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The ^{Post} 'Possible Truth'

It was a mean thing to do to one of Washington's straight-shooters. But presumably when Gen. Brent Scowcroft, the White House national security adviser, accepted the invitation from NBC-TV's "Meet the Press," he knew that the questions would not be softballs.

In any event, Scowcroft came up with a very useful phrase as he was pressed at one point about fresh evidence challenging President Bush's account of his role, as vice president, in the Iran-contra affair.

A bit of background: Five years ago this month, Bush told me in an interview that in the critical period of 1985-86 when the ill-fated arms sale to Iran was being debated inside the Reagan administration, he never weighed in against it because he had never heard the objections being raised by Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. Not once but three times, he said in the interview that he was unaware of their arguments. "If I'd have sat there and heard George Shultz and Cap [Weinberger] express it strongly," he said, "maybe I would have had a stronger view. But when you don't know something, it's hard to react. . . . We were not in the loop."

The story on the interview ran in The Post on Aug. 6, 1987, and last week, for the first time, I learned what the reaction had been. The special prosecutor who has filed charges

against Weinberger introduced a pre-trial document quoting from a memo Shultz dictated to his assistant the day after the story ran.

It said: "VP [Bush] in papers yesterday said he not exposed to Cap or my arguments on Iran arms. Cap called me [and] said that's terrible. He [Bush] was on the other side. It's on the Record. Why did he say that."

On "Meet the Press" I asked Scowcroft, who was one of the three members of the Tower Commission, which did the first investigation of the Iran-contra affair, what he made of it. He said the commission had not seen this memo and "we had no indication he [Bush] was in a passive place."

Since then, Shultz and Weinberger have said he was not in the loop. Scowcroft's statement was truthful.

It was an uncomfortable moment. Scowcroft's answer: "I think it's quite possible it was a truthful statement."

Possibly true. What an artful phrase. Possibly true but, obviously, by implication, possibly not.

Bush himself last week brushed aside a news conference question about the Shultz memo, saying he had not bothered to read the news stories about it and adding, "I see no reason to contradict myself at all." But the contradictions to his accounts of his non-involvement in the biggest scandal of the Reagan years are many. He has denied any direct role in the decision to sell arms, even though others say he was an advocate and was present when the issue was debated. And he has denied knowing anything about the diversion of funds to the contras, even though some of the principals in that diversion were in regular contact with Bush's own national security adviser, Donald Gregg, and, on occasion, with Bush himself.

Iran-contra is history, even though Weinberger, who honorably opposed the folly, is being hauled into the dock by the special prosecutor. What gives this episode its relevance is Bush's effort to make "trust" a theme of his

reelection campaign.

The Bush organization's prime argument that challenger Bill Clinton is not to be trusted goes back to Clinton's avoidance of the Vietnam War draft. Clinton sought to preempt the attack in a speech to the American Legion last week. This time he began with his getting a draft induction notice while studying at Oxford. Earlier in the year, before the press learned of it, Clinton omitted that event from his narrative and even claimed that this event—a memorable moment for millions of others—had no special significance to him. When he spoke to the Legion, it was front and center.

What he didn't tell the Legion was that he later thanked the colonel who had accepted his promise to join a University of Arkansas R.O.T.C. unit "for saving me from the draft." Nor did he acknowledge that in the letter to Col. Eugene Holmes, he had said that he had finally "decided to accept the draft in spite of my beliefs for one reason: to maintain my political viability within the system."

And he certainly did not admit in his Legion address that in the same letter he wrote of "loathing the military, to which you and other good men have devoted years." Quite the contrary. "I was never against the heroic men who served in that war," Clinton told the Legion. "I honored your service then, and I honor it still."

Clinton's speech to the American Legion fits perfectly into Scowcroft's category of the "possibly true."

The voters could better focus on the alternatives the two candidates are offering if Bush and Clinton could find it in themselves to remove the demeaning adverb from their accounts about these episodes in their pasts.