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ALWASHINGTON POST
14 November 1986

President Was Told Arms Were Key to Iran's Help

Families' Pressure Overcame Aides' Warnings

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(Washington Post Staff Writer)

President Reagan ordered secret arms shipments to Iran last spring after being told that it was the only way to get Tehran's help in freeing five U.S. hostages then held in Lebanon by pro-Iranian terrorists, informed sources said yesterday.

In making his decision, the president disregarded warnings from Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger that such action would undermine his public counterterrorism policies, according to the sources, who provided many details of the covert operation that Reagan described sketchily in his televised speech last night.

Even Reagan's envoy in the Iranian negotiations, former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane, objected to the arms shipments, according to one source familiar with his views. Other officials, however, said McFarlane supported the idea.

Although Reagan had agreed in January that the United States would shun arms-for-hostages bargaining, the president was "unhappy" with that position, largely because he was under pressure from the hostages' families to take action, sources said.

Reagan repeatedly asked Shultz, Weinberger and others during the spring whether they were "sure we can't ship arms," sources said. He eventually reversed his January decision, and two Americans were freed after arms shipments were received by Tehran. Earlier, in September 1985, the Rev. Benjamin Weir's release had come after a U.S.-approved Israeli shipment of arms to Iran.

As the furor over the covert operation intensified this week, the White House has sought to portray Reagan's authorization of arms to Iran as principally an effort to win the good will of factions in Tehran that might become important in a government succeeding Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Despite 18 months of continuing disappointment at what they consider Iranian duplicity in promising more than was delivered—as followed McFarlane's mistaken expectation that all hostages would be freed

before he arrived in Tehran on a secret mission last May—some White House officials say they hope Tehran will help free some of the remaining American hostages believed held in Lebanon. While the pro-Iranian Islamic Jihad group controls some of the hostages, administration officials acknowledge they are not certain who kidnaped three other Americans within the past two months or how they will be freed.

The secret diplomatic gambit with Iran had its origins nearly 18 months ago during the June 1985 hijacking to Beirut of TWA flight 847, according to current and former U.S. officials, congressional sources and knowledgeable Israelis.

After the White House realized that only the intervention of Iranian officials led to the freeing of some of the hijacking hostages, McFarlane explored the possibility of new channels to Tehran through Iranian exiles and U.S. allies.

This secret diplomacy began about the time Reagan gave a July 8, 1985, speech to the American Bar Association in Washington's Constitution Hall. In it, he denounced Iran's alleged support of terrorism and called Khomeini's regime part of a "new international version of Murder Incorporated."

At that time, the director general of the Israeli foreign ministry, David Kimche, and some Israeli arms dealers suggested to McFarlane that the Reagan administration could "show good faith" to Iran by approving shipments of arms and military spare parts to that country. The shipments, they suggested, could help the United States reestablish Iranian contacts and expedite the hostages' release, sources said.

Reagan and his top aides found the idea intriguing, despite the administration's well-publicized neutrality in the six-year war between Iran and Iraq, its policy of not pay-

ing ransom for political hostages and its global efforts to embargo arms to Iran. One issue the administration never was willing to consider was the demand of the pro-Iranian group holding the Americans that 17 terrorists in Kuwaiti prisons be freed.

For the first contacts with Tehran, the Israelis used a former agent of their secret service who had acted as Jerusalem's air attache in Tehran during the last 12 years of the shah's rule. They also employed an exiled Iranian businessman who is a friend of Iran's prime minister, Mir Hussein Mousavi.

The first plane load of U.S.-built military equipment was shipped in early September by the Israelis, with U.S. officials aware of but not interfering with the plan. The plane flew from Israel to Iran via Portugal, but the Iranians said they could not deliver hostages and instead sent a \$10 million check through the Iranian businessman to pay for the material. The Israelis, according to Newsweek magazine, returned the check and demanded release of hostages. The Iranians responded that they needed additional arms, and a second plane load was dispatched.

On Saturday, Sept. 14, the second plane left Iran; Weir was released that day. The White House, according to sources, had expected release of all five Americans believed held in Lebanon by the pro-Iranian Islamic Jihad. A sixth hostage, U.S. diplomat William Buckley, had been killed earlier, according to Islamic Jihad statements.

In hopes that others would be freed, the president waited until Thursday, Sept. 18, to announce Weir's release.

In one of many unexplained episodes involving the hostages, Marion G. (Pat) Robertson, in a television interview with Reagan on his Christian Broadcasting Network the next day, Sept. 19, told the president: "Word reached us that a member of the White House staff was dispatched on Sunday [the day after Weir's release], I believe, to Iran to seek the release of the remaining [hostages]."

Reagan replied that "I can't really talk about what we are doing." His aides at that time refused to confirm or deny Robertson's assertion. One official familiar with the Weir release said yesterday he had not heard of anyone going to Tehran at that time. White House spokesmen refused to discuss the matter.

In the wake of Weir's return, Reagan called Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres to thank him for Israeli cooperation, according to Israeli and U.S. sources.

In succeeding months, the Israeli arms dealers suggested another try at freeing the hostages. In December 1985 and January 1986, an interagency review of U.S. policies toward Iran was conducted because McFarlane believed that Iran, strategically located near the Persian Gulf, was threatened by Soviet expansionism and perhaps ready to tilt back toward the West.

Although McFarlane had left the government for personal reasons on Dec. 4, he continued to participate in the discussions on Iran. At one point he met in London with the Israeli arms dealers and reported to the White House that if there were to be future arms shipments, they should not go through that channel.

About that time, Peres, also told Washington that the continued use of Israeli arms dealers would be too dangerous.

At a January meeting in the White House, the president and his top advisers decided that it was important to make contacts in Tehran. Supporting this decision was a belief that Tehran was increasingly fearful of Moscow and needed special U.S. equipment to keep its U.S.-made aircraft—particularly the F14 Tomcat—and sophisticated air defense systems working.

It was then that Reagan approved a secret plan to explore contacts with Iran but agreed to cut off discussion of an arms deal.

By April, however, Reagan had changed his mind and ordered an arms channel to be opened. One source said new "feelers" had been put out by Tehran; others said Reagan had been influenced by his concern for the hostages and the public pressures created by their families. Reagan was also said to hope that the United States could eventually reestablish electronic "eavesdropping posts" in Iran to listen to Soviet missile facilities. Those posts were lost after the Iranian revolution in 1978.

Reagan called Peres and asked that a new channel be opened for further arms shipments. Peres offered the use of an aide familiar with Israeli antiterrorism contacts.

Reagan also reportedly offered to establish a system under which Israel would be resupplied with military items sent to Iran. Items sent to Iran that Israel did not possess—including F14 parts—would be shipped to Israel as part of its military aid program and then turned over to Iran.

Although the shipments were relatively small, the items were considered critical to Iran. Although the military supplies have repeatedly been called "defensive" by administration spokesmen, one knowledgeable official said they included some offensive munitions.

In approving arms shipments, Reagan also ordered that, with the exception of Shultz and Weinberger, officials of the State and Defense departments be kept unaware of the program. Furthermore, the Central Intelligence Agency was to be bypassed in order to keep Congress in the dark.

In May, McFarlane was told by his successor, Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, that contacts since his departure from the White House had paved the way for a trip to Tehran and face-to-face talks with top officials of the Khomeini regime.

McFarlane traveled to Tehran with Lt. Col. Oliver North of the National Security Council staff, who had supervised the resumed arms shipments for the White House. They flew in a cargo plane carrying military spare parts, although one source said McFarlane was not aware, prior to that time, of Reagan's resumption of arms shipments.

McFarlane mistakenly thought that all the U.S. hostages would be freed before his plane landed. He thought talks would be totally focused on such political goals as ending Iran's support for terrorism, searching for a way to conclude the gulf war and discussing resumption of relations.

Instead, he found the Iranians wanted to discuss terms for releasing the hostages, including not only arms but U.S. help in getting the terrorists imprisoned in Kuwait freed.

Two weeks later, Reagan said, in response from an appeal from a hos-

tage family, that an avenue for getting all five released "didn't work out," causing him "great disappointment."

Additional secret shipments were sent in July. Late that month the Rev. Lawrence Martin Jenco was released. In late October, another shipment was sent, and on Nov. 2, David Jacobsen was released. The secret diplomacy became public last week, however, when as part of the political infighting in Tehran, an Iranian official leaked a version of the McFarlane visit to a Lebanese magazine.