

8/19/91

The Elliott Abrams Case

NOBODY IN Washington this side of Ronald Reagan and possibly Oliver North brought more passion to the cause of the Nicaraguan contras than Elliott Abrams, the State Department's Latin affairs chief in the later Reagan years. For his zeal he has now paid a heavy personal price. In a plea bargain this week with the Iran-contra independent prosecutor, Mr. Abrams pleaded guilty to two criminal violations committed to cover up aid that the executive branch was providing the contras at a time when Congress had ruled aid out of bounds. From two congressional committees Mr. Abrams withheld information about secret efforts, including his own, to aid the insurgents. All this falls loosely under the "Iran-contra affair," although he was not tied in court either to the secret sale of arms to Iran to reclaim American hostages or to the diversion of proceeds to arm the contras.

The two violations are misdemeanors. Or, as some put it, "only" misdemeanors. There is in some quarters an inclination to look at the

withholding-information-from-Congress charges as technical and not all that important in the larger scheme of things. In that larger scheme, Mr. Abrams is accorded a certain deference for doing what he thought at the time was legal, or for keeping an oath of confidentiality made to others—like the sultan of Brunei, from whom he had solicited \$10 million for the contras—or simply for acting in accordance with high political principle as he understood it.

But government officials in general must be expected to act in accordance with law, and people in the executive branch, in particular, must provide Congress with the material necessary to conduct oversight of their actions. In this case the actions were secret, and Congress was at the mercy of the executive for the information needed for effective oversight. Mr. Abrams failed to provide such information and also fed misleading and false information to Congress. Mr. Abrams was not punished for his loyalties and politics but for these particular actions to which he pleaded guilty.