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No Time for Truth

Secretary of State George P. Shultz made a mistake last week. He told the truth—about the "disinformation program" the White House unfurled for the spooking of Moammar Gadhafi. He said Americans should be glad that their government was making life miserable for a terrorist. The damage to the American press and public was unintentional.

This week, he is taking no chances. He is issuing daily denials about the three Americans who were shot down over Nicaragua. They are not, repeat, not, employes of the Central Intelligence Agency, not—don't ever think so—connected with the U.S. government.

The wife of the survivor of the crash, Eugene Hasenfus, says he works for the CIA, providing the one discordant note in the symphony of denials played by administration officials.

They are "private citizens," according to Shultz, freebooters for freedom.

It would not do at all for the CIA to be involved. Under present law, which is days away from being changed, the CIA is forbidden to engage in arms traffic or to assist the warriors in any way. All they can provide right now is intelligence and communications help.

The administration strategy is clear. If they make the denials loud and strong enough, they can drown out the skeptics and get their $100 million in contra aid safely through. It is so close. All that stands between the contras and the boodle is a little band of stubborn men in the House who won't surrender to President Reagan in the matter of arms control amendments they have written into the continuing resolution that contains the contra kitty.

If it turns out in the course of time that the nasty suspicions being voiced on Capitol Hill and elsewhere are indeed grounded in fact, it won't matter. So they keep those denials coming and beat up on the balky House members, and expect by adjournment to be on their way to widespread carnage in Nicaragua.

Meantime, they are asking the public to believe that the cargo plane came out of nowhere, carrying Soviet weapons that nobody can account for, following orders from someone unknown.

Unnamed government officials fleetingly tried to pin it on John K. Singlaub, the errant right-wing ex-general who runs his own foreign policy and who has boasted that CIA Director William J. Casey telephones him with a "good work" commendation from time to time. Singlaub's people, however, have also issued a denial, as surprisingly did White House spokesman Larry Speakes.

"CIA's fingerprints are all over this," says Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa).

The administration is counting on the fact that enemies of its contra policies simply have no time to conduct any inconvenient investigations that might confirm their suspicions. Republican senators want to go home and campaign. Democrats don't control the Senate committees that might inquire where Eugene Hasenfus got his paychecks and about the two dead crew members who have been linked to Southern Air, which was until 1973 part of the CIA's private air force, and still does contract work for the agency.

The denial-blizzard can't cover the questions mounting up about the operation and the policy.

Up until recently, when no excuses were necessary for a weary, cowed Congress, we were told that one of the reasons we had to lay waste to Nicaragua is that Nicaragua is shipping arms to rebels in El Salvador.

But here's a switch. The plane was flying arms from El Salvador to Nicaragua. And they were of Soviet make so that no one would suspect the U.S. as the sender. And where did the three Americans get them?

And how come the identity cards of the trio showed them to be U.S. advisers to the Salvadoran Army? Were they forged? The Nicaraguan officials who put Hasenfus on show hardly had time for intricate counterfeiting. And if the cards were authentic, were the three Americans counted among the 150 advisers permitted in El Salvador under U.S. law?

By the time we get the answers, your tax dollars will be at work, burning peasant villages.

When the four U.S. veterans who have been fasting on the Capitol steps for 38 days against the Nicaraguan policy were brought in out of the cold and into a news conference by congressional sympathizers, the members told them they had great hopes of turning things around next January. They could think of nothing that can be done, meanwhile, to stop the war.

For the fasters, who have vowed to fast to death, January could be too late. It will also be too late for the Nicaraguans, for the Americans who could eventually be sent there to rescue the contras, and too late for the truth.

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