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Role may put NSC at a risk

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WASHINGTON – The National Security Council, which is at the center of the controversy about reported US dealings with Iran, has taken a more activist role in recent months and questions have been raised about whether it has jeopardized its most important asset – its ultra-private relationship with the president.

By its proximity to the president and the nature of its responsibilities, the NSC has been among the most important offices in the White House. Its chief, Adm. John M. Poindexter, is one of the first people who sees President Reagan every morning, and they discuss many of the most sensitive topics affecting the nation's security.

Until recently, the NSC's major function was coordinating the foreign policy initiatives that were being presented to the president as options by various agencies. But in recent months the NSC and its staff have taken on a newly expanded role in carrying out or operating foreign policy initiatives in two areas – the Nicaraguan conflict and Iran. According to congressional sources and former NSC officials, this new role could result in more congressional exposure for the agency's dealings with the president.

"I believe firmly in the need for the president to have confidential counsel on national security matters," said Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.). "But if they [NSC officials] are going to be involved in covert operations then Congress must have oversight."

According to Leahy and others, Congress could require that the head of the NSC, the president's assistant for national security affairs, be confirmed by the Senate or require that person and others on the staff to make periodic presentations to congressional committees on their activities.

Leahy has been vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which, under provisions enacted in the late 1970s, must be informed of all foreign covert operations undertaken by the executive office, whether they involve the Central Intelligence Agency, State Department or the Pentagon. But, Leahy said, during his eight years on the committee there has never been any secret briefing of the committee involving an NSC operation.

That, he believes, must change if the evidence regarding the NSC's involvement in Nicaragua and Iran is accurate.

On Nicaragua, recently confirmed allegations state that NSC officials were intricately involved in providing guidance and coordination to a private network of Americans who were giving financial support to the rebels seeking to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. The NSC's assistance came during the 18-month period that ended this month in which the US government was prohibited from giving military aid to the rebels, and during the longer period of time that the CIA was restricted from providing covert aid to the rebels, known as contras.

Questions for North

According to congressional sources, the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which is investigating allegations of illegal activities by some of the contras and their supporters, has asked the White House to make Lt. Col. Oliver North, deputy director of NSC's political-military affairs, available for questioning on his role in the network.

The Reagan administration has denied that North was involved in any illegal conduct, but phone calls were made to his White House office from a so-called "safe house" in El Salvador that was used by several Americans participating in a supposedly private mission flying in military supplies for the contras in Nicaragua during the congressional ban.

Likewise, the House Committee on Intelligence, which shares oversight responsibility on covert actions with the Senate committee, is seeking to determine what North and other NSC members may know about this supply network, two of whose members were killed last month when an arms-laden plane was shot down over southern Nicaragua by Sandinista military.

"If what I've read about these allegations involving the contras is true, then it's a quantum leap in the type of things that the NSC I know has ever been involved with," said William B. Quandt, a former member of the NSC staff during the Nixon and Carter administrations. "Sure, when [Henry] Kissinger was NSC chief he was involved with China, Vietnam and the Soviet Union for Nixon. But those were all diplomatic missions. This contra operation was much more operational, and something that the NSC has never been involved in before."

A major attraction for using the NSC in "hands-on" operations is the secrecy that enshrouds its business, said Quandt and others. "The major fear for any administration is leaks, whether from the Hill, CIA or the State Department," said Richard K. Betts, a former NSC staff member now with the Brookings Institution. "You can be sure with any NSC task that it is going to be a secret one."

Leaked activities

But that confidentiality has been shattered in two other major initiatives involving Poindexter and his staff recently. Last month, the Washington Post reported that Poindexter had formulated a plan for a "disinformation" campaign against Libyan leader Moammar Khadafy. While the White House denied that the plan was ever put into effect, it caused extreme public embarrassment to the Reagan administration. How the Post learned of the disinformation campaign is not known, but one NSC staff member was recently reassigned to the State Department after refusing to take a lie detector test.

Even more embarrassing, however, have been last week's reports that the White House had initiated a strategy in 1985 to free American hostages in Lebanon by opening secret negotiations with Iran and sending 500 tons of arms and spare parts for aircraft to Iran. According to press reports, Poindexter and his NSC staff carried out the program, which had been opposed in part by other members of the administration, including Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger. Both Shultz and Weinberger are members of the NSC board along with President Reagan and Admiral William J. Crowe Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"I can understand the president at times wanting to cut through the bureaucracies of State or Defense and call on NSC for a particular task," said Quandt. "But those bureaucracies are the embodiment of the wisdom of the past and you run the risk of carrying out a politically motivated and amateurish operation."

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