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Fearless Fiction at the CIA

It didn't take the trial of Clair E. George, former deputy director for operations, to let us know about the CIA's contempt for Congress. The entire Iran-contra scandal has been exceptionally enlightening on that score. But the testimony of George's singing subordinate, Alan D. Fiers, demonstrates how much of it was justified.

Fiers, whose official title at the CIA was chief of the Central American Task Force (CentAm or CATF to the knowing), on paper at least reported to George—who is now on trial for perjury and obstruction and who was embarrassingly often bypassed by the big boss, William J. Casey.

Fiers, a big ex-football player from Ohio State, was Casey's fair-haired boy. Casey, a strong-willed man, ignored the chain of command and ordered Fiers to "get up here right away" or to "give it to me in three minutes." When Congress ordered him to shut down an elaborate contra operation whereby funds sent to the Catholic archbishop were routed to arms purchases, Casey sent a memo to Fiers, "Alan, what should we do about this?"

It was signed simply with an imperial "C."

Casey plainly had no intention of complying with the congressional ban on contra aid. He knew what his boss Ronald Reagan wanted, although the fiction—that Reagan never knew that Iran arms profits went to contra arms purchases—was so carefully created that he never had to make it clear what he knew about Oliver L. North's supply operation. The most trouble the agency took with Congress was to prepare with some care the lying testimony it presented to inquiring committees. The spooks felt they had nothing to fear, and they were right.

Fiers told the court that he had told Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), who was chairman of the House intelligence committee and a stalwart adversary of the contra war, about one of the central follies of Reagan's obsessive little war. The same planes that carried officially sanctioned humanitarian aid to the victims of the fighting also carried lethal weapons designed to create more casualties. They were called, Fiers said with a straight face, "a commingling of mixed loads." They certainly were: life and death.

Why did Hamilton not set up a cry?

He is one of the most highly regarded of House members, magisterial,

painfully fair-minded and always on the list when Democratic presidential nominees are looking for a running mate.

Congress knew about North's activities. His involvement, said Fiers, was "an open secret around town." He was the chief spider in the web of supply and command. But when Hamilton asked North what he was doing, North said "nothing," and Hamilton believed him.

Fiers suggested they imagine North with a luminescent paint brush and all the lights in Washington turned off. "You would be stunned at how many people had luminescent paint on them from brushing up against him."

According to North's diaries, he and Fiers were engaged not just in covering up but in shutting up name-droppers like Felix Rodriguez. One entry tells of "Felix talking too much about vp connection." Rodriguez, also known as Max Gomez, was a close friend and protege of Donald P. Gregg, who was Vice President Bush's national security adviser; he is now ambassador to South Korea. At his confirmation hearings, Sen. Charles S. Robb (D-Va.) said he thought Gregg, who was closely and vainly questioned about his contra knowledge, was telling the truth "under the circumstances." George, he said, gave him "binding instructions not to tell Congress about Felix Rodriguez.

George's attorney, Richard A. Hibey, mysteriously abandoned his two-day attempt to paint Fiers as an informer who also fabricated malicious stories about his former superior and friend to save himself. He was not asked why he decided to turn on George. He spoke wistfully of the "camaraderie" among the merry crew of coverups as they plotted how to hoodwink Congress—a ridiculously easy enterprise, it seems.

"I guess I've broken that camaraderie today," he said.

Nobody doubted the truth and accuracy of that statement.

Fiers is now on the payroll of W.R. Grace and Co., the shipping company, one of several Iran-contra survivors who have fared well.

Ronald Reagan is Exhibit A, of course. It was all his idea. Thousands of peasants died because he thought the Cold War should be fought with real bullets in a wretched little country. Reagan's doing fine. He will be the first and probably most acclaimed speaker at the Republican convention in Houston on Aug. 17.