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Regan, Poindexter work well together

By Jeremiah O'Leary
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When the White House senior staff meets every weekday at 8 a.m., Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan sits at one end of the long table and National Security Adviser John M. Poindexter takes his place at the other. There is no question about which end of the table is in charge.

But in the six weeks since Mr. Poindexter's promotion to the top job in the National Security Council, a number of insiders say a remarkably good chemistry has developed between the tough, autocratic chief of staff and the diffident Navy vice admiral.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes and other high-ranking officials say Mr. Poindexter has complete access to President Reagan. He can go into the Oval Office or call Mr. Reagan on the phone whenever the need arises, without first getting approval from the chief of staff.

The White House officials say the chief of staff always wants to know about discussions between the NSC director and the president. But, they claim, Mr. Poindexter's access to the president is not impeded by the control Mr. Regan exercises over the people and paperwork that make their way to the president.

It has not always been that way since Mr. Reagan took office five years ago. Richard V. Allen, the first national security adviser, briefed the president daily on security matters but never had open-door access to the Oval Office.

Judge William P. Clark — in the days when the triumvirate of James Baker, Michael Deaver and Edwin Meese shared the White House authority Mr. Regan now has — talked to the president as he saw fit. Mr. Clark, a Reagan friend from the California days, completed his tour hostile to Mr. Deaver. To a lesser extent he was at odds with Mr. Baker, the former chief of staff and current Treasury secretary.

Robert C. McFarlane was never comfortable with Mr. Regan's take-charge style. He was accustomed to immediate personal and telephone contact with the president. In a

building where access to the president is equivalent to power, the two former Marine officers did not hit it off. McFarlane resigned from the NSC post Dec. 4.

Mr. Poindexter, 49, is a good-natured, unflappable man who moves easily through the bureaucratic maze. Mr. Regan already was established and was being called the administration's "prime minister" when the admiral was promoted from the No. 2 post in the NSC. These factors, according to officials, have reduced friction between the chief of staff's office and the NSC to low intensity.

Mr. Poindexter knows well the art of vanishing. In nearly 4½ years on the NSC, the admiral has not given an interview and has held only one press briefing.

When Mr. Poindexter was introduced as the successor to Mr. McFarlane last month, he was asked by a reporter if the press would ever see him again.

"Maybe," he replied.

In fact, he has been seen by the press only through the window of his West Wing office. This style, already has spawned a wry joke around the White House that "there has been a new Poindexter sighting."

There are signs that Mr. Regan's advisers are considering the advisability of making Mr. Poindexter a bit more visible, if only to demonstrate that the NSC has not become an adjunct of the chief of staff's office.

If Mr. Poindexter emerges from the bureaucratic shield to brief the press or be interviewed by reporters, he could have a slight credibility problem. No one has forgotten that on the night before the United States invaded Grenada, Mr. Poindexter was asked about it and replied, "Preposterous!"

The personalities of Mr. Regan and Mr. Poindexter inevitably have changed the role of the NSC. The NSC staff is supposed to function as the president's in-house specialists and advisers on national security affairs. The NSC also serves as a link between the State Department, the Defense Department and other agencies such as the CIA and the White House.

The influence of the NSC always has depended on the status of the reigning national security adviser. Strong predecessors of the admiral, such as Henry A. Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, were greatly influential in the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations. More self-effacing men, such as Brent Scowcroft, were mere channels for strong secretaries of state and defense.

With Mr. Regan in full charge of the White House machinery and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger often at odds with Secretary of State George Shultz, it is not out of character for Mr. Poindexter to keep the low profile he likes best.

It is difficult to imagine Mr. Poindexter taking sides in differences between the two Cabinet secretaries. At best, he is likely to serve the role of a referee who is strongly under the influence of the chief of staff.

Mr. Poindexter's forte is a technical knowledge of arms control, military operations and diplomacy, which Mr. Regan does not have or the time to absorb. But that does not mean that he is likely to become a policy-maker in his own right.

His other strong points are guiding the small, diverse NSC staff as it tracks national security issues and plowing through the mounds of paper and endless meetings.

Mr. Poindexter has beefed up the NSC staff by bring Ron Lehman back from Geneva to provide in-house advice on the complex arms control negotiations. Most NSC staffers are either on loan from the State Department, the military or the CIA or are from the nation's think tanks.

In the end, his self-effacing ways are bound to mesh better in the 1986 White House than if he were a fire-brand on a collision course with the chief of staff.