

Bush's Contras launched U.S. crack epidemic

by Jeffrey Steinberg

During much of the 1980s, Vice President George Bush presided over the Reagan administration's secret war in Central America, under formal authority spelled out in a pair of 1981 National Security Decision Directives, NSDD 2 and 3. Under these orders, Bush headed a little-known White House unit called the Special Situation Group, and a subsidiary working group called the Crisis Pre-Planning Group. The secretary of the CPPG was the infamous "Cocaine Colonel," Oliver North. The chief operations officer for Bush's secret team was former CIA officer, and then-Bush national security aide, Donald Gregg. This apparatus ran the Nicaraguan Contra "support" operations throughout the Reagan administration, with the aid of the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department, and other government agencies, as well as a host of private and quasi-government fronts, collectively known as the "secret, parallel government."

Now, as the result of some stellar investigative work by a team of reporters from the *San Jose Mercury*, led by Sacramento, California correspondent, Gary Webb, new evidence has been uncovered, that throughout the 1980s, Bush's Nicaraguan Contra operatives flooded the streets of Los Angeles and other American cities with cheap "crack" cocaine, fueling a spread of murderous urban gangs into every inner city in the country. In return for their indispensable role in fostering the "crack" epidemic, Bush's legions generated hundreds of millions of dollars to purchase weapons for their war against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua—which, in turn, was involved in some of the same cocaine trafficking.

In a three-part series over Aug. 18-20, 1996, the *San Jose Mercury* exposed an incredible triangular business relationship between two of the top leaders of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) in California—one of whom was a long-standing big-league cocaine trafficker—and a Los Angeles drug dealer, who at one point was pouring millions of dollars a day in crack cocaine into the hands of the Crips and the Bloods, two of Los Angeles' most feared street gangs.

Bush's footsoldiers

According to the *Mercury's* year-long investigation, including scores of government documents, court transcripts, and interviews, the three men who led the West Coast Contra-cocaine connection were:

- Norwin Meneses, a 48-year-old Nicaraguan, who has been in the cocaine-smuggling business, in partnership with

Colombian drug dealers, since 1972. In 1979, despite extensive knowledge of his drug-trafficking activities by U.S. authorities, Meneses was allowed to enter the country as a political refugee from the Sandinistas. He immediately set up shop in the San Francisco Bay area, smuggling thousands of kilos of cocaine into the United States over the next five years. When the FDN was founded in August 1981, as the major military wing of George Bush's secret war against the Sandinistas, Meneses was appointed FDN chief of "intelligence and security" in California, directly under Col. Enrique Bermúdez, the military head of the Contras. Meneses' real work for the Contras involved the sale of cocaine to generate cash for the FDN's weapons purchases. According to the testimony of Enrique Miranda, Meneses' emissary to the Colombian cocaine cartels, Salvadoran Air Force planes flew to Colombia to pick up cocaine shipments, and then flew the drugs into military air bases in Texas.

- Danilo Blandón, from a wealthy Managua family, with a master's degree in marketing. Blandón was recruited to work for Meneses in the West Coast FDN cocaine ring, after he fled Nicaragua in the late 1970s. He became Meneses' wholesale distributor in the Los Angeles area, and was the architect of the scheme to flood Los Angeles' South-Central ghetto, and nearby Compton, with very cheap cocaine. Blandón was indicted for cocaine trafficking in 1986, but the federal government intervened and the case was never unsealed. When he was eventually arrested for drug money laundering in 1992, the Justice Department intervened to have his sentence reduced, and to hire him as an undercover informant.

- Ricky "Freeway" Ross, a black cocaine dealer from South-Central, who became Meneses and Blandón's partner. By buying cocaine at drastically reduced prices from the two, Ross was able to introduce the drug, previously too expensive for the ghetto "market," into Los Angeles. When crack cocaine hit the streets in the mid-1980s, Ross created a near-monopoly, selling as much as \$2-4 million a day to the Crips and the Bloods, according to court records obtained by the *Mercury* investigative team.

According to some of the documents released by the *Mercury*, White House officials, including Oliver North deputy Rob Owen, were fully aware of the San Francisco-headquartered Contra cocaine connection, but made no effort to stop it until 1987, when the Congress terminated the Boland Amendment, which had forbidden the CIA from supporting the anti-Sandinista insurgency, and turned on the cash spigot. During Oliver North's unsuccessful 1994 campaign for the U.S. Senate seat from Virginia, former Drug Enforcement Administration agent Celerino Castillo, who had been based in El Salvador during the mid-1980s, provided an eyewitness account of North and Bush's drugs-for-guns operations, at Ilopango Air Base. The *Mercury* revelations corroborate Castillo's information, and shed light on one more facet of the Contra cocaine connection.