

The CIA: How to Think Clearly on Drugs

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Myth: The CIA may have a few rogue agents, but the allegation that it works with drug traffickers has never been proven. In fact, one reporter, Gary Webb of the San Jose Mercury News, who thought he had the story straight, was later rebuked by his editor and largely discredited.

If you believe that, they've already got to you. Consider just a few facts from "Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press, by Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair" (Verso) just out in paperback.

1. Here's just a snort of the links between the CIA and drug traffickers uncovered by Webb:

a) In 1981, Norwin Meneses had been selling about 900 kilos of cocaine a year in Los Angeles. Two years later, according to Oscar Danilo Bandon, a Nicaraguan exile after the revolution of 1979, that figure had reached 5,000 kilos. Why the sudden surge? By 1985, "Freeway" Rick Ross, who was buying the crack from Bandon, "and his affiliates in the street gangs had begun exporting their crack operation to what the DEA reckoned to be at least a dozen other cities. Bandon testified at Ross's trial that 'whatever we were running in LA, the profit was going to the Contra revolution.'"

b) The year 1985, the peak of the drug sales by Norwin Meneses and Bandon, also marked the time of the CIA's greatest need for money for its Contra army. The Boland amendment prohibiting the CIA from spending any money "for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua" expired on October 17, 1986, and immediately the portion of the CIA budget allocated for the Contras rose to \$100 million.

c) As Webb put it forcefully, "The thing to bear in mind here is that there are no facts in dispute. Danilo Bandon admits selling cocaine for the Contras. Freeway Rick Ross admits buying it and turning it into crack and selling it to the gangs. We have pictures of Meneses meeting with Adolfo Calero [the FDN's civilian leader of the leading coalition in the Contras installed by the CIA]. And we have testimony that they met with Enrique Bermudez, who are the top CIA officials running the Contras."

2. As Cockburn and St. Clair document, the counterattack on Webb was massive, and included virtually all national newspapers, among them The Washington Post and its reporter Walter Pincus -- who had been a CIA operative in the 1960s, hardly an unbiased investigator. For reasons of space, let's look at perhaps the most damaging attack on Webb, by his own boss, Jerry Ceppos. Initially, Ceppos defended Webb, writing and then rewriting a letter to the Washington Post -- which the Post refused to print -- detailing the factual accuracy of Webb's series. But months later Ceppos reversed his position in a column, "accusing Webb of leaving out contradictory information, of failing to emphasize that the multimillion-dollar figure [of aid to the Contras through drug sales] was an estimate, and of not

including the obligatory denials of the CIA. The series, Ceppos said, had oversimplified the origins of the crack epidemic. Ceppos also declared that the series had wrongly implied CIA knowledge of the Contra drug ring." Leaving aside the fact that Ceppos's reversal was then trumpeted by the mainstream press to trash Webb and attempt to ruin his career, who is right: Ceppos and those who see no CIA-drug link, or investigative journalists like Gary Webb?

3. Perhaps the best answer comes from the CIA. As Cockburn and St. Clair write, "On March 16, 1998, the CIA's Inspector General, Fred Hitz, finally let the cat out of the bag in an aside at a Congressional hearing. Hitz told the US Reps that the CIA had maintained relationships with companies and individuals that the Agency knew to be involved in the drug business. Even more astonishingly, Hitz revealed that back in 1982 the CIA had requested and received from Reagan's Justice Department permission not to report any knowledge it might have of drug-dealing by CIA assets. With these two admissions, Hitz definitively sank decades worth of CIA denials, many of them under oath to Congress."

The drug connection to the Contras is just one example of drugs being used to finance insurgent forces backed by the CIA. To mainline a good history of the scourge, see "Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press." A Verso paperback available at a discount.