

## Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

### Noriega: It's Bush who's the pusher

*The Panama invasion was to cover up Bush's "dirty dealings," charged the general on the Larry King Live show.*

General Manuel Noriega revealed for the first time on April 15 that the 1989 invasion of his country was ordered by President George Bush "to hide the dirty dealings that Bush did. They flew weapons to the Contras and were bringing back drugs to the United States," Noriega told journalist Larry King in an interview televised worldwide by CNN.

Noriega, who for many years had headed Panama's intelligence services, told King that he had had a cooperative relationship with the CIA, but things turned sour over his opposition to the Reagan-Bush policy toward Nicaragua.

"It wasn't just the Contras that were the problem," said Noriega. "The problem was also the Panama Canal. I was an obstacle to the plans of the Reagan and Bush administrations" not to hand over the canal to Panama by the year 2000. Noriega is currently jailed in Miami as the only prisoner of war in the United States, in violation of the Geneva Convention.

Noriega's bombshell revelations confirm charges uncovered during the 1980s Congressional Iran-Contra hearings, about the guns-for-drugs Contra resupply operation run out of the White House by Lt. Col. Oliver North, under the supervision of then-Vice President Bush, a former Director of Central Intelligence.

Similar charges surfaced briefly during Noriega's 1991 trial in Miami. There, convicted drug pilot Floyd Carlton admitted that pilots employed by him to deliver "humanitarian aid" to the Contras, under a State Department contract administered by former

Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, were returning to the United States loaded with cocaine.

However, U.S. District Judge William Hoeweler cut off Carlton's testimony during the trial.

Abrams, who pled guilty to two counts stemming from his involvement in the Contra affair, got a Presidential pardon from Bush, on Dec. 24, 1992, just before Bush left office.

Noriega's interview was the second time in less than a week that the Bush name was linked to drug charges. On April 10, the Venezuelan press reported that Cuban-Venezuelan banker Orlando Castro, who was just arrested in Miami along with his son and grandson for illegal banking activities, had escaped a 1990 investigation into money laundering, due to the intervention of "the son of the then-President of the United States, George Bush."

The protection reportedly came via Miguel Recarey, a business associate of Orlando Castro, who is supposedly friendly with one of the younger Bushes. The press accounts didn't specify which son was involved, although it is speculated that Jeb Bush, the former Florida gubernatorial candidate, was meant.

It so happens that banker Castro, who, according to published reports, is linked to both the Medellín and Cali cocaine cartels, is tangentially connected to the Noriega case.

In 1994, Castro hired Miami lawyer Joel Rosenthal to defend him in a lawsuit. A former Assistant U.S. Attorney, Rosenthal had gone to work for the other side, after leaving his job as

a federal prosecutor. By the time he took on Castro's case in 1994, Rosenthal was virtually a full-time employee of the Cali Cartel—and not just for legal work. Last year, Rosenthal pled guilty to money-laundering charges. According to the indictment, Rosenthal also arranged payments for the families of jailed drug dealers and served as a go-between for cartel kingpins, such as the brothers Miguel and Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, even delivering death threats for them.

It was Rosenthal, acting on behalf of the brother of Cali's number three, the recently deceased Julio Santacruz Londoño, who served as the intermediary for the secret deal the U.S. government cut in 1991, during the Bush administration, with the Cali Cartel. The deal was to procure the perjured testimony of former Panamanian diplomat Ricardo Bilonick, as the prosecution's "dynamite witness" against Noriega.

Bilonick, one of only four witnesses—of a total of 56 presented by the prosecution—who actually knew Noriega, got just three years for smuggling 22 tons of cocaine into the United States, in exchange for his testimony against Noriega. As part of the deal, the government also "brought his mistress over from Colombia," as well as his wife and children, Noriega told Larry King.

"I knew that he was lying and the government knew that he was lying," Noriega said.

However, Judge Hoeweler ruled on March 27 against granting Noriega a new trial, even while admitting that his due process rights were probably violated by the secret deal. Hoeweler said he found "troubling" the evidence that Bilonick was paid a \$1.25 million bribe by the Cali Cartel to testify against Noriega, but he didn't think that a jury in a new trial would reach a different verdict.