CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LIES: THE GOVERNMENT AND THE PRESS

On February 6, 1981, as the newly elected Reagan administration calculated how to schedule and win a quick confrontation with communism, an exclusive, leaked story appeared at the top of page one of the *New York Times*. Datelined Washington, it said:

"Indications that the Soviet Union and Cuba agreed last year to deliver tons of weapons to Marxist-led guerrillas in El Salvador are contained in secret documents reportedly captured from the insurgents by Salvadoran security forces.

"The documents, which are considered authentic by United States intelligence agencies, say that the weapons were to come from stockpiles of American arms seized in Vietnam and Ethiopia.

"Copies of the documents obtained by the *New York Times* include a report on a trip by a senior Salvadoran guerrilla to the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Eastern European capitals where party officials apparently agreed to provide arms, uniforms, and other military equipment for up to 10,000 guerrillas....

"The documents reported captured in El Salvador by security forces last month describe how the highest levels of the Communist leadership in Eastern Europe and Vietnam approved collaboration with the Salvadoran guerrillas.

"In one document, which appears to have been written in Havana, the Salvadoran emissary reports to his comrades in El Salvador on a visit to Hanoi from June 9 to 15 last year during which he was received by Le Duan,

secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist party; Xuan Thuy, vice-president of the National Assembly; and Lieutenant General Tran Van Quang, deputy minister of National Defense.

"The guerrilla, who is believed to be Shafik Handal, secretary general of the Salvadoran Communist party, reported that the Vietnamese agreed to supply 60 tons of arms and ammunition.... The list included 1,620 M-16 automatic rifles, 162 M-30 and 36 M-60 machine guns, 48 mortars, 12 antitank rocket launchers, 1.5 million rounds of ammunition, and 11,000 mortar rounds.

"On a visit to Ethiopia from July 3 to 6, the report said, the guerrilla met with Lieutenant Colonel Haile Mariam Mengistu, president of the ruling Marxist Revolutionary Council, and was promised 150 Thompson submachine guns, 1,500 M-1 rifles, 1,000 M-14 rifles, and over 600,000 rounds of ammunition."

The story continues in a similar vein, with other stops on the guerrilla's trip. Information is all carefully attributed to sources or documents, but the sources aren't named and the story doesn't say what kind of person supplied the documents, or what his motive might have been for doing so. The story shows no sign that the writer tried to verify the information independently, or to balance it with comment from Handal or his revolutionary colleagues.

The Democratic Revolutionary Front, of which Handal's group was a part, had a public office in Mexico City, and its representatives have been quoted regularly by the *Times* and other newspapers. In addition, revolutionary sympathizers maintained information offices in New York and Washington, and scholars at several major universities closely followed events in El Salvador and regularly commented on them. The *Times* story doesn't indicate that the documents it obtained were shown to anyone who could be expected to look at them skeptically. Nor could the *Times*, in the space available, print enough detail to allow skeptical readers to make their own analysis.

Yet the story was picked up by other newspapers and broadcasters. "The *New York Times* reported today that...."

This is the way leaks are normally handled—the way leakers expect them to be handled. Were it not so, the history of U.S. foreign policy might be different. Other administrations and other newspapers have played by the same rules. Governments want to fix their version of a story in print before opponents can get a crack at it. Newspapers want to be the first to report what the government is going to do next—to make sure the reader hasn't seen it somewhere else first. A bargain is struck.*

*A major factor in the author's thirteen-year romance with the *Wall Street Journal* is my conviction that pressure for this kind of story at the *Journal* is less than at any other major newspaper. Despite occasional slips, *Journal* editors have always tried to respect the philosophy that it is better to lose the "beat" on a story than to turn out later to have had a part in misleading the reader.

Domestic news is handled differently. The "other side" is usually consulted, because the other side is usually easier to find, and a reporter can be fairly sure he will hear from them later if he doesn't check with them first. When a Reagan budget plan is reported, Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill's opinion of it can be counted on to appear on the same page. Accusations of domestic wrongdoing are handled still more carefully. Even the president of the Teamsters' Union can force a retraction, or file a libel suit, if a newspaper prints a falsehood about him. A Shafik Handal or a Yasir Arafat is powerless to fight back. They might belong in jail, just as the president of the Teamsters' Union might (at this writing, he is under sentence). But in his case, newspapers are still held accountable for every word they say about him, and in their cases, newspapers are not. Yet the spread of misinformation about people like Handal, or Arafat, or Ho Chi Minh, can lead to enormous national mistakes.

It's often said that truth is the first casualty of war.* Plenty of false and slanted stories were written during previous wars. Much was written about the German and Japanese people during World War II that would not read comfortably now. But previous wars usually had a finite beginning and end, maybe a few years apart. The war against communism has been with us nearly four decades.

It's one thing to put an embargo on the truth until all the ships are back safely. It's another for generations of leaders to come and go forgetting what the truth is. The great iconoclastic journalist I. F. Stone once said, "Every government is run by liars and nothing they say should be believed." Until the time of Lyndon Johnson, near the end of the second decade of the anti-communist war, that would have sounded shockingly cynical. Now a lot of people feel compelled to believe it; based on the evidence, it's certainly a wise operating rule for newspapers.

Obviously, the lying started well before Johnson's time. But not until 1964 did government lies affect public safety so profoundly. It took at least three years for the truth to start coming out about the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which opened the door for full-scale U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The whole truth isn't available yet, and the facts that *are* available aren't generally known. Most Americans who know what the Gulf of Tonkin incident is, probably retain the impression left by the initial reporting of it in 1964. Much more ink and air time was given to the lie than to the correction.

The Tonkin incident, a supposed unprovoked attack by North Vietnam on two U.S. ships, was used to rile the public. Reports of the attack then persuaded Congress to give Johnson what he considered his marching order,

*In his book, *Truth Is the First Casualty* (Rand McNally, 1969), Joseph C. Goulden credits the quote to U Thant. In *his* book, *The First Casualty* (Harcourt Brace, 1975), Phillip Knightley credits it to Senator Hiram Johnson. Of course, since both authors were writing about war, maybe neither was being truthful.

the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution—which Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach determined under oath to be the "functional equivalent" of a congressional declaration of war. But the incident never happened, at least in any way like the government announced it. Two U.S. ships were *not* the victims of a willful, unprovoked attack by North Vietnam while on routine patrol in international waters.

One ship, the destroyer *Maddox*, did take fire on August 2, 1964, though there were neither casualties nor major damage. But we know now that the *Maddox* was deliberately ordered into a zone where in recent days similar-sized ships attached to the South Vietnamese navy had been attacking North Vietnamese islands and even attempting an invasion. The North Vietnamese had every reason to judge that the *Maddox* was part of these operations. The *Maddox* sailed within 4 to 6 miles of the North Vietnam coast; the U.S. adhered to a 3-mile territorial limit, but most communist countries, including North Vietnam, declared their belief in a 12-mile limit.

From ship's logs, communications records, and eyewitness testimony, all finally made available during Senate hearings in 1968, chaired by J. William Fulbright, we know that the *Maddox* had advance warning that it would be attacked if it persisted in the battle area (the *Maddox* was listening to radio messages among North Vietnamese officers—it was an electronic spy ship). We know it proceeded anyway (against the inclination of its commander who radioed back to his superiors at the Seventh Fleet that he thought the location was too dangerous). Then, as revealed by ship's logs, the *Maddox* fired *first*, while North Vietnamese patrol boats were nearly 6 miles away. It fired repeatedly at the North Vietnamese boats before they launched torpedoes, all of which missed or misfired.

Planes from a U.S. aircraft carrier rescued the *Maddox*, whose commander then once again suggested getting out of the battle zone. But Admiral Ulysses Grant Sharp, Jr., commander of U.S. Pacific Forces, ordered the *Maddox* to be joined by another destroyer, the *Turner Joy*, and to stay in the zone. Not only was Sharp aware that South Vietnamese boats were going to launch an attack against the North Vietnamese mainland on August 4, 1964—two days after the first incident—but his orders specifically noted that the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* might act as a decoy to North Vietnamese forces, thus assisting the South Vietnamese attack.

So a second attack, on August 4, was actually *invited*. Still, there was no sure evidence that it ever took place. The crews of the two ships testified that original reports of torpedoes fired at them, all at night, might have been in error. At one point, things were so confused that the *Maddox* mistook the *Turner Joy* for a North Vietnamese ship and a gunner was ordered to fire at her point blank—which would have sunk her—but he illegally refused the order pending an identity check. That was the closest that a U.S. ship came to being hit that night. Nevertheless, the incident was reported as an unprovoked attack on two U.S. ships minding their own business, and in the

resultant public furor, Congress was induced to pass the broadly interpreted Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

We also know now that a draft of the resolution, authorizing "all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression"—supposedly submitted to Congress in outrage over the incident—was in fact prepared three months earlier by William Bundy, then assistant secretary of state (he later became editor of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, the official publication of the Council on Foreign Relations).

What we know is entirely consistent with the possibility that the Tonkin gulf incident was a put-up job, designed to sucker the North Vietnamese into providing justification for a planned U.S. expansion of the war. We don't know that's what happened, but we know it's a possibility. At the very least, the North Vietnamese had every reason to believe they were under attack before they approached a U.S. ship, and they certainly *were* under attack before they fired a shot.

The press was lied to, and so misinformed the public. We were all lied to.*

ON February 23, 1981, shortly after the leak to the *New York Times* of the captured-documents-from-El-Salvador story, the government released an eight-page "White Paper" entitled "Communist Interference in El Salvador." Thus the government gained a second round of publicity from the same material. A lot of people think the White Paper included the supporting documentation; in fact, it didn't.

Copies of the documentation were harder to come by. Few got a chance to analyze it, and reporters and commentators who did could do so only after the initial rash of stories was published. Those stories were generally based only on the contents of the White Paper itself, and statements made at a press conference at which the paper was released.

The White Paper would have done Johnson proud. For all its casual twisting of the truth, it was perfectly sincere—meant for our own good. Central America seemed doubly important to Reagan. For one thing, he had been elected on a promise to restructure U.S. foreign policy so that never again would we be pushed around. The cornerstone of this new toughness would be a quick victory that would make our resolve clear to all. In El Salvador, Reagan saw a chance to deal the needed bloody nose to the Soviet

*The best source on the Tonkin affair is Goulden's *Truth Is the First Casualty*. But additional valuable material and perspectives appear in *The President's War* by Anthony Austin (Times Books, 1971), *Tonkin Gulf* by Eugene G. Windchy (Doubleday, 1971), and *The War Conspiracy* by Peter Dale Scott (Bobbs-Merrill, 1972).

Union and teach the Ayatollah Khomeini his lesson. We would do this by fighting a mere 5,000 guerrillas in our backyard—much easier than, say, trying to set tanks ashore in Baluchistan.

Second, Reagan accepted the superhuman bogeyman theory about the communist menace and its domino effects—the same theory that U.S. policy had been based on since 1946. The idea that the Invasion of the Bodysnatchers might now have reached the foothills of Mexico was unacceptable. And if communism was really what Reagan thought it was, and the El Salvador guerrillas were really its agents, the situation *would* have been unacceptable.

The White Paper served as a perfect launching pad for the Reagan offensive. Its authors, who saw themselves rising stars in the State Department under the new administration, displayed no false modesty in their introduction:

"This special report presents definitive evidence of the clandestine military support given by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and their Communist allies to Marxist-Leninist guerrillas now fighting to overthrow the established government of El Salvador. The evidence, drawn from captured guerrilla documents and war material and corroborated by intelligence reports, underscores the central role played by Cuba and other Communist countries beginning in 1979 in the political unification, military direction, and arming of insurgent forces in El Salvador.

"From the documents it is possible to reconstruct chronologically the key stages in the growth of the Communist involvement:

- "The direct tutelary role played by Fidel Castro and the Cuban government in late 1979 and early 1980 in bringing the diverse Salvadoran guerrilla factions into a unified front;
- "The assistance and advice given the guerrillas in planning their military operations;
- "The series of contacts between Salvadoran Communist leaders and key officials of several Communist states that resulted in commitments to supply the insurgents nearly 800 tons of the most modern weapons and equipment;
- "The covert delivery to El Salvador of nearly 200 tons of those arms, mostly through Cuba and Nicaragua, in preparation for the guerrillas' failed 'general offensive' of January 1981;
- "The major Communist effort to 'cover' their involvement by providing mostly arms of Western manufacture.

"It is clear that over the past years the insurgency in El Salvador has been progressively transformed into another case . . . a textbook case . . . of indirect armed aggression against a small Third World country by Communist powers acting through Cuba.

"The United States considers it of great importance that the American people and the world community be aware of the gravity of the actions of Cuba, the Soviet Union, and other Communist states who are carrying out what is clearly shown to be a well-coordinated, covert effort to bring about

the overthrow of El Salvador's established government and to impose in its place a Communist regime with no popular support."

THE White Paper's findings were generally accepted as fact by the press, and there were numerous follow-up stories with Washington datelines quoting administration spokesmen on their plans for countering the allegedly growing military power of the Salvador guerrillas. Within days, it was announced that the National Security Council had approved plans to supply the tiny Central American country with $25 million of additional military aid and $40 million of economic assistance.

Immediately upon the issuance of the White Paper, Reagan's special envoy, Lawrence Eagleburger (a former Kissinger aide) was dispatched to visit the capitals of Western Europe, where he presented copies of the findings and collected statements of support from France, Belgium, and West Germany.

To help personalize the achievement and allow for some dramatic coverage, the State Department put forward young Jon D. Glassman as a hero. As recently as the month before, in January 1981, Glassman, thirty-seven, was still deputy chief of the political section of the American embassy in Mexico City. Then, according to the story he told at the press conference and elsewhere, the department sent him to El Salvador, because of the guerrilla offensive that month, to see if there might be any captured documents (one batch of documents had been reported found the previous November).

As the story went on, Glassman discovered some captured documents at the National Police office, cracked the guerrilla code, and revealed the underlying international conspiracy behind the Salvadoran uprising. Glassman got to tour Europe with Eagleburger, telling war stories to potentates. Then he was promoted to the State Department policy planning staff, with a big new office on the seventh floor, just one floor below the secretary of state's.

The *Washington Post* wrote him up on page one under the headline, "Sleuth of the Salvador Papers." It said, "His role is described as more that of one of Smiley's people than of James Bond—the man who does the drudge work of international intrigue, who burns the midnight oil over superficially meaningless documents, and painstakingly puts together the pieces after the G-men have given up and moved on to more adventurous pursuits.... It was Glassman, according to U.S. officials and diplomats... a relatively unknown, thirty-seven-year-old foreign service officer... who discovered and pored over '18 pounds' of guerrilla documents captured by Salvadoran soldiers who had blithely stacked them on an unused desk, assuming they were useless."

The *Post*'s story was sprinkled with a few grains of skepticism for careful readers, and eventually *Post* staffer Robert Kaiser analyzed the supporting documents thoroughly and wrote a long takeout tending to discredit the White Paper. The White Paper deserved it.

* * *

JUST to look at the copies of the original papers—not the State Department's English language reconstruction of them, but the original documents themselves—would have raised most people's eyebrows. Only about 200 pages were ever released, many with very little on them. The word *document* seems far too dignified for most of them. Though some typewritten or handwritten reports were included, a lot of what was in these was sophomoric. And many "documents" were just scratchings—the kind of thing you might find wadded up next to the cigar butts after an afternoon of gin rummy. True, that doesn't mean they might not be important evidence, but they didn't suggest any grand conclusions on their own, and there didn't seem to be much else to support them.

For months after the White Paper was issued, reporters who specialized in Central America privately voiced serious doubts about the truth of it—even reporters from newspapers whose front pages seemed to accept the White Paper on faith. Eventually, when the dust had settled, and Glassman and others at State could be interviewed in detail about the White Paper's sweeping conclusions, the whole story began to unravel.*

For one thing, 18 pounds wasn't the weight of the evidence, it was the weight of Glassman's entire suitcase coming home from El Salvador, including all his other gear. For another thing, William G. Bowdler, who ran the Latin American affairs section of the State Department under Carter, and Luigi Einaudi, the policy planning official who supervised the analysis of the documents, recalled different beginnings to the trip. They said that Glassman, rather than discovering the second batch of documents on his own, was sent to El Salvador to examine a second batch of documents already known to exist. Glassman, told this, stuck fast to his original story—a strange contradiction.

The first batch of documents had been found the previous November during a raid on an art gallery owned by the brother of Shafik Handal, head of the small Communist Party in El Salvador. These documents had been sent to Washington, analyzed, and shipped out to relevant embassies. Glassman had already seen them, with Washington's analysis, at the Mexico City embassy where he worked.

Among these earlier documents was the report on the trip by an unnamed guerrilla, identified as Handal, to various communist capitals the previous summer—by far the most relied on of all the White Paper documents. In other words, the most sensational document had already been passed around. It was interesting, but no big deal had been made of it, because in fact it didn't say quite what the new interpretation of it said it said.

*His explanations here come from a three-hour interview with me in his office in May 1981.

What was new was as much interpretation as documentation, and in a three-hour talk in his office, Glassman acknowledged that the White Paper's interpretation included "mistakes" and "guessing," and that some of what the State Department handed out may have been "misleading" and "overembellished." As amazing as those concessions were, considering the importance given to the White Paper, Glassman was understating the case.

Basically, three "documents" were critical to the White Paper: the typewritten trip report, a typewritten list of arms, and some handwritten notes that were purported to be minutes of a guerrilla meeting. All three documents were attributed by the State Department to guerrilla leaders who, it was eventually admitted, didn't write them. And no one at the State Department knows who *did* write them, or how authoritative they are.

The two most widely reported figures from the White Paper—"800 tons of the most modern weapons and equipment" promised by foreign communist governments, and "the covert delivery to El Salvador of nearly 200 tons of those arms, mostly through Cuba and Nicaragua"—do not appear anywhere in the documents. They were extrapolated, and in questionable ways. Much important information in the White Paper doesn't have any reference point at all in the documents.

Glassman and other State Department officials continued to defend the White Paper's conclusions, and even to indulge in hyperbole. ("We possibly never again will have such an intimate insight into the development of a guerrilla movement and its gathering of financial and military support," Glassman said.) But the White Paper had stated that the evidence was "drawn from captured guerrilla documents and war material," and was only "corroborated" and "verified" by "other intelligence sources." Now Glassman and others were reduced to saying that much of the White Paper didn't come from the documents, but came from secret sources, and had to be taken on faith. Which is fine, if you have faith.

GLASSMAN acknowledges that problems arose almost immediately after the White Paper and its documents were distributed. A message came from the El Salvador government itself, saying, as Glassman recalls it, "You guys have made some mistakes." Among the mistakes cited was the misidentification of an alleged guerrilla leader whose code name Glassman thought he had broken.

This guerrilla figured prominently in two of the three critical documents, including as the alleged author of the weapons list. The weapons list was signed "Ana Maria." Glassman somehow determined that "Ana Maria" was Ana Guadalupe Martinez, a reputed leader of the ERP guerrilla group. The list was said to prove what weapons and other equipment were coming from Vietnam, Ethiopia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and East Germany. It was the only document actually pictured in the White Paper; a full page

of it was reproduced as an illustration. The data on the list provided the only chart used to illustrate the White Paper.

But the alleged author, Ana Guadalupe Martinez, didn't write it. After several months, Glassman admitted that not only didn't he or the Salvadorans know who did write it, they weren't even sure which guerrilla group it came from. "Ana Maria" could be somebody's real first name, and not a code at all. What it all comes down to, then, is that the document is merely a list of weapons, a list of uncertain origin or meaning, and that there is no reason to believe the weapons were necessarily ever shipped or received.

"We completely screwed it up," Glassman concedes.

IF there is clear evidence of willful deception in the White Paper, it is in the identification of Handal as author of the main document, the report about the arms shopping trip. The report of the trip identifies the traveler only as "the comrade." From the context, Glassman concedes, the writer of the report clearly was in Cuba, and "the comrade" had just as clearly left Cuba. So the writer could not have been the same person who made the trip, though the White Paper identified him as such. Interestingly, this same mistake was also carried over to the advance story that appeared in the *Times*.

Glassman says that the main Salvadoran communist representative in Cuba couldn't have written the trip report because of the way she is referred to in the text. Moreover, the report refers to "our embassy" in Ethiopia, and "our ships." Glassman now speculates that "embassy" might refer to a Salvadoran communist representative permanently stationed in Addis Ababa, though no such representative is mentioned in the section of the report describing Ethiopia.

Whoever wrote the report, though, the most interesting point in reference to the Soviet Union isn't cooperation, but lack of it. The Vietnamese and Ethiopians had offered surplus armaments—which both countries had because the U.S. taxpayers bestowed it on them. But what the Salvadorans still needed was transportation. "The comrade" repeatedly knocked on doors in Moscow seeking logistical help to get the arms to El Salvador. The Soviet reception was barely cordial, and was provided by lower-ranking officials than those "the comrade" had expected to see.

Russian flunkies kept telling him that senior authorities hadn't yet gotten around to approving the transportaiton arrangements, until finally "the comrade" had to go home. In addition, he had asked the Soviets to provide military training in the U.S.S.R. for thirty Salvadorans, but the Soviets told him that there wasn't space in Soviet military training programs for them. This was hardly a sign that the Soviets were goading the Salvadorans into war. The U.S., on the other hand, was bringing hundreds of the Salvadoran government's soldiers to North Carolina for training, and U.S. officers were training thousands more in El Salvador.

The White Paper doesn't report any of "the comrade's" turndowns. It

says, "Before leaving Moscow, Handal received assurances that the Soviets agree in principle to transport the Vietnamese arms." In context, though, the agreement in principle appears to be a cop-out, and "the comrade" keeps complaining that he can't get a commitment out of the Russians, which is what he keeps asking for.

Describing a final meeting, the document says, "The comrade again requested weapons, and transportation of [weapons] that Vietnam provided, expressing the conviction that the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] is capable of resolving these problems, as well as insisting upon the training of the group of thirty comrades. After this meeting," the document continues, "the comrade made known through other channels his disagreement with the absence of the meeting at the proper level and lack of decision concerning the requests for assistance."

So "the comrade," frustrated and angry, returned to Cuba empty-handed. Eventually he got a telegram there, in which the Soviets agreed to take the thirty trainees, but still wouldn't commit themselves on supplying or transporting weapons. The document ends at this point, with the comrade left "expressing concern." This is the kind of Soviet aggression the Afghans would dearly like to see. The only actual aid reported in the documents as being received by the Salvadorans was an airplane ticket to Hanoi for one guerrilla, presumably, but not assuredly, Handal.

THE White Paper also identifies Handal as the author of certain opinions that turn out to be contained in Document C, two pages of handwritten notes. The notes, however, don't include Handal's name or any date or other identification. The White Paper says they are notes "taken during an April 28, 1980, meeting of the Salvadoran Communist party." Glassman now says the identification of the notes came from other sources—which can't be revealed.

Next problem: the notes also appear to be written in at least two different handwritings. Glassman acknowledges that this makes it difficult to ascribe the work to one author. "They change people writing on them," he admits, although in four places the White Paper quotes the words as Handal's own.

Based on these notes, supposedly taken by Handal himself, the White Paper says, "In reference to a unification of the armed movement, he asserts that 'the idea of involving everyone in the area has already been suggested to Fidel himself.' Handal alludes to the concept of unification and notes, 'Fidel thought well of the idea.'"

Glassman now concedes "that could be a misleading statement." *And how!* In the context of the document—in all its various handwritings—the idea that had been suggested to "Fidel" was getting various communist parties in Latin America to cooperate, apparently about labor unions. The discussion is about union organizing, not "the armed movement."

At another point, the White Paper says Salvadoran guerrilla leaders formed

a unified front "as a precondition for large-scale Cuban aid." Glassman acknowledges that there's nothing to that effect in the documents, either. He says it was true in Nicaragua, though, so the White Paper carried the idea over to El Salvador. Apparently it was nothing but an assumption.

The White Paper also says that on July 22, 1980, Yasir Arafat, the PLO leader, met Salvadoran guerrilla leaders in Managua and gave "promises [of] military equipment, including arms and aircraft." But the only mention of Arafat in the documents is an aside, in parentheses, in one document, which says, "(...on the 22nd there was a meeting with Arafat.)." Nor does such a meeting have the sinister connotation one might suppose; they were all in Managua for the anniversary commemoration of the Nicaraguan revolution, and it's perfectly natural that they might have said hello. There is no indication the subject of arms ever came up.

Again, as with the report of the trip to Moscow, the document that refers fleetingly to Arafat indicates on the whole a lack of cooperation more than cooperation. It is an unsigned report that the State Department labeled Document G. It is full of complaints that the Salvadoran delegation was cold-shouldered and otherwise insulted on its visit to Nicaragua. The delegates were kept locked in a hotel room for a week, until they finally threatened "that if they [the Nicaraguans] did not attend to us either we would go to H. [apparently Havana, not Hell] or return to the country [apparently El Salvador], since we were wasting our time."

The Nicaraguans eventually agreed to a meeting. After much squabbling and mutual criticism, the document says, the Nicaraguans promised to supply rifles—"hunting weapons" are mentioned—and ammunition, but not in the quantities the Salvadorans expected. And the Nicaraguans refused to send any guns unless the Salvadorans agreed to certain unspecified "political conditions" that the Salvadorans strongly objected to. There is no indication in the documents whether this dispute was ever resolved, or whether the guns were ever sent.

Salvadorans living in Managua complained to the visiting Salvadoran delegation that "there was not a relationship of mutual respect" with the Nicaraguans, "but rather one of imposition." None of the squabbling is mentioned in the White Paper, which is intent on proving conspiracy.

Glassman explains that the White Paper's mention of Arafat's role came from other, secret intelligence. The White Paper doesn't say so, but Israel, Arafat's nemesis, was the major arms supplier to the El Salvador government until the U.S. became directly involved in 1979 and 1980.

The White Paper says that the Communist party of El Salvador "has become increasingly committed since 1976 to a military solution." Actually, the communists had supported the government that took over El Salvador in a coup in October 1979—the very government that the U.S. then maintained in power until the 1982 elections. The communists pulled out of that government two months after the coup, in December 1979, and joined the armed

opposition because, in Glassman's own words, the government was "still arresting them, still shooting them"—which isn't an illogical reason for revolting, when you get right down to it.

GLASSMAN also says the figure of 200 tons of arms allegedly smuggled into El Salvador through the network of communist countries "comes from intelligence based on the air traffic, based on the truck traffic. In other words, it does not come from the documents."

The White Paper, however, specifically states that it does come "from the documents."

Glassman says part of the estimate of the truck shipments into El Salvador was based on extrapolating the cargo-hauling potential of several trucks that are listed in one document, Document N. The document, an undated, unsigned, barely legible hand-scrawled sheet, lists four trucks, three of which apparently are still to be bought or built. Alongside the trucks are the initials of four guerrilla groups, and some tonnage numbers totaling 21 tons, under the headings, "sea," "air," and "road."

The other commonly quoted figure from the white paper, 800 tons of promised weapons, was, says Glassman, extrapolated from a single comment made in Document I. This document is a typewritten report identified as minutes of a meeting of three men said to be the "guerrilla joint general staff." The State Department translation of the document includes a date at the top. September 26, 1980, which isn't on the actual document (but would be more than two months after the meeting in Nicaragua at which guns were promised but held up because of political conditions).

Although the three men in Document I call themselves a "general staff," and refer to having been in Cuba, they are identified only as Companero Ramon, Companero Vladimir, and Companero Jonas. As in other documents, the words seem so amateurish that they could have been set down by three teenagers with delusions of grandeur. The information is interesting, but hardly definitive.

Most of the "minutes" are taken up by quibbles over where to meet—they start out in a coffee shop and wind up at somebody's house—and by the minute-taker's complaints that nothing is being planned very well. Only at the end is there a quibble over how arms should be distributed. At this point, the minute-taker says, "It contradicts military reality to discuss percentages of arms when hardly 4 tons of the 130 warehoused in Lagos [believed to be a code word for Nicaragua] have been brought into the country. These 4 tons have been in intermittent supply and the material now in Lagos is only equivalent to one-sixth of all the material obtained that the DRU [a group of revolutionary organizations] will have eventually concentrated in Lagos."

Glassman says he multiplied 130 by 6 to get 800. But from the document,

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The White Paper, however, specifically states that it does come "from the documents."

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The other commonly quoted figure from the white paper, 800 tons of promised weapons, was, says Glassman, extrapolated from a single comment made in Document I. This document is a typewritten report identified as minutes of a meeting of three men said to be the "guerrilla joint general staff." The State Department translation of the document includes a date at the top. September 26, 1980, which isn't on the actual document (but would be more than two months after the meeting in Nicaragua at which guns were promised but held up because of political conditions).

Although the three men in Document I call themselves a "general staff," and refer to having been in Cuba, they are identified only as Companero Ramon, Companero Vladimir, and Companero Jonas. As in other documents, the words seem so amateurish that they could have been set down by three teenagers with delusions of grandeur. The information is interesting, but hardly definitive.

Most of the "minutes" are taken up by quibbles over where to meet—they start out in a coffee shop and wind up at somebody's house—and by the minute-taker's complaints that nothing is being planned very well. Only at the end is there a quibble over how arms should be distributed. At this point, the minute-taker says, "It contradicts military reality to discuss percentages of arms when hardly 4 tons of the 130 warehoused in Lagos [believed to be a code word for Nicaragua] have been brought into the country. These 4 tons have been in intermittent supply and the material now in Lagos is only equivalent to one-sixth of all the material obtained that the DRU [a group of revolutionary organizations] will have eventually concentrated in Lagos."

Glassman says he multiplied 130 by 6 to get 800. But from the document,

these numbers could be a pipe dream. Even if the 4-ton figure is correct, considering that one M-16 without magazine or bayonet weighs 7 pounds, and a week's supply of ammunition weighs 42 pounds, 4 tons wouldn't make much of a revolution.*

A common highway truck in the U.S. carries about 20 tons. Steel armaments are so dense, however, that 20 tons of weapons would probably occupy much less space. The guerrillas wanted not just light combat rifles, but mortars, shells, and rockets. Measurements of arms by tons is unusual. But even 800 tons is not enough to equip a large guerrilla army for very long, and such a supply would be dwarfed by the amount of arms the U.S. has sent to the El Salvador government.

MOST of the documents distributed along with the White Paper were said to have been found in a Salvadoran grocery store in early January. As Glassman tells it, the Salvadoran police "had captured a Venezuelan correspondent, a journalist who was bringing in money for ERP [a guerrilla group], and by following him were able to capture the ERP propaganda commission as a whole, meeting in a house." The owner of the house denied involvement, Glassman says, but was persuaded to tell police of other locations he had heard people on the propaganda commission talk about.

One such location was a grocery store owned by a known leftist. There police found a false wall, behind which were a mortar and some shells, and documents, which were in a plastic bag and a suitcase. Glassman says he thinks the documents were kept there because the guerrilla coalition consists of four groups, "none of which fully trusts the others," so that records must be maintained.

Hearing this story, Robert White, who was the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador at the time, is incredulous. "All of this is news to me," he says. "It strikes me as unlikely that I would not have heard this story before—this business about following a Venezuelan and finding this wall and breaking it down." He also denies the statements by Assistant Secretary of State Bowdler and analyst Einaudi that he had asked for anyone—let alone Glassman—to be sent down to help analyze captured documents. He says the White Paper is "bizarre, tendentious, [and] tries to prove more than the evidence warrants."

Yet *Time* magazine reported as fact the story about the hollow wall and about Glassman's heroic analysis of documents that "were mostly in code." This last, at least, was absolutely untrue; the only "code" words were some place names, on which Glassman has so far been given the benefit of the

*Figures courtesy of Captain Farrar of the Pentagon press office, based on his estimate that a soldier should carry 15 to 20 one-pound magazines of ammunition for three days of combat.

doubt, and some personal nicknames or pseudonyms, which Glassman concedes he got *wrong*, at least in assigning authorship of the most important documents.

Time also reported, "The grocery-store papers represented over 70 percent of the material that Washington used to draw up last month's White Paper documenting Soviet and Cuban arms aid to El Salvador's insurgency." This was also untrue; on analysis, little that is in the text of the White Paper can be nailed down by anything that is in that group of documents.

THE Salvadoran government has a history of press manipulation. Anne Nelson, who has covered the Salvadoran war for many publications, has reported witnessing Salvadoran forces placing guns in the hands of murdered civilians so they would look like guerrillas when photographers arrived; she and others wrote of the flaws in the Salvadoran government's story that a team of Dutch journalists died when caught in a crossfire, whereas apparently they were deliberately ambushed for meeting with guerrillas.

So, understandably, there has been speculation that the White Paper documents were concocted and planted, either by the CIA, or by Salvadoran authorities, or both. Former Ambassador White says, "The only thing that ever made me think that these documents were genuine was that they proved so little."

Assuming their genuineness, what *do* they prove? Barely even the obvious.

Considering the history of U.S.-supported right-wing repression in Central America, and considering the propaganda schools that Castro has created to teach Marxism as the only workable alternative to U.S. repression, it only makes sense that revolutionaries in El Salvador would seek aid from Marxist governments.

Few would doubt that Marxist governments would encourage the revolutionaries, coach them when they asked for it, and sneak them weapons if that could be done under the table (although this material aid could never match what the U.S. has supplied to the Salvadoran government; it probably hasn't even approached what the Salvadoran guerrillas have obtained from other sources).

But the White Paper says more than that. It says that a unified, Soviet-run international communist network took over the El Salvador rebellion to such an extent that the uprising constitutes a foreign, armed aggression rather than a legitimate civil war. In fact, so far as we can rely on the documents at all, they show the opposite: a disorganized, ragtag rebellion. Some of its participants have gone around begging for help from the most likely sources, and have been consistently stalled off and sent home empty-handed, or with much less than they asked for. Not only do the documents not prove the thesis, the thesis simply isn't true.

* * *

IF a couple of newspapers hadn't published prominently displayed, skeptical analyses of the White Paper in June 1981, there would have been more. The State Department was already leaking stories, preparing the way for another White Paper. This one would have libeled some major charities, in a manner that truly deserved the overused characterization, McCarthyism.

Glassman was saying in speeches that other captured documents, not yet released, showed that relief funds raised by several charities were subject to diversion to the communist war effort in El Salvador, perhaps even with the charities' knowledge. Needless to say, this upset the charities, which included Catholic Relief Services, Oxfam America, and the World Council of Churches, all of which denied the accusation.

All the charities said they had investigated the charges, and found them false, after learning of them in leaked newspaper accounts. This time, the leakee was United Press International. UPI assured its readers of "extensive" documentation for the charges, and didn't even bother to report the charities' denials. (Reporting denials might offend the leaker, who then couldn't be counted on for the next leak. Like every administration, Reagan's railed against unauthorized leaks to the press, and like every administration, it operated by leaking things to the press any time it could control the news by doing so.)

The purportedly incriminating documents were alleged plans to merge two Salvadoran relief agencies into a single agency, known as CESAH. CESAH would be secretly controlled by communist revolutionaries and its money would be used to buy arms, among other things. In fact, the charities said, the two agencies *did* merge into one organization, called ASESAH, which the charities continued to support.

Monsignor Robert J. Coll, assistant executive director of Catholic Relief Services in New York, said he visited El Salvador to check with church and political leaders about the charges. Monsignor Coll said he got endorsements for ASESAH's work from two rather impressive sources. One was the Salvadoran president, José Napoleón Duarte, whom U.S. forces were supporting. The other was Bishop Rivera y Damas, head of the Catholic church in El Salvador. The bishop told the monsignor he had "the best priest in his diocese committed to it [the charity]," the monsignor says.

A spokesman for the World Council of Churches denounced the allegations. "There are thousands of people, chiefly widows and children, for whom this money is responsible for their daily food," she said. Lawrence Simon, an official of Oxfam—a worldwide food assistance organization founded at Oxford University in England*—expressed fear that the stories would affect a lot more than just fund-raising.

*Which does wonderful grass roots work in many countries, not only distributing food gifts, but, more important, helping increase local food production. The author has seen

"We're more worried about the Latin American newspapers getting this information," he said. "Saying someone is connected to the Communist party of El Salvador is tantamount to signing someone's death warrant down there. We're concerned about the danger this has placed our field staff in."

After all this was reported in the press, the second white paper, publicly promised, was never issued.

ON March 10, 1982, The *Washington Post*, one of the three premier newspapers in the United States, published a stunning story on its front page, above the fold. One of the story's coauthors was no less than Bob Woodward, who had rightfully earned his place as a hero in American history during Watergate. The story unequivocally reported that President Reagan had approved a $19 million plan to establish a covert paramilitary force in Central America. The object of the force was to bring down the government of Nicaragua, a nation with whom the United States was not legally at war.

The story was based on the word of anonymous administration officials. It said the paramilitary force of 500 men would try to destabilize the Nicaraguan government by attacking vital economic installations such as dams and power stations. No one who said the plan was approved was ever identified to the reader. Yet the plan was reported authoritatively.

One day later, on March 11, 1982, the *New York Times*, another of the three premier newspapers, published a story on page one, above the fold, reporting authoritatively that Woodward and Patrick Tyler, the *Post* reporter who shared the byline on the earlier story, were wrong. Of course, the *Times* didn't say exactly that, but there was no other possibility open. The *Times*'s story said, "Mr. Reagan and his top national security advisors *rejected* a proposal to finance and support the creation of a paramilitary force in Central America [emphasis added]." It said the administration was aware that several South American countries were establishing a force in the area, but had "declined to provide financial or military support." Of course, the story was attributed to "senior administration officials," who were never identified to the reader.

Three days later, the *Times* struck again, on page one, above the fold. The story was by Leslie Gelb, a *Times* reporter who had been a State Department official in the Carter administration and who joined the *Times* as national security reporter after Reagan's election. (Gelb took the place of Richard Burt, who left to become a State Department official in the Reagan administration—prompting press critic Alexander Cockburn to twit that the *Times* should hold public hearings before filling its national security beat.)

Now, Gelb, for all intents and purposes, reported that not only were

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Oxfam at work, donates regularly himself, and encourages the reader to do so. (Oxfam America, 115 Broadway, Boston, Mass. 02116.)

Woodward and Tyler wrong, but the *Times* had been wrong, too. Contrary to what the *Times* had said previously, there really *was* a plan for a paramilitary force. But the plan wasn't what the *Post* said it was, either. "According to interviews and documents obtained by the *New York Times*," Gelb wrote, "the plan approved by Mr. Reagan calls for using the paramilitary unit to attack what the administration says are Cuban arms supply lines in Central America." The plan "seeks to focus attention on the Cuban presence in Nicaragua," he wrote. It's hardly necessary to say that his sources weren't identified.

The same week that the *Post* and *Times* ran these stories, *The Nation*, a weekly political magazine (and practically an institution on the American left), ran as its lead story a report that a paramilitary operation against Nicaragua—run by the CIA—was not only approved but actually in operation. *The Nation* said that Assistant Secretary of State Thomas O. Enders had informed the relevant congressional committees of this back in December.* *The Nation*'s report was authoritative and unequivocal, and, of course, its sources were anonymous.

Here were four stories in three major national publications, all the same week, all displayed with top prominence, all dealing with the most vital of subjects—whether or not the United States was at war—and all claiming to be completely authoritative on the answer. And after reading all four stories, the only thing you knew for sure was that three of them were wrong. Maybe all four.

Somebody in government was lying to the public—a lot of people in government were lying to the public—and using reporters to do it. They weren't using just any reporters, but in the case of the *Times* and *Post*, several of the best reporters in the country. Not one of the reporters admitted in his story to the possibility that his sources might be sandbagging him. Not one gave weight to sources with an opposite point of view, just to let the reader know there might be something else to say on the subject.

None of the reporters indicated that he had asked his sources how the information could be verified independently. None told the reader why, if the story was true, it *couldn't* be verified independently. All the stories were written from Washington, none of them from Honduras or Nicaragua, where the facts supposedly lay. None of the stories suggested what self-serving motive the source might have for saying what he was saying.

THE Sunday after all these stories ran, there was a hint about what really may have been going on. The lead story in the *New York Times* was headlined, "High Aide Says U.S. Seeks Soviet Talks on Salvador Issue." The story said

*Members of these committees flatly denied this in interviews with me, some off the record, some on.

that the U.S. government believed that the Central American situation should be negotiated and resolved on a global basis.

Aha! A peace offensive!

First you let the other side discover that you're about to launch a war against them, then you let them know that they can get out of it by coming to certain terms—not a unique diplomatic ploy, if that's what happened. Officials weren't sending out phony messages for nothing. Washington and Moscow bluff and parry each other a lot through the front pages of newspapers. But how is the public supposed to arrive at foreign policy opinions if reporters are busy carrying diplomatic feelers for politicians, who are fighting a war in which truth was that first casualty, so long ago?

The story reporting the peace offensive was, of course, attributed to an anonymous "senior administration official." The story gained its authority by what appeared to be its exclusivity. The impression one is left with, after reading the story, is that the *Times* diplomatic correspondent had spent all week chasing the conflicting rumors, and finally pinned down a source who would explain the administration's *real* policy, but only on condition he not be named:

"'We have to talk to the Russians,' the official said. 'There are discussions that must be held, there are steps that must be taken in political, economic, and security areas which tend to influence calculi in Moscow, in Havana, in Nicaragua, and in the regional context.'" Finally, the press had dug out a source who could explain the government's behavior. And everyone understood that the press couldn't mention this cooperative official's name, because his honesty might cost him his *job* (as if his syntax didn't give him away).

Is that what happened? No. Two days later, a small item appeared on the "Washington Talk" page of the *Times*, a more informal, gossipy place in the newspaper. It said, in its entirety:

"On Saturday morning in Washington, Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, Jr., held a meeting with a group of reporters and spoke at length about his conviction that the problem in El Salvador could not be solved in El Salvador alone, but on a 'global' basis in which the Soviet Union, Cuba, Nicaragua, and other Latin American countries had to be involved.

"Mr. Haig, in that session, spoke on condition he be identified only as a 'senior administration official.'

"When President Reagan returned to the White House yesterday from a weekend at Camp David, he was asked by reporters about articles attributed to the 'senior administration official.' He responded. 'I always have trouble about wondering who those senior officials are. I haven't met any of them yet.'

"This led to questioning aboard Air Force One yesterday in which Larry Speakes, the deputy press secretary, was asked if Mr. Reagan was actually unaware of Mr. Haig's 'backgrounder' on Saturday. Mr. Speakes said that Mr. Reagan was talking 'in jest.'" End of story.

So a secret source can be disclosed at will in an amusing item in the back

pages, but cannot be disclosed at the top right of page one when the reader is relying on the source to say whether the country is going to war or not. This is the way the game is played. The *Times* is used as an example here not because it is the worst newspaper at foreign reporting, but because it has always been the *best*. This wasn't a mistake, this was the system at work, and that is what is wrong.

All these stories, from Woodward's first news break in the *Post* to the peace offensive story in the *Times*, got their authority by a single device: they were all written as if the reporter had dug out an exclusive source who knew all the answers, and had coaxed that source into revealing the truth. Perhaps with Woodward's story, that is what actually happened, and all the other stories were wrong. Perhaps with Gelb's. We don't know.

But it is clear what happened with the peace offensive story. The secretary of state called a big press conference to put across the official line. To make it believable, he demanded anonymity. What incredible gall! It seems a blight on journalism that the press corps didn't arise in unison and walk out of the room, much less that under the rules reporters don't even clue their readers in on the process at work. Surely one of the things the public has a "right to know" is that what is being said isn't necessarily the truth, but maybe just what the government wants the Russians and Nicaraguans to hear, for reasons of its own.

What really happened? Did Haig leak the first story to the *Post* in order to scare the bejesus out of the Nicaraguans? Did Philip Taubman, the excellent *Times* reporter who wrote that paper's first story, then begin to sniff out that it was a plant? Did Haig then pick up Taubman's story and say, "My God, just when I had the Nicaraguans where I want them, the *Times* says it isn't true," and so proceed to call up Gelb and give him a more credible story, which then allowed Haig to launch the peace offensive as planned?

We'll probably never know.

A year later, it had become clear that a U.S.-run paramilitary program was in operation on the Nicaraguan border. Many in Congress suspected that the program was designed to overthrow the Nicaraguan government—as the Nicaraguans themselves contended at every opportunity—although the administration continued to insist that the purpose of the program was to interdict arms headed for El Salvador. Was this the program that the *Post*, or one of the other publications, had reported? Or was it a newer program, launched *after* Haig's peace offensive had failed, perhaps intended to make good on the original threat, which had never had much practical hope of success anyway?

We may never know the answer to that, either.*

*The right of the press to protect the confidentiality of its sources is vital to the function of the press in a democratic society—otherwise, many persons with valuable information would never come forward, for fear of losing their jobs, or in some cases their lives.

* * *

ON May 27, 1981, the *New York Times* reported on its front page that the citizens of Libya were getting fed up with Muammar Al-Qaddafi, and that a resistance movement was growing on the Sahara. A legitimate story perhaps—one could think of a lot of reasons for becoming disaffected with Qaddafi. The story reported authoritatively on conditions inside Libya. ("There are shortages of food and other necessities. Libya is short of skilled administrators.") But the story was datelined Washington. It was based entirely on anonymous sources, mostly, apparently, from the U.S. State Department.

One "Arab diplomat" was also quoted as confirming the stories. Who? A Saudi, perhaps? Saudi Arabia's own government is worried about a Qaddafi-style revolution, and it has to cater to the State Department for permission to buy high-tech military equipment from the U.S. Such factors might have colored the Arab diplomat's comments. We are never told.

At about the same time, the *Washington Post* sent out a story, also datelined Washington, quoting "senior U.S. and allied intelligence sources" as saying that "the Soviet Union has been effectively building in Libya a potential military threat to southern Europe and to U.S. forces in the Mediterranean." The story ran as the lead item, covering all eight columns at the top of page one of the *International Herald Tribune*.

Usually, if what those sources tell the reporter is true, the information can be verified elsewhere. The confidential source is thus not relied on as to truth—he is just indispensable in pointing the reporter in the right direction.

In such cases, when the courts or the executive branch want to learn the identity of the source, they simply want to punish the bearer of bad tidings; for the purpose of discovering truth, the facts stand or fall independently. Sometimes, as in the case, say, of an exposé of the Teamsters' Union's exploitation of its members, all sources for certain information are confidential, but there are hundreds or thousands of such sources. Confirmation can be obtained by interviewing more teamsters at random.

What is being talked about here is the use of this confidentiality by government officials to mislead the public. The officials involved are not blowing the whistle on wrongdoing by the system; they don't need confidentiality to protect themselves. Rather, these officials are speaking *for* the system, but saying things that the system doesn't want to be responsible for, possibly because they will turn out not to be true.

It is especially outrageous for a senior government official like Haig to invoke this privilege of confidentiality (the protection is for the source, not for the reporter). While such officials routinely ask reporters to pledge not to identify them as sources, they turn around and argue in court, sometimes successfully, that reporters should be jailed for keeping just such confidences with regard to *other* persons who have provided information *contrary* to the official line. Haig's old boss Kissinger, who constantly invoked the privilege of confidentiality when speaking with reporters, turned around and *wiretapped* some of the same reporters to learn their other sources. Haig's more recent boss, President Reagan, wants lie detector tests to do that job.

It quoted "sources recently in Libya" as saying that East Germans now staffed Qaddafi's bodyguard. Without any attribution, it reported that "a small contingent of North Korean air force personnel... now operates in Libya." Doing various military and civilian chores, the story said, were between 1,000 and 2,000 Soviets, between 600 and 1,000 Cubans, and from 1,500 to 2,000 East Germans. This information wasn't attributed to anyone.

Contrary to what those two stories might have led readers to expect, in the two years that followed there were neither rebellions against Qaddafi within Libya (that we know of) or Libyan attacks on southern Europe or the U.S. forces in the Mediterranean. What there has been, instead, is thoroughly documented evidence from Seymour Hersh of the *New York Times* that the most frightening source of Libyan terrorist power came from former CIA agents on the make—Edwin Wilson and Frank Terpil and their colleagues—and greedy U.S. munitions suppliers.

When Qaddafi wanted to put his military machine into action against Chad, he turned to U.S. mercenaries supplied by Wilson and Terpil to make his air force work. When he wanted to assassinate a political opponent, it wasn't East Germans or North Koreans he turned to, but the retired CIA operatives. (Wilson has since been convicted of supplying deadly munitions to Libya; Terpil is a fugitive from justice.)

Western journalists have been allowed into Libya, where one might get a better sense of the conditions there than one could get attending a State Department briefing in Washington. Why was there a spate of leaks to Washington reporters in the spring of 1981? Maybe to scare Qaddafi so the U.S. might gain an edge in some secret negotiation or maneuver? Maybe to justify some CIA overthrow attempt that never came off? Maybe just to paint the Carter legacy in such dark hues that the Republicans would get credit for doing a good job when nothing awful happened?

Or, maybe the stories were absolutely accurate. But they offered no independent confirmation, and they offered no explanation of why there couldn't be such confirmation.

Even reporters who actually go to the countries they write about tend to get far too much of their information from the U.S. embassy, or other official sources in the capital. Then they return to the standard surroundings of a world-class hotel and file their stories. How many stories about what is "really going on" in Libya, or any of a hundred other countries, are written by reporters who have never slept a night in a Libyan home, or eaten a meal at a Libyan family's table or relaxed with a Libyan worker after work? And how tuned in are the sources who are informing the State Department itself?

A personal note:

Early in 1980, just after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the author was in a conference room in the U.S. embassy in Kabul. The event was a

secret, confidential, not-for-attribution briefing for the entire press corps—more than a dozen people. The instructions were to attribute what was said to "Western diplomatic sources."

The purpose of this briefing was for the military attaché to announce to the press that Soviet troops were concentrating near the Iranian border, rather than spreading out around Afghanistan. The unmistakable implication was that the real purpose of the Soviet invasion might be to march into Iran.*

The attaché seemed knowledgeable and articulate, so I went up to him privately, after the meeting was over, and told him my plans to take off around the countryside. Though I knew the country a bit from a previous visit as a backpacker, I wanted advice on what to look for, and asked him where he would recommend I try to go. The attaché basically admitted that he was operating on very little information. He wasn't allowed outside Kabul. He said that the news he had just told the press conference had come from Washington, not from anything gathered at the embassy. He did give me a list of things he had been wondering about, mainly, what the Russian troops were really up to.

He seemed to know so little that I decided his briefing wasn't worth a story, and besides, I was naive enough then to assume that if the information had come from Washington, my newspaper's Washington bureau would already have it, and would have filed it. I didn't realize that the State Department had deliberately sent its latest propaganda line halfway around the world to Kabul, Afghanistan, to be released to reporters there, presumably because after the news wended its way back home again, it would seem more credible to readers if it had a Kabul dateline on it.

So I went out in Afghanistan and saw the Soviet encampments the attaché had been talking about. They were near Iran, all right. But the encampments seemed logically placed there to interdict a main route of guerrilla activity, to protect the main military airfield used for air strikes against Afghan villagers, and to have a convenient highway link to Russia and all parts of Afghanistan. Since there was no invasion of Iran, my judgment has since seemed vindicated.

I was amazed to get back to the U.S. more than a month later and see the press coverage while I was gone. The day after the press conference I had attended, papers all across the country screamed with headlines like the one atop a New York tabloid, "Russ Troops Mass on Iran Border." The reports were said to have originated in Afghanistan. The newsmagazines featured the story, too.

The import of this story just wasn't true, and I felt the frustration of being perhaps the only one around who knew it.

*I came in late and missed the instructions on attribution, and so feel no reluctance to say now what happened.

* * *

ON March 1, 1981, the *New York Times* (and the same reporter who wrote the original White Paper leak story) reported:

"President Reagan stressed that he had 'no intention' of involving the United States in another Vietnam, and, indeed, it appeared the administration had decided to intervene in El Salvador precisely because the situation there was so different from Vietnam. Defeating a small Marxist-led insurgency in the United States's backyard seemed an easily 'winnable' test of the administration's determination to, in Mr. [Edwin] Meese's words, 'stop the expansion of communism throughout the world.'"

Two years later, on April 22, 1983, the *Times* reported, "A range of administration officials say the United States must make a sustained, increased effort in El Salvador or lose the war to the guerrillas. Even with such an effort, the officials believe, it will take *from two to seven years* before significant progress can be made toward bringing the situation there under control [emphasis added]."

And the story went on to say that two years earlier—about the time the first story was printed—"Senior United States military commanders concluded... that even with increased military assistance from the United States the Salvadoran military as then constituted could not defeat opposition guerrilla forces, according to Reagan administration officials."

According to the *Times*'s 1983 account of the 1981 military study, the problem was not Shafik Handal and the Soviet-Vietnamese-Cuban-Nicaraguan connection. Instead, the *Times* said, "The report, officially known as a Defense Requirement Survey, concluded that in the long term only a dramatic restructuring of the Salvadoran military, including the removal of many senior officers, a crackdown on corruption, and the adoption of more aggressive tactics, could turn it into an effective fighting force."

A month earlier, in March 1983, the *Times* had reported, "American military officials in El Salvador... recently said that they had seen little evidence that guerrillas were using arms provided by the Soviet Union and Cuba.... Intelligence officials said there was evidence that some weapons the United States has sent to friendly nations in Central America, including Honduras and El Salvador, have been sold by officials in those countries to guerrilla forces in El Salvador." Fortunately, the intelligence sources said, the number of such weapons was not significant so far.

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