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21 July 1986*Rowland Evans and Robert Novak*

The Case of Oliver North

The case of Ollie North pinpoints the transformation of the National Security Council staff under Adm. John Poindexter from arbiter of inter-agency struggles and control point for operations to a bland paper machine that makes President Reagan victim rather than master of the bureaucracy.

Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North has been Reagan's star player in the long, hard struggle to keep alive the Nicaraguan contras while the House tried to smother them. Poindexter, described by critics as "uneasy" with North's growing fame on a staff, wants him back in the Marines. The pretext: to fend off a politically drenched House probe of North as Reagan's handler of the contra account.

Although serious enough by itself, the imminent loss of North is important as a symbol of the institutional degradation of the once-mighty NSC staff. It is inconceivable that a Henry Kissinger or a Zbigniew Brzezinski would fire the one member of the NSC staff who could keep it—and hence the president—in tight control of the unfolding contra drama.

Shedding the once-formidable power of the NSC staff over the feuding bureaucracies of State, Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency is what Poindexter apparently feels is expected of him. Critics inside the administration feel that comports with White House Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan's wish to be surrounded by gray and faceless officials who cannot threaten his own supremacy or gain power enough to play to the press.

That may make Poindexter the man for him. But an NSC staff infused with passivity invites feuding bureaucracies to settle matters by elbowing their way, individually, into the Oval Office. There they can argue their parochial policy preferences in the absence of an NSC synthesis. As one

State Department official told us, "The system works just fine for [Secretary of State] George Shultz, because the president becomes the victim of the one who sees him most, and that's our George."

Pentagon officials were surprised when stories appeared in the press praising Soviet ruler Mikhail Gorbachev's arms control letter just after it arrived in the Oval Office. These officials knew there had been no NSC-directed interagency discussions of the arms control proposals and no adversarial proceeding. Yet here was the president pumping out the line that Gorbachev's letter contained new and serious ideas.

Shultz's verdict that the new Soviet arms control ideas were meritorious was not shared by leaders of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, the Defense Department or the CIA. Yet it has become the basis for heavy pressures on Reagan to accept the Soviet demand for a moratorium on withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. In the absence of a well-formulated administration policy, the president is being urged to write Gorbachev a letter offering a multiyear ABM extension that would suffocate the Strategic Defense Initiative.

NSC protection for the president in the case of the contras has come from the staffer earmarked for oblivion, Ollie North. Although nothing is yet chiseled in granite, he is supposed to be replaced by Vince Cannistrero, a CIA Central America specialist who has been on the NSC staff for two years. The switch would likely send North back to the Marine Corps, though he might stay at the NSC with his original counterterrorism assignment.

The House investigators have sent a letter to the president asking for all contra documents and papers involving North. Both Regan and the White House legal staff have tentatively decided to invoke executive privilege and withhold the few such papers that exist.

Poindexter is described by friends as wanting to step back from any confrontation, which he says privately might hurt the president. Stepping back means getting rid of North.

That is what the CIA wants. With its man Cannistrero handling the Central America account in the White House and the agency running the operation in Nicaragua, CIA hegemony over the delicate contra maneuvers ahead would be solid. Such domination is opposed by both the Pentagon and State.

Considering Ronald Reagan's stake in the fate of the contras, why would Poindexter shift power from his own staff in the person of Ollie North to the CIA?

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