Activity Introduction

Hey, how’s it going? (Name) here, with a quick word on how sometimes even the presidents make mistakes that get them into trouble.

Let’s look at how President Reagan got into trouble with Congress when he tried to help another country overthrow their communist government.

Video 1 - Introduction

President Reagan didn’t just want to end communism in the Soviet Union, he was prepared to fight for freedom and democracy anywhere in the world.

Sometimes he was willing to take extreme measures to make sure that groups in other parts of the world had what they needed to fight back against their totalitarian governments.

Let’s check out this video and find out how Reagan’s instincts got him into some hot water.

Video 1

In the early 1980’s, a civil war was raging in Nicaragua between the left wing socialist called Sandinistas and the Contras, a collection of anti-Sandinistas, partially financed by the U.S. government and the C.I.A. U.S. government intervention in the war in Nicaragua was limited by several U.S. laws, but the Reagan administration paired involvement with the Contra rebels with arms sales to the Iranians in order to find a way around U.S. law.
This Iran-Contra Affair became the defining scandal of the Reagan administration and resulted in the indictment of many top Reagan administration officials. The war in Nicaragua had been going on since the early 1980’s with the Contras fighting against the governing Sandinistas. The Sandinistas, the socialist group that had taken over the government in Nicaragua in 1979, by overthrowing the Somoza family that had ruled for decades. The Sandinistas were part of a group that was responsible for the government takeover, but when other members of their coalition left or were forced out of the government in 1989, the Sandinistas, led by Daniel Ortega, took over.

Since the 1960’s the Sandinistas, along with other Marxists groups in Nicaragua had received assistance from the Cuban government of Fidel Castro. Beginning around 1980, when the Sandinistas were attempting to consolidate their control over the government by purging rebel factions, several distinct opposition groups began to emerge to fight against them. These groups included the FDN, which was a rebel army created and funded by the U.S. government, particularly the C.I.A. Also, what was left of the Nicaraguan army of the Somoza Regime, led by Eden Pastora, known as Commander Zero, was among these groups.

These rebel groups, thought not joined together in any meaningful way in their struggle against the Sandinistas, were known as the Contras. The U.S. government in keeping with its long standing policies to aid in any effort to fight against socialist or communist governments, particular in Latin America, were engaged in aiding the Contras with money and weapons. In 1982, Congressman, Edward Boland of Massachusetts, proposed an amendment to an appropriations bill that would prevent the Reagan administration and the C.I.A. from giving funds to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua. The Boland Amendment would prove to be problematic for the Reagan administration later on when it was discovered that the administration had been funneling money to the Contra groups.
Ever since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the late 1970’s, the relationship between the United States, who had been a supporter of the previous regime, led by the Shah of Iran and the Iranians under Ayatollah Khomeini, had been strained. This was made worse after 66 American hostages were seized after the storming of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979. In fact, 52 of those hostages were held for 444 days and were not freed until the first day of the new Reagan administration.

The Reagan administration was unable to improve relations with Iran and the continued war between Iran and Iraq, coupled with the general instability in the region, had resulted in tense relations between Iran and the United States and it also seen some further instance of hostage taking. The militant group, Hezbollah, took 30 hostages, six of them Americans in Lebanon in 1983 and it was believed by members of the Reagan administration that selling arms to Iran, which the administration would subsequently do, would influence Hezbollah to release the hostages. This was not a very successful strategy.

Because of the Iran-Iraq War, which had been raging since the beginning of the 1980’s, the Iranians were desperate to get weapons from any advanced nation, especially the Americans. The Americans had been arming the Iraqis for years and arming the Iranians would mean that the U.S. was selling weapons to both sides in the conflict, but under a U.S. law, called the Arms Export Control Act, the sale of weapons to Iran was illegal. Both Nicaragua and Iran were areas of trouble for the United States at the beginning of the 1980’s. In an interesting and ill conceived policy move, the administration decided to combine these two trouble spots in to one disastrous policy that would become the major scandal of the Reagan administration.

Video 1 – Recap
So basically, the U.S. was talking to an old enemy and trying to come up with a way to help out a new friend, but not everyone believed this friend was legit; some people thought this friend might even be an enemy.

That’s just a little confusing, but that’s exactly what was going down in the mid-nineteen-eighties.

You can check out that intriguing video a second time, or we can move on to a question.

**Reading Passage Introduction**

Congress did not approve of the U.S. helping another country overthrow their government. In fact, Congress passed laws preventing us from taking such action.

Then, some assistants to the president came up with a way to get around these laws so the U.S. could help the Contras in their fight.

Read here to see how it all played out.