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Senate panel hears three ex-officials

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WASHINGTON – The Senate Intelligence Committee yesterday began two weeks of closed-door hearings into the White House's controversial Iran policy by taking sworn testimony from three former administration officials.

Robert C. McFarlane, President Reagan's former national security adviser, was the lead-off witness, testifying for more than six hours.

Late in the evening he was followed by Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North Jr., the man identified by the administration as the only White House official who knew all the details of an initiative in which some profits from arms sales to Iran went to the rebels in Nicaragua.

The committee also heard from John N. McMahon, who resigned as deputy CIA director in February amidst speculation that he was unhappy with covert action taken by the agency.

Committee members would not specify what had been discussed during the daylong session, which was held as momentum built on Capitol Hill for a Watergate-style congressional committee to investigate the administration's much-criticized enterprise.

In another development, Sen. Robert Dole of Kansas, the Republican majority leader, seemed to raise the political stakes over the controversy by saying Reagan has to act quickly or risk damage to his entire party and its members.

Dole said that is the message he relayed yesterday to Donald Regan, the White House chief of staff, and the one that he would deliver to Reagan today at a meeting with a half-dozen Republican leaders at the White House; he said participants would discuss "where this takes us as a party."

Dole, an undeclared candidate for the GOP's 1988 presidential nomination, effectively said the burden on Reagan was far greater than just minimizing the fallout for his administration.

"This does reflect on the Republican Party and Republicans, not just on White House staff and others involved," Dole told reporters. Alluding to the Watergate scandal, he added, "Having been through this process one time, it seems to me we ought to cut our losses."

McFarlane, who left his post with the White House a year ago, was the lead-off witness in the formal committee hearings on the Iran episode.

While he did not initiate the plan that has caused a firestorm of criticism against Reagan, McFarlane did carry out at least one mission to Iran in helping implement the policy. Questioning yesterday presumably focused on his role and on his knowledge of who else was involved.

Vice Adm. John Poindexter, who succeeded McFarlane as the president's national security adviser and was the architect of the Iran operation, also is expected to testify. Poindexter, the object of intense criticism for his actions, resigned last Tuesday, the same day North was fired as his deputy.

Sen. Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said yesterday that the panel would continue its questioning for the next two weeks and then decide whether to expand its probe to include members of Reagan's Cabinet.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), the vice chairman of the committee, said the line of inquiry would be as broad as possible, despite an administration request that some subjects be excluded.

"The White House asked me if I'd be willing to put certain areas of questioning off-limits," said Leahy. "I said absolutely not." He did not say who had made the request, nor did he specify what restrictions were sought.

Both Leahy and Durenberger said after the hearing last night that they were satisfied the witnesses were being forthcoming in their testimony and that the administration was being cooperative as well.

Several committees in both the House and the Senate have either expressed a desire to hold investigations of their own or have already planned some. To make the process more focused, Dole suggested on Sunday that a single "supercommittee" be established instead – a proposal backed by the incoming majority leader, Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.), and by a growing number of members of both parties.

At the same time, however, there seemed to be little enthusiasm among either Republicans or Democrats for Dole's proposal that Reagan call a special session of Congress in December to create the Watergate-style panel. Byrd repeated yesterday that he opposed the idea but would cooperate if Reagan decides to convene such a session.

Reagan's chief of staff has come under attack by more and more Republicans as the White House has seemed to sink deeper and deeper into political quicksand over the Iran-Nicaragua issue, and close associates of the president reportedly have suggested Regan be replaced.

Sen. David Boren (D-Okla.), who will become chairman of the Intelligence Commitee in January, joined that call yesterday in a letter to the president. It read, in part, "Frankly, it would appear wise to seriously consider naming a new White House chief of staff who is completely free of any possible reason to be defensive about past mistakes. . . ."

Boren also said he would go along with the idea of a Watergate-style committee, a significant factor given the powerful position he is about to assume.

Dole, during a press conference after meeting with Byrd, yesterday changed his previous position and entered the growing ranks of legislators clamoring for a special prosecutor to be named by the administration to conduct an independent investigation of the overall Iran initiative.

Leahy spelled out the reason he thinks an independent investigator is needed. "The special prosecutor can do something that no legislative committee can do," he said. "And that is if people have broken the law, prosecute them, convict them and have them sent to jail."

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