

ABROAD AT HOME | Anthony Lewis

The Reasons for Lying

There is a wonderful absurdity in the Reagan Administration's effort to distance itself from the C-123 cargo plane shot down in Nicaragua while carrying weapons to the contras. The performance brings back happy memories of Richard Nixon's flights of Watergate deniability.

The plane flew from a Salvadoran air base, Ilopango. The base is entirely financed by the United States Government. Americans can get into the place only if they have identity cards approved by U.S. officials.

But of course the three American crew members had nothing to do with any official United States enterprise. So President Reagan and Secretary Shultz and their aides assure us. And they are all honorable men.

The C-123 was connected to Southern Air Transport, a charter airline once owned by the C.I.A. In 1984 the same aircraft was used in a United States effort to catch Nicaraguan officials at drug smuggling. The C.I.A. installed hidden cameras on board.

But of course neither the C.I.A. nor any other U.S. agency had anything to do with the plane on its last flight. So the highest officials assure us, and they are all honorable men.

The one American survivor of the flight, Eugene Hasenfus, said he worked for a contra air supply operation run from El Salvador by two Cuban-Americans, Max Gómez and Ramon Medina. Max Gómez flew for a C.I.A. airline during the Vietnam War. The Los Angeles Times reported that Vice President Bush's national security adviser got Mr. Gómez a job with the Salvadoran Air Force, and he has told friends he reports to Mr. Bush on his operations for the contras.

Ends and means in Nicaragua

The Vice President said Max Gómez was "a patriot." He did not comment on his staff's role in placing Mr. Gómez in El Salvador, or on Mr. Gómez's reporting to him about the contra supply flights. Mr. Bush did deny what no one had alleged: that he himself was in charge of the operations. "It's absolutely untrue," the Vice President said.

The exact chain of command that put Eugene Hasenfus and the others in that airplane with a load of guns and ammunition may remain a secret for some time. "I know the White House knows and is not telling," the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Republican Dave Durenberger of Minnesota, said.

But there are only two broad possibilities. One is that the operation was in fact being run by agents of the United States Government, in violation of statutes that have banned such activity since 1984. The other is that the operation is a "private" venture, active without formal official control but with the enthusiastic approval of the Reagan Administration.

Over the last several years there has been a mushroom growth of "private" military activities in areas targeted by the Reagan Administration. Retired Gen. John K. Singlaub, head of the World Anti-Communist League, has raised upward of \$10 million for

what he says is nonlethal aid to the contras.

Reagan officials have also persuaded foreign governments to help. Saudi Arabia, for example, reportedly agreed to pay for contra arms in return for Reagan Administration support of its bid for Awacs aircraft.

The nature of the Reagan crusade against Nicaragua is what inevitably produces lame explanations when something like the C-123 crash happens. It is a lawless crusade, resorting to the extremely dangerous device of private war because it does not have public support, designed to slip the American people into a commitment they do not want to make.

Everything about the Reagan war on Nicaragua has been a lie from the beginning: the talk of aiding the contras only to stop arms flowing to the Salvadoran guerrillas, the later statement that the objective was to force the Sandinistas to negotiate. Ronald Reagan is trying to overthrow another government. From that improper, un-American objective flows all the embarrassment. A bad end produces bad means.

"This is an outrageous violation of international law," Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, said the other day. He was talking about the Nicaraguan Government's temporary delay in allowing U.S. consular access to Eugene Hasenfus.

That from an Administration that has violated international law wholesale in Nicaragua — and that ran away from the World Court's adjudication of the issue. In its foolish shrillness the remark is a telling indication of how American values and common sense have been corrupted by the war on Nicaragua. □