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Washington's Cowboys

As news of secret U.S. dealings with Iran began to appear last week, attention inexorably turned to a cluster of suites in the Old Executive Office Building next door to the White House. They house a select band of globe-trotting staffers of the National Security Council, the executive agency that coordinates U.S. defense and foreign-affairs activities. Known for its bravado and love of derring-do, the small group conceived and ran the secret talks with Iran. While the group is part of a crisis-management team within the 46-person NSC staff, its free-wheeling style has led Washington insiders to call its members the "cowboys."

The most prominent is Lieut. Colonel Oliver North, 43, a Marine who earned the Silver Star and two Purple Hearts—among other medals—in the Viet Nam War. He is deputy director for political-military affairs on the NSC. A close friend and military comrade of former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane, North arouses strong emotions in people. "Nobody can be indifferent to Ollie," says the wife of a top foreign diplomat. "Either you love him, or you hate him with a passion."

Since he joined the NSC in 1981, North has handled many highly sensitive missions. After the 1983 Beirut bombing that killed 241 U.S. Marines, North led the hunt for those responsi-

ble. The chief suspect, however, managed to escape. When terrorists seized the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship off the coast of Egypt last year, North arranged the midair interception of an Egypt-Air jet carrying Abul Abbas, the mastermind of the hijacking, to safety in Tunisia. North helped plan the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada and last April's Libyan air raid. It was not surprising that North turned up in Cyprus last week just when Released Hostage David Jacobsen arrived there. "Oliver North is the prototype of the modern American hero," says a friend and colleague. "Wherever and whenever Americans are in trouble, sooner or later you will see him at the scene."

Yet North's global troubleshooting has sometimes landed him in trouble. As head of NSC operations in Central America, he organized a private supply network that provided aid to the *contra* rebels seeking to oust the Marxist Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Senate and House committees investigated North's role last year, but found no proof that he had violated a U.S. law regulating aid to the *contras*. The colonel's name briefly surfaced again last month when Gunrunner Eugene Hasenfus was captured in Nicaragua after his plane was shot down while he was flying weapons to the *contras*. A card found in the wreckage belonged to a businessman thought to have links to North.

A confirmed workaholic, North regularly puts in 16-to-18-hour days while in Washington. He dislikes paperwork, and once grouched to a friend, "Every time a terrorist fires a bullet, we have to fill out a pile of papers." Colleagues quip that North's real power comes from two office computers hooked into the major U.S. intelligence-gathering agencies, and from a secure telephone line that he uses for classified conversations. For his own protection, the slender officer is rarely photographed or quoted in news accounts. "He is there to serve the President, and that is it," a colleague says.

Like North, the rest of the cowboys tend to be hard-line conservatives who crave adventure and seem to generate controversy. Howard Teicher, 35, a respected expert on the Middle East, recently emerged as a source of a Washington disinformation campaign designed to suggest, among other things, that the U.S. was planning military moves against Libya. The Administration caused a furor last month when it admitted that the reports were false.

Teicher, who speaks fluent Hebrew, caused another flap five years ago when he tried to publish a fictionalized account of Israel's nuclear secrets. The manuscript was confiscated by the Israeli military censor, and Teicher did not seek to publish it elsewhere.

Another zealous cowboy is Vince Cannistraro, 41, a twelve-year veteran of the CIA. He took over Central American opera-

tions from North last spring after first being responsible for operations in Africa. He has directed the channeling of weapons and aid to Jonas Savimbi's UNITA rebels fighting the Marxist regime in Angola. Insiders say Cannistraro managed to supply Savimbi with more arms than the White House originally intended. A quiet official who joined the NSC in 1983, Cannistraro has helped funnel supplies to the *mujahedin* guerrillas at war with the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan.

Other members of the crisis-management team are more shadowy figures. Robert Earle, 42, a Marine lieutenant colonel and Rhodes scholar, joined the staff from the CIA last year and now serves as North's deputy. He meets regularly with foreign counterterrorist experts and coordinates operations with them. Craig Coy, 36, a Coast Guard commander, joined the NSC after serving on a White House terror task force. Lieut. Colonel Jim Stark, 38, worked with North in planning last spring's Libyan air raid. He is considered to be more disciplined than his sometimes freebooting colleagues, while sharing their tough-minded attitudes.

The crisis-management cowboys, of course, have attracted critics, and their methods are often questioned. One congressional staffer calls North a "ruthless operator." But if the cowboys sometimes appear to ride roughshod, NSC officials say, they are only carrying out Administration policies. —By John Greenwald.

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