

George Bush's Iran-Contra albatross

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Disclosures and questions about the Vice President's role are beginning to hurt Ronald Reagan's heir apparent

■ The memorandum had come from Lt. Col. Oliver North's office safe. It was stamped SECRET, and in the upper-right-hand corner was a notation: "Ollie—For summary and recommendation—Bud." Was it just another of the many secret documents from the Iran-Contra affair? Not by a long shot. The memo was written by a top aide of George Bush's to Robert McFarlane, President Reagan's national-security adviser. Although there is no proof that Bush knew of the document or his aide's activities, the memo adds to the growing perception that the Vice President had to have known more than he has admitted about the most damaging scandal of the Reagan years.

The rising tide

It has been a rather rotten several weeks for George Bush. He has consistently maintained that he didn't know that arms were being traded for hostages until Senator David Durenberger briefed him in December, 1986. Recent disclosures undermine that contention, and they place Bush, at a key moment in his race for the Presidency, in an extremely awkward and potentially dangerous situation.

For weeks now, the evidence has been mounting that Bush was well informed about the arms-for-hostages gambit, almost from the very beginning. Last month, a computer message written by then National Security Adviser John Poindexter surfaced all of a sudden, and in it Bush was described as "solid" in his support for the arms-for-hostages deal. Just last week, the *Washington Post* disclosed new details of Bush's regular attendance at other White House meetings where the Iran arms sales were discussed. CNN, meanwhile, reported that Bush knew in advance about McFarlane's May, 1986, trip to Teheran to negotiate with the ayatollahs.

As if that weren't enough, *U.S. News*

has obtained a copy of the March 17, 1983, memorandum found in North's safe by FBI agents. Investigators believe the memo may have marked the beginnings of the National Security Council staff's involvement in directing paramilitary operations in Central America. This NSC activity later resulted in the White House overseeing the clandestine resupply of arms to the Contras—an operational involvement undertaken to skirt congressional prohibitions on such assistance by removing the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Department from the direct line of responsibility.

The memo is intriguing not just for whatever political implications it may come to have. It was written by Donald Gregg, Bush's national-security aide, after he met with Felix Rodriguez, a Cuban-born former CIA official who worked under Gregg during the Vietnam War. Rodriguez dropped off a military plan—dubbed the "Pink Team" plan—to launch mobile air strikes with "minimum U.S. participation" at leftist rebels in Central America. Though Rodriguez wrote that the plan "will be ideal for the pacification effort in El Salvador and Guatemala," an attached map showed concentric circles drawn over shaded strike zones that also included Honduras and Nicaragua. One intelligence source who examined the plan said, "It is clear that targets inside Nicaragua were to be targeted." Gregg liked the plan so much

he forwarded it to McFarlane and urged that it be adopted.

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Gregg, it appears, was a pivotal player in Central American policy. He introduced Rodriguez to Bush and North. Through Gregg's efforts, Rodriguez came to direct counterinsurgency operations in El Salvador. Sometime in 1985, Rodriguez was recruited by North to become a key participant in the covert efforts to resupply the Contras. Gregg's earlier introduction of the two men, it seems, was beginning to pay some dividends. Gregg, in sworn testimony to Iran-Contra investigators and in two chronologies endorsed by the Vice President, failed to mention his earlier actions, as reflected in the SECRET March, 1983, memo. "One, I didn't think of it," Gregg told *U.S. News*. "[And] two, it had nothing to do with the questions being asked of me."

Question upon question

A larger question is whether Gregg knew of the efforts to resupply the Contras early on and informed Bush. An April 30, 1986, briefing memo prepared for Bush for a meeting with Rodriguez lists the "resupply of the Contras" for discussion, yet Bush and Gregg both say the subject never came up. Did Gregg know about the diversion of Iran arms-sale profits to the Contras then? In August, 1986, Gregg met with Rodriguez, who told him about the resupply operation. But Gregg's handwritten notes also seem to indicate that the subject of the diversion came up. "Felix . . . stated a swap of weapons for dollars was arranged to get aid for the Contras," the note said. Gregg insists that this did not refer to the diversion. And, again, he says he never informed Bush of the subject of his talk with Rodriguez. "Frankly," he said, "I did not think it was vice-presidential material."

Is it possible that Bush knew nothing at all about the Contra-resupply efforts or the diversion? That's what the Vice President says. And for now there is no hard evidence to the contrary. In short, Bush says he was never privy to the step-by-step maneuvering in the Iran-Contra shenanigans.

But unfortunately for Bush, that may not be the end of it. As a political candidate in an increasingly close race with Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole, Bush may find himself at the very beginning of a long and damaging fight—especially since the lesser candidates have nothing to lose by taking shots at him. And if new disclosures keep tumbling out about his knowledge of the Iran-Contra affair, it may well prove to be a fight Bush cannot win. ■

by Steven Emerson