

Witness Weeps About Scandal's Impact

After 1986 Iran-Contra Exposure, Fiers Says, 'I Knew the Next Years

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Former CIA official Alan D. Fiers, who received his agency's highest awards for his work with the contra rebels in Nicaragua, broke into sobs on the witness stand yesterday as he described how trapped and scared he felt at the outbreak of the Iran-contra scandal that he realized would ruin his career.

Fiers said the realization that he, and the agency, inevitably would be sucked into the scandal was driven home as he watched the televised Nov. 25, 1986, news conference at which Attorney General Edwin Meese III announced the firing of White House aide Oliver L. North for secretly diverting funds to the contra cause.

"It was devastating," Fiers told a rapt courtroom at the trial of his former boss, onetime CIA spymaster Clair E. George. "The other shoe had dropped. I knew the next years would be horrible. I had no idea there would be six of them."

Fiers, the chief prosecution witness, began losing his composure at the end of two days of testimony when asked to read the commendations that George himself had written about Fiers's accomplishments in 1985 and 1986.

But Fiers said those actions involved illegal activities: getting caught up in a covert resupply network directed out of the White House at a time such aid was barred by Congress, then lying about the operation under questioning on Capitol Hill.

George, who in 33 years at the agency had risen to the No. 3 posi-

tion as deputy director in charge of clandestine operations, stared coldly at Fiers during the testimony. Prosecutor Craig E. Gillen spent the day using Fiers to build the government's case against George on nine counts of lying and obstructing congressional and grand jury investigations of the Iran-contra scandal.

A gaunt-faced but still husky ex-Marine, Fiers said he began lying about the contra resupply network almost immediately after the Oct. 5, 1986, shootdown of a cargo plane that was part of the covert operation run by North.

He was questioned about the crash on Oct. 7 by two staff members of the House intelligence committee, but Fiers said he "was not truthful" with them.

As chief of the CIA's Central American Task Force during the 1985-86 period when Congress barred U.S. military aid for the rebels, Fiers said he knew he would be "one of the first out of the blocks" to be asked about the flight and the Americans who were running it.

He said he knew of North's secret control of the network and the involvement of several of North's confederates, including retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord and Felix Rodriguez, a former CIA officer with connections to the staff of then-Vice President Bush.

"I just didn't have enough courage to put it on the record," Fiers said in explaining why he did not reply truthfully to the questions from the House investigators. "No one directed me to do that."

Two days later, in preparing for a briefing that he and George were to give the Senate Foreign Relations

Committee, Fiers said he decided to try to be as forthcoming as he could without compromising the CIA, North or the White House.

Fiers likened his situation to that of the late race car driver Bill Vukovich seconds before he was incinerated in the Indianapolis 500 in 1955. Two cars had crashed ahead of the driver, and Vukovich had a chance to get through a tiny opening.

"I was trying to keep from making a false statement, at the same time making [the problem] go away," Fiers said. "I was trying to manage the crisis, answer questions, but not enough to go where we didn't want it to go. . . . It was not my intent to get out in front and tell the whole story."

The approach he proposed to George was to describe how a humanitarian aid program for the contras, authorized by Congress in 1985, had evolved into an apparently privately funded operation to provide the contras with military aid from Ilopango air base in El Salvador.

Fiers said he felt this tack would explain the crash of the plane, which was loaded with military supplies. But he said George overruled him.

"He said, 'No, I don't want that [in the opening statement Fiers had written for George]. . . . It puts the spotlight on the White House, Ollie North or the administration. . . . I don't want to be the first person to do that,'" Fiers testified.

The statement was rewritten over Fiers's protests to deny any CIA involvement in the resupply network and any agency knowledge of the people who were running it. Fiers said George also insisted that they not tell the Senate committee about the involvement of Rodriguez, who

on CIA Career

'Would Be Horrible'

at that point had been identified in news stories under his alias, Max Gomez.

Gillen led Fiers through a line-by-line recital of other false statements that Fiers said he and George made to the Senate panel and, four days later, to the House intelligence committee.

The denials by Fiers and George of CIA involvement in the resupply network overlooked the role played by the agency's Costa Rica station chief, Joseph Fernandez. Fiers said he had known since the spring of 1986 that Fernandez was helping the North resupply network.

In late October of that year, Fiers said Fernandez told him he "had big trouble" because his telephone records, which the press had obtained, showed he had been in regular contact with resupply personnel. Fiers said he told his immediate superior—Jerry Gruner, the chief of the CIA's Latin American Division—about Fernandez's predicament, but nothing was done about the impropriety until after the Meese news conference.

On Nov. 26, the day after the conference, a concerned subordinate demanded that Fiers do something about Fernandez, Fiers told the jury. Fiers said he told Gruner, "We've got to get ahead of the curve."

Fiers then described how he and Gruner met with George, who told them to "write a memo saying we decided to do an investigation" before the scandal became public. Fiers said he and Gruner arbitrarily picked Nov. 10 as the date they would say they had discussed Fernandez's problems, and Gruner wrote a memo to that effect.



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Alan D. Fiers, the chief prosecution witness in the trial of onetime CIA spymaster Clair E. George, arrives at the federal courthouse here yesterday.

Fiers hesitantly described a series of conversations with George that he said occurred as Fiers was being called to testify before various investigating forums.

He said he asked George at one point, "How in the world am I going to testify?" George, Fiers said, told him, "You're going to have to tell the truth."

When Fiers suggested to George, "We all ought to get lawyers," he said George responded, "We don't need lawyers. No one is going to get indicted. If we all stick together, nothing is going to happen."

Several years ago, after both men had retired from the CIA, Fiers said he spoke with George as they left a party in downtown Washington. He said he had once warned George that

North's contra resupply operation could be "worse than Watergate" if it ever became public.

That night, as they walked together, Fiers said George recalled that moment and remarked: "Alan, you said this was going to be as bad as Watergate. Well, you got it exactly right."

Fiers said he replied: "Well, Clair, it's not quite that bad. But it's plenty bad."

Fiers, who faces cross-examination today, pleaded guilty last year to two misdemeanor counts of withholding information from Congress. He said he is testifying under a grant of immunity from further prosecution because of the "legal vulnerabilities" posed by the other misstatements he admitted making.