

WASHINGTON James Reston

Who's in Charge Anyway?

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During the Bay of Pigs disaster, President Kennedy, irritated by the opposition of the State Department, turned on Ambassador Charles E. (Chip) Bohlen and demanded to know, "What's wrong with your department?" Bohlen replied, "You are, Mr. President!"

Secretary of State Shultz, caught between his personal honesty and his loyalty to President Reagan, was less candid during the recent Iranian flap but was getting at much the same point.

Bohlen was saying, with the utmost respect, that foreign policy was too complicated and too dangerous to be left to the whims of Presidents. Nobody questioned the President's authority as Commander in Chief, Bohlen thought, but everything depended on how he exercised that authority and where he sought advice in making his decisions.

Kennedy relied on the Central Intelligence Agency at the Bay of Pigs and failed; he took the entire Government foreign policy establishment into his confidence during the Cuban missile crisis and succeeded.

It's not always so, but President Johnson on Vietnam, President Nixon on Watergate and President Carter in the first Iranian crisis all brushed aside the doubts of the professionals to their regret. Likewise, President Reagan went back to Iran with military arms without the knowledge of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, against the advice of the Secretaries of State and Defense, and without consulting with Congress in advance.

The President has dealt with this latest blunder after his fashion. He has denied that he has done anything wrong and says he won't do it again.

A private White House government

He ignored Mr. Shultz's advice and is now taking it. He vilified the Democrats during the Congressional elections, and evaded them on Iran, and is now calling for their support.

One can only hope that he gets it, for nothing could be worse than leaving the conduct of foreign policy in the next two years to the collective judgment of a divided Democratic Party running wild toward the Presidential election of 1988.

The President will, however, have to pay more respect to the responsibilities of the Secretary of State, unless he is willing to lose him. And he must rein in the C.I.A. and the subversive operations of the National Security Council unless he wants a running battle with Congress over the next 24 months.

He is now on his fourth national security adviser in six years, and Admiral Poindexter, his latest, is not the pride of the Ship of State. He is the officer who misled the press on the invasion of Grenada, and is the author of the "disinformation" program on Libya.

There is no evidence that the National Security Act, establishing the N.S.C., gave that body authority to engage in covert operations in Iran or anywhere else. It started with a staff of 10 and now has over 100 beyond the call of Congress.

It was authorized "to assess and appraise the objectives, commitments and risks of the United States in relation to our actual and political military power; and (2) to consider policies on matters of common interest to the departments and agencies of the government concerned with the national security, and to make recommendations to the President in connection therewith."

Nothing there to justify Bud McFarlane and Colonel North carrying weapons to Iran, armed with false passports and official lies.

This private government within the White House, however, is the President's personal responsibility. If the C.I.A. mines the harbors of Nicaragua and the United States refuses to explain this to the World Court, that can be done only with a wink and a nod from the President.

It may be, therefore, that something useful will come out of the Iranian embarrassment. For years now, the C.I.A. and the National Security Council have been skirting the law, trying to achieve by covert action what they cannot justify or explain to Congress.

The result is that there is now a crisis of confidence in the Government precisely at a time of critical negotiations over the control of nuclear weapons and control of the budget, now in alarming deficit.

This has been a topic of private anxiety here for years. It has poisoned relations between the White House and Capitol Hill and even personal relations between members of the Cabinet. But the facts are beginning to come out, and despite all the official arts of television propaganda, even the people are beginning to notice. □