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ARTICLE APPEARED IN

A19.

WASHINGTON POST
12 November 1986J, J
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Like 'a Shadow CIA'

The penalty the new Democratic Congress will try to exact from President Reagan for illicit U.S. arms aid to Iran may mark the end of autonomy for the National Security Council staff, now headed by Vice Adm. John Poindexter. That punishment would be grave, considering the importance of the NSC and its high quality of service in the past. What may make it possible is that the new Congress will be controlled by Democrats who have long itched to attack Reagan's national security staff for its alleged excesses.

"Reagan has let the Democrats get to his right on this one, and he's lost his own conservatives," a highly placed administration source told us. "We are pinioned."

The easy way for the president to withdraw from battle, mark the case closed and terminate the policy of bribes-for-hostages would be quick release of the remaining five Americans. More likely, in the opinion of non-NSC officials, is that the Iranian terrorists will up the ante and, when they get more arms, seize more Americans and raise the ante still higher.

Ending the NSC's autonomy as a unique arm of the presidency would at the least compel Poindexter and other NSC officers to testify on Capitol Hill. That would terminate the strange twilight world of the past 10 days. Neither State nor Defense has known enough about the arms-for-hostages deal to explain what is going on. But the NSC staff, which knows all there is to know, today is protected from testifying under the doctrine of separation of powers.

Exposing his personalized national security staff to Capitol Hill would create major problems for Reagan—and all future presidents. As with the CIA 10 years ago, it took a major scandal to upset decades of gentle congressional oversight and force the CIA to accept tough-minded Intelligence Committees in the Senate and the House.

The only occasion in recent times that a president allowed his NSC adviser to testify on Capitol Hill was in the juicy but highly specialized case of Billy Carter and Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi. President Carter sent Zbigniew Brzezinski to explain the Billy Carter affair in person and answer questions in public.

The lineup of Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which would have a major say in putting a leash on the NSC staff, worries White House aides. The test they are using is the contra-aid vote last year. With Sen. Claiborne Pell certain to become chairman in January, the committee contains not a single Democrat who supported President Reagan's supreme effort to authorize \$100 million for aid to the contras.

It has been in the Republican-controlled Senate that Reagan has so often saved his bacon the past six years on such inflammatory issues as arms for the contras and for Jonas Savimbi's freedom-fighters in Angola. But liberal Democrats on the Foreign Relations Committee have charged that Reagan's NSC operatives have acted as surrogates for the CIA in carrying out clandestine operations to further the president's policies. Having forced the CIA to submit to congressional watchdogs, they may demand equal treatment for the NSC staff.

No better case could be made in pursuit of that highly questionable objective than the uncovering of the NSC's arms aid for terrorist Iran. The case these Democrats will make starts with a compelling argument: since neither Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger nor Secretary of State George Shultz could stop the arms-for-hostages trade, Congress has no recourse but to move in on its own to control the NSC staff.

That staff was erroneously downgraded by Reagan in one of his first acts in office. Partly as a result, it has failed to play the top-drawer coordinating role designed for it by Dwight Eisenhower 35 years ago. Reagan has given it four bosses in less than six years, a debilitating turnover rate.

Despite its shortcomings in working out conflicting policy aims pushed on the president by tough-nosed Cabinet chiefs, former chief Robert McFarlane and now Poindexter have ironically converted the NSC staff into a powerful implementer of policy. In the arms-for-Iran affair, it has operated like a shadow CIA responsible to the president alone. Even some Republicans, brought up to respect law and order in government and disliking runaway power, may join the Democrats in the battle to end autonomy for the NSC staff.

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