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And now: lame-duck presidency

By William M. LeoGrande

You don't hear much talk about the "Teflon presidency" anymore. In the weeks since the Iran scandal first broke, Ronald Reagan's standing in the opinion polls has dropped more than 20 points. That represents the sharpest decline in popularity suffered by any president for as long as polls have been taken — worse than Richard Nixon's during Watergate and Jimmy Carter's during the Iranian hostage crisis.

Reagan's plummeting popularity is all the more dramatic because for six years he was able to maintain consistently high ratings. He defied the conventional wisdom that presidential popularity inevitably declines over time because the complexities of governing compel presidents to make enemies faster than they make friends. Somehow, Reagan stood above it all. Neither gaffes nor scandals could shake the public's confidence in him.

So what are we to make of this sudden precipitous collapse in the president's popularity?

Part of the explanation lies in what may be dubbed the "Watergate syndrome." It took almost two years of revelations and investigations to convince the public that the Watergate conspiracy was centered in the Oval Office. With the Iran scandal only a month old, many already assume that Reagan and his senior staff are stonewalling, lying and covering up. Such is the residue of public cynicism left by Richard Nixon's high crimes and misdemeanors.

Another factor contributing to the public's speedy abandonment of Reagan is the cumulative effect of several recent events, all of them damaging to the administration's credibility: the Daniloff swap that wasn't a swap; the Reykjavik summit that wasn't a summit; the confusion over exactly what Reagan proposed to Gorbachev in Iceland; the disinformation campaign on Libyan terrorism; and the capture of Eugene Hasenfus, whose plane was shot down over Nicaragua while dropping supplies to the contras — a private operation that turned out to be organized, supervised and financed by the White House.



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The Iranian arms deals and the manifestly illegal diversion of its profits to a secret contra slush fund were the last straw.

But there is another even more basic reason why the White House media managers — the "spin patrol" that has been so deft at controlling public perceptions through public relations — cannot contain the current crisis.

What makes this crisis different is that Reagan was already a lame duck when it began. In earlier crises, Reagan could count on unwavering support from Republican conservatives willing to publicly defend their chief no matter what. He could also rely on the timidity of the press and the Democrats, both of whom were afraid to be too critical of an enormously popular president.

Now, however, the press is pursuing the new scandal with unusu-

al zest and the Democrats are relishing Reagan's predicament. Even more important, no one is rising to Reagan's defense.

This stark change in attitudes is a direct result of the 1986 elections. White House communications director Patrick Buchanan rails against Republicans in Congress for "abandoning Reagan's ship." But Buchanan is wrong to think that these Republicans are merely being feckless. They are afraid. Unlike Buchanan, they have to stand for re-election.

Iran still evokes strong public emotions, and the contras have always been unpopular with the electorate. Both these issues are political losers. Republican members of Congress are not willing to climb out on a political limb to defend Reagan's Iranian capers because they saw, in the last election, that Reagan no longer has the po-

litical muscle to carry them.

The aggressiveness of the press springs from the same source. Reagan's loss of electoral clout makes the press far less hesitant to take him on.

In short, the Iranian scandal is engulfing the White House because Ronald Reagan's friends have lost faith in the power of his political charm, and his adversaries no longer fear him.

The Iranian scandal, then, is as much a symptom of Reagan's fall from grace as it is the cause of it. Even if the Iranian scandal is disposed of quickly, Ronald Reagan's presidency is over. With Reagan's electoral strength gone the way of the emperor's new clothes (Reagan had, as one wag put it, "Teflon coattails"), and his popularity at low ebb, it will be impossible for him to push his agenda through the Democratic Congress.

To the chief of staff Donald Reagan, who once compared himself to the man with the shovel who cleans up after a parade, the White House must look like the Augean stables these days.

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