

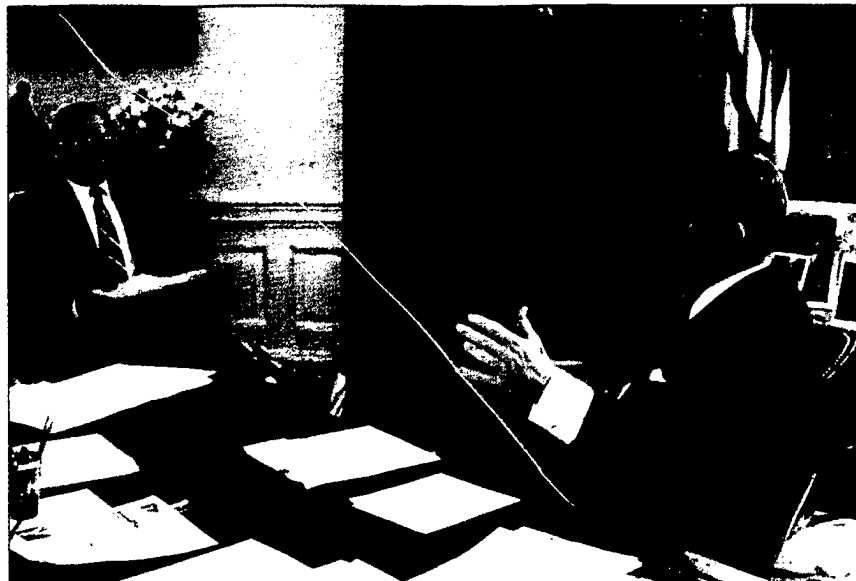
# A Trail of Tantalizing Questions

## Did Reagan know?

Whatever else Ronald Reagan may have accomplished with his dramatic admission of responsibility, he did very little to advance the nation's knowledge of just what it was that "happened on [his] watch." His speech shed no new light on the principal questions vexing investigators: What happened to the money? And what did the president know about the secret contra network and the diversion of profits from Iranian arms sales? The Tower commission found no evidence that Reagan knew of the diversion, but final reports by the Tower Board and the Senate Intelligence Committee left several loose ends—scanty, tantalizing clues—that seem to suggest the president may have been told more than he says.

Three investigations—by two congressional select committees and special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh—are following these leads into largely uncharted territory. The Senate select committee plans to vote within two weeks on whether to give former national-security adviser John Poindexter and Oliver North limited immunity from prosecution in exchange for their testimony. Walsh has expressed reservations about immunity and urged the committee to hedge any deals it makes. In the meantime, all three panels are following the money trail. Investigators have been unable thus far to open the Swiss bank accounts used by North, but they do have access to detailed financial records—of some \$33 million in cash donations—released last week by contra leader Adolfo Calero.

If nothing else, the clues in hand make clear that Reagan shared North's sympathy for the contras and their benefactors. As early as March 1985, the Tower report notes, North sent a memo to national-security adviser Robert McFarlane proposing that the president solicit private funds; McFarlane wrote "not yet" in the margin, but Reagan did eventually appear at several fund-raising dinners. Ever bolder, in April 1985 North sent another message (now in the hands of investigators) to McFarlane suggesting Reagan be briefed about arms deliveries to the con-



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**A Poindexter briefing: Did he reveal the connection between the contras and Teheran?**

tras. It is not clear if the briefing was held.

The clues surface again in the spring of 1986. Among the most elusive is the Tower report's reference to a "photo session" in the White House: Reagan posed with Donald Regan, North, Poindexter, a CIA field officer (later connected with the contra effort) and an unidentified couple (in which the husband turns out to be a Costa Rican official who reportedly helped North build a secret airstrip in that country). No one seems to know what they discussed.

More suggestive pieces of the puzzle fell into place the next month. According to the Senate Intelligence Committee, on May 15 Poindexter briefed the president about both McFarlane's delivery of arms to Teheran and the contras' increasingly desperate finances. The next day the

president authorized a search for third countries that might help fund the rebels.

Did Poindexter reveal the diversion of Iranian profits? A document describing the McFarlane trip exactly as Poindexter did in briefing the president eventually turned up in an NSC file attached to a North memo about the diversion. Both the date and the addressee had been deleted from the memo—North's secretary, Fawn Hall, may have doctored it at his request—and there is no proof that it had been shown to the president, in May or any other time. What is known is that on the day of his talk with Reagan, Poindexter sent North an anxious message, cited in the Tower report, suggesting caution. North himself was unconcerned: "The President obviously knows why he has been meeting with several select people to thank them for their support of Democracy in CentAm."

Where does this leave the investigating panels? Far too many of their leads were provided by the hyperbolic North, and it is not surprising that the investigators want to make the more credible Poindexter their primary witness. The most recent clue from North suggests why the panels are nervous: on Oct. 12, according to the Tower Board, he reported to McFarlane that he had told Reagan he was providing a lawyer for the mercenary Eugene Hasenfus, who was shot down over Nicaragua. Does this mean that Reagan knew about North's secret network? North's memo suggests exactly that. It was either his most damaging revelation or one of his most extravagant boasts.

TAMAR JACOBY with  
ROBERT PARRY in Washington

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