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CONTRA, CRACK AND THE COMPANY

Drug Money, the CIA and Nicaragua

By HARRY E. VANDEN

WHAT SOME government officials did to continue Contra operations against Nicaragua in the early 1980's is an affront to America's sense of justice. When Congress would not go along with Contra support, Oliver North and his cronies set up the sale of surplus weapons to Iran and used the proceeds to pay for the operation. These activities eventually occasioned senate hearings, criminal prosecutions and almost brought down the Reagan White House.

The CIA and the armed Nicaraguan groups they organized and funded conspired not only to violate the congressional prohibition against using additional government funding to support Contra activities, but violated domestic law and morality in the worst possible way. They used their supply network and ties to exiled Nicaraguans in the US to bring huge amounts of cocaine into the country, turn it into crack cocaine, and then introduced the new product into the US market.

Danilo Blandon, a CIA-paid Nicaraguan with a master's degree in marketing aided the operation. Tons of the new product were sold on the domestic market, beginning with their initial target area in South-Central Los Angeles. The solid supply lines through the Honduran-based Contras into the US (often through military bases) enabled the newly formed network of Nicaraguan exiles with US government ties and Los Angeles drug dealers like Rick Daniel Ross ("Freeway Rick") to sell crack at bargain basement wholesale prices and guarantee an ample, continuing supply. Heavy Contra involvement with bringing drugs into the United States has been long rumored, and sometimes written about, but rarely if ever picked up by the popular mass press. A T.V. network story of a pilot who blew the whistle on Contra drug flights into Homestead Air Force base in South Florida is the exception. Congressional hearings were even begun by Harlem Congressman Charles Rangel, but never proceeded very far because of lack of cooperation from government officials in the CIA, DEA and other agencies.

In a hard hitting series of articles based on a year of investigative journalism, *San Jose Mercury* reporter Gary Webb tells the story of how a San Francisco-based drug ring with Contra ties sold "tons of cocaine to the Crips and Bloods street gangs of Los Angeles and funneled millions in drug profits" to the CIA-run Contras. Even more disturbing, his amply documented series explains how this drug network "opened the first pipeline between Colombia's cocaine cartels and the black neighborhoods of Los Angeles" (now the crack capital of the world).

Given the tons and tons of crack that were distributed through this network, one can only begin to imagine the thousands of lives that were ruined by the new drug. The mind boggles when contemplating the tens of thousands of crimes that have been committed to fuel this CIA-stimulated crack habit.

Exactly what, if any, real threat to American society was actually posed by the Sandinistas? It is difficult to imagine that it could have been worse than the crack cocaine scourge.

Meanwhile, the lucrative proceeds from the sale of the drugs and weaponry were facilitating ever more brutal violence in Nicaragua. Under Reagan's direction, then CIA head Bill Casey had flown to Nicaragua to help start the Contra operation against the Sandinista government. As the war continued through the 1980's and into 1990, it took some 30,000 lives, mostly civilian.

The initial Contra force was mostly made up of ex-members of former dictator Anastacio Somoza's brutal National Guard. They seemed to believe that they could reduce support for the new government by brutalizing all who were connected with it. As civilian casualties reached the thousands, more reports of their abuses began to come out of Nicaragua. The role of the United States government's intervening in Nicaragua and supporting these activities was such that Nicaragua was able to win a World Court case against the U.S. in 1986. Domestic courts in the United States were less clear in their condemnation of the wrongs done. Danilo Bandon was never convicted. When investigations were begun on his and other Contra drug dealings, they were blocked or quashed by the FBI, CIA or FDA. Frustrated by such pressure, prosecutors were never able to bring Bandon to justice. He is now a highly paid DEA informant.

Those associated with the whole Contra operation consistently showed a willingness to resort to almost any means to overthrow or destabilize the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Thousands of civilians and Sandinista conscripts in Nicaragua were expendable. Nicaraguan teachers and health care workers were expendable. Innocent civilians in farms and villages were expendable. The occasional foreign worker was expendable (as was the case for American citizen Benjamin Linder who was murdered at close range after he was already wounded.) The American sense of decency and morality were also expendable!

Thanks to media manipulation by the Reagan White House and a general lack of investigative reporting by the mainstream media and the journalists they employed (see *Washington Post* reporter Christopher Dickey's *With the Contras* for one notable exception), the real story on Contra atrocities and their involvement with the drug trade never got the attention it deserved.

It was too easy to blame it all on the "Cuban and Soviet backed Sandinista government in Nicaragua" or on endemic violence in Central America. For these and similar reasons the Republican administrations were able to use the most crass and morally corrupt members of the National Security Council and the CIA to perpetrate a Contra scam on the Nicaraguan and American people.

But just as the careers of a few decent government officials and the lives of thousands of Nicaraguans were sacrificed for such questionable ends, so too were thousands of lives of mostly black Americans who lived in places like South Central Los Angeles. They and their families

were swept away in a U.S. government facilitated blizzard of crack cocaine that emanated from the LA. Contra-CIA drug connection. They were the consumers whose dollars were needed to finance the weapons and support necessary to kill and terrify thousands of Nicaraguans into getting rid of the Sandinistas.

And yes, they got away with it. The war weary and economically stricken Nicaraguan people were finally cajoled into voting for the U.S.-backed candidate for president Violeta Chamorro in the 1990 Nicaraguan election. With the Sandinistas out of office, the problem was taken care of: It mattered little that the economy continued to decline

The United States government even continued to press Violeta Chamorro's new government until it dropped the claim for some \$17 billion in damages that the Nicaraguans were pursuing after their initial victory with the World Court.

Oliver North and his cronies, those involved in the CIA, and quite a few Contras and their drug dealing counterparts went above the law and got away with it. They were not brought to justice despite Senate hearings and congressional attempts to investigate drug ties to the Contras. Even Oliver North's minimal sentence was overturned.

The revelation of direct government involvement in inner-city drug sales has once again brought calls for high level investigations. It remains to be seen if those who ordered, made and implemented these wicked policies will continue to get away with it or if, by some quirk of fate, they will finally be made to pay for their crimes.

Dr. Vanden, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Caribbean and Latin American Studies Center at the Univ. of South Florida, has published two books and numerous articles and book chapters on Nicaragua and Central America. (Newest book, edited with Gary Prevost, *Undermining the Sandinista Revolution*, St. Martin's Press)

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