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OLLIE'S NEXT MISSION

Seven years after Iran-Contra, Oliver North is a very wealthy man launching a run for the U.S. Senate—but guess who won't be supporting him?

BY JEFFREY TOOBIN

THE Iran-Contra affair. Say the words and your heart sinks. So complicated, so obscure. Arms for hostages, that much was pretty clear, but how did the cake and the Bible fit in? Didn't Ollie North take a cake to Iran—or was it a potted plant? Shredding: that was Iran-Contra—we remember that. We remember Fawn Hall, but Richard Secord and Albert Hakim? Who really knew the difference, and did it matter? What did?

This national befuddlement, the general indifference, started early. In January of 1987, just a few weeks after Attorney General Edwin Meese III announced that some of the money from illegal arms sales to Iran had been diverted to support the Nicaraguan Contras, I was hired as a junior prosecutor on the staff of Lawrence E. Walsh, the independent counsel who conducted the criminal investigation of the Iran-Contra affair. My friends reacted with unanimity. “What a great job!” they'd say. And then, after a pause, they'd add, a little embarrassed, “You know, I haven't really followed this one as closely as I did Watergate.” I worked on Walsh's staff for two and a half years, and left on May 4, 1989, the day that North was convicted of three of the twelve felony charges against him. Throughout, the feeling had lingered that we Iran-Contra aficionados were grasping at the coattails of a fleeing nation. “Hey, come back here!” we'd shout. “This is important! Pay attention!”

But, if Iran-Contra never really took hold in this country, it never really disappeared, either, and as 1993 comes to an end it is reemerging with a vengeance.

The release of Walsh's final report, which contains the findings of nearly seven years of investigation, is imminent. More important, the most celebrated figure in the Iran-Contra affair is preparing to storm back into public view. Shortly after the New Year, Oliver North will officially declare his candidacy for the Republican nomination to the United States



In 1990, North founded Freedom Alliance. It has raised nearly nine million dollars—and spent the bulk of it promoting him.

Senate from Virginia. North is no dabbler, and his campaign in no way resembles the halfhearted attempts of many celebrities—from Norman Mailer to Maureen Reagan—to transform renown into votes. “Ollie did about a hundred political events around the state in 1992 and more than that in 1993,” Mark Merritt, who has been North's political aide since

VICTOR JIHASZ



"I'm sorry I scratched you, but you had me in a corner."

1990, told me. "Our rule was that we went to everything, from the statewide convention to the smallest fund-raisers for candidates for the House of Delegates." As a result of those efforts—and his enormous name recognition—North will enter the race as the favorite for the Republican nomination. The Democrats, for their part, are divided and weak. The incumbent senator, Charles S. Robb, has been dogged for much of his term by afflictions concerning libido and law. He must now face a Democratic-primary challenge from L. Douglas Wilder, the Virginian who in 1989 became the nation's first black elected governor. In polls taken last August by Mason-Dixon Political/Media Research, the latest surveys available, North trailed Robb in a head-to-head race by only nine percentage points. In a race with Wilder, North led by one point. More recent developments have perhaps enhanced North's chances: the Republican George Allen won a landslide victory in last November's race for governor. According to more than a few independent experts on Virginia politics, North stands about an even chance of winning next November.

I spent much of the fall following North around the country to learn how the "new" North compared with the one I'd known. For two people who never

officially met, we have had a complicated relationship. Though I worked on Walsh's staff—and principally on the case against North himself—our connection was not exclusively one of predator and prey. After I left Walsh's staff, I wrote a book about my experiences. For a variety of reasons, including concern about grand-jury secrecy, Walsh did not believe that I should be allowed to publish my book, and a nasty court fight between us ensued. (I won, and the book was published.) For North, then, I became the enemy of his enemy—if not exactly his friend.

In keeping with the protocol of criminal trials, North and I had never so much as shaken hands, but the proximity of a four-month trial yields an undeniable intimacy. When I first approached him, last October, after a rally for the Republican ticket in the Washington suburb of Oakton, he smiled broadly. For him, the criminal side of the case has faded into insignificance. The Court of Appeals reversed the convictions, and Walsh was compelled to drop all charges against North, so he is a completely free man. For North today, Iran-Contra is just another "issue" in the campaign, like NAFTA or health care. "Iran-Contra cuts about seventy-thirty for us," he told me during one of several talks we had, referring to polls his campaign has taken. So he greeted me as he might one of his box-



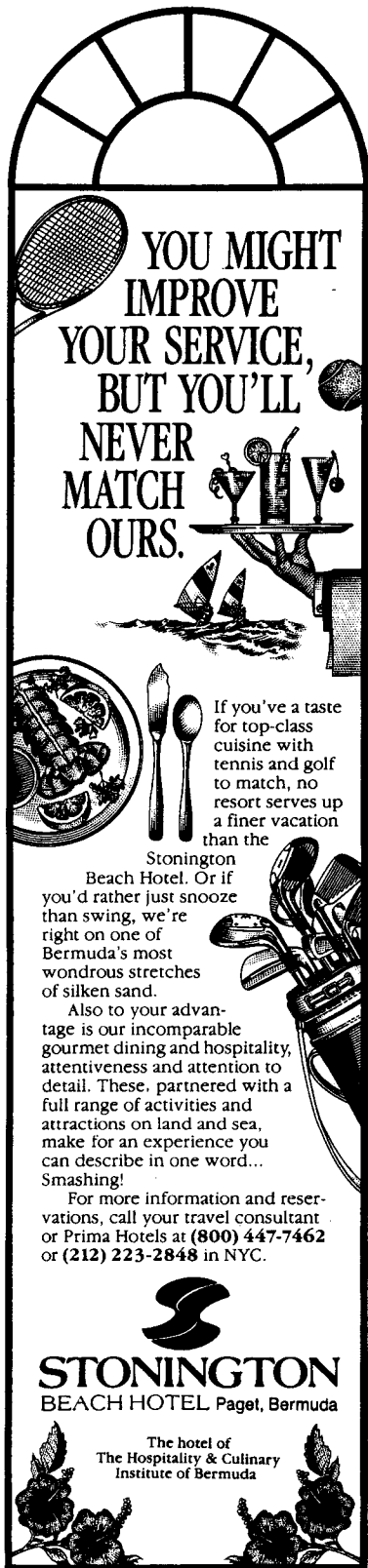
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ing opponents from his days at the Naval Academy—an old sparring partner, no harm done.

North likes to complain about what he calls his "thinning hair and thickening waistline," but on first (and second) glance he looks much the same as he did when he held Americans transfixed in front of their televisions six summers ago. As ever, his shave never quite catches up with his five-o'clock shadow, but his cheeks still have a healthy glow. His teeth are generously spaced, but his big, openmouthed smile transforms that flaw into a Huck Finn charm. He has the easy gait and slow handshake of a celebrity: he knows that people are happy to wait for him. North laughed when he heard I had long ago left Walsh and the legal profession. "You've had enough of Iran-Contra," he said, "and I've had enough of Iran-Contra." But as I learned about North's life in the nearly five years since we crossed paths it became clear that the echoes from that ultimate crisis have continued to shape him in profound and sometimes unexpected ways.

NORTH came to the National Security Council, where he served as a middle-level aide from 1981 to 1986, spectacularly unprepared for the challenges that awaited him. After the Vietnam War, and before he came to the N.S.C., his most demanding professional assignment had been to serve as the third-ranking officer commanding a Marine training center at Camp Lejeune, in North Carolina. By 1985, North was negotiating for the delivery of missiles to the government of Iran to encourage that government to help free American hostages being held in Beirut. He was also leading the Reagan Administration's secret effort to fund, arm, and command the Contra rebels as they fought a guerrilla war against the government of Nicaragua. North did not speak Arabic, Farsi, or Spanish. He was hopelessly out of his depth, almost poignantly so. A colleague at the N.S.C. once made the mistake of complaining to North about having high blood pressure. "That's not too bad," he replied. "Mine is 205 over 180." And then he pulled an eyelid down to reveal that the blood vessels in his eyes were breaking under the tremendous pressure.

Oliver North today is rather grand. He flies in a private plane and often travels with bodyguards. He is the author of

a best-selling book about his ordeal. Not a day goes by when someone doesn't ask to have a picture taken with him. He lives in a converted farmhouse, two hours' drive from the capital, for which he paid a million one hundred and seventy thousand dollars; he bought it in 1989, just after his conviction. (Two years later, he sold his former house, in McLean, Virginia, for two hundred and fifty-five thousand dollars.) A corner of an office complex in Chantilly, Virginia, near North's Senate-campaign headquarters is called Freedom Plaza, and it features a flagpole and a plaque that reads "Dedicated to Oliver North and the Freedom Fighters of the World Who Made a Stand and Paid a Price. Dedicated at Family Salute to Oliver North—September 24, 1989." While I was watching North autograph copies of his latest book at Waldenbooks, on Wall Street, he beckoned me close and whispered, "You know, Tom Clancy's pushing me to write a novel."

Money—millions upon millions of dollars—has been the leitmotif of North's life since Iran-Contra. His testimony before the congressional Iran-Contra committees in the summer of 1987 did more than make him a household name. It turned him into a magnet for money—first, for his survival, then for his political career, and, finally, just for himself.

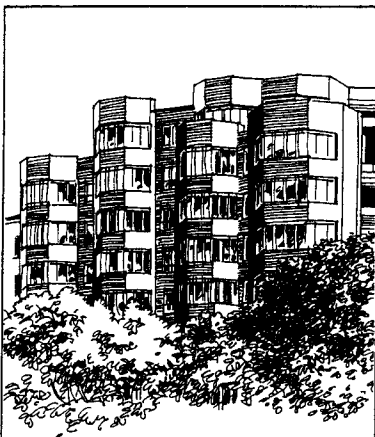
So North probably does not think very often about Mary Dix, even though she may represent the biggest difference between his old life and his new one. During North's tenure at the N.S.C., Dix served as its director of administration—that is, among other things, as the keeper of the petty-cash box. Dix's testimony about her relationship with North provided some of the most riveting moments of his trial.

"Did you have any occasions," one of the prosecutors, David Zornow, asked Dix, "to have contact with Lieutenant Colonel North regarding reimbursement for moneys that he had expended for taxi fare?"

"Yes," Dix said. "There were troubles at times in keeping money in the cashbox. . . . Colonel North would get very upset if we didn't have the cash right there when he needed it."

Zornow asked if Dix remembered any specific incidents.

"Yes," Dix replied. "There were occa-



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sions when I would be walking down the hallway to leave work at night and I would hear him yelling, 'Mary! Mary!' And he would need cash to go home; that he didn't have enough cash for gas." On two occasions, she said, North ran into her office. "His face was red, and he was very upset with my staff because they didn't have money. . . . He either would say that he didn't have enough money for gas to go home or he didn't have enough lunch money."

I thought of Mary Dix on the Indian-summer day when I drove by North's home, which is situated on a ridge along the Shenandoah River, in Clarke County, Virginia—a gorgeous stretch of land west of Washington. On an isolated stretch of the river, where the trees do lazy arabesques over the bank, Oliver North's farmhouse sits on a hundred and ninety-four acres. He named it Narnia, after the fairy-tale land of C. S. Lewis's children's books.

According to a friend, North says that his property possesses at least one unusual feature: a series of widely spaced metal grates set into the ground, which, as it turns out, top airshafts leading to the federal government's once supersecret doomsday bunker. The so-called Mount Weather facility, which is buried deep underground, was designed to house the President, the Justices of the Supreme Court, the Cabinet Secretaries, and other high-ranking government officials in the event of a nuclear war. North's penthouse at the Armageddon Inn has a security fence, as did his former home, in McLean. At his trial, North was convicted of receiving an illegal gratuity, because Richard Secord, the retired Air Force general who was running some of North's off-the-books operations at the White House, had paid fourteen thousand dollars for the fence in McLean. It was rather rinky-dink—little more than an electronic gate with an intercom—but the gate at Narnia is constructed of metal, stone, and mortar. Like North's new prosperity, this fence is built to last.


NORTH first took advantage of his popularity in April of 1988, when he established the North Legal Defense and Family Safety Trust, which was designed to pay his Iran-Contra legal fees and to provide for his personal protection. The trust organized some fund-raising events—Richard Nixon's close

friend Bebe Rebozo held one at his Florida home—but the bulk of the money was raised through direct-mail appeals. In the remaining months of 1988, according to documents on file with New York's Office of Charities Registration, the defense fund raised \$4,652,649. In 1989, the fund raised an additional \$6,487,517. By the time the fund ceased its money-raising activities, in late 1992, it had raised more than thirteen million dollars. It had also provided North with another, less obvious asset: Duane Ward, an employee of the fund and a former public-relations director for Jerry Falwell, who would eventually become a crucial figure in the securing of North's personal fortune.


North took over an inactive charitable corporation called the Interamerican Partnership, rechristened it Freedom Alliance, and started raising money anew. ("On March 22, 1990," an early Freedom Alliance brochure reads, "Ollie accepted the presidency of Freedom Alliance because he believes that all citizens blessed to live in a free country have a moral duty to work vigilantly to guard their God-given liberties.") The result was another direct-mail fund-raising bonanza. "They had the list of contributors from the defense trust, and they just mailed to the same people," I was told by a person who has worked closely with North over the past several years. "That list was pure gold."

In 1990, the Alliance raised \$3,775,225. The following year, it took in \$2,737,557, and in 1992 the total was \$2,196,197. An early North letter to potential contributors denounced both the Walsh investigation and the "increasingly imperial Congress, dominated by the far left and containing too many members mired in immoral personal behavior." As North's subsequent letters made more and more clear, his passions were those of the New Right: he decried the "arrogant army of ultra-militant feminists," "homosexual activists," and "the appalling legacy" of Justice William J. Brennan, who "used his power on the Supreme Court to conform the law of our land to meet the radical agenda of the Left." Some of North's fund-raising techniques were unconventional. After the Gulf War, Freedom Alliance mounted an appeal for funds to assist the families of Gulf War veterans. Included in the solicitations was a handsome color photograph of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the com-

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mander of Operation Desert Storm. According to Marvin Josephson, the General's agent, Schwarzkopf had not been consulted about the use of his name or his likeness. "He was very upset—really outraged—over the shameless use of his name," Josephson told *Legal Times*. (Neither Josephson nor Schwarzkopf will now comment on the matter.)

Freedom Alliance has raised nearly nine million dollars. It pays North only a modest annual salary, but it spends the great bulk of its funds promoting him. (A 1993 Alliance wall calendar mailed to contributors contained no fewer than thirty-five photographs of North—at a graduation ceremony, speeches, and book signings, and posed in front of the Jefferson Memorial.) According to the Alliance's 1992 tax return, for example, it spent about ninety-three per cent of its program budget of a million seven hundred thousand dollars on "public-policy research," "community outreach," and "public information"—all of which appear to be euphemisms for speeches by and other public-relations activities featuring North. Just seven per cent went to "military family outreach." Also in 1992, the Alliance spent thousands of dollars of contributors' money on what its annual report called the President's Roundtable—a two-day "conference," in which North and about fifty friends and contributors rented two private railroad coaches for a round-trip journey from Washington to a private

box at the Army-Navy football game in Philadelphia.

"But the real money for North came from the book—and then from Duane Ward," a person who has worked with North told me. North's autobiography, "Under Fire," was one of the great publishing success stories of the early nineteen-nineties. After an exclusive excerpt from the book was the cover story in the October 28, 1991, issue of *Time*, "Under Fire" became a best-seller. The book, published by HarperCollins, spent thirteen weeks on the *Times* best-seller list and sold a total of six hundred and twenty-five thousand copies in hardcover and paperback editions. North was also making speeches, for fees reported to run as high as twenty-five thousand dollars each, to an assortment of trade and business groups. But Duane Ward took that idea and went one better. "From his days with Falwell, Duane knew that there were lots of churches that would be happy to pay Ollie's fees to get him to speak," the person who has worked with North said. "And then Duane figured out that HarperCollins would sell North hardcover copies of 'Under Fire' for next to nothing as it was going out of print. He bought fifty or sixty thousand for less than three dollars apiece." (Neither Ward, North, nor HarperCollins would confirm the numbers or prices involved in the transaction.) After every speech he gave, North would graciously agree to autograph copies of

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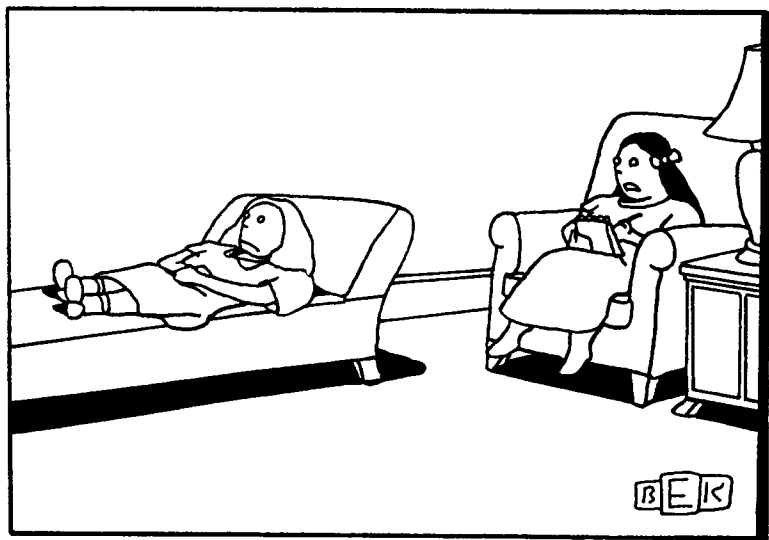


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"I find it very significant that you would rather play house."

his book at a table off to the side. The person explains, "North would sell the books to the folks for list price"—twenty-five dollars—"and make more than twenty dollars profit for every book sold. People would buy three or four copies at a time. North could sell hundreds in a night." One experience was especially memorable, this person said: "Toward the end of the Bush Administration, the Fraternal Order of Police held an event on the Mall in Washington, where North spoke. Afterward, they backed up a truck that was full of boxes and boxes of books."

North is now a very rich man. In 1992, according to the financial-disclosure form he filed in connection with his Senate race, he earned about sixty-two thousand dollars from Freedom Alliance, twenty-one thousand dollars in retirement pay from the government, and, as an author and lecturer, \$1,096,879. As of last October 6th, when North reported how much he had made in the first three quarters of 1993, he had earned amounts comparable to those he had earned in that period of the prior year from Freedom Alliance and in retirement pay, and \$602,981 from speaking fees and royalties. The form also shows that the value of North's personal financial assets—stocks, bonds, and the like—is somewhere between \$2,329,000 and \$4,760,000. More than a million dollars of that amount comes from North's stake in Guardian Technologies, a small manufacturer of bulletproof vests. North is a co-owner of Guardian with Joseph Fernandez, a fellow Iran-Contra figure, who won dismissal of an indictment for obstructing justice when the Bush Administration failed to disclose enough classified information to assure him a fair trial. Guardian and Freedom Alliance have adjoining offices.

North has spent much of November and December travelling around the country promoting his new book, "One More Mission," which is an account of his military exploits in the Vietnam War and of a trip he made back to Vietnam last April. Even as a committed Senate candidate, North remains an assiduous bookseller. He recently wrote a letter to all Freedom Alliance contributors on behalf of his Senate campaign committee. "You don't have to wait in line for *One More Mission!*" North announced. "As an expression of my gratitude for your past



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support—and as a way of helping the North for Senate Committee, I want to send you a personally autographed copy of my book *One More Mission*.” He went on to say that a minimum contribution of forty dollars to his Senate campaign was required to receive a copy of the book, which retails for twenty-two dollars. “Frankly,” North explained in his letter, “my author’s royalties are going to be our family’s principal source of income in the months ahead.”

ON the last Saturday of October, just two days before Virginia’s gubernatorial election, North nearly missed his chance to give the keynote speech before a rally of the Republican faithful of Virginia’s Dickenson County, which is near the southwestern tip of the state. Starting early that morning, a thick rag of fog settled over the county, and a steady rain soaked the region’s oak and pine forests and abandoned coal mines. Word reached Clintwood High School, the site of the rally, that North’s private plane couldn’t make it to the small landing strip nearby. Still, by two o’clock in the afternoon, the time the rally was to have started, the high-school gym was packed with nearly three hundred people—a formidable turnout in a heavily Democratic county of seventeen thousand. They had paid ten dollars apiece for speeches and a reception—ham-salad sandwiches and the local specialty, “stack cake.” Refined sugar was a luxury in the days before railroad tracks first snaked their way through the narrow valleys, so the locals grew their own sugarcane and melted it into molasses during daylong “stir-offs.” Apples were among the few other crops to flourish amid the jagged hilltops. The combination of these culinary exigencies yielded a kind of Appalachian napoleon: multiple layers of molasses-sweetened pastry and thick applesauce. Lacking speeches, the Republicans ate cake.

But North does not miss speeches. He phoned Charlie Krum, the Clintwood pharmacist who had organized the rally, and asked him where the next-nearest airport was. It turned out to be outside Bristol, Tennessee, a rugged two-hour drive from Clintwood. “Be there,” the former lieutenant colonel ordered Charlie Krum. When the word went out that Ollie was coming after all, almost no one left the building. Passing the time, some

in the crowd bought political buttons: "Dr. Jack Kevorkian for White House Physician!" and "First Hillary, Then Gennifer, NOW YOU!" and "Run Ollie Run!" It was just after four-thirty when North leaped out of Krum's van and into the gym.

North is, as the world remembers, a compelling speaker—fluid, articulate, and confident, even without a prepared text. His high, almost squeaky voice vibrates with a distinct tremble, which conveys intimacy and warmth, even in a large group. Like many politicians, he has a standard stump speech. It is high on exhortation, low on issues. "There are three things we've got to do in these last days of this campaign," he told the crowd that afternoon, in words that he had already spoken throughout the state. "We honestly have to pray. I deeply believe that. I'm living proof of the power of prayer or I wouldn't be standing here. I said that the other day down in Texas, and afterwards the chaplain of the police department came up and said, 'Son, if you're gonna pray for our President, you ought to use a Bible verse.' I said, 'Which one,

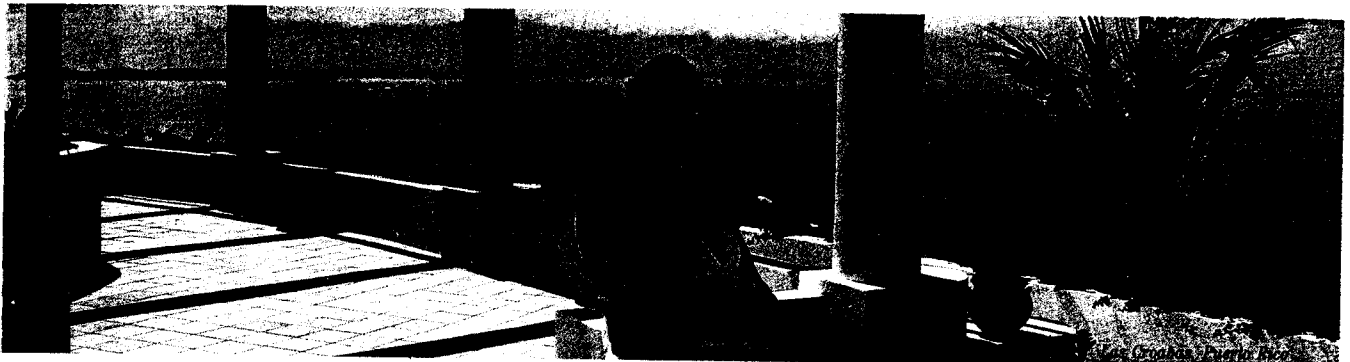
chaplain?' He said, 'It's Psalm 109, verse 8.' I said, 'Gosh, I don't have that one committed to memory, chaplain. What is it?' He said, 'No, go look it up. It'll be good for you.' I did. Psalm 109, verse 8, that he recommends for our President, reads as follows: 'May his days be few and may another take his office.'" Psalm 109, verse 8, got a big laugh. (The two other tasks were to contribute to Republican candidates and to vote on Election Day.)

Besides admonishing his supporters to pray for victory, North always lobs a few grenades at the news media. An interview he gave on G. Gordon Liddy's Washington-area radio program was typical. North told the Watergate convict turned celebrity, "You know, Gordon, I will never be forgiven, for having served in the [Reagan] Administration or having done the things that we did, by the *Washington Compost*, the *New York Crimes*, the *Reader's Digest*, or the Nasty Broadcasting Company." Every speech of North's contains at least one reference to the *Crimes*, the *Compost*, and the *Disgust*, but, even to a casual political observer, North's list of villains sounds like

a question on a standardized test: Which one does not belong? One could make a case that the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and even NBC belong on a roster of arch-liberals, but the *Reader's Digest* has reigned for decades as the grande dame of American conservatism. North's reference to the *Digest* was neither accidental nor mistaken, however. In fact, North has a very specific grievance against the *Digest*—one that reveals a fissure in the outwardly overwhelming support for his candidacy among the American Right.

THE headline on the lead story of the June, 1993, issue of the *Reader's Digest* asked, "Does Oliver North Tell the Truth?" The article, by a *Digest* staffer named Rachel Flick Wildavsky, who had interviewed many of North's former colleagues in the government, left no doubt about the answer. "Too much of what North has said and written, they believe, is false," Wildavsky wrote. "Many now say he cannot be trusted to tell the truth—in speech or in print, about Iran-Contra or much else." The

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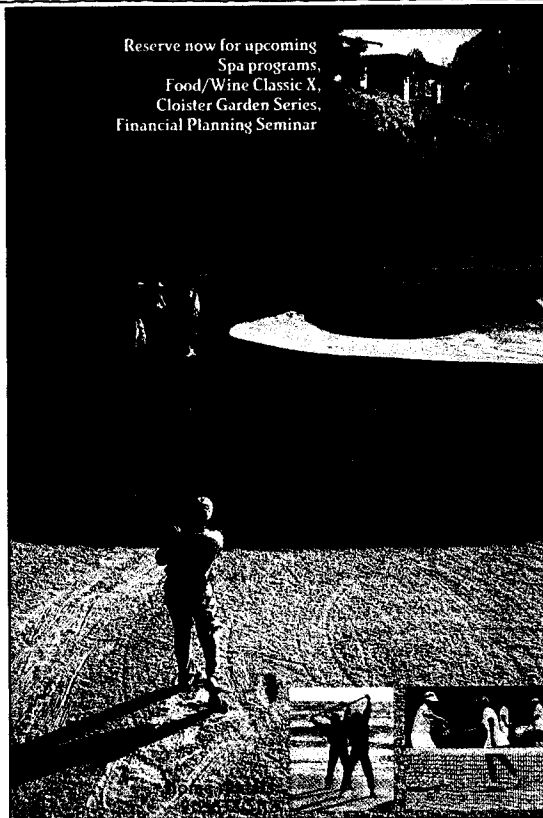
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story did not break much new ground on the scandal, nor did it mention that in his Iran-Contra committee testimony North had admitted previously telling repeated lies to Congress about his role with the Contras. But Wildavsky's meticulous recital of several other North whoppers had a devastating collective impact: North said the C.I.A.'s director, William Casey, sent him encryption devices—false. North said Casey's widow invited him to his wake—false. North said he persuaded a superior to stop walking to work because of the threat of terrorism—false. Wildavsky's article certainly rang a bell with me. One of my assignments while on Walsh's staff had been to collect, in a binder, a list of provable lies that North had told while he worked in the White House. It included things like North's lie to White House lawyers about who was helping him raise funds for the Contras and his false claim to John Poindexter that he had telephoned Costa Rican president Óscar Arias and threatened him with a cutoff of American assistance. John Kecker, the lead prosecutor, used the binder in cross-examining North at his trial. "Ollie's Tall Tales," we called my weighty volume.

The idea for Wildavsky's story had come from Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, the editor-in-chief of the *Reader's Digest*. Tomlinson is a man of impeccable conservative credentials; he served as the director of the Voice of America, under President Reagan, from 1982 to 1984. "Over the course of months and years, I had heard from lots of different people that North was not a truth-teller," Tomlinson told me. "I asked Rachel to go explore it. And the more people we talked to, the more we realized it was a story."

After the *Digest* story appeared, North wrote a full-page letter to his Freedom Alliance contributors announcing that he and his wife, Betsy, had "canceled our subscription. Why? Because *Reader's Digest* has now joined Time-Warner, Sam Donaldson, the *Washington Post* and a host of other media élites in their vengeful effort to destroy me." He added that "these attacks have intensified since Freedom Alliance opposed President Clinton's plan to allow open homosexuals in our Armed Forces." In response, Tomlinson pointed out that the issue in which Wildavsky's piece appeared also contained a column by the Chicago

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Later, North told me he had heard that the story ran because the editor of the *Digest* was planning to run for the Virginia Senate seat himself. Tomlinson, who has been a voting resident of New York's Westchester County since 1981, laughed when I repeated North's claim and said, "There he goes again!"

Among veterans of the Reagan White House, Tomlinson's misgivings are far from unique. As it turns out, the Virginia Senate race has generated near-unanimity on the part of these Reaganites against North, and they have expressed their disaffection by backing his opponent for the Republican nomination, Jim Miller. Although Miller served as the chairman of the Federal Trade Commission and later as the director of the Office of Management and Budget, both under Reagan, he is virtually unknown; indeed, he cheerfully shared with me an internal campaign poll showing that seventy-three per cent of Virginia's Republicans had never heard of him. With some sadness, Miller recognizes that he will probably not be able to win the most important blessing of all for his candidacy. "I just saw President Reagan out in California," he told me, "and I think I know how he feels about this race, but he believes very strongly in the Eleventh Commandment": Thou shalt not speak ill of thy fellow-Republican. (In "Under Fire," North did not observe this rule: the greatest revelation in the book was his contention that Reagan knew all along of the covert mission to aid the Contras.) Yet Miller is drawing overwhelming support from people who served with both him and North in the Reagan Administration: Alexander Haig and George Shultz, the former Secretaries of State; Caspar Weinberger and Frank Carlucci, the former Secretaries of Defense; H. Lawrence Garrett III, a former under-secretary of the Navy; and Charles Cooper, a senior official in the Reagan Justice Department. Both Edwin Meese, the former Attorney General, and Lyn Nofziger, an old California friend of Reagan's, who served as his White House political director, have written fund-raising letters on Miller's behalf. Elliott Abrams, too, is supporting Jim Miller. As Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs,

Abrams was an unapologetic cheerleader for the Contra cause—the dark prince of "Nightline." In 1991, he pleaded guilty to the misdemeanor of withholding information from Congress, which set off a festival of Schadenfreude among his legion of liberal detractors. (He was later pardoned by George Bush.) "I do think North should have been fired from the White House, but I don't think he should have been prosecuted," Abrams told me. "But having been unjustly prosecuted—as I believe North was—is not a qualification to be in the U.S. Senate. He became the target of the entire Washington establishment, and the prospect of his going up to the Hill and saying



'Screw you!' is a great part of his appeal. But can he be a spokesman on health care? The budget? I don't see it."

"I certainly would not support Oliver North," John Singlaub told me. A retired Army major general, Singlaub worked closely with North in the White House on the fund-raising efforts for the Contras and served as a leading anti-Communist spokesman. "In the course of our dealings, North constantly referred to meetings he had with the President and others that turned out never to have taken place," Singlaub said. "He tried to blame Bill Casey for decisions he had made himself. He was disrespectful and disloyal with his superiors. I don't consider him a moral person, and we have enough immorality in the U.S. Senate." Vincent Cannistraro was a colleague of North's on the National Security Council staff and was also the first witness North called in his defense at his trial. "I went through Iran-Contra with North and I certainly won't vote for him," Cannistraro told me. "He's a zealot. He has a great deal of trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality."

It is true that a number of Iran-Contra veterans have taken neither side in the North-Miller contest. Richard Secord, a former neighbor of Miller's as well as a former collaborator with North, will say only, "I consider them both super-good men." Alan Fiers, who was chief of the Central American Task Force at the C.I.A., is steering clear of the matter. (Like Abrams, he pleaded guilty to withholding information from Congress, and then he, too, was pardoned.) Fiers is now an executive at

W. R. Grace in Wisconsin. "I'm totally uninvolved in politics," he told me, laughing. "I've joined a monastery as far as these things are concerned." Robert McFarlane, North's longtime boss and mentor at the N.S.C., and Fawn Hall, his former secretary, did not return phone calls.

John Poindexter, the former national-security adviser, is the lone prominent Iran-Contra figure to come out for North. Poindexter was the only government official to be sentenced to prison as a result of Iran-Contra, but his conviction was overturned before he served any time. "I'm supporting Ollie," he told me, speaking publicly on the subject for the first time. "I'm supporting him because I think he would be a good senator and support the principles I believe in. I'm very loyal both up and down, both to President Reagan and to Ollie. By and large, everything considered, he did a very good job for me." Now running a computer-software-development company in Maryland, Poindexter said that, in retrospect, he didn't think Iran-Contra was such a big deal. "The way the press treated Iran-Contra, you would think that it was the only thing we were doing at the White House, when in fact it was just a small part of what we were doing. I believe that Iran-Contra was overblown." What about the way he destroyed documents in the White House, so that investigators wouldn't find them—was that no big deal? "I think I better talk to my attorney before I answer that," he said and thereupon ended our conversation.

North could not be less concerned that most of the people who worked closely with him are backing Jim Miller in the June nominating convention, for he clearly views the Republican nomination as already locked up. "We're working on setting up an organization for the general election now," he said.

IF Oliver North does win next November, he will become the first Virginia senator in more than a decade who did not marry into celebrity. When John W. Warner ran for the Senate, in 1978, he was an almost unknown former official in the Nixon Administration. Warner's candidacy coincided, however, with his brief tenure as Elizabeth Taylor's sixth husband. (He followed Richard Burton's second tour and pre-

ceded the incumbent, Larry Fortensky.) In spite of Taylor's aura, the plodding Warner managed only to finish second at the Republican nominating convention. But the winner was almost immediately killed in an airplane crash, and Warner became the nominee. He narrowly won the 1978 general election and has subsequently enjoyed an uneventful career in the Senate.

Charles Robb, who is North's putative Democratic opponent, has been famous for nearly thirty years. On December 9, 1967, Robb donned the spotless dress blues of the Marine Corps and married Lynda Byrd Johnson, L.B.J.'s elder daughter, in a televised ceremony at the White House. After seeing combat in Vietnam, Robb attended law school and worked briefly at a law firm with another young attorney, Brendan V. Sullivan. (Many years later, Sullivan aggressively defended Oliver North and earned a measure of fame for quipping that he was an attorney, "not a potted plant.") In 1977, Robb won his first race for public office, becoming Virginia's lieutenant governor and launching a political juggernaut. Four years later, he easily won election as governor. After the single four-year term that Virginia governors are permitted, Robb was so popular that the incumbent United States senator resigned rather than face a challenge from him. In the 1988 general election, Robb took seventy-one per cent of the vote, and his supporters were all but picking draperies for the Oval Office.

Thus began one of the more spectacular flameouts in recent American political history. "I don't live and die by poll numbers," Robb told me, "but if I did, I'd be dead." Shortly before his election to the Senate, news began leaking out about Robb's social life as governor. It appeared that Robb, who is now fifty-four, had suffered a midlife crisis of sorts in his early forties. As governor, he spent many weekends with a fun-loving crowd in Virginia Beach that included con artists and drug dealers. In 1991, a statuesque former Miss Virginia named Tai Collins went on NBC to assert that she had had an affair with Robb while he was governor. Indignities multiplying, Robb denied the charge but admitted that he had removed his clothes and received a massage—but *only* a massage—from Collins at a New York hotel. Meanwhile,



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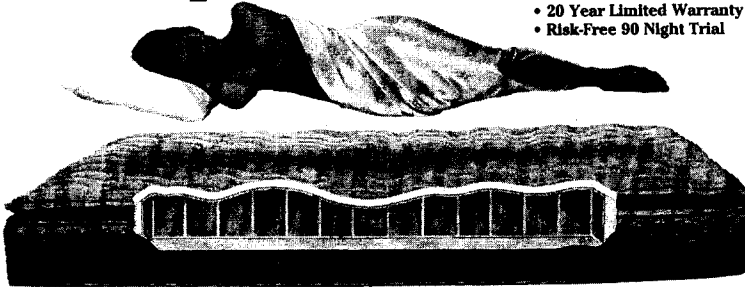
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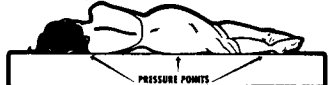
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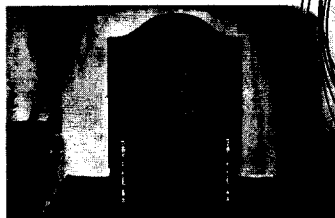


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Wilder's election as governor, in 1989, elevated a man with whom Robb had squabbled in the past. Their relationship deteriorated further when it turned out that a former member of Robb's staff had played for reporters a tape of Wilder speaking on his car phone about politics. A Republican United States Attorney launched an investigation of the incident and obtained guilty pleas from three members of Robb's staff by invoking a seldom used (and rather minor) anti-wiretapping statute. Robb himself narrowly avoided indictment. Robb hinted to me that after he officially declares his candidacy in the spring he will be "addressing some of the issues about me personally." It appears that a Southern-fried "Checkers" speech may be in the offing. He needs it. In a state where Tai Collins may have better name recognition than John Warner—and where Wilder has asserted that Robb is "unfit" to serve in the Senate—Robb's career is in a shambles.

Wilder, for his part, affects a boundless and elegant confidence. I visited him in his office in the State Capitol in Richmond—the building where Robert E. Lee accepted command of the Confederate troops during the Civil War. Despite the recession and cutbacks in support from Washington, Wilder has during his four years in office managed to avoid tax increases, and he also sponsored a widely praised gun-control law. Notwithstanding this commendable record, his popularity runs as low as Robb's. Some of his problems no doubt stem from a prickly temperament, but, just as surely, Virginians seem less willing to tolerate a black egocentric politician than a white one. Nevertheless, the sixty-two-year-old Wilder, who has long flourished in the state's white political culture, impatiently dismisses talk of the Senate race as boiling down to who was the more heroic serviceman. "I've never been a colonel, but I was a sergeant on the front lines in Korea. Army, infantry, doughboy. Don't tell me about defending your country. I was there. I fought for my country when my country wasn't fighting for me." He prefers to run on his accomplishments as governor: "What has Oliver North done for Virginia as compared to what Doug Wilder has done for Virginia? That's where the campaign takes off—on records." He said that he won't make an issue out of Iran-Contra,

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but his eyes had a knowing glow when he added, "I won't have to."

No, of course not. Reporters will do it for him. So I asked North how he thought Iran-Contra would affect the Senate campaign. "I am the most investigated person on the face of the planet," he replied. "I not only have no skeletons in my closets—I have no closets. I had my mistakes broadcast around the world, but now is not the time to dwell on them. It's time to talk about what concerns people most—cutting taxes."

In a peculiar, perhaps even a subconscious, way, however, North seems to recognize his debt to the scandal that made his name. In the speech I heard him give around Virginia this fall, he always concluded with the same parable. "My friends, the future is far too important to be left up to the professional potentates of pork in the other Party," he would say. "We have a chance to change that future for the good, but it requires that we be people of action. I want to tell you one last story. I live on the banks of the beautiful Shenandoah River, out

there in Clarke County, with a next-door neighbor who's a great man of action, not a lot of words. Sam isn't much for talk, but he is a man of action. He's also a great fisherman. Unfortunately, when Sam fishes in the Shenandoah, he doesn't use a fly rod. Sam . . . Sam uses . . ." Here there was a pause, a perfectly timed hesitation, as North invited his audience to pick up the twinkle in his eye. "Well, Sam uses dynamite. Sam was out fishing a few weeks ago. He'd just thrown out the first cast—what we call a DuPont spinner. There was a large explosion, and Sam was out there scooping up the stunned fish with his net when along came the Clarke County game warden. He knew exactly what had happened, stopped his car, ran up, grabbed Sam by the shoulders, and said, 'Sam, this is the last time. There can't be any more fishing with dynamite.' Now, remember, I've asked you all to be people of action in these last days of this campaign, just like Sam. Sam didn't waste a lot of words. He simply bent down, picked up out of that box another stick of dynamite, and put it in the game warden's hand—and lit the fuse. And

finally Sam spoke. He said, 'Son, are you gonna fish or are you gonna talk?'"

The laughter and cheers almost drowned out North's final lines, which were "Folks, it's time to go fishing. God love you all."

In the nineteen-eighties, Congress, in its bumbling way, decreed that the United States government should neither send arms to terrorists in Iran nor stoke the Contras' war with the Nicaraguan authorities. North and his colleagues, in their wisdom, decided that they'd go fishing just the same. When the lumbering Congress finally got around to noticing that the law was being broken, North lied and deceived and shredded to prevent the truth from emerging. It helped his cause that the barons of Congress proved such unsympathetic victims; in any case, what was holy writ to them was red tape to Ollie North. Perhaps as a senator himself he would do better. Certainly, he is eager to try. He told me, "I just haven't gotten the satisfaction out of writing blockbuster best-sellers and running a successful business that I have out of public service." ♦



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