

Art of living



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An August, 1996, series in the San Jose Mercury News by reporter Gary Webb linked the origins of crack cocaine in California to the contras, a guerrilla force backed by the Reagan administration that attacked Nicaragua's Sandinista government during the 1980s. Webb's series, "The Dark Alliance," has been the subject of intense media debate, and has focused attention on a foreign policy drug scandal that leaves many questions unanswered.

This electronic briefing book is compiled from declassified documents obtained by the National Security Archive, including the notebooks kept by NSC aide and Iran-contra figure Oliver North, electronic mail messages written by high-ranking Reagan administration officials, memos detailing the contra war effort, and FBI and DEA reports. The documents demonstrate official knowledge of drug operations, and collaboration with and protection of known drug traffickers. Court and hearing transcripts are also included.

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Documentation of Official U. S. Knowledge of

Drug Trafficking and the Contras

The National Security Archive obtained the hand-written notebooks of Oliver North, the National Security Council aide who helped run the contra war and other Reagan administration covert operations, through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit filed in 1989. The notebooks, as well as declassified memos sent to North, record that North was repeatedly informed of contra ties to drug trafficking.

In his entry for August 9, 1985, North summarizes a meeting with Robert Owen ("Rob"), his liaison with the contras. They discuss a plane used by Mario Calero, brother of Adolfo Calero, head of the FDN, to transport supplies from New Orleans to contras in Honduras. North writes: " Honduran DC-6 which is being used for runs out of New Orleans is probably being used for drug runs into U. S." As Lorraine Adams reported in the October 22, 1994 Washington Post, there are no records that corroborate North's later assertion that he passed this intelligence on drug trafficking to the U. S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

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In a July 12, 1985 entry, North noted a call from retired Air Force general Richard Secord in which the two discussed a Honduran arms warehouse from which the contras planned to purchase weapons. (The contras did eventually buy the arms, using money the Reagan administration secretly raised from Saudi Arabia.) According to the notebook, Secord told North that “ 14 M to finance [the arms in the warehouse] came from drugs.”

An April 1, 1985 memo from Robert Owen (code-name: “ T. C.” for “ The Courier”) to Oliver North (code-name: “ The Hammer”) describes contra operations on the Southern Front. Owen tells North that FDN leader Adolfo Calero (code-name: “ Sparkplug”) has picked a new Southern Front commander, one of the former captains to Eden Pastora who has been paid to defect to the FDN. Owen reports that the officials in the new Southern Front FDN units include “ people who are questionable because of past indiscretions,” such as Jos Robelo, who is believed to have “ potential involvement with drug running” and Sebastian Gonzalez, who is “ now involved in drug running out of Panama.”

On February 10, 1986, Owen (“ TC”) wrote North (this time as “ BG,” for “ Blood and Guts”) regarding a plane being used to carry “ humanitarian aid” to the contras that was previously used to transport drugs. The plane belongs to the Miami-based company Vortex, which is run by Michael Palmer, one of the largest marijuana traffickers in the United States. Despite Palmer’s long history of drug smuggling, which would soon lead to a Michigan indictment on drug charges, Palmer receives over \$300, 000. 00 from the Nicaraguan Humanitarian Aid Office (NHAO) — an office overseen

by Oliver North, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams, and CIA officer Alan Fiers — to ferry supplies to the contras.

State Department contracts from February 1986 detail Palmer's work to transport material to the contras on behalf of the NHAO.

Evidence that NSC Staff Supported Using Drug Money to Fund the Contras

In 1987, the Senate Subcommittee on Narcotics, Terrorism and International Operations, led by Senator John Kerry, launched an investigation of allegations arising from reports, more than a decade ago, of contra-drug links. One of the incidents examined by the “Kerry Committee” was an effort to divert drug money from a counternarcotics operation to the contra war.

On July 28, 1988, two DEA agents testified before the House Subcommittee on Crime regarding a sting operation conducted against the Medellin Cartel. The two agents said that in 1985 Oliver North had wanted to take \$1.5 million in Cartel bribe money that was carried by a DEA informant and give it to the contras. DEA officials rejected the idea.

The Kerry Committee report concluded that “senior U. S. policy makers were not immune to the idea that drug money was a perfect solution to the Contras' funding problems.”

U. S. Officials and Major Traffickers

Manuel Noriega

In June, 1986, the New York Times published articles detailing years of Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega's collaboration with Colombian drug

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traffickers. Reporter Seymour Hersh wrote that Noriega “ is extensively involved in illicit money laundering and drug activities,” and that an unnamed White House official “ said the most significant drug running in Panama was being directed by General Noriega.” In August, Noriega, a long-standing U. S. intelligence asset, sent an emissary to Washington to seek assistance from the Reagan administration in rehabilitating his drug-stained reputation.

Oliver North, who met with Noriega’s representative, described the meeting in an August 23, 1986 e-mail message to Reagan national security advisor John Poindexter. “ You will recall that over the years Manuel Noriega in Panama and I have developed a fairly good relationship,” North writes before explaining Noriega’s proposal. If U. S. officials can “ help clean up his image” and lift the ban on arms sales to the Panamanian Defense Force, Noriega will ““ take care of’ the Sandinista leadership for us.”