

Name

Class / Period

Date

Two Reports, One Scandal: How Did Congress Judge Iran-Contra?

Read two excerpts from the same official 1987 report. Document A is from the majority; Document B is from the minority.

BACKGROUND

In 1985–86, officials in the Reagan administration secretly sold U.S. weapons to Iran, then under a U.S. arms embargo, hoping to free American hostages held in Lebanon. Meanwhile, National Security Council (NSC) staffer Oliver North helped run a private network supplying the Nicaraguan Contras after Congress had cut off U.S. military aid to them (the Boland Amendment). Some profits from the Iran sales were diverted to the Contras. After the sales became public in November 1986, House and Senate select committees investigated and held joint hearings in 1987. Their final report, released November 18, 1987, contains a **majority report** (signed by 15 Democrats and 3 Republican senators) and a **minority report** (signed by 8 Republicans).

Document A • The Majority Report

SOURCE	Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. 100-433 / S. Rept. 100-216, Executive Summary, p. 11
DATE	November 1987 (ordered printed Nov. 17; released Nov. 18)
CREATED BY	The committees' majority: 15 Democrats and 3 Republican senators from the House and Senate Iran-Contra committees
INTENDED AUDIENCE	WHO WAS MEANT TO READ IT? HOW DO YOU KNOW?
PURPOSE	WHY WAS IT WRITTEN? WHAT DID THE AUTHORS WANT TO HAPPEN?

EXCERPT (EXACT WORDING)

“...But enough is clear to demonstrate beyond doubt that fundamental processes of governance were disregarded and the rule of law was subverted.

The common ingredients of the Iran and Contra policies were secrecy, deception, and disdain for the law. A small group of senior officials believed that they alone knew what was right. They viewed knowledge of their actions by others in the Government as a threat to their objectives. They told neither the Secretary of State, the Congress nor the American people of their actions. When exposure was threatened, they destroyed official documents and lied to Cabinet officials, to the public, and to elected representatives in Congress. They testified that they even withheld key facts from the President.”

U.S. Congress, House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views*, H. Rept. No. 100-433, S. Rept. No. 100-216, 100th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington: GPO, 1987), Executive Summary, “Findings and Conclusions,” p. 11. Public domain.

Q1 • SOURCING Who wrote Document A, and what was their job? How might being members of Congress, the branch investigating the executive, shape the way they judge what happened?

Q2 • CLOSE READING Name the three “common ingredients” the majority lists. Then underline one sentence that states a specific action (not just an opinion). How could investigators check whether it is true?

Document B · The Minority Report

SOURCE	Same report, Minority Report, Part I, Chapter 1, “Introduction,” p. 437
DATE	November 1987 (same volume as Document A)
CREATED BY	The committees' minority: Reps. Dick Cheney, William Broomfield, Henry Hyde, Jim Courter, Bill McCollum and Michael DeWine; Sens. James McClure and Orrin Hatch (all Republicans)
INTENDED AUDIENCE	WHO WAS MEANT TO READ IT? HOW DO YOU KNOW?
PURPOSE	WHY WAS IT WRITTEN? WHAT DID THE AUTHORS WANT TO HAPPEN?

EXCERPT (EXACT WORDING)

“President Reagan and his staff made mistakes in the Iran-Contra Affair. [...] The bottom line, however, is that the mistakes of the Iran-Contra Affair were just that—mistakes in judgment, and nothing more. There was no constitutional crisis, no systematic disrespect for ‘the rule of law,’ no grand conspiracy, and no Administration-wide dishonesty or coverup. In fact, the evidence will not support any of the more hysterical conclusions the Committees’ Report tries to reach. No one in the government was acting out of corrupt motives.”

Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, H. Rept. No. 100-433, S. Rept. No. 100-216 (1987), Minority Report: “The Minority Views of Mr. Cheney, Mr. Broomfield, Mr. Hyde, Mr. Courter, Mr. McCollum, Mr. DeWine, Sen. McClure, and Sen. Hatch,” Part I, Chapter 1, “Introduction,” p. 437. [...] marks omitted sentences; a footnote marker after the first sentence is also omitted. Public domain.

Q3 · CONTEXT & POINT OF VIEW Document B opens by admitting “mistakes.” Why might the authors begin with that admission? How might belonging to the President’s own party shape their point of view?

Q4 · CLOSE READING Find two phrases in Document B that seem to answer Document A directly. Why do you think the minority put “the rule of law” in quotation marks?

CORROBORATION TASK · COMPARE THE TWO REPORTS For each question, quote a few words from each document. Then mark where they **agree** (A) or **disagree** (D).

QUESTION	DOCUMENT A (MAJORITY) SAYS...	DOCUMENT B (MINORITY) SAYS...	A / D
Did officials make mistakes or do wrong?			
Was the rule of law respected?			
Was there deliberate deception or a cover-up?			

Q5 · CORROBORATION Both documents came out of the same hearings and the same evidence. What does it tell you that they reached such different conclusions?

SOURCING CHECK Circle one: these two reports are **strong / limited** evidence of *what actually happened* in Iran-Contra. Circle one: they are **strong / limited** evidence of *how Congress divided over it*. One reason:

TEACHER PAGE

Answer guide: Two Reports, One Scandal

Time: about 25–30 minutes, or pair it with any lesson on checks and balances or congressional oversight. **Skills:** sourcing (HIPP: historical context, intended audience, purpose, point of view), close reading, corroboration. Answers will vary; these are model points, not the only acceptable ones.

SOURCE BOXES (BOTH DOCUMENTS)

- **Audience:** Congress, the President and executive branch, the press and the public; it is a published House and Senate report. Document B is also written to readers of the majority report (it refers to “the Committees’ Report”).
- **Purpose:** A states the committees’ findings after the hearings and argues that legal and constitutional processes were not followed. B rebuts the majority, puts the mistakes in context and defends the administration’s officials. Later in the same chapter the minority says context “can help explain and mitigate the resulting mistakes. It does not explain them away, or excuse their having happened.”

Q1 • SOURCING

The members of the House and Senate select committees, which had a bipartisan majority (15 Democrats plus Republican Sens. Warren Rudman, William Cohen and Paul Trible). As members of Congress, they had an institutional stake: the Boland Amendment was Congress’s law, and the majority found that Congress had not been told of the operations. Strong answers note this can shape judgment without making the report wrong.

Q2 • CLOSE READING

“Secrecy, deception, and disdain for the law.” Specific, checkable actions: told neither the Secretary of State, Congress nor the public; destroyed official documents; lied to Cabinet officials, the public and Congress. These can be checked against records and sworn testimony. For example, the same page reports North testified he assured Poindexter that he had destroyed all documents relating to the diversion.

Q3 • CONTEXT & POINT OF VIEW

The admission makes the rebuttal more credible: it concedes what the evidence cannot deny before contesting the conclusions. The omitted sentences ([...]) note that Reagan had directed the NSC staff not to engage in covert operations, changed procedures for notifying Congress, and appointed a new Chief of Staff, National Security Adviser and Director of Central Intelligence. All eight signers were Republicans, the President’s party, and the minority argued that the majority rested on an overly broad view of Congress’s foreign-policy powers (same page, p. 437).

Q4 • CLOSE READING

“No systematic disrespect for ‘the rule of law’” answers “the rule of law was subverted”; “no... dishonesty or coverup” answers “destroyed official documents and lied”; “mistakes in judgment, and nothing more” answers “disdain for the law”; “hysterical conclusions the Committees’ Report tries to reach” names the majority report directly. The quotation marks likely signal that the minority is quoting the majority’s own phrase in order to dispute it; accept any reasoned answer.

CORROBORATION TASK & Q5

Agree: both say things went wrong (A: processes “disregarded”; B: “made mistakes”). **Disagree:** the rule of law (A: “subverted”; B: no “systematic disrespect”) and deception (A: “lied,” “destroyed official documents”; B: no “dishonesty or coverup”). Q5: the same evidence can support different interpretations. Purpose, institutional role and party can shape conclusions, so historians corroborate with other sources.

SOURCING CHECK

Best answer: *limited* evidence of what happened (both are interpretations written by participants in a political dispute) but *strong* evidence of how Congress divided in 1987. To check facts, students should turn to other records, such as the original documents, the Tower Commission report (Feb. 26, 1987) and Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh’s Final Report (made public Jan. 18, 1994).

What happened next (state factually): Walsh charged 14 people; 11 were convicted, but two convictions were overturned on appeal. North’s conviction was reversed in 1990 and the charges were dismissed in 1991; Poindexter’s conviction was reversed in 1991, both because of their immunized testimony to Congress. On Dec. 24, 1992, President George H.W. Bush pardoned six people: Caspar Weinberger, Duane Clarridge, Clair George, Elliott Abrams, Alan Fiers and Robert McFarlane.

Find the original: both excerpts are from the GPO print edition, free at govinfo.gov (S. Rept. 100-216, Congressional Serial Set) and archive.org/details/micro_IA41152829_0391. Outcomes: Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters*, Vol. I, “Summary of Prosecutions” and Executive Summary.

Want the full lesson? The Iran-Contra Classroom Pack has 10 documents, worksheets, a debate and an answer key. payhip.com/b/vPjae