

Corporate Media Propaganda and CIA Covert Ops

How Roy Cohn Helped Rupert Murdoch

By [Robert Parry](#)

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Rupert Murdoch, the global media mogul who is now a kingmaker in American politics, was brought into those power circles by lawyer/activist Roy Cohn who arranged Murdoch's first Oval Office meeting with President Ronald Reagan in 1983, according to documents released by Reagan's presidential library.

"I had one interest when Tom [Bolan] 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." Cohn sent the letter nine days after Murdoch met Reagan in the Oval Office along with Cohn, his legal partner Thomas Bolan, and U.S. Information Agency Director Charles Wick.

In a photograph of the Jan. 18, 1983 meeting, Cohn is shown standing and leaning toward Reagan who is seated next to Murdoch. Following that 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 William Casey, but the details of Murdoch's role remain sketchy partly because some of the records are still classified more than three decades later.



President Reagan meets with publisher

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

However, at my request, the Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California, released a batch of documents about Roy Cohn's contacts with the Reagan White House. Most of the documents revealed a warm personal relationship between Cohn and Reagan, with exchanges of effusive compliments, handwritten thank-you notes and birthday greetings.

Both Cohn and 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 the years before he died, Cohn gained some measure of revenge against his liberal enemies by helping to elect Ronald Reagan. Roger Stone, another Cohn associate, has asserted that – at Cohn's initiative – he delivered an apparent bribe to a leader of New York's Liberal Party in 1980 to arrange the endorsement of independent candidate John Anderson, who then siphoned off 7.5 percent of the vote and opened the way for Reagan to carry New York against President Jimmy Carter.

Stone described the transaction in a 2007 [article](#) by Matt Labash in The Weekly Standard, with Stone noting that he was speaking only after the statute of limitation on bribery had run. Stone described a discussion with Cohn about a \$125,000 cash payment “to grease the skids” for the Liberal Party's endorsement of Anderson and then recounted Cohn's instructions that he deliver a suitcase to a law office two days before the Liberal Party, indeed, did endorse Anderson.

Cohn's Murdoch Ties

Whatever Reagan's personal knowledge of that scheme, the conservative Republican President subsequently lavished favors on Cohn, including invitations to White House events, personal thank-you notes and friendly birthday wishes. But perhaps nothing was more important to Reagan than Cohn's ability to deliver Murdoch, then an Australian citizen, as a stalwart media ally.

According to the documents from the Reagan library, Cohn's relationship with Murdoch apparently developed around their mutual commitment to Israel. For instance, [one set of documents](#) described Cohn's intervention with Reagan to get the President to praise Murdoch's 1982 receipt of an award from the American Jewish Congress as its first

“Communications Man of the Year.”

Handwritten notes cite Murdoch’s “steadfast support of Israel + free + outspoken support of free press” and point to Cohn as the contact. On April 20, 1982, Reagan extended his and his wife Nancy’s congratulations to Murdoch.

Cohn, a notable socialite, further ingratiated himself to Reagan’s insiders by co-hosting a lunch on June 28, 1982, for USIA Director Wick, which also counted as guests Roger Stone and the New York Post’s Niles Lathem, according to [a document](#).

By late 1982, the Reagan administration was gearing up for an expanded propaganda push in support of the President’s hard-line 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 William 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.”

Murdoch’s Thin Skin

But Cohn also passed on Murdoch’s annoyance at “consistent slights that have been dealt to Niles Lathem, the head of the News Media (Murdoch) bureau in Washington, while the Reagan haters on TV and in the media have the run of the place.”

Cohn complained that Reagan, during a trip to Boston on Jan. 26, 1983, had ignored Murdoch’s offer

“to turn the Boston Herald over to him. ... Mr. Murdoch himself placed calls to Michael Deaver and to a Mr. Michael McManus [a deputy assistant to the President], none of which were ever returned to him. One of his editors at the Boston Herald was told that the President ‘had no time for them.’”

Cohn continued:

“Mr. Murdoch has been deeply disturbed at what he regards as a failure to stand by some basics in the President’s original program, which he believes to be correct. His advice is consistently sought by Mrs. [British Prime Minister Margaret] Thatcher and Prime Minister [Malcolm] Fraser of Australia, in both of which countries he owns extensive media interests. he is not the kind who is offended when his advice is not taken but he does appreciate being treated courteously and having at least the same courtesies extended to his Washington reporters as seem to be heaped upon the opposition.

“He is hurt at the way the Boston matter was handled and there is just so much that Tom [Bolton] and I can do. Because I believe that the total support and loyalty of at least one major publishing chain in this nation is of key importance to the President, and because of our admiration and affection for the President, I thought I would be less than forthright if I did not bring this situation to the attention of the three of you.

“I know how hectic things are there but if there is time for the enemy there must be just a little time for at least a thoughtful handling of a friend - unlike what happened in Boston.”

The letter got the attention of the three senior White House aides, with Reagan’s chief of staff Baker writing a note to Deaver, “why don’t we have someone draft a response from the 3 of us. Can you arrange?”

On Feb. 4, 1983, McManus, the deputy assistant to the President, offered an apology to Cohn:

“we were all sorry about the confusion surrounding a possible Presidential visit to the Boston Herald. We are all aware of the very positive nature of such a visit. Unfortunately the request came in after the visit had been planned and the President’s schedule was full. ...

“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 the fulsome apology, Cohn continued to complain about perceived slights against Murdoch’s publications. In [an April 28, 1983 letter](#), Cohn told Wick:

“I write you in desperation, because you have always recognized the importance to the President of Rupert Murdoch, probably the world’s most powerful publisher, whose papers played a key role in carrying close states for Ronald Reagan in 1980 ... But all of our hard work to get the Murdoch papers an even break with those that opposed Reagan - some in vicious terms - comes to naught - because there are some people in the White House who don’t have the sense to know friends from enemies.”

Cohn expressed Murdoch’s dismay that Reagan, during a speech in New York, seemed to favor the New York Daily News over the New York Post, saying

“in remarks prepared for and delivered by the President not once but twice ... the President asked people to follow the fight against crime by reading the Daily News. The Post people walked out. ... The News supported [George H.W.] Bush over Reagan, and then barely squeaked out an endorsement over Carter as the lesser of evils. The Post and the other Murdoch papers gave their blood on a daily basis for Ronald Reagan, and I know Bill Casey, Roger Stone, Tom Bolan, etc. will confirm that without the Post, Reagan could not have carried New York. ...

“To say that all the good you tried to do, and I tried to do, and the President did in his meeting with Rupert has been severely damaged by this second insult, is an understatement. As of now, tempers are so hot that I would wait for things to cool off. ... I believe in Ronald Reagan – and it hurts me to see him victimized this way from within. How many of these screw-ups can he survive?”

In a May 2, 1983 addendum to the complaint, Cohn added:

“The lead News opinion column every Sunday is written by Ken Auletta, a consistent attacker of the President, and the one who just spearheaded the drive against Ken Adelman’s confirmation, carrying it to the point of personally appearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to call Ken a liar. With friends like the News, the President does not need enemies.”

On the same day that Cohn fired off the complaint about Auletta, Murdoch served as an honorary chairman of [a testimonial dinner](#) in honor of Cohn sponsored by the B’nai B’rith Banking and Finance Lodge and the Banking and Finance Division of State of Israel Bonds. President Reagan sent a congratulatory telegram to Cohn.

Propaganda Campaign

Despite Cohn’s complaints about the alleged slights to Murdoch, the Australian media magnate appears to have pitched in to help the Casey-Raymond outreach program for Reagan’s Central American policies. Documents released during the Iran-Contra scandal in 1987 and later from the Reagan library indicate that Murdoch was soon viewed as a source for the private funding.

On May 20, 1983, the longtime CIA propagandist Raymond, from his perch inside the NSC, wrote that \$400,000 had been raised from private donors brought to the White House situation room by USIA Director Wick, with the funds divided among several organizations including the right-wing Accuracy in Media 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 Murdoch — 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 aggressive policies in Central America, Raymond referred to Murdoch as if he were one of the benefactors helping out. In [a memo](#) to Clark, entitled “Private Sector Support for Central American Program,” Raymond criticized a more traditional White House outreach program headed by Faith Whittlesey as “preaching to the converted.”

Raymond told Clark that the new project would involve a more 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.”

Crozier, who died in 2012, had [a long history](#) of operating in the shadowy world of CIA propaganda. He was director of *Forum World Features*, which was set up in 1966 by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which received covert funding from the CIA. Crozier also acknowledged in his memoir keeping some of his best stories for the CIA.

At least one other document related to Murdoch's work with USIA Director Wick remains classified, according to the National Archives. Murdoch's News Corp. has not responded to several requests for comment about the Reagan-era documents.

According to the new documents released by the Reagan library, Reagan and Cohn continued to exchange mutual praise, sometimes in handwritten messages. On March 28, 1985, Cohn sent Reagan [a handwritten letter](#) thanking the President for contributing a video tribute in support of Cohn's receipt of the Americanism Award from the Young Republicans.

"I count many blessings, but none more meaningful than the privilege of living through the Ronald Reagan era - which represents everything I have loved since I joined the Justice Department at age 19 - our great country, and the opportunity it offers for the election of a man of your greatness to lead it."

In his own hand, Reagan drafted the reply, writing: "I know I'm sending a thank you in answer to a thank you but in this case it's to express to you appreciation for your generous words. You were more than kind."

The last dated communication from Reagan to Cohn in the files was a "[Get-Well message](#)" on Nov. 22, 1985, saying: "I just learned that you are being sent home from the hospital tomorrow. Nancy and I are keeping you in our thoughts and prayers. May our Lord bless you with courage and strength. Take care and know that you have our concern."

At the time, Cohn was suffering from AIDS, though he claimed that his illness was liver cancer. He died on Aug. 2, 1986, due to complications from AIDS, the disease that was then ravaging the gay community in the United States and other countries. He was 59.

Among the ironies of his death was Cohn's history of purging gays and Lesbians from the U.S. government as security risks, a policy put in place by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1953 in response to the Lavender Scare generated by Cohn and McCarthy - and not rescinded until 1995 by President Bill Clinton. Another irony was that President Reagan, when faced with the devastating AIDS epidemic, failed to respond aggressively to the crisis because many religious conservatives considered the disease God's punishment of homosexuals.

Murdoch's Rise

Meanwhile, with the close ties to the Reagan White House that Cohn helped nurture, 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 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, including The Wall Street Journal, America’s leading business news journal.

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.

On Wednesday, the New York Times [reported](#) that Murdoch, now 83, was using his extraordinary media power among conservatives to block Mitt Romney from gaining the Republican presidential nomination for a second time — and instead was favoring Jeb Bush.

“In the delicate and unseen campaign underway for Mr. Murdoch’s affections in the next presidential campaign, this much is clear: Mr. Romney is out of the running, a reality that has pained and angered his allies,” the Times reported.

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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