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The Committee's Criticism of President Reagan Is Muted

Why Contra Hearings Aren't Like Watergate

By JOEL BRINKLEY

WASHINGTON

ALONG with new details of White House links to a private foreign policy initiative, the Iran-contra hearings so far have provided clear indications of what the proceedings probably will — and probably will not — achieve.

By now it seems clear they will not turn into a forum for attacking President Reagan. Despite comparisons, these are not the Watergate hearings. Almost no one believes the President will be impeached, even though testimony shows Mr. Reagan and his aides deep in planning and encouraging aid for the Nicaraguan contras, a program that may eventually be judged illegal.

Instead of excoriating the President or his aides and allies as possible lawbreakers, most

committee members are trying to reinforce Congressional influence on foreign policy. The result has been a relatively bloodless proceeding.

The sharp contrast between these hearings and those on the Watergate scandal was amply demonstrated last week by Capitol Hill's reaction to Mr. Reagan's startling about-face on what he knew of the covert program to aid the contras. Three weeks ago he said, "I had no detailed information" about it. One week ago, after Robert C. McFartane, his former national security adviser, contradicted him, Mr. Reagan said the program "was my idea to begin with" and the hearings were producing nothing "I didn't know about."

Legislators were ruminating last week about what would have happened 14 years ago if President Nixon had suddenly come forth during the Watergate hearings, after months of saying he had not been involved in the cover-up, to say that the whole thing had been his idea from the start.

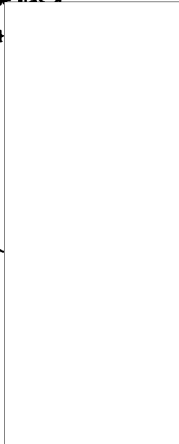
Certainly the reaction would not have been as muted as it was last week. Mr. Reagan's about-face was not mentioned or alluded to even once in three days of Iran-contra hearings.

In private, some members of the Iran-contra committees and other legislators say President Reagan remains so popular that they dare not attack him. They also seem concerned that harsh criticism of the contra aid program might make them appear pro-Sandinista — or worse, pro-Communist. Besides, they say, even in the unlikely event that sentiment for impeachment should arise, Mr. Reagan's term of office would be almost over by the time evidence was compiled, charges were filed and hearings held. So the rule of most legislators now seems to be: Lay out the evidence, but make no editorial comment.

One Opponent's Complaint

This approach leaves the President's less reticent opponents frustrated and alone. Representative James J. Florio, a New Jersey Democrat, sounded almost plaintive Thursday, speaking on the House floor about the polar change in the President's statements on what he knew: "I have waited in vain to this point for someone to utter the word 'lie.' The American people were being lied to by their President, and no one has said a thing."

What most Democrats, including



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Whatever Congress does or intends, the special prosecutor, Lawrence E. Walsh, is proceeding apace, and law enforcement officials involved with the case believe indictments are likely to arise from what prosecutors are describing as a broad conspiracy to evade restrictions on military aid to the contras.

If a conspiracy case is made, it has been known for months that Lieut Col. Oliver L. North would almost certainly be placed in the middle of it. But evidence presented at the hearings last week added the possibility of a different charge, one that would lack the broad foreign policy implications of his other potential problems. The contra leader, Adolfo Calero, testified that he gave Colonel North \$90,000 in blank travelers' checks; committee members found Colonel North had cashed almost \$2,500 worth himself, using some of the money to buy groceries, snow tires and women's hosiery.

Speaker Jim Wright, and some legal scholars did say that they strongly disagreed with Mr. Reagan's new assertion that restrictions on aid to the contras did not apply to him and perhaps not to the National Security Council either. Challenges to that position are likely to be exercising the courts long after the hearings end.

At a high school graduation ceremony Tuesday in Chattanooga, Tenn., a local reporter asked President Reagan if he would resign should it ever be proved he had broken the law. The President did not take the bait. "I know absolutely that I did nothing illegal" was his only response.

A Democratic member of the Iran-contra committee said, "The evidence involving the President at this point is considerable, and if the special prosecutor decides to act on it, that's his decision to make. But we are not prosecutors; that is not our role." The committee's purpose, he and others said, is to give the public a full accounting of the case and then to recommend legislation to make sure it is not repeated.

Committee members predict Congress will either limit the sorts of activities the National Security Council is permitted to undertake, or require Congressional oversight if the N.S.C.'s mandate remains as unspecific and potentially broad as it is today. Closer oversight of the Central Intelligence Agency has already begun.

The hearings are also likely to have unintended results — perhaps including the further erosion of the contras as a conceivably effective force. Many are predicting that Congress will refuse to renew aid to them this year, on the basis of testimony that they are divided, greedy, ineffectual and brutal. Representative Richard Cheney of Wyoming, the ranking Republican on the House Iran-contra committee, acknowledged that if further aid is denied, "it may well be that this short-term program designed to keep them alive may ultimately have done them in."

Iran-Contra Affair: The Unfolding Story

A parade of secondary figures — exporters, contributors and one beneficiary of aid to the Nicaraguan rebels — testified at last week's Congressional hearings on the Iran-contra affair. Highlights of the week's developments follow.

• Robert Owen, a courier for Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, said several Central Intelligence Agency officers helped him to assist the contras while the law forbade them to do so. Mr. Owen also told of a secret trip to a corner Chinese grocery in New York City, where the grocer had a donation — a wad of \$5 hundred-dollar bills, pulled from under his trouser leg.

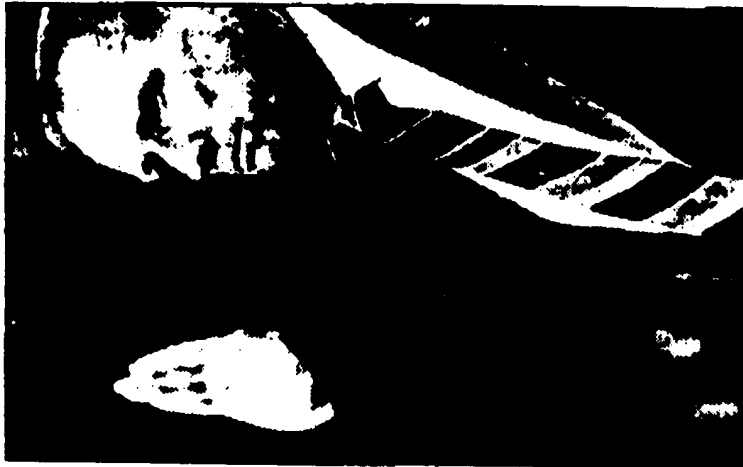
• Of the overall covert effort, Mr. Owen said: "I think, in 'insight, the people we were trying to deceive may have been the American public.'"

• Congressional investigators said Colonel North apparently spent almost \$2,500 in travelers' checks, of \$90,000 from the contras, for personal items.

• Three wealthy contributors said Colonel North had worked in tandem with a fund-raiser, Carl R. Channell, and in one case with William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, to solicit large donations for the contras. Senator Warren Rudman called that "the old one-two punch."

• John K. Singlaub, a retired Army major general who was helping the contras himself, said Colonel North asked him to serve as a "lightning rod" to take public attention away from the secret White House program.

• The special prosecutor subpoenaed David Kimche, the former Israeli official



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John K. Singlaub being sworn in last week before testifying about his role in private network to aid contras.

who was involved in the arms sales to Iran. Following protests from the Israeli Government, however, a judge said Mr. Kimche could leave the United States without testifying.

• The House of Representatives voted to bar the use of American armed forces in or over Nicaragua, but rejected proposals for other limits on United States military maneuvers that might help the contras.

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