

North: Reagan 'Knew Everything'

Former Aide's Book Alleges White House Iran-Contra Coverup

By George Lardner Jr.
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Oliver L. North, in a new book called "Under Fire," says that he is now convinced Ronald Reagan "knew everything" about the Iran-contra scandal when he was president and that the White House began an elaborate coverup to protect him several weeks before the scandal broke in 1986.

North accused Reagan of being untruthful in his memoirs and said he has no doubt that the former president was not only fully aware of the diversion of Iranian arms sales profits to the contra rebels in Nicaragua, but also that he approved it "enthusiastically."

In an excerpt published in this week's editions of Time magazine, North suggested that the notorious "diversion" was itself a "diversion," made public to draw attention away from "what else the President and his top advisers had known about and approved."

The former White House aide offers no hard evidence to support his assertions about Reagan, but instead tries to build a circumstantial case, including details about previously undisclosed attempts to get him to exonerate the president.

Reagan's office in California did not respond to phone calls yesterday. In a story appearing with the excerpt, Time quoted a spokesperson as saying the former president was traveling abroad last week and was "unavailable for comment."

Saying that he sometimes feels betrayed, North, 48, wrote that he is still "very glad" Reagan was president for two terms, but added that Reagan could have ended "years of suffering for me and my family—by granting a pardon or shutting down the office of special prosecutor."

"Is that betrayal?" North wrote. "Well, it sure as hell wasn't supportive."

The 446-page book, written in tight secrecy with William Novak, is being published by HarperCollins and is expected in bookstores by the end of the week.

As straw boss at the National Security Council for the covert arms-for-hostages deals with Iran and the secret contra resupply network,



OLIVER L. NORTH
... tries to build circumstantial case

North recalled watching with incredulity as President Reagan and then-Attorney General Edwin Meese III announced the scandal on nationwide television on Nov. 25, 1986.

He said he expected to leave "or maybe even be fired," as a result of warnings he got from CIA Director William J. Casey following the crash of a contra resupply plane over Nicaragua on Oct. 5, 1986. But North said he was stunned when Meese announced there might be some "criminality involved."

Reagan wrote in his memoirs that after the scandal broke, "we sent word" to lawyers for North and former national security adviser John M. Poindexter stating that "I wanted them to tell the entire truth and do nothing to protect me."

North said his lawyers received no such message. "The only message I heard," he said, "was 'exonerate the President.'"

For instance, North said that on Dec. 11, 1986, Texas entrepreneur H. Ross Perot met with North lawyer Brendan V. Sullivan Jr. and told him: "Look, why doesn't Ollie just end this thing and explain to the FBI that the President didn't know. If he goes to jail, I'll take care of his family. And I'll be happy to give him a job when he gets out."

Perot told The Washington Post in 1987 that he offered to take care of both North and Poindexter if

they would "step forward and tell everything, full disclosure."

A few days later, on Dec. 17, North said, a military aide to then Vice President Bush visited him and Sullivan and "suggested that I waive my Fifth Amendment rights and absolve the President of responsibility. . . . Had this officer been sent? Had he come on his own? I still don't know."

The reported Dec. 17 visit came a day after the Senate intelligence committee spurned as premature a Reagan request that the panel give North and Poindexter immunity from prosecution in return for their testimony.

According to North, coverup efforts on the president's behalf began shortly after the Iranian arms deals had been exposed by a Beirut magazine in early November. Fearful of another Watergate, "somebody—probably Donald T. Regan, the White House chief of staff, or Nancy Reagan—decided that there could not be even the hint of a cover-up," North wrote.

As result, the scandal was revealed by the White House itself,

but with the focus "almost exclusively on the 'diversion.'"

"There was certainly a lot to be gained by presenting it that way," North said. ". . . [I]f the press and public focused on that, then maybe you didn't have another Watergate on your hands after all. Especially if you insisted that the President knew nothing about it."

From the outset, North said, the president, Regan and Poindexter "studiously avoided any mention of our involvement" in 1985 arms shipments to Iran, at least partly because a belated Reagan "finding" approving them made plain they were straight arms-for-hostages deals, something Regan was now denying.

The president, North said, "pointedly omitted" any reference to his approval of the shipments in a Nov. 12, 1986, meeting at the White House with congressional leaders. "From then on, the Pres-

ident and his senior advisers were committed to this version of events," North said.

At the National Security Council, North was assigned to drawing up a chronology of the Iran initiative, but he said former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane intervened and "totally altered the facts" so that the chronology coincided with the president's statements.

North said the approaches by Perot, by the aide to Bush, and a similar one in January 1987 by former senator and Reagan friend Paul Laxalt may have been "part of a pattern" that began with a phone call from Reagan himself shortly after the Meese's Nov. 25 press conference.

North said he was sorry about the collapse of the Iranian initiative. He said Reagan told him, "Ollie, you have to understand, I just didn't know."

Reagan could have just said, "Ollie, why didn't you tell me about the diversion?" North wrote. "I now wonder whether he was alone when he made that call. . . . He was almost always scripted."

North also disclosed what he called the "smoking gun in the closet" tape, inexplicably picked up on June 17, 1987, during routine recording of a conversation between two Citibank employees in New York. Two unidentified men were picked up, too, and North said it was clear that one of the men had testified before the congressional Iran-contra committees.

In one exchange, according to North's book, a voice is heard saying, "there's a smoking gun in the closet. Reagan knows. . . . Reagan has all the memos." The other voice said: "He's got all the memos? I thought he tore all that stuff up."

North said his lawyers got the tape from independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh before his 1989 trial but were unable to use it because they could not identify the voices. Sources said Walsh's office, and the FBI made efforts to match the voices with recordings of likely candidates, but were unsuccessful.

North was convicted on three felony counts, but one was reversed on appeal and all charges were dropped last month at Walsh's request. He said he could not show that all the testimony at North's trial had been untainted by the immunized testimony North gave to Congress in the summer of 1987.