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Aide to Bush Says Neither Knew Of Friend's Link to Contra Arms

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 12 — Vice President Bush's national security adviser, Donald P. Gregg, said today that neither he nor Mr. Bush knew until August that Mr. Gregg's protégé, a former employee of the Central Intelligence Agency, was deeply involved in "private" arms shipments to the rebels in Nicaragua.

Mr. Gregg's friendship with the protégé, Felix Rodriguez, which dates to 1970, and his own long service in the C.I.A. have fostered wide speculation that he, and possibly Mr. Bush, were among the Reagan Administration's links to a clandestine arms-supply network.

But Mr. Gregg insisted today, in the only interview he has given since the existence of the arms-supply network became known, that neither he nor Mr. Bush had any links with the network beyond knowing Mr. Rodriguez and that they had known nothing of the diversion to the rebels of some profits from arms sales to Iran.

Ends Weeks of Silence

The Vice-Presidential aide's agreement to an interview, after weeks of refusing to answer press queries, had the approval of senior members of Mr. Bush's staff. It indicated that the Vice President felt compelled to take new steps to lessen the political damage caused by repeated suggestions that he and Mr. Gregg were hiding something.

In the interview, Mr. Gregg acknowledged that he introduced Mr. Rodriguez to Mr. Bush and to senior State and Defense Department officials in January 1985. The officials obtained a job for Mr. Rodriguez, who used the alias Max Gomez, with the air force of El Salvador, Mr. Gregg said, and Mr. Rodriguez advised the Salvadorans on anti-guerrilla tactics.

Mr. Gregg said that in addition to Mr. Bush, he introduced Mr. Rodriguez at that time to Thomas R. Pickering, then the United States Ambassador in El Salvador; Langhorne A. Motley, then the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, and Nestor D. Sanchez, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Inter-American Affairs. In May, Mr. Gregg said, Mr. Rodriguez met with Mr. Bush and Edwin G. Corr, the Ambassador to El Salvador, in the Vice President's office.

Several American officials have said Mr. Corr closely monitored the supply network's operations from his office in San Salvador, but he has denied that he

"supervised" the flights.

In August, Mr. Gregg declared, he received a telephone call from Mr. Rodriguez — one in a long series — in which Mr. Rodriguez expressed concern about the continuity of supplies to the contras, as the Nicaraguan rebels are known. Mr. Gregg said that shortly afterward he held a meeting in his office in the Executive Office Building between Mr. Rodriguez and C.I.A. officials.

According to Mr. Gregg, Mr. Rodriguez expressed concern that the private network might be disbanded before official American military aid, newly authorized by Congress, could begin to be delivered.

Asked whether he inquired of Mr. Rodriguez, a Cuban-American veteran of the Bay of Pigs invasion, how long he had been involved in the arms shipments, exactly what he did and whom he reported to, Mr. Gregg replied: "No, I did not. I saw my role as putting him together with the knowledgeable people, and I did nothing at all beyond that."

Called Dedicated Anti-Communist

"I find it quite understandable that he should have become involved," Mr. Gregg said. "He was down there, he's a dedicated anti-Communist, and a lot of this arms-supply stuff was going on. He knew some of the people, I'm sure. I don't feel he pulled the wool over my eyes. We still talk a lot; we're still fast friends."

Mr. Rodriguez's activities were first disclosed after one of the supply network's cargo planes was shot down over Nicaragua on Oct. 5, about two months after the meeting in Mr. Gregg's office.

American crewmen said Mr. Rodriguez, a burly 45-year-old, had helped get them permission to operate flights from the Ilopango military air base near El Salvador's capital, had obtained false identity cards for them from the Salvadoran Air Force and had done other favors for them.

Shortly thereafter, it was disclosed that Mr. Gregg had interceded for Mr. Rodriguez and had introduced him to Mr. Bush, who met with him three times in all, twice in his Washington office and once at a rally in Miami.

The Vice President publicly described the Cuban-American as a "patriot." The revelations raised questions about the possibility that Mr. Bush, a

former Director of Central Intelligence, had been involved in the diversion of funds from the Iran arms sales.

Mr. Bush's chances for the 1988 Republican Presidential nomination may have been damaged as a result.

Involvement Is Denied

In an hour-long conversation, Mr. Gregg categorically denied that he or Mr. Bush had had "any involvement whatsoever" in raising funds for the contras, in the diversion of arms sale revenues, or in the operations of the clandestine supply network in Central America.

Mr. Gregg worked for the C.I.A. from 1951 to 1979, when he joined the National Security Council staff. He retained his links to the agency until August 1982, when he went to work for Mr. Bush. He said he had made it "an informal rule not to reach back to my agency career while working for the Vice President" — a rule he said he had broken only once, in his continuing relationship with Mr. Rodriguez.

"Felix knows more about low-intensity insurgency than almost anyone else alive," he said.

Mr. Gregg displayed an autographed color photograph of Mr. Rodriguez standing next to a small helicopter in El Salvador. He said the two men talked often on the telephone and sometimes exchanged letters. Mr. Rodriguez, he said, has left Central America and is now recovering from a serious hernia operation somewhere in southern Florida.

"I have a Felix file right there in my desk," Mr. Gregg added, "and every bit of paper in it relates exclusively to El Salvador."

Between 1970 and 1972, Mr. Gregg headed C.I.A. operations in the area of South Vietnam around Saigon, which was known as III Corps. In those years, he said, Mr. Rodriguez developed under his direction a system using low-flying helicopters, warplanes and small airborne squads for destroying entrenched Vietcong positions.

At that time, Mr. Gregg continued, his boss was the C.I.A. station chief in Saigon, Theodore G. Shackley. Now re-

tired from the agency, Mr. Shackley played a key early role in setting up arms transfers to Iran, but Mr. Gregg said he had not maintained close contact with Mr. Shackley, seeing him only occasionally at weddings and other such events, and had no knowledge of Mr. Shackley's links to the Iranians.

Mr. Gregg also denied knowing several key figures in the arms-supply network — Rafael Quintero and Luis Posada Carriles, two other Bay of Pigs veterans who have worked for the C.I.A., and retired Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord, one of the organizers of the network.