

The CIA, Contras, and Crack:
The Foreign Policy Scandal That Wasn't

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I

The United States of America has become an empire in the decades since World War II. While Americans are loathe to actually use the word “empire,” the nation neatly fits within the academic definition of empire, a sole political unit lording over an extensive mass of land and neighboring territories while, through the use of their economic and political might, holding sway over lesser states. The establishment and maintenance of an empire is a difficult thing, and often the imperial power must use all the tools at its disposal to stay atop its pinnacle of power. These methods range from economic and diplomatic to the use of coercion and force.¹ It is preeminent in the minds of the American government and media to emphasize the economic and diplomatic methods that have been used to maintain our empire, while the realities of the use of force and other unsightly actions are almost subconsciously swept under the rug. The involvement of the United States with drug traffickers throughout the twentieth and into the twenty first centuries constitute the use of coercion and force as a means for establishing, supporting, and maintaining an empire. The public’s willingness to suppress the issue from the forefront of political dialogue in the country represents a swift move by the collective conscience of the American people to return to believing that they are just another simple democracy.

Stories of conspiracies abound on the internet, and given time, chances are that one of them involves the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the organization within the federal government responsible for foreign intelligence gathering and covert policy enforcement. While the suspicions concerning this agency vary from the conspiracy

¹ Simes, Dimitri K. “America’s imperial Dilemma”, *Foreign Affairs*, (Nov/Dec2003), Vol.82, Issue 6 (Ebscohost, p 1)

belief that they orchestrated the assassination of John F. Kennedy to that they are in direct communication with aliens, there are instances when their secret activities have been found to be illegal and all too real. For example the Agency admitted to assassinations following congressional banning and to their unsuccessful experimentation with LSD as a truth serum. LSD is not the only drug that has been tied to CIA activities, as rumors both heroin and cocaine have also crossed the historical trail of the agency, some merely alleged, others substantiated.

In August of 1996, Gary Webb of the *San Jose Mercury News* wrote a three part series of articles under the title of "Dark Alliance" that sought to firmly substantiate the connection of the crack cocaine explosion in Los Angeles during the mid-eighties to dealers associated with funding the Contra army of Nicaragua, which was also bank rolled off and on by the CIA. Webb's series implicated the CIA in aiding and abetting the Contras in their drug trafficking without ever directly stating it.

The fallout from the article series was quick and overwhelming, with major publications (such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*) immediately dismissing Webb's findings. They considered his research as fictitious and conspiracy theory based, while the CIA simultaneously denied any involvement with drug trafficking in any form. Later investigations into the agency by an independent investigator showed at least minor involvement in the Nicaraguan drug program, and later *Washington Post* and *New York Times* articles retracted many of the arguments against Webb that had previously been raised. Unfortunately the issue of CIA involvement in the Nicaraguan drug trafficking had already been completely dismissed in the public's eyes. Based upon the investigative reporting of Webb and several others, along with the findings of the

independent investigation and knowledge of the CIA's past with narcotics, it becomes apparent that while the CIA never relied upon an executive order to push drugs within our border. The Agency was responsible for consorting with and funding drug runners, providing materiel support to drug runners, and for protecting those Nicaraguan Contras involved in the drug trade from both prosecution and investigation by the CIA itself.

There are important aspects of this topic that merit discreet examination. Central to understanding the CIA involvement with suspected drug traffickers is an understanding of its past involvement with narcotics. The Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner to the CIA, experimented with Marijuana and LSD as truth serums during World War II, the Agency had active involvement in opium trafficking in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam during the Vietnam war, and worked with Afghani warlords responsible for producing the lion's share of world opium during the 1990's. To understand the link between the cold war and domestic drug use, the CIA's involvement with the Nicaraguan Contras must be examined, from the beginning of involvement, through the Iran-Contra affair, to the resolution of fighting between the Contras and Sandinista government. Most importantly, the issue of the mass media's negligence in reporting on the eventual admission of involvement with the drug traffickers by the CIA was must be analyzed and examined.

II

The CIA, which grew out of the wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS), was chartered to provide both human and technology based intelligence gathering during the expanding cold war. In addition to it's role as intelligence advisors to the executive branch, it wa also created for the purpose of "Conducting counterintelligence activities,

special activities, and other functions related to foreign intelligence and national security, as directed by the President”², the latter category of activities ranged from apprehending foreign terrorists to the utilization of special operatives to assist the US military. Several authors have accused the CIA of connections to drug running in the 57 years of its existence, starting most notably with the allegations of opium smuggling by CIA pilots in Christopher Robbins’s 1979 book *Air America*.³ While this book would later be turned into a movie in 1990, the basic facts concerning the veracity of Robbins’s statements are notably backed up by Alfred W. McCoy⁴ who found that during the 60’s the only method of transport from the mountains of Laos where the opium was produced to the lowlands of Vietnam and Cambodia was through CIA planes that continued to operate into the area⁵. The CIA has adamantly refuted these allegations, and maintains that the only way that the opium could have gotten aboard their planes was in extremely small numbers by individual smugglers, which according to the research of William Leary was extremely rare⁶. What both sides do admit is that it is certain that some pilots involved in the Air America system for the transportation of goods to Laos were involved in the trafficking of opiates, and that the CIA was slow to penalize and remove them from the job.

Following the overthrow of the left leaning rulers of Afghanistan in 1979 by that nation’s communist party, the CIA was instructed to begin assisting the tribal leaders who would begin a guerilla battle against the communists within their country and later the Soviet Union when their army invaded to assist in the clearing out of the anti-communist

² According to the official CIA website, at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/information/info.html>

³ Robbins, Christopher. *Air America: The story of the CIA's Secret Airlines*. G.P. Putnam’s sons, New York, 1979 p 15

⁴ McCoy, Alfred W. *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*. Harper & Row. New York. 1972, p 126

⁵ Ibid, p152

⁶ Leary, William M. “CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974”. *Journal of Military History* 1995, vol.53

forces.⁷ Many of these tribal leaders were also heavily involved in the production of heroin and other opium products, which accounted for upwards of three quarters of the nation's economy. This support of drug producers would cause an enormous strain on CIA relations with the Drug Enforcement Agency, as the CIA routinely would protect the interests of their Afghani supporters from the prosecution of the DEA.⁸ While the activities to protect drug tsars in Afghanistan were not put up as an executive order within the agency, there was a strong trend to keep from labeling the use of drug trafficking to raise funds as illegal within the agency.⁹ Currently in Afghanistan the same heroin growing warlords that the United States allied with against the Soviets, then allied against during the Taliban's rule, are now being made into the foundation of the new Afghani government after their assistance with the overthrow of the Taliban. Consequently, the production of heroin has exploded across the country while the press has largely ignored the story.

The CIA was also heavily involved in research into the acquisition of a truth drug to be used in both law enforcement and for military and espionage purposes. Throughout the 1940's and '50's the CIA, in collusion with agents of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (later to become the Drug Enforcement Administration [DEA]), used both convicted felons and conscripted mafia members to undergo tests using both marijuana and opium to stimulate truth telling.¹⁰ In 1953 the project "MK Ultra" was established, which granted unparalleled rights to the CIA's drug experimenters to try new techniques. One

⁷ Prados, John. "Notes On The CIA's Secret War In Afghanistan" in *Journal of American History* 2002 vol.89(2) (Ebscohost, p 1)

⁸ Ibid, p 2

⁹ Hitz, Frederick P. "Obscuring Propriety: The CIA and Drugs" in *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* (Oct99) Volume 12, Number 4

¹⁰ McWilliams, John, "Covert Connections: The FBN, the OSS, and the CIA", *Historian*, (Summer 91), vol. 53, Issue 4, p 5

such experimenter, Sidney Gottlieb, established a safe house in Greenwich village where he would lure prostitutes and other street people to try his latest drug combinations, mainly using substances that had already been officially made illegal by the United States government. The realities of these experiments were not made public until the Edward Kennedy commission of 1977 investigated them.¹¹

III

The United State's involvement in Nicaragua did not begin suddenly with the ascension of the Sandinistas to power in 1979. Rather, the conflict grew upon successive revolutions and counterrevolutions that would destabilize the area through the 20th century, and to understand the United States willingness to be involved illegally in the Nicaraguan affairs, it is important to know the extent of the United State's prior involvement in Nicaragua.

The Nicaraguan conflict's roots lie in the late 19th and early 20th century, the period of revolutions and counterrevolutions in Central America, especially in Nicaragua, influenced by the U.S.'s military involvement in the region. The U.S. encouraged a conservative revolt in Nicaragua in 1909, and sent in the marines in 1912 to oppose liberal revolts against the conservative regime they had assisted¹², after which they elected to maintain a military presence in the country until 1925, when it felt that the conservative regime that they had installed was sufficiently strong enough to hold its own against future uprisings. At the heart of these liberal revolts at the start of the century was the issue of foreign control of both land and the economy, as both were lorded over by

¹¹ Ibid, pp 7-8

¹² Foster, Clare, "The Sandinista Heritage", *History Today*; (Apr87), Vol. 37 Issue 4, p 5

American companies that actively worked to squash progressive members of the upper class and stifle any growth of state sovereignty. As part of their custodianship of the new conservative regime, the U.S. forced the passing of the Bryan-Chamorro treaty of 1916 that gave the United States the license to build an inter-oceanic canal.¹³

The conservative government did not have long to rest on its laurels after the United States' withdrawal, as the liberal revolt started anew within two months of the United States' exit. When the United States returned its military presence to the country in 1926, they would elect to stay until 1933. During this stage of occupation the United States worked to establish a government in Nicaragua that gave more voice to the liberals, while still allowing the United States to maintain overall control of the country. As the United States pulled out of the country in 1934 due to a lack of support within the United States, the newly elected president Juan B. Sacasa took power, aided by the United States trained National Guard led by Anastasio Somoza Garcia.

The liberals who had been fighting a protracted guerilla battle with both the Nicaraguan guard and the U.S. marines were led by Augusto Cesar Sandino, the son of a rich landowner with strong liberal beliefs. Sandino accepted the new president's entreaties for peace in early 1933, and a cease fire was soon established. In the ensuing peace conference, Sandino demanded that the National Guard be disbanded in exchange for his own forces disarmament. As the talks winded down, Somoza, in a move to protect his power within the country and to retain the National Guard, arrested Sandino and several of his officers and had them shot. After initially protesting his innocence to Sacasa, Somoza eventually admitted to ordering the murders as he slowly grew more

¹³ "History of Relations Between United States and Nicaragua", *Congressional Digest*; Apr27, Vol. 6 Issue 4, pp 111-114

openly opposed to Sacasa's rule. Using his own para-military blue-shirts, Somoza ascended to the presidency in 1936, beginning a four decade term of rule by Somoza and his descendants.¹⁴

During the terms of Anastasio Somoza (assassinated in 1956), Luis Somoza Debayle (president 1956 to 1963, then by proxy till his death in 1967) and Anastasio Somoza, Jr. (1967-1971, by proxy afterward), the Somoza family grew in wealth rapidly through their running of the state largely for their family and close friends profit. By 1970, they accounted for over a quarter of the economic production of the country. The Somozas stayed in power largely because of the control that they gave to both the wealthy planter class and to foreign corporations, namely U.S. corporations. Although their policies of encouraging land ownership for the upper class would cement the power structure that they had developed since their ascendance, the growing plight of the peasant and middle classes swiftly lead to problems.¹⁵

Revolts began in the 1950's against Somoza's regime, but they did not gain in strength until the early sixties when the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) was founded. The FSLN, while originally unsuccessful at guerilla insurgency, swiftly grew in membership throughout the 1950's and 1960's, predominantly from disenchanted college students and middle class. The largest boom to the membership in the FSLN would occur between 1972 and 1975, after an enormous earthquake ripped through the city of Managua on December 23rd, 1972, killing over 10,000 and leaving tens of thousands of others homeless¹⁶.

¹⁴ Foster, p 8

¹⁵ Keen, Benjamin, Keith Haynes, *A History of Latin America*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, (2004). pp 466-467

¹⁶ Phillips, R. Hart, "Since the Earthquake", *National Review* (11/21/75), vol. 27 Issue 45 p.1294

The Somoza regime's response to the disaster was lukewarm at best, with the majority of relief effort in the city itself being taken up by foreign interests, notably the United States. On top of their refusal to assist with the disasters cleanup, the Somoza regime went on to pocket over a quarter of the international aid that was coming into Nicaragua for reconstruction purposes and would use this money to purchase land and businesses on the border of the disaster area, establishing themselves and their benefactors as the sole beneficiaries of the reconstruction efforts of the international community. Outraged refugees and students swelled the membership in the FSLN.

Anastasio Somoza also erred in his allowing of the killing (probably orchestrated by Anastasio's son, Anastasio Somoza Portocarrero¹⁷) of *La Prensa* journalist Pedro Joaquin Chamorro after he ran a series of articles revealing the Somoza's selling of Nicaraguan blood supplies to the United States for personal profit. Chamorro had also been an early revolutionary opponent to the Somozas in the 1950's, even though he personally came from a wealthy family. This killing sparked off a national strike by not only the peasant, but by the upper classes as well. Sandinista enrollment grew at an exponential rate.

IV

By June 1979, the Sandinistas had overrun most of Nicaragua and were preparing for the final ouster of Somozan forces. The Sandinistas allowed for an escape route via the Managua airport for the Somozas, which Somoza would take as he moved in exile to Florida on July 16, 1979. In the meantime, the FSLN had established a provisional government to handle the country, led by a five member junta comprised of three Sandinistas, the conservative Alfonso Robelo, and the moderate widow of Pedro

¹⁷ *National Review*, 11/02/79, Vol. 31, Issue 44, p.163

Chamorro, Violeta Chamorro. The United States argued heavily for the inclusion of former Somoza regime and National Guard leaders to be included, but these demands were firmly rebuffed by the FSLN leadership.

Following the rise to power of the Sandinista's leftist Government of National Reconstruction (GRN) in Nicaragua in 1979, relations between the United States and the new Nicaraguan government quickly cooled. The first meeting between Ortega's agents and the Carter administration was marked by strong pressure by the United States for the Sandinistas to hold open elections and to integrate the remnants of the Somoza regime into the new government so as to bring moderation to the strong leftist stance that the Sandinistas had taken. Also of concern to the United States was the amount of aid that the Cuban government as well as other social democratic parties the world over had contributed to the FSLN's war treasury. American leaders feared that the Sandinistas were merely acting as the Soviet Union's cat's-paw.

The Carter, and later the Reagan, administrations were unhappy with the steps that the Sandinistas were taking in redistributing wealth and nationalizing private enterprises. Many of these policies were made as emergency patches to problems stemming from poor stewardship of the country during the Somoza regime. Sandinistan governmental programs were made to start repairing the damaged city of Managua and planting of emergency food crops on nationalized lands, most of which were stripped from the Somoza family itself. To combat the rampant poverty and unemployment, the GRN instituted food for work programs that not only help fixed many of the civic shortcomings of the country but also fostered a sense of national pride for many who had been disaffected by numerous years of indifferent Somoza rule.

The GRN, not wanting to alienate the west, decided that it would pay the \$1.6 billion dollar national debt so as to keep the west's good faith, as a way of offsetting the food aid that was being sent to them by the Soviet Union and the professional assistance from Cuban doctors and teachers. In an effort to help keep the Nicaraguans at least in a grey area between the soviet bloc and the United States, Carter agreed to provide a \$75 dollar loan to the Nicaraguans to assist the expansion of a healthier private sector. By 1981, then President Reagan cut off all aid to the Nicaraguan country because of their socialist leaning policies,¹⁸ also stopping the loan that Carter had initiated citing that the Nicaraguans were supporting El Salvadoran rebels, a claim that he would keep up well into the late eighties even though he was never able to provide evidence that it was actually happening.

V

With their connection to the United States all but severed, the fledgling Nicaraguan government was forced to turn to its allies in socialist countries such as the Soviet Union and Cuba and social democracies in Europe, abandoning any hope of American foreign aid. During this time, though, Nicaragua was not a socialist country itself, as over 60% of the economic activity in the nation was in private hands, with an even higher percentage of manufacturing land remaining in the upper-class's hands.

As the Sandinista government drifted closer and closer to the Soviet Union and Cuba, Reagan decided that there needed to be military actions made to oppose the Nicaraguan government. Reagan authorized funding for the newly created Central American Task Force of the CIA of \$19 million dollars for 1981-82, and instructed the Agency to begin delivering this money in the form of equipment and agency advisors

¹⁸ Ibid, pp 451

within the year. These advisors armed and equipped ex-national guardsmen from Nicaragua into the paramilitary Somocistas or Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), later called Contras, from Honduras they smuggled them across the border to make terrorist raids against the Sandinista government. The Contra forces were separated geographically, with the Sandino Revolutionary Front (FRS) and Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE) operating along the southern border and the FDN operating in the North. In 1982 ARDE and FRS had merged and thus began the CIA's funding of both the FDN and the newly combined ARDE/FRS. Most of the supply and training for these two groups was run from the CIA's regional headquarters in Honduras, with a massive influx of advisors coming south in the early 1980s. By the end of 1982, Ambassador John Negroponte (currently Ambassador to Iraq) arrived in Honduras and ran the Contra operations.

By 1983, the spending limit set by Congress was moved up to \$29 million, \$21 million short of what the CIA deemed necessary to properly assist the insurgency, though as much as \$120 million more dollars may have reached the contras through hidden budget items of the CIA up until 1983. The first two years of congressional funding for the Contras (\$48 million dollars) had been assigned to programs that would work to interdict arms shipments into Nicaragua from Cuba and the Soviet Union, but were actually being used for the training and arming of the terrorist Contras, contrary to the Intelligence Authorization act that had been passed to limit the CIA involvement in the region.. When the CIA explained that it wished to not only interdict arms, but bring the Nicaraguan government to peace talks and to hold free elections as their goal, Congress gave the go ahead for a further \$24 million dollars in aid for 1983-84. Following the

public discovery that the CIA had mined the Nicaraguan seaports, Congress passed a series of Boland amendments (named after their architect, Rep. Edward Boland [1899-1989]) that would cut all funding to CIA involvement in the area.

To make up for the lack of congressional support for its war in Nicaragua following the Boland amendments, the CIA and the Contras were forced to turn elsewhere for funding at the president's request¹⁹. Surprisingly, Saudi Arabia had contributed \$32 million during the period of 1984 to 1986 but Congress resumed funding the Contras in 1986, the Saudis discontinued their support. An additional \$22 million dollars in aid flowed into the Contra's coffers from other sources during the 1984-1986 time period. After the U.S. resumed its finance of the Contras, all supporting countries stopped aid. The CIA and Contra representatives also lobbied for private donations, which eventually accounted for over \$10 million dollars of assistance, though a solid quarter of this total was spent on advertising to sway public opinion against the Sandinista government. By March 21, 1986 President Reagan hosted a reception for these private donors, where he specifically gave accolades to the Contra's civilian representative, Adolfo Calero, who the president called "the future of Central America".

Aside from these official sources of income for the CIA and Contras, there were less legal avenues taken to continue the funding of the insurgency. From late 1985 to late 1986 the CIA's selling of TOW and HAWK missiles to Iran rose over \$25 million dollars, of which \$16.1 million was intended for the Contras. By the time that the scandal concerning the arms deals hit the public and a congressional inquiry had started in November 1986, only around \$3.8 million dollars from the arms deals had actually arrived in the Contras hands. In addition, a portion of the \$27 million in humanitarian aid

¹⁹ Ibid, p.453

that Congress had earmarked for Nicaragua disappeared and may have been utilized for military purposes. It is specifically during this time period of 1984 to 1986, while Congress was withholding funding, that some portions of the Contra armies turned to drug trafficking as a system for maintaining funding.²⁰

VI

Allegations of Nicaraguan drug running as a funding method for the Contras first began cropping up in the early 1980's. In 1986 the Reagan administration had already squashed a story by the associated press and pro-actively discouraged any journalistic interest into possible Contra drug ties.²¹ Aside from press identifications of drug trafficking connections, the Kerry Commission (special subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations) noted in its 1,000 plus page report that the United States was more than willing to work with drug traffickers to achieve its foreign policy objectives.²² Surprisingly enough, both of these investigations failed to elicit a reaction from both the journalistic and public world, as the blatant disparity between American drug and foreign policies quickly faded away with any possibility of chasing after the leads established by these events could be acted upon.

Assertions of Contra and CIA involvement with cocaine resurfaced in the early '90's during the trial of former CIA operative Manuel Noriega. Carlos Lehder, described as "the most notorious cocaine trafficker ever apprehended" by US officials²³, testified that during the period of 1984-1986 his Medellin cartel contributed over \$10 million

²⁰ Ibid, pp.454

²¹ Millman, Joel, "Narco Terrorism: A Tale of Two Stories", *Columbia Journalism Review*, Sept-Oct. 1986, vol.25, issue 3, p.48

²² Kornbluh, Peter. "The Storm Over 'Dark Alliance'." *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jan/Feb97, Vol. 35 Issue 5, p33

²³ Isikoff, Michael, "Drug Cartels gave contras \$10 million, court told: prosecution witness startles Noriega trial", *Washington Post*, 11/25/91, page A1

dollars in aid to the Contra forces. Drug lord Ramon Milian Rodriguez made a similar allegation in 1987, but his account was discredited as many believed he made it to lessen his own sentence after being arrested. Lehder appeared as a witness for the prosecution, against Noriega, and thus his statements would not shorten his tenure in the American penal system, but rather elongate it. Adolfo Calero strongly opposed Lehder's assertions at the Noriega trial, stating that no testimony could be trusted from Lehder, as he "is the lowest form of being."²⁴

VII

The connections between the Contras and cocaine were all but extinct by 1996 when Gary Webb began his research into the rise of the cocaine epidemic in California. He observed that Starting in 1981, there was a deluge of crack trafficking into San Francisco and Los Angeles, where from 1983-1992 the annual cocaine related hospital emergencies jumped from 40 annually to 2,284.²⁵ While President Reagan's 'war on drugs' influenced a decline in most other forms of drug usage, cocaine continued to grow in popularity even in the face of new measures being taken by the FBI and DEA.²⁶ Webb, then a journalist for the *San Jose Mercury News*, was tipped off to the cases of two civilian supporters of the Contras who were under trial for Narcotics smuggling: Ricky Ross, who was primarily a dealing agent for crack, and Oscar Danilo Blandon Reyes, a Nicaraguan expatriate. In his article series, titled "Dark Alliance," Webb found Blandon and Ross imported a "Ton" of crack during the mid eighties.²⁷ Webb then alleged that the

²⁴ Ibid. p A1

²⁵ *New York Amsterdam News*; (12/21/96), Vol. 87 Issue 51

²⁶ UPI, "Level of Use of Illegal Drugs Will Stay High, Meese Says", *New York Times*, (9/12/1985), p. B24

²⁷ Kornbluh, Peter. "The Storm over Dark Alliance". In *Columbia Journalism Review*. (Jan/Feb 1997) Vol.35 Issue 5. p.35

majority of these profits were then directly funneled to “a Latin American guerrilla army run by the CIA”²⁸.

Blandon, who had originally been in charge of the southern California distribution for the Nicaraguan pipeline, had been arrested on narcotics charges and had turned full-time informant for the DEA, netting him \$166,000 in a year while assisting the DEA in systematically dismantling the organization he helped found.²⁹ As part of his deal with the DEA, Blandon implicated Ross and several other subordinates. According to Blandon, the first year of his importing crack into the United States netted \$54 million alone, of which an indeterminate amount was funneled to the Contras, though Blandon claimed that all proceeds were going back to Nicaragua.³⁰ Blandon also made a point in his trial of stating that he was in the employ of one Mr. Bermudez, a CIA agent in command of the Contras who he quoted as saying “the ends justifies the means” in relation to drug dealing to finance the revolution.³¹

Webb asserted that Blandon himself was merely an underling to a more powerful contra and cocaine figure, Juan Norwin Meneses Cantarero. Meneses, whose family had enjoyed lucrative deals under the Somoza regime, was a large financial benefactor of the Contras as well as a large time dealer in cocaine, who lived openly in the San Francisco Bay area while over 45 separate federal investigations sought to implicate him in drug smuggling from 1974 to 1994.³² Webb then asserted that most of these investigations were not halted by the wiles of Meneses but rather the active involvement of “agencies of

²⁸ Webb, Gary. “‘Crack’ Plague’s Roots Are In Nicaraguan War”. *San Jose Mercury News* (August 1996)

²⁹ Ibid, p.2

³⁰ Ibid, p.2

³¹ Ibid, p.1

³² Ibid, p.4

the U.S. government.”³³ Meneses’ involvement with the Contras was perhaps most openly suggested by his hosting of Adolfo Calero in one of his San Francisco homes in 1984, at a time when coincidentally enough Calero was searching for monetary contributions at the CIA’s request and Meneses was making a fortune off of cocaine selling while not having to hide from the law.³⁴

While Webb, in his article series never specifically states that the CIA ran the operation of drug running, he does allude to its complicity in it’s occurrence. The *Mercury News*’ website even more pointedly implicated the CIA by imposing its department seal on the background of pictures of crack use. What the article series had in spades was thoroughly researched numbers for drug movement and profit flow. The article firmly traced the money and drugs back to Meneses, a friend of Anastasio Somoza who provided immense financial support to the Contra cause, specifically during the low funding years of 1984-85. Webb reliably traced to the crack movement from Columbia to the United States, and the use of profits skimmed off the top to purchase American made weaponry and training.

Where Webb’s article most directly implicated the CIA was in its attempt to prove that Ross and Reyes were protected from prosecution by the agency. Here Webb’s urge for the dramatic overtook the veracity of his research, with the only solid proof of ties to the CIA being found in Ross and Reyes’ defense testimonies. These Webb misquoted to the point of illegibility while failing to cross check with an objective account of the government’s official doings during the same time period.

³³ Ibid, p.3

³⁴ Ibid, p.5

Aside from these failings, Webb over sensationalized his story. While he had struck journalistic gold with his discovery of Meneses' involvement with the drug trade into Los Angeles³⁵, he chose to press home the involvement of Blandon and Ross, both of whom were not directly involved with the CIA and were actually just common drug dealers for most intents and purposes.³⁶ Because of the holes in the story and the sensationalist way that his thesis was put forth, 'Dark Alliance' was quickly jumped upon by the more established media and its information discredited as yet another conspiracy theory. After the 'Dark Alliance' series gained momentum through high internet readership, specifically in the African Americans and other conspiracy theorists, both the *New York Times*³⁷ and the *Washington Post*³⁸ ran headline stories that directly disputed Webb's findings.

VIII

The *Times*' and *Post*'s reactions to the unfolding *Mercury* news issue were schizophrenic at best. While they covered the beginnings of the CIA investigations and the official requests for inquiries by Congress, they also directly attacked the evidence that Webb presented in his articles. The same day that the *Times* ran an article titled "Though Evidence Is Thin, Drug Story Has a Life of Its Own"³⁹ on the same page another, smaller article written by the same reporter, Tim Golden, suggested that some truth to Webb's allegations with an article titled "Pivotal Figures of Newspaper Series

³⁵ Which would become a CIA tie drug trade into Los Angeles because of their financial and materiel support of Meneses

³⁶ *ibid*, p.38

³⁷ Golden, Tim. "Though Evidence is thin, Tale of CIA and Drugs Has Life of it's Own" *New York Times*, (10/21/96) vol. 146 Issue 50587 p.A14

³⁸ Pincus, Walter, Roberto Suro, "The CIA and Crack: Evidence is Lacking of alleged plot; Nicaraguans had limited role in bringing drug to U.S. cities", *Washington Post*, (10/4/96), p. A1

³⁹ Golden, p.A14

May Be Only Bit Players”.⁴⁰ Although the articles dealt with the same subject, the larger of the two, which was almost time and a half as large as the other, was largely a summary of common people’s reactions to the allegations. “Pivotal . . .” was an actual investigation into the individuals involved in the ‘dark alliance’ series and agrees with many of the Webb’s assertions. This article, though, was pushed to the bottom of the page.

The *Washington Post* treated their initial coverage of the *Mercury News* article series in a similar fashion. Priority was given to stories that opposed the *Mercury News*’ allegations, while those that actually investigated the *Mercury News*’ sources and assertions were buried deep in their sections. The *Post*’s article “Running with the CIA Story”⁴¹ which dismissed allegations of direct CIA involvement in Nicaraguan-Contra drug controversy, was the front page story of section B when it ran, as opposed to the page 18 placement of their story that alleged that the CIA knowingly ignored the drug connections of its operatives in the article “Ex-Prober: CIA ignored Drug Issue.”⁴² As was the case in the *Time*’s articles, the articles in the *Post* that criticized the *San Jose Mercury News* were larger than their fact finding ones that lent some support to Webb’s stories.

In response to Webb’s allegations, the CIA denounced all charges and then CIA director John Deutch agreed to the use of an independent investigation to prove the CIA’s innocence. This investigation, run by the Inspector General of the CIA, Frederick P. Hitz, found that the CIA did not have direct contact with Ross and Blandon and therefore was

⁴⁰ Golden, Tim. “Pivotal figures of newspaper series may be only bit players”, *New York Times*, (10/21/96), p.A14

⁴¹ Kurtz, Howard. “Running with the CIA Story; Reporter says series didn’t go as far as readers took it” *Washington Post News Feed* (10/2/96), Vol. 119 Issue 302, pB1

⁴² Pincus, Walter. “Ex Prober: CIA ignored drug issue; Agency didn’t encourage trafficking to aid contras, senate panel told”, *Washington Post*, (10/24/96), p. A18

free from allegations of trafficking of drugs into Los Angeles. Yet Hitz also subtly points to the CIA's knowledge of its involvement with drug traffickers. Hitz finds that the agency purposefully kept drug trafficking off its list of crimes requiring reporting to the Department of Justice in relation to its operatives and informants. In cases of other drug dealing Contras outside of Meneses, Hitz found the CIA to be extremely slow in verifying its involvement with drug smuggling. In several cases it continued to deal with them after their drug trafficking activities had been substantiated.⁴³ Hitz's investigation found that when laws changed and limited the ability of their employees and contacts to be involved in drug trading, Nicaraguan contacts shifted their business to the categories that were protected.

Hitz's reports were initially released in stages, and as such the press' response shifted over time. Hitz's initial report cleared the higher ups of the CIA from direct guilt in the hiring and working with of drug dealers. The *Times* ran a short *Associated Press* blurb⁴⁴ about the announcement, as did the *Washington Post*, but neither had an in depth accounting of Hitz's statements. The next article published by the *Post* on the 31st of October was headlined "CIA, Contras, and Drugs: Questions on Links Linger,"⁴⁵ and actually made the front page. The article was an investigation into other possible Contra ties to drug trafficking, but while fairly well researched, it failed to draw any significant conclusions. In the end the article did, as its title suggested, merely present lingering questions.

⁴³ Hitz. Pp 454-456

⁴⁴ *Associated Press*, "CIA official sees no evidence of crack role", *New York Times*, (10/24/96), p.A17

⁴⁵ Farah, Douglas, "CIA, Contras and Drugs: Questions on Links Linger", *Washington Post*, (10/31/96), p.A1

When *The Mercury News*' editor repudiated the 'Dark Alliance' series on its front page in May of 1997, he provided more ammunition for sinking of the CIA drug trafficking issue. Editor Jerry Ceppo's accounting of Webb's research and explanation had been slanted provided not only a way for his paper to save readership in the face of the mainstream media pressure, but also effectively squashed the issue of whether the CIA had worked with drug traffickers. This repudiation provided both the *Post* and *Times* the opportunity to effectively silence the issue, with the *Post*'s editorial board focusing on the need for editorial oversight of articles rather than whether or not the information was solid in their statement⁴⁶ and the *Times* ran a front page story announcing the *Mercury news*' repudiation.⁴⁷

Following the *Mercury* editor's statements, the story was largely dropped from the national media. When more findings from Hitz's reports were made at the end of 1997 the *Times* ran two five hundred word stories about the findings in back page areas.⁴⁸

⁴⁹ Both elicited neither responses nor follow up stories, even though they both contradicted early statements that the CIA had made about their knowledge and involvement with Blandon and Meneses. When Hitz's investigation discovered that there had been definite involvement on the CIA's part with known drug dealers, an anonymous source within the CIA announced to the *Times* several months before Hitz's final report was made, that the agency had contact with known drug dealers but they never worked with or supported them, and the *Times* responded by writing a 1000 word article on the

⁴⁶ Editorial, "The Mercury's Hard Second Look", *Washington Post*, (5/17/97), p. A24

⁴⁷ Purdum, Todd S., "Expose on Crack was Flawed, Paper says", *New York Times*, (5/13/97), p. A1

⁴⁸ Weiner, Tim, "CIA says it has found no link between itself and Crack trade", *New York Times*, (12/19/97), p.A23

⁴⁹ Weiner, Tim, "CIA report concludes Agency knew nothing of Drug Dealers' ties to Rebels", *New York Times*, (1/30/98), p.A11

second page that, while titled “CIA says it used Nicaraguan Rebels accused of drug tie”, exonerated the CIA as having not known about the traffickers drug ties.⁵⁰

When the final Hitz report was released at the beginning of October in 1998, the Print media’s response was lukewarm to the severity of what Hitz’s report stated. The *Times* article on the tenth of that month was a mere 600 words long, even though it covered the Hitz report’s accounting of 58 Contras being involved in drug trafficking.⁵¹ The *Post*’s article was run on the third of November and, while correctly accounting for the end results of the Hitz report, was still not given front page placement.⁵² Within the *Post* article Fredrick Hitz is quoted as stating the aim of the report was “to try to find out what was on the written record . . .and not develop any cases to bring to closure . . .This is grist for more work, if anyone wants to do it.”⁵³

IX

Therein lies the problem. Following these articles about the final results of the Hitz investigation, the press completely dropped the story, with neither the *Post* nor *Times* running any more articles directly related to the topic, even though Hitz had actively encouraged others to utilize his research to find a solution or assign blame to the Nicaraguan drug connection. In the end, the only person who actively used Hitz’s data was Hitz himself in his “Obscuring Propriety” piece, which he wrote over a year after the initial publication of his report. Even here he still mainly related the data⁵⁴, and does not

⁵⁰ Risen, James. “CIA says it used Nicaraguan Rebels Accused of Drug Tie”, *New York Times*, (7/17/98), p.A2

⁵¹ Risen, James, “CIA repeatedly ignored charges of contra drug dealing in the ‘80’s”, *New York Times*, (10/10/98), p.A7

⁵² Pincus, Walter, “CIA ignored tips alleging Contra drug links, report says”, *Washington Post*, (11/3/98), p.A4

⁵³ Ibid, p. A4

⁵⁴ Hitz, pp.459-461

go as far as he could with the over 1,000 items of information and contacts he had amassed for the initial report.⁵⁵

It was because of the discrepancies between the research that Webb cited and the CIA's own investigation that made Webb's case hard to accept. While there is definite proof of CIA involvement with drug traffickers, Webb attempted to draw a direct line of involvement of the CIA in the trafficking itself, a conclusion that lacks basic facts. The truth in the matter, and quite probably the more important story, is that the CIA continued to operate and fund individuals that it knew, on at least an operative if not executive level, were involved in the trafficking of crack cocaine into the United States. While this conclusion does prove the allegations of conspiracy theorists, it does provide a strong indictment against the CIA. Whether within the context of the anti-Sandinista movement, or within a vacuum, the CIA's involvement with drug traffickers by all rights should have been a major scandal, unfortunately sensationalist reporting and inaccurate statements tainted the important message of Webb's 'Dark Alliance' series and killed whatever public furor would be felt towards the CIA.

The mainstream press' downplay of the issue constitutes a major failure on the part of American journalism. By not giving the story strong enough coverage, the mass media effectively did a cover-up for the government, preventing wide scale outrage over what should have been an issue of broader contention. Simultaneously discrediting a news agency that pioneered the use of the internet to market news to the black, online community, but these results are not the most important information to be gleaned from this series of events.

⁵⁵ Pincus, p.A4

The media's reaction to the issue of Contra crack trafficking serves as a microcosm for American governmental involvement with drug traffickers the world over, and indeed provides an interesting insight into how American foreign policy plays out in opposition to what we would like to believe about ourselves. While it is often believed by the majority of us within America's borders that we are a benevolent country whose foreign policy is largely directed at world peace, the 20th century provided a plethora of examples where this was simply not the case.

Quite often the federal government has skirted the edges of legality in order to attain policy goals that aren't necessarily in synch with its public statements. The trend of government involvement with drug dealers is a long and well documented one, which continues to play out today with the U.S. support of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. Many participants of this coalition rebelled against the Taliban because it limited poppy cultivation and heroin production. Similarly, our willingness to work with Central and South American drug dealers has been a constant tool in the American foreign policy's toolbox that too frequently we have willingly utilized.

While each of these involvements has been thoroughly documented and reported on, there is one part missing in the equation: journalistic and public outrage. Whenever a report has come out indicting the CIA or other branches of government for breaking their own laws to pursue vague policy goals, public outrage is small and eventually fades away. The media, specifically print and television, by not hammering home the seriousness of American involvement with drug dealers, made the problem a non-issue. When allegations arise now, unfortunately they are quickly ignored as just another rumor or conspiracy theory.

The end result is that Americans are willing to look the other way when their government breaks the law. They are willing to accept the benefits of empire while trying to pretend that they have not strived towards world hegemony. The mass media's reaction is symptomatic of a larger issue in the collective American psyche, which refuses to accept American domination in the world. "Most of the world sees the United States as a nascent imperial power"⁵⁶, as Dimitri Simes states, so why do we go to such an extent to pretend we are not? While it would be easy to assert that the American subconscious does not want to be compared with other past empires through time such as Rome or the Soviet Union, this answer fails to account for America's willingness to behave as a true empire. This crisis of identity best explains the crisis in international relations which the United States has confronted since World War II.

⁵⁶ Simes, p.1

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