

Speaker criticizes government for controlling mainstream press

By Sarah Kitchen
Of the Emerald

The essential role of the mainstream press is to support the government and to reassure the American population, said Alexander Cockburn, press critic for The Nation.

Cockburn spoke last night to a crowd of more than 600 people about the American press and its relationship to the Iranian arms scandal. The event was co-sponsored by the Cultural Forum, Sister University project and CISCAP.

"What is the (Iranian) scandal really about? It is important that we define it the way we see it and not the way the mainstream press or the Reagan administration define it. The secret and criminal use of power is what this scandal is about," Cockburn said.

The press is a public relations arm of the U.S. government, and in recent years it has not doubted what it is told by the government — that is, until the arms scandal, Cockburn said.

According to Cockburn, much of the happenings in government are not widely covered by the mainstream press because the press is one large institution. "We can really say the press gets onto a story when the press 'institutionally' gets onto a story — what you might call pack journalism."

"If the press is objective and value free, how come out of about 1,600 newspapers in the United States, 99.99 percent support the capitalist system, and how come not one of them has a regular socialist column?" Cockburn asked.

The press has limitations on what it considers to be a scandal, he added.

"They don't regard it as scandalous that this country has been flouting law by attacking Nicaragua for the past two years," he said. "They really have a much more procedural idea of scandal, such as, 'Was Congress adequately informed.'"

Until recently, the press has accepted two myths of the Reagan administration, Cockburn said.

One myth is the desire to negotiate settlements with the Sandinistas, and the second is the administration's interest in arms control, he said.

"We all know Reagan came into office not wanting to cut the U.S. arms by even a missile, and he will leave office in that state of mind," Cockburn charged.

In the past, the press labeled Reagan as a "sharp shooter," saying he was the most popular president in the history of the United States. However, what has entered into mainstream press is the fact that the Reagan administration has been shipping arms to the men who for years have been portrayed as enemies of the United States.

"They couldn't sustain the



Photo by Bobbie Lo

Alexander Cockburn attends a reception Thursday.

myths any longer," Cockburn said. "When you look at the situation back before the scandal started, at the end of September, let's say, you can really see how significant this scandal has been."

Since then, the Reagan administration has been halted, or at least slowed down in its tracks.

"If it were not for the recent Iranian arms scandal, the immediate invasion of Nicaragua was a very firm likelihood," Cockburn said. "The Reagan administration's arms control policy also was seen as somewhat credible by the general population."

"Really what the conservatives were hoping in the final two years of the Reagan administration was to set the agenda for the next decade and a half. I think they thought Reagan could leave the White House in 1988 with the Sandinistas toppled, with (Libyan leader Moammar) Gadhafi toppled, with permanent cuts on social spending installed, with the Democrats saddled with a deficit," Cockburn said.

The American public now has seen the gap between appearance and reality. However, there is still a long way to go in order to understand the full extent of the scandal, Cockburn said.

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