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ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 20NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE
26 May 1985

TAKING CHARGE

The Rising Power Of National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane

By Leslie H. Gelb

IN THE BIG CORNER ROOM WHERE Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski once held sway, a few doors down from the Oval Office, Robert C. McFarlane sits on a couch talking about his rise to the post of national security adviser. The 47-year-old former marine sits quietly, hands in his lap, his speech slow and deliberate. Back in October 1983, McFarlane says, he was the "compromise choice." No one saw him "as a threat."

Most Presidents have chosen strong-willed, independent-minded outsiders for the job. When Ronald Reagan picked McFarlane, it seemed this would be an exception. McFarlane was an insider to the core: loyal, efficient, knowledgeable, discreet. The Secretaries of State and Defense could rest easy with this perennial No. 2 man.

But it hasn't turned out that way. Within the last few months, McFarlane has suddenly emerged as a powerhouse in the formulation of Administration foreign and defense policy, sometimes rivaling and sometimes overruling Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger. And his influence is growing — inside and outside the Administration.

One sign of that dramatic change came in March when McFarlane was moved out of the basement office occupied by his two immediate predecessors, Richard V. Allen and William P. Clark, and moved into the large office close by the President. The message of his being newly anointed was further spread within the Administration when he and his wife, Jonda, were invited to private dinners with the President and Nancy Reagan in the White House dining room.

Inside power feeds outside power, and vice versa. In recent months, Robert (Bud) McFarlane has ended his careerlong isolation from the public. Where once he talked with the press anonymously, identified simply as "a senior Administration official," today he briefs reporters in full view of the television cameras. He has begun making the rounds of the Sunday television talk shows.

McFarlane's willingness to be interviewed on the record for this article is itself an unprecedented move that reflects his new power. As a longtime McFarlane friend puts it: "Bud would never dream of doing this without the complete backing of the President." And the national security adviser's candor during the interview was also extraordinary.

He spoke, for example, of the failure of American policy in Lebanon last year and how one possible approach — linking military force and diplomacy

tween the State and Defense Departments made "agile diplomacy" impossible. He also revealed the White House diplomatic agenda, as the President viewed it in 1983, as well as unknown details of how foreign-policy decisions are now shaped in this Administration. According to White House aides, that process includes a little-known band of top officials, called the "Family Group," that is dedicated to smoothing over internal tensions.

The evidence of McFarlane's new clout is everywhere:

■ According to White House officials, when he feels he knows the President's mind on an issue, he often signs decision memorandums "Robert C. McFarlane for the President" without even showing the memos to the President. Recently, the State Department wanted to allow Guatemala \$75 million in commodity credits, but the Treasury Department opposed the move unless Guatemala first put its finances in order. McFarlane issued a decision memo, on his own, providing a total of \$50 million in credits in two installments. "This happens often," says an aide. "That's real power."

■ In March, before the American delegation left for the arms-control talks in Geneva, McFarlane called a meeting of the National Security Council. Officials say the meeting ran for about an hour, and that McFarlane took up most of that time showing charts and outlining six options for the United States position at the talks. After the session, he and his aides drafted a 14-page decision memorandum, and President Reagan signed it without change.

■ Earlier this year, McFarlane knocked heads with Shultz and Weinberger when they pushed hard for immediate and massive arms sales to Saudi Arabia and Jordan. According to an aide, McFarlane told them: "We've got lots of fights on the Hill first — the MX missile, aid to the contras, arms control, the defense budget — and the Middle East is fifth." McFarlane proposed instead a general review of Middle East policy as a cover for the delay, and the two Secretaries agreed. The aide says McFarlane told them: "If the Arabs complain, lay it off on me, say the White House wants the review."

McFarlane's ascendance comes at a time when, according to the national security adviser and other Administration officials, President Reagan now believes that his military buildup and the economic recovery, coupled with a rash of Soviet political and economic problems, have provided an opportunity for some diplomatic initiatives — with the Soviet Union and around the world. "We have been building the leverage," McFarlane says, "and now is the time to build more and use it."

The national security adviser brings years of foreign-policy experience to the task: he is far more