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Confusing Chronology of a Crisis

White House Aides Disagree on How Iran Affair Transpired

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On Nov. 4, immediately after the first public confirmation by an Iranian official that the United States had shipped arms to Iran, a group of past and current advisers to President Reagan met at the White House to try to produce a chronology of their secret Iranian policy over the previous 18 months. They were unable to agree on what had happened, according to informed sources.

On Nov. 6, the president told reporters at a bill-signing ceremony in the White House that the "story that came out of the Middle East" about former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane traveling to Tehran "to us has no foundation." That day McFarlane, his successor, Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, National Security Council (NSC) aide Lt. Col. Oliver L. North and a representative of Central Intelligence Agency Director William J. Casey were trying to reach agreement on what had occurred, sources said.

Eventually, North prepared a chronology, but it has proved inaccurate in some details, according to White House aides.

"They just had different memories or views of what happened," according to one source. The officials also disagreed on how much information should be disclosed, sources said.

Complicating the search for the truth about what has become the Iran-contra scandal was the White House's practice, directed by chief of staff Donald T. Regan, of so-called "damage control," that is, making statements intended to defuse the issue and get it off front pages of newspapers and out of television news programs.

When newspapers began to describe large shipments of arms to Iran, the White House countered with a presidential speech describing what Reagan had approved as "small amounts" of arms that "could easily fit into a single cargo plane." Later it became clear that the quantity of arms delivered to Iran in at

least six separate shipments was much greater than that.

When the president was accused of trading arms for hostages, the White House countered with stories of Iran's geostrategic position next to the Soviet Union and Moscow's attempts to gain favor there.

Many public statements made in November by Regan, Poindexter, McFarlane, White House spokesman Larry Speakes and by Reagan turned out to have been wrong or misleading; many have been amended since by the White House. The mistakes then made and the efforts to correct or change them reveal some of the biggest political and legal problems that now face the White House in what has become the major scandal of the Reagan presidency.

The most important shift has occurred on the key issue of whether the president approved the initial Israeli shipments of U.S. arms to Iran either before or after the event in September 1985. That was four months before Reagan signed an intelligence "finding" that provided explicit legal authority for U.S. participation in such an activity. Before that finding was signed, U.S. approval of and participation in secret Israeli arms shipments to Iran in 1985 may have been illegal. That was the view of at least one senior CIA official who insisted that a retroactive finding be prepared when he learned that a second shipment had gone out in November on an agency-arranged aircraft.

In the chronology he prepared, North said that the president turned down the Israeli proposal in the summer of 1985, and approved it only in October, after the fact, when word reached the White House that the shipment had been made. In North's chronology, the November shipment was also made without notice, and was ordered returned when Washington found out about it.

McFarlane, who once indicated that Reagan reacted negatively to the idea of Israeli arms shipments, subsequently testified to congressional committees that the president gave him vocal approval for the shipments in August 1985, be-

fore the first arms were sent.

White House chief of staff Regan, who on Nov. 14 told reporters that the president approved the Israeli shipments before they were made, changed that story within days. He has since told congressional committees under oath that the president's approval came only after the first shipments were made in September.

Confusion on this point was also evident in the wrong answers Regan gave at his Nov. 19 news conference.

In a practice session on Nov. 18, with aides playing reporters, the president was asked if he had approved any Israeli shipments, as reported in the news media. In response Reagan denied he had, and was corrected by Poindexter, sources said.

According to these sources, who were present at the session, Poindexter told the president that he had condoned such shipments: "We don't want to identify that country; we don't want to point the finger at Israel," the sources said Poindexter told the president that day.

At these mock news conferences the president usually tries a second answer when aides express dissatisfaction with his first try. But on this occasion, one knowledgeable source said, Reagan did not try to answer the question a second time in light of Poindexter's guidance.

The next night, Reagan either disregarded, forgot or was confused by Poindexter's correction. Three times during his televised news conference, he denied that he had condoned the 1985 arms shipments by Israel.

Minutes after the session ended, a "clarification" was released in the president's name saying he had condoned such shipments.

Confusion over past events has been evident also in NSC decision documents prepared this year to bring Reagan up to date for key meetings to discuss making direct U.S. arms shipments to Iran, McFarlane's May trip to Tehran and the last arms shipment in October, according to sources in the

administration and on Capitol Hill where the documents were sent last week. One source said these documents "show inconsistencies" in descriptions of the events.

Sources on Capitol Hill familiar with testimony to date disagree over whether the White House has been engaged in a cover-up since the first public disclosures or just cannot settle on one story.

One source who has heard much of the testimony and reviewed White House material said what he has seen indicates "incredible incompetence and freewheeling operations," with North, for one, at times "exceeding his authority and not telling his superiors."

Several congressional investigators said they were not surprised that the White House has yet to come up with an authoritative history of what happened between June 1985 and last month. "Now," according to another source involved in reviewing the data, the participants "are trying to protect themselves or others and are changing their stories."

Reagan's Nov. 6 remark that there was "no foundation" to reports of a secret McFarlane mission to Iran was followed by a week of "no comments" and warnings to reporters like the one White House spokesman Speakes gave on Nov. 7: "Lives are at stake, and American interest is at stake."

Speakes attempted to undercut published stories that Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger opposed and were ignorant of the Jan. 17 intelligence finding that authorized arms shipments to Iran. On Nov. 14, Speakes said at his daily news briefing that Shultz and Weinberger "participated in meetings in which the president made his decision. They were aware of the president's finding in January."

Poindexter, during Nov. 14 briefings, also said that Shultz and Weinberger took part in discussions of the finding and were aware that it had been signed.

When Shultz testified under oath before Congress in December, he said he was not present when the president decided to go ahead with the Jan. 17 finding, and did not learn about it until it became public in November.

Speakes also was caught out on the question of whether the president's finding contained a directive to Casey not to inform Congress

about its existence. On Nov. 17, three days after the finding was disclosed, Speakes told reporters there was "a general agreement" that the White House would not tell Congress, but Speakes said he did not believe it was in writing or in the finding. It was.

The conflict over authorization of the first 1985 shipment could prove significant.

After more than a week of refusing all comment, the White House decided to put the president on television on the night of Nov. 13 to take the offensive on the Iran arms sales. The speech was designed in part to distance the administration from reported shipments of many tons of arms to Iran, hence Reagan's claim that night that he had authorized only "minuscule" shipments that could have fit easily in a single aircraft.

In a briefing for reporters before the speech, a senior administration official insisted that Reagan had not violated his arms embargo against Iran or any other law because he had signed the intelligence finding in January. "We didn't do anything illegal," said this briefer, who cannot be identified under ground rules of this "background" briefing. The official has since resigned from the White House.

Asked about shipments in September 1985, the official responded, "They are not related to the U.S. government."

The next day, after the speech, Regan and Poindexter gave eight interviews on television shows and to reporters as part of the well-publicized damage-control effort that began with Reagan's speech. In those interviews the two men said that Reagan had approved arms shipments in 1985 by a third country, later identified as Israel, before the arms had been sent—and therefore months before the president signed the Jan. 17 intelligence finding.

In a briefing for television reporters that day, Regan said that "in the summer of 1985 . . . there was a request that a third party be allowed to sell [Iran] some weapons, and we agreed that if that third party wanted to sell weapons of that same nature as we were discussing, we would not object to that."

Two hours later, Poindexter was questioned on the subject by the same TV reporters and said the 1985 shipment "was authorized verbally . . . by the president." Did

that happen in September? Poindexter replied, "I honestly don't remember the date but it was several months prior to that."

McFarlane in those days ducked the question of the president's decision. On a Nov. 16, television interview program, for example, he told one questioner that he should ask the president if he had approved the shipment before it was sent. When asked if he were "arguing with the chief of staff" on the issue, McFarlane said that the "portrayal" of the situation "doesn't match my own understanding."

McFarlane's statements led to news reports that the president had not approved the 1985 shipments. At the White House the next day, in the midst of Speakes' daily briefing, a senior administration official said he could not clear the matter up because McFarlane, who originated the operation, was no longer at the White House and Poindexter, his deputy at the time, "does not have the details that we need to discuss" the matter.

Sources close to McFarlane talked to reporters about Nov. 20 and said the former national security adviser first told the president about an Israeli proposal to trade arms for hostages in July 1985 while Reagan was hospitalized recovering from colon cancer surgery. At that time, according to McFarlane's account, both he and the president opposed the proposal, but Reagan did favor exploring better relations with "moderates" in Iran and recognized that they might need weapons to defend themselves against radicals in the Khomeini government.

Later, according to McFarlane's account, David Kimche, the Israeli official then involved in secret dealings with Iran, met with McFarlane, in part to see if Reagan would approve the arms shipments. According to the account McFarlane provided to associates then, McFarlane told Kimche he could not condone the arms shipments, but McFarlane nevertheless had the impression when Kimche left that the Israelis would go forward with the plan to ship arms.

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The day after Reagan's news conference, Speakes tried to persuade reporters not to write that the shipments were undertaken before Reagan had legally authorized them in writing.

"We're off on a legal track here that seemed to say that if we did it, if there were shipments prior to Jan. 17, 1986, it would have been illegal," Speakes said. "So I'm trying to guide you: don't write that kind of stuff, because it would be inaccurate."

Later in the briefing Speakes said that he did not think any White House official meant to give the impression that there was any U.S. condoning of an Israeli shipment in September, at about the time that the Rev. Benjamin Weir was released.

McFarlane contradicted that version before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on Dec. 1, when he told a more complete and different story than that he had earlier related to associates.

The president, McFarlane testified, approved the idea of Israeli shipment of U.S. arms to Iran after an Aug. 6, 1985, discussion of the idea with his top advisers, including Shultz and Weinberger, who both opposed the proposition.

In a private meeting with McFarlane—from which there are no notes, sources said—Reagan said that if the Israelis decided to go ahead with the idea, he would approve replenishing any American arms they transferred, by McFarlane's latest account.

As described by McFarlane, Reagan's position was that if Israel proceeded with the arms shipment, the United States would make up the 508 TOW antitank missiles Israel planned to sell to the Iranians. In fact this transaction was completed this year after the Jan. 17 finding was signed, sources said.

In return for shipping the TOWs, the Israelis, who handled all the negotiations, led the White House to expect that at least two and perhaps all six Americans then believed held hostage in the Mideast would be freed. But only Weir was released.

There was a second shipment from Israel to Iran in 1985, but this was ignored in last month's White House discussions of arms shipments before the Jan. 17 finding. According to McFarlane's testimony to Congress, he also approved this second shipment under authority he had from Reagan.

McFarlane discussed this shipment, which included Hawk anti-aircraft missile parts, with Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin shortly before the Nov. 21-22 Soviet-American summit in Geneva.

While at the summit, McFarlane got a phone call from the Israelis. The Portuguese government had created obstacles to the transshipment of weapons through that country as planned, the Israelis reported. They asked for help.

McFarlane called North back at the White House and asked him to settle the matter. North called the CIA and sought assistance of one of Casey's top aides, Duane (Dewey) Clarridge. The CIA helped obtain another plane and the shipment went through. Later, it turned out that the Israelis had sent obsolete Hawk parts to the Iranians and no hostages were released.

The CIA's then-deputy director, John N. McMahon, told colleagues when he learned of the agency's role that he thought the action was illegal because there was no written presidential authority. He later told the Senate intelligence panel that he had said there were to be no similar actions without the president's signature.

A draft finding was sent to the White House in November by the CIA, authorizing the shipments that had taken place and any future ones. Agency officials, sources said, never received back a signed copy of the finding. Poindexter said later that after the president signed a finding dated Jan. 17, the document was kept in the NSC adviser's safe.

Since the first news stories were published on Nov. 27 describing the November 1985 arms shipment that the CIA had supported, the White House has never acknowledged that such an event took place.

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