

**The Secret Government (1987), 84 minutes**  
**Narrated by Bill Moyers and shown on PBS**

What follows are essentially paraphrases of Bill Moyer's statements about what he calls "The Secret Government. " Not everything is written in the same order in which it appears on the show. Some things have been rearranged so that information concerning a particular topic is together, rather than spread out.

The following quote is Bill Moyers' central idea.

"All this, the contempt for Congress, the defiance of law, huge markups and profits, the secret bank accounts, the shady characters, the shakedown of foreign governments, the complicity in death and destruction; they did all this in the dark because it would never stand the light of day. Secrecy is the freedom zealots dream of. No watchman to check the door, no accountant to check the books, no judge to check the law. The Secret Government had no Constitution. They set up their own rules. "  
(1947-1987)

- I. The Secret Government in the U.S.
  - A. Has been growing for 40 years.
  - B. It is a cancer on the Constitution.
  - C. It was staffed by zealots who felt any extreme is justified by the ends.
  
- II. A short history of the Contras
  - A. Reagan promised to restore American military and moral prestige and be tough on terrorists in 1980.
    - 1. Reagan said America would never make concessions to terrorists.
    - 2. One year before Iran-Contra hearings, a magazine in Lebanon broke the story that Reagan had traded arms for hostages.
    - 3. Reagan repeatedly denied the story.
  - B. Meese (U.S. Attorney General) revealed that money the Iranians gave Israel, who acted as middleman in the arms-for-hostages deal, was diverted to the Contras in Nicaragua.
  - C. Two months after inauguration, Reagan had approved the funds that Casey (Director of the CIA) had used to create the Contras (1980).
  - D. Congress cut off contra funds after the CIA mined Nicaraguan harbors and blew up Nicaraguan fuel tanks.
    - 1. Reagan asked his aids if there was something he could do "unilaterally" (Poindexter 's quote) to fund Contras.
    - 2. Poindexter claimed to have made the decision to divert funds and keep it from the President to provide him with "deniability".
    - 3. The Constitution requires that the President ensure that "the laws be faithfully executed. " However, the Reagan government mislead Congress.
  - E. Reagan, Casey, Poindexter, McFarlane and North set up a small group to run contra policy.
    - 1. They raised money from right-wing governments.
    - 2. North raised money from right-wing Americans.

- F. There still isn't enough money, so the White House turned to "the Enterprise, " a group of companies that sold arms to the Contras.
1. General Richard Secord exercised overall control.
  2. Albert **Hakim** handled finances and the Enterprise was run on a for profit basis.
  3. The Enterprise was the means by which arms were sold to Iran.
- G. The Enterprise turned into a "shadowy government" with its own air force, own navy, own fund raising mechanism, and the ability to pursue its own ideas of the national interest free from constitutional checks and balances and free from law (and made money at the same time). For example:
1. Secord and **Hakim** put private donations into secret Swiss accounts. The money was then channeled to the Contras.
  2. Secord purchased missiles from the CIA for \$3.7 million and sold them to an Iranian middleman for \$10 million profit.
  3. Overall profits from arms sales to Iran may have reached \$15 million.
    - a. Only \$3.5 million went to the Contras.
    - b. Much of the money was retained as profit.
    - c. At the same time this show was aired, \$8 million remained in a private Swiss account.
  4. Arms were sold to the Contras at a big markup.
  5. Arms sold to the Contras were used in a terrorist war.
  6. Arms sold to the Iranians were used in the 8 year Iran-Iraq war of the 1980's.
- H. Robert Owens was North's subordinate and liaison with the Contras. In a memo to North, Owens said that:
1. The head of the Contras, Calero, was "a creation of the U.S. government. "
  2. Those around Calero "are not first rate people."
  3. "They are liars and greed and power motivated. "
  4. "This war has become a business to many of them. "
- I. Ex-contra officers accuse the leaders of taking advantage of the war to make a profit.
- J. North organized contra supply by airlifting. Some sources say that drugs were smuggled on return trips and profits used to buy some more arms.
- K. Robert Owens wrote to North that some contra leaders were running drugs and said that a supply flight had been used to smuggle drugs and part of the crew had criminal records. The CIA had chosen the crew.
- L. Casey wanted the Enterprise to take on a life of its own so he could use it to carry out other secret policies.
- M. Participants in the contra adventure were willing to put aside the Constitution for a "higher" purpose, fighting communism. They worked in secret.
1. The purpose of the Constitution was to avoid unaccountable power, of which the Enterprise is an example.
- N. The U.S.S.R. was aware of the Enterprise and the participants in the Enterprise knew it. The only purpose of concealment was to deceive the American people. The U.S. citizens were kept in the dark.

- III. Brief History of the Secret Government (work outside of the Constitution with no accountability). Started just after World War II.
- A. We hired Nazi war criminals as spies after World War II and helped them evade justice in the cause of stopping communism.
  - B. National Security Act of 1947 put into law ways to work during the Cold War. The rules were not important.
    1. Established framework of the national security state.
    2. Established the CIA.
  - C. The CIA overthrew a popularly elected government in Iran in 1953 covertly. The CIA put the Shah of Iran into power. Over 20 years, \$18 billion was given to Iran. In 1979 the Shah was overthrown because of his abuse of power.
  - D. The CIA overthrew a popularly elected government in Guatemala in 1954. A dictatorship took over with U.S. help. Over 100,000 of their citizens were killed.
  - E. The CIA tried to overthrow Castro in 1961, but did not succeed. Mafia were used to do CIA work.
  - F. After Kennedy promised an end to the worst of the dirty tricks, the CIA ran a covert war against Cuba.
    1. CIA organized a small department called "Executive Action" as a permanent assassination department. There were 8 documented attempts to kill Castro.
  - G. The CIA entered Vietnam in 1954 and conducted covert operations against North Vietnam (off the books).
    1. South Vietnam had an American puppet government but it was not an effective government.
    2. U.S. became more involved. A war was fought but not declared by Congress.
    3. The CIA conducted "Operation Phoenix" to round up, torture and kill suspected Vietcong collaborators.
    4. The CIA ran a secret war in Laos which did not work.
    5. 58,000 soldiers died in Vietnam. South Vietnam fell to North Vietnam.
    6. Congress had not declared a war since 1941, yet wars have been fought.
    7. The Church Committee looked at what the CIA had been doing and suggested limits.
  - H. The CIA ran a covert war against Allende, the popularly elected president of Chile who was killed.
  - I. The U.S. Government waged a covert war against the American people by (among other things) bugging civil rights leaders. They broke laws here in the U.S. They argued that only they knew and understood the problems.
    1. Watergate hearings showed again the Secret Government (1973).
    2. Nixon had an enemies list (people he wanted revenge on). (Plumbers)
    3. Iran-Contra Hearings again showed the Secret Government in action (1987).
    4. Nixon said the tapes should have been destroyed, but they had not been.
    5. North shredded the damaging documentation.
    6. Reagan argued we were at risk and must do all to stop the communists.
    7. Only lawful orders are to be followed according to U.S. law. North indicated he would do whatever the President told him to do.
    8. Other military officers disagreed with North, McFarlane, and Poindexter.

- J. Reagan increased the number of military advisors on the National Security Council. It had started as a civilian advisory board and has become a command post for covert military operations.
  - 1. NSC directives are classified executive orders. This fact gives the president license to do what he wants when he wants. Only the secret agents know about them.
- K. The Constitution doesn't outlaw covert operations, but it makes the President answerable to Congress for them.
  - 1. The law requires the president to make a "finding" that the national interests will be **serbed** by a covert action and to report it to Congress in a timely fashion. This rule was designed to make the President and Congress accountable.
  - 2. However, Reagan ignored the law. "Findings" were sent after the fact.

#### IV. Reasons of State

- A. The doctrine that anything necessary for the survival of the state must be done by the responsible individuals for it. However, the Constitution required accountability. The means to an end are extremely important in a democracy.
- B. Executives argue that they must be allowed to act without constraints.
- C. Nixon: "When the President does it, that means it is not illegal. "
- D. "Reasons of state" or the National Security principle interferes with the citizen's right to understand our government.
- E. Citizens want the truth. To be strong the people need to be able to judge. The Secret Government thwarts the Constitution and the will of the people.
- F. The people need to question what they are being told.
- G. The strength of our government is its openness and debate.

#### V. Sources for the program

- A. Testimony before Congress.
- B. Written reports, usually government.
- C. People involved in the Secret Government, usually from T.V. hearings.
- D. Statements by politicians on TV and written.
- E. Moyer's views and conclusions.

#### VI. Ideas to Discuss

- A. What is the Secret Government? Were you aware of it before?

- B. Does the Secret Government follow government guidelines? Why or why not?
- C. Why is it important for the President and his staff to report to Congress?
- D. Do you know of other Secret Government activities?
- E. Did Moyers convince you? Why or why not?

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## Film Review

### ***THE SECRET GOVERNMENT: The Constitution in Crisis***

Produced by Alvin H. Perlmutter. Alvin H. Perlmutter, Inc., and Public Affairs Television, Inc. in association with WNET and WETA, 1987. 90 minutes.\*

Bill Moyers narrates this television documentary, which begins with a twenty-minute summary of the Iran-Contra scandal. To Moyers the point of the scandal is clear: the ends justify the means in the war against communism, and the means include a "secret government" that is "growing like a cancer" on the United States Constitution. Moyers traces the secret government back to the National Security Act of 1947, which created the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Those agencies became two of the instruments through which American leaders worked, usually in secret, to beat the Communists at their own game. According to Moyers, they replaced the rule of law and the doctrine of fair play with the ideology of "anything goes." They employed former Nazis as American spies, sanctioned the CIA's assassination plots, cooperated with the Mafia in the struggle against Fidel Castro, and organized a succession of covert actions against foreign governments. The film gives brief histories of the United States interventions in Iran, Guatemala, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam. In many of those cases, it argues, the country involved was delivered from the dangers of revolutionary nationalism into the hands of a repressive military dictatorship whose American-trained forces routinely jailed, tortured, and murdered political dissidents.

Equally serious, the secret war against communism abroad has subverted the American system at home. That is Moyer's primary message, and he gives it special attention in the closing segment of the film. He argues that national security managers, including the president, have routinely deceived the public; have arrogated to themselves constitutional powers, especially the power to declare war, that belong to Congress; have transformed foreign policy into military policy; have increased the number of professional military men in high policy-making positions; have used the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the CIA to repress domestic critics; and have set up private governments, such as the plumbers unit under Richard M. Nixon and Oliver North's operation under Ronald Reagan, in order to circumvent Congress. In short, national security managers have repeatedly engaged in activity the Founding Fathers would have considered treasonous and have done so in the name of a righteous anticommunism that answers to a higher law than the Constitution.

Although Moyers makes a strong case for his conclusions, it is worth remembering that the pattern of American intervention in the internal affairs of other countries, especially those in the Western Hemisphere, began well before the Cold War. Nor is that the only criticism. Viewers are bound to feel let down by the lack of concrete recommendations in the closing segment of the documentary. The film is better history than prescription. As history, however, it would be a useful supplement in the classroom. It makes excellent use of some old news reels as well as more recent clips from the Iran-Contra hearings and presidential news conferences. It also keeps commentary by "experts" to a minimum, relies instead on the testimony of historical actors, and begins and ends with a Jackson Browne tune ("Lives in the Balance") that summarizes the main theme Moyers is trying to develop.

\*Hogan, M. (1988, Dec.) Movie review of *The Secret Government*. *Journal of American History*, 75 (3), 1052-1053. Quoted.

## **Example Answer: Idea Notebook *The Secret Government***

The Bill Moyers film about *The Secret Government* was interesting. I would probably have been more moved by it before I studied the critical evaluation material.

I tried to watch this piece critically. These are my initial impressions:

1. I believe the film appeals to the emotions by showing dead bodies, injured women and children, and burning villages.
2. I believe the film uses a harsh choice of words in calling people “liars.” When a government is as large as ours, it would be virtually impossible for one individual (the president) to know every minute detail about every activity engaged in by the government. Every president has mispoken about something at one time or another (as has every other human). I would hesitate to call this lying. The word “liar” conjures up images of dishonesty which may or may not apply to the situations described in the film.
3. The film shows many short clips of speeches, addresses, conferences of the individuals spoken about. I believe that when you see a compilation of such short clips, you have to realize that you are only seeing a small part of a whole. The news media is famous for using small parts of a sentence, paragraph or longer piece and use it for its own purposes. If a certain segment of a speech is taken out of the context in which it was given, it can be made to say something which the speaker did not intend. I don’t know if this is the case, but because you don’t see the whole picture, you have to consider this.
4. The film shows only one side of the story. I’d like to hear someone who believes in these causes be able to address each specific point that Mr. Moyers makes. Are Mr. Moyers’ facts accurate? If not, in what ways have they been modified? What supporting evidence does a person have to refute Mr. Moyers? What are the benefits, if any, that have been the fruit of these efforts?
5. Where is Mr. Moyers’ evidence? He did a lot of interviews with a lot of people who think the government is rotten and corrupt. The world is filled with people like that. What I didn’t see was documentation to back up what he said. Perhaps a film is not conducive to showing this type of evidence. However, without it, his point of view is just that ■ another point of view.

I think Moyers is trying to look beyond what the government presents to us as absolute. This is good. He is doing the same thing as Jim Garrison in the film *JFK*. Questioning is good. But I don’t think we as consumers should accept what he is saying over what anyone else says, including the government.