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Bush Is Linked to Head Of Contra Aid Network

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Max Gomez, a Cuban American veteran of the CIA's ill-fated Bay of Pigs operation, has told associates that he reported to Vice President Bush about his activities as head of the secret air supply operation that lost a cargo plane to Nicaraguan missile fire this week, sources said yesterday.

Gomez has said that he met with Bush twice and has been operating in Nicaragua with the vice president's knowledge and approval, the sources said.

On Thursday, Eugene Hasenfus, the American crew member who survived the crash of the cargo plane and was captured by Nicaraguan troops, identified Gomez as head of the elaborate aerial supply system serving anti-Sandinista guerrillas, or contras, in Nicaragua.

Hasenfus, speaking at a news conference organized by Sandinista officials, told reporters that he believed Gomez worked for the Central Intelligence Agency.

But several sources said Gomez formally worked for the air force of El Salvador, a job he apparently gained with the help of an aide to Bush, not the CIA.

Asked about these matters, a spokesman for Bush, Marlin Fitzwater, said: "Neither the vice president nor anyone on his staff is directing or coordinating an operation in Central America." But he refused to say whether Bush had met with Gomez or whether Bush's staff had helped Gomez in any other way.

[Sources close to Bush told The Washington Post last night that the vice president acknowledged meeting Gomez once or twice and expressing approval of his efforts to help the contras. However, these sources

said they knew nothing of any direct assistance given to Gomez by Bush or his staff.]

The emerging story of Gomez illustrates the way a group of White House and administration officials over the last two years knit together a web of private military and financial assistance that sidestepped legal restrictions imposed by Con-

gress in 1984 and kept the contras fighting while President Reagan campaigned here for resumption of direct aid.

Organized at Reagan's behest and operating with his blessing, a network of private citizens and foreign governments has worked to provide the contras with airplanes, guns and food to maintain their war against Nicaragua's leftist regime whether Congress approved or not.

No U.S. government funds were directly involved, officials said, and the CIA was carefully kept at arms' length because of Congress' close scrutiny of that agency's operations. But Reagan, Bush and other officials made it clear, both to conservative donors at home and allied governments abroad, that they hoped others would aid the contras when Congress did not.

And, several U.S. officials and contra sources said, Reagan and Bush detailed aides to help the private aid network get organized with instructions to insulate the administration from any direct responsibility for its operations.

As a result, members of Congress said, the White House appears to have skirted and stretched the law forbidding direct aid to the rebels, but stopped just short of breaking it.

The exposure of the secret supply effort has caused an uproar in Congress, consternation in El Salvador and alarm in the administration. But leading members of Congress said that they did not expect the disclosures to block the final passage of a new \$100 million fund of U.S. aid for the contras that both houses have already approved.

And as far as administration officials are concerned, the private supply effort has been a success because it has kept the contras fighting during two years without U.S. military aid.

"What's kept the resistance alive has been private help," Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams said. "Some members of Congress accuse us of approving of this with a wink and a nod. A wink and a nod, hell. We think it's been fine."

In the case of Gomez, one knowledgeable source said, Bush aide Donald Gregg provided a recommendation that introduced the Cuban American to Gen. Juan Rafael Bustillo, the chief of staff of El Salvador's air force, from whose base many of the contras' supply flights ran.

Gomez—who has also gone by the name of Felix Rodriguez—first went to El Salvador to advise the Salvadoran air force on antiguerrilla operations in 1985, several sources said, and carried the recommendation of Gregg.

Only this year did Gomez begin working solely on the contra supply system, the sources said, but he continued reporting to Gregg and Bush. He was paid by the Salvadoran air force, not by the U.S. government, they said.

[Telephone calls to Gregg by The Post were not returned.]

[At a news conference Thursday, retired major general John K. Singlaub, head of the United States Council for World Freedom, said Gomez had been employed by the CIA at one time and is now an adviser to the Salvadoran government. The San Francisco Examiner, which earlier this week linked Gregg to Gomez, reported that Gomez maintains daily contact with Bush's office. The Examiner said Gomez reportedly served in Vietnam with Gregg.]

In other cases, administration and contra sources said, a National Security Council aide, Marine Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, put rebel officials in touch with Americans who could help them raise money and obtain arms.

But in every case, the sources said, the White House aides were careful to avoid giving direct orders to the contras or their backers. "You're not going to find a smoking memo in this program," one knowledgeable U.S. official said. "It's not that simple."

Still, members of Congress said yesterday that they wanted to investigate the administration's conduct further. And after a secret, three-hour briefing by administration officials, several said that their focus had shifted from the CIA to the White House.

Washington Post staff writer Joanne Omang also reported:

Members of Congress said yesterday they are generally satisfied with the Central Intelligence Agency's denials of involvement with the cargo plane shot down in Nicaragua last week, but said they want to know much more about who did sponsor the flight.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.) said he had "no reason to doubt" the CIA position that it had no direct or indirect involvement with the flight.

A State Department official, meanwhile, confirmed that William J. Cooper, the pilot of the downed plane, flew at least one mission to Central America for the office that supplied humanitarian aid to the anti-Sandinista forces. Cooper may also have been the owner of a second C123 transport plane that was being serviced this week at Southern Air Transport Inc. in Miami. That plane left Miami early yesterday for Honduras, according to Federal Aviation Administration records.

Lugar added he did not think the Americans aboard the downed plane violated any U.S. law. Cooper and his copilot, both Americans, were killed—along with an unidentified Latin American—in the crash.

However, the Sunday crash will be among events covered by a Foreign Relations Committee probe into allegations that the contras

may have been involved in drug running and abuse of U.S. aid funds, Lugar said.

The Customs Service said yesterday it is investigating whether the downed plane may have carried guns out of Miami, which would violate federal restrictions on arms exports and other laws, including the Neutrality Act, which bars U.S. citizens from working to overthrow governments not at war with the United States.

Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) said he will ask the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, of which he is a member, to investigate gun running into Nicaragua. He added that if any U.S. citizens broke the law, the Reagan administration must prosecute them even if it agrees with their objectives.

"The administration does not have the right to selectively enforce the laws," Nunn said.

Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) said the Foreign Relations Committee should subpoena Hasenfus' bank records "so we can find out who was paying him." He said the briefing "raised more questions than it answered," such as where the plane originated, why it had easy access to the high-security Ilopango Air Base in El Salvador and who funded the trip. "Somebody has to have the answers to these questions," he said.

Hasenfus told reporters in Nicaragua the plane had flown out of Miami. And the contras have said the ill-fated plane was bringing arms supplies to their troops in southern Nicaragua. But spokesmen here insisted they did not know which organization had sponsored it.

In an interview with Washington Post staff writer Art Harris, UNO procurement officer Mario Calero said the flight "was a private deal." He said his brother, Adolfo, one of three UNO directors, had told him that "it was an operation with a string attached" and that the string was that the sponsoring organization would run it.

"Whoever it was requested complete confidentiality, and we have to respect that," Calero said his brother told him.

Calero added that Singlaub was not involved with the trip, contrary to published reports.

Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the intelligence committee, urged the administration to "be more forthcoming about what it knows about privateering" in the contra arms supply pipeline.

"I think the White House knows and has not been telling the world, and probably should at some point, in order to help the CIA," Durenberger said. Congressional staff members said agency officials had expressed irritation at what they regarded as bungling and "a waste of assets" by whoever ran the doomed cargo flight.

Nunn was among several lawmakers who said Congress has been too overloaded with money bills to dig into the Nicaraguan question. "The plate is just too full," Nunn said. He added that next week should be different.

Rep. Corinne C. (Lindy) Boggs (D-La.) agreed Congress has been too busy to focus on Nicaragua, especially when the facts are uncertain. "Until there's some indication of what is an accurate account, you're reluctant to make any judgments," she said.