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Insiders cite Reagan's desire to free hostages

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The National Security Council-run operation to ship U.S. arms to Iran was so secretive — a secret operation within a secret operation — that even council staff members were told not to ask questions, say sources familiar with the effort.

Although it isn't unusual for NSC operations to be closely held even within the council, sources say the project went out of control due to a lack of internal checks and balances. They say President Reagan's "deep concern" for the American hostages in Beirut was a factor overriding caution.

John Poindexter, the president's national security adviser, was nominally in charge, but Lt. Col. Oliver North was said to be the project officer with "hands-on" responsibility.

"Ollie [North] wrapped himself in his Silver Stars [military decorations] when this thing blew up, and now he is smelling like a rose," said a source. "But he is responsible because he simply wouldn't admit to himself that the Iranians were playing us for the fool."

"They [the Iranians] pulled the bait a little further each day, and North followed the bait," the source said. "It reached the point where he even misled the president."

The source said Mr. North led the president to believe "if we just deliver this one more time, we'll get them all back."

"He [Mr. North] really believed that," the source said. "He couldn't accept that he was being used."

Mr. North, the council's deputy director for political-military affairs, could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Although senior administration officials have denied that the U.S.-Iranian dealings were an "NSC cowboy-run" operation, they have said a very small number of people were familiar with the details of the arms shipments.

Secretary of State George Shultz said on CBS television yesterday that his knowledge of the operation was "fragmentary at best," and Mr. Poindexter acknowledged in an NBC interview that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were not informed of the arms shipments.

Mr. Poindexter said, "This was not a military operation, so it's not unusual that the chairman" of the chiefs, Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., "would not be aware."

Even some senior members of the 46-person NSC staff were told not to ask questions about the operation and others were "cut out of the loop," according to sources.

A source said the president authorized the shipment of U.S. arms to

Iran in January because of his deep concern for the hostages held by pro-Iranian terrorists in Beirut. Three of those hostages have been released, but at least five others remain.

"Ronald Reagan has a soft spot in his heart for Americans in peril elsewhere, and once it got to him about these hostages being held, there was no holding him back," a source said.

Mr. Reagan disclosed last week that he had authorized the shipment of arms to Iran to foster ties with moderates who could be helpful in winning the release of hostages, despite a 7-year-old embargo on such arms shipments.

Although the president publicly admitted his secret dealings with Iran, members of Congress have accused him of breaking laws requiring that they be notified of intelligence activities.

Rep. Jim Wright, who is expected to become House speaker in January, said yesterday he does not believe executive privilege exempted the president from notifying Congress about the arms shipments.

He said he did not want to repeat "that very, very sad episode in American history surrounding Watergate and Mr. Nixon's claim of executive privilege."

"We don't want that kind of thing," Mr. Wright said on CBS. "We want the creation of an atmosphere in which members of Congress and the president can sit down in mutual trust and mutual respect and talk these things out, as the law anticipates that we shall."



John Poindexter

Sen. Patrick Leahy, Vermont Democrat and a member of the Intelligence Committee, yesterday called the shipment of arms to Iran a "devastating" setback in the war against terrorism, signaling "terrorists anywhere if you want to get American arms, seize an American hostage."

"But more importantly, it's a case where they were running the State Department, the CIA and the Defense Department out of the basement of the White House, without any kind of congressional oversight, ending up with a disaster," he said on ABC.