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Where did d'Aubuisson's pal come up with \$6 million in cash?

INSIDE DOPE IN EL SALVADOR

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ON FEBRUARY 6 several U.S. Customs agents stopped a sleek white Sabreliner jet as it was fueling up at the Kleberg County Airport, 60 miles outside of Corpus Christi, Texas. They suspected it was carrying the cash profits from a series of major drug deals. The plane had made two suspicious flights to Panama and El Salvador in the previous three weeks. There were four men traveling on the plane, all of whose names appeared on police computers as suspected narcotics smugglers. When customs agents attempted to search the men's luggage, the apparent leader, a self-possessed 34-year-old businessman from Central America named Francisco Guirola, resisted. "It would cause trouble," he warned the agents in near-perfect English.

He swore he was not carrying drugs or arms. He insisted that he was entitled to diplomatic immunity, and he showed a Costa Rican diplomatic passport to prove it. Customs officials checked with the State Department and learned that, although Guirola's passport was genuine, he was not protected by diplomatic immunity. The agents opened Guirola's eight large suitcases. Each one was stuffed with thousands of \$20 and \$100 bills. There were 650 pounds of unmarked bills, a total of more than \$5.9 million. Guirola and two of the men with him are now awaiting trial on charges of violating federal regulations restricting the removal of money from the country.

In El Salvador, where Guirola lives, he was quickly nicknamed "the six-million-dollar man." He had been known in Salvadoran political circles as one of a group of wealthy young businessmen active in right-wing activities. Since 1979 he had served intermittently as a quiet and effective fund-raiser for his close friend Roberto d'Aubuisson, the leader of the Arena party and a man repeatedly charged with organizing death-squad activities. Arena is the

country's largest and most extreme right-wing political organization. (See "Mi ASESINO, the Freedom Fighter," page 19). In March 1984 d'Aubuisson ran unsuccessfully for president against the Christian Democratic candidate, José Napoleón Duarte. During the campaign, he used Guirola's home in San Salvador as his personal headquarters. In their search warrant affidavit, the customs agents cited Drug Enforcement Administration files that state, "Guirola in March 1984 was reportedly involved in Cocaine and arms smuggling in El Salvador and Guatemala."

Guirola clearly belongs to d'Aubuisson's inner circle. Last spring the United States heard of a plot among d'Aubuisson associates to assassinate U.S. ambassador to El Salvador Thomas Pickering. U.S. authorities believe that Dr. Antonio Hector Regalado, a dentist who is d'Aubuisson's personal security adviser and who is known as "Dr. Death," was behind the plot. His private phone number was found in Guirola's address book. President Reagan dispatched special envoy General Vernon Walters to inform d'Aubuisson personally that the United States would not look kindly on the murder of its ambassador. Only four men are known to have attended the meeting: Walters, Pickering, d'Aubuisson, and Chico Guirola.

D'Aubuisson was reportedly in no condition to meet with anyone. One knowledgeable source recalls, "He's known to take anything—full glasses of alcohol, cocaine, you name it. He scares the hell out of people when he goes on a bender. He goes crazy. For this meeting with Pickering, [they] had to stand him in a shower and pour coffee down his throat. He took Chico Guirola [to the meeting] as his witness. It was real South Italian—Guirola was the *hombre de confianza* to say d'Aubuisson didn't rat on anyone."

The credentials and papers that Guirola was carrying at the time of his arrest testified to his political connections.

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In particular, Guirola carried official credentials, signed by d'Aubuisson, which said he was a "special adviser to the Constituent Assembly." Guirola and one of the other men arrested—a Cuban-American—also carried special credentials signed by the highest law enforcement official in El Salvador, Attorney General José Francisco Guerrero. Guerrero, incidentally, is also d'Aubuisson's personal attorney.

For d'Aubuisson, Guirola's arrest came at a bad time. The National Assembly and municipal elections will be held on March 31. D'Aubuisson is leading the Arena party's campaign to consolidate right-wing control of the legislature, and is running for an assembly seat himself. "*La avion pirata*"—"the pirate plane," as it has been dubbed in El Salvador—became a campaign issue. The Christian Democrats have run full-page newspaper ads pointing out d'Aubuisson's ties to the *avion pirata*. D'Aubuisson has acknowledged Guirola is a friend, but he said he could not be responsible for the actions of all his acquaintances. In any case, d'Aubuisson has survived far worse charges than that of a friend being charged with illegally removing money from the United States.

D'Aubuisson's real problem may be that Guirola's suitcases never reached San Salvador. Arena has formed a formal alliance with the next largest conservative party, the Party of National Conciliation (PCN). The PCN, however, is believed to be almost broke. In addition, wealthy supporters of Arena have grown tired of funding d'Aubuisson and his private security force. U.S. government officials close to the case have not ruled out the possibility that Guirola planned to keep the money himself. But they believe that at least part of the \$5.9 million was intended to rescue the PCN and to protect d'Aubuisson from the dissatisfaction in his own party.

U.S. law enforcement officials are reluctant to release details of the Guirola case because it is still under investigation. On the record they stress that they are not yet sure what Guirola intended to do with the \$5.9 million. "The money is dope money," one U.S. Customs agent asserted in an interview. "Whether it was part of a terrorist-money-dope connection" is not known, the agent said, "but we strongly believe it."

What is definite is that the arrests at Kleberg County Airport have exposed some of the clandestine activities of d'Aubuisson's inner circle. At the very least, government documents and recent interviews with more than a dozen sources both here and in Central America demonstrate that El Salvador's drug smugglers, death-squad killers, and right-wing politicians know each other, do business with each other, and share complete immunity from the law.

FRANCISCO GUIROLA, known to friends as Chico, is typical of the people who travel in this world. He comes from that small class of people whom Salvadorans describe as "adjunct oligarchs." They are the men and women of Jaycee age who cannot quite afford to live out their lives without working, but who are rich enough to fear being kidnapped by leftists. Revolution and reform have deprived them of the undisturbed power that they once would have inherited. These entrepreneurs have responded with fervent right-wing patriotism and support for d'Aubuisson. Their counterrevolutionary zeal is the soul of the Arena party.

We first talked with Chico at the Camino Real Hotel in Guatemala City in June 1982. He was the picture of casual wealth, amiable and well dressed. Those were euphoric days for the "adjunct oligarchs." The elections in March 1982 had given the Arena party (which was formed only in late 1981) near control of the National Assembly. More important, the elections had restored some of the political legitimacy that the right had lost after 1979 because of the death squads. Between October 1979 and the summer of 1982, hundreds of unarmed civilians were murdered every month in El Salvador. D'Aubuisson and his closest associates openly resented domestic and international revulsion at the violence. "It's not a legal war," Ricardo Paredes, an Arena party activist and one of Chico's best friends, explained in 1982. "We don't want to fight a fair war. We have to go and beat their pants off."

Guirola and a few dozen other civilians closest to d'Aubuisson had studied counterrevolutionary theory with aging French mercenaries who told stories of the Battle of Algiers. They had rubbed shoulders with secret Argentine police who trained Salvadoran military officers to run death squads one day and who shuttled to Honduras to train the *contras* the next. Their friends and family had fled to Miami or been killed. But they had toughed it out, and they had won. By the summer of 1982 Guirola and his friends were feeling cocky enough to brag about their adventures.

Guirola told us that his background and personal ambitions had coincided with the needs of the right-wing underground. As a young man he studied business at the Menlo School and College in California with a close

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friend who was a nephew of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. He said he learned "how to manage money, how to make money." But when his family's large rice plantation began losing money, he had to return to El Salvador. The family's holdings were then broken up by the country's land-reform program. Deeply embittered, he joined the Salvadoran Nationalist Movement (MNS), a small group of friends who described themselves as "violently anticommunist." "I supported them with my own funds," he explained. As financial director of the group, he received limited contributions from secret donors to underwrite the group's activities. "They just put money in our pockets. I never asked the source." D'Aubuisson, he said, was "our liaison to the military."

Guirola claimed that the movement used its money for standard political purposes. The group was not a death squad, but Guirola's friends said he had also given money to people who were involved in other illicit activities, including a black propaganda campaign that portrayed reformist military officers as closet Communists, purchases of arms on the black market, and a counter-terror campaign in which bombs were planted at some 30 churches, schools, and other institutions considered too sympathetic to the left. Guirola's own role was described by these acquaintances as that of an all-purpose smuggler, a *contrabandista*. They said he regularly flew his Beechcraft Baron surreptitiously between the three cities where the Central American right was strongest: San Salvador, Guatemala City, and Miami.

But as Chico talked in the bar of the Camino Real, he was also fighting off disillusionment. He had seen corruption in men he once admired. He had watched Arena supersede the MNS as older and wealthier men moved in to take control of the party now that it was legitimate. And though he was still willing to work with the counterrevolutionaries, he hinted that he had been sickened by seeing their work firsthand.

After mid-1982 Chico dropped out of politics for a while and began spending more time in Florida. His parents had fled to Albuquerque, where his mother, a native of Costa Rica, obtained the job of vice consul for the Costa Rican government. He didn't live with his parents, but there were advantages to his mother's largely honorary post. For one thing, as the son of the vice consul, he used a diplomatic passport from Costa Rica. This entitled him to avoid customs searches when entering and leaving the United States.

THREE MONTHS after we talked with Chico, the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador began to receive reports that d'Aubuisson and his close associates might be financing their political activities partly by smuggling guns and cocaine. The reports dealt with a friend of d'Aubuisson named Julio Vega. Vega owned a cotton farm in Usulután, the eastern province of El Salvador where hit-and-run guerrilla attacks had driven many cotton farmers into debt. Yet Vega always seemed to have money to throw around. U.S. officials later concluded that Julio operated a

thriving gun and cocaine smuggling enterprise and ran death squads with the profits.

Vega took off in his private plane for Guatemala on September 14, 1982. Just before he left, Vega obtained a \$1.6 million government loan, ostensibly for a new cotton crop. A well-placed Salvadoran official told us that d'Aubuisson had encouraged Vega to get the loan, and that the future attorney general Francisco Guerrero had provided legal advice. According to U.S. Embassy reports, the proceeds were stashed aboard Vega's twin-engine Piper Navajo, as part of a load of contraband cargo. At least two intelligence reports received by the Central Intelligence Agency from associates of Vega alleged that the money was part of a multi-million-dollar guns and cocaine deal.

Vega and his plane never returned from Guatemala. The U.S. Embassy, recognizing that the incident might have political ramifications, immediately tried to find out what had happened. "The right wing was a chronic challenge in both Guatemala and El Salvador," said the embassy official who conducted the inquiry. "There were two aspects to the threat that this episode presented. The first aspect, and the main reason we were concerned, was because of the alliance between the two right-wing movements and the potential involved for right-wing coup plotting. Drugs were the second aspect."

The president of Guatemala, Efraín Ríos Montt, apparently had similar concerns. Ríos Montt, who was overthrown in a military coup in 1983, was an evangelical Protestant deeply opposed to drugs. D'Aubuisson and his friends had often used Guatemala as a refuge, but as one source put it, Ríos Montt concluded that this time the Salvadoran "had crossed the line." The Guatemalan government announced publicly that Vega and his co-pilot had been stopped by police and turned over to Salvadoran authorities.

The embassy officer said he later learned that Vega's wife, Marta Luz, was the last person to hear from him. "Marta, darling," Vega reportedly said, "I'm having trouble entering the country because my name is on a list at the airport." After that, Vega and his money vanished. The

only remaining question was exactly how the Guatemalans disposed of Vega and his co-pilot. "Either he was turned into cement in a cement factory or dropped into a volcano," said one foreign observer. "The volcano is the traditional way in Guatemala."

D'Aubuisson made no secret of his concern about Vega. Twice he abruptly left his duties as president of the Constituent Assembly to make trips to Guatemala to seek a meeting with Ríos Montt. But, according to the embassy officer, the presidential aides "told him something heavy enough to make him back off. He never touched it again." D'Aubuisson may have mourned his missing friend but

not for too long. When Vega did not resurface, d'Aubuisson left his wife and moved in with Marta Luz.

As a rule the State Department investigates only those foreign crimes that have implications for U.S. policy. The Vega scandal quickly subsided, and U.S. officials in Central America came to regard it as just one more unresolved disappearance. It wasn't until the arrest of Guirola seven weeks ago that American diplomats in San Salvador began to reconsider the possibility that d'Aubuisson and his backers were involved in drug trafficking.

There was a good deal of evidence linking Guirola and his companions to the

drug trade. U.S. Customs officials first became interested in the Sabreliner jet, according to an affidavit for the search warrant, when they learned that Guirola allegedly had unloaded more than one million dollars in cash in Panama on January 21. On January 22 Guirola and three other men had landed at a small airport in the town of Alice, Texas, to refuel. An unidentified airport employee thought the refueling stop was suspicious and alerted customs officials. The affidavit says that customs had been informed that the plane had been used in "a large-scale illegal money laundering operation" in Central America.

On February 6 customs officials seized the plane at the Kleberg County airport, on the technicality that the aircraft had allegedly not reported to customs authorities since returning from Panama. Guirola and two Cuban-

Americans, Gus Maestrales and Oscar Rodriguez Feo, were arrested for conspiring to violate a federal statute that requires anyone taking more than \$10,000 in cash out of the country to file a report with the U.S. Treasury Department. Maestrales was the owner and pilot of the plane. Bail for Guirola and Rodriguez Feo was set at two million dollars, and they remain in jail in Corpus Christi. Maestrales's bail was set at one million dollars, which he posted. The fourth man on the plane, co-pilot Arturo Guerra, who was named in the affidavit as a "large-scale" narcotics trafficker, was questioned but not charged. Investigators said there was no evidence he was involved in the scheme.

U.S. authorities are not yet certain what the arrest of Guirola and Co. means. Records from the Drug Enforcement Administration confirm that all four men have been suspected of cocaine or marijuana smuggling. Law enforcement officials say that the men appeared to be working around the clock shipping money out of the United States. One law official familiar with the case said, "They never slept." An encyclopedic array of personal papers confiscated from the men shows large cash transactions. They also indicate that Guirola and Rodriguez Feo were connected with a Salvadoran business that has a bank account in Panama.

The four men had obtained enough identification of their own to operate without challenge from the law—at least in El Salvador. In addition to the Costa Rican passport, Guirola carried the Salvadoran passport that identified him as a government official. His credentials from the Salvadoran attorney general's office identified him as a "special commissioner." Curiously Rodriguez Feo also had signed credentials from the Salvadoran attorney general—even though he is a naturalized American citizen. Rodriguez Feo's credentials as a "security adviser" are also unusual because he is known, at least to U.S. law enforcement authorities, as the registered owner of a shrimp boat found in the Bahamas in November 1982 with 10,496 pounds of baled marijuana on board. No one was aboard the boat at the time it was seized, and no charges were brought in the case. It is not known whether the Salvadoran attorney general knew about the shrimp boat case. Nor is it clear whether the I.D.s mean that Guirola and Rodriguez Feo were on the attorney general's payroll held merely honorary titles, or had bought the credentials.

After Guirola's arrest, Pickering wrote an unclassified cable to the State Department reporting that d'Aubuisson had called him about the incident. Pickering said d'Aubuisson claimed "he had only a slight and nodding acquaintance" with this "ne'er-do-well young man." When Pickering "asked Major d'Aubuisson if this wasn't the same Mr. Guirola whom he brought along to the very sensitive meeting" with General Walters, d'Aubuisson said yes, according to Pickering, but "attempted to dismiss the importance of their association."

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The major law enforcement question now is whether Guirola's travels and "fund-raising" could have remained completely unknown to d'Aubuisson and to other officials in the Salvadoran government. But the even more important political question is whether the U.S. investigation will be followed up in El Salvador and Panama. U.S. intelligence files are already crammed full of far more serious allegations against d'Aubuisson. Nevertheless, the Reagan administration has continued to treat d'Aubuisson as if he were a legitimate conservative politician. Better to have him struggling for votes in the legislature, the reasoning goes, than to have him killing his opponents on the streets.

If the U.S. government will not stand up to d'Aubuisson, it is certain that no one in the Salvadoran government, from President Duarte on down, will do so either. D'Aubuisson dismisses the most credible death-squad allegations as "disinformation" spread by communist sympathizers. He is sure that neither American nor Salvadoran officials will challenge him on the Guirola case or any other. His lawyer is El Salvador's attorney general, and his longtime friends sit on the Supreme Court. When d'Aubuisson was last in Washington, he spoke to fawning members of the Young Americans for Freedom at Georgetown University, and expressed his usual confidence that not even the worst charges against him will ever stick. "Where is the proof?" he demanded. "If anyone has any real evidence against me, let them give it to a judge." He is El Salvador's Teflon terrorist. □

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CHICO AND THE MEN

Here are the major characters in the story of the mysterious six million dollars.

Roberto d'Aubuisson: leader of the far right-wing Arena party and reputed organizer of Salvadoran death squads. He campaigned out of Chico Guirola's house when running for president of El Salvador last year.

Francisco "Chico" Guirola: arrested carrying \$5.9 million in cash in Texas on February 6. A young well-to-do Salvadoran rice farmer, he has raised

money for d'Aubuisson and the Arena party.

José Francisco Guerrero: attorney general of El Salvador and d'Aubuisson's personal lawyer. He issued and signed the official law enforcement credentials that Chico Guirola and Oscar Rodriguez Feo were carrying when arrested in Texas.

Thomas Pickering: outgoing U.S. ambassador to El Salvador. He was the target of a suspected death-squad plot by key d'Aubuisson aides last May.

Hector Antonio Regalado: Salvadoran dentist known as "Dr. Death" for his

role as d'Aubuisson's security chief. U.S. officials say he organized the plot against Pickering.

Oscar Rodriguez Feo: a Cuban-American suspected drug trafficker who was arrested with Guirola. His credentials identified him as a "special security adviser" to El Salvador's attorney general.

Julio Vega: friend of d'Aubuisson who disappeared in Guatemala in 1982. U.S. authorities believe he was involved in guns and cocaine smuggling.

Marta Luz de Vega: Julio Vega's wife, now d'Aubuisson's mistress.