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THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL'S GROWING REACH
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The National Security Council's behind-the-scenes maneuvering in the release of an American clergyman held hostage in Lebanon illustrates the operational side of the White House policy making body. STAT

Organized nearly four decades ago primarily to process paperwork for the president, the staff of the little-known White House agency at times undertakes tasks that could be assigned to the State and Defense Departments or the Central Intelligence Agency.

The NSC staff is far less accountable to Congress and operates outside of the public eye. But its influence inside the government appears to be growing.

The council staff was especially active in the Middle East hostage crisis arising from the hijacking of a TWA jetliner and in the kidnapping of Americans in Lebanon.

Asked about the efforts to free the Rev. Benjamin Weir, who was released Sept. 14, and six other Americans who are still being held hostage in Lebanon, a usually well-informed State Department official pleaded ignorance.

"It's an NSC operation. No one here knows about it," said the official, who spoke on condition he not be identified.

Some academic experts and aides from former administrations believe the NSC staff has become too embroiled in day-to-day management in recent years and should be attending more strictly to policy making, leaving the operational details to the State and Defense Departments.

Others say the council staff is just doing what it has been doing more or less steadily at least since the Kennedy administration, and it's role is no cause for concern.

But observers in both camps agree that the staff of the council, which was established in 1947, is doing much more than it did in its early days under Presidents Truman and Eisenhower.

The NSC's members are President Reagan, Vice President George Bush, Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger. CIA Director William J. Casey and Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, are advisers.

The council is supposed to help the president formulate foreign and military policy.

Robert C. McFarlane, the president's national security adviser, heads the NSC staff but is not a member of the council. The staff includes about 35 foreign policy experts and about 100 other employees who provide administrative assistance and run the White House Situation Room.

In recent months, in addition to the NSC staff's role in secret to free the hostages, staff members who have made news have included:

Lt. Col. Oliver North, an NSC staff aide who reportedly provided some military advice to rebels fighting Nicaragua's leftist regime and helped them raise money from outside sources.

Donald R. Fortier, deputy assistant to the president for national security affairs, who was dispatched to India and Pakistan this month along with Michael H. Armacost, undersecretary of state for political affairs, to discuss nuclear proliferation and other problems.

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McFarlane, named along with White House Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan to head a coordinating council preparing for the president's summit meeting in Geneva on Nov. 19-20 with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

The sharpest questions have been raised over North's role in Nicaragua. STAT

"I think there is something new afoot if you are sending someone down to Central America for God knows how many weeks on end to coordinate the activities of the Contras or liaison with them or things like that," said William Quandt, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who was on the NSC staff during the Carter administration.

That's the kind of stuff that in my day would have been done by CIA," said Quandt. We would not have gotten involved in any way at all in things like that."

Burton M. Sapin, professor of international affairs at George Washington University and a former State Department aide, said of North's role, "That struck me as inappropriate. It seems to me it is not the sort of level at which people in that staff ought to be working."

The House and Senate intelligence committees and a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee have announced plans to investigate North's role despite assurances from McFarlane that no one on his staff ever acted as a go-between" for private aid to the rebels.

Sen. David Durenberger, R-Minn., Intelligence Committee chairman, said the panel is investigating North's mission "to see whether or not he stepped out of line" and expects to make a public report, but he believes that NSC staff members are for the most part performing their traditional role." STAT

George A. Carver Jr., a former CIA official who is now a senior fellow with the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University, said, "The notion of quietly dispatching someone from the White House staff to take care of something that a president ... has considered delicate and would prefer not to have leaked is a precedent that has some three decades of tradition behind it, so I don't regard a repetition of it in a particular instance in 1985 to be necessarily surprising or necessarily sinister."

Several scholars said NSC staff members had traditionally been active in preparation for summit meetings and accompanied high-ranking government officials on missions abroad.

Helmut Sonnenfeldt, who was on the NSC staff under Henry Kissinger, said he thought Fortier's trip to the Indian subcontinent was "very much in the tradition of the NSC staff."

And another former Kissinger NSC staffer, Morton Halperin, now director of the Washington office of the American Civil Liberties Union, said the council, rather than confining itself to policy making, "has been an operating agency for a very long time; it's just gotten bigger and more bureaucratic."