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Tried to deal and got caught

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WASHINGTON—JUST A month ago, the White House was the master of "spin control," transforming the incomprehensible and apparently fruitless Reykjavik summit into a triumph for American diplomacy. Today, the spinmasters have become whirling dervishes. Each time they turn they come up with a different story about why we went begging to Iran.

Recall that this started on Nov. 4, when Hashemi Rafsanjani, speaker of the Iranian parliament, announced that former national security adviser Robert McFarlane had arrived in Tehran with a false passport, a Bible and a cake, eager to make friends.

What was the reason for McFarlane's trip? White House chief of staff Don Regan gave a clue the next day: He said he could "not go into details of how we're negotiating in order to get these hostages out" of Lebanon. But even in denial, the fact was clear: The U.S. was negotiating with Iran for the release of hostages in Lebanon.

President Reagan himself confirmed as much Nov. 6. Though he said the stories about McFarlane's trip were "without foundation," the President went on to add, "All of that (press speculation) is making it more difficult for us in our effort to get the other hostages free."

Ridicule mounted. An administration that had insisted it would never negotiate with terrorists or pay ransom for hostages was caught doing just that. Thus, a different reason for McFarlane's visit had to be found—a lofty and principled reason, not this grubby bribing of fanatics with weapons that would allow them to spread their fanaticism.

And so the President came forth. He told Democratic and Republican congressional leaders Wednesday that he had in fact authorized arms shipments to Iran to support moderates involved in an Iranian power struggle to succeed the Ayatollah Khomeini. And good luck now, fellas.

Then McFarlane spoke. In a brief explanation written for The Washington Post, he suggested that he had sought the "strategic reorientation" of Iran—much as Henry Kissinger had secretly negotiated with China in 1971—so that it does not fall into the Soviet orbit.

Last week's naive appeasers and ransom-payers are this week's farsighted, geostrategic thinkers.

But it doesn't wash. To address the Chinese analogy first: Kissinger secretly traveled to Peking in 1971 to meet Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, not some Chinese dissident lurking in the wings. And he didn't come offering weapons.

Second, if Reagan were simply pursuing a hard-headed, long-range geostrategic realignment toward Iran, why would he have kept it from the Departments of State and Defense? Such an approach toward Iran is a defensible foreign policy that would find broad support within the Reagan administration.

The Pentagon could remind the President that the U.S. trained 28,500 Iranian officers between 1952 and 1979—and that those who have survived the Iran-Iraq war and the Khomeini purges might yet nurture warm feelings toward the U.S. The State Department would report that there are indeed moderates to work with in Tehran. "It's a mistake to think that they're all a bunch of crazies over there," says a senior State Department official.

But the State Department was never asked for its intelligence reporting. Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, says Secretary of State Shultz "really is not conversant" with what McFarlane did in Iran. And the Defense Department was busily enforcing an arms embargo that the White House was just as busily breaking.

If this were sound policy, soundly executed, there would have been no need for the deception, the embarrassment, the humiliation of cabinet officials. The spinmasters are "groping for a retroactive justification" for the ill-conceived mission to Iran, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) said yesterday.

But the fact remains: They tried to free hostages by paying ransom to terrorists and they got caught.

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