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WHITE HOUSE SAYS C.I.A. HAD A ROLE IN IRAN OPERATION

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 14 — The Administration acknowledged today for the first time that the Central Intelligence Agency had been directly involved in the secret arms shipments to Iran.

The White House spokesman, Larry Speakes, said at a briefing that the National Security Council staff ran the operation "in conjunction with the C.I.A." and that an agency operative attended each meeting with the Iranians.

In Teheran, the Iranian President denied today that his Government had held talks with the United States at a diplomatic level, and he dismissed President Reagan's report Thursday of negotiations as "mere lies."

Continued Criticism

In Washington, Mr. Reagan's defense of the White House's secret policy of conducting talks and sending military equipment to Iran continued to draw criticism today from both Republicans and Democrats.

Congressional officials said they would demand an explanation for why they were not briefed until 11 months after President Reagan incorporated the new policy in secret financing.

Although Congressional officials said they were not briefed, the Administration is required to inform Congress of any significant expected C.I.A. intelligence activities. The requirement is contained in laws enacted in the 1970's after Congressional investigations of C.I.A. abuses.

A Possible Loophole

But President Reagan said in his speech Thursday night that under the 1947 National Security Act, he had the right to delay briefing Congress until the operation was over. That law was cited in the President's classified executive order last January, which put the plan in place, according to a source who has seen the document.

Congressional officials said, however, that they have begun extensive research into the laws regarding congressional oversight. Senator Patrick Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, said he was particularly concerned by the 11-month delay in briefing Congress. He said the provision of the act cited by the President appeared to him to apply to

extraordinary circumstances of a brief duration.

Congressional aides and members of Congress said they also want a detailed accounting of the amount and value of weapons shipped to Iran by the United States or by third parties at American instigation.

The information would be crucial in assessing the Administration's contention that the deliveries did not violate American law and could not have affected the progress of the Iran-Iraq war.

Mr. Reagan's classified executive order formally approving the Iran operation said Congress would not be told of the operation because of the "extreme sensitivity" and because of the "security risks" involved, according to a source who has seen it.

Administration officials have said that only "defensive" weapons, such as spare parts for anti-aircraft batteries, were shipped to Iran. But some military experts said that even small improvements in the Iranians' anti-aircraft capabilities could be critical in blunting the main Iraqi strategic advantage, which is in mounting air attacks against key economic targets.

"The Iraqi Air Force is not famous for its bravery," said Thomas McNaughter of the Brookings Institution. "All you have to do to throw off their aim is upset them a little at the margins."

An Iraqi source said, "What has been shipped would have to be crucial to the Iranians, or they wouldn't have struck a deal. They never accept less than they need in such things." This source said the Iraqi military has in recent months detected improvements in the capabilities of Iranian anti-aircraft gunners defending the Kharg Island oil installation.

Various Channels Reported

According to accounts from Israeli and American officials, the shipments to Iran moved through several channels, some supervised by the United States, others by the Israelis, who say they in turn received replacements from American stocks.

President Reagan, in his speech, disputed various reports of United States-sponsored shipments to Iran, but said nothing about reports of a series of shipments by Israel.

In a televised interview today, White House Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan said: "We have never authorized, never allowed, never condoned large shipments by anyone, by Far Easterners, Mideasterners, Europeans, Israelis or anyone. We do not want large amounts of arms being shipped to either Iran or Iraq."

Mr. Regan did not define what he meant by "large" amounts of weapons. In a briefing Thursday, a senior Administration official characterized the shipments as "minuscule," saying they could be fit onto a C-5 cargo plane, which can carry more than 100 tons.

Additionally, a high-level Israeli official disclosed that Israel had been shipping arms to Iran with American knowledge since 1982. This official said the American Ambassador to Israel was routinely notified of the nature of each shipment. This suggests that the United States was tacitly approving violations of its arms embargo on shipments to Iran well before mid-1985, when the first secret contacts with Iran were made by presidential advisers.