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Secord led secret anti-terror unit, probers say

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan in 1984 authorized an ultra-secret U.S. counterterrorism unit, whose leaders included retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord, that was intended to bypass normal government controls, according to interviews and recent government investigations.

As a leader of that unit, Secord often dominated White House aide Lt. Col Oliver L. North, who has been generally depicted as the driving force behind the Iran-contra affair, associates of both men and federal investigators say.

Memos released by the Tower commission show that North frequently communicated with Secord, but rarely curbed, commanded or controlled him. More often, the memos show that North simply asked his superiors to support Secord's views and proposals, particularly on trading arms to Iran for American hostages.

Secord and his business partner, Albert Hakim, were described by the Senate Intelligence Committee as "almost co-equal lieutenants" with North in the Iran-contra affair.

A Pentagon special operations officer who has worked with North and Secord went further. "Hakim had money; Secord had ideas; North got captured," he said.

Secord, a private citizen with a personal financial stake — and no public accountability — thus influenced some of the U.S. government's most sensitive national-security decisions.

Federal investigators have documented that Secord played a large role in the Iran-contra affair: He delivered arms to Iran, opened Swiss bank accounts for the transactions and supplied weapons to the Nicaraguan rebels.

Secord and North have refused to be interviewed and pleaded the Fifth Amendment before the Senate Intelligence Committee. White House spokesman Dan Howard said, "Everything North and others did is currently under investigation, and we will not be commenting on that."

The ultra-secret anti-terrorist task force that Secord helped run was set up to report directly to the National Security Council at the White House, a former Secord associate at the Pentagon said.

It was intended to take tough, "pro-active" approaches to terrorism, he said, bypassing what Reagan admin-

istration officials considered reluctant, slow, leak-prone bureaucracies at the State Department, Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Department. The Pentagon kept the unit's existence such a secret that its name could not be learned.

The idea for such a task force developed in informal discussions among administration officials in 1982 and 1983, the source said. President Reagan approved the arrangement on April 3, 1984, when he signed a National Security Decision Directive drafted by NSC aide North, according to sources in the Pentagon.

One essential part of the directive authorized the Defense Intelligence Agency — the Pentagon's version of the CIA — to employ intelligence agents to collect information concerning terrorism.

Unlike the CIA, the DIA is not required to report certain sensitive operations to Congress.

According to the former associate, Secord, a stocky 5-foot-9 fighter pilot and veteran air commando, led the anti-terrorist task force as one of "a small group of government employees and consultants ... experienced people from the Middle East and Southeast Asia ... absolutely trustworthy, low-profile people who won't talk."

Secord had retired from the military the year before, in 1983, and was eager for the new counterterrorism assignment, according to the former Pentagon associate, a Secord loyalist. No longer on active duty, the source now does business with the Pentagon and asked not to be identified.

The Tower commission report offers evidence supporting the account, as do interviews with Secord's former Pentagon colleagues and participants in contra-aid efforts.

The report revealed for the first time that Secord, North and North's boss at the time, White House national security adviser John M. Poindexter, seriously considered a commando raid in Lebanon last June to free hostages held by radical Muslims.

The raid was conceived as an option if talks and arms trades failed. Secord at one point told the negotiators for Iran that they might "provide us with current intelligence of their [the hostages'] location," and U.S. commandos would take it from there, the report said.

Secord had recruited 40 Druse militiamen with the aid of Israeli government counterterrorism specialist Amiram Nir, according to a North memo to Poindexter. In a phrasing

that implies Secord's authority, North wrote Poindexter that "Dick rates the possibility of success on this operation as 30 percent, but that's better than nothing."

In another memo, North wrote that available resources for such an assault included "one ISA officer in Beirut," although more could be infiltrated. The initials ISA probably refer to the Intelligence Support Activity, a secret U.S. counterterrorist commando unit that Secord helped organize in 1980.

It was intended to improve U.S. counterterrorist capability after the failed 1980 mission to rescue U.S. hostages in Iran, according to congressional testimony. Secord, who had served in Iran between 1975 and 1978, was principal airlift planner for that ill-fated attempt.

Indeed, of the roughly 30 former military officers and crewmen who helped airdrop arms to contra rebels last year, at least 13 had taken part in the attempted rescue of U.S. Embassy hostages in Tehran, according to interviews with the crewmen.

The ISA was supposedly deactivated in 1983, the same year Secord retired. A year later, the New York Times reported that the ISA was providing "both equipment and personnel to the CIA for its covert operations in Central America."

Following his retirement, Secord remained in a position to oversee covert activities. He served as a non-salaried member of the Pentagon Special Operations Policy Advisory Group until October 1985, according to Pentagon records. SOPAG was created in 1984 as a panel of retired commando generals to advise Noel Koch, then deputy assistant defense secretary in charge of special operations, counterinsurgency and counterterrorism.

Secord also performed other sensitive tasks as a civilian, suggesting a continuing action role in secret counterterrorism operations. In January 1986, for example, he served as the CIA's "purchasing agent" for Iran-bound TOW missiles taken from Pentagon stocks despite resistance by Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, the Tower report said.

In August 1986, the Tower report revealed, Secord turned up in Brussels, Belgium, "arranging a pickup for our friends in a certain resistance movement" — probably arms for Afghanistan's anti-communist rebels, according to one former Se-

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cord associate at the Pentagon. As early as 1982, the source said, Secord had been ordered to arrange delivery of small arms to the Afghan rebels via Pakistan.

In a recent interview, Koch described Secord as "one of the few people who understand [covert military action] and are qualified to do it." He said organizers of the Iran-contra affair "were lucky to get him."

When it came to retaliating against terrorists and rescuing hostages, Koch said, little was done because the CIA "figured the Pentagon had responsibility for action." But the Pentagon did not want the job either, according to Koch. "The generals were covering their asses," he said.

"The people this troubled," Koch said, "were the people with responsibility for seeing something get done — people like Dick [Secord], who read the President's promise of 'swift and effective retribution' against terrorists and said, 'Let's act.'"

Secord was uniquely qualified: He was expert in counterterrorism and covert operations, and his connections in the Middle East were impeccable. He had served in Iran and had close ties to the royal family of Saudi Arabia, for whom he had helped win from Congress the AWACS early-warning system, the cornerstone of Saudi military security. Until he retired, Secord also was the Pentagon's most influential expert on the Iran-Iraq war.

Both Secord and Saudi King Fahd feared fallout from the Iran-Iraq war. A victorious Iran might overrun Saudi oil fields near the Persian Gulf, while an Iran on the ropes might launch terrorist attacks against them.

Congressional investigators now believe, despite official denials, that the Saudi royal family contributed up to \$31 million to aid U.S. efforts against Iranian terrorism and on behalf of anti-communist groups.

Several of the retired Air Force officers assembled by Secord to drop arms to the contras were offered some financial help by Saudi interests, according to interviews with officials of firms who said they were encouraged by Saudi leaders to hire the officers.

Most of these officers shared a common background. They had worked in the Air Force Office of Special Plans, which reported to Secord from 1981 to 1983.

In an interview, retired Air Force Maj. Gen. George J. Keegan Jr., former chief of Air Force intelligence, explained, "It was an office set up to facilitate CIA requests to the Air Force for covert air-taxi services. They have missions they conduct around the world, including extremely sensitive missions involving the support of rebel factions, guerrilla movements and the secret airlift of arms and personnel, which the White House and/or the CIA desire supported and which are of a nature that cannot be made public."

The office's duties, Keegan said, include "responsibility for certain types of covert operations, including foreign military sales that are of a clandestine or covert nature."

He said it was "sometimes" possible for the office to act on a White House request without notifying the secretary of defense.

"We can regret the fact that such business goes on 'til hell freezes over," he observed, "but it is far more effective to carry out and conduct and implement certain types of limited foreign policy by secret and covert means than it is to wage open war. That's what it boils down to."