watch started beeping. She smiled sheepishly and covered it with her sleeve.

Minutes passed. Some people whispered. Some smiled. And then the phone rang. The phone to the gas chamber rings for only one reason: A stay of execution has been granted. But nothing happened. Nobody moved—nobody except Robert, that is, who twisted and turned trying to figure out what was happening. He peered down between his legs to see if he could...
see the vat of acid beneath him. He sniffed the air and mouthed the words, "Pull it." More minutes passed. He peered over his left shoulder where I was just out of his line of vision. "Where's Mike?" he mouthed.

I jumped down to the lower riser and walked over to the window. A female guard ordered me back to my place, but not before Robert saw me, smiled and settled down.

Ten minutes after the phone rang, the gas chamber door was opened and the three guards unfastened Robert and took him from the chamber. Nothing like that had ever happened in the history of the gas chamber. (I later learned that during that eternity, California's Attorney General, Dan Lungren, had been on the phone to the clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court informing him that Robert was in the chamber. Lungren begged the Justices to overturn the stay. But the Court wanted to read what Circuit Court Judge Harry Pregerson had written in the fourth and last stay of execution, so Lungren was told to take Robert from the chamber.)

We were escorted back to Mosqueda's office to continue waiting. I shook uncontrollably for a long time, and cried openly. My escort suggested I needed medical attention, hinting I might have to leave. I forced back my tears and pulled myself together, although I could not stop trembling. Karen, the lawyer with us, picked up the heavy phone and dialed the office where lawyers who supported Harris had gathered. People there were crying. They did not know Robert had been spared from inside the chamber. Lungren begged the Justices to overturn the stay. But the Court wanted to read what Circuit Court Judge Harry Pregerson had written in the history of the gas chamber.

We resumed the grim vigil, cut off from the outside world. Just after 6 in the morning, I saw the witnesses from the victims' families being led past our window toward the chamber. Some were laughing. As honored guests, they had been playing video games, napping in the warden's home and eating specially prepared food. My heart stopped. Something was happening. Again, Karen called the same office and was told the stay of execution was still in place. But, as with the aborted execution attempt, they were the last to know.

Within fifteen seconds, the phone clattered to life, and Mendez told us the stay had been dissolved. (He did not tell us the Supreme Court had ordered all federal courts to enter no more stays of execution regardless of the issues.) We were going again.

Quickly we moved through the chill dawn air toward the chamber. Randy whispered in my ear, "Slow down." Near the entrance, Vernell Crittendon stood watching the procession move smoothly into the chamber. He pumped his upturned fist three times, the way football players do when their team has scored.

When they brought Robert in, he was grim-faced, tired and ashen. Beyond the horror of having stood at the brink of the abyss just two and a half hours before, he had been up for several days and nights. He was under horrific pressure. Again, he nodded to acquaintances. He did not smile. He faced to his right and said "I'm sorry" to the father of victim Michael Baker, the one family member he recognized from his endless rounds of television appearances. He craned his neck left once more and nodded quickly toward us. "It's all right," he reassured us. After about two minutes, he sniffed the air, then breathed deeply several times.

His head began to roll and his eyes closed, then opened again. His head dropped, then came up with an abrupt jerk, and rolled some more. It was grotesque and hideous, and I looked away. When I looked back, his head came up again and I covered my mouth. Randy was whimpering in pain next to me, and we clutched each other. The lawyer, sobbing audibly, put her arms around us and tried to comfort us. I could not stop shivering. Reverend Harris, Robert's second cousin and spiritual adviser, who had been with Robert in the holding cell almost until the moment they took him away, whispered, "He's ready. He was tired. It's all right. His punishment is over."

He writhed for seven minutes, his head falling on his chest, saliva drooling from his open mouth. He lifted his head again and again. Seven minutes. A lifetime. Nine more minutes passed with his head slumped on his chest. His heart, a survivor's heart, kept pumping for nine more minutes, while we held each other. Some of the witnesses laughed. I thought of the label "Laughing Killer," affixed to Robert by the media, and knew they would never describe these good people as laughing killers.

We were in the middle of something indescribably ugly. Not just the fact of the cold-blooded killing of a human being, and not even the fact that we happened to love him—but the ritual of it, the participation of us, the witnesses, the witnessing itself of this most private and personal act. It was nakedly barbaric. Nobody could say this had anything to do with justice, I thought. Yet this medieval torture chamber is what a large majority of my fellow Californians, including most in the room with me, believe in. The implications of this filled me with fear—fear for myself and for all of us, a fear I am ashamed to confess—while my friend was being strangled slowly to death in front of me.
Some witnesses began shuffling nervously. People looked at their watches. Then a guard stepped forward and announced that Robert Alton Harris, C.D.C. Prisoner B-66883, had expired in the gas chamber at 6:21 A.M., sixteen minutes after the cyanide had been gently lowered into the sulfuric acid. Sixteen minutes. He was a fighter to the end.

It was the moment Crittendon had been waiting for. He stepped into the middle of the quiet room, his Jheri-Kurls reflecting the eerie green light from the gas chamber where my friend lay dead, slumped forward against the straps in Chair B.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Please stay in your places until your escort comes for you. Follow your escort, as instructed. Thank you."

Our guard came and we followed him out. The eighteen media witnesses, who had stood against the wall opposite us, began scribbling on paper provided by the prison, preceded us out of the room. As they had been for weeks, they were desperate for a Harris family member to say something to them. "Is this a Harris? Is this a Harris?" a reporter standing just outside the door shouted, pointing at each of us as we emerged into the first light of morning over San Francisco Bay.

My god, it was a beautiful day.

EDITORIALS.

(Continued From Page 5)

church. In late 1988 Richard Land, a leading fundamentalist, was named executive director of the commission, and he began to turn it into a voice of the political right. The commission once spent much time on hunger, poverty and racial issues. Now it focuses its energy on bashing the National Endowment for the Arts and opposing abortion rights. Land is not shy about his political allegiances. He wears G.O.P. suspenders and White House cuff links. His Nashville-based office contains more Republican memorabilia than religious symbols, according to a former staff member. Land has steered the commission into alliances with right-wing groups like the Eagle Forum, Concerned Women of America and Paul Weyrich's Free Congress Foundation.

In Southern Baptist circles, Land has bragged of his ties to the White House. His contact is Leigh Ann Metzger, the White House special aide responsible for liaison with conservative organizations. Not surprisingly, she is among the small group of White House officials who have cheered on Quayle's anti-Hollywood crusade.

Land deserves his cuff links. In late 1990, he penned a statement for the commission that supported Bush's move toward war in the Persian Gulf. Besides the Southern Baptists, only one other major Christian denomination backed the war: the Mormon Church. Some moderate Southern Baptist activists accused Land of writing the statement at Metzger's request. Land denied the charge.

Almost a year ago Robert Parham, an associate director, left the commission in disgust to establish a moderate, nonpartisan alternative, the Baptist Center for Ethics. Through Land's endeavors, Parham believes, the Southern Baptists became practically an appendage of the Republican right.

"There is a danger," he notes, "when the religious community provides no substantive, ongoing critique of the state" and "endorses uncritically the statements and actions of political leaders."

For his part, Bush has been mostly consistent in his courting of the fundamentalists—witness his stand on abortion—but there have been moments of stress. In 1990 Bush canceled plans to address the Southern Baptist Convention after Baptist leaders reacted angrily to the presence of homosexuals at a White House bill-signing ceremony. In the spring of 1991 the Christian Life Commission's Washington office complained when Bush did not fire N.E.A. chairman John Frohnmayer. But in June, Bush was back before the Southern Baptist yearly gathering, calling for school prayer and shedding a tear for the men and women of Desert Storm. "As I see it, he's reaching an understanding with evangelicals in America," a Baptist minister told The Washington Times.

That understanding has included the February 1992 dismissal of Frohnmayer and Bush's adamant opposition to federally funded research on fetal tissue from abortions. And with Bush, a personal connection always helps. Paul Pressler Jr., a Houston judge who plotted the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptists, is reportedly a friend of Secretary of State James Baker and hails from a family that is close to the Bush clan. (Some Baptist activists consider Richard Land a protégé of Pressler.) In 1989 Bush tried to appoint the pious Pressler to head the Office of Government Ethics. But an F.B.I. background check unearthed a problematic "personal situation." The details were never disclosed—the gossip in Southern Baptist circles got pretty randy—and Pressler did not get the job.

By bringing their culture-war revival to the Southern Baptists, Quayle and his wily chief of staff, William Kristol, undoubtedly hope to shore up a core constituency—if not for Bush, then at least for Quayle. (Quayle's Murphy Brown tirade has, to the delight of conservatives, towed a rudderless Bush toward the right.) Whether or not Bush wins in November, there will be a fight among those who yearn to lead the right after 1992. For street-smart conservatives—don't underestimate Quayle and Kristol—the highly politicized Southern Baptist establishment is a place to cultivate support, for now and for the future.

DAVID CORN

KUWAIT REPEL THE INVADERS

On May 20, Kuwait's Interior Ministry barred a delegation from the International Republican Institute, an offshoot of the U.S. Republican Party, from holding a seminar for the Kuwaiti opposition in Kuwait City. The subject was "political campaign strategies," a fairly timely topic since parliamentary elections, in which only property-owning male passport-holders may vote, are scheduled for October. The "liberator" of Kuwait, George Bush, had no comment, but then, as he always said, "The war wasn't fought about democracy in Kuwait."
Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, Inc. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.