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U.S. allegedly ran private network to arm 'contras'

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House, working through outside intermediaries, managed a private aid network that provided military assistance to Nicaraguan rebels during last year's congressional aid ban, according to government officials, rebel leaders and their American supporters.

The U.S. intermediaries helped the rebels with arms purchases, fund-raising and enlistment of military trainers after Congress, in October 1984, barred U.S. officials from "directly or indirectly" aiding the "contra" war against Nicaragua's leftist government.

The aid ban lasted through September 1985, when Congress provided \$27 million in non-lethal assistance but kept restrictions on a U.S. military role.

The administration's behind-the-scenes role was described by more than two dozen sources in interviews over the past 18 months. It exceeds the description provided by administration officials who told Congress last summer that White House contact with the rebels had been limited to political advice.

Most sources — five current and former U.S. officials, 12 rebel leaders and eight American supporters of the contras — insisted on anonymity.

The sources said Lt. Col. Oliver L.

North, deputy director for political-military affairs at the National Security Council, oversaw the work of the intermediaries, including conservative activist Robert W. Owen and retired Army Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub.

Mr. Owen, a former Republican congressional aide, operated as a private individual during the aid ban although sources said he worked out of Colonel North's office in late 1984 and early 1985. Last fall, he won a \$50,675 State Department grant to work with the rebels.

One administration official close to both men said Mr. Owen acted as Colonel North's go-between to the rebel movement and would participate in military-related meetings that Colonel North "considered risky" legally, given the congressional ban.

An administration official said Colonel North sent messages through Mr. Owen to contra leaders in the field. A former government official close to the White House said Colonel North used Mr. Owen as a "buffer" when dealing with the aid network — the dozens of conservative groups that gave money, supplies and training to the rebels after Congress cut off aid.

A prominent rebel official said Mr. Owen "represented North" to contra leaders. The rebel said Mr. Owen helped organize Nicaraguan Indian military operations in Honduras and establish a 200-man force in Costa Rica in early 1985.

Two paramilitary trainers, Tom Posey and Jack Terrell, said Mr. Owen, claiming to represent the U.S. government, sought their help in training that new contra force.

Mr. Owen and Colonel North both refused comment, as did White House spokesman Pete Roussel.

Mr. Singlaub, chairman of the World Anti-Communist League, is credited by rebel leaders with raising funds internationally for arms purchases and advising them on military strategy.

Mr. Singlaub has said the congressional ban stopped Colonel North from giving him direct "advice or encouragement." But in an interview last October, he said he had an arrangement with the colonel that was "like in the military" when a junior officer tells his superior what he plans to do and silence is regarded as approval.

Two former senior Reagan officials said Colonel North's central role in the private aid network dated to early 1984, when Congress — angered by the CIA's mining of Nicaragua's harbors — rejected continued covert CIA support of the rebels.

The ex-officials said that Colonel North drafted a plan to replace direct CIA assistance by using private individuals and third countries to help the contras, and that President Reagan approved the plan in the spring of 1984.

Former contra leader Edgar Chamorro said that in early 1984, Colonel North assured the Nicaraguan Democratic Force rebel group "of continued United States government support, notwithstanding the refusal of the Congress to appropriate more funds."