

X
A1WASHINGTON POST
30 November 1986

Tale of Two White House Aides: Confidence and Motivation

*North Viewed as a Can-Do Marine
Who Went Too Far in Zealousness*

By David Ignatius
Washington Post Staff Writer

Lt. Col. Oliver L. North told an acquaintance in early 1985 that he knew his secret efforts to maintain funding for the Nicaraguan contras might ruin his career in the Marine Corps. But he was prepared to accept the consequences, North said, because he believed it would be morally wrong to abandon the contras in their time of need.

Then, as now, North was operating close to the edge of illegality. North told an acquaintance last year that he had confided to only one person—his boss at the time, national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane—details of his fundraising effort for the counterrevolutionaries, or contras, which at that point mainly involved introducing rebel leaders to private contributors in this country and abroad.

North's remarks last year help explain the personality of the man who is at the center of the Reagan administration's greatest political crisis. They show a man who is intensely loyal to his friends and allies, a moralistic military officer who often tends to dramatize his role in events, a man with a passionate sense of mission who, in his zealotry, long ago crossed the border into questionable conduct.

"Ollie knew he had sacrificed his career a long time ago," said one of his close friends, a former Pentagon official.

A bizarre new chapter in Oliver North's secret war emerged last Tuesday. According to Attorney General Edwin Meese III, North was involved in a scheme to divert profits from a secret Iranian arms deal he had helped arrange, launder this money through a Swiss bank account and use it to aid the contras in Central America. North's friends generally refuse to comment on the Iran connection, but none seems surprised by it.

North is at the center of a Justice Department criminal in-

vestigation and several congressional investigations focusing on potential violations of U.S. export laws and congressional prohibitions against military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels. This 43-year-old military officer, whether acting on orders or unilaterally, has been blamed for the most serious crisis of the Reagan presidency. His is a story of a can-do Marine who went too far.

North's friends stress two things about him: that he is idealistic and intensely patriotic, and that he is a loyal military officer who executed the policies decided by his superiors, rather than operating as a rogue elephant.

"Of the two kinds of ambitious people—those motivated by causes and those motivated by personal ambition—Ollie is motivated by causes. He is an idealist and a ro-

mantic," said Michael Ledeen, who was until recently National Security Council consultant on terrorism and worked closely with North in the early stages of the secret negotiations with Iran.

Ledeen added, "I don't believe that North did anything in this that didn't reflect the convictions of his superiors."

"Ollie is not a cowboy," said Noel C. Koch, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense who supervised the Pentagon's special forces and antiterrorism programs until several months ago. "He's not the freebooter he's been made out to be. He's a prudent and deliberate officer . . . His first loyalty is to principle, then to his family and his friends."

North's critics argue that this devotion to principle sometimes got out of control and may even have led him to take the law into his own hands.

One administration official who has worked closely with North said, for example, that he was not surprised by allegations last week that the Marine officer may have shredded documents about the Iran operation.

"Ollie is the kind of guy that if he had papers that identified sources, he would have thought of protecting those people first, regardless of the consequences for himself," this official said. "It's the same as if he were in a firefight in Vietnam and a grenade came into his bunker. He would be the first to jump on it."

To his NSC colleagues, North seemed like a real-life Rambo. He was tough, courageous, contemptuous of the Washington institutions—Congress, the news media, the bureaucracy—that blocked the exercise of American power. He seemed to embody the strong, self-confident image that the Reagan administration wanted to present to the world.

North's gung-ho manner was not a pose. Born in San Antonio, Tex., he initially was a pre-med student at

Rochester and then transferred to the Naval Academy, where he was graduated in 1968. He was the academy boxing champion and company commander in his senior year. The academy's 1968 yearbook, "Lucky Bag," said of him, "No matter where his career may lead, he knows his thoughts will always be: the Corps, the Corps, the Corps."

After graduation, North distinguished himself in Vietnam, winning a Silver Star and a Bronze Star for valor under fire. He also received two Purple Hearts, and he still walks with a slight limp because of his combat wounds. Details of his war record are hard to come by, but he apparently was part of the CIA-run covert war in Indochina. North told one acquaintance that he had survived one of his war wounds only because he was carried to safety on a makeshift stretcher by some of the fighters he had trained and led into battle.

"Ollie thinks in terms of life and death, and there are people to whom he owes his life," Ledeen said. Some of his friends claim, for example, that North's life was saved once in Asia by retired Air Force major general Richard V. Secord. Recent news reports have alleged that Secord was involved in two of North's secret NSC operations: the Iran arms deal and covert aid for the contras.

North joined the NSC staff in August 1981. His subsequent career proved to be an extreme version of something that has become common on the NSC staff in recent years: the rise of the can-do military man. He originally went to the NSC on temporary assignment (with a strong recommendation from Navy Secretary John F. Lehman Jr.) to help lobby for Senate approval of the sale of Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) radar-surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia. But he soon made himself indispensable.

"He was an incredible worker, very reliable, always there," recalled Geoffrey Kemp, a former NSC senior director for the Middle East who is with the Carnegie Endowment for Peace. "In the first few years, he would rarely open his mouth during a meeting. But he got things done. The briefing books were always there. The phone calls were made. The Situation Room was briefed."

One former national security adviser who supervised North says his rise reminds him of advice he once received about the ways that military officers can become essential to civilians. "Get yourself a military aide," the advice went. "It will change your life. When you come into the office in the morning, your desk will be clear. Your mail already will be opened and answered."

"What Ollie did after 1981 was to make himself Johnny on the spot," said another administration official.

From North's base on the NSC's military staff, he became involved in Middle East policy, then in the Falklands War, then in planning the invasion of Grenada, then in developing the administration's antiterrorism policy and finally in coordinating U.S. aid to the contras. He was promoted to deputy director for political-military affairs, a job that gave this officer enormous power in the bureaucracy. By this year, he had served on the NSC staff longer than nearly anyone else, and he understood how to use—and abuse—the policy process.

When a fellow Marine, Lt. Col. Robert C. (Bud) McFarlane, became national security adviser, North's position was enhanced. North was also aided by a bureaucratic stroke of luck. His secretary was the daughter of McFarlane's secretary. "If Ollie wanted to get in to see Bud, it was just a question of the daughter calling up her mother to set up an appointment," said one administration official who worked closely with North.

North's usefulness as a secret operative increased for McFarlane because of the gridlock that developed on major policy issues between Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger.

The foreign-policy situation "made it impossible to function at all," except in secret, according to Koch, the former Pentagon antiter-

rorism official. The lesson for North, Koch said, was: "If you're going to do anything bold or innovative, you're going to have to do things through irregular channels."

The contras had become a consuming passion for North by early 1984. He traveled often to Honduras to visit their training camps and talked regularly—sometimes several times a day—with one of their leaders, Adolfo Calero. North would animatedly tell people about some of the contra fighters he met, men like "Tigrillo," who had broken from the Sandinistas, joined the resistance and been wounded in combat.

As the secret war in Nicaragua became more controversial, North became more determined to stay the course. He was intensely loyal to those whose careers had been harmed by the war. Following the 1984 flap over a CIA-sponsored manual for the contras that advocated assassination, North helped arrange a job on the NSC staff for Vincent Cannistraro, the CIA officer who had run the agency's task force on the contras. And he helped find a job for the former army officer who had written the assassination manual for the CIA and was then fired by the agency.

When Congress voted to cut off funds for the contras in 1984, North took it as a personal blow. Friends say that he regarded the Boland Amendment—which made it illegal for the United States to finance the anti-Sandinista rebels, directly or indirectly—as a betrayal of people whom the United States had recruited and trained. The money ran out in mid-1984, and the contras were broke. One of the contra leaders was so starved for cash that he had mortgaged his wife's house in Miami, North complained to one acquaintance last year.

North's initial answer to the contras' money crunch was to help raise private contributions. He traveled the globe in late 1984 and early 1985 seeking donations. The cash flow last year totaled about \$1 million a month, according to one source. One man who knows the details of North's 1985 fund-raising effort described it this way:

"Adolfo Calero has been introduced to people in various countries who are sympathetic to the cause of democracy. They have decided after being introduced to him to make donations. They are provided with information about how to contribute."

This system for funding the contras was somewhat shaky and unreliable. But an alternative source of funds apparently emerged late last year, when North became involved in the sale of weapons to

Iran. According to statements made last week by Meese, North was aware of a skimming operation that diverted \$10 million to \$30 million in profits on the Iran arms deal to a Swiss bank account, from which money was drawn to support the Nicaraguan rebels.

The Iran operation grew out of North's other preoccupation: the war against terrorism. It was in this area that North had some of his greatest successes and ultimately his costliest failure.

North's finest hour, according to several colleagues, was his role in the capture of the Palestinians who hijacked the Italian cruise ship, Achille Lauro. After the ship docked in Egypt and the hostages were released, North dropped his plans for a military rescue mission at sea. But he kept watching the situation. When the NSC received intelligence reports that the terrorists planned to fly from Egypt to Tunisia on a chartered Egyptair plane, North realized that he had an opening.

"We can do an Admiral Yamamoto," North exclaimed to one of his NSC colleagues. He was referring to Japanese Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, who was ambushed in flight by American planes in 1942.

North planned the interception of the Egyptair plane and its forced landing in Italy from beginning to end. Hoping that the United States would be able to capture the terrorists and bring them to trial in America, he obtained arrest warrants from the Justice Department, a colleague recalled.

It was a bravura performance, but North also made a characteristic mistake. He did not think through clearly the political implications of the operation for Egypt and Italy—the Italian government fell shortly thereafter and bad blood between Washington and Cairo persisted for months. North did not seek the advice of regional specialists who might have offered useful political insights. When the specialists finally arrived late that night, North is said to have greeted them with relief.

Continued

For North, the United States was at war with terrorism. He helped draft a 1984 National Security Decision Directive that committed the administration to a tougher antiterrorism strategy, and he supervised the increased antiterrorism efforts that followed last year's TWA Flight 847 hijacking. North also took charge of efforts to free American hostages in Lebanon. That responsibility eventually led him into the past year's secret round of negotiations with the enemy—Iran.

North's tendency to overdramatize himself was evident in some of his antiterrorism activities. One source described North's agitated reaction several months ago when the new government of France's conservative prime minister, Jacques Chirac, was shaken by terrorist bomb attacks in Paris.

"Chirac will fall," North is said to have warned colleagues melodramatically. "We have to send in our forensics people to help him. We have to save him." North apparently did not understand that dispatching a team of FBI agents at that delicate moment might have hurt Chirac more than it helped him, the source said.

Former national security adviser Richard V. Allen, who hired North for the NSC staff, had a bizarre encounter with North at Dulles Airport not long ago. Allen will not discuss the incident, but one of his friends summarized the highlights. Allen, according to this account, was sitting in the lounge awaiting his flight to Frankfurt. He was approached by Secord, who was also waiting in the lounge with North.

"Don't recognize him," Secord implored, referring to North. He explained later, after the plane was airborne, that North was traveling under an assumed name and was afraid that Allen might blow his cover.

Yet for all his secrecy about his foreign travels, North was sometimes surprisingly open about his

work. Last December, for example, he testified in the trial of former NSC aide Thomas C. Reed, who was later acquitted on charges of securities violations. At one point in his 10-page testimony, North remarked: "... I just returned from overseas, where we are trying to effect the recovery of the five Americans who are missing in Beirut."

It is North's tendency to overdramatize himself—the sense he conveys that he is starring in his own movie—that may have gotten him in such trouble. One of his close friends recalled a gathering not long ago at the headquarters of the Republican National Committee. The subject was aid for the contras and the guests included some prominent diplomats, politicians and defense intellectuals. The discussion was somewhat academic. North finally exploded in anger and impatience.

"Ollie went ballistic," the friend said. "He told the group: 'You're sitting here having a nice quiet lunch while people in Nicaragua are dying.' He was trying to make people understand what the world is like."

North operated with the same ferocious sense of mission, and the same contempt for the people who sit in armchairs watching the action, in nearly everything he did. That zealotry finally landed him in the midst of a criminal investigation exploring whether, in his secret operations with Iran and the contras, he broke the law.

North's friends argued last week that the NSC aide conducted his secret missions with a conviction that he was right and that he was serving President Reagan. Observed North's friend Koch: "Whatever he was, he was the president's man."

Staff writer Tom Vesey and special correspondent John Kennedy in New York contributed to this report.