

## The NSC's Panamanian dope connections

by Gretchen Small

On Jan. 8, the *Wall Street Journal* revealed that Adm. John Poindexter's National Security Council used the services of Steven Samos, one of Panama's top narcotics mafia drug-money launderers, to administer its Contra resupply operation. That bit of news proves, down to the pay-stub, *EIR's* charges that:

- the National Security Council and other corrupted elements of U.S. intelligence knowingly used the narcotics mafia to set up and supply the Contras;
- the same group set out to destroy any political force in Central America hostile to the Contra policy and/or the drug trade on which that policy depends; and,
- for that reason, the commander of Panama's Defense Forces, Gen. Manuel Noriega, was made the target of an international slander campaign last year, designed to eliminate him as a leading opponent of these policies.

Samos is linked to the Contra operation, according to the *Journal* report, in two ways. His services were used to create a Panamanian-registered company, Amalgamated Commercial Enterprises, in November 1984. Amalgamated, run by "former" Samos employees, then provided "an important link in the private network resupplying Nicaraguan insurgents." The specific assignment of Amalgamated, was to help "administer an extensive airlift operation from [El Salvador's] Ilopango military base" to the Contras. That resupply operation broke into the public eye on Oct. 5, 1986, when Southern Air Transport's plane was shot down over Nicaragua. It has since become known that retired U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord ran the Ilopango supply route, in coordination with the NSC's Lt. Col. Oliver North.

Samos's specialty is creating shell-companies such as Amalgamated for mafia operations. He formally "sold out" of his businesses to go into retirement in December 1983, after learning that a federal grand jury in Miami was investigating his part in a drug ring known as the Fernández marijuana syndicate. He "retired," simply by creating a shell company for himself, International Management and Trust Company (Intertrust), run by his employees, so that he could hold on to his position as the largest shell-company-selling

operation in Panama.

Samos also has "extensive dealings" with Panama's Banco de Iberoamerica, which "sources believe may have been used in the Contra money trail," the *Journal's* intelligence sources add.

### A dope 'democracy'

Samos is featured in *EIR's* June 1986 *White Paper on the Panama Crisis: Who's Out to Destabilize Panama and Why*. That report documents his role as the bagman for drug-runners now leading Panama's "democratic opposition" movement, from their posts at the head of Panama's opposition daily, *La Prensa*. Samos's business partners at *La Prensa*—Winston Robles and Roberto Eisenmann—have raised a hue and cry at home and abroad against Panama's military for "repressing" them, the self-proclaimed "representatives of the people."

That dope dealers cry "repression!" when their operations are hit, is to be expected. What made the Panama case unusual, and caused *EIR* to issue its report, was that high-level U.S. officials took up the mafia's campaign against the military, and presented it as *U.S. government policy*.

In its report, *EIR* warned that "Sen. Jesse Helms, the U.S. State Department, and sections of the Reagan administration, have joined in a campaign to overthrow the government and Defense Forces of the Republic of Panama. . . . If allowed to continue, the destabilization campaign of Helms and the liberals will hand the Panama Canal over to Soviet-directed narco-terrorists—without the Soviets having to spend the cost of a bullet."

Today, the names of those who led that campaign, are found daily in the press, as leading players in the international underworld of drug- and arms-dealing exposed in Irangate. Former National Security Adviser Admiral Poindexter, who oversaw U.S. dealings with "moderate" Iranian terrorists, traveled to Panama in December 1985, to deliver the message that the United States wanted General Noriega out of the way. Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, known as the "field marshal" of the Contras, testified as the administration's star witness in Senator Helms's congressional hearings, demanding that Panama's Defense Forces be weakened, "if civilian constitutional rule is to prosper." Behind the scenes, the same CIA networks running the Iran caper, pumped out reports that General Noriega ran drugs, while claiming that the proof was too "classified" to publish. Publicly, it was former National Security Council staffer Norman Bailey who took the point for this bankers' wing of the intelligence community, demanding that the bankers' man in Panama, Nicolás Ardito Barletta, be returned to power as President. Bailey's business partner is former CIA director William Colby, the man who ran the Operation Phoenix assassination program during the Vietnam War.

Did they know they were dealing with drug-runners? Yes! After all, Ardito Barletta, the former World Bank vice-

president and an advocate of legalizing narcotics, was the man who created Panama's offshore banking center as "more secret than Switzerland," to service the billions from South America's cocaine boom. Documentation of the drug mafia activities of Samos and his "opposition" associates was available in court papers and government documents by the time the U.S. officials demanded that the *La Prensa* opposition be given power.

Furthermore, Samos's role in the dope trade was known by federal authorities at the time that Amalgamated was created for the Contra operation. Amalgamated Commercial Enterprises was established in November 1984, through Samos's people. Less than one month later, on Dec. 12, 1984, U.S. federal authorities issued a 30-count indictment against Samos's business partners, the Fernández drug ring, a group which admitted to having brokered the sale of 1.5 million pounds of Colombian marijuana in the United States between 1977 and 1981. The federal grand jury which produced the indictment against the Fernández syndicate had been sitting for nearly two years, and Samos, who had agreed to turn state's evidence, on the condition that his closest partners receive immunity from prosecution, was the star witness in the case.

Other federal investigations into Samos's activities uncovered several dope mafia operations for which Samos—today free to travel in the United States as a "protected" government witness—provided his services. But it is in the Fernández case, that the leaders of the "get Panama" campaign are caught attempting to install the drug mob in power in a friendly nation.

The indictment charged that the Fernández mafia formed "a group of individuals and entities, foreign and domestic, associated in fact for the purpose of importing and distributing marijuana, laundering the proceeds and profits, and investing the monies derived from marijuana importation and distribution through the use of foreign and domestic corporations, financial institutions, and business entities utilized to conceal the true owners of the acquired assets and the true source of the finances for the acquisition of these assets." As Samos later testified in court, "My purpose was to take [the mob's money] to Panama, launder it, and send it back in a clean form. . . . We opened a whole chain of bank accounts in Miami in different banks, either in our respective names as individuals or as trustees, or mostly for a group of Panamanian companies which I had then available in Panama."

One of those banks was Banco de Iberoamerica.

Helping Samos transfer the money to Panama (sometimes by the suitcase-full) was Ivan Robles, whose lawfirm, Robles & Robles, had worked closely with Samos's shell-company business since Samos married Ivan's sister Alma, in 1960. Robles & Robles maintained its offices just a few doors down from Samos.

The other Robles in the lawfirm? Winston Robles, then editor-in-chief, today contributing editor, of *La Prensa*. The

lawfirm was up to its neck in the Fernández syndicate, in all aspects, including advising Samos on how to handle the Colombian Gaviria gang. In the international law directory Martindale-Hubbell, Robles & Robles lists as its references, Banco de Iberoamerica and one Dadeland Bank.

Dadeland Bank also figures prominently in the Fernández syndicate. Fernández had bought shares in Dadeland back in 1976, and it was there that Ivan Robles opened a strong-box to deposit the earnings of the Fernández trade, before transfer to Panama. One-third owner of Dadeland Bank is Roberto Eisenmann, the owner of *La Prensa*, today the paper's editor-in-chief, and rumored to be planning to announce soon his candidacy for President of Panama, as the "unity" candidate of the opposition in the 1989 elections!

### The Contras in the Spadafora case

Samos testified also that the third courier of the syndicate's dope money, along with himself and Ivan Robles, was Panamanian lawyer Alvin Weeden Gamboa. Weeden had been a political associate of Roberto Eisenmann and Winston Robles for over 10 years, going back to the mid-'70s, when the three founded a "social democratic" opposition group, the Popular Action Party (PAPO). Most recently, PAPO made the headlines in Panama as one of three parties opposing joint U.S.-Panamanian military exercises. *EIR's White Paper* details the Weeden family's drug-money laundering operations in Costa Rica, centered around Banco Weeden International.

Weeden, in turn, brings the story back to where we started: the tie between the Contras and the Panama campaign. Weeden was a close associate of Hugo Spadafora, the Panamanian terrorist/gun- and drug-runner turned Contra, who has become the cause célèbre of the witchhunt against the Panamanian military led by *La Prensa*, Abrams, Helms, et al. In January, *Readers Digest* went so far as to call Spadafora "a fiery idealist!"

Spadafora was no one's hero, until he was found beheaded in September 1985. He spent his life as a professional guerrilla, moving into any ideological camp without discrimination. During the Sandinista insurgency, he fought with Eden Pastora in the Southern Front, funded by the Costa Rican business partner of Robert Vesco, former President "Pepe" Figueres. That over, he contacted Qaddafi, promising to supply insurgents in El Salvador and Guatemala. Then he became a Contra, offering his services as a weapons procurer, first to Eden Pastora in ARDE, then to Brooklyn Rivera's Misurata, and was negotiating work with the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN—one of the Contra groups) at the time of his death. When he died, he was also working with Colombian and Bolivian dope kings, including Alberto Audemar, an arms salesman for the Colombian guerrillas and mafia.

It was Weeden, the Fernández syndicate's courier, and Spadafora, a mafia weapons dealer, who charged that Panama's General Noriega ran drugs.