

TV Preview

Dredging Up Gulf Secrets

'Nightline' Investigates The Airbus 'Accident'

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If you remember nothing else about the downing of an unarmed Iranian airliner by a U.S. warship four years ago this weekend, you remember the pictures: ghastly shocking images of corpses, pale and clumped together by the dozen, floating just beneath the surface of the Persian Gulf.

Two hundred and ninety men, women and children died. At the time, U.S. officials blamed Iran for the accident, saying the USS Vincennes had been operating in international waters and was defending neutral merchant ships from Iranian gunboats when the unidentified aircraft appeared on its radar screen.

Now comes the provocative report "Public War/Secret War" by the ABC News program "Nightline" with an entirely different take on the story. Unveiling a months-long investigation by ABC News and Newsweek reporter John Barry, "Nightline" anchor Ted Koppel makes the persuasive—though not conclusive—case that the United States not only provoked the incident but also lied to

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cover it up. The broadcast airs tonight at 11:30.

Probably the program's most titillating news bomblet is the on-camera admission by retired Adm. William Crowe, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the Vincennes was operating *inside* Iranian territorial waters at the time the civilian Airbus was shot down. Crowe's revelation contradicts his own previous statements—repeated by President Reagan—that the ship was in international waters. It also makes the U.S. government claim that the Iranians provoked the incident seem somewhat less plausible.

But "why," as Koppel puts it, "would the Navy, the Pentagon, the State Department and White House all participate in such an elaborate coverup to protect the reputation of one Navy captain?" The answer, the program asserts, is that the United States was engaged in a "secret war" against Iran on behalf of its erstwhile ally in the region, Iraq. And here the program moves onto shakier ground.

In 1987, U.S. warships had been dispatched to the gulf to protect Kuwaiti merchant vessels from Iranian attacks. But the broadcast claims that the Navy actually went a good bit further than that, deliberately targeting Iranian gunboats and mine-laying ships in a series of covert missions. One of these—according to Barry, who appears frequently on the program—occurred on the day the airliner was shot down. Barry tells us that U.S. officials lied when they said the Vincennes had been responding to distress calls from neutral merchant vessels under attack by the Iranians. In fact, he says, no such calls were broadcast, and one of the ships, a Liberian merchant vessel, "didn't exist."

Barry says the Navy faked radio broadcasts from the imaginary vessel "to lure out the Iranian gunboats from the islands in the Straits of Hormuz so that these gunboats would come south to attack this helpless Liberian tanker and would instead find themselves confronted by U.S. warships and armed U.S. helicopters."

Unfortunately, Barry offers no direct evidence, beyond his inability to locate the ship in international shipping records, to support this rather startling conclusion.

Similarly, the program relies heavily on the statements of a retired Marine lieutenant colonel, Roger Charles, "who has been investigating the USS Vincennes incident for several years." But we never learn the source of Charles's information.

Crowe, for his part, said in an interview yesterday that the presence of the U.S. ship in Iranian waters was "sort of irrelevant" because the Vincennes had initially encountered the gunboats in international waters, then pursued them inside Iran's 12-mile coastal limit. He said if there

were a secret war, "it was locally generated by the commanders as part of their tactics and I'm not even sure about that."

Still, "Nightline" and Newsweek may be onto something. As U.S. officials interviewed on the program clearly acknowledge, the Reagan administration was tilting heavily toward Iraq at the time the Airbus was shot down. Many puzzling contradictions remain. Maybe this lively and provocative broadcast will finally prod the Navy into telling us what it really knows.