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DRUGS FOR GUNS

Big papers give drug story small play

By Jim Naureckas

JOURNALISTS HAVE DOCUMENTED, THROUGH firsthand testimony and confirmations from government officials, that Nicaraguan rebels either participate in or profit from cocaine traffic into the U.S.

But this news did not appear in the influential media outlets that set the bounds of political debate. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and even the *Miami Herald* have limited their coverage of the contra-drug connection to the barest mentions of other people's investigations.

In fact, *New York Times* stories have consistently disparaged allegations of contra drug running. Three stories that ran over one week last month contained some variations on this theme from the July 20 edition: "Investigators, including reporters from major news organizations, have tried without success to find proof of...allegations that military supplies for the contras may have been paid for with profits from drug trafficking."

Without validation by the elite press, crucial evidence of contra drug involvement gets thrown away with yesterday's newspaper, never entering public discourse. Yet this evidence, when assembled, points to a pattern of widespread, officially tolerated

Evidence gets thrown away with yesterday's news.

drug trafficking that may reach the highest levels of the contra hierarchy and into the U.S. government.

The first U.S. report linking contras to drugs came in a Dec. 20, 1985, Associated Press (AP) dispatch by Robert Parry and Brian Barger. They wrote that U.S. and Costa Rican law enforcement officials and American contra supporters told them Nicaraguan rebels in Costa Rica were financing their war through cocaine smuggling. The story also cited a secret CIA report that the contra army ARDE had used cocaine profits to buy \$250,000 in arms.

Hard-hitting as it was, the story distributed by AP was considerably watered down from the reporters' version. According to the September/October 1986 *Columbia Journalism Review*, AP editors omitted, at the U.S. government's request, allegations involving

John Hull, an American rancher who was the CIA's contra coordinator in Costa Rica.

"Hull has enough problems right now," a U.S. official reportedly told AP.

Even in this form, the story almost didn't run. Only the unauthorized release of the story on AP's Latin wires on December 16 forced AP to offer it to their English-language customers, according to the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Freedom frogmen: Seth Rosenfeld of the *San Francisco Examiner* reported on March

16, 1986, that two convicted drug smugglers said they were working for the contra cause. "The money belonged to help the contra revolution," Nicaraguan expatriate Carlos Cabezas testified, before being convicted for his role in the 1983 "frogman case," described as the biggest cocaine bust in West Coast history. (The case involved frogmen retrieving cocaine from a ship in San Francisco Bay.)

Another "frogman" defendant, Julio Zavala, made the same claim, and the U.S. govern-

An inside look at media's contragate mindset

By Joel Bleifuss

UNtil the Iran-contra scandal broke, America's love affair with Ronald Reagan had helped shield him from criticism. So successful was he at blurring the boundary between reality and fantasy that eventually many citizens' perceptions of public events became inured to demonstrable fact. Consequently, administration policies often went unchallenged.

Who's to be indicted for this breakdown in civic consciousness? One party without plausible deniability is the mainstream press, which helped keep the teflon on the presidency.

This culpability was explored by a panel on "Reporting the Iran-contra scandal" at the June 20 Investigative Reporters and Editors Conference in Phoenix. Journalists from *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* gave a rare inside glimpse into how Reaganate news is made news and how—as in the case of contra drug smuggling—it isn't (see accompanying stories).

Arguably the most revealing analysis came from the *New York Times* Iran-contra editor Joel Brinkley, who posed this question to participants: "Why did the press, and the public, and Congress have all this information and just sort of let it slip through their fingers?"

He then offered this example of his own slippage: On Aug. 8, 1985, Brinkley, as one of the *New York Times* reporters responsible for covering the contras, came out with a story that began: "Rebels fighting to overthrow the Nicaraguan government have been receiving direct military advice from White

House officials on the National Security Council, an administration official said.... The operation has been run by a Marine officer who is a member of the NSC." That story, in the words of Brinkley, gave "the bare outlines of everything we have been hearing in these first six weeks of congressional hearings."

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"I wrote that story and didn't follow it up adequately," continued Brinkley. "Five years of the Reagan administration had brought on uncounted—I can't count them—stupidities, blunders, illegalities or apparent illegalities; mining the harbors, preparing an assassination manual for the contras, the Marines in Beirut, you can go on and on and on. And all these things come and they make a splash.

"I am not writing stories to cause parades in the streets, but when you write stories and nobody gives a hoot...you just lose the momentum to keep going with it. And that is not an excuse but that...is an illustration of the mindset that is set in a lot of Washington newspaper offices."

Later Brinkley offered this observation: "Who's to blame? We're all to blame. I think the American public, and Congress as a reflection of it, and the press as an inadvertent reflection of all of that, [all] sort of got suckered by a man with such immense popularity that he acquired a degree of personal power that I don't think we have experienced since Roosevelt.

"Every time we wrote one of the stories," he continued, "the White House would simply offer bald-faced lies and accuse us of being pro-Communist. Maybe I shouldn't care about that, and I don't really, but after

ment appeared to endorse it by returning to Zavala \$36,020 federal prosecutors had seized as drug proceeds at the request of a Costa Rican-based rebel group that claimed Zavala was a contra official. The group, the UDN-FARN, later became the nucleus for Lt. Col. Oliver North's "Southern Front."

Zavala told the *Examiner* he had given \$500,000 to the contras, largely proceeds from cocaine sales.

In the June 23, 1986, *Examiner*, Rosenfeld reported links between the FDN contra army and another major Bay Area cocaine importer, Norwin Meneses. The *Examiner* wrote that Meneses, a Nicaraguan expatriate, was an "organizer and financial supporter" of the contras, employed FDN members in his operations and had met with such top FDN officials as Adolfo Calero and Enrique Bermudez.

In 1986 Jesus Garcia, a Cuban-American mercenary who worked with Hull, began talking about a contra drug connection after being convicted on a weapons charge. "It is common knowledge here in Miami that this whole contra operation in Costa Rica was paid for with cocaine," Garcia told Vince Bielski and Dennis Bernstein, writing in *In These Times* (Dec. 10, 1986). "I actually saw the cocaine and the weapons together under one roof, weapons that I helped ship to Costa Rica."

Guns in, dope out: Other convicts told their stories to news operations like *Newsweek*, the *Wall Street Journal* and CBS' *West 57th*: Gary Betzner and Michael Tolliver, im-

Continued on page 22

a year of contra reporting...when you begin to challenge the White House and get in response accusations and direct lies of the facts, it simply wears you down.... And there begins to grow a seed of doubt in the minds of some editors: 'Is Brinkley really right? What's this about?' That is not a good explanation. But I am human and I did not follow it up...."

Although Brinkley candidly appraised why he and others in the national press did not buck public opinion and portray Ronald Reagan and his administration for the liars they are, he failed to account for the role that same press played in placing the president in that supposedly unassailable position. Nor did he address the problems of an editorial system that failed to give him support when it should have.

And when asked if the ideology of *New York Times* editors influenced decisions on what news is covered and what is not, Brinkley invoked journalistic objectivity.

"That's just nonsense," he responded. "I know of no ideological strictures except my own that dictate how I direct our staff on Iran-contra, and I try to ignore mine, just as we all do in journalism, not always successfully."

Objectivity is itself an ideology in the world of journalism. And it's this ideology that, on the basis of presenting the two sides of every question, obliges the national press—and, it often appears, the *New York Times* in particular—to rely on unidentified administration sources to give that other side. For the press to continue granting credence to these sources during the current scandal, when most White House officials are now on record as public liars, seems risky, if not stupid. □

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CIA agent's lawyer moves for secrecy in Christic suit

By Dennis Bernstein, Richard Ryan and Peter Shinkle

WASHINGTON, D.C.

LAST YEAR RET. GEN. RICHARD SECORD HIRED Glenn Robinette to discredit the Christic Institute's suit against him. (This was in addition to asking Robinette to build a security fence around Lt. Col. Oliver North's home.) On July 24 a District of Columbia court heard Robinette's attorneys argue that their client's pretrial testimony in the suit should be closed to the public and press in order to protect Robinette's reputation and privacy.

The Christic suit claims that North, Secord, Albert Hakim, Robert Owen, Theodore Shackley, Adolfo Calero and 24 others in the contra-support network planned the 1984 bombing of defecting contra leader Eden Pastora that killed eight people. The civil suit, brought under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) act, also alleges the defendants ran a cocaine-smuggling operation out of Costa Rica and planned to assassinate the U.S. ambassador there in order to provoke U.S. intervention in Nicaragua.

Robinette, a former CIA agent who allegedly no longer works for the Company, is not a defendant in the Christic suit, but his testimony is important because the congressional hearings uncovered that Secord had paid Robinette more than \$60,000 to gather derogatory information about the plaintiffs

and to bribe as-yet-unidentified people.

Political analysts believe Robinette's deposition could be explosive because of his relationship to Secord, North and Oliver "Buck" Revell, the senior FBI representative on the National Security Council's "Operations Sub-Group" on terrorism.

"Not one question": According to an FBI report released by the Iran-contra select committees, North met with Robinette on July 17, 1986, to discuss a former contra sup-

CONTRAGATE

porter who was talking publicly about North's involvement in a network that was allegedly resupplying the contras and smuggling cocaine from a base in Costa Rica. North asked Robinette to meet with the FBI concerning the former contra supporter, Jack Terrell. Later that evening Robinette met with the FBI.

A July 22, 1986, FBI report outlines a discussion between North and two FBI agents about the former contra Terrell, although it does not explain the FBI's reason for investigating Terrell. The same two agents interrogated Terrell in August 1986, ostensibly about a threat on the life of the president in July of last year.

But during 12 hours of questioning and a polygraph test over two days, "not one question did they ask me about the president," Terrell told *In These Times*. Seven people attended the interrogation, although only the

two FBI agents identified themselves, according to Terrell, who noted the session was more like a "political debriefing" than an investigation.

Terrell, who once led Miskito Indians against the Nicaraguan army, said the event "may have been intended to intimidate me."

The possibility of FBI participation in the attempt to discredit the lawsuit is also raised by the July 19, 1986, entry of the name of Assistant FBI Director Revell in Robinette's appointment calendar, two days after North met with Robinette.

Revell's involvement with Robinette was not discussed during the open sessions of the Iran-contra hearings. Said Christic attorney Lanny Sinkin, "[The Congress] didn't get who he talked to, who he paid, what he got, what other activities he engaged in—we will go after all that information."

On July 1 Robinette was subpoenaed by the Christic Institute to give a sworn deposition on July 23. But on July 22 his lawyers filed a motion to restrict that deposition by closing it to the press and public.

On July 24 Christic attorney Daniel Sheehan told U.S. District Court Judge Joyce Green that Robinette's testimony was "of vital public importance" and should remain open. Sheehan argued that during previous testimony in Costa Rica, an attorney for the defendants had agreed that all depositions would be public because a "favorable" local newspaper wanted to cover them. But Thomas C. Green, the man who helped North and Fawn Hall destroy documents and the attorney for Secord, Hakim, Shackley and other defendants, said the lawyer who made that agreement, Florence Snyder, was not "competent" to do so.

Robinette's attorney, Mark Tuohey, told

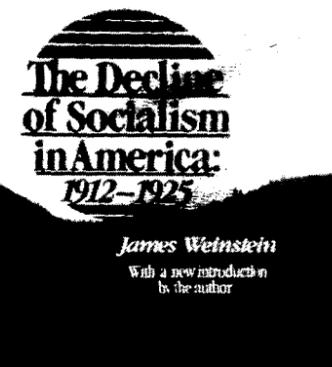
the court that *New York Times* statements falsely attributed to Robinette had damaged his client's reputation. He said his motion to restrict discovery was intended to avoid a repetition of that "abuse."

Change of heart: Tuohey charged that the Christic Institute attorneys solicited the press to attend the deposition. In response, Sheehan told the court that he "received requests" from several news organizations to attend. He also asked the court to consider why Robinette would suddenly become "shy" of the media now, after he had granted interviews to the Associated Press and CBS News earlier in the year.

Attorney Stephen Kohn, who represented *In These Times*, the *Village Voice* and New York City's WBAI radio in a friend-of-the-court appearance, said, "We believe there is a First Amendment right to access to depositions...in cases concerning the public interest, such as this case, which concerns the assassination of a foreign leader abroad by alleged representatives of our government."

Judge Joyce Green, sensing acrimony between the parties, suggested Robinette's deposition might be held in a courtroom monitored by a magistrate to avoid a "circus-like atmosphere." Both sides said they would consider such a resolution of the dispute. Green will postpone her decision until a ruling in the same suit is made by U.S. District Court of South Florida Judge James L. King. On July 27 in Miami the defendants made four motions to restrict discovery in the case. King is expected to announce his decision in early August.

Freelance writers Dennis Bernstein, Richard Ryan and Peter Shinkle are part of *In These Times*' ongoing investigation of the contragate morass and various associated scandals.



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