

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 3-AWASHINGTON TIMES
8 December 1986

North belonged to secret group that planned global covert action

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Former National Security Council aide Lt. Col. Oliver North participated in a secret Reagan administration covert action planning group dubbed the "208 Committee," according to informed sources.

The committee, unofficially named after the Old Executive Office Building conference room where it met, could become a focal point in investigations of the Iran arms scandal and secret funding of Nicaragua's anti-Marxist rebels, sources said.

About a dozen specialists from the U.S. intelligence and defense community made up the inter-agency group, including covert action specialists from the CIA's Directorate of Operations, the State and Defense departments and Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Some NSC staff members participated, including Col. North, who planned and directed covert action programs in Central America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia until he was dismissed last month by President Reagan, sources said.

The group met irregularly to discuss ways of implementing covert action programs. Decisions were reached by informal consensus and few written records were kept. The group was authorized to commit millions of dollars in secret White House and CIA funds to the programs, sources said.

Currently, there is nothing to indicate that the secret Nicaragua re-funding scheme run by Col. North was ever discussed by the committee. Nevertheless, members of the group are likely to be questioned at length by federal and congressional investigators looking into the Iran-Nicaragua scandal, the sources said.

Moreover, the scandal is likely to prompt broader congressional inquiries about the Reagan administration's use of covert aid in other areas of the world.

Deputy CIA Director Robert Gates, who testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee for four hours Thursday, has described covert action as "an appropriate instrument of foreign policy, as long as it is undertaken in the context of a larger policy."

"The decision to undertake covert action is a policy decision ... made by the National Security Council, and CIA is the instrument by which it is implemented. And I believe that when that decision is made, that CIA has the obligation to implement it as effectively as it can," Mr. Gates said in congressional testimony last April.

Covert action describes three types of secret activities designed to be untraceable to the U.S. government: funding of foreign political parties, foreign media manipulation and, as in the case of U.S.-backed anti-communist insurgencies, large paramilitary operations that are difficult to keep secret.

Between 1950 and 1974, CIA agents played active roles in the Philippines, Iran, Congo, Chile, Ecuador, Greece, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Press accounts in 1974 of CIA domestic covert activities, in violation

of the agency's charter, led to a series of debilitating congressional inquiries that virtually shut down the agency's covert operations, according to former intelligence officials.

The CIA began to rebuild its covert action capabilities in the late 1970s and the process was accelerated in 1981 by the incoming Reagan administration. Since then, hundreds of millions of dollars have been devoted to covert action programs throughout the world, in such places as Nicaragua, Afghanistan and southern Africa.

Traditionally, the CIA has been solely responsible for carrying out covert action programs. But revelations of Col. North's activities indicate that NSC staff also had begun playing operational roles in covert action programs.

Last week the president ordered his NSC staff, which coordinates covert action policies, to refrain from taking part in "the operational aspects of sensitive diplomatic, military or intelligence missions" pending the outcome of a three-member Special Review Board.

Sources said NSC Director of Intelligence Programs Vincent Cannistraro was known as the 208 Committee's "controller" — the NSC official who granted access to the top-secret planning sessions.

Mr. Cannistraro directed the CIA task force supporting Nicaragua's so-called Contra rebels until 1984, the sources said. He was removed from that post following disclosures that the CIA helped formulate an insurgency handbook for the rebels calling for "neutralization" — the CIA euphemism for assassination,

an activity banned by U.S. law, sources said.

Mr. Reagan and then-National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane said at the time that all officials involved in developing the insurgency manual would be dismissed. Mr. Cannistraro, however, was transferred to the NSC, sources said. His future is uncertain in light of reports that incoming National Security Adviser Frank Carlucci, who takes over Jan. 1, has promised a thorough NSC staff reorganization.

Mr. Cannistraro coordinated the 208 Committee's drafts of "findings," or orders, that were later signed by Mr. Reagan and represent the first step in setting a covert action program in motion.

Once signed, copies are sent to the Senate and House intelligence committees and a team is dispatched to answer congressional questions.

"If the committees don't ask the right questions, they don't get the right answers" about covert programs, said one source.

Information on covert programs is tightly guarded among the few officials allowed access to the committee. Analysts at the State and Defense departments and the intelligence bureaucracy are not notified about covert programs.

"Big things could be going on inside a country that only a few government officials know about," the source said.

The handful of U.S. officials granted access to all covert action findings includes the president, the secretary of state and two senior State Department officials, the secretary of defense and two senior deputies, the CIA director and two deputy directors, and three or four representatives of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"It's considered the high politics of national security," one source said of the covert action group.