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Notes: Iran-contra Affair Investigation, Impact On Reagan Administration's Bid For More Contra Aid, July 25-28

by Deborah Tyroler

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July 25: According to the NEW YORK TIMES (07/26/87), key members of Congress say they do not share the Reagan administration's view that the hearings have improved the outlook for continued contra aid. Both Democrats and Republicans said they expected the rise in public support after North's testimony to be of little lasting value to the White House. They said the debate in Congress after the current \$100 million appropriation runs out in September would be contentious, with the outcome very much in doubt. Reagan is expected to ask for an 18-month appropriation of \$130 to \$140 million, which would carry the contra aid program through the end of his term. Officials had feared that disclosures from the Iran-contra hearings could make the outcome of contra aid doubtful. But the hearings have instead served as a platform for government officials and others to present the case for contra aid without the "irritant" of hearing opposing arguments. President Reagan has said that the hearings have turned the tide. "The American people are waking up," he said in a July 25 speech. But polls showing modest increases in public support were generally discounted on Capitol Hill. A NEW YORK TIMES/CBS News Poll taken July 21-22 showed 49% opposed to contra aid, with 40% in favor. In January, the same poll found 60% opposed and 28% in favor. Public support has "maybe gone up a little, but it's still going to be tough," said Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.). "You've got to have the votes." Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.), said the hearings had given the contra policy increased visibility without increasing public confidence. As chairman of the Foreign Relations committee until the Democrats took control of the Senate this year, Lugar spent years guiding the administration's contra policy through an increasingly reluctant Senate. "A large number of Americans now see the Sandinistas as a very unfortunate government. But the question is, what do we do about it? What hasn't jelled yet is any enthusiasm for the contras as a remedy. The formula that will give any sort of bipartisan staying power has yet to be found," Lugar said. Lugar said that if a vote were taken now, aid to the contras would probably be defeated in the House and win narrowly in the Senate. But he said that was a "snapshot for the moment" that could easily change. Lugar said he believed the administration did not realize how thin its support was in the Senate even last fall, when the \$100 million appropriation was approved 53 to 47. Only a bipartisan agreement on a simultaneous vote on sanctions against South Africa saved the contra bill from a filibuster that could have killed it, he recalled. In March, in what was essentially a symbolic vote, the Senate voted 52 to 48 against blocking the final \$40 million of the appropriation. Several Senators who remained loyal to the administration warned then that the White House could not take their future support for granted. One of those senators, Frank H. Murkowski (R-Alaska), said that the hearings had done nothing to ease his doubts. "There's still no definition of our role in Nicaragua. It's never-never land. There's no end to it. I don't think that's good enough any more." Murkowski said he wanted a formula under which the US would end its role in Nicaragua if the Soviet Union and Cuba would do the same. But he said he did not sense that the administration was interested in looking for a new approach. "They'd be wise to think of alternatives." "Another plane crash, anything that goes wrong, and their credibility with the public can be undermined so fast," he said. Several opponents of contra aid said they expected the behavior of the contras

themselves to provide powerful arguments against continued aid. As an example, they cited an incident the previous week. Contra spokesmen claimed a major military victory in an attack on San Jose de Bocay, where reporters found that they had in fact killed three children and a pregnant woman while failing to damage the military targets, the airstrip and local army headquarters. "Ollie explained the administration's position better than anyone, better than the president," said Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.). "But what he said went unchallenged. We will reassert ourselves. Who are the contras? They have failed." The House initially rejected the \$100 million appropriation, then approved it 221 to 209. In March, it voted 230 to 196 to block further aid to the contras until the administration provided an accounting of all funds spent thus far. While the measure never came to a vote in the Senate, the House Democratic leadership regards the vote as having placed a solid majority in the House on record against administration policy. "We're not sensing any loss," as a result of the hearings, said Rep. David E. Bonior (D-Mich.), the chief deputy whip, who heads a leadership task force on the issue. He said he was in constant touch with the 75 House members, of both parties, who are the least committed one way or the other and who therefore hold the key to the next vote. Rep. Tony Coelho (D-Cal.), the Democratic whip, expressed confidence that the House would vote against further aid. "The president's timing is against him," he said, noting that in late September, when the vote is likely to occur, Congress will be in the midst of the final budget consideration for the next fiscal year. Rep. Robert H. Michel (R-Ill.), the House Republican leader, said he thought the hearings, particularly North's testimony, had rescued the administration from a "devastating" situation. But he was not willing to predict that the administration would prevail. July 27: White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater told reporters in Port Washington, Wis., that the president "was trying to protect the lives of those hostages" still held in Lebanon when he advised aides at a White House meeting on November 10 to avoid detailed comments about the sale of arms to Iran. "The President's comments on Nov. 10 were appropriate, honest and consistent with all of his public statements," Fitzwater said. Notes taken at the meeting by Alton G. Keel, the deputy national security adviser, were made public last week by the congressional committees. "Don't talk TOW's, Don't talk specifics," Reagan said, according to the notes. They also show that Reagan urged everyone at the meeting to indicate "no bargaining with terrorists" and "no ransom for terrorists." Fitzwater denied the assertion by the WASHINGTON POST that the comment demonstrated that "President Reagan actively led the initial effort last November to conceal the essential details of his secret arms-for-hostage program and keep it alive." White House and other officials said that in the first days after the arms dealings became public, that Reagan was most concerned about jeopardizing negotiations with Iran over the hostages. His statements on November 10 and other misleading statements made in public during the period, were part of an effort to minimize the damage public disclosure might cause to the hostage negotiations, they said. On November 18, the White House publicly acknowledged that it had not been entirely forthcoming. Larry Speakes, then White House press secretary, said, "We were faced with 10 days that we were unable to tell the story because we wanted to protect the goals and the release of the hostages." Fitzwater's comments reflect a growing frustration among the president and his aides over the public's steady refusal to believe that Reagan is telling the whole story about his role in the affair. The latest NEW YORK TIMES/CBS News Poll showed that 53% did not believe the president's assertion that he did not know about the diversion of profits from the Iran arms sale to the contras. Only 35% said they believed Reagan. Reagan has been trying to get out of Washington and focus attention on his economic proposals. But a large crowd gathered on the shores of Lake Michigan to hear the president graphically demonstrated why Reagan is having so much trouble getting the public to shift away from his foreign policy problems. Some in the crowd held signs

bearing such messages as "No more lies," and "No more contra aid." July 28: In testimony before the congressional investigative committees, Attorney General Edwin Meese said he had not asked probing questions last November during his three-day preliminary inquiry because he had no reason to disbelieve top officials. He maintained that he and his associates had "turned up the essential facts that are still the essential fact today." He said that former national security adviser Adm. John Poindexter, fired National Security Council aide Lt. Col. Oliver North and former CIA director William Casey had misled him on key aspects of the case. But Meese steadfastly avoided any judgment that they had been untruthful. He was especially reluctant to say that Casey had lied to him. When pressed on earlier testimony that suggested otherwise, Meese said, "Since I did not have the benefit of watching their testimony, I couldn't say for sure [that he had been lied to]. But I will accept your characterization of it." Asked why he did not realize he was not being told the truth, Meese said, "It's always easy some eight months later to look back, and it certainly looks a lot different to us now than it did then. But at that time, there was nothing that gave us that hint." Under new procedures adopted after lawyers were seen as taking too much time and being too confrontational with some earlier witnesses, the counsels had been instructed merely to bring out the direct evidence and to leave the cross examination to committee members. Only two legislators questioned Meese Rep. Peter W. Rodino (D-NJ) and Bill McCollum (R-Fla.). Several matters were unresolved. For one, Rodino and Meese got into a dispute over whether the Justice Department's criminal division had asked to join the investigation. Meese said it had not. Rodino said a sworn deposition from William F. Weld, the Assistant Attorney General in charge of the division, indicated Weld's desire to become involved. Another was whether Shultz had suggested to Meese that perhaps the Iran and Nicaraguan policies were interrelated. Shultz testified that his notes showed that was the case. Meese maintained that no such conversation occurred. Meese testified that during his inquiry last November, officials made false statements. * Casey told Meese that he did not learn of the diversion of funds until November 25, the day the episode was made public and North and Poindexter were forced to leave the White House. North testified that Casey not only knew of the diversion from the outset but may even have suggested it. * North told Meese that Casey did not know of the diversion of funds and that money was sent directly from Iran to bank accounts controlled by the contras. Further, he said, an Israeli official had told him a shipment to Iran in November 1985 consisted of oil drilling equipment. But in fact, North said in his testimony that the money from the arms sales was put in bank accounts controlled by retired Air Force major general Richard Secord and partner Albert Hakim and that he knew all along the November shipment involved Hawk missiles. * Poindexter testified that he had authorized the diversion, but told Meese, "Ollie has given me enough hints about this so that I generally knew, but I did nothing to follow up or stop it." Meese conceded that Poindexter and North had misled him, but he had no such indication at the time. "I had no reason to believe otherwise," he said of North's statement to him. "He had been very forthcoming in response to what we had asked him." Meese said his interview with Poindexter has been "casual" and had lasted no more than five minutes.

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