

UNTOLD STORY
OF SKYNAP COUP

U.S. bugged Egypt gov't

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President Reagan's dramatic decision to intercept the seajackers of the Achille Lauro was based on super-sophisticated electronic spying on the Egyptian government.

While President Hosni Mubarak was telling the world that the four Palestinian terrorists already had flown out of Cairo, U.S. officials knew exactly where they were.

In a massive eavesdropping operation, the U.S. intercepted almost all telephone calls and radio messages made by key Egyptian officials concerning the terrorists.

The extent of the spying — and of earlier U.S. plans to lead a rescue raid on the hijacked liner — emerged today amid details of how the U.S. responded to the terrorist challenge.

U.S. authorities gave this account:

Reagan approved the general outlines of the plan to capture the pirates moments before he delivered a speech Thursday to employees of a Sara Lee bakery

in Chicago.

The President acted after National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane gave him "hard intelligence," gained by the National Security Agency and Israeli intelligence, that the Egyptian government was trying to smuggle the four Palestinian terrorists out of the country.

On the basis of intercepted telephone conversations, the U.S. and Israelis concluded that Egypt planned to transport the Palestinians from a naval base near Port Said, Egypt, to an airfield near Cairo — possibly for a flight to Algeria.

Some intelligence officials indicated last night that the U.S. surveillance was so extensive that telephone conversations involving Mubarak were monitored.

"Between NSA and the Israelis, the entire area was wired," a high ranking U.S. intelligence official said.

"I don't think there was a person involved in this who could have sneezed without us knowing about it," he said.

The information was being relayed through a giant U.S. listening post operated by the ultra secret NSA in Cyprus as well as

through Navy EC-2 spy planes which were dispatched later to monitor air traffic and radio transmissions.

The intelligence picked up by NSA's hi-tech vacuum cleaners was so accurate that at 4:00 p.m., while he was returning to the White House aboard Air Force One, McFarlane was able to give Reagan 15 minutes' advance warning that the Egyptian plane was taking off.

At that time, Reagan gave the green light for the operation to begin.

"Go ahead. Let's execute," Reagan told McFarlane.

"Let's make sure we stay on top of it."

The President's decision capped a series of steps that began shortly after the 23,000-ton Italian cruise liner Achille Lauro was hijacked Monday in Port Said.

Early in the crisis, sources said, an interagency workforce was set up, made up of representatives from the CIA, the joint chiefs of staff, the National Security Council and the State Dept., headed by deputy National Security Adviser Adm. John Poindexter.

The first phase of the U.S. strategy was to insure that no country in the Mediterranean let the ship call on its shores — a move which kept the hijackers from getting reinforcements, splitting up the hos-

tages or receiving additional food, fuel and ammunition supplies.

The U.S. also made clear to all nations involved that there would be "no consideration," whatsoever to any nation pressuring Israel to release 50 Palestinian prisoners as demanded by the Palestinian Liberation Front terrorists who had seized the liner.

The first phase was a success. After strong warnings from Reagan, Syrian President Hafez Assad refused to allow the Palestinians to bring the Achille Lauro into Syrian waters.

The ship — and the hijackers — were isolated.

Wednesday night, in the second phase, an elite U.S. commando team made up of units from the DELTA force and Navy SEALs flown in from the U.S., was prepared to join Italian "Leatherheads" and British SAS commandos in the rescue operation.

The plan was to strike at night from special submarines and helicopters that already were aboard warships that had been stalking the Achille Lauro.

Hours before the operation was to have been launched, Egyptian, Italian and PLO negotiators struck a deal with the hijackers — guaranteeing them safe passage out of Egypt in return for the surrender of the ship.

U.S. officials say it still is unclear whether the Egyptian government knew about the murder of wheelchair-bound New Yorker Leon Klinghoffer.

After his death was confirmed, the Egyptians rejected strong U.S. protests about safe passage for the hijackers.

According to sources close to the negotiations, Mubarak — in meetings with tough talking U.S. Ambassador Nicholas Veliotis — insisted repeatedly that "he had given his word," and could not renege on his deal without ruining his standing in the Arab world.

Late Wednesday night, Reagan ordered U.S. intelligence agencies to track the movements of the hijackers because it had become clear that "the Egyptians were lying to us," a source said.

Thursday, the President was in Chicago, delivering the final speech of his "fall offensive," on tax reform.

It was about noon when McFarlane informed him, in a holding room, that the Egyptians planned to smuggle the four Palestinians out of the country.

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With White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, a White House military aide and Secret Service agents present, McFarlane gave Reagan the recommendations of Poindexter's workforce.

"The community of advisers proposed . . . whether we might consider whether we might not be able, if as reports indicated, this aircraft left, to divert it," McFarlane said.

"The proposal or that concept, if you will, was considered by the President at the first stop and, together with the rules of engagement that would apply if he were to approve such a concept," he said.

"He provided one or two elements of guidance on the concept and on the rules and approved them in principle and then, through the day, he was kept advised on what we were hearing about the possibilities of movement of the aircraft."

As soon as Reagan gave initial approval, the Pentagon was notified and a message was relayed to the commander of the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga, which had been in the Aegean Sea near Albania.

Reagan gave the final order at 4 p.m. from Air Force One after word was relayed to McFarlane that the Egyptian 737 was about to take off.

Immediately, four F-14s and support aircraft were scrambled and flew to a point south of Crete where they waited for the Egyptian plane. The interception took place at about 5:30 p.m.

McFarlane, describing Reagan's demeanor during the crisis, said:

"The president's mood throughout was one of wanting as full a set of facts as he could have, asking very sensible questions about risks, possible gains, about the possible attitudes of and assistance to be offered by other countries as well as the what-ifs, if the expected scenario didn't play out; and a very prudent regard for these risks."

"As he was briefed, he obviously was very interested in staying very much informed in a very timely way and asked often, 'Where does it stand now.' "