Financing an Insurgency:

The Complicity of the CIA and Reagan Administration in Narcotrafficking by Contras and Contra Associates, 1981-1987

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Introduction

On the afternoon of August 5, 1987, Alan Fiers, chief of the Central Intelligence Agency's Central American Task Force, gave a sworn deposition to the joint congressional committees investigating the Iran-Contra affair. "With respect to [drug trafficking by] the resistance forces," Fiers testified, "it is not a couple of people. It is a lot of people."[1]

The resistance forces Fiers referred to were the Contras, Central American guerrilla armies established by the United States in 1981 in its efforts to undermine Nicaragua's burgeoning socialist revolution. The rise to power of the nation's Sandinista National Liberation Front in 1979 signified a loss of American control, as the socialist Sandinistas were soon backed by the Soviet Union; this was unacceptable to President Ronald Reagan, who was elected a year later. This occurred in the latter stage of the Cold War, an era of rivalry and animosity during which both Washington and Moscow ventured to remake the world in their image and impose their respective ideologies of capitalism and communism upon periphery nations.

The Iran-Contra Affair was a crucial chapter of this period and resulted from coinciding foreign policy crises in Central America and the Middle East. In July 1982, a U.S. citizen was abducted in Beirut by Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shi'ite militant group loyal to Iran. Although the American was released a year later, this marked the beginning of a protracted hostage crisis, and in 1985 there were still seven American hostages in captivity in Lebanon. Washington's clandestine operations in Nicaragua and its efforts to engage with Iran became intertwined when Reagan's National Security Council (NSC), with assistance from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and private third parties, masterminded a scheme to sell anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to Iran in an attempt to secure the release of the hostages. Residual funds from these arms-for-

[1] U.S. Congress, Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics and International Operations, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy: A Report Prepared by the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics and International Operations of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate*, 100th Cong., 2nd sess., 1988, S. Rep 100-165, 38, https://archive.org/details/KerryCommitteeReport/.

hostages deals were then diverted to the Contra forces in an illegal ploy to circumvent congressional funding restrictions. The exposure of the covert network in November 1986 came as a profound shock to the American public, heralding a media circus that challenged Reagan's credibility and evoked unpleasant memories of the Watergate Scandal and U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. However, interest in the Iran-Contra scandal soon waned in the collective American consciousness.

One of the more controversial yet routinely overlooked elements of Washington's covert program in Latin America was the Reagan administration and the CIA's complicity in cocaine trafficking by Contras and Contra sympathizers as long as a share of the revenue was directed toward the Contra war effort. This unlawful association was first exposed by Associated Press reporters Brian Barger and Robert Parry in December 1985, their comprehensive article "Reports Link Nicaraguan Rebels to Cocaine Trafficking" citing documentation and witness testimony from U.S. investigators and American volunteers working with Contra rebels.[2] Both Barger's and Parry's story and U.S. Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.)'s subsequent investigation into Contra drug smuggling as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics and International Operations were disregarded by major news outlets. Although the Kerry Committee found in 1989 that there was "substantial evidence of drug smuggling . . . on the part of individual Contras, Contra suppliers, Contra pilots, mercenaries who worked with the Contras, and Contra supporters," its findings were similarly overlooked by the media.[3]

In August 1996, the subject of Contra drug connections resurfaced in a three-part investigative series by the journalist Gary Webb published in the *San Jose Mercury News*. The collection of articles, titled "Dark Alliance," expounded once again that the Reagan

[2] Brian Barger and Robert Parry, "Reports Link Nicaraguan Rebels to Cocaine Trafficking," *AP News*, December 20, 1985, https://apnews.com/article/c69eaf370de9884f907a39efd90337d3.
[3] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy*, 48.

administration and the CIA attempted to prevent the spread of communism in Latin America by colluding with notorious drug lords to fund the Contra war. Because the U.S. Congress had effectively precluded the executive branch from aiding the Contras, hidden financial sources of support were deemed imperative, and Webb alleged that the CIA obtained this support from drug traffickers. The CIA perceived Webb's story as a public relations disaster, and some of the nation's most influential media outlets swiftly attacked the journalist's credibility. Leading publications focused on his alleged lack of professionalism rather than on the story itself, which was soon consigned to historical irrelevance.

Still, the CIA conducted an internal investigation of the charges, publishing its findings in a report titled *Report of Investigation Concerning Allegations of Connections Between CIA and The Contras in Cocaine Trafficking to the United States*. It was released in two volumes, the first as a classified report in December 1997 with a declassified version available in January 1998, and the second as a classified report in April 1998 and declassified in October 1998. The findings cleared the CIA of any wrongdoing and denied knowledge of ongoing narcotics violations, though the report was clearly selectively crafted; the affair's main actors refused to be interviewed, and according to the CIA, any and all links between the Agency and narcotics trafficking could be attributed to error and poor judgment, despite "coincidences" that suggested otherwise.[4] An investigation conducted by the Department of Justice (DOJ) in 1997 similarly neglected to admit fault, though its methodology, not unlike that of the CIA report, was inherently flawed, as the conclusions it reached did not directly stem from the information it presented. The DOJ acknowledged that a small amount of drug money was disbursed to the

[4] Central Intelligence Agency, Office of the Inspector General, *Allegations of Connections Between CIA and the Contras in Cocaine Trafficking to the United States*, Oct. 8, 1998, https://permanent.fdlp.gov/websites/www.cia.gov/www.cia.gov/cia/reports/cocaine/contents.html.

Contras, but it contended that it did not know the exact quantity. In other words, the DOJ had no basis for assessing the degree of involvement.

The vast majority of journalists and scholars who have contributed to the historiography of this topic concur with the Kerry Committee report and contend that U.S. officials tolerated and protected drug trafficking in Latin America provided the traffickers gave support to the Contras. Books and reports authored, most notably, by Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne of the National Security Archive, by the political scientist Thomas W. Walker, by the investigative journalist Leslie Cockburn, and by the historians Alfred W. McCoy and Theodore Draper present information consistent with the Subcommittee's findings and highlight the Reagan administration's intentional neglect of narcotics trafficking by the U.S.-backed rebels.

However, there exists a pronounced gap in the historiography: I have yet to identify a comprehensive, focused work that considers developments that occurred years after the war's conclusion and incorporates textual evidence, newspaper articles, and once-classified government documents. Scholars who focused their research specifically on the Contra-cocaine affair, such as Cockburn, largely failed to recognize the gravity of this involvement in comparison to the CIA's other illicit dealings and Washington's history of engaging in covert foreign policy operations; further, I believe each work neglected to devote adequate attention to the adverse effects of protecting drug pipelines, instead focusing disproportionately on the act of appropriating drug profits. Ultimately, the picture that emerges in hindsight, when considering the Reagan administration's parallel expansion of the domestic drug war, disclosures included in government reports, and the lack of accountability systemic to the U.S. government, is one that demonstrates a far greater degree of harm than previously posited.

I argue that the Reagan administration and the CIA directly sanctioned cocaine trafficking by Contras and Contra associates, many of whom collaborated with notorious Central American drug cartels, to further Washington's foreign policy agenda of asserting U.S. hegemony in the region. The administration's key players actively sought out potentially lucrative drug connections and protected narcotraffickers in order to obtain additional funding for the covert war in Nicaragua; as evidenced by administration officials' later denial of any involvement in these dealings, they understood them to be indefensibly illegal, but feigned ignorance in order to better achieve foreign policy objectives. This was not a case of political ineptitude, as the CIA and DOJ reports implied, but rather a calculated subversion of foreign policy restrictions that ultimately calls into question the professed morality of Reagan's domestic "war on drugs." Moreover, the cocaine connection could be referred to as narcocolonialism, whereby the CIA was able to exert influence by compelling criminals to do the bidding of the powerful patron government and offering government-protected drug pipelines destructive to the region's collective economy. Ultimately, the Reagan administration's continued protection of these pipelines over the course of the Contra War should be condemned in stronger terms than its desire to appropriate drug profits for political gain.

Background

The Rise of the Sandinista National Liberation Front

The United States has colluded in Nicaraguan affairs for more than a century, influencing its elections, popular ideology, economy, and government. In 1909, the United States assisted with the removal of liberal President José Santos Zelaya in favor of the minority conservative party, and occupied the country from 1912 to 1933 to promote the authority of pro-American

governments. After quashing a 1926 rebellion that targeted the U.S. occupiers, General Anastasio Somoza García of the Nicaraguan National Guard, a local force created by Americans to keep order among the populace, established a dynasty that ruled the nation until 1979. While the Somoza family, its supporters, and U.S. investors prospered, the National Guard's repression of dissent largely subordinated the Nicaraguan people.[5]

In the early 1960s, following the assassination of Anastasio Somoza by Rigoberto López Pérez, a young poet, and the installation of Somoza's older son, Luis Somoza Debayle, a group of leftist revolutionaries at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua founded the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional – FSLN) to launch military initiatives against the autocratic family dictatorship. Anastasio Somoza Debayle succeeded his brother in 1967, and although the Sandinistas struggled to win support in their early years, Anastasio Somoza's response to a devastating earthquake in 1972 galvanized the opposition, as the president misappropriated much of the earthquake-related foreign aid. Somoza's private business holdings stood to benefit from the reconstruction of Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, so he directed the National Guard to demolish severely damaged buildings rather than rescue trapped survivors. As the Sandinistas grew in strength, the president employed torture, extra-judicial killings, intimidation, and censorship to assert his authority. By 1979, the Somoza regime had alienated the church, the conservative middle classes, and the administration of President Jimmy Carter, and the Sandinistas had ascended to power after an armed insurrection.[6]

The Sandinistas' official political platform included nationalization of Somoza property, agrarian reform, improved working conditions in rural and urban areas, the freedom to unionize,

[5] Thomas W. Walker, "Introduction," in *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 2-3.
[6] Leslie Cockburn, *Out of Control: The Story of the Reagan Administration's Secret War in Nicaragua, the Illegal Arms Pipeline, and the Contra Drug Connection* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), 3.

price ceilings for basic commodities, improved public services and education, and the protection of democratic liberties. Arguably, however, the party did not protect such liberties scrupulously; while it stressed a commitment to the eradication of exploitation, prejudice, and poor standards of living, which it accomplished to a certain degree — particularly in the realm of womens' rights[7] — Reagan disputed this assessment in a 1987 speech to the Organization of American States:

> The Sandinistas must learn that democracy doesn't mean allowing a rally to take place and then arresting those who take part — it means hundreds of such rallies, free from harassment, either by the secret police or by what the Sandinistas call the "divine mobs." Democracy doesn't mean opening one newspaper and one radio station — but opening them all. Democracy doesn't mean releasing a few political prisoners — but all 10,000 of them, some of whom have been imprisoned as long as 8 years. Democracy doesn't mean selectively granting temporary freedoms in order to placate world opinion — but permanent, across-the-board human rights, guaranteed by a constitution and protected by the checks and balances of democratic government.[8]

This is a complex issue, as Reagan's animosity toward Nicaragua and its government was, to a great extent, unfounded. One 1985 *Washington Post* article described the Sandinista government as imperfect and hardly devoid of failures and abuses, but recognized that its officials were not "dungeon masters," citing domestic health improvements that prompted the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund to present Nicaragua with an award in 1982 for the best health achievement in a Third World country. Washington failed to acknowledge the Sandinistas' social accomplishments, and indeed, "[t]here [was] continuity in Reagan's venomed hate of Nicaragua. It [was] another imposition of American views on a comparatively poor and powerless country."[9]

[7] Gary Prevost, "The Nicaraguan Revolution — Six Years After the Sandinista Electoral Defeat," *Third World Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1996): 2, accessed January 10, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993095?seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents.
[8] Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States" (speech, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C., Oct. 7, 1987), https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-permanent-council-organization-american-states.
[9] Colman McCarthy, "The Truth About Nicaragua," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C), Mar. 10, 1985, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1985/03/10/the-truth-about-nicaragua/ba769e17-ce46-4bac-a62c-

The Reagan administration evidently viewed the rise of the Sandinista government as emblematic of the loss of U.S. hegemony in the region and a hindrance to the advancement of leadership that worked to serve American interests. The United States has historically been hostile toward socialist regimes in Latin America. This attitude became especially pronounced after the Cuban revolution of 1959. Fidel Castro's Cuban experiment demonstrated the potential of Latin American nationalist movements to defy U.S. hegemony and emphasized, from Washington's perspective, the need to repress potential communist activity in order to defend hemispheric interests.

Initial U.S. Involvement in the Contra War

President Reagan, who took office in January 1981, would not countenance the spread of communism in Latin America. Instead, he honored the well-established tradition of promoting United States hegemony in the region for the benefit of stateside security, economic interests, and political leverage. While his predecessor, President Carter generally emphasized human rights concerns over Cold War issues in Central America, Reagan maintained that Moscow was proliferating forces of evil that, if left unchecked, would thrust the U.S. into peril and threaten its democratic values. The eradication of Marxism became the keystone of the President's foreign policy, as established in the first State of the Union address of his second term; the "Reagan Doctrine," as it came to be known, proclaimed overt and unconditional support for anti-communist revolution and contended that support for freedom fighters was a means of self-defense sanctioned by international law.[10] Antithetical to the 1968 Brezhnev Doctrine, which affirmed the determination of the Soviet Union to uphold communism within any nation that had

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[10] Ronald Reagan, State of the Union Address, Feb. 6, 1985, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-5.

already embraced it, the Reagan Doctrine declared that the United States would endeavor to suppress Soviet influence. The President exacerbated public fear of the proliferation of communism, and often referred to a quote he believed was attributed to Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin: "Once we have Latin America, we won't have to take the United States, the last bastion of capitalism, because it will fall into our outstretched hands like overripe fruit."[11] However, no such statement has been identified in Lenin's works, and it is more likely to derive from a foreign policy discussion by then-Secretary of State John Quincy Adams in 1823 promoting U.S. imperialism in Cuba: "[I]f an apple severed by the tempest from its native tree cannot choose but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjointed from its own unnatural connection with Spain, and incapable of self support, can gravitate only towards the North American Union."[12]

Evidence suggests that by the 1980s, the Kremlin viewed Latin America primarily as an opportunity to neutralize the activities of the United States in other regions rather than as a target of aggression. Nevertheless, Reagan adhered to his hard line stance toward the Soviet Union, and after executing an ambitious domestic agenda — cutting taxes, increasing defense spending, withdrawing support from social welfare programs, and presiding over a market-driven recovery that boosted employment, albeit often in lower-paying jobs in the service sector — he turned his attention to the ideological struggle escalating in Central America. Policy makers had first set their sights on El Salvador in 1980, where a recently installed, U.S.-supported junta faced an insurgency by a leftist coalition known as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional – FMLN). Washington feared that El Salvador, like Nicaragua and Cuba before it, would fall to a communist revolution. Although the Carter

[11] Malcolm Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 9.
[12] John Lawrence Tone, *War and Genocide in Cuba, 1895-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 245.

administration had provided some support to the new military government, the Reagan administration sought to quash the insurgency entirely.[13]

Reagan's first Secretary of State, the staunchly anti communist Alexander Haig, wasted little time in taking the offensive. The Cuban, Nicaraguan, and Soviet governments, he said in February 1981, were exploiting internal turmoil in Central America by surreptitiously exporting arms and providing guidance to El Salvador. That same month, the State Department's Bureau of Public Affairs produced a white paper on El Salvador alleging "definitive evidence" of communist subversion. The report stated that Soviet proxies were carrying out "what is clearly shown to be a well-coordinated, covert effort to bring about the overthrow of El Salvador's established government and to impose in its place a Communist regime with no popular support" through "indirect armed aggression . . . by Communist powers acting through Cuba."[14] The white paper, titled "Communist Interference in El Salvador: Documents Demonstrating Communist Support of the Salvadoran Insurgency," marked the administration's first attempt to justify its plan of attack against the "Marxist-Leninist guerillas" in Central America to the U.S. public. While the report included some verified facts, journalists, foreign policy analysts, and some members of Congress criticized it for exaggerating the influence of Soviet-backed aggression and diminishing the roles of economic turmoil and political infighting in Salvadoran issues. This hard line rhetoric divided Reagan's foreign policy team, as ideological differences and strong personalities rendered agreement unlikely. While some senior officials such as Vice President George H. W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger were hesitant to hastily take military action, others, including Haig and CIA director William Casey, favored immediate intervention, particularly concerning the anti-communist crusade in Latin America. Thus, the

[13] Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 10.
[14] U.S. Department of State, *Communist Interference in El Salvador* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Public Affairs 1981), S1.129:80, 1, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Communist_Interference_in_El_Salvador/LcxTFkoIcZoC?hl=en&gbpv=0

Reagan administration turned to covert action to address the crises in both El Salvador and Nicaragua.[15]

Clearly failing to learn from the lack of transparency surrounding both the Watergate scandal and the United States' misguided intervention in Vietnam just a few years earlier, certain officials evidently subscribed to the rationale that proxy warfare was a cost-effective and straightforward means of accomplishing policy objectives that would absolve the administration from congressional and public opposition. Thus, Casey devised a plan for the agency to "provide all forms of training, equipment and related assistance to cooperating governments throughout Central America in order to counter foreign-sponsored subversion and terrorism."[16] This ostensibly defensive program, which Reagan authorized on March 9, 1982, was largely immune to criticism, as the Carter administration had initiated a similar plan of action years earlier to defuse tensions in the region. In the course of providing military aid to the Salvadoran government, the Reagan administration condemned the Sandinistas for joining with Cuba in support of El Salvador's "Marxist" revolutionary movement and soon turned much of its attention to Nicaragua.[17]

The subversive, clandestine program to undermine the Sandinistas commenced in late 1982. On November 17, Reagan signed a National Security Decision Directive (NSDD 17) calling for "support and conduct of political and paramilitary operations against the Cuban presence and Cuban-Sandinista support structure in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America [through] . . . an opposition front that would be nationalistic, anti-Cuban and anti-Somoza." Whereas President Carter had authorized the expenditure of $75 million in covert funds in 1980 to promote dissent in Nicaragua, the Reagan White House sought presidential authorization for

[15] Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 13.
[16] David Ryan, *U.S.-Sandinista Diplomatic Relations: Voice of Intolerance* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 16.
[17] Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 13.

$19 million and the creation of a 500-soldier force; the agency anticipated that "more funds and more manpower will be needed" as the operation evolved.[18] This directive was internal and thus particularly candid, as it did not require congressional approval; in contrast, a document prepared for a congressional audience signed by Reagan on December 1, 1982 simply alluded to the intended paramilitary operations and presented the exercise as limited in scope.[19] Between 1981 and 1986, Peter Kornbluh postulates in *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas*, the administration's covert war — one that, ironically, became public at its inception — underwent three phases: the creation of "la contrarrevolución," or the "Contras," as the surrogate army became known; direct CIA attacks on Nicaragua; and a determination by the National Security Council to preserve the resistance force despite congressional restrictions on federal aid.[20]

The Contras' Crimes

The CIA had begun to establish contact with various exiled anti-Sandinista operatives in the spring of 1981. Unorganized, disparate, and largely found in Miami and Central America, many of these groups were already exploring ways to undermine the Sandinistas.[21] In May of that year, the CIA dispensed $50,000 to Argentine military officials who were to transfer the sum to the emergent Contras as an incentive to unite while Washington sanctioned the existence of stateside paramilitary training camps. These U.S.-endorsed facilities frequented by CIA operatives openly violated the Neutrality Act of 1794, which prohibited an American citizen from waging war against any nation at peace with the United States.[22] To conceal CIA

[18] Ronald Reagan, "National Security Decision Directive on Cuba and Central America," January 4, 1982, Federation of American Scientists, accessed January 5, 2021, https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-17.pdf.
[19] Brown University, Understanding the Iran-Contra Affair, Ronald Reagan to the Director of Central Intelligence, Dec. 1, 1981, accessed January 5, 2021, https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/documents/d-all-45.pdf.
[20] Kornbluh, "The Covert War," 22.
[21] Kornbluh, "The Covert War," 24.

involvement, an arrangement was conceived between the informal *tripartida* of the United States, Argentina, and Honduras. Argentina would supply training and military advisors, Honduras would provide bases along the Nicaraguan border from which the Contras would operate, and the CIA would issue funding.[22] Thus, the conflict, like earlier wars in Latin America, was subject to the control and influence of outside powers with self-serving agendas.

Washington's direct involvement with the rebels was sparked by the dispatch of the CIA's newly-appointed operations chief for Latin America, Duane "Dewey" Clarridge, to Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Clarridge was directed to consult with the ardently anticommunist head of the Honduran Public Security Force, Colonel Gustavo Álvarez Martínez, to whom he stated, "I speak in the name of President Ronald Reagan. We want to support this effort to change the government of Nicaragua."[23] While official policy held that the Contras were merely an interdiction force against the suspected passage of Soviet-supplied weapons from Sandinistas to insurgents in El Salvador — an organized supply operation that likely existed but ceased in early 1981[24] — soldiers training at U.S.-sanctioned facilities in California, Florida, and Texas were preparing for aggressive assaults. Although anti-Sandinista attacks had previously been limited to sporadic incidents, the influx of resources rapidly increased the scale and sophistication of these incursions. On March 14, 1982, CIA-trained Contra forces blew up two vital Nicaraguan bridges, issuing an unofficial declaration of war. According to the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA):

> In a 100 day period from 14 March to 21 June, at least 106 insurgent incidents occurred within Nicaragua, [involving] . . . sabotage of highway bridges and attempted destruction of fuel tanks . . . sniper fire and attacks against small military patrols . . . attacks by small guerilla bands on individual Sandinista soldiers and the assassination of a minor

[22] Kornbluh, "The Covert War," 24.
[23] William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 118.
[24] William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. and C.I.A. Interventions Since World War II* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 2008), 550.

> government officials and a Cuban adviser . . . [and] burning of a customs warehouse, buildings belonging to the Ministry of Construction, and crops.[25]

Indeed, by the spring of 1982, the ostensibly clandestine Contra War was fully underway.

As stated, the phrase "covert war" is a misnomer, as the U.S. effort to undermine the Sandinista government was highly conspicuous. The CIA began to engage in brazen propaganda efforts as early as 1983, when insurrection manuals were manufactured by the Agency and disseminated throughout Nicaragua. Thousands of copies of the comic book-style *Freedom Fighters' Manual* — the more innocuous of the two produced — were airdropped over the nation late that year, intended to reach the average citizen. The stated goal of this publication was to provide a "[p]ractical guide to liberating Nicaragua from oppression and misery by paralyzing the military-industrial complex of the traitorous marxist state," and explained methods by which citizens were able to quietly facilitate civil unrest. Instructions escalated from leaving water faucets running and calling in sick to work to assembling Molotov cocktails, implicitly suggesting that these incendiary weapons be employed to attack police stations and fuel depots.[26] While this manual stirred some political debate after a Contra fighter gave a copy to a U.S. reporter in 1984, it garnered far less criticism than its companion publication, *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare*.

The latter manual was similarly circulated in 1983, though solely to Contra fighters. Supposedly authored by a low-level CIA contract employee, *Psychological Operations* was exceedingly sinister, advocating terrorism as a supplement to combat and recommending tactics such as kidnapping, selective killings of innocent civilians, and detonating public buildings. On occasions where inflicting violence upon villagers is deemed necessary, the manual expounds, guerrillas must:

[25] Kornbluh, "The Covert War," 25.
[26] Central Intelligence Agency, *Freedom Fighter's Manual*, 1983, https://archive.org/details/freedomfightersm00unit/mode/2up.

> Admit frankly and publicly that this is an 'act of the democratic guerrilla movement' with appropriate explanations . . . explain that if that citizen had managed to escape [a Contra occupation], he would have alerted the enemy that is near the town or city, and they would carry out acts of reprisal, such as rapes, pillage, destruction, captures, et cetera, in this way terrorizing the inhabitants of the place for having given attention and hospitalities to the guerrillas . . . [explain that] this death would have been avoided if justice and freedom existed in Nicaragua, which is exactly the objective of the democratic guerrilla.

Victimizing unwitting civilians is the essence of terrorism and negates the Agency's portrayal of the war as a "Christian and democratic crusade" to overcome communism by way of "God and patriotism."[27] When the manual was revealed by the Associated Press in October 1984, there was a public outcry. President Reagan dismissed the controversy entirely while the CIA feigned ignorance, stating that the manual was the work of a low-level operative and had been hastily cleared by mid-level agency officers who did not speak Spanish.[28] *Rolling Stone* magazine responded with an article which declared, "[o]ne of the least attractive qualities about us Americans is our stubborn belief that we are the innocents of the world . . . This time, Americans can no longer claim innocence."[29]

Funding Restrictions

Press leaks and condemnatory media reactions to the Contra War were rife, and revelations to the public in early 1982 led lawmakers to exert more control over U.S. activities in Latin America. One such leak, the cover story of *Newsweek* on November 8, titled "America's Secret War — Target: Nicaragua," quoted anonymous U.S. officials and clarified the full extent of U.S. involvement in the proxy war.[30] Public backlash forced Congress to act, and House

[27] Central Intelligence Agency, *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare*, 1983, https://fas.org/irp/cia/guerilla.htm.
[28] Joanne Omang, "Hill Panels Ask for Manuals On 1960s Guerrilla," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 28, 1984, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/10/28/hill-panels-ask-for-manuals-on-1960s-guerrilla/95bb5470-b40d-4748-b19d-98c4e20674c0/.
[29] William Greider, "U.S.-Sponsored Terrorism: The CIA has its own good book for Christian soldiers," *Rolling Stone* (New York, NY), Dec. 6, 1984, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/u-s-sponsored-terrorism-74693/.

Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) chair Rep. Edward P. Boland (D-Mass.) submitted an amendment that prevented the CIA and Department of Defense (DOD) from allocating funds for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua. The Boland Amendment, which was attached to an omnibus appropriation bill for fiscal year 1983 and ultimately passed the House of Representatives by a 411-0 vote, marked significant progress for Congress in its years-long back-and-forth with the White House. But the amendment contained a loophole: So long as the official position of the United States did not advocate the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government, the U.S. was still able to fund the Contras.[30] Thus, the amendment did not significantly affect the progression of the covert war.

Washington's authorization of coordinated attacks on villages in northern Nicaragua and the mining of Nicaraguan harbors in early 1984 — a flagrant violation of international law that caused irreparable damage and elicited bipartisan condemnation — left Congress unwilling to continue to look the other way. Tighter restrictions were deemed necessary, and Congress passed new legislation, again named for Representative Boland, "[t]o provide that none of the monies appropriated . . . [could] be used to fund directly, or indirectly, activities against the government of Nicaragua which [had] not been authorized by or pursuant to law, and for other purposes."[31] Boland II covered the period from October 1984 to October 1986.

Reagan administration officials attempted to circumvent these regulations with numerous clandestine programs, the most notorious being covert arms sales to Iran; this operation, devised by the National Security Council (NSC) in 1985, erupted in the Iran-Contra scandal. In what began as a separate initiative, Reagan administration officials concluded that, despite an existing U.S. arms embargo on Iran, the sale of weapons to that country via financial intermediaries in

[30] U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, *Department of Defense Appropriation Act*, 97th Cong., 2nd sess., 1982, https://www.congress.gov/bill/97th-congress/house-bill/7355.
[31] U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on Appropriations, *Supplemental Appropriations Act*, 99th Cong., 1st sess., 1985, https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/house-bill/2577/all-info.

Israel could facilitate the release of seven American hostages held captive in Lebanon by Iranian-backed Shia political groups. The arms sales soon became intertwined with the Contra War effort when NSC staffer Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North proposed the direct shipment of arms at a markup with a share of the proceeds to be diverted to the Nicaraguan Contras. Three secret, illegal shipments of arms were dispatched between February and October 1986 by the Enterprise, an arms-smuggling network managed by retired Air Force Major General Richard Secord. While only three of the seven Americans then held hostage were released through this arrangement, the network succeeded in transferring $18 million in arms profits to the rebels in Nicaragua.[32]

Covert arms sales were not Washington's sole method of obtaining funds for the Contras. Although a December 1985 modification to the Boland Amendment permitted the administration's solicitation of other nations solely for humanitarian aid, the National Security Council circumvented this condition by providing support to the Contras through a shadow network that relied on intermediaries and sympathizers. The humanitarian aid — $27 million — was dispersed by the newly-established Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office (NHAO), which soon became another mechanism by which the administration could bypass the law. Suspected misappropriation of NHAO funds was confirmed following an investigation by the General Accounting Office (GAO), with which the NHAO initially refused to cooperate. Bank records became accessible only after a congressional subpoena was issued. It was revealed that $1.5 million had been paid to the Honduran military, which was providing shelter and support to the Contras, and over $6 million had appeared in obscure bank accounts in Miami, Panama, and the Cayman Islands.[33]

[32] Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 97.
[33] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Problems in Controlling Funds for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance*, GAO/NSIAD-87-35 (Washington, DC, 1986), 9, accessed December 10, 2020, https://www.gao.gov/assets/210/208965.pdf.

This misconduct temporarily imperiled the Reagan administration's ultimate objective of persuading Congress to re-approve funding for the Contra War, and prospects appeared even slimmer when compounded with public accusations of corruption and other atrocities by Contra leaders. While official subversion efforts largely centered around conventional combat missions by Contras and American pilots and economic deprivation, such as the execution of attacks on fuel depots and damage to agriculture, Contra forces also engaged in torture and brutality; the U.S.-backed army assassinated 910 state officials and killed 8,000 civilians from 1981 to 1984, evidently following the recommendations presented in *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare*.[34] This issue was first raised in testimony by CIA officials to the House Select Committee on Intelligence in December 1984, the agents presenting evidence that Contra leaders "raped, tortured and killed unarmed civilians, including children," and that "groups of civilians, including women and children, were burned, dismembered, blinded, and beheaded."[35] The Reagan administration attempted to minimize accusations of human rights violations and diminish subsequent media coverage, Assistant Secretary of State of Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams labeling the allegations a "smear campaign" and "out-and-out McCarthyism." In May 1986, when Jack Terrell — an American who had worked at a Contra base in Honduras — publicly accused Contra leaders of corruption and other atrocities, Lt. Col. Oliver North sent a memorandum to the President describing Terrell as a terrorist threat under investigation by the FBI. The memorandum, titled "Terrorist Threat: Terrell," described Terrell's involvement in "anti-contra and anti-U.S. activities," deeming the man "an active participant in the disinformation/active measures campaign against the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance."[36]

[34] Blum, *Killing Hope*, 546-548.
[35] Joel Brinkley, "Nicaragua Rebels Accused of Abuses," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec. 27, 1984, https://www.nytimes.com/1984/12/27/world/nicaragua-rebels-accused-of-abuses.html.
[36] Memo, Oliver North to Ronald Reagan, July 28, 1986, folder "Iran/Arms Transaction: Jack Terrell," box CFOA 1129, Arthur B. Culvahouse Files, Ronald Reagan Library,

Although Terrell was never charged, North was clearly eager to discredit opponents of Washington's Contra program.

Charges of corruption and human rights violations similarly failed to deter the President, who continued to press for congressional aid in televised messages and addresses to special interest groups in a publicity blitz that demonstrated a complete disregard for the Contras' poor human rights record. Reagan termed the rebels "freedom fighters," the "moral equal of our Founding Fathers and the brave men and women of the French Resistance," and identified Nicaragua as a totalitarian dungeon governed by puppets of the Soviet Union.[37] His rhetorical appeals were effective, and in June 1986 — despite corruption, human rights abuses, and blatant subversion of congressional mandates — Congress gave way to intense pressure from the Reagan administration and approved the provision of $100 million to aid the declining Contras, thereby renewing the war in Nicaragua.[38] In a virtual legislative endorsement of warfare against the Sandinista government, all restrictions on CIA involvement were lifted.

However, in the years prior to the approval and distribution of this congressional funding, it had been necessary for the CIA and Reagan administration to accompany the financial support stemming from their covert funding operations by establishing a surrogate source of capital: existing drug traffickers who would divert a share of their profits to the war effort in exchange for legal immunity.

The Narcotics Problem

https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/digitallibrary/smof/counsel/culvahouse/cfoa1129/40-123-12011812-CFOA1129-043-2018.pdf.

[37] Judith D. Hoover, "Ronald Reagan's Failure to Secure Contra Aid: A Post-Vietnam Shift in Foreign Policy Rhetoric," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1994): 531-533, accessed February 20, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27551282.pdf?casa_token=IDorOgUavF8AAAAA:ck1Ct9aRhMLXllvte7V_jE6hZYthBCwEViuwKYkIz8OyF4-m-PM4D4m8MPuiMMofDMwgEzvGw_iMwQm_oXA1WVii4jkacg70WKgFgWAqp11a0eaDSyValw.

[38] Kornbluh, "The Covert War," 34.

Allies of Convenience

At this juncture, the magnitude of cocaine imports to the United States was already a matter of concern. “Unfortunately, ample supplies of coca and cocaine are expected to be available for the international market for the next several years,” U.S. Attorney General William French Smith wrote in a 1982 report. “The total smuggled into the United States in 1980 approximated 44 metric tons, an increase of about 57 percent from 1979. Cocaine is the top illicit drug income producer, generating an estimated $29 billion in retail sales in 1980.”[39] This narcotics epidemic was catalyzed by Latin American cocaine exports, which increased considerably during the 1980s and endowed individual narco-traffickers and larger cartel networks with formidable influence. One such coalition, Colombia’s Medellín Cartel, which formed in 1980, was among the first to operate as a cohesive unit, its collaborative financial and marketing strategies proving extremely lucrative. By 1988, the Medellín Cartel was generating some $8 billion annually, illustrating the lucrative nature of drug trafficking.[40] Indeed, the cocaine smuggling business was a source of both economic and political leverage, as these high-profile organized crime groups were able to exert regional influence by providing financial support to favored Central American political candidates while protecting themselves from prosecution.

The CIA has a long history of colluding with narcotics traffickers, thus demonstrating complicity in the global drug trade. In 1947, its first year of existence, the Agency supplied arms and money to heroin-smuggling Corsican criminal groups in Marseille, France, in order to seize control of labor unions from the Communist Party.[41] A decade later, the CIA carried out a

[39] William French Smith, “The Drug Traffic Today,” *Drug Enforcement: Dealers, Dollars and Drugs* 9, no. 1 (1982): 4, https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/LmvHfyac670C?hl=en&gbpv=1.
[40] Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003), 487.
[41] Ibid.

clandestine paramilitary operation in Laos following the nation's invasion by communist North Vietnamese units; U.S. forces recruited a surrogate army from the indigenous Hmong population, which relied upon opium poppy cultivation and sale for currency. Issues with opium transport soon threatened the Hmong with economic ruin, a potential hindrance the CIA refused to entertain. Soon, Air America, an airline secretly owned and operated by the CIA, was delivering opium from mountain villages to refinement facilities and allegedly profiting from doing so.[42] While many official records state that the extent of the CIA's participation remains inconclusive, the historian Alfred McCoy contended that U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia's narcotics trade from 1955 to 1972 "had gone far beyond coincidental complicity; embassies covered up involvement by client governments, CIA contact airlines had carried opium, and individual CIA agents had winked at the opium traffic."[43]

While covert cooperation with drug networks by the CIA is not without precedent, the Agency's collaboration with drug traffickers during the Contra War directly coincided with Reagan's crusade to criminalize drug users in the United States in the "war on drugs." This parallel renders it difficult to reconcile the purported morality of the domestic campaign with the hypocrisy of Washington's foreign policy. Thus, the CIA and Reagan administration's readiness to collude with known and suspected drug runners associated with the Contra program constitutes a particularly thought-provoking case study. The prominence and power of the narcotics trade in Latin America established it, in the eyes of the CIA and certain high-level Reagan administration officials, as an entity simply too valuable to ignore, and with respect to funding the Contras, drug trafficking was considered a far less convoluted method of circumventing congressional restrictions than navigating complex legal and legislative pathways. In the words of Jeane Kirkpatrick, the Reagan administration's first ambassador to the United

[42] Ibid., 380.
[43] Ibid., 383.

Nations, “Central America is the most important place in the world for the United States today.”[44]

The Northern Front

Many Contra affiliates were deeply embroiled in the drug trade from the outset of the conflict. One such organization, the Guatemala-based guerilla group Fifteenth of September Legion (Legión Quince de Septiembre), was established in 1980 by exiled former Nicaraguan National Guard officers and financed its missions through extortion, robbery, and drug running. In August 1981, at the behest of the CIA and Argentine intelligence forces, it merged with the Nicaraguan Democratic Union (Unión Democrática Nicaragüense – UDN) to form the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense – FDN), the largest and most active Contra group. Although a 1998 CIA report titled *Allegations of Connections Between CIA and the Contras in Cocaine Trafficking to the United States* contends that the Legion was disbanded in 1982, a merger does not constitute dissolution.[45] The military wing of the newly-formed FDN was dominated by exiles who had previously declared loyalty to the Legion and was commanded by Colonel Enrique Bermúdez Varela, who had created the Legion with Richard Lau.[46] Bermúdez was on the CIA payroll, his army trained, equipped, and armed by the United States.

The CIA was aware of drug trafficking allegations against the Legion and dismissed additional claims as they emerged. The CIA report maintains:

> In September 1981, a report to Headquarters relaying information obtained from an asset stated that the ADREN[47] leadership had made a decision to engage in drug smuggling to

[44] Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 10.
[45] Central Intelligence Agency, *Allegations of Connections*, 62, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Report_of_Investigation/bn5TgqtpT2AC?hl=en&gbpv=0.
[46] Cockburn, *Out of Control*, 6.
[47] The Fifteenth of September Legion was the military arm of the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Democratic Alliance

> the United States in order to finance its anti-Sandinista operations. Reportedly an initial trial run had taken place in July 1981 when ADREN member Alan Downs carried drugs in a suitcase on a flight to Miami. Once the drugs were delivered and paid for, Downs reportedly turned over the proceeds to Edwin Hoocker in Miami. No other information concerning Downs has been found . . .
>
> A February 1982 Headquarters cable, in response to a name trace request, indicated that members of the splinter group of the 15th of September Legion Group who had refused to join the FDN were using the Legion name in conducting robberies, drug smuggling and hijacking.[48]

The CIA discredited these allegations in October 1982, issuing a cable describing the source of both messages as "untrustworthy and a possible agent of the Government of Nicaragua."[49] This does not explain, however, why the Agency maintained its close relationship with former members of the Legion after receiving the first report in September 1981, over a year before claims of drug trafficking were deemed fallacious. The report seemed to consider it unremarkable that the CIA had ties to figures believed to be engaging in drug trafficking.

These reports were shared with neither Congress nor law enforcement, as diligent and subversive steps had been taken to safeguard the Contras from legal scrutiny. In 1982, a secret memorandum of understanding (MOU) was prepared by the CIA and U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and implemented with the signatures of Attorney General William French Smith and Director of Central Intelligence William Casey. The MOU, which relied on precedent from the Ford and Carter administrations and Reagan's Executive Order 12333, clarified which crimes the Agency was obligated to report to authorities and which were exempt from this requirement. Offenses likely to expose classified information during their prosecution, for example, did not mandate reporting. The most significant revision proposed by the 1982 MOU was a change in the definition of "employee" as outlined in the memorandum. Reporting requirements differed for CIA employees and nonemployees, and as of 1979, there existed no written requirement to

(Alianza Democrática Revolucionaria Nicaragüense – ADREN) until the ADREN merged with the UDN to form the FDN.

[48] Central Intelligence Agency, *Allegations of Connections*, 66-67.

[49] Ibid., 67.

report narcotics violations by nonemployees. While the Reagan executive order described an employee as an individual "employed by, assigned to or acting for an agency within the Intelligence Community," the 1982 MOU changed the working definition to a "staff employee or contract employee of the Agency." The effect of this omission was to transfer private proxies who acted for the Agency — such as the Contras — from employee to nonemployee status, where they were subject to less rigorous standards regarding drug crimes.[50] In a 1998 *Idaho Observer* article, former Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent Michael Levine commented that "[t]o a trained DEA agent this literally means that the CIA had been granted a license to obstruct justice in our so-called war on drugs; a licence that lasted, so the CIA claims, from 1982 to 1995, a time during which Americans paid almost $150 billion in taxes to 'fight' drugs."[51]

As the Carter administration's version of the MOU featured the same omission of a formal requirement to report nonemployee narcotics violations, Attorney General Smith declined to append a requirement "in light of [federal statute and Executive Order 12333], and in view of the fine cooperation the Drug Enforcement Administration has received from CIA."[52] Until the MOU's expiration in 1995, the Agency was obligated to report drug crimes only when specifically requested by the attorney general, who from 1985 to 1988 was the staunch Reagan loyalist Edwin Meese. Thus, the CIA was not compelled to report Contra drug trafficking to law enforcement, which allowed agents to focus more on ousting the Sandinistas and less on potential prosecution. As an unnamed Central American CIA station chief explained:

> There was a range of derogatory information that may have included some narcotics activities. Early traces revealed [the Contras] should be treated carefully. Some were

[50] Ibid.
[51] Michael Levine, "CIA Head Admits to Justice Obstruction Deal with DOJ," *Idaho Observer* (Boise, ID), May 1998, https://proliberty.com/observer/19980502.htm.
[52] Central Intelligence Agency, *Allegations of Connections*, 28, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Report_of_Investigation/bn5TgqtpT2AC?hl=en&gbpv=0.

> scoundrels . . . yes, there is derogatory stuff and we would be careful in terms of counterintelligence and operational security, but we were going to play with these guys. That was made clear by Casey and [then-LA Division Chief Duane] Clarridge.[53]

As evidenced by a number of Lt. Col. Oliver North's notebook entries, the MOU effectively allowed Reagan administration officials to "play with these guys." One particularly incriminating entry dated August 9, 1985 discusses a plane used by the brother of Adolfo Calero, former president of the FDN, to dispatch supplies from New Orleans to Contra forces in Honduras: "Honduran DC-6 which is being used for runs out of New Orleans is probably being used for drug runs into U.S."[54] North was not required to report this intelligence to the DEA, and according to a 1994 *Washington Post* article, he never did, thus undermining the system of checks and balances between the three branches of the U.S. government. North asserted later, however, that he "did all in [his] power to ensure that whenever the slightest rumor or concern was raised about drugs, the matter was immediately referred to the cognizant authorities in our government."[55]

Evidently, the United States' crusade to quash the communist insurgency in Nicaragua was considered to be of greater importance than avoiding entanglement with Contras and Contra sympathizers engaged in large-scale narco-trafficking operations. Central America was regarded as a region of great importance in the collective American psyche; in 1982, Secretary of State Alexander Haig stated, "I know the American people will support what is prudent and necessary, providing they think we mean what we say and that we are going to succeed and not flounder as we did in Vietnam."[56] The Reagan administration was determined to restore the United States'

[53] Ibid., 54.
[54] George Washington University, The National Security Archive (hereafter NS Archive), Notes by North, 9 Aug. 1985, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB2/docs/doc01.pdf.
[55] Lorraine Adams, "North Didn't Relay Drug Tips," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 22, 1994, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/10/22/north-didnt-relay-drug-tips/034375bb-8698-44d2-b086-87b7d4ea6748/.
[56] Gary Prevost, "The 'Contra War' in Nicaragua," *Conflict Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1987): 6,

credibility and power after the foreign policy failures of the Vietnam War, and perceived Nicaragua as a relatively sound place to start.

The Southern Front

While Colonel Enrique Bermúdez and the Nicaraguan Democratic Force operated on the Northern Front of Honduras, the Costa Rica-based Southern Front was home to a separate Contra group established in September 1982 by Edén Pastora Gómez, also known as "Comandante Zero."[57] Pastora, a former Sandinista who had fought to overthrow Anastasio Somoza in 1979, united his militaristic Sandino Revolutionary Front (Frente Revolucionario Sandino – FRS) with the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement (Movimiento Democrático Nicaragüense – MDN) and other right-wing factions to form a coalition of Sandinista dissidents who rejected Soviet influence. The Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática – ARDE), as it was termed, was regionally and ideologically antithetical to its northern counterpart. As Pastora contended in a 2009 interview, the Northern Front occupied a "counterrevolutionary position, revengeful, full of hatred," while the Southern Front wished "to save the original Sandinista project."[58] ARDE was the principal recipient of Contra military aid from the group's inception until May 1984, at which point the CIA deemed Pastora too "disruptive and unpredictable" for continued financial support. Much to the Agency's frustration, Pastora had refused to join forces with the formidable Northern Front Contras after his army had demonstrated consistently poor performance.[59]

https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/14764/15833.

[57] Cockburn, *Out of Control*, 22.

[58] Carlos Chirinos, "Edén Pastora: el Contra que no fue," *BBC Mundo* (London, U.K.), Jul. 15, 2009, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/america_latina/2009/07/090715_nicaragua_contras. Translated by Lily Hopwood.

[59] McCoy, *Politics of Heroin*, 489.

Experiencing "desperate conditions" exacerbated by the temporary incapacitation of Pastora, who had sustained injuries during a failed assassination attempt on the very day the CIA discontinued its funding, the impoverished Southern Front was on the verge of disbanding.[60] Pastora's associates began to seek alternate financial sources, and in October 1984 the CIA received reports indicating that several ARDE lieutenants, including Adolfo "Popo" Chamorro and Octaviano Cesar, had been conspiring with known Miami-based drug trafficker Jorge Morales. Morales, indicted twice for drug smuggling, was to provide cash payments and aircraft to the ARDE in return for use of the Southern Front's pilots for narcotics transportation and potential CIA assistance with his legal difficulties.[61] According to a U.S. State Department report, Morales furnished Pastora's Southern Front with a C-47 aircraft and two crated helicopters so pilots could "fly narcotics shipments from South America to sites in Costa Rica and Nicaragua for later transport to the United States," an arrangement that endured from October 1984 to February 1986.[62] The operation concluded after the C-47 had conducted 24 flights among El Salvador's Ilopango air base; La Penca, Nicaragua; and Costa Rica, shuttling some 156,000 pounds of guns and ammunition and unspecified quantities of drugs. Following a polygraph test, Morales — convicted in 1986 of drug trafficking — testified before the Kerry committee that he contributed $3 million and at least two airplanes to Pastora's Southern Front, an admission substantiated in the testimonies of Chamorro and Pastora himself.[63]

Although the CIA received word of potential narcotics flights weeks prior to their commencement — one October 1984 cable asserted that "[ARDE] would provide [ARDE] operational facilities in Costa Rica and Nicaragua to facilitate the transportation of narcotics, and would obtain the assistance of Costa Rican Government officials in providing documentation, in

[60] Cockburn, *Out of Control*, 23.
[61] McCoy, *Politics of Heroin*, 490.
[62] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy*, 48.
[63] Ibid., 41.

exchange for financial support, aircraft, and pilot training for the [ARDE]."[64] The Agency rejected direct action, electing instead to remain passive. A subsequent cable instructed colleagues "not to take definitive action to declare the relationship with [Pastora] terminated," instead affirming, "we want to back away from the man leaving him guessing as to the status of his relationship with the [CIA] . . . We do not want to initiate contact with him under any circumstances, unless it is done for the purpose of manipulating him towards some objective clearly consistent with [U.S.] policy in the region."[65] Clarridge admitted, however, that the CIA maintained a certain degree of contact with the Southern Front leader following the narcotics revelation.[66] Morales, mentioned by name in multiple CIA cables, was arrested for an unrelated cocaine flight after two years of uninterrupted collusion with the Contras;[67] pursuant to the MOU and corroborated by the Department of Justice's internal investigation, "the relationship between the DEA and the CIA during this time period was not characterized by substantial coordination and information-sharing."[68] While there were certainly obstacles to a productive relationship between the CIA and Pastora's Contra group, the latter's involvement in the drug trade was evidently not one of them.

The furtive activities occurring on the Southern Front did not cease with Morales' narcotics trafficking. John Hull, a Costa Rica-based farmer and CIA contract operative from Indiana, played a significant role in Contra operations from 1984 to 1986 following Lt. Col. Oliver North's establishment of a private aid network and implementation of a covert arms-

[64] Central Intelligence Agency, *Allegations of Connections*, 69, https://permanent.fdlp.gov/websites/www.cia.gov/www.cia.gov/cia/reports/cocaine/contents.html.
[65] Ibid., 75.
[66] Douglas Farah and Walter Pincus, "CIA, Contras, and Drugs: Questions on Links Linger," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 31, 1996, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/10/31/cia-contras-and-drugs-questions-on-links-linger/090571e6-99c5-4879-a3b4-bd3a94bd4ac5/.
[67] McCoy, *Politics of Heroin*, 490.
[68] United States Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, *The CIA-Contra-Crack Cocaine Controversy: A Review of the Justice Department's Investigations and Prosecutions*, 1997, https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/archive/special/9712/ch11p1.htm#F.

supply operation. Hull had acquired an expansive 8,000-acre ranch in northern Costa Rica in the 1970s through individual personal investments, and dispersed throughout were six private airstrips and numerous properties. The American ostensibly assisted the CIA with humanitarian aid and military supply to the Contras in exchange for a $10,000 monthly stipend from the National Security Council at North's discretion; in reality, however, Hull was complicit in cocaine trafficking, a fact substantiated by polygraph-verified witness testimonies.[69]

Much of the information surrounding Hull's status as a liaison between the Contras and the CIA was revealed during hearings on Capitol Hill, in which five witnesses claimed personal knowledge of drug connections. Costa Rican official Werner Lotz testified that, although he did not witness drug flights, Colombian and Panamanian pilots informed him that Hull's landing strips served as a refueling station: "The aircraft would land, there would be fuel waiting for them, and then would depart. They would come in with weapons and drugs."[70] Gary Betzner, a pilot for Morales' weapon and drug smuggling network, claimed that, on two occasions, both he and Hull had witnessed the loading of cocaine onto an aircraft. In July 1984, Betzner flew a Cessna 402-B to Hull's ranch in preparation for a drug flight to Lakeland, Florida. The Costa Rican was then greeted by Hull and together they "watched the cargo of weapons being unloaded, and cocaine, packed in 17 duffel bags, and five or six two-foot square boxes being loaded." Two weeks later, Betzner piloted another "guns for drugs" flight out of an airstrip ten miles from Hull's ranch, where he was again met by Hull and stood with him as the two watched "while the weapons were unloaded and approximately 500 kilograms of cocaine in 17 duffel bags were loaded for the return flight to Florida."[71] According to a report prepared by the DEA's Intelligence Division in 1987, much of the cocaine loaded at or conveyed through Hull's landing

[69] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy*, 162.
[70] Ibid., 54.
[71] Ibid., 55.

strips was concealed in shipments of frozen shrimp and dispatched to fictitious Miami-based companies “Mr. Shrimp” and “Ocean Hunter.” Although this information was corroborated by numerous DEA sources and the registering agent of the shrimp companies had already been indicted in U.S. federal court on narcotics charges, no case was ever developed due to an alleged lack of sufficient evidence.[72]

The first public revelation of Hull’s involvement with the Contras occurred on March 23, 1984, when a U.S. government-owned DC-3 cargo plane crashed near the rancher’s property while on a furtive mission to supply arms to a Contra unit in Costa Rica. Over the course of the ensuing investigation conducted by the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Florida, U.S. officials in Central America ventured to absolve Hull of blame. When U.S. attorney Jeffrey Feldman traveled to Costa Rica in March 1985 to explore Neutrality Act violations by the Contra resupply network, he was informed that Hull was not permitted to speak to him without an attorney present and concluded that U.S. Embassy officials in Costa Rica were taking active measures to protect the rancher.[73] On July 20 of that year, North transcribed a message from Clarridge in his diary: “Leave Hull alone.”[74]

Clarridge’s order to protect Hull was evidently effective, as the rancher escaped prosecution even after major media outlets reported probable drug connections.[75] Hull remained free until January 1989, when Costa Rican authorities arrested him on charges of drug trafficking, espionage, and engaging in activities that had the potential to imperil relations between Costa Rica and Nicaragua’s Sandinista government. Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) and

[72] United States, Department of Justice, *The CIA-Contra-Crack Cocaine Controversy: A Review of the Justice Department’s Investigations and Prosecutions*, Dec. 1997, section H2, https://fas.org/irp/agency/doj/oig/c4rpt/ch11p2.htm#N_84_.
[73] Ibid.
[74] NS Archive, “July 90, 1984,” https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB113/July%2020,%201984.pdf.
[75] George Lobsenz, “Drug Smuggler Suggests CIA Involved in Alleged Contra Drug Smuggling,” United Press International (Washington, D.C.), Jul. 15, 1987, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1987/07/15/Drug-smuggler-suggests-CIA-involved-in-alleged-Contra-drug-smuggling/1904553320000/.

eighteen other U.S. congressmen swiftly penned a letter to Costa Rican President Óscar Arias Sánchez, imploring him to promptly conclude the rancher's case in a manner that would not jeopardize U.S.-Costa Rica relations. Arias responded cogently, "[i]t pains me that you insinuate that the exemplary relations between your country and mine could deteriorate because our legal system is fighting against drug trafficking, no matter how powerful the people who participate in it, or what external backing they might have."[76] Nevertheless, Hull was freed pending trial and soon fled to the United States, where extradition requests by Costa Rica were sidestepped and ultimately denied. The rancher was never indicted on drug charges, and the DEA failed to conduct any formal investigation.[77]

The Dealings of Oliver North

The Bueso Case

Arguably the most brazen collusion with known drug traffickers was conducted by marine-turned National Security Council staffer Oliver North. North actively worked with known drug smugglers to support the Contra effort, a fact that, for years, he categorically denied; however, North's declassified emails and notebooks reveal otherwise. In 1987 testimony before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, numerous DEA officials recalled that North had proposed the diversion of $1.5 million in seized Medellín and Sandinista drug money to Contra forces. Although the DEA rejected this suggestion, it exhibited North's willingness to entertain the idea of third-party drug running for personal and political gain.[78]

[76] David Johnson and Stephen Engelberg, "Washington Talk: Briefing; Dispute With Arias," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Mar. 8, 1989, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/08/us/washington-talk-briefing-dispute-with-arias.html.
[77] Department of Justice, *The CIA-Contra-Crack Cocaine Controversy*, section H1.
[78] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy*, 41.

This willingness to take part in subversive activities is best demonstrated by North's communication with narco-militarists José Bueso Rosa and Manuel Noriega. General Bueso, who worked under Honduran armed forces chief Gustavo Álvarez Martínez, was actively involved with the CIA's Contra training operations in Honduras from 1982 until Álvarez's ousting in March 1984, at which point Bueso was demoted to Honduras' military attaché in Chile. In October of that year, the FBI seized a shipment of 345 kilograms of cocaine from an airstrip in rural Florida. The cargo, estimated to be worth no less than $40 million, was intended to finance a military coup d'état against democratically elected Honduran President Roberto Suazo Córdova. Bueso was soon identified as the plot's primary conspirator, and in July 1986 was convicted on murder-for-hire conspiracy charges by a federal judge in Miami. At the General's sentencing, however, two U.S. government officials testified on his behalf, urging leniency for the man deemed "a valuable ally to the United States."[79] Despite Bueso's guilty plea of attempted assassination and conspiring to stage a coup, the information presented by the U.S. officials prompted the judge to sentence the Honduran to a five-year prison term with immediate eligibility for parole. Bueso's accomplices received sentences of up to forty years.[80]

Despite the Justice Department's description of the assassination plot as the "most significant case of narco-terrorism yet discovered,"[81] North was unhappy with the sentence and urged further leniency in a maneuver later reported by the *New York Times* as inappropriate and ill-advised.[82] In a September 1986 email to National Security Advisor John Poindexter, North highlighted the "problem" with the Bueso case:

[79] Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall, *Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies, and the CIA in Central America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 60.
[80] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy*, 121.
[81] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy*, 76.
[82] Susan F. Ratsky, "North Urged Leniency for Honduran Linked to Assassination Plot," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Feb. 23, 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/02/23/world/north-urged-leniency-for-honduran-linked-to-assassination-plot.html.

> Bueso was the man with whom [former U.S. Ambassador to Honduras John] Negroponte, [chief of the U.S. Southern Command in Panama Paul] Gorman, [chief of the Latin American division of the CIA Dewey] Clarridge, and I worked out arrangements [redacted]. Only Gorman, Clarridge, and I were fully aware of all that Bueso was doing on our behalf . . . When the FBI broke the case Bueso was indicted for conspiracy. His legal advice was apparently to keep his mouth shut and everything w[oul]d be worked out. Although subpoenas were prepared for Gorman, Clarridge, Negroponte, and North, they were never issued because Bueso pleaded guilty (on advice of counsel). Several months ago [President of Honduras Jose] Azcona wrote to the President, and was never answered. He now is going to call the President to ask if Bueso can be pardoned. Bueso is due to report to Tallahas[s]e Fla to start serving sentence on Sep 25. He apparently still believed up until yesterday that he w[oul]d be going to the minimum security facility at Eglin for a short period (days or weeks) and then walk free . . . Our major concern — Gorman, North, Clarridge — is that when Bueso finds out what is really happening to him, he will break his longstanding silence about the Nic resistance and other sensitive operations. Gorman, Clarridge, [Associate Deputy FBI Director Oliver] Revell, [Associate Attorney General Stephen] Trott, and [Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott] Abrams will cabal quietly in the morning to look at options: pardon, clemency, deportation, reduced sentence. Objective is to keep Bueso from feeling like he was lied to in legal process and start spilling the beans.[83]

Evidently, North was unable to separate his own political interests from the rule of law, as his objective was not to protect international security but rather to prevent Bueso from "spilling the beans." It is unclear exactly what information North was concerned Bueso would disclose, but the circumstantial evidence surrounding this extraordinary attempt at a cover-up begs the question of whether or not Bueso was aware of the CIA's complicity in narcotics trafficking and underscores the readiness of White House and CIA officials to protect narco-terrorists for political gain.

"You may advise all concerned that the President will want to be as helpful as possible to settle this matter," Poindexter wrote in response to North's email. Although the State and Justice Departments ultimately blocked attempts to pardon Bueso or grant him immediate parole, the Justice Department agreed to allow the Honduran to be housed in the white collar, minimum-

[83] NS Archive, "Note From: Oliver North," Sep. 17, 1986, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB113/north13.pdf

security federal prison camp at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. Bueso was released after two years and never talked.

The Noriega Case

North similarly conspired with General Manuel Antonio Noriega, a Panamanian drug lord and de facto ruler of the country from 1983 to 1989. Before and during this time, Noriega worked with the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies to support the Contras on the Southern Front; his ability to convincingly forge "end-user" certificates required for the sale and shipment of weapons rendered Panama a supply hub where weapons were imported and subsequently redirected to other Central American nations.[84] The weapons were costly, however, and the General's association with the Latin American drug trade, and particularly the Medellín Cartel, generated enormous revenues that allowed for their purchase. This regional power made Noriega a valuable asset for U.S. forces, who in turn would offer a degree of protection from prosecution. Indeed, Noriega was deeply embroiled in narco-trafficking, and transformed Panama's political system into a "narcokleptocracy" whereby the government was essentially funded with narcotics money and controlled by its ruler's corrupt associates.[85]

In 1983, Vice President George H. W. Bush met with Noriega to discuss the provision of aid to the Contras. Noriega, who had previously assisted U.S. guerrilla forces in El Salvador, supplied military intelligence and assigned his pilots to shuttle guns and drugs from Panama to Costa Rica, where the guns were handed over and the drugs were flown on to the United States. In July 1984, Noriega provided the Southern Front Contras with $100,000. Washington was well -aware of Noriega's illegal dealings — his ties to influential cartels had been documented as

[84] Kevin Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 25.
[85] John Dinges, *Our Man in Panama: How General Noriega Used the U.S. — and Made Millions in Drugs and Arms* (New York: Random House, 1990), 253.

early as 1978, and officials harbored a "twenty-one cannon barrage of evidence" against him by 1983 — but considered Noriega too advantageous to the war effort to dismiss, even renewing his contract with the U.S. government in 1985. This ploy was addressed by former U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica Francis McNeil in his 1988 testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who criticized the "coddling of Noriega beyond any time when one could reasonably doubt . . . Noriega's involvement in drug trafficking to the United States."[86]

The publication in June 1986 of two incriminating *New York Times* articles, in which the author exposed Noriega's money laundering, drug activities, arms trafficking, political murders, and close relationship with U.S. intelligence forces, opened a trapdoor under the Panamanian's feet.[87] North quickly countered with the publication of a photograph taken by American pilot and undercover agent Barry Seal in 1984; the photo, which depicted Medellín Cartel principal Pablo Escobar and numerous Sandinista officials loading cocaine onto a military aircraft — a purchase orchestrated by Seal as a sting — leveled the playing field, as Reagan's reference to the photo during a televised address before Congress garnered significant public support for the Contras.[88] Noriega's position, however, was still precarious, and in an attempt to ameliorate the public relations crisis, the General contacted North with a quid pro quo proposal. After meeting with Noriega's emissary, North outlined the encounter to Poindexter in an email, divulging that "[i]n exchange for a promise from us to 'help clean up [Noriega's] image' and a commitment to lift our ban on [Foreign Military Sales] to the Panamanian Defense [Force]," Noriega would "undertake to 'take care of' the Sandinista leadership for us." When North declined what was evidently an assassination proposal, the emissary "countered that Noriega had numerous assets in

[86] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy*, 90, 50.
[87] Seymour M. Hersh, "Panama Strongman Said to Trade in Drugs, Arms and Illicit Money," *New York Times* (New York, NY), June 12, 1986, https://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/12/world/panama-strongman-said-to-trade-in-drugs-arms-and-illicit-money.html.
[88] Buckley, *Panama*, 59-60.

place in Nicaragua that could accomplish many things that wd be essential." North recognized that a Contra victory was unlikely and recommended to his superior that they accept the offer as a last resort, suggesting the payment of $1 million from Project Democracy funds collected from the sale of U.S. arms to Iran. "The proposal seems sound to me," North wrote, "and I believe we could make the appropriate arrangements w/ reasonable OPSEC [operations security] and deniability."[89]

That same day, Poindexter responded. The National Security Advisor was loath to enter into an assassination plot, but contended that "more sabotage would be another story. I have nothing against him other than his illegal activities." Poindexter told North, "[i]t would be useful for you to talk to [Noriega] directly to find out exactly what he has in his mind with regards to cleaning up his act."[90] After clearing the scheme with Clarridge, North set a time and place for the meeting — September 22, at a hotel in London — but faced some resistance from colleagues before his departure. The CIA's Alan Fiers testified in 1992 that North revealed the sabotage proposal at a meeting of the Reagan administration's informal Restricted Interagency Group, which helped set Contra policy, stating, "there was significant silence at the table. And then I recall I said, 'No. We don't want to do that.'"[91]

North pressed forward with the meeting regardless after securing the approval of Secretary of State George Schultz. In London, North and Noriega formulated a plan that involved the sabotage of Nicaraguan airports, refineries, and electric and telephone systems, and the establishment of a school with "courses for commandos" that would train forces to fight in both Nicaragua and Afghanistan. North had met Noriega numerous times before, and asserted in his 1991 memoir, "Noriega was probably the single most despicable human being I ever had to

[89] NS Archive, "Reply to Note From: Oliver North," Aug. 23, 1986, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB113/north07.pdf.
[90] NS Archive, "Email," Nov. 22, 1986, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB113/north08.pdf
[91] NS Archive, "Transcript of Trial," Jul. 29, 1992, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB113/north10.pdf.

deal with. After a meeting with him, you just had to go home and take a shower." Despite this unfavorable description, North underscored that the U.S. would "certainly compensate [Noriega] for his efforts" to overthrow the Sandinista government.[92]

This clandestine operation never came to fruition, however, as the Iran-Contra scandal broke two months later. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush ordered the U.S. military to invade Panama, arrest General Noriega, and restore Guillermo Endara's democratically elected government in Operation Just Cause, which cost hundreds of millions of dollars and resulted in the loss of American and Panamanian lives in an ignoble conflict between superpower and underdog. Noriega was convicted in 1992 on eight charges of drug trafficking, racketeering, and money laundering, and sentenced to forty years in U.S. prison.[93] Interestingly, the Bush administration had no more evidence of Noriega's illicit dealings than North and other U.S. officials had in 1986 — the Reagan administration conceivably acquiesced to the General's drug trafficking as long as his activities were benefiting the Contra effort.

Aftermath

The facade concealing the extent of the Reagan administration's involvement in the Contra War began to break down in spring 1986, when press disclosures became both more incriminating and more prolific than ever before. On April 10 of that year, the Associated Press published an article addressing an investigation by the Miami U.S. attorney's office into allegations of gun-running and drug smuggling by Contras and their American backers;[94] this was quickly followed by a major *Miami Herald* story naming North as a key figure in the Contra

[92] Oliver North, *Under Fire: An American Story* (New York: 21st Century Press, 1991), 337-339.
[93] Larry Rohter, "The Noriega Verdict; U.S. Jury Convicts Noriega of Drug-Trafficking Role as the Leader of Panama," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Apr. 10, 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/10/us/noriega-verdict-us-jury-convicts-noriega-drug-trafficking-role-leader-panama.html.
[94] Brian Barger, "FBI Reportedly Probes Contras on Drugs, Guns," Associated Press (New York, NY), Apr. 10, 1986, https://apnews.com/article/4c28d082f93d4d08d4fc2b41a968a1f4.

resupply operation. These articles heralded further revelations by the press and brought the National Security Council under significant congressional scrutiny. During this time, North moved to suppress potential threats — as indicated by his eagerness to protect Bueso and Noriega — and continued to orchestrate arms shipments to Central America.[95]

This determination to sustain the Contra exercise proved imprudent. On October 5, a fourteen-year-old Sandinista soldier in southern Nicaragua shot down an Enterprise plane that was shuttling military supplies to Contra forces; the sole surviving crew member, Eugene Hasenfus, was taken captive and confessed the operation was coordinated by the CIA.[96] Washington immediately prepared for the fallout, and the notes from a Restricted Interagency Group meeting which followed underscored the administration's cohesive response "which states no [U.S. government] involvement or connection, but [general awareness] of such support contracted by the Contras."[97] Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams adhered to this direction in subsequent appearances before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, asserting before the first committee, "it is not our supply system . . . We do not encourage people to do this."[98] Senior CIA officials Clair George and Alan Fiers, both involved in the arms resupply enterprise, similarly gave false testimony.

The intersection between the Contra affair and the hostage situation in Lebanon was revealed soon after. On November 3, Lebanese magazine *Ash-Shiraa* reported the illegal sale of American weapons to the Iranian government. It was a shocking disclosure, not least because the arms sales violated the U.S. embargo against Iran and negated Reagan's vow to never negotiate

[95] Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 215-217.
[96] Ibid., 234.
[97] Brown University, Understanding the Iran-Contra Affair, Transcription, Oct. 5, 1986, accessed March 5, 2021, https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/documents/d-nic-27.pdf.
[98] Byrne, *Iran-Contra*, 254.

with terrorists.[99] The affair was compounded on November 25, when Attorney General Edwin Meese announced that the Justice Department had found definitive evidence to suggest that some of the proceeds from the arms sales had been diverted to the Contras. By then, North had already shredded thousands of incriminating documents, emails, and notebook entries, and continued to do so after he was terminated by Reagan later the same day.[100]

The investigative phase of the Iran-Contra scandal commenced immediately, and in February 1987, the President's Special Review Board, or Tower Commission, released a report charging a "failure of responsibility" among Washington's top officials and condemning Reagan for his lack of oversight.[101] From early May to early August of that year, the Iran-Contra committee — composed of the Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition and the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran — conducted televised joint hearings. Over 500 witnesses testified or were interviewed, including North; Meese; Abrams; Poindexter; and Robert McFarlane, Poindexter's predecessor as National Security Advisor, and the committee's majority report ultimately concluded that senior Reagan administration officials had knowingly deceived Congress and covertly raised money for the Contras through arms deals with Iran, all without presidential authorization.[102] In the course of a six-year follow-up investigation conducted by the Independent Council, fourteen men were charged on counts including conspiracy, perjury, and obstruction, and eleven were convicted. On Christmas Eve of 1992, however, outgoing President George H. W. Bush — who had served as vice president under Reagan — issued six pardons;

[99] Ibid., 71.
[100] Ibid., 275.
[101] United States, President's Special Review Board, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President's Special Review Board*, New York, NY.: Times Books, 1987.
[102] U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, and U.S. Senate, Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*, November 13, 1987, 100th Cong., 1st sess., 1987, https://archive.org/details/reportofcongress87unit/page/n7/mode/2up?view=theater.

thus, none of the affair's major players ever served time behind bars, and Poindexter's hometown of Odon, Indiana even renamed a street for him. When the peace activist Bill Breeden took down the street sign and claimed to be holding it for a ransom of $30 million, the amount that was covertly funnelled to the Contras by the National Security Council, he was arrested and jailed for four days. Consequently, Breeden was the sole person to serve prison time in connection with the Iran-Contra scandal.[103]

The Contra-cocaine connection — a key element of the administration's illicit operations in Central America — was a political minefield intentionally disregarded by the Senate and House Select Committees investigating the Iran-Contra scandal; although the affair attracted scrutiny from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which conducted its own extensive investigation, it was deemed too risky to focus attention on during the Iran-Contra hearings. A January 13, 1987 *New York Times* article addressed this trepidation: "Some senators say that any official inquiry on this topic, and how much if anything American officials knew about it, at this time would create such an uproar that it could derail the main thrusts of the Senate inquiry: to sort out the Reagan Administration's secret arms sales to Iran and diversion of profits to the contras."[104] This public outrage arguably would have stemmed largely from the perceived hypocrisy of the administration's parallel domestic crusade to criminalize drug dealers and users.

The Domestic War on Drugs

It is essential to note that because the major policy decisions of the Contra War occurred against the domestic backdrop of the war on drugs, the Contra-cocaine affair must be viewed

[103] Jason Vest, "America at a Crossroads," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Dec. 1, 1991, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1991/12/01/america-at-a-crossroads/b3b5518f-9857-4cbc-a5b2-f56f92187602/.

[104] Wayne King and Warren Weaver Jr., "Washington Talk: Briefing, Drugs and the Contras," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Jan. 13, 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/01/13/us/washington-talk-briefing-drugs-and-the-contras.html.

through a discerning lens. During this time, the Reagan administration's foreign policy was at odds with its domestic one. At the very time that U.S. officials were displaying striking indifference about the drug-related activities of their associates in Central America, the Reagan administration was greatly expanding the reach of the drug war within the United States.

The war on drugs preceded Reagan's time in office, as President Richard Nixon first decried drug abuse as "public enemy number one" during a press conference in 1971.[105] Nixon soon shifted his focus away from rehabilitation of drug users and toward prosecution, and in 1972 established the Office for Drug Abuse Law Enforcement, which was eventually consolidated with other federal agencies to form the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); this placed greater emphasis on fighting drugs through the criminal justice system. Reagan's presidency shaped the war on drugs into the modern, punitive drug war we recognize today and marked the dawn of a long period of skyrocketing rates of incarceration, the majority of which occurred in underserved Black neighborhoods.

With the publicity of the drug epidemic fueling financial and legislative support, Reagan signed into law the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, a policy that compounded mandatory minimum sentences for the distribution of cocaine with other harsh penalties. This act disproportionately impacted Black communities, as it allocated far more severe punishment for distribution of crack — used more often by Black Americans — than powder cocaine, a drug popular with the white middle-class. This legislation, ostensibly created to target high-level drug traffickers, was revisited in 1988 and rendered far harsher, this time extending beyond traditional punishments and introducing new "civil penalties" for drug offenders, including first-time culprits. The new Anti-Drug Abuse Act authorized the eviction of tenants associated with drug

[105] Richard Nixon, Remarks About an Intensified Program for Drug Abuse Prevention and Control, June 17, 1971, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-about-intensified-program-for-drug-abuse-prevention-and-control.

use, eliminated federal benefits for individuals convicted of a drug offense, imposed new mandatory minimum sentences, and expanded the use of the death penalty for serious drug-related crimes, which sent staggering numbers of Black people to prison and segregated released convicts into a permanent secondary class.[106]

The most controversial claim expounded by the journalist Gary Webb in his 1996 "Dark Alliance" series was that the CIA intentionally targeted Black communities in the United States with drug pipelines from Latin America. "For the better part of a decade," Webb wrote, "a San Francisco Bay Area drug ring sold tons of cocaine to the Crips and Bloods street gangs of Los Angeles and funneled millions in drug profits to a Latin American guerrilla army run by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency." This drug ring allegedly "opened the first pipeline between Colombia's cocaine cartels and the black neighborhoods of Los Angeles . . . [As a result,] the cocaine that flooded in helped spark a crack explosion in urban America."[107] Webb's claim was attacked by the media and disputed by the CIA and DOJ, but it raised troubling questions that remain unresolved.

To be sure, no definitive evidence exists to suggest that the CIA explicitly condoned or was definitively unaware of this development. Similarly, no concrete evidence confirms that Contra affiliates were instrumental in the United States' crack cocaine boom.

Nonetheless, much of the cocaine trafficked by U.S. associates was undeniably funnelled into American communities. In 1971, the DEA estimated that over 45 metric tons of cocaine a year were being smuggled into the United States by the Medellín Cartel, a conglomerate in which CIA asset and drug kingpin Manuel Noriega later became a key player.[108] Although the

[106] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010), 52.
[107] Gary Webb, "U.S. Policy Helped Start Crack Plague Drugs Sold to Gangs; Profits Funded CIA's Contras," *San Jose Mercury News* (San Jose, CA), Aug. 21, 1996, https://www.spokesman.com/stories/1996/aug/21/us-policy-helped-start-crack-plague-drugs-sold-to/.

CIA may not have actively authorized these connections, its willingness to collude with and protect corrupt allies of convenience — many of whom were known drug traffickers affiliated with some of the world's most notorious drug cartels — demonstrates a certain degree of complicity in the exacerbation of the crack cocaine epidemic in the United States. This deception calls into question the professed morality of the war on drugs while underscoring Washington's willingness to disregard major domestic policy initiatives. In a 1986 White House speech, Reagan stated, "[d]espite our best efforts, illegal cocaine is coming into our country at alarming levels and 4 to 5 million people regularly use it." In reality, however, U.S. imperial policy was facilitating the escalation of the drug crisis, as U.S. hegemony in Latin America was deemed a more pertinent issue.[108]

Official Investigations

Press accounts regarding links between the Contras and narcotrafficking began to appear in December 1985. The earliest piece, published by the Associated Press, publicized allegations of smuggling operations made by U.S. investigators and volunteers of the Contra war effort.[109] This story led to a review by the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Justice, and other intelligence agencies in 1986, and in April of that year, the State Department reported that it had "evidence of a limited number of incidents in which known drug traffickers tried to establish connections with Nicaraguan resistance groups."[110] Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) subsequently headed a three-year-long investigation on behalf of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the resulting Senate report — formally titled *Drugs, Law Enforcement and*

[108] Ronald Reagan, Address to the Nation on the Campaign Against Drug Abuse, Sep. 14, 1986, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-campaign-against-drug-abuse.
[109] Brian Barger and Robert Parry, "Reports Link Nicaraguan Rebels to Cocaine Trafficking," Associated Press (New York, NY), Dec. 20, 1985, https://apnews.com/article/c69eaf370de9884f907a39efd90337d3.
[110] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy*, 37.

Foreign Policy: A Report Prepared by the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics and International Operations of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate but commonly referred to as the Kerry Committee report — compiles over a thousand pages of congressional subcommittee hearings.

Released on April 13, 1989, the Kerry Committee report stated that the media's accusations of CIA involvement in Contra cocaine trafficking networks were legitimate. National Security Council staff and senior U.S. officials such as North did not run drugs themselves, the report maintained, but instead created a privatized network that enticed narcotraffickers while actively ignoring frequent reports of Contra-related drug smuggling and colluding with known drug smugglers for financial gain. The 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," and contended that drug links included provision of military supplies and other materials to the Contras by narcotics traffickers. These links further included "payments to drug traffickers by the U.S. State Department of funds authorized by the Congress for humanitarian assistance to the Contras, in some cases after the traffickers had been indicted by federal law enforcement agencies on drug charges, in others while traffickers were under active investigation by these same agencies."[111] Criminal behavior was indirectly sanctioned, as many individuals who engaged in Neutrality Act violations and supported narcotics trafficking were unaware of the extent of deception; indeed, they operated under the false pretense that these actions were authorized by the U.S. government.[112]

Agencies of the U.S. Executive Branch, however, offered an entirely different interpretation. The CIA and DOJ investigations were conducted in response to the publication of journalist Gary Webb's "Dark Alliance" series, which claimed that the Reagan administration

[111] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy*, 41, 45.
[112] Ibid., 140.

and the CIA had colluded with notorious drug lords to fund the Contra war and were thus complicit in the escalation of Los Angeles' crack cocaine epidemic. The CIA and DOJ reports warrant attention, as they negated the conclusions presented by the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics and International Operations and stated that the CIA was entirely unaware of any narcotics trafficking by Contras and Contra affiliates.

The CIA report was released in two volumes, the first issued as a classified report in December 1997 with a declassified version available in January 1998, and the second released as a classified report in April 1998 and declassified in October 1998. Although this report denied knowledge of ongoing narcotics violations and concluded that the CIA did not knowingly collaborate with drug traffickers, the Agency's Office of Inspector General (OIG) presented information that did not align with its verdict; for example, although the report discussed in detail the memorandum of understanding for reporting narcotics crimes to the DEA, the OIG failed to analyze the justification for and implications of the memorandum. The DOJ report, completed in December 1997 and released in July 1998, similarly absolved the CIA of blame, but focused heavily on disproving the allegations raised in the "Dark Alliance" series rather than addressing the conclusion presented in the Kerry Committee report. As stated, no evidence exists to prove or disprove Webb's contention that the CIA intentionally targeted Black communities — a fact Kerry himself conceded was not the focus of his investigation.[113] The DOJ acknowledged that a small amount of drug money was disbursed to the Contras, but it contended that it did not know the exact quantity, and concluded, much like the CIA report, that the Agency was not aware of drug trafficking by its affiliates. A cursory review of North's notebook entries immediately disproves this assertion.

[113] Roberto Suro and Walter Pincus, "The CIA and Crack: Evidence is Lacking of Alleged Plot," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 4, 1996, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/10/04/the-cia-and-crack-evidence-is-lacking-of-alleged-plot/5b026731-c5de-4234-b3bd-9e0fd2e21225/.

The CIA and DOJ reports also conceded their respective interviewing weaknesses. The CIA report stated that, as the CIA's OIG lacked subpoena power, certain individuals central to the Contra affair, such as Duane Clarridge and Clair George, refused to be interviewed. The DOJ's OIG similarly lacked power to compel certain witnesses to testify; thus, Oliver North and former CIA Central American task force chief Alan Fiers, who assumed control of the Contra operation after Clarridge, declined to contribute to the investigation. The DOJ report affirms that this created a "significant gap in the evidence-gathering abilities."[114]

Although the CIA and DOJ reports were favored by the media, which had largely criticized Kerry's inquiry a decade prior, it is evident that the reports' methodologies were intrinsically flawed and the findings selectively crafted. The CIA and DOJ effectively veiled the Reagan administration's degree of complicity, which placated the public and ensured none of the affair's main actors were ever held accountable for drug trafficking.

Conclusion

On March 24, 1988, after six years of war, leaders of the Sandinista government and the Contra rebels agreed to a cease-fire. The framework for ending the conflict was defined by the presidents of Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Guatemala in Tela, Honduras on August 7, 1989; the resulting Tela Accord, as it was termed, called for the demobilization of the Sandinista and Contra armies; the disbanding of Contra camps in Honduras; free and fair elections in Nicaragua by February of the following year; and a regional condemnation of drug trafficking and abuse.[115] In February 1990, in accordance with the peace agreement, incumbent Sandinista President José Daniel Ortega Saavedra willingly took part in a free national election,

[114] Department of Justice, *The CIA-Contra-Crack Cocaine Controversy*, section 2G.
[115] Robert Pear, "Pact in Nicaragua: U.S. Resists Too," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Nov. 3, 1989, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/03/world/pact-in-nicaragua-us-resists-too.html.

in which he was ultimately defeated by National Opposition Union (Unión Nacional Oppositora – UNO) candidate Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. However, the reelection of Ortega to the presidency in 2006 — a position he has held ever since — occasioned Nicaragua's gradual regression to authoritarian practices.[116]

While the Nicaraguan Revolution, which encompassed the increasing opposition to the Somoza government, the Sandinistas' rise to power, and the Contra War came to an end in 1990, the covert involvement of the United States raises concerns that are still relevant today. Indeed, far from an aberration, the Iran-Contra affair was a symptom of the chronic dysfunction that plagued U.S. foreign policy over the course of the Cold War. The Soviet Union's ideological incursions, particularly into Latin America, caused the morality of the U.S. government to fall by the wayside, as suppressing threats to U.S. hegemony took precedence over ensuring internal accountability, demonstrating executive transparency, and maintaining effective checks and balances among the three branches of government.

The culpability of the Reagan administration and the CIA in colluding with and providing protection to Central American drug traffickers during the Contra War is indisputable. Indeed, the covert nature and subsequent denial of this involvement suggests that the key U.S. players were well aware of their illegal conduct. The Contra-cocaine connection was a political minefield deliberately neglected during the extensively broadcast Iran-Contra hearings. Perhaps if the Senate and House Select Committees had chosen to question high-ranking government officials about their knowledge of narcotrafficking by Contras and Contra affiliates, it would have led to a public outcry on the scale of the Watergate scandal a decade earlier. Instead, when

[116] Mark A. Uhlig, "Turnover in Nicaragua; Aristocratic Democrat; Violeta Barrios de Chamorro," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Feb. 27, 1990, https://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/27/world/turnover-in-nicaragua-aristocratic-democrat-violeta-barrios-de-chamorro.html.

two men stood up in the public gallery during the hearings and shouted, “What about the cocaine dealing that the U.S. is paying for?” they were escorted from the chamber and arrested.[117]

This rhetoric — that the U.S. was “paying for” the cocaine dealing — was, in many respects, an accurate assessment. CIA and Reagan administration officials were effectively promoting the escalation of drug trafficking in the Americas by actively benefiting from its existence and promising individual smugglers aid and immunity from prosecution. This in turn safeguarded certain narco-pipelines and allowed for the consolidation of a channel by which cocaine traveled freely north, and hard currency flowed south into the collective Central American economy and the hands of corrupt drug kingpins. The strengthening of narcotics networks resulted in an increased economic dependence on these illicit commodities and provided individual traffickers with the capacity to infiltrate political systems, as evidenced by Panama’s narcokleptocracy and General Manuel Noriega’s rise to power, and offered the networks’ external protector — in this case, the CIA — a great deal of regional influence. This embodied narcocolonialism, as these pipelines destabilized Latin America in a way that was favorable to the United States and rendered criminals beholden to the U.S. government and reliant upon its protection. Indeed, while the Reagan administration was, along with Congress, waging the war on drugs by championing mass incarceration and aggressively criminalizing domestic dealers and users, it was simultaneously condoning the passage of narcotics into the U.S. by participating in the Central American drug trade.

The fundamental lesson of the Contra-cocaine affair is that democracy cannot exist in the absence of government transparency. While the Reagan administration’s commitment to countering the expansion of communism was portrayed as an extension of liberalism, its imposition of imperialist policies demonstrated little regard for the human cost. The neo-

[117] Staff Writer, “The Iran-Contra Hearings: Two Protesters Seized in Outburst,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Jul. 10, 1987, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-07-10-mn-1966-story.html.

imperialism and colonialism characteristic of the Contra War were shrouded in secrecy and compounded by practices, such as collusion with drug traffickers, that necessitated the preservation of this secrecy for fear of public outcry. Although the administration was subject to backlash following the revelation of the Iran-Contra arms sales, the drug connection failed to amass the censure it deserved. It is the duty of citizens to hold the U.S. government accountable through elections, and the responsibility of the U.S. government to hold itself accountable through an interplay of power that limits the ability of the executive branch to act independently. The carefully calculated memorandum of understanding, President Bush's retroactive pardoning of the main players, and North's favorable reputation among modern conservatives — he even recently headed the National Rifle Association — are all consequences of the systemic despotism that arises from a fundamental lack of accountability.

The illicit mechanisms of support utilized during the Contra War were not directly condoned by the American people and their elected representatives, and nobody was ever held liable for the drug trafficking. A democracy cannot circumvent its system of checks and balances, reject full transparency, renounce its principles of accountability, and still remain democratic.

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