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TARGET QADDAFI

✓ By Seymour M. Hersh

SEVENTEEN AMERICAN WARPLANES SET out from Lakenheath Air Base in England last April 14 to begin a 14-hour, 5,400-mile round-trip flight to Tripoli, Libya. It is now clear that nine of those Air Force F-111's had an unprecedented peacetime mission. Their targets: Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi and his family.

The mission, authorized by the White House, was to be the culmination of a five-year clandestine effort by the Reagan Administration to eliminate Qaddafi, who had been described a few days earlier by the President as the "mad dog of the Middle East."

Since early 1981, the Central Intelligence Agency had been encouraging and abetting Libyan exile groups and foreign governments, especially those of Egypt and France, in their efforts to stage a coup d'état — and kill, if necessary — the bizarre Libyan strongman. But Qaddafi, with his repeated threats to President Reagan and support of international terrorism, survived every confrontation and in the spring of 1986 continued to be solidly in control of Libya's 3 million citizens. Now the supersonic Air Force F-111's were ordered to accomplish what the C.I.A. could not.

That the assassination of Qaddafi was the primary goal of the Libyan bombing is a conclusion reached after three months of interviews with more than 70 current and former officials in the White House, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the Pentagon. These sources, a number of whom were closely involved in the planning of the Tripoli raid, agreed to talk only if their names were not used. Many of them, however, corroborated key information. The interviews depict a White House decision-making process that by early last year was relying on internal manipulation and deceit to shield true policy from the professionals in the State Department and the Pentagon.

The interviews also led to these findings:

■ The attempt last April on Qaddafi's life was plotted by a small group of military and civilian officials in the National Security Council. These officials, aware of the political risks, operated with enormous care. A back channel was set up to limit information to a few inside the Government; similar steps had been taken the year before to shield the equally sensitive secret talks and arms dealings with Iran.

■ Much of the secret planning for the Iran and Libyan operations took place simultaneously, so that the Administration was pursuing the elimination of one Middle East source of terrorism while it was trading arms with another. The two missions involved the same people, including John M. Poindexter, then the national security adviser, and Oliver L. North, the N.S.C.'s deputy director for political-military affairs.

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■ There was widespread concern and anger inside the National Security Agency over the Administration's handling of the Libyan messages intercepted immediately after the April 5 terrorist bombing of a West Berlin discotheque. The White House's reliance on these messages as "irrefutable" evidence that Libya was behind that bombing was immediately challenged by some allies, most notably West Germany. Some N.S.A. experts now express similar doubts because the normal intelligence channels for translating and interpreting such messages were purposely bypassed. As of this month, the N.S.A.'s North African specialists had still not been shown these intercepts.

■ William J. Casey, then Director of Central Intelligence, personally served as the intelligence officer for a secret task force on Libya set up in mid-1981, and he provided intelligence that could not be confirmed by his subordinates. Some task force members suspected that much of Casey's information, linking Qaddafi to alleged "hit teams" that were said to be targeting President Reagan and other senior White House aides, was fabricated by him.

President Reagan's direct involvement in the intrigue against Qaddafi — as in the Iran-contra crisis — is difficult to assess. The President is known to have relied heavily on Casey's intelligence and was a strong supporter of covert action against Qaddafi. But Mr. Reagan initially resisted when the National Security Council staff began urging the bombing of Libya in early 1986. Some former N.S.C. staff members acknowledge that they and their colleagues used stratagems to win the President over to their planning.

THE PLANNERS FOR THE LIBYAN RAID AVOIDED the more formal White House Situation Room, where such meetings might be noticed by other staffers, and met instead in the office of former Navy Capt. Rodney B. McDaniel, the N.S.C.'s executive secretary. The small ad hoc group, formally known as the Crisis Pre-planning Group, included Army Lieut. Gen. John H. Moellering of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Michael H. Armacost, Under Secretary of State for political affairs, and Richard L. Armitage, Assistant Secretary of Defense for international security affairs. Most of the planning documents and option papers on the bombing were assigned to a small subcommittee headed by North; this committee included Howard J. Teicher, the N.S.C.'s Near East specialist, and Capt. James R. Stark of the Navy, who was assigned to the N.S.C.'s office of political-military affairs.

For North, a Marine lieutenant colonel who had emerged by early 1985 as the ranking National Security Council operative on terrorism, the Libyan raid was a chance to begin a new phase in the American counterterrorism struggle — the direct use of military force. He had served as a member of Vice President Bush's Task Force on Combating Terrorism, whose report — made public last February — presciently summarized the pros and cons of the mission:

"Use of our well-trained and capable military forces offers an excellent chance of success if a military option can be implemented. Successful employment, however, depends on timely and refined intelligence and prompt positioning of forces. Counterterrorism missions are high-risk/high-gain operations which can have a severe negative impact on U.S. prestige if they fail."

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At the time of the attack on Libya, North, Poindexter and Teicher had been deeply involved in the Administration's secret arms dealings with Iran for nearly a year; they also knew that funds from those dealings were being funneled from a Swiss bank account controlled by North to the Administration-backed contras fighting against the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua.

North has told associates that only he and a few colleagues worked on the targeting of Qaddafi and that they left no written record. "There was no executive order to kill and no administrative directive to go after Qaddafi," one former N.S.C. official quotes North as saying. "They've covered their tracks beautifully."

EVEN THE OFFICIAL BOMBING ORDERS supplied by the White House to the Pentagon did not cite as targets the tent where Qaddafi worked or his family home. Instead, North has told colleagues, the stated targets were the command-and-control center and administrative buildings of El-Azziziya Barracks in Tripoli, none of which were struck by bombs, as well as the military side of the Tripoli airport and a commando training site in the nearby port city of Sidi Bilal, which were hit by the other nine F-111's. Also mistakenly hit by one F-111 assigned to attack the barracks was a heavily populated residential area of Tripoli near the French Embassy.

The shielded orders explain a series of strong denials after the bombing, especially by State Department officials, when it became clear that Qaddafi's personal quarters had been a primary target. That, too, was part of the White House orchestration, officials acknowledge.

One well-informed Air Force intelligence officer says, "There's no question they were looking for Qaddafi. It was briefed that way. They were going to kill him." An Air Force pilot involved in highly classified special operations acknowledges that "the assassination was the big thing."

Senior Air Force officers confidently predicted prior to the raid that the nine aircraft assigned to the special mission had a 95 percent "P.K." — probable kill. Each of the nine F-111's carried four 2,000-pound bombs. The young pilots and weapons-systems officers, who sit side-by-side in the cockpit, were provided with reconnaissance photographs separately depicting, according to one Air Force intelligence officer, "where Qaddafi was and where his family was."

The mission was the first combat assignment for most of the fliers. Qaddafi's home and his camouflaged Bedouin tent, where he often worked throughout the night, were inside the grounds of El-Azziziya. The notion of targeting Qaddafi's family, according to an involved N.S.C. aide, originated with several senior C.I.A. officers, who claimed that in Bedouin culture Qaddafi would be diminished as a leader if he could not protect his home. One aide recalls a C.I.A. briefing in which it was argued that "if you really get at Qaddafi's house — and by extension, his family — you've destroyed an important connection for the people in terms of loyalty."

In charge of the mission was Col. Sam W. Westbrook 3d, a

Rhodes scholar and 1963 Air Force Academy graduate who was subsequently promoted to brigadier general and reassigned in September to the prestigious post of Commandant of Cadets at the Academy. A special biography made available to recruiting officers for the Academy includes a typewritten addendum stating that Westbrook led the Libya raid and cautioning that he "is not cleared to address this subject under any circumstances."

Israeli intelligence, North has told associates, pinpointed Qaddafi's exact location during the long night of April 14, as the Air Force jets, bucking strong headwinds, flew around France, Portugal and Spain to the Mediterranean. The last fix on Qaddafi's location came at 11:15 P.M., Libyan time, two hours and 45 minutes before the first bombs fell. He was still at work in his tent.

In the hours following the raid, Qaddafi's status was not known, but inside the White House there was excitement, one N.S.C. staff aide recalls, upon initial reports that he had not been heard from. Teicher reacted to the belief that Qaddafi had been killed by excitedly telling colleagues: "I'll buy everybody lunch, and not at the Exchange," an inexpensive Friday night staff hangout.

Shortly afterward, a C.I.A. operative in Tripoli informed the agency that the Libyan leader had survived but was said to be shaken by the bombing and the injuries to his family. All eight of Qaddafi's children, as well as his wife, Safiya, were hospitalized, suffering from shock and various injuries. His 15-month-old adopted daughter, Hana, died several hours after the raid.

Poststrike infrared intelligence photographs showed that the bombs, guided by the F-111's sophisticated on-board laser system, left a line of craters that went past both Qaddafi's two-story stucco house and his tent. Newsmen reported that the bombs had damaged his tent and the porticoed family home.

The Air Force viewed Qaddafi's survival as a fluke. Two senior officers separately compare his escape with Hitler's in the assassination attempt led by Count Claus von Stauffenberg in 1944, and a four-star general, after describing in an interview the tight bomb pattern near Qaddafi's tent, says resignedly, "He must have been in the head."

Another well-informed Air

Force officer says: "The fact is, they got into the exact target areas they had planned. It was an ironic set of circumstances that prevented Qaddafi from being killed. It was just an accident, a bad day." The officer is referring to the fact that the laser-guidance systems on four of the nine F-111's attacking Qaddafi's quarters malfunctioned prior to the attack. The pilots had to abort the mission before reaching the target, thus eliminating at least 16 more bombs that could have been dropped. The high-technology system that was to insure Qaddafi's death may have spared his life.

The C.I.A. already knew how difficult a target Qaddafi could be. In late 1981, according to a senior Government official, after Libyan forces returned from Chad, Qaddafi promoted the commander of his successful invasion to general and invited him to his desert headquarters. On the jeep ride, the new general pulled out a revolver and fired point-blank at Qaddafi.

The C.I.A. knew of the plot in advance, the official says, but was unable to learn for several days that the officer had missed and been shot to death by the Colonel's security guard, believed to be an East German. After the attempt, Qaddafi was not seen publicly for 40 days.

AFTER THE RAID ON Tripoli, any suggestion that the United States had specifically targeted Qaddafi and his family was brushed aside by senior Administration officials, who emphasized that the Government had no specific knowledge of Qaddafi's whereabouts that night.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz told newsmen, "We are not trying to go after Qaddafi as such, although we think he is a ruler that is better out of his country." One of the Air Force's goals, he said, was to "hit directly" at the guard around Qaddafi.

At a closed Qaddafi hearing before the House Appropriations defense subcommittee

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six days after the raid, Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger was questioned about the Air Force targeting by Democratic Representative Norman D. Dicks of Washington. "Mr. Secretary, you are a lawyer," Dicks said, according to a subsequently released manuscript. "Can you characterize this in any other way than an attempt to eliminate a foreign leader?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Dicks, we sure can," Weinberger responded. "His living quarters is a loose term. This is a command-and-control building. His living quarters vary from night to night. He never spends two nights in the same place. His actual living quarters are a big Bedouin sort of tent. We are not targeting him individually."

When questioned for this article, Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said through a spokesman that there had been what he termed "some loose talk" during planning sessions about "getting" Qaddafi, but, he went on, such targeting was "never part of the plan." The spokesman added, "There was a lot of bantering at these meetings," but Crowe and his aides "did not take the bravado seriously."

A Congressional aide who participated in classified briefings on the raid says he understood all along that the denials of Administration officials of any assassination plans were pro forma. "I found myself feeling somewhat ambivalent," he recalled, because of the Air Force's target — "you know, 'Scum of the earth.'"

A senior American foreign service officer on assignment in the Middle East at the time of the raid recalls having few illusions: "As abhorrent as we find that kind of mission, the Arabs don't. The first word I got was, 'You screwed it up again. We missed.'"

Only one F-111 was reported missing during the attack and the overall operation was subsequently described by Weinberger as a complete success..

In private, however, there was acute disappointment in the White House and Pentagon, military officials say, because five of the nine F-111's had failed to engage their target — besides the four malfunctioning guidance systems, human error aboard another F-111 resulted in the bombing of the residential area, killing more than 100 people.

There was criticism from abroad, but the attack was strongly supported by the American public and Congress. A New York Times/CBS poll, taken the day after the raid, showed that 77 percent of those queried approved, although many voiced fear that it would lead to further terrorism.

One reason for the widespread support was a collective sense of revenge: the White House had repeatedly said prior to the attack that it had intercepted a series of communications, said to be "irrefutable" and a "smoking gun," which seemed to directly link Libya to the April 5 bombing of the La Belle discotheque in West Berlin, in which an American serviceman was killed and at least 50 others injured. There were also nearly 200 civilian casualties, including one death.

MANY IN THE INTELLIGENCE community believe that the Reagan Administration's obsession with Libya began shortly after the President's inauguration in 1981, and remained a constant preoccupation.

Director of Central Intelligence Casey and Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. took office prepared to move against Qaddafi, who had been utilizing a number of former C.I.A. operatives, most notably Edwin P. Wilson and Frank E. Terpil to help set up terrorist training camps.

There were other reasons for American concern. Qaddafi was relentlessly anti-Israel, supported the most extreme factions in Syria and opposed the more moderate regimes of Jordan's King Hussein and Egypt's Anwar el-Sadat. There also were reports early in 1981 that Libya was attempting to become a

nuclear power, and Qaddafi's often-stated ambition to set up a new federation of Arab and Moslem states in North Africa alarmed policy makers, especially after his successful invasion early in the year of Chad. One of the areas seized by Libyan forces was believed to be rich in uranium.

Qaddafi was further viewed as having close ties to the Soviet Union, a point repeatedly driven home in a 15-minute color movie that was prepared by the C.I.A. in 1981 for the President and key White House officials. It was clear early in the Administration, one former White House aide recalls, that the best way to get the President's attention was through visual means. The movie, which substituted for a written psychological profile of Qaddafi, the aide says, was meant "to show the nature of

the beast. If you saw it, there's little doubt that he had to go."

Libya became a dominant topic of the Administration's secret deliberations on C.I.A. covert action. At senior staff meetings, one participant later recalled, Haig repeatedly referred to Qaddafi as a "cancer to be cut out."

In mid-1981, Haig put William P. Clark, the Deputy Secretary of State, in charge of a secret task force to look into the Qaddafi issue. The initial goal of the small group, which included a representative from the Department of Energy, was to evaluate economic sanctions, such as an embargo on Libyan oil purchases. Libya was then supplying about 10 percent of total American imports of crude oil, and an estimated 2,000 American citizens lived in Libya. Such planning was hampered by the fact that Libyan crude oil was of high quality and much in demand. Clark, whose confirmation hearings had been marked by controversy over his lack of knowledge about foreign affairs, turned to Robert C. (Bud) McFarlane, then the State Department counselor, for help.

One immediate step, taken early in 1981, was to encourage Egypt and other moderate Arab states to continue their longstanding plotting against Qaddafi. In May, the State Department ordered the closing of the Libyan diplomatic mission in Washington and gave Libyan diplomats five days to leave the country.

There were reports in American newspapers, leaked by Government officials, suggesting that Libyan opposition to Qaddafi was growing and citing the defection of Mohammed Magaryef, a former Libyan Auditor General living in exile in London who would become the focal point of American, French and Egyptian efforts over the next four years to overthrow Qaddafi.

In August 1981, President Reagan approved a series of naval war games inside the so-called "line of death" — the 120-mile limit claimed by Libya in the Gulf of Sidra. As expected, the Libyan Air Force rose to the bait and Navy jets shot down two SU-22 warplanes about 60 miles off the Libyan coast.

Libya accused the United States of "international terrorism." According to an account later provided to the columnist Jack Anderson, an enraged Qaddafi, in a telephone call to Ethiopian leader Lieut. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam after the planes were shot down, threatened to assassinate President Reagan.

One former Cabinet-level official, who served in a national security position in 1981, recalls that there was no question that the "only thing to do with Qaddafi was kill him. He belonged dead." However, White House and C.I.A. planning throughout much of 1981 was hampered, the former official says, by President Carter's 1978 executive order against assassinations. "The thought was to get a third party," the former official said — such as Egypt's President Sadat, who some in the White House believed was within a few days of moving against Qaddafi when he was

assassinated on Oct. 6, 1981. On Oct. 7, Magaryef and other exiles formed a National Front for the Salvation of Libya, based in London, "to rid Libya and the world of the scourge of Qaddafi's regime."

In the weeks following Sadat's death, newspapers and television reported a barrage of Qaddafi death threats to Reagan and senior Administration officials. Secret Service protection was ordered for the President's three top aides, Edwin Meese 3d, James A. Baker 3d and Michael K. Deaver, and security for senior Cabinet members, including Haig and Weinberger, was increased. Haig, at a news conference, told newsmen: "We do have repeated reports coming to us from reliable sources that Mr. Qaddafi has been funding, sponsoring, training, harboring terrorist groups, who conduct activities against the lives of American diplomats."

There were further reports that five Libyan-trained terrorists had arrived in the United States to assassinate the President and some of his aides. Mr. Reagan publicly endorsed those reports. "We have the evidence and he knows it," he told newsmen, referring to Qaddafi.

ACCORDING TO KEY sources, there was little doubt inside Clark's task force about who was responsible for the spate of anti-Qaddafi leaks — the C.I.A., with the support of the President, Haig and Clark. "This item stuck in my craw," one involved official recalls. "We came out with this big terrorist threat to the U.S. Government. The whole thing was a complete fabrication."

Casey began traveling regularly to the State Department to attend policy meetings of the Clark group. He was accompanied at first by his deputy, Vice Adm. Bobby R. Inman, a long-time intelligence officer who had served as director of the National Security Agency in the Carter Administration.

According to one participant, Casey claimed to have reports and intercepts directly linking Qaddafi to terrorist activities. "I listened to Casey's pitch and it was going for broke," the participant recalls. "We're going to take care of Qaddafi." Everyone was very careful — no one uttered the word assassination — but the message was clear: "This matter has to be resolved."

If Casey's intelligence was correct, the participant recalls, it threatened the day-to-day ability of American officials to travel internationally. Inman attended only one meeting, at which he said little.

The participant, experienced in intelligence matters, was struck by Inman's sudden disappearance and the lack of specificity in Casey's presentations. Privately, Inman confirmed to a task force member that there was no further specific intelligence on the Libyan "death threats." A trip to N.S.A. headquarters was arranged for the member; there was nothing in the raw intercepts other than "broad

mouthings" by Qaddafi, the official recalls.

During this time, the American intelligence community consistently reported that Iran and its religious leadership were far more involved than Libya in international terrorism. Qaddafi was known to have brutally murdered former Libyan officials, but he was not known to have acted on his many threats against Western political leaders. An intelligence official who has had direct access to communications intelligence reports says, "The stuff I saw did not make a substantial case that we had a threat. There was nothing to cause us to react as we have, saying Qaddafi is public enemy No. 1."

Inman soon resigned from the C.I.A. and Casey continued to handle the intelligence briefings to Clark on Libyan terrorism. Some task force members were convinced that Clark's aides, including McFarlane and Michael A. Ledeen, then a State Department consultant, were leaking Casey's reports. One task force official eventually concluded that Casey was in effect running an operation inside the American Government: "He was feeding the disinformation into the [intelligence] system so it would be seen as separate, independent reports" and taken seriously by other Government agencies.

There were reprisals planned if Qaddafi did strike. By the early 1980's, the Navy had completed elaborate contingency plans for the mining of Libyan harbors, and submarines bearing the mines were dispatched to the Mediterranean during training exercises. In late 1981, a White House official was sent to Lajes Air Base in the Azores, one N.S.C. aide recalls, to insure that it was secure in case an air raid against Libya was ordered. "When Haig was talking about the hit team," the aide recalled, "we were ready to bomb." None of Qaddafi's alleged threats materialized.

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IN JANUARY 1982, Clark succeeded Richard V. Allen as national security adviser and quickly named McFarlane as a deputy. McFarlane brought in Donald R. Fortier from the State Department's policy planning staff. The two had worked together on defense issues as Congressional aides in the last days of the Carter Administration.

Later, Howard Teicher, another McFarlane protégé from the State Department, joined the staff. North, who had come to the White House on a temporary basis in the summer of 1981, was kept on. He would establish a close working relationship with McFarlane. "He accompanied McFarlane to meetings with the President and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs that other N.S.C. staffers would not participate in," one of North's former colleagues recalls.

After a year and a half, Clark, who had a poor relationship with Nancy Reagan and the men who ran the White House staff, resigned. The President picked McFarlane as his successor, and McFarlane named Fortier and Vice Adm. John Poindexter as deputy assistants. Fortier was given the authority to delve into any N.S.C. activity, including covert action.

A critical step occurred in early 1984 when, after a series of political defeats on the contra-aid issue in Congress, President Reagan authorized McFarlane, one aide recalls, to get the contras funded "in any way you can." North subsequently wrote an internal memorandum outlining the shape of much of the future N.S.C. activities, calling for White House-led fund-raising efforts in the private community and among foreign governments. Meanwhile, Fortier, relying on raw intelligence, was beginning to argue that the Administration could make some policy moves toward Iran. The N.S.C. staff began to go operational.

MUAMMAR EL-QADDAFI again became an obsession in Washington after the June 1985 hijacking of an Athens-to-Rome Trans World Airlines flight by a group of Lebanese Shiite Moslems. One Navy diver on board was killed and 39 other Americans were held hostage for 17 days. There was no evidence linking the hijacking to Libya, but within the Reagan Administration feelings ran high that action must be taken, and striking against Iran and Syria wouldn't do. By July, the N.S.C. was secretly involved in conversations with Israeli officials over the possibility of trading American arms to Iran for hostages. And any attempt to target Syria would be strongly resisted by the Pentagon. Syria's superb anti-aircraft defenses had shot down an American Navy fighter plane in 1983 and one navigator, Lieut. Robert O. Goodman Jr., had been captured. He was later released to the Rev. Jesse Jackson, one of the President's most severe critics.

The target was obvious. In July, McFarlane opened a high-level foreign policy meeting with the President by declaring that diplomatic and economic pressure had failed to curb Qaddafi's support for terrorism and much stronger measures had to be taken.

During the late summer and early fall, there was a series of White House meetings on Libya, under the supervision of Poindexter and Fortier. The two even made a secret visit to Egypt to coordinate possible joint military operations against Qaddafi.

By October, the President had formally authorized yet another C.I.A. covert operation to oust Qaddafi. But, according to a report in The Washington Post, the Administration was forced to have Secretary of State Shultz appear in secret before the House Select Committee on Intelligence in order to prevent a rare committee veto of the action. Committee members were said to have been concerned over a top-secret

1984 C.I.A. assessment concluding that it would be possible to call on "disaffected elements" in the Libyan military who could be "spurred to assassination attempts or to cooperate with the exiles against Qaddafi."

United States officials knew of at least two major French operations to assassinate or overthrow Qaddafi in 1984, both directed by the Direction de la Sécurité Extérieure, the French counterpart of the C.I.A. According to a participant, officials at the National Security Agency monitored cable traffic from C.I.A. headquarters to its station in Paris authorizing the sharing of highly sensitive intelligence, including satellite photographs and communications intercepts, in support of the operations. Teams of Libyan exiles were armed with Israeli and other third-party weaponry, brought to the Sudan for combat training and infiltrated through Tunisia into Libya.

Neither plot succeeded, although one, in May 1984, resulted in a pitched battle with Qaddafi loyalists near El-Aziziya Barracks. Libya later reported that 15 members of the exile group had been slain. Qaddafi emerged unscathed.

THE SECRET WHITE House planning escalated dramatically after terrorist bombings in airports in Vienna and Rome on Dec. 27, 1985, killed 20 people, five of them Americans.

Within days, the N.S.C.'s Crisis Pre-planning Group authorized contingency military planning that included possible B-52 bomber strikes on Libya from the United States, as well as F-111 attacks from England. Predictably, Qaddafi responded to published reports of American plans by warning that his nation would "harass American citizens in their own streets" if the bombers came.

Newsmen were told that the C.I.A. had found a strong Libyan connection to the airport attacks, although the Israelis publicly blamed them on a Palestinian terrorist faction led by Abu Nidal. A State Department special report, made public early in 1986, was unable to cite any direct connection between Libya and the airport incident. The sole link was that three of the passports used by the terrorists in Vienna had been traced to Libya. One had been lost in Libya by a Tunisian laborer eight years earlier and two had been seized by Libyan officials from Tunisians as they were expelled in mid-1985.

One involved White House aide believes that the basic decision to use military force was made at a high-level National Security Planning Group meeting on Jan. 6, 1986, in the emotional aftermath of the airport bombings. All of the key Administration officials attended, including the President, Shultz, Weinberger, Casey and Poindexter.

Reviewing his notes of the Jan. 6 meeting, a White House aide recalls that a decision was made to provoke Qaddafi by again sending the Navy and its warplanes on patrol in the Gulf of Sidra. Any Libyan response would be seized upon to justify bombing.

According to this N.S.C. aide, there was talk, inspired by a memorandum written by North, Teicher and Stark, of using one of the Navy's most accurate weapons, the Tomahawk missile, to attack targets in Libya. Libyan air defenses, the White House had been told, were excellent and would probably shoot down some American aircraft. The Tomahawk, a submarine-launched cruise missile with a range of 500 miles, is accurate at that distance to within one hundred feet of a target.

The next day, Jan. 7, the President, declaring that there was "irrefutable" evidence of Qaddafi's role in the airport attacks, announced economic sanctions against Libya, including a ban on direct import and export trade. The idea, advocated by Fortier, was "to get economic sanctions out of the way so the next time they could do more," one involved White House aide recalls. President Reagan, the aide adds, may not have been fully aware that he was being boxed in by an N.S.C. staff that wanted action. "We were making an end run on the President," the aide says.

But the President, although unwilling to stop the planning, continued to resist a military response pending a "smoking gun" — some evidence linking Qaddafi to the airport bombings.

Another of Mr. Reagan's concerns was that an attack on Libya must appear to be a just response. The Joint Chiefs were known to be reluctant to use force as a response to terrorism, and had been resisting White House staff entreaties to move a third aircraft carrier into the Mediterranean to buttress the two already on patrol. The Joint Chiefs had claimed that at least three carriers and their strike force would be needed if Libya responded to a bombing with its 500 fighter aircraft. Adding a third carrier to the task force, the Joint Chiefs explained, would disrupt the schedule of leaves for seamen and pilots. One White House aide recalls a tense meeting in which Richard Armitage of the Defense Department declared, "Cancel the leaves," only to have the Joint Chiefs insist that three carriers could not be on station until March.

SPEAKING AT THE NATIONAL Defense University at Fort McNair in Washington on Jan. 15, George Shultz argued that the United States had a legal right to use military force against states that support terrorism. Under international law, he claimed, "a nation attacked by terrorists is permitted to use force to prevent or pre-empt future attacks, to seize terrorists or to rescue its citizens, when no other means is available."

Shultz's statement was part of a carefully constructed scenario. In subsequent weeks, one White House official recalls, State Department lawyers began to prepare an extensive legal paper arguing, in part, that "in the context of military action what normally would be considered murder is not."

Two days after Shultz's speech, the President signed a secret executive order calling for contacts with Iran and waiving regulations blocking arms shipments there. Casey was instructed not to inform Congress, as the law provided, because of "security risks." The White House was careening down two dangerous paths.

EARLY IN 1986, INTELLIGENCE sources said, the National Reconnaissance Office, the secret group responsible for the procurement and deployment of America's intelligence and spy satellites, was ordered to move a signals intelligence satellite (SIGINT) from its orbit over Poland to North Africa, where it could carefully monitor Libyan communications.

Libyan diplomatic and intelligence traffic had long been a routine target of the N.S.A., whose field stations ring the globe; but beefed-up coverage was deemed necessary. Interception stations in England, Italy and Cyprus, among others, were ordered to monitor and record all communications out of Libya. In the N.S.A. this is known as "cast-iron" coverage. A high-priority special category (SPECAT) clearance was set up for the traffic, denying most N.S.A. interception stations access to the Libyan intelligence. A special procedure for immediately funneling the intercepts to the White House was established.

A third American aircraft carrier arrived in the Mediterranean in mid-March, and the three carriers and their 30-ship escort were sent on an "exercise" into the Gulf of Sidra. It was the largest penetration by the American fleet into the Libyan-claimed waters.

One involved N.S.C. aide acknowledges that Poindexter, who had succeeded McFarlane as national security adviser, and Fortier had determined that the Navy should respond to any loss of American life in the exercise by bombing five targets in Libya. As the Navy task force sailed toward Libya, the aide remembers, he overheard Fortier and General Moellering, the Joint Chiefs' delegate to the Crisis Pre-planning Group, disagree on tactics during a meeting in the N.S.C. crisis center. Fortier, the aide says, asked the general to outline the Navy's rules of engagement in case Libya responded. "Proportionality," the general said.

"They should be disproportionate," the aide heard Fortier sharply respond.

On March 25 and 26, the Sixth Fleet attacked four Libyan ships, destroying two of them. Navy aircraft also conducted two raids against a radar site on the Libyan coast. There were no American casualties and no Libyan counterattack. The White

House, pressing the advantage, warned Qaddafi that any Libyan forces venturing more than 12 miles from shore — the international limit recognized by the United States — were subject to attack.

Qaddafi's failure to rise to the bait frustrated the N.S.C. staff. One senior State Department official acknowledges, "Everybody wanted to beat the hell out of Libya." Instead, the fleet was withdrawn after three days in the Gulf of Sidra, two days earlier than planned.

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The basic question for N.S.C. aides remained: how to convince the reluctant President that bombing was essential. In late March, the N.S.A. intercepted a message from Tripoli to Libyan agents in East Berlin, Paris, Belgrade, Geneva, Rome and Madrid ordering them "to prepare to carry out the plan." Shortly before 8 P.M. on April 4, Washington time (April 5 in Germany), the La Belle disco in West Berlin was blown up. Fourteen hours later, the men in the White House had their "smoking gun."

BY 10 A.M. ON SATURDAY, April 5, the N.S.A. had intercepted, decoded, translated from Arabic and forwarded to the White House a cable from the Libyan People's Bureau in East Berlin to Tripoli stating, in essence, according to N.S.C. and State Department officials, that "We have something planned that will make you happy." A few hours later, a second message from East Berlin to Tripoli came across the top-secret computer terminals in the N.S.C. providing the exact time of the La Belle bombing and reporting that "an event occurred. You will be pleased with the result."

The messages were rushed to the California White House, where the President was spending Easter. The decision to bomb was made that afternoon, one former White House official recalls: "The same people who wanted to have a show of force in late March could now do it in the context of terrorism." The President would no longer be, as one aide put it, "the inhibitor."

By Monday, Teicher had prepared a discussion paper for a talk at a high-level meeting on the proposed bombing; one key element, a firsthand source recalls, was a proposal that the intercepts should be declassified and made public in a Presidential speech. The idea, the White House official adds, was to again "make an end run on the President" and prevent any second thoughts.

The inevitable leaks came within hours. One State Department intelligence officer recalls, upon seeing the intercepts, "It was too good. I knew it would leak."

On April 7, Richard R. Burt, the Ambassador to West Germany, publicly linked the Libyans to the La Belle bombing. Interviewed on the "Today" show, Burt said, "There is very, very clear evidence that there is Libyan involvement."

Yet police officials in West Berlin repeatedly told newsmen that they knew of no evidence linking Libya to the discotheque bombing. One week after the attack, Manfred Ganschow, chief of the anti-terrorist police in Berlin, was quoted as having "rejected the assumption that suspicion is concentrated on Libyan culprits."

Christian Lochte, president of the Hamburg office of the Protection of the Constitution, a domestic intelligence unit, told a television interviewer five days after the bombing, "It is a fact that we do not have any hard evidence, let alone proof, to show the blame might unequivocally be placed on Libya. True, I cannot rule out that Libya, in some way, is responsible for the attack. But I must say that such hasty blame, regarding the two dreadful attacks at the end of the year on the Vienna and Rome airports, for which Libya had immediately been made responsible, did not prove to be correct."

A senior official in Bonn, interviewed last month for this article, said that the West German Government continued to be "very critical and skeptical" of the American intelligence linking Libya to the La Belle bombing. The United States, he said, which has extremely close intelligence ties with West Germany, had made a tape of its intercepts available to German intelligence, with no change in Bonn's attitude.

Some White House officials had immediate doubts that the case against Libya was clear-cut. The messages had been delivered by the N.S.A. to the White House, as directed, without any analysis.

There was nothing in any of them specifically linking Qaddafi to the La Belle bombing. What is more, the discotheque was known as a hangout for black soldiers, and the Libyans had never been known to target blacks or other minorities.

The normal procedure for SPECAT intelligence traffic from Libya is that it be processed and evaluated by the G-6 group at N.S.A. headquarters at Fort Meade, Md., before being relayed elsewhere. But the La Belle traffic was never forwarded to G-6. As of this month, the April 4 and 5 Libyan intercepts had not been seen by any of the G-6 experts on North Africa and the Middle East.

"The G-6 section branch and division chiefs didn't know why it was taken from them," says an N.S.A. official. "They were bureaucratically cut out and so they screamed and yelled."

Another experienced N.S.A. analyst notes: "There is no doubt that if you send raw data to the White House, that constitutes misuse because there's nobody there who's capable of interpreting it." N.S.A. officials had no choice if the White House asked for the intercepts, he says, but adds, "You screw it up every time when you do it — and especially when the raw traffic is translated into English from a language such as Arabic, that's not commonly known."

Yet another analyst points out that Qaddafi was known to have used personal couriers in the past — and not radio or telephone communication — in his many assassinations and assassination attempts.

A senior State Department official who was involved in the White House deliberations on the Libyan bombing insists that he and his colleagues were satisfied with the handling of the intercepts.

"There was nothing to suggest that it was not handled in good faith," he says. "The intercepts did not say La Belle disco was bombed. They never identified the site. But there was a history that the Libyans were going to mount an operation in Europe."

THERE WAS AN ATMOSPHERE of cynicism and disarray within the National Security Council as it prepared to bomb Libya while supplying arms to Iran. Poindexter was being hailed in Newsweek as "a cool warrior" who "steadies the N.S.C." But privately, some security council officials say, he was feeling overwhelmed, and would soon be telling close associates that he wanted a transfer to the National Security Agency. By April, some N.S.C. insiders, and reportedly the President, knew that William Casey had started undergoing radiation treatment for prostate cancer; his illness was not made public until December. Donald Fortier also was extremely ill. He would die of liver cancer in August.

In the weeks preceding April 14, Oliver North has told associates, he became extremely active in the Libyan planning. The Joint Chiefs had decided on a two-pronged aerial attack, involving Navy units in the Mediterranean and the F-111's from England. But none of the military planners wanted to see American airmen shot down and paraded around Libya; and there was concern that the Navy's A-6 bombers would be vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire. The F-111's not only flew much faster — they would hit the target going 9 miles a minute — but also had far superior electronic defense mechanisms to ward off enemy missiles.

The round-trip from England to Libya, over France, would be about seven hours, well within the F-111's limits. Admiral Crowe and the Joint Chiefs agreed that the F-111's would play the lead role in the attack, buttressed by 12 Navy A-6's, which were assigned to bomb an airfield and military barracks 400 miles east of Tripoli.

But North has told colleagues that he had doubts about the Air Force's mission, and they were heightened when the French refused to permit the F-111 overflight. The Air Force was now confronted with a difficult assignment against the strong headwinds of the Bay of Biscay.

According to an account given to colleagues, North, just prior to the bombing, made a series of suggestions at a high-level meeting attended by the President, Poindexter, Crowe and Gen. Charles A. Gabriel, the Air Force Chief of Staff. With the approval of Casey, North had already interceded with the Israelis to increase the intelligence available before the mission. Now he argued for using a covert Navy SEAL team, which would surface on the beach near Qaddafi's tent and residence and set up a laser beam that could guide the American bombs directly to the main targets. The attacking planes could then launch their bombs offshore — out of range of Libyan anti-aircraft missiles — and be just as effective. The SEAL team, apparently at North's direction, had already been deployed to the Middle East.

But, North told colleagues, Crowe said no — that no one wanted to put Americans at risk.

North reportedly then raised the issue of using the Air Force's most-advanced fighter-bomber, the supersecret Stealth, said to be capable of avoiding enemy radar. The aircraft would be perfect to attack Qaddafi's personal quarters and tent; it could be ferried to the huge American naval base at Rota, Spain, and attack from there. Admiral Crowe again said no, explaining that the Stealth technology was too valuable to risk.

North told colleagues that he persisted in seeking alternatives, raising the possibility of attacking the Qaddafi quarters with a conventionally armed Tomahawk cruise missile fired from a submarine. Admiral Crowe, the report goes, responded that there were too few conventionally armed Tomahawks in the arsenal. North has claimed that he then raised the possibility of supplementing the bombing by mining and quarantining the harbors, saying he wanted "a far more sophisticated scenario to cover up the fact that the target was going to be an assassination."

The President sided with the Joint Chiefs Chairman, North told colleagues. At the close of the meeting, with the President out of hearing, North related, Crowe walked up to him, and nose to nose warned: "Young man, you'd better watch your step."

Through an aide, Crowe denies the encounter, saying that he "did not recall any discussion on substantive matters that he ever had" with North. "Nor does he recall any meetings with North except as a back-bench note taker" at White House meetings, the aide said. Furthermore, Crowe was quoted by an aide as saying, "He doesn't recall North having any input at all in the April raid."

IN A NATIONALLY televised speech on April 14, President Reagan said the intelligence linking Libya to the La Belle bombing "is direct, it is precise, it is irrefutable. We have solid evidence about other attacks Qaddafi has planned." He described the Tripoli raid as a "series of strikes against the headquarters, terrorist facilities and military assets that support Muammar Qaddafi's subversive activities."

The President added: "We Americans are slow to anger. We always seek peaceful avenues before resorting to the use of force, and we did. We tried quiet diplomacy, public condemnation, economic sanctions and demonstrations of military force — and none succeeded."

According to one involved N.S.C. official, there was other language prepared for the President — a few paragraphs bracketed into the text in case the White House could confirm that Qaddafi had been killed. The message would echo an analysis prepared by Abraham D. Sofaer, the State Department legal adviser, claiming that the United States had the legal right "to strike back to prevent future attacks." The killing of Qaddafi, under that doctrine, was not retaliation nor was it in any way a crime.

But Qaddafi was not killed, and a White House official recounts an elaborate briefing a day or so after the raid at which the Air Force's failure

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to accomplish its mission was obvious. "The Navy people were at ease, confident," the aide recalls. "All had worked perfectly." The Navy's two main targets had been accurately attacked, with no loss. "The poor Air Force guy," recalls the aide. "He was defensive and polite. Talked about how the White House kept on changing signals."

The intelligence satellite that had been moved from Poland was ordered to remain over Libya, in the hope

that the bombing would rally those military men opposed to Qaddafi and spark a revolt. "They honestly thought Qaddafi would fall or be overthrown," one National Security Agency official says, referring to the N.S.C. "and so they kept the bird up there."

There was no coup d'état — and there was one intelligence satellite missing over Eastern Europe in late April, when an explosion rocked one of the reactors at the Soviet nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, in the Ukraine. After another bureaucratic battle inside the intelligence community, one N.S.A. official recalls, the satellite was returned to its normal orbit above Poland, as the United States tried to unravel the extent of damage to the nuclear power plant and the scope of the fallout threat to Western Europe.

The White House's two-track policy toward Libya and Iran continued. In May, McFarlane, accompanied by North and Teicher, among others, traveled to Teheran bearing arms. A few weeks later, Poindexter routinely approved a proposal, strongly supported by Casey and Shultz, calling for another disinformation operation against Libya in the hopes of provoking Qaddafi. The C.I.A. triggered the renewed planning, one insider recalls, by reporting once again that "Qaddafi was on the ropes."

In September, there was a second visit by American officials to Iran, and continued arms trading. Within a month the policy — and the National Security Council — began to come apart. By early November, the Iran scandal was on the front pages. Its major casualty was the credibility of a popular President.

In the wake of that scandal, Oliver North would emerge in the public's perception as a unique and extraordinary player inside the National Security Council, a hard-charging risk-taker who was different from his colleagues. It is now apparent that North was but one of many at work in the White House who believed in force, stealth and operations behind the back of the citizenry and the Congress. He was not an aberration, but part of a White House team whose full scope of operations has yet to be unraveled.

North, along with Poindexter, Teicher and others, have left the Government. The much-reviled Colonel Qaddafi remains in power. ■