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Bush link to contras questioned

Office had contact with arms runner

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WASHINGTON — When the unofficial supply network ferrying arms and supplies from a military base in Ilopango, El Salvador, to the Nicaraguan contras was plagued with problems last summer, one of the leaders of the operation turned to Vice President Bush's office for consultation.

Throughout July, according to crew members on the operation, fuel had been difficult to obtain, delaying the supply flights across the border into Nicaragua. Often, vehicles meant to ferry crew members and supplies from San Salvador to the airstrip were in disrepair or the drivers could not be found.

When flights finally did take off, it was not unusual for the pilots to discover that there were no contras to meet them at the assigned supply drop points in Nicaragua.

"It was just a hassle all the way through," said one former crew member. "There were all these little potholes and stumbling blocks."

So on Aug. 8, Felix Rodriguez visited Donald P. Gregg, Bush's assistant for national security affairs, and Gregg's deputy, Army Col. Samuel Watson. He told them that the supply network might not survive until the CIA could come in to take over the operation, according to documents released last week by Bush's office. That meeting occurred two months before President Reagan signed the legislation authorizing \$100 million in U.S. military and nonmilitary aid to the contras.

Although in June 1984 Congress made government involvement in supplying the contras illegal, contacts between Rodriguez and Gregg were not unusual. In fact, over the last three years, there were 16 meetings or telephone conversations between Rodriguez and Bush or members of his staff, primarily Gregg, according to the documents.

Officials throughout the adminis

tration have denied any involvement in the contra supply network, but the new revelations have heightened questions about the knowledge of the operation in Bush's office and underscored inconsistencies in previous statements from vice presidential aides.

The contacts between Rodriguez and the vice president's office were extensive, according to the chronology of calls and meetings. Rodriguez, a Cuban-American and former CIA agent who uses the name Max Gomez, attended two meetings with Bush himself — in January 1985 and May 1986 — and a Christmas party in Gregg's office.

In addition, there were numerous telephone calls and meetings with Gregg and other officials. Moreover, Gregg helped Rodriguez get a job at the Ilopango base in El Salvador.

However, Bush's office maintains that the August meeting was the first time any of the vice presidential aides were aware that Rodriguez was involved in the effort to supply the contras.

Despite the fact that U.S. involvement in supplying the contras would not be legal again until October, Gregg convened an Aug. 12 meeting of officials from the State Department, the National Security Council and the CIA to relay Rodriguez's report on the desperate shape of the contra supply operation, according to Bush's office.

Marlin Fitzwater, Bush's spokesman, said he could not explain why these discussions were conducted in August, except for the fact that it was "close" to the time that the administration had hoped U.S. involvement in supplying the contras could resume.

The first evidence of any possible link between the contra supply network and Bush's office came in October from Eugene Hasenfus, a crewman for the supply network who was shot down over Nicaragua.

Hasenfus, who was pardoned and freed last week after serving one month of a 30-year sentence, said Oct. 17, in a CBS interview after his capture, that Rodriguez or Bush knew how the supply operation worked.

At the time, Bush's spokesman, Fitzwater, said that "Gregg has said he had no knowledge of anything involving contras. Neither the vice president nor anyone on his staff is directly or indirectly coordinating an operation in Central America."

But last week, with bits and pieces of contradictory information slipping out, Bush's office laid out a chronology that confirms a very different version of what happened than previously had been said.

The new version is that Gregg helped Rodriguez get his job as a

director of the contra supply operation at Ilopango and that Gregg was aware of Rodriguez's involvement in the network more than two months before Bush's office acknowledged knowing of the connection. It also says the U.S. government found out that Hasenfus' plane was shot down through a telephone call Rodriguez made to Gregg.

Fitzwater maintains that Bush's office had no involvement in the supply network and that it thought Rodriguez was working with the Salvadoran military to suppress a Marxist insurgency in El Salvador.

"Our purpose from the beginning has been to end speculation about the relationship between Felix Ro-

driguez and the office of the vice president," Fitzwater said in a statement accompanying the chronology.

According to the chronology, Rodriguez began his work in El Salvador in February 1985, several months after Congress cut off military aid to the contras.

Gregg helped Rodriguez get the job working against the Salvadoran insurgency, Bush's spokesman has acknowledged, because the two had done similar work in Vietnam in efforts to eliminate the Vietcong guerrilla units operating in the provinces around Saigon in 1970.

Rodriguez and Gregg also were involved in the CIA's Bay of Pigs operation in 1961, according to a former CIA agent who participated. But by the time Rodriguez came to Gregg looking to help work against the leftist insurgency in El Salvador, he had left the CIA, according to information from Bush's office.

Gregg spent 31 years working for the CIA, until he retired in 1982 to join Bush's staff as assistant for national security. His last job with the CIA was as director of intelligence programs for the National Security Council.

Gregg did not return telephone calls last week. Gregg's involvement in the Bay of Pigs operation could not be independently confirmed. A Bush spokeswoman, Gayle Fisher, said she knew nothing of Gregg's CIA career.

Bush met Gregg in the CIA, while Bush was serving as director of central intelligence during the last year of the Ford administration.

In January 1985, one month before Rodriguez moved to El Salvador, Gregg introduced him to Bush, according to the chronology. By that time, Bush was well acquainted with

the situation in Central America.

As chairman of the White House's National Security Planning Group, he had received a National Security Directive on Central America a year earlier warning that the governments of Costa Rica and Honduras were being threatened by "the continuing Sandinista military buildup and the lack of real democratization in Nicaragua," according to government documents concerning that report.

The chronology from Bush's office makes clear that the vice president approved of getting Rodriguez hired by the Salvadoran military, which the United States publicly supports with aid. Indeed, Bush has subsequently called Rodriguez a national hero for his work in El Salvador.

Since the downing of Hasenfus' plane in October, Rodriguez's work at the Ilopango base in El Salvador

has been detailed by numerous former crew members involved in the operation.

They say Rodriguez served as the liaison between the operation and the Salvadoran military. Many of the supplies sent to the contras, including weapons, passed through the Ilopango air base. Mercenaries were issued identification cards that permitted them on the base.

Bush and his aides have been adamant in their denial that they knew what type of work Rodriguez has been doing in Central America.

But not everyone is convinced. "There were 12 meetings with [Bush's] staff," said Arlene Alligood, a contra researcher for the International Center for Development Policy, based in Washington, D.C. "I find it ridiculous that they never discussed anything to do with the contra supply effort."