

# New book documents US complicity in drug running

Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion, by Gary Webb, Seven Stories Press (New York: 1998)  
\$24.95

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Gary Webb's new book is a major political event and deserves the widest possible audience. It provides a careful review of the evidence documenting the role of the Central Intelligence Agency and the US-backed mercenary force of Nicaraguan Contras in narcotics trafficking in the United States. It fully documents the charges initially presented in a series of articles by Webb, published in the *San Jose Mercury-News* in 1996, which touched off a political furor, particularly in black communities hardest hit by the crack epidemic of the 1980s.

In the intervening two years many things have changed for Gary Webb. He left the *Mercury-News* after the newspaper caved in to pressure from the intelligence agencies and the national media and retracted his original four-part series. Webb sued the newspaper for breach of contract and accepted a substantial out-of-court settlement. Two CIA inspector general reports have been issued that largely confirm his findings. His book has been published by a small New York publishing house, but largely ignored by the press.

*Dark Alliance* tells two stories: the involvement of the Nicaraguan Contras in drug trafficking, particularly in the crack cocaine trade in south central Los Angeles, and how the Contra-cocaine connection came to public attention. It is a lucidly written detective story, far more gripping than the thousands of potboiler crime novels which come on the market each year.

It begins with a tip Webb received in the summer of 1995 from the girlfriend of a Nicaraguan immigrant who was awaiting trial on cocaine charges after three years in prison. She told him that the key government witness in the case, Oscar Danilo Blandón, had worked for the CIA-financed Contras while smuggling drugs into the United States. She provided federal grand jury transcripts in which Blandón gave detailed accounts of his operations importing cocaine and selling it to wholesale drug dealers in Los Angeles.

Blandón's case led Webb to the most important figure in the

Contra cocaine smuggling ring, Norwin Meneses, head of a cocaine-trafficking family based in San Francisco and a prominent supporter of the Contras, who hosted a well-publicized fundraiser for Contra leader Adolfo Calero, a longtime CIA agent. Meneses was never arrested or convicted of any crime in the United States, despite being known to police agencies as one of the biggest drug traffickers on the West Coast. He was protected by his political connections with the US intelligence services. Today he is serving a prison term for drug trafficking in Nicaragua, where he returned after the fall of the Sandinistas.

It is not possible here to summarize the complex network of connections between drug traffickers, Contra mercenaries and US government officials which Webb details over nearly 500 pages. Suffice it to say that the charge that the CIA knew of and connived in drug trafficking by the Contras throughout the 1980s is neither a surmise, nor an inference based on circumstantial evidence. It is an allegation abundantly backed up by facts.

Webb provides hundreds of citations from documents, many of them produced by the CIA, the Drug Enforcement Administration and other government agencies. It is remarkable how much evidence there is: three volumes of documents produced by the Senate subcommittee headed by John Kerry in 1987; thousands of pages of court transcripts in which drug traffickers linked to the Contras told their stories; official records of the CIA, DEA and local police in San Francisco, Los Angeles and other areas; police and court records from Nicaragua.

The largest single source of information is the investigation into the Iran-Contra affair by Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh. While Walsh ignored the Contra drug-trafficking charges, accepting the Reagan and Bush administration claims that these were a leftist fabrication, Webb repeatedly mines the documents accumulated by Walsh's office--CIA and DEA

reports, the diaries and notebooks of Oliver North, the testimony of dozens of individuals involved in the illegal contra arms shipments--to provide damning details of the US government's role in permitting the contra drug trafficking and covering it up. Oliver North himself was fully aware of the criminal side of contra fundraising activities, as Webb demonstrates with citation after citation from his diaries.

Webb traces the flow of cocaine from Blandón and Meneses to large-scale Los Angeles drug dealers, who flooded south central LA with crack cocaine throughout the 1980s, and the flow of money from the drug traffickers to the Contra arms supply operation, based in Miami and directed first by the CIA and later, after Congressional passage of the 1984 Boland Amendment, by the National Security Council staff under Oliver North.

A decisive moment in Webb's investigation came when he attended the May 1996 trial of cocaine wholesaler Ricky (Freeway Rick) Ross, who made millions marketing crack in Los Angeles in the early 1980s. The star government witness against Ross was his wholesale supplier Blandón who, despite his own role in drug trafficking, had been approved by the US State Department to receive permanent resident status.

Ross's attorney, Alan Fenster, wanted to raise the issue of CIA involvement in drug trafficking. Assistant US Attorney L. J. O'Neale filed a motion to bar this line of defense. The motion read, in part, 'The United States believes that at least one defendant will attempt to assert to the effect that the informant in this case sold cocaine to raise money for the Nicaraguan Contras and that he did so in conjunction with, or for, the Central Intelligence Agency.... This matter, if true, would be classified.'

The judge granted the motion to suppress any questioning on the role of the CIA, and the government placed Blandón on the stand as a witness, apparently believing that the court order would prevent any unwanted exposure. However, Fenster began cross-examining Blandón using questions suggested by Webb. This line of questioning drew out detailed, sworn testimony from Blandón, a central figure in the Contra cocaine ring, confirming meetings with key CIA personnel such as Enrique Bermudez, the military leader of the Contras, and demonstrating that the entire operation was under the control and direction of the US government, although Blandón was not permitted to name the CIA itself.

*Dark Alliance* is as much an exposure of the American media as of the American intelligence apparatus and the Nicaraguan Contras. It is no discredit to Webb's enterprise and intelligence to say that any serious and competent reporter, given the leads he was given, could have produced a similar exposé. That no other reporter did what Webb did demonstrates the largely controlled character of the American media.

A few stories did appear in the mid-1980s, produced by a handful of conscientious reporters. Robert Parry and Brian Barger of the Associated Press wrote the first story, only to see

it withheld for weeks and heavily edited, then killed, until it was accidentally transmitted over the AP's Spanish-language wire. The edited English-language version was then released, omitting any mention of CIA involvement in the cocaine trafficking by the Contras. Parry later discovered that the AP's Washington Bureau chief was having regular meetings with Oliver North.

Seth Rosenfeld of the *San Francisco Examiner* reported in 1986 on the 'Frogman' case, in which the Justice Department intervened to protect several Nicaraguan drug traffickers who said they had delivered hundreds of thousands of dollars in drug profits to the Contras. The Justice Department withheld dozens of boxes of documents on the case in the face of requests from the press and defense attorneys, a fact noted approvingly by Oliver North in his diaries.

After Webb's series was published in the summer of 1996 the major national media tried to discredit his findings. First to attack was the *Washington Post*, in a rebuttal article by Walter Pincus and Roberto Suro that ignored the bulk of the evidence and parroted distortions of the series originally voiced by the US intelligence agencies (alleging, for instance, that Webb claimed the CIA had deliberately targeted black communities in promoting Contra cocaine trafficking).

Several months later Webb discovered that Walter Pincus had worked for the CIA as a young man. Now the national security correspondent for the *Post*, Pincus had written an article in 1967, 'How I Traveled Abroad on CIA Subsidy,' boasting about his service to the intelligence agency at several international youth conferences in the late 1950s and early 1960s, where he spied on both foreign delegations and his American colleagues. Pincus was selected by the *New York Times* in 1975 to review *CIA Diary*, ex-agent Philip Agee's best-selling exposure of the agency. Neither the *Post* nor the *Times* has ever acknowledged Pincus's role as a CIA agent.

The alignment of the national media with the CIA continues to this day. The recent review of *Dark Alliance* in the *New York Times* --one of a handful of such notices in the big business press--is a vicious attempt to kill the book. It declares: 'It is laughable to suggest that today's CIA has the imagination or the courage to manage a cover-up on the scale' documented by Webb. It concludes by denouncing the book's publisher for allowing Webb to get into print at all.



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