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New  
Regime?

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If President Reagan does as he says, we are going to see an extraordinary kind of palace revolution in Washington. The king will still be there, but he will preside over a radically different Government.

"I have directed that any covert activity be... in compliance with American values," Mr. Reagan said in his speech on the Iran affair. "I expect a covert policy that if American saw it on the front page of their newspaper, they'd say, 'That makes sense.'"

In that one example of the President's promises one sees the profound possibilities for change. The special stamp of his foreign policy has been the frequent use of covert violence precisely because the public would not approve an open policy of that kind. Thus most Americans have consistently opposed the covert war on Nicaragua, the mining of harbors, the arming of terrorists.

The Reagan years in foreign policy have also been marked by disregard for law and by fierce resistance to Congress when it asserted its role. In the Iran affair, for example, the Tower commission reported that Lieut. Col. Oliver North and the others scarcely paused to consider legal constraints. And the covert policy in Iran was not reported to Congressional intelligence committees as required by law.

It was startling, therefore, to hear Mr. Reagan say Wednesday night that he had told N.S.C. staff members he "wanted a policy that reflected the will of the Congress as well as the White House." Just as striking was his disclosure that he had created the position of N.S.C. legal adviser — "to assure a greater sensitivity to matters of law."

Anyone who doubts that those are changes of potential significance should look at the reaction among Mr. Reagan's hard-line conservative supporters. They are in a state of agitation at what they fear is the end of the conservative wave in Washington.

The Wall Street Journal had an uncommonly revealing editorial the morning before the President's speech. It urged him, in effect, to tough it out, to assert plenary power in foreign policy. Congress's attempts to legislate in that field, it said, were "dangerous and perhaps unconstitutional." The President should rely on "the evident will of the people."

The Journal's editors must have written with a glum realization that Mr. Reagan was unlikely to follow their advice. He had already signaled a different course by choosing Howard Baker as his chief of staff. To movement conservatives Mr. Baker is The Enemy: someone who would take the Republican Party back toward the center. That is why they treated him so badly at the 1984 Republican convention.

Mr. Baker is not the only harbinger

of change. The President's nomination of William H. Webster as Director of Central Intelligence also sent a message unwelcome to the extreme right.

William Casey was a powerful engine of conservative ideology at the C.I.A. He was gung-ho for covert action against leftist governments around the world. He slanted intelligence analyses to fit. He deceived Congress. In all those things, Judge Webster's instincts will be the opposite.

In looking to the future of the Reagan Administration, there is of course still the big if of the President's physical and mental energy. The Tower commission found him amazingly ignorant of what went on in the Iran affair, almost uninterested. His passivity in office long antedated Iran. There is every effort now to make him look energetic. But can he really change?

What has to be understood is that Reagan passivity will have a very different effect now from the time of Casey, Poindexter, North, Regan et al. Presidential detachment will leave more to figures whose instinct is for moderation, who want to work with Congress and respect the law. Conservatives obviously do understand: hence their anger.

The largest issues will still require more of Mr. Reagan than he has been prepared to give. The immediate example is arms control. An agreement with the Soviet Union on intermediate-range missiles in Europe is plainly now attainable. Will the President at last be willing to override his own Administration's dogged opponents of arms control?

How much his Administration and Mr. Reagan himself can recover in these last two years remains very much a question. But the direction has changed in Washington. In the phrase of Senator Alan K. Simpson, the Wyoming Republican, the White House is no longer filled with "guys who act like 9-year-olds playing with rubber guns." □