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Fickle winds favor Weinberger after a stormy passage

By James M. Dorsey
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Untarnished by the Iran-Contra affair, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger is reaping the harvest of his foresight and his loyalty to President Reagan.

Since the scandal broke in November, a paradoxical calm seems to have settled over Mr. Weinberger's sometimes stormy tenure, and he has consolidated his position in the administration's internal defense debate.

Recently, he has argued vigorously and with some success for a reinterpretation of the 1972 anti-ballistic missile treaty so the United States can test proposed weapons systems in space. Mr. Weinberger also is urging Mr. Reagan to endorse early deployment of the Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly known as "star wars."

"Weinberger has quietly been making gains," said Kim Holmes, a foreign policy expert with the Heritage Foundation.

Critics argue, however, that it is too early to say he is in the ascendancy.

"Weinberger is talking about short-term deployment of SDI, but

he's got nothing to show yet," said John Steinbrunner, director of the foreign policy studies program at the the Brookings Institution. "Ascendancy should be based on something more substantive than that."

Mr. Holmes said Mr. Weinberger had won support for early SDI deployment within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, but had yet to lobby the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who apparently remain skeptical of his proposals.

Nevertheless, Pentagon officials and analysts attribute Mr. Weinberger's enhanced stature within the administration to:

- his unquestioned loyalty and longstanding ties to Mr. Reagan;
- his intuition that the bungled attempts to woo Iran with arms would end in failure;

- the appointment of one of his closest associates, Frank Carlucci, as Mr. Reagan's national security adviser;

- the defense secretary's improved relations with Congress despite Democratic control of the Hill; and

- Secretary of State George Shultz' perceived attempt to dis-

tance himself from the administration regarding the sale of arms to Iran.

Although the arms sold to Iran originated in Pentagon depots, Mr. Weinberger, 69, has remained aloof from much of the infighting characterizing the affair.

The defense secretary advised Mr. Reagan against selling weapons to Tehran and dismissed as "absurd" a CIA report citing evidence that the Soviet Union was ready to exploit a power struggle inside Iran.

He pronounced himself "horri-fied" to learn that proceeds from the sales had been diverted to the Nicaraguan resistance.

But Mr. Weinberger's reaction has never been to say, "I told you so."

"Weinberger probably fits the ideal role model of a Cabinet officer at a time that the president is under attack," said one of the secretary's aides. "His reservations about the Iran policy were known, but he hasn't tried to rub anyone's nose in the mud."

"Weinberger was simply following orders from the White House," said James Hackett, editor of the Heritage Foundation's National Security Record.

Unlike Mr. Shultz, Mr. Weinberger has avoided discussions of the degree to which he was aware of

America's secret dealings with Iran and the diversion of funds to the Contras.

Mr. Shultz and former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane have clashed publicly over the extent of the secretary of state's knowledge of the secret efforts to improve relations with Iran and achieve the release of Americans held hostage in Lebanon.

"Shultz has been damaged by his lack of public support for the president on Iran," said Mr. Holmes. "That has helped Weinberger."

Mr. Weinberger's aides say White House reaction to the secretary's speech last month to the National Press Club is an indication of his current stature within the administration. Mr. Weinberger argued then that Mr. Reagan should be allowed to pursue his agenda despite the Iran-Contra affair.

"His speech was well-received," said one aide. "The president ordered that hundreds of copies of the speech be distributed through White House channels.

"His loyalty to the president was always well-known, but now it is being appreciated in the White House," the aide said.

It has not always been so.

Mr. Weinberger was cut out of U.S.-Soviet summit meetings in 1985 and 1986, illustrating the difficulty he once had in getting a hearing in the Oval Office.

During Mr. McFarlane's tenure as national security adviser, Mr. Weinberger was excluded from White House meetings and his advice often ignored.

"Things began to change with McFarlane's departure," said an aide to the defense secretary. "Weinberger now has regular one-on-one meetings with the president."

Mr. Carlucci, a former deputy under Mr. Weinberger and Mr. Reagan's new national security adviser, has helped pave the way for the secretary.

"Weinberger is now being given due treatment," said a senior Pentagon official. "That's all he ever asked for."

Earlier this month, Mr. Shultz publicly shifted his position on SDI a long way toward Mr. Weinberger's view. Since then, the Pentagon has been careful to downplay the deep divisions between the two on arms control issues.

"There are greater differences of opinion between the subordinates in

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the Pentagon and those in the State Department than there are between Weinberger and Shultz," said one Pentagon official. "The bureaucracies like to put their own spin on whatever their bosses' views are."

But officials and analysts doubt whether Mr. Weinberger and Mr. Shultz have really buried their differences. A possible litmus test, they say, will be their responses to new arms control proposals expected soon from Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

"Weinberger has the best interests of the nation in mind while Shultz has to take the international community into account," added a Pentagon official.

Said Sen. John Warner, Virginia Republican and a former secretary of the Navy: "There has always been a turf war between State and Defense and there will always be one."

Officials and analysts predict Mr. Weinberger will feel the absence of William Casey in future battles within the administration. The ailing Mr. Casey resigned this month as CIA director and his deputy, Robert Gates, has been nominated.

"Gates is a career man with whom the conservatives are satisfied, but who will not support Weinberger as strongly as Casey did," Mr. Holmes said.

"The jury is still out on whether Weinberger has gained more influence overall," Mr. Hackett said.

One indication of Mr. Weinberger's stature, according to officials and analysts, will be the fate of the 1988 budget the secretary presented to Congress. Mr. Weinberger's \$303 billion defense spending plan calls for a 3 percent increase.

Said one official: "Although the Democrats are in the majority, Weinberger is no longer being perceived as ineffective on the Hill, and his budget proposals are seen as realistic."

"In fact, members of Congress now come to Weinberger, asking him to use his influence with the president."