

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **A-1**NEW YORK TIMES
8 January 1987

Iran Defense For Reagan

White House Putting Blame on His Aides

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 7 — As the Iran-contra affair unfolds, the White House finds itself in the strange position of defending President Reagan with the argument that some of his most powerful aides were incompetent or deceitful.

News Analysis

The stance is noteworthy because it evokes one of the most frequent criticisms of Mr. Reagan by Congressional critics and others: that he is out of touch with the details of government and has given too much latitude to staff members.

Nonetheless, senior White House aides have apparently decided it was better to suggest that Mr. Reagan was unaware of or misinformed about key decisions than to allow continued speculation about his involvement in such activities as the clandestine diversion to the Nicaraguan rebels of millions of dollars in profits from arms sales to Iran.

This approach resulted this week in a conflict between the White House and Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, with the Administration — in a seeming paradox — pushing for release of a report on Iran that includes many unflattering details.

The committee demurred, with some Democrats calling the report a "white-wash." But White House aides are eager to see the document made public because in two key areas they believe it helps the President's cause.

The polemics used by senior officials has been striking because they undercut Mr. Reagan's image as a powerful leader. One senior White House official who favored release of the report, for instance, said it showed that some Presidential aides were "running wild" and that "we didn't have control over" foreign policy.

The White House was also eager to make public details in the Senate report about a chronology of the Iran dealings prepared by Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North that contained inaccurate statements. It said the Israeli arms shipments in September and November were not approved by Mr. Reagan until January 1986, when he signed a formal order authorizing the program.

That was clearly incorrect because, by all other Administration accounts, Mr. Reagan had approved the Israeli shipments when a planeload of Hawk missiles was flown to Iran in November 1985.

The North chronology asserts that the President was angered by this supposedly unauthorized Israeli shipment in November and ordered that the missiles be reclaimed.

Actually, the report says that the Central Intelligence Agency aided the November shipment at Colonel North's request and that the missiles were returned because the Iranians were dissatisfied with their quality.

Could Be Embarrassing

Disclosures about the misleading North chronology are potentially embarrassing to the Administration because senior officials relied on this document to prepare their testimony on the issue.

Still, the White House was eager for the document to be made public, in part because it bolstered the impression of Colonel North as a renegade who embellished the truth to suit his purposes.

The Senate report, according to White House officials and members of Congress, also shows that Colonel North played a key role in keeping the Iran shipments alive and in organizing the diversion to the contras, as the Nicaraguan rebels are called.

For instance, according to officials who have read it, it says he wrote in a memo, "If this program collapses, the hostages will die." Feeling that deeply, the report says, Colonel North got together with an Israeli official and worked out a method for resuming the shipments after they were suspended in December 1985.

The report also depicts Colonel North and the White House as having been taken in by Iranian promises to arrange the release all the American hostages in Lebanon. The original program of arms shipments, as laid out by Colonel North in a memo on Jan. 24, 1986, called for the delivery of 4,000 anti-tank missiles and some anti-aircraft missiles in exchange for a phased release of the hostages.

Abrams Offers Defense

The chorus of critical statements about Colonel North, largely from Administration officials, has reached such a crescendo that Elliott Abrams, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American affairs, was moved to offer a spirited defense.

"It seems to me," Mr. Abrams said, "that it has become a great national sport to criticize Ollie North. I have no criticism to offer. He was a good colleague and a pleasure to work with."

The Senate report's focus on the activities of Colonel North and Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, the former national security adviser, reflect only the testimony and evidence the panel was able to gather in three weeks of hearings. The committee did not hear from

many of the key witnesses.

Among those who refused to testify, citing their Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination, were Colonel North, Admiral Poindexter, and Richard V. Secord, the retired Air Force general who played a crucial role in arranging the logistics of the arms trade and in getting money to the contras.

Some Congressional investigators suspect that if all these figures testify, officials other than just Colonel North and Admiral Poindexter will be seen as having known of or assisted in the diversion of funds to the contras. This is one of the reasons Democrats were so quick to condemn the report as incomplete.

There is at least some reason for skepticism about the suggestion that members of the National Security Council staff had run amok without the guidance or knowledge of other senior officials.

According to several Administration officials, the White House in the last few years had used the technique of "plausible deniability." This term is normally applied to intelligence operations and means that covert measures should be "deniable" — not traceable to the United States.