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WHITE HOUSE KNEW OF A SHIFT ON IRAN, C.I.A. OFFICIALS SAY

By MICHAEL R. GORDON, Special to the New York Times
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WASHINGTON, March 19— Central Intelligence Agency officials say that, in revised intelligence estimates in 1985, they told the White House that there was little prospect for improving relations with Iran, even as the Reagan Administration began a covert initiative to accomplish that purpose.

The C.I.A. officials, Richard J. Kerr and Graham Fuller, also said that they advised the White House at that time that there was no imminent threat that the Soviet Union would gain significant influence in Iran.

Nonetheless, the White House proceeded with clandestine arms sales to Iran and even composed an intelligence finding in January 1986 that cited the possibility of growing Soviet influence as a major rationale for the Iran initiative. Estimate Is Reversed

In his news conference today, President Reagan said he decided to carry out the Iran initiative because he "was not going to miss an opportunity" to improve relations with a country that "is very important strategically."

But the two C.I.A. officials, speaking Wednesday in rare on-the-record interviews, said the revised intelligence reports, in the fall of 1985, had suggested that the prospects for improving relations were faint.

The officials agreed to be interviewed to counter charges that intelligence reports had exaggerated accounts of internal instability in Iran and the purported Soviet threat to lend support to the Iran initiative.

They acknowledged that the intelligence assessments on Iran in the fall of 1985 represented a reversal of an estimate the previous spring that the political situation in Iran was deteriorating and that the Soviet threat was serious.

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The report by the Tower Commission on the Iran-contra affair, issued Feb. 26, said that Mr. Fuller, then the C.I.A.'s national intelligence officer for the Middle East, and Howard Teicher, then director of political-military affairs in the National Security Council staff, worked together on a key intelligence assessment that laid the basis for the Iran initiative.

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Some members of the commission have privately said they suspect that the intelligence reports were tailored to support policy goals.

Mr. Fuller, now 49 years old, is retiring from the agency at the end of the year. He prepared a "think piece" for William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, in May 1985 stating that the Soviet Union was in a better position to exert influence in Iran and that the regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was "faltering."

In his memorandum, Mr. Fuller suggested that Western nations be allowed to sell arms to Iran with a view to gaining influence.

Those conclusions were also stated in a Government-wide intelligence assessment cited by the Tower Commission and overseen by Mr. Fuller, which was prepared in May 1985 at the request of the National Security Council.

Mr. Kerr, who is the Deputy Director for Intelligence at the C.I.A., said that assertions in that assessment about the Soviet threat to Iran had been a matter of contention and that he was now "fairly critical" of its conclusions. 'Situation Had Stabilized'

Mr. Fuller and Mr. Kerr said they and other experts concluded several months after the May 1985 assessment that Iran was not as unstable as initially predicted and that the Soviet Union had not attempted to exploit opportunities for gaining influence within the Iranian regime.

Mr. Fuller said, "Within a matter of four to five months, I came to a conclusion that the trends we had identified as active in May had not continued to develop in that direction."

He said he had prepared a written analysis of his new views, but had not distributed it throughout the Government, as he did his "think piece." He said he told officials throughout the Government of the new assessment.

"The internal situation had stabilized and the Soviets were not following up as they could have," Mr. Fuller said.

Mr. Kerr asserted that the "trend" of intelligence reports in the summer and the fall was going against the May assessment.

"The intelligence was running in the other direction," he said. "It certainly was not pointing to openings in Iran with 'moderates.' "

The two C.I.A. officials said that they had not not known of the covert shipment of arms.

In firms.closures since November on the evolution of the Iran-contra affair, this turned out to be the period in which President Reagan's advisers were beginning what became the clandestine Iran initiative.

One knowledgeable official said that after the summer of 1985 the Administration became preoccupied with exchanging arms for hostages and that the intelligence assessment about Iran and the Soviet Union became less relevant to the White House. New Findings Were Codified

He said he did not know whether White House officials had conveyed the new reports to President Reagan. Although the reports were formally codified in an intelligence estimate in 1986, the Iran dealings continued.

Mr. Fuller denied the implications of members of the Tower Commission that he and Mr. Teicher had tailored an intelligence estimate to support Administration policy.

"They are suggesting a coziness, an irregularity of relationship, that is far from the truth," he said.

Mr. Fuller now serves as the vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council, which oversees the preparation of intelligence assessments.

Discussing the differences between the spring and autumn estimates, Mr. Kerr said that by the summer and fall the Iranians were "winning" their war with Iraq and that, as a result, there was less "internal pressure" on the Khomeini regime.

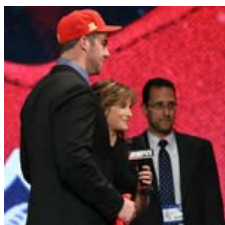
Despite these intelligence reports, President Reagan approved the finding in January 1986 that the United States should facilitate the sale of arms to Iran to gain influence with "moderates" in Teheran.

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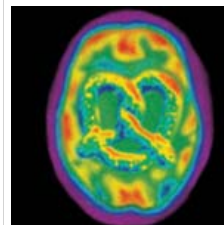
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