

While Ronnie napped

By Greg Palast

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Vinnie the Chin had a great alibi. The New York mob capo shuffled down the street in his bathrobe, unshaved, drooling out the side of his mouth. When he got busted, he pleaded he was too gone-in-the-head to know about the Cosa Nostra running rackets from his candy shop.

Ronald Reagan out-Chinned the Chin. When caught paying ransom to Khomeini and his Hizbollah terrorists, Reagan did his aw-shucks I'm just a ga-ga grandpa routine, "I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart tells me that's true, but the facts tell me it is not." Oh, OK then.

If it were Jimmy Carter who'd been caught in such an act of treason – arming our enemy – Republicans would still be roasting his flesh today. You know it and I know it.

The Reagan Right has used the late President's funeral for a shameless political victory dance, carefully wiping the blood off the historical files. Before the truth is interred, let us have a moment of remembrance for the dubious doings in the White House while Reagan napped:

* South Africa's government went on a murder spree to insure that Black folk would never vote. Reagan blessed that police state with a smile, refusing, despite the pleas of Nobel laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu, to take even the small measure of limited trade sanctions against the evil white empire.

* Reagan's Secretary of Interior, James Watt, launched a biological pogrom against trees. Before he was indicted, the Environmental Protection agency became a country club for polluters' lobbyists. Reagan's heart told him it wasn't true, but the screeching chain saws said otherwise.

* AIDS was identified in 1981. Reagan's official policy was to hit the research snooze button. Our president did not mention nor act on the epidemic until 1987 – 30,000 funerals too late. The gay death toll brought glee to Reagan's apocalyptic allies, the mewling mullahs of the Christian Right. (But As the Good Book warns, doing unto others has a price: the same fruitcake fanatics that slowed AIDS research also blocked the stem cell studies that might have saved the dying president from the horrors of Alzheimer's.)

* Reagan politically fathered those rascally Rosemary's Babies of the Bush junta: Dick Cheney, Ronnie's appropriately titled Whip in Congress; Paul Wolfowitz, the kind of Dr.

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Strangelove that scares even Henry Kissinger; John Poindexter, convicted of abetting Contra terrorists while in the Reagan White House, later Bush's first Total Information Awareness chieftain; and Reagan Treasury Secretary James Baker, who tried his damndest to bankrupt America for Ron, and now, from his Bush White House office, is doing the same for Iraq as "special advisor" to the conquered nation.

But there can be no more dangerous creature to have burbled out of the Reagan Frankenstein factory than his Cold War comrade, Osama bin Laden.

In November 2001, with my BBC television and Guardian newspaper colleagues, I reported that, during the Reagan presidency, a US embassy official in Saudi Arabia was, in his own words, "repeatedly ordered by high-level State Department officials to issue visas to unqualified applicants."

Sounds icky but not too notable until you learn the identities of these "applicants." They claimed to be engineering students who, when queried as to what school they attended, answered they "could not remember." They didn't have to. The unlikely "engineers" had little helpers in the Reagan Administration.

After investigation, the career diplomat, attorney Michael Springmann, learned they were, "recruits, rounded up by Osama bin Laden, to [bring to] the United States for terrorist training by the CIA. They would then be returned to Afghanistan to fight against the then-Soviets."

Uh, oh. They returned to Afghanistan all right. But terrorists are like homing pigeons – they have a bad habit of coming home to roost. In spook-world, it's known as "blow back." The Reagan-bin Laden killer brigade, skilled in such crafts as skinning Russian prisoners alive, blew back with a sickening vengeance.

That story ran world wide at the top of the BBC nightly news – except in the USA where it bounced off the electronic Berlin Wall. Our media was careful not to wake America from its nap, to hide the deeply disturbing truths behind Grandpa Gipper's grin.

Ronald Reagan's loss of memory was, undeniably, a great personal tragedy. But lost in this week's circus of fakery and fawning for a failed president, is the greater national tragedy: America's amnesia, an unforgivable forgetting, a great sleep of reason from which we have yet to awaken, even after September 11.

*Greg Palast is author of the New York Times bestseller, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*, just released in a new Expanded Election Edition. To view Palast's report on bin Laden for the BBC and the Guardian report (winner of a 2002 California State University Journalism School Project Censored Award), go to <http://www.GregPalast.com>.*