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Joint Chiefs Not Told Of Shipments to Iran

Stunned Chairman Ordered Internal Inquiry

By George C. Wilson
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The Joint Chiefs of Staff had "zero knowledge" of President Reagan's secret shipments of arms to Iran, informed officials said yesterday.

Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs, was so astonished when he heard about the deal through news reports that he ordered his top staff officers questioned to determine whether one of them had known about it and neglected to inform him, officials said.

The internal inquiry, they said, revealed that neither Crowe nor his deputies had been informed by Reagan, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger or national security adviser John M. Poindexter. Weinberger, his aides said, opposed the arms-for-hostages plan, but apparently did not inform Crowe of its existence.

Asked how U.S. weapons and spare parts could be flown to Iran without the chiefs' knowledge, one military official said the White House asks the armed services to provide transport for various items hundreds of times each year. "We don't ask why when directed to take something from point A to point B," said one military official, "and wouldn't necessarily know what we were carrying."

Failure to inform the chiefs follows a pattern of extreme secrecy in which the White House attempted to withhold news of the Iran operation from Congress and from many within the administration.

CIA Director William J. Casey was ordered by Reagan in mid-January not to tell the appropriate congressional intelligence committees of the operation, according to informed sources, and the president gave only scant information to top Cabinet officers, including Secretary of State George P. Shultz.

Shultz issued an unusual statement through his spokesman Friday saying he "was not directly involved [in the operation], although he was sporadically informed of some details."

Reagan, who came into office five years ago pledging full consultation with military leaders, also froze out the chiefs when he endorsed elimination of all nuclear weapons during his October meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Iceland. Army Lt. Gen. John H. Moellering, Crowe's assistant, was at Reykjavik to represent the chiefs but was not consulted before Reagan made his offer, informed sources said.

Neither Crowe nor his fellow chiefs—the heads of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps—have publicly discussed either the Iranian arms deal or Reagan's offers at Rekjavik. The House and Senate Armed Services committees intend to call them to testify in January on those issues.

To prepare for those inquiries, sources said, Crowe has directed his staff—1,627 military and civilian personnel who report to him alone under the defense reorganization bill passed in the last Congress—to assess the consequences of eliminating strategic ballistic missiles by 1996. Such a step would mean taking Minuteman missiles out of silos in the West and removing ballistic missiles from Poseidon and Trident submarines now at sea.

One big question being addressed, sources said, is how the U.S. balance of power with the Soviet Union could be maintained as ballistic missiles were being scrapped over 10 years. A second question is how the United States and its allies would stack up against the Warsaw Pact if all ballistic missiles were eliminated by 1996.

Some of the military's preliminary findings are likely to shock Reagan, sources said. Not only is there not enough money in sight to build up U.S. nonnuclear forces—bombers, air defenses, armored divisions, infantry maneuver battalions—to match the Soviet Union's, they said, but the transformation might take much longer than 10 years no matter how much money was spent.

One example being cited is the conversion of ballistic missile submarines—the Poseidon and Trident boats—to cruise missile carriers. Military leaders are presuming that Reagan does not intend to scrap this underwater deterrent, the nation's most invulnerable force. So one part of the chiefs' study is how to convert these submarines into cruise missile carriers, which military leaders presume would be allowed under Reagan's arms pact.

"It would be one hell of a job to do that," said one official. "It just might be impossible mechanically to convert the fleet in 10 years even if we had all the money and started now."

Crowe is credited with keen political sensitivity. In his first year as chairman he has not publicly opposed Reagan on any issue, including the president's decision to break through the ceilings in the unratified SALT II treaty. His style has been to give the pros and cons seen by the military and let the president make the call.

He has not made any public statements opposing the Reykjavik offers or the Iranian arms deal. But such leading Democrats as Senate Minority Leader Robert C. Byrd (W.Va.), Sen. Sam Nunn (Ga.), slated to become chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee next year, and Chairman Les Aspin (Wis.) of the House Armed Services Committee have vowed to get the chiefs' personal views on these issues next year.

[Administration sources, meanwhile, said a U.S. consulting company has been talking to officials in Iraq about giving them strategic advice on the war with Iran, the Associated Press reported.

[U.S. officials were aware of the discussions between Iraq and BDM International Inc. of McLean, the sources said. Any such contract would have to be approved by the State and Defense departments.]

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