

## Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

### Bush's boy Barletta and drugs

*One reason Bush invaded Panama was to avenge the ouster of Barletta, candidate of the CIA and the drug cartels.*

**T**he Bush administration invaded Panama to make that country safe for drug trafficking. Although much of the relevant information was suppressed by federal Judge William Hoeverler at the Miami, Florida trial of Gen. Manuel Noriega, sufficient evidence did come out to warrant a congressional investigation or the appointment of a special prosecutor. But neither George Bush's Democratic Party opponents nor the major U.S. media have said a word on this issue.

Take the case of Nicolás Ardito Barletta. In the speech he delivered at his sentencing on July 10, General Noriega said that, among the evidence the defense team was not allowed to present at the trial, there was "the trip to Washington in 1984, where the United States chose and gave its backing to Barletta as the presidential candidate against Arnulfo Arias."

Who is this man Barletta and why was he so important that the U.S. government would pressure the Panamanians to make him their President? To understand that, one must understand Panama's place in the international drug-trafficking chain. Panama does not grow drugs, and before the invasion, it had no drug-processing laboratories. While drug consumption has skyrocketed since the invasion, from the cartel's standpoint it is not a major market because of its small population. But Panama is a transshipment point and one of the world's premier drug money-laundering centers.

The man responsible for that is Nicolás Ardito Barletta. Trained in economics at the University of Chicago by drug-legalization advocate George

Shultz, Barletta went back to Panama to run the Bureau of Planning and Administration in the late 1960s under Noriega's predecessor, Gen. Omar Torrijos. At that time, Torrijos was hoping to negotiate with the United States for a new canal treaty to end Panama's semi-colonial status. Those sections of the establishment tied to the New York Council on Foreign Relations and to David Rockefeller's Trilateral Commission, told Panama: "You may have the treaty, but in exchange we want you to establish an international offshore banking center, free from government regulation."

Their boy Barletta delivered. He drafted a law that was passed in 1970, which made Panama, in Barletta's own words, "more secret than Switzerland." Even better was the fact that Panama has no currency of its own; its only money is the U.S. greenback, so the dollars from the cocaine sold to a Wall Street yuppie, or from the crack to fry the brain of a ghetto youth, can go straight into the bank, with no intermediate laundering steps.

His masters rewarded Barletta with a vice presidency at the World Bank in Washington. But his old teacher, Secretary of State Shultz, and others in the Reagan-Bush administrations, including foreign intelligence adviser Henry Kissinger, decided that—to show the rest of Ibero-America how to bend over to the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to implement pro-drug flea market economics—Barletta should be made Panama's head of state in the 1984 election.

The CIA spent thousands of dollars to try to buy the elections for Barletta, as was revealed at the Noriega trial. (Judge Hoeverler ruled that the CIA contributions to Barletta's presidential campaign were "irrelevant.") Also contributing big bucks to Barletta were Medellín cocaine cartel kingpins Jorge Ochoa and Pablo Escobar, who gave him at least \$200,000.

"They want to contribute to your campaign because later they're interested in making certain investments in this country," Barletta was told, according to trial testimony. There is even a photograph of a smiling Barletta receiving a suitcase full of cash from cocaine cartel operative Ricardo TribalDOS.

In any case, his presidency was short-lived. By 1985, opposition to his IMF austerity program forced his resignation. Shultz blamed Noriega for the failure of his former pupil. Nor did Noriega win any favor with the administration by pushing to reform Barletta's banking law and by moving against the drug banks in the 1987 Operation Pisces.

Since the 1989 invasion, some \$12 billion in new deposits have come into Panama's offshore banks, and there is a boom in cash-financed construction of luxury high-rises and offices buildings, mostly from drug money. Last year, Panama experienced a 9.3% growth rate that everyone admits is drug-based, since unemployment is above 30% and the middle-class has been largely wiped out of existence.

What about Barletta? Was he hurt by the revelations that he was getting money from the Colombian drug lords? Hardly. In April, as Noriega's trial was wrapping up, Barletta was an honored speaker at Rockefeller's Forum for the Americas in Washington, sharing the dais with Kissinger and President Bush.