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# White House Taping System Disclosed

## *Computer and Audio Recordings May Contain Data on Iran Deal*

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A sophisticated White House communications system that can record some telephone calls and meetings and preserve messages and documents written on National Security Council computer terminals may contain information on the secret Iran arms affair, informed sources said yesterday.

The high-quality taping system in the White House Situation Room was used to record some of President Reagan's key foreign policy meetings, according to one source with firsthand knowledge. This source, however, did not know if any meetings relating to the Iran arms deals were taped.

Another official said the Situation Room taping system has been used by the president for telephone conversations with heads of state when there might be problems in the translation of foreign languages.

White House spokesman Daniel Howard said last night that the president's phone calls with foreign leaders occasionally were recorded. Howard also said that the only audio recording system in the basement Situation Room is part of a video system connected with the Defense Department that has only been used in tests.

Several of the key presidential meetings on the secret Iran initiative were held in the Situation Room, including a Jan. 7 meeting of the president's National Security Planning Group during which Secretary of State George P. Shultz said he argued against a proposal to sell arms directly to Iran, the sources said.

The White House electronics system includes a computer network used for interoffice communications by members of the National Security Council, including Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, who was fired from the NSC staff last month for his role in the Iran arms-contra aid affair.

North used the computer system extensively, according to sources.

Sources said the White House decision to modernize and install taping systems followed the March 30, 1981, assassination attempt on Reagan. At the time, there was confusion over what various senior officials, particularly then-Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., said and did in the Situation Room. Senior members of the White House staff realized the need to have a verbatim record during a crisis, sources said.

North, who is central to the investigation into secret arms sales to Iran and the diversion of proceeds to aid the Nicaraguan rebels, frequently worked out of the Situation Room. One source who worked with him said that North used the Situation Room as a kind of second office. The room has secure communications that North and others used during terrorist incidents.

Though small, the Situation Room is effectively the White House crisis management center, and senior officials tend to gravitate there during a crisis, as they did immediately after the president was shot in 1981.

In the last part of Reagan's first term, sources said, Richard S. Beal, the senior director of crisis management support and planning for the NSC, supervised a modernization of communications equipment in the White House. It included a secure computer system used extensively by NSC staff aides to communicate with each other and with U.S. intelligence agencies. The system stores and can compartmentalize sensitive information, the sources said.

"It was technology gone bonkers," said one source. "Electronically everything was hooked into everything else." Beal, who died of a heart condition in 1984 at the age of 38, also oversaw installation of a tape recording system for room conversations and telephone calls in

the large crisis management center in Room 208 of the Old Executive Office Building next to the White House, the sources said.

Beal also did communications work for the Central Intelligence Agency, the sources said.

During the Watergate scandal of 1972-74, the revelation that tape recordings were made of conversations in the Oval Office led to a legal battle over access to the tapes. The conflict was finally resolved by the Supreme Court, and ultimately led to the downfall of President Richard M. Nixon.

Nixon's system was "voice-activated," meaning the tape recorders were automatically turned on whenever someone spoke or a sound was made. Sources said the current system in the Situation Room has to be turned on manually each time it is used.

The NSC computer system's central memory, sources said, might provide investigators with information on NSC operations, and possibly the Iran-arms and contra-aid affair even though information was kept within a small group in the NSC.

It could not be determined yesterday what kind of system the NSC used to preserve information within the computer network, or whether the technical capabilities would allow investigators to retrieve data that once may have existed in the system.

One source said NSC staff members had great confidence in the security of the computer system, and internal NSC messages called "PROFS" and other documents could be restricted to those granted access to special operations.

Officials said that it is common to have a taping system in an operations or crisis management center, and that similar systems are employed by the Pentagon, other military commands and some intelligence agency operations centers.

"You may have to play back something to check," one official said, "or a military order may have to be given, or there may not be time to execute the proper document."

The spring 1986 issue of The Washington Quarterly published a series of articles entitled "What Hath the Computer Wrought?" in which Beal was quoted on his work at the White House: "When I arrived, the White House had a great big corner office without technology . . . . We spend billions and billions of dollars to collect information to get it from the field to an analyst in the bowels of the bureaucracy . . . . We spend virtually nothing on direct support to a senior-level policymaker."

White House spokesman Howard's statement last night said:

"There is a set procedure for presidential telephone calls with heads of state. The procedure involves initial contacts by staff members on both sides for the arrangement of the proper day and time for such a call. Once the call is initiated, the appropriate NSC staff member responsible for the geographic region of the call usually sits in on the call with the president's knowledge and that of the other party in order to produce a written record of the conversation. In addition, at times a translator may be present on the call to handle language problems.

"There is a fail-safe procedure using a recorder which has been used to monitor the conversation on a few occasions when a staffer and/or translator was not available. This, or a similar recording system, has been in place since the creation of the Situation Room in the early 1960s. There is also a secure video link-up between the Situation Room proper and the National Military Command Center. This system is to be used only in national emergencies. It has never been used operationally. It has been used only in testing exercises since its installation about 10 years ago."

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*Staff researcher Barbara Feinman contributed to this report.*

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