

Oliver North

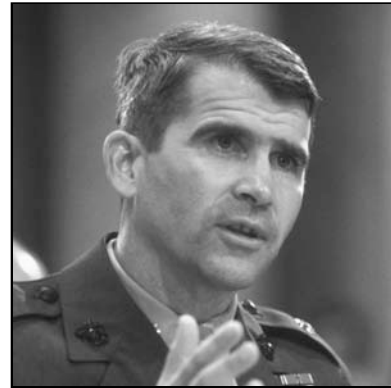
1943–



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Oliver North was a marine who became famous for his role in the Iran-Contra affair. He helped sell weapons to Iran and sent the money to Nicaraguan rebels illegally.



As you read the biography below, think about Oliver North's motives and his support of the president's goals. Do you think North's actions were wrong?



Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

President Ronald Reagan was determined to oppose Communist groups and governments around the world. His administration often gave money, training, supplies, and weapons to groups who would fight communism. One such group, called the Contras, fought a long civil war in Nicaragua with over 20 million dollars of U.S. help.

The enemies of the Contras were the Communist-supported Sandinistas, who overthrew the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979–80. The Sandinistas installed a Communist-leaning government, which the Contras and members of the Reagan administration were against. When Congress found out in 1984 that U.S. forces had secretly placed mines in Nicaraguan ports, it passed a law forbidding U.S. support of the Contras. President Reagan, however, told his national security adviser to do whatever was necessary to help the Contras. Others on Reagan's security team, including Oliver North, thought this instruction meant they could break the law.

Oliver North was born in 1943 in San Antonio, Texas. He grew up in Philmont, New York. In 1968 he enrolled in the U.S. Naval Academy. He served in the U.S. Marine Corps for 22 years, and fought in the Vietnam War. He received the Silver Star, the Bronze Star for valor, and two Purple Hearts for wounds in combat.

In 1981 North became a member of President Reagan's National Security Council staff. In this position, North worked at combatting acts of terrorism against U.S. citizens. In 1983 he supervised the laying of mines in Nicaraguan harbors and coordinated the U.S. invasion of Grenada. He also led efforts to arrest the hijackers of the passenger ship *Achille Lauro* in Italy. In addition, he organized the 1986 air raids on Libyan military bases in response to a Berlin nightclub bombing that the Reagan administration claimed had been done by Libyan agents.

A Conservative Era**Biography**

North became known internationally in 1986 for his involvement in the Iran-Contra affair. Although support of the Contras was banned by the Congress, North saw their support as part of his own personal fight against communism.

In 1985 President Reagan agreed to sell weapons to Iran even though Iran was considered an enemy. Reagan hoped that Iran would then help release some U.S. citizens who were being held hostage in Lebanon. Oliver North supervised the arms deal and overcharged the Iranians by 30 million dollars. With that money, North bought weapons and supplies for the Contras.

The scheme was discovered in 1986 when the Sandinistas shot down a plane carrying weapons to the Contras. One of the American crew members was captured, and he revealed that the plane and the weapons belonged to the CIA. One month later, Iran publicly admitted the illegal arms sale.

Some officials in the U.S. government, including North, tried to cover up the scandal by destroying important documents. President Reagan claimed he knew nothing about the illegal arms sale or Contra support. That November, he fired several of his staff members who had been connected to the scandal, including North. Less than a year later, North testified publicly that he had lied to Congress, to the press, and to the American people.

At the end of a three-month trial in 1989, North was convicted on three of twelve criminal charges. A year later, an appeals court overturned the conviction, saying that North had not received a fair trial.

North's career was far from over. In the years following Iran-Contra he ran unsuccessfully for the Virginia Senate. He also wrote several best-selling books and served as a television commentator.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Identify** What group did Oliver North support with an illegal weapons sale? What was the group trying to do?

2. **Evaluate** What do you think motivated Oliver North's actions?

ACTIVITY

Oliver North testified before Congress on his role in the Iran-Contra affair. If you had an opportunity to question him, what would you ask?