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FILE ONLY

Energetic colonel at back of discussions with Iran

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WASHINGTON — When Nicaraguan rebels were sustaining their military struggle against the ruling Sandinistas despite a cutoff of U.S. aid, a curious administration colleague pressed Lt. Col. Oliver North on where their money was coming from.

"He just wouldn't answer. . . . I never got anything," the man recalls. But he adds, "I wasn't in a position to accuse him. . . . I don't know what his orders were."

Above all, say people who have watched the tight-lipped National Security Council staffer at close hand, he is a professional Marine who follows orders. If coordinating continued support for Nicaraguan "contras" pushed him to the edge of

the law — perhaps beyond, as critics allege — and if working out a deal with Iran easing the way for release of U.S. hostages appeared to conflict with stated U.S. policy, he was not acting as a loose cannon, they say.

"He's a very energetic cannon, but there's always someone behind the cannon firing," says an administration official who knows him well.

Since mid-1981, when Colonel North joined the NSC staff, where he is director of political-military affairs, that "someone" has been either former National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane or his successor, Vice Adm. John Poindexter.

How those orders were conceived in the Iranian case is the focus of growing controversy amid reports

that two principal Reagan advisers, Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, were unhappy with shipping arms to Iran in return for help in freeing U.S. hostages.

The operation of the NSC staff itself, removed from congressional scrutiny and the cautionary influence of experts in the State and Defense departments, is likely to draw renewed challenge in the Democratic-controlled Congress.

By all accounts, "Ollie" North, a 1968 Annapolis graduate and a decorated Vietnam combat veteran, meshed perfectly with the NSC's style.

Impatient with bureaucracy, willing to take great personal risks and to work long hours and weekends, he could always be counted on to carry out the most sensitive assignments "110 percent," one former official says.

Although he avoids publicity and the NSC is close-mouthed about his activities, he is reported to have helped plan the U.S. invasion of Grenada, to have searched for those responsible for the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983 and to have helped conceive last year's interception of the airliner carrying the hijackers of the Achille Lauro cruise ship.

He also played a key "crisis management" role after the Soviets shot down a Korean airliner in 1983.

Although not a policy-maker, by virtue of his skill and determination "he wields much more influence than someone of that rank would normally have," an administration official says.

"He's articulate, a little bit of a bulldog — a little too pushy for a lieutenant colonel," says one who has worked with him.

He is also creative. "I imagine he would be a schemer," this source adds. "If given an assignment, he would probably stay awake nights thinking about ways to get it done."

And there is widespread questioning here about the extent to which his actions in carrying out instructions from above eventually loom so large as to become a crucial aspect of administration policy.

Such is the case with his role as point man in maintaining support in the United States for the Nicaraguan contras during a congressional ban on U.S. aid to the rebels.

Telephone logs that have come to light point to a close involvement by Colonel North in complicated private efforts to continue supplying the contras, although the administration insists there was no breach of the law.

This private aid network is the subject of an inquiry by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. One member, Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., has asked that Colonel North and others be subpoenaed to testify under oath.

Colonel North "had lots of ideas of his own," says a man who has worked with him on other issues. "He does what he's told, but when people give him latitude and tell him to achieve such and such an objective, he'll find a way to do it."

"I don't think he would knowingly violate the law. But there are all sorts of interpretations," this former official says.

So secretive and "compartmentalized" is the NSC staff that it is not just other agencies that are kept in the dark on some of its actions. One former staffer says he failed to learn of some "major things" that occurred within his own area of expertise until "they broke in the press."