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Inside the National Security Council

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Menges, Constantine. *Inside the National Security Council: The True Story of the Making and Unmaking of Reagan's Foreign Policy*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988. 418pp. \$19.95

This book is both fascinating and disturbing. The author, Constantine Menges, was a controversial and strongly conservative member of the Reagan National Security Council (NSC) from October 1983 until his dismissal in July 1986. *Inside the National Security Council* provides a defense of his self-described solitary battle against invidious bureaucratic forces bent on blunting or subverting President Reagan's foreign policy goals.

The book is an uneasy blend of political science and tell-all, "here's the way it *really* happened" gossip. While largely autobiographical over the five year period covered, it also attempts to place the major events of those turbulent years in context: Grenada, Lebanon, Nicaragua and the Sandinistas, and the Iran-contra debacle. Mr. Menges ostensibly has a primary purpose in describing the failure of the National Security Council process to properly adjudicate and present varying cabinet-level views on foreign policy to the president so that he could make the final decision for implementation. In conveying this message the book is ultimately successful; indeed, the final chapter, which is readable as a stand-alone monograph, summarizes this concept nicely. It is, however, no more compelling or different an argument than could be found in the

Tower Commission Report which followed the Iran-contra hearings.

With that as premise, the book is devoted to illustrating what Mr. Menges saw as calculated obstruction of the Reagan agenda by the State Department through "accommodation" with pro-Soviet communist groups worldwide. As a Latin America expert, Mr. Menges is convincing in his many references to the unfolding Reagan policies toward Central America, the Sandinistas, initiatives such as the Contadora and Arias Peace Plans, and Grenada. As a policymaking and implementation primer, this glimpse into world-class bureaucratic infighting is disturbing. Other recent books of the period, such as Caspar Weinberger's *Fighting for Peace*, hint at the problems without presenting the stark and ugly realism of Menges' work. Perhaps its greatest utility, aside from preserving another snapshot of the historical period, is in bringing the informed reader an alternate, and unpolished view of government.

Unfortunately, the all-too-believable tableau of deception, careerism, and flexible ethics he details is insufficiently supported by source notes. Granting that a majority of this work was based upon personal recollection and gleaned from his own diaries, there are nonetheless many instances in which he could have either cited specific sources or provided background. Virtually all of the U.S./Nicaraguan history presented is assumed and unsubstantiated. It may be perfectly

correct and supportable, but without endnotes—given the admittedly partisan nature of his values—the reader feels somewhat at the author's mercy.

"Damning by faint praise" seems a tactic as well. For example, during a diatribe against Special Envoy Philip Habib—one of the author's State Department "accommodationists," the role Habib played in the Marcos-Aquino election of February 1986 is brought up. Following a denigration of Habib's services in the Lebanon crisis the author states, "Somehow this record of negotiating experience suggested to the State Department that Habib was the right person to become special envoy to the Philippines in late 1985 (sic) when the United States finally realized that the Marcos regime was in crisis. As it turned out, Marcos was the architect of his own demise: it was Mrs. Corazon Aquino and the Philippine people who brought about the democratic transition." Having been in Mrs. Aquino's Makati campaign headquarters the afternoon that Ambassador Habib's mission was announced in Washington—and a student of all that followed—I can state with some authority that subsequent to his non-sense visit to Manila he *was* instrumental in getting President Reagan to reassess U.S. foreign policy vis-a-vis Marcos, in favor of Mrs. Aquino. In at least this instance Mr. Menges is at best misleading and at worst incorrect. But Habib is just a bit player in *Inside the National Security Council*. The real ammunition

is saved for George Shultz and Robert McFarlane.

Most of the book is devoted to uncovering the Shultz-McFarlane-Deaver connection and demonstrating its linkage to the Iran-contra scandal. While careful to avoid implicating Secretary of State Shultz directly in Iran-contra, the author does lead the reader on a pathway in which NSC Advisor McFarlane is unwittingly led by Shultz to a position from which Iran-contra was an almost inevitable step. This progression seemed particularly unproved to the reviewer.

In summary, despite its prejudices and the highly polemical style, *Inside the National Security Council* is worth reading. It offers a perspective that few have talked about. The author makes no secret of his political ideology and states a forceful case for improved NSC procedures (which have been realized). Had it been more inclusive, with less pleading and more factual substantiation, it would be an even better work. The ultimate value of *Inside the National Security Council* to the National Security community lies in its unflinching look at bureaucratic politics gone awry.

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