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# Controversial colonel will get new duties away from contras

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WASHINGTON — A National Security Council staff member whose secret links to the Nicaraguan contra rebels are being probed by three congressional committees will be assigned to other duties, a senior administration official disclosed Friday.

The official said the plan to detach Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, 43, from the contra program he has supervised since 1984 will be formally activated after President Reagan signs a bill giving the anti-Sandinista rebels \$100 million in U.S. aid. That could occur early next month.

The decision to reassign North comes amid reports that some senior Reagan administration officials have suggested dismissing or reassigning North in an effort to defuse the controversy over his contra role.

A senior official denied Friday that the congressional investigation into North's activities had played a part in his reassignment. The official said the move was procedural because approval of the new aid program will also lift restrictions on CIA and Pentagon involvement with the contras, making the role of the NSC coordinator superfluous.

But other administration officials said efforts to head off an investigation were behind the decision to "put Ollie back in his box," as one source put it.

Controversy has swirled around North, who is deputy director of the NSC's office of policy development and political military affairs, since it was revealed last year that he had been in charge of setting up a private supply network for the contras after Congress cut off U.S. financial support in 1984. Con-

gress also prohibited U.S. officials from direct or indirect involvement with the contras. The current congressional investigation hinges on whether North violated that prohibition.

North declined comment. An official authorized to speak for him did not specify what North's new duties would be, but indicated that he would continue to be involved in crisis management and worldwide strategic planning.

Pressures around North intensified recently after Rep. Ronald Coleman, D-Texas, introduced a resolution of inquiry aimed at forcing Reagan to disclose information on North's contra ties.

An administration official said Friday that the administration opposes the resolution.

The official said NSC director Poindexter will gladly brief congressmen on North's activities but will deny them access to any documents. The official also noted that White House and NSC legal experts had already conducted a search for North's records on the contras and found none.

"There are no documents," the official said.

He said it is still the White House position that North dealt with the "contra account" but did not violate the assistance ban. "He provided no tactical military advice or directly raised any funds for those guys fighting in the jungles down there," the official said.

Despite the controversy generated by his involvement with the contras, North is said to be admired and trusted by Reagan because the officer has put forward ideas that have given the United States major foreign policy triumphs.

A case in point was the October 1985 interception by U.S. F-14 jet fighters of an Egyptian airliner carrying the hijackers of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro. Officials said interception was North's idea.

Officials also said North played a key role in planning the U.S. bombing of Libya earlier this year.

North's first major involvement with hemispheric policy was the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada. Officials said North helped to coordinate invasion plans with the Pentagon.

North practically took over the contra program between late 1983 and mid-1984 after Congress ordered the CIA to withdraw.

Besides managing the contra program, officials said North's responsibilities included oversight of such sensitive White House activities as the Office of Public Diplomacy and the Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office (NHAO), the State Department agency that disbursed \$27 million in "humanitarian" aid to the rebels.

The Office of Public Diplomacy, many of whose original staffers have left in what appears to be a State Department effort to dismantle the operation, released information — sometimes classified intelligence data — designed to advance administration policies in Nicaragua and "demonize" the Sandinista regime, as one official characterized its activity.

Other officials said that North also frequently provided logistical advice to NHAO on the type of equipment the contras needed. Last fall, North reportedly traveled to Honduras to pressure a balky Honduran regime into lifting a blockade on rebel supplies.