

# Bush's friends ran drugs in Panama

by Carlos Wesley

On Dec. 20, 1989, President George Bush went on television to say that he had ordered U.S. troops into Panama "to combat drug trafficking" by "the dictator of Panama, Gen. Manuel Noriega." As usual, Bush lied.

As everyone knows, the crack cocaine epidemic has not abated in the nearly seven years since Noriega was seized and made a U.S. prisoner of war. If anything, it has gotten worse. And not just in the United States. In Panama, where there were few cocaine users before the invasion, a recent study showed that 8% of patients admitted to hospital emergency rooms had consumed cocaine, or crack cocaine—nearly double the highest rate of consumption anywhere else in Ibero-America.

The entire Bush operation against Noriega was aimed at easing, not ending, the flow of drugs. Virtually every official of the Bush administration involved in the "Get Noriega" effort, was up to his nose in drugs or drug traffickers. Attorney General Richard Thornburgh, who oversaw the indictment of Noriega and provided the legal pretext for the invasion, the so-called Thornburgh Doctrine, saw two of his own top aides convicted for using and/or trafficking cocaine, including Henry G. Barr, his assistant when the indictment against Noriega was drafted.

Fawn Hall, the secretary of the most infamous of the Iran-Contra figures, Lt. Col. Oliver North, admitted to Drug Enforcement Administration investigators that she had frequently used cocaine while working for North at the National Security Council. At the time, her boyfriend was Arturo Cruz, Jr., son of leading Contra Arturo Cruz, Sr. Ironically, Hall fell victim to the plague her boss's and her boyfriend's partners set loose against black ghetto residents, and by 1994 she was a crackhead, prowling the back alleys of Los Angeles in search of a fix.

Noriega incurred Bush's wrath because he refused to go along with Bush's drug-running Contra operation.

On Dec. 12, 1985, Adm. John Poindexter, North's superior at the National Security Council and an architect of the Contra policy, met in Panama with Noriega. Capt. Moises Cortizo, who served as the interpreter, said that Poindexter walked in saying he came with "precise instructions" for the Panamanian Defense Forces to "play a leading role against the Nicaraguan Sandinista regime," or else. "Noriega categorically rejected Poindexter's disrespectful behavior," said Cortizo. "Since then, we have been suffering the consequences."

Poindexter already had his man in Panama: Hungarian-American Stephen Samos. An admitted drug-money-launderer and drug-trafficker with ties to the Colombo U.S. organized crime family, Samos was used by Poindexter to set up Amalgamated Commercial Enterprise in Panama in 1984, to serve in the Contra resupply operations and the shipment of weapons to Khomeini.

By the time he was recruited by the Bush gang, Samos had already been indicted in the Sunshine Bank of Miami case, as part of the Tony Fernandez drug syndicate. Samos plea-bargained himself out of that fix, and arranged immunity for other key participants, all leaders of the Bush-organized Panamanian anti-Noriega opposition, including: Samos's ex-wife Alma Robles and her two brothers, Winston and Ivan; banker and publisher Roberto "Bobby" Eisenmann, owner of *La Prensa*; and Eisenmann's partners in the drug money-laundering Dadeland Bank of Miami, Carlos Rodríguez, and Guillermo "Billy" Ford. Ford was later made vice president in the government of drug-cartel operatives that Bush installed in Panama following the invasion.

On June 12, 1986, six months after Noriega said no, Poindexter made good on his threat: *The New York Times* published a story written in the basement of the White House, but signed by Seymour Hersh, accusing the drug-fighting Panamanian leader of being a drug kingpin.

## High priced witnesses against Noriega

Poindexter, who kept Bush fully briefed on every step of the dirty Contra dealings, wasn't the only one to make common cause with narcos.

According to the May 26, 1996 *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Carlos Lehder, the murdering drug-lord once considered America's public enemy No. 1, had begun cutting a deal with U.S. authorities "that would eventually land him in the Federal Witness Protection Program," even before his capture by Colombian authorities in 1987. As soon as he was extradited to the United States, Lehder began to get special treatment, including a two-cell unit at the federal penitentiary in Marion, Illinois, and a phone.

"There he made contact with aides to Vice President George Bush," who agreed to reduce his sentence for testifying against Noriega. "Lehder admitted he had no direct contact with Noriega," and his "rambling" testimony "was so incoherent the judge considered ordering a psychiatric examination," the paper said. Nonetheless, his family was resettled in the United States at taxpayers' expense, and he kept his drug money.

According to documents recently filed with the U.S. Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals, Bush officials also arranged with the Cali Cartel to pay government witness Ricardo Bilonick \$1.25 million to testify against Noriega. As part of the deal, the sentence of Luis "Lucho" Santacruz Echeverri, brother of one of the cartel leaders, was reduced. Assistant U.S. Attorney Pat Sullivan admitted under oath earlier this year, that Lucho Santacruz was "our intermediary, our agent."