

Photo: Diana Walker



ELLIOTT ABRAMS: THE TEFLON ASSISTANT SECRETARY

by Eric Alterman

Ollie North is gone. John Poindexter is gone. William Casey is gone. Even Don Regan is gone. But Elliott Abrams, who is, more than anyone, officially and substantially responsible for the contra policy that has been such a disaster for the Reagan administration, is still giving orders.

Despite serious questions about Abrams's involvement in supplying the Nicaraguan contras, the hard-line assistant secretary of state for Latin American affairs appears to have ridden out the storm that felled his colleagues on the contra support team. Abrams and his staff were reportedly relieved by the content of the Tower Commission report. Since the outbreak of the scandal, Abrams has returned on various occasions to face his critics on Capitol Hill. Unlike North and Poindexter, Abrams answered every question fired at him. His political adversary on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Christopher Dodd, praised Abrams's forthcoming attitude. At a House hearing on future U.S. aid programs, Abrams was treated not as an object of scandal, but simply as a

State Department officer who had a program to administer.

Abrams still has his job in part because, according to the evidence revealed so far, he has steered just clear of illegality, and in part because he has practiced the neoconservative art of deflecting even clearly legitimate criticism by attacking the left-liberal biases of his opponents. He has not always been as far to the right as he is now, but his enemy has always been the left.

No sex and drugs

In 1968 at Harvard, where the word liberal was often followed by "fascist" and Vietnam almost inevitably by "war criminal," where Dick Gregory received more support in an election poll than either of the two major party candidates, and where the conservatives on campus split their vote between Bobby Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy, 19-year-old Elliott Abrams was a lonely voice for Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey, the standard-bearer of cold war liberalism, was undergoing a process of political disintegration, unable to distance himself from a war that even President Johnson likened to a one-eyed retarded child. Amazingly, Humphrey allowed Nixon to paint

Eric Alterman is a Washington writer and a fellow of the World Policy Institute.

himself the “peace candidate,” then prattled on about “the politics of joy” in the wake of the killings of Kennedy and King.

What drew Abrams—of liberal parentage and a progressive education—to support Humphrey? Idealism? What idealism could there be in supporting a worn-out candidate and a failed policy in Vietnam? Ambition? The future of the party, particularly for bright young men from Harvard, was clearly with the “Dump the Hump” legions, who, four years later, would coalesce in the McGovern candidacy.

Abrams chose Humphrey because the peace movement wanted not merely to end the war but to smash the establishment with which he identified. Steven Kelman, one of Abrams’s college roommates and now professor of public policy at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, recalls Abrams seemed uncommonly concerned about “the real world” outside Harvard. He remembers him as a “basically happy, well-adjusted, and unalienated guy. He had good relations with his family and was always far more oriented towards success, including monetary, than anybody else we knew.”

At Harvard, Abrams ensconced himself in Adams House, a hub of left-wing activity. He was definitely “different,” even from his own crowd of anti-SDS conservatives and social democrats. Clean-shaven, neatly groomed, and serious to the point of eccentricity, Abrams stood out on campus as a metaphor for the parents everybody had left behind. He seemed immunized against the common collegiate attractions of sex, drugs, and rock ’n roll. His own theory as to why is that his Greenwich Village high school, Elizabeth Irwin, “constituted an inoculation of sorts. . . . Marijuana was all over Elizabeth Irwin when I was in high school. That style of dress, radical politics. And it was quite clear to me that this was not a manifestation of individual thought; it was mass thoughtlessness.” Moreover, he recalls, “My parents were more traditional in a number of ways than most parents raising children in the sixties. . . . There were very strict rules.” “Elliot was completely out of sympathy with the cultural tone of the sixties,” says Benjamin Ross, another roommate. “He was the only person I ever met who looked more comfortable in a brand new pair of Levis than worn-out ones.”

Anti-war, anti-SDS

Abrams entered college with the demeanor of a small-town pastor and the politics of an Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) liberal.

He thought hard, made up his mind, and then spoke it to anybody who would listen. In those days, Abrams spoke as a disillusioned liberal, but one who still believed in the possibility of a reformed, peaceful, and progressive American government. In his first published article, in *The New Leader* in 1968, he explained to the magazine’s fuddy-duddy readership that students were “voicing more subtle objections, I suppose, than are convenient. . . . we are talking about problems that even prosperity cannot solve.” He worried that the war in Vietnam caused America’s image in the world to suffer new damage each day the war went on. “This is unfair to me and to my generation,” he complained. “Destroy the irreplaceable and you deprive us of our birthright. . . . There are riots in our cities and 10,000 boys are dying in Vietnam and people have the nerve to tell us we object to the president because of his style.”

An Abrams piece published a year later on the SDS riot at Harvard and the ensuing student strike contained this passage about the Cambridge police: “With their helmets, plastic face visors, and long riot clubs, the effect they created was not merely terrifying, but grotesque.”

Abrams recalls these articles almost apologetically as “the most left-wing things I ever wrote.” Yet more interesting than the left-wing voice of youth Abrams adopted is the sophistication of his writing style and sentiments. Abrams wrote about why American youth was aflame and described the events that struck terror into the hearts of Harvard students, administrators, and faculty without once resorting to rhetorical condemnation of either side. His critiques of liberal America have no hint of joyous rebellion or cynical contempt for his elders; they’re models of hard-headed liberal analysis.

Nevertheless, in Myra McPherson’s *Long Time Passing*, Abrams portrayed himself as “the rarest of political species—an outspoken hawk at Harvard—class of 1969.” He told McPherson, “It always seemed to me that the so-called NLF forces, the Buddhists, were in fact not going to take over [Vietnam], but that the communists were going to take over. The notion that if the United States would just leave, the killing would stop was unbelievably foolish.” In his office, Abrams puts aside his public revisionism and admits to having opposed the war in Vietnam, although he says he came to support the Nixon position in Vietnam and Cambodia by the time he left to get his masters at the London School of Economics.

Abrams, exempt from the draft for medical

reasons, was opposed to Johnson's Vietnam policy while in college. But he was far more passionate in his opposition to the radical anti-Vietnam movement on campus that had united in SDS. "Elliot opposed the war," recalls Kelman, "but it's hard to say to what extent his opposition was his ticket to credibility. In order to get anyone to listen to you in those days, you had to be against the war."

Kelman wonders whether Abrams's current feelings about El Salvador and Nicaragua derive from his days in the besieged anti-SDS minority at Adams House: "In many ways he is still living in the sixties. . . where Harvard is about to be taken over by left-wing radicals." Dan Hastings, a law school comrade who is now a New York attorney and conservative Republican, disagrees: "Elliot had the rare personal experience to observe a genuine totalitarian group—the SDS—exercise its influence in American life."

All in the family

While a law student, Abrams began to impress leading neoconservative intellectuals. He rented the attic of Nathan Glazer, who recruited him to write for *The Public Interest*. Glazer also introduced him to Norman Podhoretz, who was in the market for bright new conservatives for *Commentary*. Though increasingly skeptical of liberal solutions to age-old problems of poverty and race relations, Abrams's writings remained civil and reserved. Like Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, and most of the New York-Cambridge neoconservatives, Abrams concentrated much of his criticism on the New Politics wing of the Democratic party.

After finishing law school, Abrams worked briefly for the high-powered New York law firm of Breed, Abbott and Morgan. He was getting rich, but he was bored. "These people don't even read *Commentary*," he complained to a friend. So he accepted a job with Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, the leader of the Democratic party's anti-McGovernism faction, and the father of political neoconservatism.

Political neoconservatism, nurtured in Washington, was a parallel development to that of the New York neoconservative intellectuals, though instead of Marxists becoming Nietzscheans, Democratic Cold War anticommunists became Republican Cold War anticommunists. In the years before he became a Republican and joined the Reagan State Department, Abrams straddled the worlds of political and intellectual neoconservatism, carefully maintaining his ties to the cen-

trist establishment in both cities. He continued to contribute to *Commentary*, keeping his rhetoric civil and deferential rather than adopting the inflammatory, prosecutorial tones of Podhoretz. Abrams left Jackson's staff in 1976 to become special counsel, then chief of staff for the then- neoconservative senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. There, too, Abrams impressed his associates. Chester Finn, now assistant secretary of education for research and improvement, Charles Horner, now USIA assistant director for programs, and Timothy Russert, now vice-president of NBC News, all former Moynihan aides, are unanimous in their undiluted praise for their ex-boss, Abrams.

When Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976, his administration infuriated Abrams and his friends by refusing to appoint them to important foreign policy jobs. "We were completely frozen out," he complained to Sidney Blumenthal. "We got one unbelievably minor job. It was a special negotiator position. Not for Polynesia. Not Macronesia. But Micronesia." That Carter chose Cyrus Vance, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and James Schlesinger for his cabinet somehow convinced Abrams that Carter's was a "new left administration."

In 1980, Abrams married Rachel Mark Decter, Podhoretz's adopted daughter, in essence merging, in Abrams, the political and intellectual schools of neoconservatism. Podhoretz jokingly admits to trying to arrange the marriage, because Rachel "had a lot of dangerous friends." But in marrying Decter, Abrams also enlisted in what Blumenthal has called Podhoretz's neoconservative "family-run dry cleaners," which now includes Podhoretz, and Rachel's mother, Midge Decter, who is a writer and the executive director of the Committee for the Free World. It also includes their daughter, Naomi Munson, a frequent contributor to the committee's publication, *Contentions*, and her husband, Steve Munson, until recently the committee's deputy director. Their son, John Podhoretz, is executive editor of Sun Myung Moon's newsweekly, *Insight*.

After plotting revenge throughout the Carter administration, Abrams, in 1980, joined Democrats for Reagan and traveled across the country giving speeches to Jewish organizations on how much tougher Reagan would be than Carter was. Shortly after the election, Abrams enlisted in the conservative Counter-Establishment and became a card-carrying Republican. It was a propitious decision.

Alexander Haig appointed Abrams assistant secretary of state for international organizations;

his job was to stay out of the way of Jeane Kirkpatrick, for whose operations at the UN he was ostensibly responsible.

At the outset of his stormy tenure, Haig had considered human rights sissy stuff and informed the senators who confirmed him that since terrorism was the most serious violation of human rights he could imagine, all resources previously devoted to the promotion of human rights by the American government would henceforth be devoted to terrorism. That position, and the administration's first nominee for it, Ernest Lefever, proved unpopular with Congress and the Washington media. So Haig redefined the job and sought a new nominee.

Abrams was named to the high-profile position in the wake of a leaked memo recommending his selection. The memo, ostensibly written by Deputy Secretary William Clark and Undersecretary Richard Kennedy, was actually written by Abrams. "Human rights means trouble," the memo said, "for it means choices which may adversely affect bilateral relations. At the very worst, we will have to speak honestly about our friends' human rights violations." Shortly after, in a memo approved by Reagan, Abrams wrote: "Human rights is not something we tack on to our foreign policy but is its very purpose: the defense of freedom in the world." Yet he also made clear that he saw U.S. human rights policy as a strategy to counter the Soviets.

The appointment was perfect both for Abrams and for the promotion of neoconservative philosophy. Nothing had annoyed Kristol, Kirkpatrick, and *Commentary* about Jimmy Carter so much as his constant complaining about this or that political prisoner in some anticommunist jail somewhere. "Carter never had a human rights philosophy except that the U.S. was generally a bad place going around the world doing bad things," says Abrams.

As assistant secretary, Abrams managed to redefine the concept of human rights with such political dexterity that it took his opponents in the human rights community a while to make sense of what he'd done. Most of them had not opposed his appointment, partially out of political necessity but also because they believed this "tough cookie-pusher," as William Safire called him, might actually mean some of the reasonable things he was saying.

Today, the list of complaints against Abrams by human rights activists and Central American experts is long and deep. Patricia Derian, Jimmy Carter's human rights secretary, calls Abrams's policies a mixture of "hatred, pandering,

cries of anti-Americanism, screwy logic, and jingoistic slogans—all the shoddy hallmarks of the Reagan era of human rights and foreign policy." The former head of the State Department's Cuban Interests section in Havana, Wayne Smith, calls Abrams "a man willing to lie and misrepresent the facts about anything." Vice-chair of Americas Watch Committee, Aryeh Neier, thinks he sees in Abrams "an opportunist who uses human rights to advance other agendas" and the possessor of "a personal vicious streak." Larry Birns, the director of the Council for Hemispheric Affairs, considers Abrams "the most disreputable if not sleazy figure" he has met in 30 years of monitoring U.S.-Latin American relations.

Abrams regularly returns the favor. He calls former ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, "a crank and a fanatical hater of the administration." Neier's human rights work is "garbage" and "completely politicized," and Father Robert Drinan of ADA "stinks" for comparing U.S. action in El Salvador and Nicaragua with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Abrams routinely exercises his constitutional right to refuse to appear on platforms with such critics as Alexander Cockburn, Smith, Birns, and White. When informed that *The Nation's* Christopher Hitchens was among the journalists who would be questioning him on one television news show, Abrams canceled his appearance. He has also instructed his staff not to deal with Birns or his organization.

Why the hatred? "I'll tell you why," Abrams volunteered. "Over the period of the Vietnam struggle in the U.S., the left, in which I include people like Mary McGrory, Anthony Lewis, and Aryeh Neier, became absolutely certain of its moral superiority over the right. They were accustomed to having policies they believed in challenged, but what drives them nuts is the attempt to undercut their position of moral superiority."

The Abrams attempt to undercut the "moral superiority" of the human rights community is based on the old "teach a man to fish" homily. Get a dissident out of jail, and you'll have to get another one out tomorrow. But teach a country to become democratic, and human rights will be codified and protected forever. As long, then, as a country is moving "in the direction of democracy," the U.S. must do what it can to avoid antagonizing that country's military so democratic reforms are allowed to proceed. Countries that are going to or have already gone communist, however, must be pressured to make



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THE NEW REPUBLIC

“Elliott was completely out of sympathy with the cultural tone of the sixties,” said Benjamin Ross, a college roommate. “He was the only person I ever met who looked more comfortable in a brand new pair of Levis than worn-out ones.”

their ruling elites realize the cost of being undemocratic and refusing to respect human rights. “We consider anticommunism to be a human rights policy,” said Abrams. Thus we have contras in Nicaragua, Savimbi in Angola, and rebels in Afghanistan and Cambodia. Abrams does admit there are serious limits to this kind of pressure. We haven’t aided an armed struggle in, say, Poland “not because we don’t have the right to. . . or because we wouldn’t like to,” he says, but because it could lead to nuclear war.

In some cases, Abrams and the administration may have had success with this kind of pressure, though, of course, how much influence our policies have is unknowable. Some countries in Latin America are moving slowly towards greater democracy. Abrams also opposed Jesse Helms’s attempt to pressure the State Department closer to General Augusto Pinochet in Chile. There is also reason to be proud of our support for Corazon Aquino and her peaceful revolution, however belated it may have been.

Still, the net result of Abrams’s shift in philosophical focus is that if a country receiving U.S. aid surrounds itself with the trappings of democratic process, it is likely that such things as torture, disappearances, and denial of *habeas corpus* will become less of a problem in bilateral relations—particularly if the country can point to a few Marxists in its hills.

No massacres

In early 1981, Haig drew the line against further Marxist advancement in El Salvador. The Salvadoran government, led by the tattered remains of a reformist coup and in the midst of a civil war with Marxist guerrillas, was helpless to control a military on a rampage. Hundreds of people were being murdered each month for political reasons in a country the size of Vermont. The U.S. Senate, confronted with reports of these massacres, passed legislation requiring the presi-

dent to certify that the Salvadoran government was making progress toward controlling human rights abuses before Congress would grant him his requested military assistance. Reagan eventually circumvented this inconvenience using a pocket veto, but the certification hearings in the interim were highly embarrassing.

In July 1982, Abrams admitted to the House Foreign Affairs Committee that “human rights violations in El Salvador continue at levels that could easily dishearten us.” That year, Tutela Legal, the human rights office of the archdiocese of San Salvador, attributed more than 6,000 political murders of noncombatants to the army, the security forces, and their allied paramilitary groups. While this was indeed an “improvement” of more than 50 percent compared to 1981 figures, there were also fewer potential victims after the tens of thousands of killings in 1980 and 1981. But, Abrams testified, the Salvadorans now had “a government freely elected, committed to democratic reform, including further free elections, and attempting. . . to make significant improvements in the human rights situation.”

By early 1985, Abrams and the administration were declaring victory for their El Salvadoran policy. There had indeed been improvements. Death squad massacres had been reduced considerably. The 1982 elections resulted in a new constitution, and the election in 1984 brought to power Jose Napoleon Duarte, a leader who had clear popular support. But Abrams and the administration oversold their success. No members of the death squads were ever brought to justice. The elections—with their mandatory voting, clear plastic voting boxes, and soldier escorts—were hardly pristine. And when the press reported human rights problems, Abrams dismissed them as fabrications. Appearing with Aryeh Neier on “Nightline” in February, Abrams insisted to Ted Koppel, “I’m telling you there were no massacres in El Salvador in 1984.” When Neier asked about reported massacres in Los Llanitos in July and

near the Gualsinga River in August, Abrams countered, "They never happened," insisting that such reports were often guerrilla propaganda. Yet remains of victims of the first massacre were observed and survivors were interviewed by correspondents from three major newspapers, the Catholic Church, and Americas Watch. "[R]eporters who went to the scene and looked at what took place, they were simply being propagandists for the guerrillas. Is that right?" asked Neier. Responded Abrams: "I would have to tell you that the U.S. embassy is in a better position than a newspaper which has a one-man bureau, to investigate what is going on in El Salvador." When asked by Koppel if the embassy had investigated reports, Abrams's confidence seemed to drop: "My memory is that we did, but I don't want to swear to it because I'd have to go back and look at the cables." Neier says embassy officials have told him the investigations never took place; the State Department has never offered proof to the contrary.

Disappearing evidence

Abrams has reacted similarly to other incidents that didn't suit his perspective. In April 1985, a leader of the Guatemalan Mutual Support Group (an organization of mothers of the disappeared), her brother, and two-year-old son, were found dead in their overturned car. Friends of the deceased had cause for suspicion; mourners at the funeral, for instance, noted that the child's fingernails were missing. The case drew the attention of the international press. Yet Abrams supported the official government explanation and asserted that "so far there is no evidence indicating other than that the deaths were due to an accident." In late 1986 Abrams denounced the continued protests of the group and one of its spokeswomen, Ninez de Garcia. "They are out to get a man [President Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo] who literally risked his life to bring democracy to Guatemala." President Cerezo probably has put his life on the line. And while the military remains powerful and the killings continue, there is now a civilian government in Guatemala; no small accomplishment given the country's authoritarian history. Rather than admit, however, that the country has a long way to go, Abrams simply impugned the motives of those pointing out uncomfortable facts. "Ninez de Garcia considers this country to be a fascist country," he went on. "She has no right to call herself a human rights worker."

In another incident, Beatriz Mann noted in an

op-ed article for *The New York Times* that she had witnessed the assassination of 29-year-old Carlos Diaz in broad daylight on the streets of Guatemala City. She said that reports of the assassination never appeared in the press and that therefore the State Department's figures for deaths and disappearances probably were not accurate. In a letter to the editor, Abrams insisted that "the murder was reported in the Guatemalan press" and named a nonexistent newspaper. A State Department official later admitted that the newspaper report to which Abrams had referred was not a report of the assassination but a funeral announcement paid for and placed by the victim's family. There was no mention in the announcement of the cause of death.

Abrams has made strong assertions and then been unable or unwilling to back them up time and again. Perhaps the most widely publicized case was that of Patricia Lara, the left-leaning 35-year-old star reporter for the largest, most important newspaper in Colombia. Upon entering this country last October for a routine visit, Lara was detained and then imprisoned in maximum security at the Manhattan Correctional Center. Following a brief hearing at which she was told that her name had appeared on the Immigration Service's list of undesirable aliens, Lara was deported.

The imprisonment and deportation caused an international uproar. Lara was greeted at home as a heroine and widely referred to as "Patricia Daniloff." A few weeks later, Abrams appeared on "60 Minutes" to explain that Lara was not a "journalist" but an administrative terrorist directed by the Cuban secret service and M-19, the Colombian guerrilla organization. Lara had in fact written a book critical of M-19 and its Cuban connection. Colombian Defense Minister General Rafael Samudio Molina, in a December letter, informed Lara that the Colombian government had "no evidence" of her participation in guerrilla activities. Molina's letter, says Abrams, "would appear to be at variance with the facts as they are known to both the United States and the Colombian government."

Contra Inc.

With the contras, as with the Salvadoran government, Abrams has attempted to discredit reports of human rights violations as politically motivated. He has told Congress that "there are strong grounds for skepticism concerning many of the charges of abuse," and personally, Abrams did "not think it is that big a problem." As with

At the New York law firm of Breed, Abbott and Morgan, Abrams was getting rich, but he was bored. "These people don't even read *Commentary*," he complained to a friend.

El Salvador, Abrams is simply trying to wish away inconvenient aspects of reality. While no solid figures are available from any credible sources, Americas Watch reported that in 1986 the contras continued to engage in, among other reprehensible practices, "selective but systematic killings... indiscriminate attacks against civilians... wholesale kidnapping of civilians for the apparent purposes of recruitment as well as intimidation... including a significant number of children."

On April 30, 1985, Abrams was appointed assistant secretary for Latin American Affairs. Flacking for the contras has been just one of his new responsibilities. The Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office (NHAO), set up when Congress mandated that the CIA was to have no involvement in the distribution of the original \$27 million "humanitarian" contra aid package, is under Abrams's direct charge.

Abrams chaired the weekly interagency meetings attended by North, officials from the Pentagon, the CIA, and whomever else was needed to discuss logistical details of the contra war. The agenda at these meetings reportedly ranged from the number of grenade launchers needed to whether or not contra leader Adolfo Calero should appear on "Nightline."

Although Abrams so far has survived the contra investigations, the evidence shows he came perilously close to running afoul of the law:

- An associate of North's named Robert W. Owen, who received a \$50,000 contract from Abrams's NHAO for unspecified services, has been identified by former mercenary Jack Terrell as having been with Adolfo Calero at the contra planning session of the murder of Eden Pastora, a contra leader the CIA was unable to control. Pastora escaped with only injuries, but four journalists were killed.

- Abrams has admitted to giving the number of North's Swiss bank account to agents of the sultan of Brunei, who then donated \$10 million,

since "lost," to fund the contras. When put under oath by the Senate Intelligence Committee, Abrams apologized to Congress for his earlier testimony, which "clearly left a misleading impression," about whether there had been any solicitation, according to the committee's report.

- U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica, Lewis A. Tambs, who was under Abrams's direct charge, operated a secret airstrip in that country to supply the contras against the wishes of its president, Oscar Arias Sanchez, and without the knowledge, much less the authorization, of Congress. Tambs says his order to "open up a southern front" for the contras was given by North and "confirmed by Abrams." Moreover, when Arias threatened to go public about the existence of the airstrip, North, according to the Tower Commission report, informed Poindexter that he held a conference call with Abrams, Tambs, and a CIA official in which all agreed that the Costa Rican president should be threatened with the cutoff of U.S. aid unless he kept his mouth shut. North wrote that he made some threats and that Arias had gotten "the same word from Elliott." Abrams told the Tower Commission that he could not remember how or when he had learned about the airstrip. Abrams denies ever agreeing that Arias should be threatened with the aid cutoff. Arias denies ever speaking to North.

Rhetoric at the door

Since taking responsibility for the contras, Abrams, a brilliant bureaucrat when it comes to turf protection, has professed a startling degree of ignorance before congressional committees, not only of North's activities and the Costa Rican operation but also of the constant resupply of the contras by mercenaries using the Ilopango airbase in El Salvador, a base we practically own and operate. Abrams's enthusiasm for such operations is unhidden. "Some members of Congress accuse us of approving of the [private aid]

with a wink and a nod," he has explained. "A wink and a nod, hell. We think it has been fine." Without apology, Abrams told the House Western Hemisphere Subcommittee that NHAO could not account for more than \$16 million of the original \$27 million appropriated by Congress. He then instructed his country officers to refuse to cooperate with the General Accounting Office's audit of those funds that had been ordered by Congress.

Abrams has managed to retain plausible deniability regarding the worst aspects of contra funding. "Everybody involved in the [restricted interagency group] knew that Ollie was somehow connected" to contra funding, Abrams, with disarming candor, told the Tower Commission. "I think most of us were careful not to ask lots of questions other than once in a while to say 'Is this okay? Is this stuff legal?'"

But that's not the only reason he's still around. George Shultz likes him, in part because Abrams buys the secretary a measure of good will from the right wing. Abrams is also a capable politician. A man with a moderate past, Abrams knows to leave his vituperative neoconservative rhetoric at the door when lobbying moderate congressmen who have been the key to continued contra aid. Yet that same rhetoric has also given him leverage with conservatives in Washington, and with the squabbling egos in the contra high command.

Cracking liberals

For all his rigid ideology and political arrogance, I must admit that I could not help liking Abrams when I interviewed him. He is clearly dedicated to what he considers a just cause and, as much as anyone in the administration, has put himself and his political future on the line in support of that cause. But his zealotry in fighting those he has deemed communists, socialists, liberals, or whomever the enemy happens to be

at the moment, has blinded Abrams. Honest disagreements about means and ends are no longer possible. Intellectual arguments are judged not on principle but on their usefulness as tactics in the ultimate struggle.

Rather than acknowledge that criticisms of his policy might derive from differences on how to contain the Sandinista revolution or whether or not the U.S. has any right to intervene in Nicaragua, Abrams regularly refuses to appear publicly with those who would question his policies' ends. The motive is not fear; Abrams is a skilled debater and could certainly hold his own. But by refusing to countenance them as opponents, he helps eliminate dissident views from the public dialogue.

Abrams complained to me that the "liberal establishment line" had, until recently, considered the president's SDI program to be "madness" and the contra policy to be "wrong." "But now," he observed, "they're cracking." Who, I asked, is the liberal establishment? "*The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the TV networks," plus a few Democratic politicians and some academics, in other words; the same journalists Abrams described in 1984 as "simply yesterday's peace activists in somewhat more decorous garb." "It is not surprising," he noted, "that their view of the world is distorted by a seemingly invincible anti-Americanism on the one hand, and by a profound reluctance to criticize America's adversaries on the other." The SDS is back, only they've changed their initials to CBS, NBC, and ABC.

In the middle of last summer, while the administration was secretly diverting funds to arm the contras, Abrams gave a speech to the Inter-American Defense College. He told his audience, "Overreaction will only discredit us. We must guard against fighting the enemy indiscriminately with an excess of zeal or an excess of force. To lose sight of the values we defend is to help our enemies!" Well said. ■

The remains of victims of a massacre in El Salvador were observed by correspondents from three major newspapers, the Catholic Church, and Americas Watch. Yet Abrams said the massacres "never happened."

WHO'S WHO in the Administration

One reason the Tower Commission report did not deal too harshly with Col. **Robert McFarlane** may be that he had in the past served as aide to two of its members, **Brent Scowcroft** and **John Tower**. He may also have been helped by the sympathy that was inspired by his suicide attempt, which seems to have won him a period of tenderness from the press as well. It is our opinion, however, that McFarlane will emerge as one of the principal architects of Irangate. . . .

The Washington Times's Michael Hedges, who seems to have the best sources on Lt. Col. **Oliver North**, recently reported some interesting quotes and observations from North's friends:

"Ollie is the kind of guy you'd take that hill for you whether you wanted it taken or not."

"I saw a side of him that was malevolent, so opportunistic that finally you had to get away from him."

"He always had to prove he was better than everyone else."

"He could be a little crazy," or "the most intense person I've ever seen," or a man who, "if I were in trouble, he'd be one of the first I'd go to."

Another said that, when North took off the jacket of his uniform, "he'd set it up in a chair beside him so everybody could see his medals". . . .

Howard Baker is going to have to come up with some red meat for **Ronald Reagan's** conservative constituency. By appointing **Kenneth Duberstein** as his chief deputy, he has enraged the right-wingers who have always regarded Duberstein's mentor, **Jacob Javits** as a flaming liberal. Of the three others Baker brought in with him, **A.B. Culvahouse** is said to be well-liked by the White House staff, **James Cannon** is not around very much and apparently isn't in the running for a major post, and **Thomas Griscom** won the director of communications job after establishing his territorial claim by physically taking over **Pat Buchanan's** old office several weeks earlier. **Dennis Thomas** had tried a similar ploy but it failed when his patron, **Donald Regan**, went into exile. . . . Of the holdovers, **Marlin Fitzwater**, **Nancy Risque**, and **Frank Donatelli** are all smiling because Baker had told them he wants them

to stay on. . . . **David Chew** appears to be the only one of **Donald Regan's** "mice" to have a chance of surviving in the Baker White House. . . .

Frank J. Gaffney is almost certain that he will be **Richard Perle's** successor as assistant secretary of defense for international security policy. If he is, expect no changes. Gaffney is Perle's protege. . . .

Why has the nomination of **Trusten F. Crigler** to be ambassador to Somalia been put on hold? It seems that Senator **Jesse Helms** has discovered that in 1984 **Crigler** contributed \$100 to the **Mondale** campaign. . . .

Clearly, **Richard Gephardt's** presidential campaign has not electrified the nation, but it is impressive that he already has won the support of 21 of his House colleagues. . . .

Anne Burford says that she knew about the danger of radon gas in 1982 and tried to get \$2 million to study the problem but got this response from **Fred Khedouri**, then associate director of the Office of Management and Budget: "Come on, if we give you \$2 million, you're liable to uncover a problem and then you'll be coming back for millions more."

Khedouri is now staff director for **George Bush**. Another Bush aide, **Donald Gregg**, may be in hot water for having told reporters that he had never discussed the contras in an August meeting with **Felix Rodriguez**, key leader in the contra supply effort. Gregg said all they talked about was El Salvador. Later, however, according to David Hoffman of *The Washington Post*, "Bush's office issued a chronology showing that Gregg had met with Rodriguez last August to discuss problems in the resupply operations, and that Gregg convened a second meeting afterward of top U.S. officials to see how the resupply effort could be helped." This was a time when Congress had cut off U.S. military aid to the contras. When asked why Gregg had at first failed to disclose his contra discussions with Rodriguez, Bush said, "He forgot". . . .

In

WHITE HOUSE

Deputy Chief of Staff—**Kenneth Duberstein** has been vice president at Timmons and Co. Inc, a Washington lobbying firm.

Assistant to the President for Communications and Planning—**Thomas C. Griscom** was president and chief operating officer of Ogilvy and Mather, a Washington public relations firm.

Assistant to the President for Operations—**Rhett Dawson** has been staff director on the Tower Commission.

Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs—**T. Kenneth Cribb** was counselor to the attorney general. Deputy Press Secretary—**Leslye A. Arshnt** was director of public affairs at Cabot Corp. Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of Political Affairs—**Franklin L. Lavin** was deputy executive secretary at the NSC.

DEFENSE

Chief of Staff, Army—**Gen. Carl E. Vuono** was commanding general of Army training and doctrine command at Ft. Monroe, Virginia.