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A Moment's Peace

In the old days, when Howard H. Baker Jr. spoke at the White House as Senate majority leader, he had to please 55 Republicans. The outer branches of his flock, Lowell P. Weicker Jr. (R-Conn.) and Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), were never satisfied, but the center was.

Now, as White House chief of staff, he has a constituency of one—er, make that two. Nancy Reagan has established herself as the steel in the Oval Office. When her husband blanched at firing Donald T. Regan, she said to him in effect, as Lady Macbeth to her lord, "Oh, infirm of purpose, give me the daggers." When Regan was at length dispatched, the First Lady crowed in a public statement.

Baker, a small and exceptionally pleasant man, when asked at his first press briefing whether he had conferred with Nancy Reagan, laughed: "I intend to, later today." At the sound of a nearby ringing, he chuckled, "And there is the phone now."

Republicans, in despair over the loss of Ronald Reagan's magic, hail the advent of Baker as nothing less than a miracle. Their mood changed as dramatically as the weather over the weekend. The raw cold of winter gave way to a day of dazzling sunshine and soft breezes; even the endless Sunday talk-show discussion of the Tower commission report could not dampen the wild hopes brought by Baker's arrival. The president, they said, had been "scared straight" by its deferentially stated findings.

With Baker, the Republicans know that communication had been restored to the White House along with humor and reason. Their calls would be returned, their advice respectfully heard. When Regan left, so did all the bad trips of the last two years—Bitburg, Reykjavik, Iran.

Gone is high-handedness, scorn, braggadocio. Baker, from the hard school of the Senate, is used to dissenting opinions, conflicting egos, collapsing agreements. His patience in the face of snags, delays, tantrums, is legendary.

His first day in his new place of business brought a disappointment. The withdrawal of Robert M. Gates as the new CIA director was arranged without much sweat. The hope of announcing another candidate fell through—explaining three postponements of his first briefing.

Republicans see the miracle man guiding the party back into the sunlight, Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) emerging as the consensus presidential nominee,

Baker slated for secretary of state in the Dole administration. It's blue skies from now on. The Tower commission, they tell themselves, has done its worst; independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh and the two congressional committees will be dispensing anticlimax.

It is springtime until they think about the second half of the commission's report, and then the biting winds begin to blow. The first half, which is about the Iranian arms deal, is awkward, but not basically unmanageable. Sure, everyone agrees, it was mad even to think about selling arms to the ayatollah, but at least there was a commendable human motive. Everyone knows that the Gipper is a soft touch for a hard-luck story, and who's going to stay mad at him for wanting to spring the hostages at any cost? The appeals of the families tore him up.

But the diversion of the arms profits to the contras is another chilling story. The money belonged to the U.S. Treasury, not to Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, who saw to its disbursement. It was a violation of the law to send lethal aid to the contras.

The president can say he knew nothing about it. And he has. The Tower commission, without the power of the subpoena or the grand jury, without the testimony of the two principals, could not begin to trace the money, most of which disappeared.

The Tower commission really did not go into it, and would have come up empty except that a young computer genius on its staff discovered buried treasure—the messages that Poindexter and North, indefatigable correspondents both, sent each other on their terminals.

North was not the free-booter of initial White House issue. He was a docile subordinate, reporting his every move to his superior, Poindexter. The swashbuckler followed the rules of the service while breaking the law of the land. He reported to Poindexter. And Poindexter reported to whom?

North, in the most radioactive paragraph in the Tower commission report, writes, "The president obviously knows why he had been meeting with several select people to thank them for their support for democracy in CentAm."

When the music occasioned by his arrival stops, Baker may find himself spending much of his time trying to answer the question he made immortal during his service on the Watergate committee: "What did the president know, and when did he know it?"