

# George Bush sinks deeper into Iran-Contra scandal

by Scott Thompson

The Jan. 18 issue of *U.S. News and World Report* carries an article entitled, "George Bush's Iran-Contra Albatross." If the story is accurate, then the Iran-Contra scandal is likely to take on greater importance in the 1988 presidential elections than has heretofore been the case. One Washington, D.C. observer has described the series of leaks that implicate Vice President Bush in the scandal as "the Chinese water torture."

The latest *U.S. News* article makes clear that the involvement of Bush's office in the Contra resupply operation was much deeper than the vice president and his aides have previously admitted. For weeks now, the evidence has been mounting that Bush was well informed of the arms-for-hostages gambit, almost from the very beginning. In December, a computer message was uncovered, written by National Security Adviser John Poindexter. It described Bush as "solid" in his support for the arms-for-hostages deal.

Then, in early January, the *Washington Post* disclosed new details on the series of meetings in which the Iran arms-sales operations were "fully vented." They were attended by the vice president, and he raised none of the objections leveled by the secretaries of State and Defense at the plan. Cable News Network meanwhile, reported that Bush knew in advance about Robert McFarlane's May 1986 trip to Teheran to negotiate with the ayatollahs, citing as evidence Bush's demand that the trip and the arms sales follow his own trip to the Middle East. That trip was made to "jawbone" the Saudis into raising oil prices to benefit the Iranian Treasury's ability to purchase arms.

Now, the March 17, 1983 memorandum stamped "secret" and found in Lt. Col. Oliver North's safe has, in the words of *U.S. News*, led "investigators" to "believe the memo may have marked the beginnings of the National Security Council staff's involvement in directing paramilitary operations in Central America. This NSC activity later resulted in the White House overseeing the clandestine resupply of arms to the Contras—an operational involvement undertaken to skirt congressional prohibitions on such assistance by removing the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Department from the direct line of responsibility."

Combined with a flurry of accusations from Bush's leading opponent, Sen. Robert Dole, this series of leaks has already seriously damaged Vice President Bush's campaign. Bush has also been hauled before Special Prosecutor Law-

rence Walsh, because it was thought that his original testimony before the Tower Commission was incomplete and misleading.

## Enter Felix Rodriguez

The cited March 17, 1983 memorandum was written by Donald Gregg, Bush's national security aide, after he met with Felix Ismad Rodriguez, a.k.a. Max Gomez, a Cuban-born former CIA official who worked with Gregg and with the CIA's Theodore Shackley in Vietnam. Rodriguez gave Gregg a military plan to launch air strikes with "minimum U.S. participation" at leftist rebels in Central America. Although Rodriguez described the plan as "ideal for the pacification effort in El Salvador and Guatemala," an attached map showed that air strikes were also to include Honduras and Nicaragua. Gregg liked the Rodriguez plan so much he forwarded it to Bud McFarlane, urging that it be adopted. McFarlane, in turn, forwarded it to Oliver North, with the notation: "Ollie—For summary and recommendation—Bud." Concludes *U.S. News*, "Gregg, it appears, was a pivotal player in Central American policy."

Despite official disclaimers, the record clearly indicates that Rodriguez had discussed the Contra resupply operation with Gregg, who introduced Rodriguez to Vice President Bush and Lieutenant Colonel North. The first meeting between Gregg and Rodriguez, according to a chronology released by the vice president's office after the relationship first became known, was on Nov. 3, 1983, sometime after the meeting reported on in the "secret" memorandum from North's safe. Even the official record shows Gregg helping Rodriguez obtain a post as an adviser on counterinsurgency with the El Salvador Air Force, where he worked on a project that Rodriguez described later as similar to what he had done for Theodore Shackley in Vietnam. This, after Gregg had introduced Rodriguez to several leading Washington officials, including the vice president. Eventually, Rodriguez became the coordinator of the Ilopango, El Salvador supply operation.

By not later than July 1985, Rodriguez was in phone contact with Gregg concerning the need to continue supplies for the Contras, according to the *New York Times* of Dec. 13, 1986. Evidence points to Rodriguez having discussed the Contra resupply operation with the vice president as well,

despite official denials. The background briefing supplied by Gregg for a May 1, 1986 follow-up meeting with the vice president and Rodriguez had the Contra resupply operation as one of the topics that was to be discussed, along with the counterinsurgency operation in El Salvador. Oliver North was present at that meeting.

Finally, on Aug. 8, 1986, Rodriguez met with Gregg and another Bush aide, Colonel Watson, to express his concerns that the informal Contra supply organization which then existed, might not last until the U.S. government effort organized by the CIA could put in fresh funds then only recently authorized by Congress. Gregg passed these concerns on to other Washington officials in a position to do something about it.

### **The 'narcontras'**

Felix Rodriguez was brought in to the Contra supply operation by Jorge Mas Canosa, head of the Cuban-American National Foundation and a close collaborator of John Ellis "Jeb" Bush, the vice president's second son. Salvadoran military leaders claim that Rodriguez worked for the foundation only as a cover; that he instead coordinated supply shipments for the Contras.

But, there is a deeper scandal involved in connection with the name, Felix Rodriguez. It implicates the vice president's office in the narcotics-running, whose proceeds the Contras used to purchase weapons during the period that official support from Washington was cut off.

Convict Ramon Milian-Rodriguez testified before a closed-door session of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Terrorism and Narcotics that he had supplied \$10 million to the Contras from Colombia's Medellin Cartel of cocaine traffickers, according to Newt Reuss of *Newsday*. The money allegedly was transferred to the Contras by Felix Rodriguez.

There is additional evidence supporting the Milian-Rodriguez story. According to pilot Michael Toliver, two men hired him to fly weapons to the Contras: Felix Rodriguez and Rafael Quintero. Like Rodriguez, Quintero is a veteran of Ted Shackley's 1960s Operation Mongoose to assassinate Fidel Castro. Toliver claims that he flew arms to the Contras, and also, that on two flights, he returned to the United States with cocaine and marijuana aboard, loaded at Contra airfields by people he did not know. On one return flight, says Toliver, he flew 20 tons of marijuana into Olmstead Air Force Base in Florida.

Several Contra pilots also claim that Felix Rodriguez was involved in clandestine arms shipments out of Miami—an apparent violation of the Boland Amendment—during the period that he was in close contact with Bush's office. Congressional investigators say participants in the Contra supply network claim that Vice President Bush's office received regular intelligence reports on the progress of the clandestine arms deliveries.

According to Central American intelligence sources cited in *Progressive* magazine, Rodriguez made contact with Gen. Oscar Humberto Mejia Victores, the Guatemalan chief of state. A *New York Times* report quotes an unnamed U.S. official identifying Mejia as a "close friend" of Rodriguez. The Central American sources say Rodriguez and Mejia discussed a plan, first broached by Rodriguez during a previous trip, whereby Guatemala would provide cover for U.S. arms shipments to the Contras in exchange for increased U.S. aid to Guatemala. The specifics of the plan were later revealed in the Tower Commission report, which printed excerpts from a March 5, 1985 computer message from Oliver North to then-National Security Adviser McFarlane. The Guatemalans were to falsify end-user certificates to show that what North described as "\$8 million of munitions for the FDN" Contra organization was destined for the Guatemalan Army. The deal went through in a series of shipments starting around March 10, 1985.

Throughout the period of these illicit activities, Rodriguez was in regular contact with Gregg and frequent contact with Vice President Bush.

### **'Arms for hostages'**

Gregg's handwritten notes seem to indicate that, when Rodriguez met with Gregg in August 1986 to discuss the Contra resupply operation, the question came up of the diversion of funds from the Iranian arms sale to the Contras. "Felix . . . stated a swap of weapons for dollars was arranged to get aid for the Contras," the note said. Gregg insists that the note did not refer to the diversion, but there can no longer be any doubt that George Bush knew about the arms-for-hostages swap offered by the Israelis from almost the earliest discussions of this by the National Security Council. Moreover, a review of the details of a series of meetings attended by Bush from July 1985 through Jan. 17, 1986, shows that Bush's objections to the swap were, at most, of a technical nature. Bush was "solid" behind the swap, as the computer message by Poindexter had stated.

Bush was even present at the select Jan. 17, 1986 meeting which excluded the opposing secretaries of State and Defense, during which the President signed the authorization for the arms shipments to Iran.

Accompanying the latest *U.S. News* piece is a lengthy box touting the campaign banner of Robert Dole. As the vice president slips ever more deeply into the Iran-Contra scandal, U.S. intelligence sources report that Bush's support among the intelligence community and Wall Street is rapidly eroding. The reasons go beyond the Iran-Contra scandal: Because of his strong ties to the Ivy League-Wall Street crowd, Bush is a potential liability in the context of a major financial crisis.

In any case, one of the biggest questions that must be running through the vice president's mind at this moment is, who is behind the leaks, given that he has been so protected by intelligence-community "old boys" in the past.