

Rupert Murdoch: Propaganda Recruit for Reagan

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In February 1983, global media magnate Rupert Murdoch volunteered to help the Reagan administration's propaganda strategy for deploying U.S. mid-range nuclear missiles in Europe by using his newspapers to exacerbate public fears about the Soviet Union, according to a recently declassified "secret" letter.

Murdoch, then an Australian citizen with major newspaper holdings in Great Britain and some in the United States, had already established close political ties with British Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and was developing them with President Ronald Reagan, partly through one of Murdoch's lawyers, the infamous Red-baiter Roy Cohn, who had served as counsel to Sen. Joe McCarthy's investigations in the 1950s.

By February 1983, Cohn had already arranged a face-to-face meeting between Reagan and Murdoch (on Jan. 18, 1983) and had brokered a collaborative relationship between Murdoch and Charles Z. Wick, director of the U.S. Information Agency who oversaw U.S. propaganda operations worldwide.



President Reagan meets with publisher Rupert Murdoch, U.S. Information Agency Director Charles Wick, lawyers Roy Cohn and Thomas Bolan in the Oval Office on Jan. 18, 1983. (Photo credit: Reagan presidential library)

On Feb. 14, 1983, in [a "secret" letter](#) to Reagan's National Security Advisor William P. Clark, USIA Director Wick described a phone call from Murdoch in which they discussed ways to heighten European and American fears about Soviet SS-20 intermediate-range missiles and thus undermine activists pushing for nuclear disarmament. Murdoch said his comments reflected the views of high-ranking British officials with whom Murdoch had talked.

In the letter, Wick told Clark that CIA Director William J. Casey was eager to help Murdoch's efforts by releasing classified satellite photos of the Soviet missiles in eastern Europe but was confronting resistance from the spy agency's professional analysts.

"Rupert Murdoch ... called me on February 9 [1983]," Wick told Clark. "Senior British officials have been telling him of their increasing concern with the rapid progress being made by the unilateralists," a reference to the anti-nuclear activists who were rallying millions of Europeans to the cause of nuclear disarmament.

"According to Murdoch, the majority of the people just do not understand the SS-20 threat. He asked if we could release satellite photographs of Soviet SS-20s to dramatically stem the rising opposition to GLCM [U.S. ground-launched cruise missiles] and Pershing II deployment. He felt that the delineation of the SS-20 threat graphically could be very persuasive. It would give the press - the friendly press in particular - an opportunity to counter the growing wave of unilateralism.

"I pointed out to Murdoch that I had seen these photographs and they are not comprehensible to the lay person. Murdoch responded that he would commission credible analysts to be briefed here. They could make the photographs understandable to the average individual with circles, arrows, and other enhancements."

The next section of Wick's letter remains classified - more than three decades later - on national security grounds.

On the letter's second page, Wick describes his contact with CIA Director Casey regarding Murdoch's phone call to seek the CIA's cooperation in releasing the satellite photographs and making other public relations moves to influence domestic and international public opinion, including "a presidential press conference similar to President Kennedy's during the Cuban missile crisis."

Wick said President Reagan

"could present large blow-ups while experts would be on hand to provide explanations in greater detail. Bill Casey agreed to re-check the objections raised by his people when we initially discussed release of the photographs last year. Bill's people still oppose release of the photographs for 'legal and security considerations.' However, Bill said we do not want to be too rigid and protective, given Murdoch's observations and with so much hanging in the balance on the upcoming German elections."

Wick added that he and Casey wanted NSC Advisor Clark to take this "major public diplomacy question" to the Senior Policy Group (SPG) to consider overriding the CIA staff's objections. (Wick's letter was declassified last month by the National Archives in response to a Freedom of Information Act request that I filed in 2013.)

Dangerous Tensions

In 1983, the escalating tensions with the Soviet Union over the SS-20s and the deployment of U.S. cruise missiles in Europe led to what became known as "the New Cold War," with Reagan rapidly expanding the U.S. military budget and engaging in extreme anti-Soviet

rhetoric.

In a March 23, 1983 [speech](#) to the nation about the supposed Soviet threat, Reagan did release a few satellite images but they were of facilities in Cuba and Central America, not eastern Europe and the SS-20s. “I wish I could show you more without compromising our most sensitive intelligence sources and methods,” Reagan said.

A [CIA historical review](#) in 2007 revealed that the Reagan administration in the early 1980s was intentionally raising tensions with the Soviet Union, in part, by mounting provocative military exercises near its borders. In response, Moscow raised its nuclear alert levels fearing a possible U.S. first strike, a hair-trigger risk for an accidental nuclear conflict that was not well understood in Washington at the time.

The CIA study reported:

“New information suggests that Moscow ... was reacting to US-led naval and air operations, including psychological warfare missions conducted close to the Soviet Union. These operations employed sophisticated concealment and deception measures to thwart Soviet early warning systems and to offset the Soviets’ ability ... to read US naval communications.”

The Soviets were also spooked by Reagan’s harsh “evil empire” rhetoric and weapons build-up, prompting “Soviet officials and much of the populace to voice concern over the prospect of a US nuclear attack,” the CIA study said. “Moscow’s threat perceptions and Operation RYAN [a special intelligence operation to collect data on the U.S. threat] were influenced by memories of Hitler’s 1941 surprise attack on the USSR (Operation BARBAROSSA).”

As a major global publisher with close ties to Thatcher’s government, Murdoch saw himself as part of this ideological struggle and volunteered his news outlets to support hard-line Thatcher-Reagan policies against the Soviets. Documents previously released by Reagan’s presidential library in Simi Valley, California, revealed the key role played by Cohn in connecting Murdoch with the top echelon of the Reagan administration.

Both Roy Cohn and Ronald Reagan got their starts in politics during the anti-communist purges in the 1950s, Cohn as Sen. Joe McCarthy’s chief counsel and Reagan as a witness against alleged communists in Hollywood. Cohn, a hardball political player, built his reputation as both an anti-communist and anti-gay crusader who aggressively interrogated witnesses during the Red Scare and the Lavender Scare, claiming that the U.S. government was infiltrated by communists and homosexuals who threatened the nation’s security.

Cohn’s high-profile role in the McCarthy hearings ultimately ended when he was forced to resign over charges that he targeted the U.S. Army for an anti-communist purge because it had refused to give preferential treatment to one of his close associates, G. David Shine. Though Cohn denied he was romantically involved with Shine – and a homosexual relationship was never proven – Cohn’s own homosexuality became publicly known after he underwent treatment for AIDS in the 1980s, leading to his death in 1986.

However, in Cohn’s final years, he enjoyed close personal ties to the Reagan administration and exchanged warm notes with Reagan himself. But, more significantly, Cohn, as one of Murdoch’s lawyers, brought the influential publisher into the Oval Office on Jan. 18, 1983, to

meet with Reagan and Wick. A photograph of that meeting – also released by the Reagan library – shows Cohn leaning forward, speaking to Reagan who is seated next to Murdoch.

“I had one interest when Tom [Bolan, Cohn’s law partner] and I first brought Rupert Murdoch and Governor Reagan together – and that was that at least one major publisher in this country ... would become and remain pro-Reagan,” Cohn wrote in [a Jan. 27, 1983 letter](#) to senior White House aides Edwin Meese, James Baker and Michael Deaver. “Mr. Murdoch has performed to the limit up through and including today.”

The letter noted that Murdoch then owned the “New York Post – over one million, third largest and largest afternoon; New York Magazine; Village Voice; San Antonio Express; Houston Ring papers; and now the Boston Herald; and internationally influential London Times, etc.” [For more details on Cohn’s role, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“How Roy Cohn Helped Rupert Murdoch.”](#)]

Financing Propaganda

Following the Jan. 18, 1983 meeting, Murdoch became involved in a privately funded propaganda project to help sell Reagan’s hard-line Central American policies, according to other documents. That PR operation was overseen by senior CIA propaganda specialist Walter Raymond Jr. and CIA Director Casey.

By late 1982, the Reagan administration was gearing up for an expanded propaganda push in support of the President’s aggressive policies in Central America, including support for the Salvadoran and Guatemalan militaries – both notorious for their human rights violations – and for the Nicaraguan Contra rebels who also were gaining an unsavory reputation for acts of terrorism and brutality.

This PR campaign was spearheaded by CIA Director Casey and Raymond, one of the CIA’s top covert operation specialists who was transferred to the National Security Council staff to minimize legal concerns about the CIA violating its charter which bars influencing the American public. To further shield the CIA from possible fallout from this domestic propaganda operation, Casey and Raymond sought to arrange private financing to pay for some activities.

On Jan. 13, 1983, NSC Advisor Clark noted in a memo to Reagan the need for non-governmental money to advance the PR project. “We will develop a scenario for obtaining private funding,” Clark wrote, as cited in [an unpublished draft chapter](#) of the congressional Iran-Contra investigation. Clark then [told](#) the President that “Charlie Wick has offered to take the lead. We may have to call on you to meet with a group of potential donors.”

Five days later, on Jan. 18, 1983, Roy Cohn accompanied Rupert Murdoch into the Oval Office for a face-to-face meeting with President Reagan and USIA Director Wick. Nine days later, in the Jan. 27, 1983 letter to Meese, Baker and Deaver – written on the letterhead of the Saxe, Bacon & Bolan law firm – Cohn hailed the success of Murdoch’s “warm meeting with the President and the goodwill created by Charlie Wick’s dinner.”

But Murdoch was also thin-skinned. Cohn complained about what Murdoch saw as a presidential snub when Reagan bypassed the Boston Herald during a late January 1983 trip to Boston. Michael McManus, the deputy assistant to the President, offered an effusive

apology to Cohn:

“we were all sorry about the confusion surrounding a possible Presidential visit to the Boston Herald. ...

“I also called Mr. Murdoch as you suggested, explained the situation to him and apologized for any confusion. I am sure you are aware of our continued high regard for Mr. Murdoch personally and our appreciation of the importance of what he is doing.”

Despite Cohn’s complaint about the slight to Murdoch, the Australian media magnate appears to have pitched in to help the CIA-organized outreach program for Reagan’s Central American policies. Now declassified documents indicate that Murdoch was soon viewed as a source for the private funding.

On May 20, 1983, longtime CIA propagandist Raymond, who was overseeing the “perception management” project aimed at both domestic and foreign audiences, wrote that \$400,000 had been raised from private donors brought to the White House by USIA Director Wick.

Raymond said the funds were divided among several organizations including Accuracy in Media, a right-wing group that attacked reporters who deviated from Reagan’s propaganda themes, and the neoconservative Freedom House (which later denied receiving White House money, though it made little sense that Raymond would lie in an internal memo).

As the White House continued to cultivate its ties to Murdoch, Reagan held a second Oval Office meeting with the publisher — on July 7, 1983 — who was accompanied by Charles Douglas-Home, the editor of Murdoch’s flagship UK newspaper, the London Times.



President Ronald Reagan meets with Charles Douglas Home, editor of London Times, and its publisher Rupert Murdoch in the Oval Office on July 7, 1983. (Photo credit: Reagan presidential library)

In an Aug. 9, 1983 memo summing up the results of a Casey-organized meeting with five leading ad executives regarding how to “sell” Reagan’s policies in Central America, Raymond referred to Murdoch as if he were one of the benefactors helping out.

In [a memo](#) to Clark, Raymond said the project would involve a comprehensive approach aimed at persuading a majority of Americans to back Reagan’s Central American policies.

“We must move out into the middle sector of the American public and draw them into the ‘support’ column,” Raymond wrote. “A second package of proposals deal with means to market the issue, largely considering steps utilizing public relations specialists – or similar professionals – to help transmit the message.”

To improve the project’s chances for success, Raymond wrote, “we recommended funding via Freedom House or some other structure that has credibility in the political center. Wick, via Murdoch, may be able to draw down added funds for this effort.” Raymond included similar information in a separate memo to Wick in which Raymond noted that “via Murdock [sic] may be able to draw down added funds” to support the initiative. (Raymond later told me that he was referring to Rupert Murdoch.)

In a March 7, 1984 [memo](#) about the “‘Private Funders’ Project,” Raymond referred to Murdoch again in discussing a request for money from longtime CIA-connected journalist Brian Crozier, who was “looking for private sector funding to work on the question of ‘anti-Americanism’ overseas.”

Raymond wrote:

“I am persuaded [sic] it is a significant long term problem. It is also the kind of thing that Ruppert [sic] and Jimmy might respond positively to. Please look over the stack [of papers from Crozier] and lets [sic] discuss if and when there might be further discussion with our friends.”

Murdoch’s News Corp. has not responded to several requests for comment about the Reagan-era documents.

Murdoch’s Rise

With these close ties to Reagan’s White House and Thatcher’s 10 Downing Street, Murdoch’s media empire continued to grow. To meet a regulatory requirement that U.S. TV stations must be owned by Americans, Murdoch became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1985. Murdoch also benefited from the Reagan administration’s relaxation of media ownership rules which enabled him to buy more TV stations, which he then molded into the Fox Broadcasting Company, which was founded on Oct. 9, 1986.

In 1987, the “Fairness Doctrine,” which required political balance in broadcasting, was eliminated, which let Murdoch pioneer a more aggressive conservatism on his TV network. In the mid-1990s, Murdoch expanded his political reach by founding the neoconservative Weekly Standard in 1995 and Fox News on cable in 1996. At Fox News, Murdoch hired scores of prominent politicians, mostly Republicans, putting them on his payroll as commentators.

Last decade, Murdoch continued to expand his reach into U.S. mass media, acquiring DirecTV and the financial news giant Dow Jones, which included The Wall Street Journal, America’s leading business news journal.

As his empire grew, Murdoch parlayed his extraordinary media power into the ability to make or break political leaders, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom. In December 2014, the UK’s Independent reported that Ed Richards, the retiring head of the British media regulatory agency Ofcom, [accused](#) British government representatives of

showing favoritism to Murdoch's companies.

Richards said he was "surprised" by the informality, closeness and frequency of contact between executives and ministers during the failed bid by Murdoch's News Corp. for the satellite network BSkyB in 2011. The deal was abandoned when it was discovered that journalists at Murdoch's *News of the World* tabloid had hacked the phone of murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler and others.

"What surprised everyone about it – not just me – was quite how close it was and the informality of it," Richards said, confirming what had been widely reported regarding Murdoch's access to powerful British politicians dating back at least to the reign of Prime Minister Thatcher in the 1980s. The Reagan documents suggest that Murdoch built similarly close ties to leading U.S. politicians in the same era.

These glimpses behind the curtain also reveal how these symbiotic – or some might say incestuous – relationships have developed between media magnates and likeminded politicians. Though Murdoch might argue that he was simply following his ideological beliefs – and putting his news outlets behind his political goals – it's also clear that his commitment to right-wing causes proved very profitable as well.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America's Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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