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# Washington Press Corps, in Iran-Contra Affair, Raises Questions on Its Handling of Tough Stories

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WASHINGTON — When the congressional hearings on the Iran-Contra affair begin next Tuesday, at least 146 reporters will be on hand, and all three major networks, CNN and public television will be poised to go live if the news warrants.

The Iran-Contra story, which will enter its seventh month as the hearings open, has given journalists "the most fun we've had since Watergate," as Washington Post executive editor Ben Bradlee has been quoted as saying. It has raised television news ratings at particularly dramatic junctures and won one paper, the Miami Herald, a Pulitzer Prize for related stories.

But while the Iran-Contra coverage has produced some outstanding journalism, it also has come in for considerable criticism from President Reagan and his defenders and raised questions about how well the Washington press corps tackles a highly competitive investigative story reaching into the Oval Office.

The lull in coverage for much of the past two months since the Tower Commission issued its report will end next week when the congressional hearings begin. As the issue heats up, with millions of Americans watching, reporters will be scrambling for leaks and trying to use the hearings as a vehicle for bigger stories. This atmosphere, most journalistic observers agree, is likely to produce both some of the best and worst of coverage.

Even before this next big surge, the sheer quantity of coverage has been awesome. Computer searches of Washington Post, New York Times and Wall Street Journal stories mentioning both Iran and Nicaragua yield 1,768 separate stories since last Nov. 4. The Washington Post has had as many as 28 reporters assigned to the story—prompting press critic Reed Irvine, chairman of Accuracy In Media Inc., and other conservatives to decry what he calls "excessive overkill."

## TV Follows Newspapers

The TV networks also have poured lots of resources into the story, sometimes devoting more than half of their evening news shows to it and scoring a few scoops. But mainly, television has followed leading newspapers that have set the agenda for most of this unfolding story.

Attorney General Edwin Meese gave the press briefing on Nov. 25 that disclosed the diversion of funds to Nicaragua, and the disclosure caught the White House

press corps off guard. Their reaction illustrates how the highly visible press corps can become preoccupied with daily coverage at the expense of more probing, investigative reporting.

Political scientist William Schneider concludes, "This story revealed something most Americans are unaware of: how powerless the White House press corps really is, and how little access they have to information that's not managed for them." To a surprising extent, some of the best White House reporters agree. NBC White House correspondent Andrea Mitchell says that it is so time-consuming to thoroughly cover the regular breaking White House news "it becomes physically impossible to do an adequate job of investigative reporting as well."

Jeff Greenfield, an ABC news correspondent who frequently reports on the press, suggests that "the White House press corps is only stylistically aggressive, not journalistically aggressive."

Former State Department spokesman Hodding Carter, now an independent television commentator and producer, says he believes many Washington reporters overlooked early danger signs partly to preserve relationships with sources. And even before the scandal broke, the coverage of national security actions at the White House raised tricky questions about whether to name U.S. officials in sensitive posts. As far back as 1985, The Wall Street Journal, like several other publications, delayed stories about the Contras naming Lt. Col. Oliver North because he argued that publicity would endanger his life. Although the Miami Herald had already named him, it wasn't until the Washington Post did so in an August 1985 story about the Contra network that most other papers followed.

The difficulty of such a story for television, with its appetite for pictures, has been particularly great. The networks have been ahead on some major stories—NBC was the first to get a copy of the Senate Intelligence Committee report, ABC broke news of a private U.S. fund-raising group buying arms for the Contras, and CBS broke a story about a secret Swiss bank account maintained by the U.S. Army. But for the most part, it has been a print story, something the networks hope may change with the on-camera drama of the hearings.

Critics have agreed that, once the press mobilized, the all-out effort produced some excellent journalism: the discovery of secret presidential approval of the arms sales, of Col. North's plan to ransom the

hostages and of White House efforts to alter and destroy documents are just a few of many examples. But most news organizations covering such a fast-breaking and complex story make some mistakes, including a few big ones.

The Lowell (Mass.) Sun made a splash with a story last December asserting that some of the diverted money from the arms sales had gone into U.S. political campaigns. Both the New York Times and CBS then featured it prominently, although conceding they couldn't substantiate it. But no proof of the story's accuracy has ever emerged, and government investigators backed away from it within days. The Lowell Sun says it still stands by its story.

A Feb. 15 New York Times piece reported that Col. North's private network was formed as the covert side of a public program now known as the National Endowment for Democracy. Many current officials with the endowment denied any covert link, and the Tower Commission said it believed no link existed. The Times editorial page acknowledged some "confusion" on this point without mentioning the paper had broken the story. But the story's author, Joel Brinkley, stands by his account, adding that, "The Tower Commission was unable to research this as thoroughly as we did. The Tower Commission was wrong."

Many news organizations carried allegations, based on unnamed sources, suggesting former White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan orchestrated a cover-up. This newspaper reported that a White House-prepared chronology of events was revised by Col. North, and that Col. North had told former associates the changes were part of a damage-control effort directed by Mr. Regan and designed to protect the president. More boldly, on Feb. 21, only days before the Tower Commission report was due, ABC correspondent Bob Zelnick reported that "ABC News has learned the (Tower) Commission has concluded that the information was doctored by White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan . . . ."

At the same time, Newsweek magazine, for two straight weeks, pointed a finger at Mr. Regan. First it said that the National Security Council's computer system "had references (to Mr. Regan) suggesting that he almost certainly knew about North's private fund-raising for the Contras." The

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next week, a Newsweek cover story entitled "Coverup" featured unnamed NSC officials saying Mr. Regan "ordered them to conceal the early approval of arms sales to Iran by Ronald Reagan. This week, the Tower Commission will tell how the president changed his story."

But the Tower Commission report contains no reference to Donald Regan orchestrating a cover-up, and a commission source says there was no testimony to that effect. Moreover, the computer system notes, published by the Tower Commission, flatly contradicted Newsweek's report on Mr. Regan's knowledge of Oliver North's operation. In a memo to Col. North, former National Security Adviser John Poindexter, wrote, "Don Regan knows very little of your operation, and that is just as well."

### **ABC Admits Error**

ABC's Mr. Zelnick acknowledges his report was wrong. "As soon as I put it on the air, I realized I'd gone too far," he says. He corrected the information in a later broadcast that night. But Newsweek's Washington bureau chief, Evan Thomas, offers no apologies for either story. He contends the cover story was based on good sources and never actually predicted the Tower Commission report would prove a cover-up.

Newsweek also published an illustration purporting to depict the August 1985 meeting at which President Reagan allegedly approved the Iran arms sales. The drawing, widely criticized by White House officials and others, was based on an unrelated October 1983 photograph to which the artist added several figures. Among them was Col. North, who by all accounts was never present at the real meeting.

Newsweek spokesman Gary Gerrard, who at first defended the drawing by saying that while "there is someone who appears to look like North" in it, "nowhere in the caption or the article does it say North was in the meeting," later said Col. North was depicted because of bad advice from Washington sources.

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