

Oliver North, In From The Cold

Cleared of All Charges,
The Colonel Points
A Finger in His Memoir

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Those moist blue eyes. That gap-toothed grin. The deep voice that still breaks every so often, as though in a burst of adolescent enthusiasm.

They were all back on display yesterday, as Lt. Col. Oliver L. North (U.S. Marines, retired) settled down in a Washington hotel suite to tell his story—"An American Story," according to the subtitle of his book—to specially invited members of the Fourth Estate.

Last month, North's felony convictions for his role in the Iran-contra scandal were erased from the docket, and the independent counsel agreed to drop all charges. Now comes his memoirs, "Under Fire"—in which he attacks his enemies, praises his friends and accuses Ronald Reagan of knowing everything. The proud publisher, HarperCollins, is shipping half a million copies to the nation's bookstores. Time magazine is running cover-story excerpts. Ted Koppel is featuring the book on two installments of "Nightline," and everybody else is doing his part to move it off the shelves.

Ollie North, free at last.

"It's like someone just cut the millstone off your neck," he said yesterday, when asked how it feels, after five years of depositions and cross-examinations, to be clear of legal entanglements and at liberty to

speaking his mind. "It's a wonderful relief, particularly for the family. In reality, this has been much harder for Betsy and my children than it has been on me. I had the support of a tremendous legal team, and I had the well-wishes of the American people in large measure. I was able to raise money to pay for an incredibly expensive legal defense."

Those eyes! That grin!

"And yet my family was left with, basically, the front page of the morning paper, and what was going to be on the evening news that night."

At 48, dressed in khakis, a sweater and hiking boots, he is still the Boy Colonel, the Huck Finn-ish adventurer who captured the hearts of millions during his 1987 televised congressional testimony. Yesterday, as he answered or parried questions from half a dozen press experts—actually a reunion of Iran-contra aficionados, who bandied arcane concepts such as "diversion" and "Langley" and "Gregg" while shoving photocopies of diary notes into the au-

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NORTH, From B1

thor's eager hands—North was true to form. "Fire away," he encouraged. By turns, he was slick, deft, expansive, jocular and friendly.

"If he'd winked at me one more time," one of the participants said afterward, perhaps overcome by the bravado filling the room, "I think I would have slugged him."

The book, which came as a complete surprise when its existence was revealed last week, is one of North's more successful covert operations—perhaps the only one that didn't go awry. No downed airplanes in Nicaragua. No shifty Iranians. No embarrassing snafus with Swiss bank accounts. No arms for hostages. No annoying leaks.

According to the author's acknowledgments, ghostwriter William Novak would fly with his laptop computer from Massachusetts to Dulles Airport "just about every Monday" to meet North in a ground-floor hotel room "with a back door opening onto the parking lot." The former National Security Council aide, whom Reagan fired on national television in November 1986 after his cover was finally blown, would then "surreptitiously" drive over to meet his literary associate. He hid in the bathroom whenever room service came. It was, if nothing else, a triumph of spycraft.

Better yet, the publisher's hefty ad-

vance found its way safely into North's bank account, unlike the famous \$10 million the Sultan of Brunei tried and failed to contribute to the Nicaraguan "freedom fighters" at the urging of former assistant secretary of state Elliott Abrams, by way of a misdirected Swiss bank deposit arranged by you-know-who.

"I haven't done that in years," North said, joining his inquisitors in a hearty laugh.

Federal law prohibits felons from profiting from literary and other commercial ventures arising from their misdeeds, but North insisted that "Under Fire" would have been published in any event, whether or not his convictions had been overturned.

"Never even crossed my mind," he said, punctuating the assertion with an unblinking blue stare. "It may have crossed others'. It didn't even occur to me. That was not an issue as far as I was concerned."

North added that he still has "obligations." His legal bills exceeded \$5 million—"like the sign in front of McDonald's says, millions and millions," he quipped. He's still not out from under, notwithstanding his lecture fees in the \$20,000 range and his position as chairman of Guardian Technologies International, a "successful" Northern Virginia company that supplies bullet-proof vests to 50-odd local police departments, "nine federal agencies and 11 heads of state," North said.

So he's not "well-heeled"? the colonel was asked.

By way of response, he inspected

the scuffed heels of his hiking boots. But after a few titters of appreciation, he became sincerity itself.

"The American people's generosity helped us wage a long, difficult campaign," he said, gravely. "I have incurred obligations that go beyond that. I'm hoping the book will sell well, because it will certainly help us get back on our feet."

Thus "Under Fire" contains the revelations required for bestsellerdom: "According to the polls," it reads, "a majority of the American people believed that President Reagan did know. I thought so, too. And now, five years later, I am even more convinced. *President Reagan knew everything.*"

There's also the now-famous "smoking gun in the closet" tape, played on Monday's "Nightline." It's of a phone conversation between two unidentified men—White House aides, North asserts—talking about Reagan's presumed knowledge of the scheme to di-

vert profits from arms sales to the Iranians into the coffers of the contras.

North acknowledged that in the onslaught of publicity—an assault better coordinated than the invasion of Grenada—he has been getting some angry messages from loyal Reaganites. But he said they misunderstand.

"This is not an attack book, like Max the Dog out in my yard," he said. "This book is not an attack on Ronald Reagan." Even if North portrays the former president as a doddering old dissembler who "threw me over the side."

"What this book is," North said, "is my recollection of an extraordinary time in our history, the events I lived through and the way I lived through it. I'm a little disappointed that people have chosen only to focus on that aspect of it," he added, sounding hurt. "I don't know why people focused on that one sentence out of a book of 446 pages. I would hope loyal Reagan supporters and people in the media would read the rest of it. Of course, I hope that they *buy* it to do so." Winning smile. "I have enormous regard for Ronald Wilson Reagan."

But only, it seems, up to a point.

"I would have *died* for Ronald Reagan," North said, with another hard stare. "I was not willing to go to jail for him."

North was careful not to make any more news during yesterday's salon, which at times resembled a graduate school seminar in which several of the "students" occasionally chimed in to correct the "teacher" on dates and times of meetings and lunches.

"You guys know more about this stuff than I do," North remarked.

He refused to implicate George Bush in the business, and had little to say about Robert Gates, Bush's nominee to be director of the Central Intelligence Agency. And he denied the oft-reported episode—broached in Ben Bradlee Jr.'s book about North, "Guts and Glory," and later dramatized in a 1989 television miniseries—of a distraught North, running naked and toting a pistol through his Quantico neighborhood one night in 1974.

"Never happened," North said, though his book acknowledges that he was hospitalized for depression and other maladies after his wife threatened to divorce him.

The colonel, however, had several tart observations about independent counsel Lawrence Walsh, who was appointed by Reagan to get to the bottom of the scandal. "Prosecutor Walsh," as North calls him, is a man bent on "ruining lives."

"Let me just share something with you," he said contemplatively, "and I

hope to God none of you ever experience it. I know the kinds of pressures that can be brought to bear against a guy who's up against a machine like what Walsh is doing. . . . My wife was dragged in by the special prosecutor, fingerprinted, mug-shot, put before the grand jury, and basically the threat was, 'You're going to lose your kids unless your husband comes over and becomes a witness for us.' It is immense pressure.

"I don't know the exact nature of the pressure that was brought to bear against Alan Fiers or Elliott Abrams," he added, referring to the former CIA and State Department officials who recently turned state's evidence after pleading guilty to various crimes and misdemeanors, "but it is extraordinary. And what people do under various conditions, where the threat is, 'You've got to come up with something really, really meaty here'—I'm not sure there's a full understanding of that."

Walsh's spokeswoman, Mary Belcher, yesterday scoffed at North's assertions.

"I'm not going to comment on any specific investigative matters that we may have undertaken in the North case," she said, "but I will respond to the suggestion of a threat. No threats were ever made. Any conversation we had with Mrs. North would have been in the presence of her attorney or the grand jury, and if we made such a threat, they certainly would have lodged a complaint. And they didn't."

Belcher also denied North's assertions that the independent counsel's office leaked "slandorous" allegations about him.

"We don't leak," she said.

North said he gave up long ago trying to answer all the charges that have been printed about him, and stopped reading newspapers during his trial preparation on the advice of the late

Edward Bennett Williams, who headed up the Williams and Connolly law firm, in which North's lawyer, Brendan Sullivan, is a partner.

In the meantime, as he girded himself for a second "Nightline" appearance, to be followed by a 20-city book tour, he planned to "guest-lecture" a class last night at the University of Maryland on the Vietnam War, taught by an "old Marine" friend.

"I would hope that the youngsters that are in this course—some of them weren't even born when I was over there—would understand that the people who served, particularly the young Marines that I served with, weren't the pot-headed martyrs that Oliver Stone has made them out to be," said the decorated former platoon leader. "I feel fairly strongly about that. All they've got to look at is things like 'Platoon' or 'Apocalypse Now' or 'Born on the Fourth of July,' and that's not my recollection of it. And I'd like to see if I could put a little bit of that straight."

As for a future political career, "It would be appalling to have to call Ted Kennedy 'dear colleague,'" North said. But, he mused, "Maybe at some point I'll return in some way or other to the service of my country. At the same time, I don't harbor any illusions about running for office. People keep talking that way, and I've been asked to run for various things, but I'm going to stick to running for father and husband."

Isn't that something he's said before, many, many times?

"It's a good line," North said. "My wife's."

At which the colonel stood up and suggested everybody "have a cup of coffee or take a bladder break."

"I shall return," he added, laughing at his own little joke.