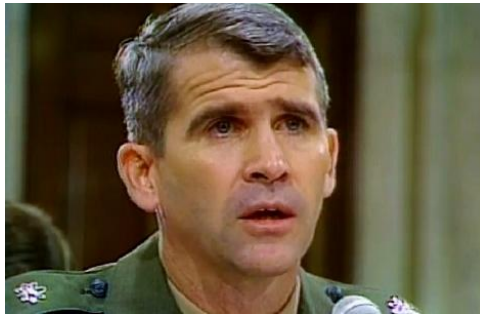




AmericanRhetoric.com

Oliver North

Opening Statement to Joint Iran Contra Congressional Committee



Delivered 9 July 1987

AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio and edited for continuity

Thank you, Mr. Chairman:

As you all know by now, my name is Oliver North, lieutenant colonel, United States Marine Corps. My best friend is my wife Betsy, to whom I have been married for 19 years and with whom I have had four wonderful children, aged 18, 16, 11, and 6.

I came to the National Security Council six years ago to work in the Administration of a great President. As a staff member, I came to understand his goals and his desires. I admired his policies, his strength, and his ability to bring our country together. I observed the President to be a leader who cared deeply about people and who believed that the interests of our country were advanced by recognizing that ours is a nation at risk in a dangerous world, and acting accordingly. He tried, and in my opinion succeeded, in advancing the cause of world peace by strengthening our country, by acting to restore and sustain democracy throughout the world, and by having the courage to take decisive action when needed.

I also believed that we must guard against a rather perverse side of American life, and that is the tendency to launch vicious attacks and criticism against our elected officials. President Reagan has made enormous contributions, and he deserves our respect and admiration.

The National Security Council is, in essence, the President's staff. It helps to formulate and coordinate national security policy.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Some, perhaps on this committee, believe that the N.S.C. was devoid of experienced leadership. I believe that is wrong. While at the N.S.C., I worked most closely with three people: Mr. Robert C. McFarlane, Admiral John Poindexter, and C.I.A. Director William Casey.

Bud McFarlane is a man who devoted nearly 30 years of his life to public service in a number of responsible positions. At the N.S.C. he worked long hours, made great contributions, and I admire him for those efforts.

Admiral Poindexter is a distinguished naval officer who served in a number of important positions of responsibility. He, too, was a tireless worker with a similar record of public service, and I, too, admire him greatly.

William Casey was a renowned lawyer, a war veteran of heroic proportions, and a former chairman of the S.E.C. I understood that he was also a close personal friend and adviser to President Reagan.

There is nearly a century of combined public service by these three men.

As a member of the N.S.C. staff, I knew that I held a position of responsibility, but I knew full well what my position was. I did not engage in fantasy that I was the President or Vice President, or a Cabinet member, or even the director of the National Security Council. I was simply a staff member with a demonstrated ability to get the job done. Over time, I was made responsible for managing a number of complex and sensitive covert operations that we have discussed here to date. I reported directly to Mr. McFarlane and to Admiral Poindexter. I coordinated directly with others, including Director Casey.

My authority to act always flowed, I believed, from my superiors. My military training inculcated in me a strong belief in the chain of command. Insofar as I can recall, I always acted on major matters with specific approval, after informing my superiors of the facts as I knew them, the risks, and the potential benefits. I readily admit that I was action-oriented, that I took pride in the fact that I was counted upon as a man who got the job done. And I don't mean this by way of criticism, but there were occasions when my superiors, confronted with accomplishing goals or difficult tasks, would simply say, "Fix it, Ollie," or "Take care of it."

Since graduating from the Naval Academy in 1968, I have strived to be the best Marine officer that one can be. In combat my goal was always to understand the objective, follow orders, accomplish the mission, and to keep alive the men who served under me. One of the few good things that has come from the last seven months of worldwide notoriety has been the renewed contact that I've had with some of the finest people in the world -- those with whom I served in Vietnam. Among the 50,000 or so messages of support that have arrived since I left the N.S.C. are many from those who recount the horrors we lived through and who now relate stories of their families and careers.



AmericanRhetoric.com

After Vietnam, I worked with my fellow officers to train good marines to be ready in case we were called upon elsewhere in the world, but at the same time, to hope that we never were. I honestly believe that any soldier who has ever been to a war truly hopes he will never see one again. My Marine Corps career was on track in 1981 when I was detailed to the National Security Council. I was uneasy at the beginning, but I came to believe that it was important work, and as years passed and responsibilities grew, I got further from that which I loved, the Marine Corps and marines.

During 1984, '85 and '86, there were periods of times when we worked two days in every one. My guess is that the average workday lasted at least 14 hours. To respond to various crises, the need for such was frequent, and we would often go without a night's sleep, hoping to recoup the next night or thereafter. If I had to estimate the number of meetings and discussions and phone calls over that five years, it would surely be in the tens of thousands. My only real regret is that I virtually abandoned my family for work during these years. And that work consisted of, my first few years on the staff, as a project officer for a highly classified and compartmented national security project which is not a part of this inquiry.

I worked hard on the political military strategy for restoring and sustaining democracy in Central America and in particular El Salvador. We sought to achieve the democratic outcome in Nicaragua that this Administration still supports, which involved keeping the contras together in both body and soul. We made efforts to open a new relationship with Iran and recover our hostages. We worked on the development of a concerted policy regarding terrorists and terrorism and a capability for dealing in a concerted manner with that threat. We worked on various crises such as T.W.A. 47, the capture of Achille Lauro, the rescue of American students in Grenada and the restoration of democracy on that small island, and the U.S. raid on Libya in response to their terrorist attacks. And as some may be willing to admit, there were efforts made to work with the Congress on legislative programs.

There were many problems. I believe that we worked as hard as we could to solve them, and sometimes we succeeded and sometimes we failed -- but at least we tried. And I want to tell you that I for one will never regret having tried.

I believe that this is a strange process that you are putting me and others through. Apparently the President has chosen not to assert his prerogatives, and you have been permitted to make the rules. You call before you the officials of the Executive Branch. You put them under oath for what must be collectively thousands of hours of testimony. You dissect that testimony to find inconsistencies and declare some to be truthful and others to be liars.

You make the rulings as to what is proper and what is not proper. You put the testimony which you think is helpful to your goals up before the people and leave others out. It's sort of like a baseball game in which you are both the player and the umpire. It's a game in which you call the balls and strikes and where you determine who is out and who is safe. And in the end you determine the score and declare yourselves the winner. From where I sit, it is not the fairest process.



AmericanRhetoric.com

One thing is, I think, for certain: that you will not investigate yourselves in this matter. There is not much chance that you will conclude at the end of these hearings that the Boland Amendments and the frequent policy changes therefore were unwise, or that your restrictions should not have been imposed on the Executive Branch. You are not likely to conclude that the Administration acted properly by trying to sustain the freedom fighters in Nicaragua when they were abandoned. And you are not likely to conclude by commending the President of the United States, who tried valiantly to recover our citizens and achieve an opening with strategically vital Iran.

I would not be frank with you if I did not admit that the last several months have been very difficult for me and my family. It has been difficult to be on the front pages of every newspaper in the land day after day, to be the lead story on national television day after day, to be photographed thousands of times by bands of photographers, who chase us around since November just because my name arose at the hearings. It is difficult to be caught in the middle of a constitutional struggle between the Executive and Legislative branches over who will formulate and direct the foreign policy of this nation.

It is difficult to be vilified by people in and out of this body, some who have proclaimed that I am guilty of criminal conduct even before they heard me. Others have said that I would not tell the truth when I came here to testify, and one member asked a person testifying before this body whether he would believe me under oath. I asked when I got here, "If you don't believe me, why call me at all?"

It has been difficult to see questions raised about my character and morality, my honesty, because only partial evidence was provided. And as I indicated yesterday, I think it was insensitive of this committee to place before the cameras my home address at a time when my family and I are under 24-hour armed guard by over a dozen government agents of the Naval Investigative Service, because of fear the terrorists will seek revenge for my official acts and carry out their announced intentions to kill me.

It is also difficult to comprehend that my work at the N.S.C., all of which was approved and carried out in the best interests of our country, has led to two massive parallel investigations, staffed by over 200 people. It is mind-boggling to me that one of those investigations is criminal and that some here have attempted to criminalize policy differences between coequal branches of government and the Executive's conduct of foreign affairs.

I believe it is inevitable that the Congress will, in the end, blame the Executive Branch. But I suggest to you that it is the Congress which must accept at least some of the blame in the Nicaraguan freedom-fighters matter. Plain and simple, the Congress is to blame because of the fickle, vacillating, unpredictable, on-again-off-again policy toward the Nicaraguan democratic resistance, the so-called "contras."



AmericanRhetoric.com

I do not believe that the support of the Nicaraguan freedom fighters can be treated as the passage of a budget. I suppose if the budget doesn't get passed on time again this year, there will be inevitably another extension of a month or two. But the contras, the Nicaraguan freedom fighters, are people -- living, breathing, young men and women -- who have had to suffer a desperate struggle for liberty, with sporadic and confusing support from the United States of America. Armies need food and consistent help. They need a flow of money, of arms, clothing, and medical supplies.

The Congress of the United States allowed the Executive to encourage them to do battle and then abandoned them. The Congress of the United States left soldiers in the field unsupported and vulnerable to their Communist enemies. When the Executive Branch did everything possible within the law to prevent them from being wiped out by Moscow's surrogates in Havana and Managua, you then had this investigation to blame the problem on the Executive Branch. It does not make sense to me.

In my opinion, these hearings have caused serious damage to our national interests. Our adversaries laugh at us and our friends recoil in horror. I suppose it would be one thing if the intelligence committees wanted to hear all of this in private and thereafter passed laws which in the view of Congress make for better policies, for better functioning of government. But to hold them publicly, for the whole world to see, strikes me as very harmful. Not only does it embarrass our friends and allies, with whom we have worked, many of whom have helped us in various programs, but it must also make them very wary of helping us again.

I believe that these hearings, perhaps unintentionally so, have revealed matters of great secrecy in the operation of our Government. And sources and methods of intelligence activities have clearly been revealed to the detriment of our security.

As a result of rumor and speculation and innuendo, I have been accused of almost every crime imaginable. Wild rumors have abounded. Some media reports have suggested that I was guilty of espionage, for the way I handled U.S. intelligence. Some have said I was guilty of treason and suggested in front of my 11-year-old daughter that I should be given the death penalty. Some said I stole 10 million dollars. Some said I was second only in power to the President of the United States, and others that I condoned drug trafficking to generate funds for the contras, or that I personally ordered assassinations, or that I was conducting my own foreign policy. It has even been suggested that I was the personal confidant of the President of the United States. These, and many other stories, are patently untrue.

I don't mind telling you that I'm angry at what some have attempted to do to me and my family. I believe that these committee hearings will show that you have struck some blows. But I am going to walk from here with my head high and my shoulders straight because I am proud of what we accomplished. I am proud of the efforts that we made. And I am proud of the fight that we fought. I am proud of serving in the Administration of a great President.



AmericanRhetoric.com

I am not ashamed of anything in my professional or personal conduct. As we go through this process, I ask that you continue to please keep an open mind. Please be open-minded and able to admit that perhaps your preliminary conclusions about me were wrong. And please also do not mistake my attitude for lack of respect: I am in awe of this great institution, just as I am in awe of the presidency. Both are equal branches of government with separate areas of responsibility under the Constitution that I have taken an oath to support and defend. And I have done so, as many of you have.

And although I do not agree with what you are doing, or the way that it is being done, I do understand your interest in obtaining the facts, and I have taken an oath to tell the truth in helping you to do so.

In closing, Mr. Chairman -- and I thank you for this opportunity -- I would just simply like to thank the tens of thousands of Americans who have communicated their support, encouragement, and prayers for me and my family in this difficult time.

Thank you, sir.