

# 'All North's pilots were drug-runners'

by Edward Spannaus

Evidence continues to pile up, implicating current Virginia senatorial candidate Oliver North and former Vice President George Bush in narcotics trafficking out of Central America during the mid-1980s. The evidence promises to further complicate North's election campaign, in which he is attempting to recast himself as tough on crime and a fighter against drugs.

At a press conference held at Washington's National Press Club on Aug. 2, a former senior U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) officer, Celerino Castillo, charged that massive amounts of drugs were being run out of the air base in Ilopango, El Salvador, the center of North's Contra supply program. "All of his pilots were drug-traffickers," Castillo said. A majority had already been arrested for drug trafficking. "He [North] knew what they were up to and refused to do anything about it."

Castillo, who was the DEA's senior agent in El Salvador from 1985 to 1991, said he had two informants at Ilopango who had access to all the flight plans and the pilots. The informants saw the drugs and the money, and the pilots talked freely about the cocaine they were taking to the United States. When the DEA ran the names of the pilots through a computer, "every single one of them was documented as a narcotics trafficker in DEA files."

Castillo's book, *Powder Burns: Cocaine, Contras and the Drug War*, co-authored with David Harmon, has just been released. In it, Castillo reports that from the moment he arrived in Central America in October 1985 to take charge of DEA operations in El Salvador and Honduras, he was inundated with evidence that the Contra resupply base at Ilopango Military Air Field was a hub of cocaine trafficking.

## Where was George?

The trail from Ilopango leads directly back to George Bush. By the time Castillo arrived in El Salvador, the Ilopango operation was already being run by "former" CIA official Felix Rodriguez, who bragged of his close association with the vice president. Rodriguez was operating out of the vice president's office, and regularly reported back to Bush and Bush's national security adviser, Donald Gregg. Rodriguez, a 30-year veteran of the CIA, was supervised by Gregg in Southeast Asia in the 1960s, and they had been close ever since.

In January 1985, Rodriguez met with Bush, in a meeting arranged by Gregg. Rodriguez immediately set to work out

of Ilopango, and by mid-March he had set up a full operation there to provide supplies and aid to the Contras. North, meanwhile, had enlisted Gen. Richard Secord to set up a "private" resupply operation to circumvent congressional restrictions on the CIA, and when North wanted to use Ilopango, he first met with Gregg, discussed the use of Ilopango with him, and then, 10 days later, wrote a letter to Rodriguez asking for his permission for Secord to use the Ilopango base.

So much for any idea that Ollie North ran the Contra operation on his own!

Rodriguez and Bush also figure prominently in the account given by Terry Reed, co-author of the book *Compromised: Clinton, Bush, and the CIA* (New York: S.P.I. Books, 1994), who also spoke at the Aug. 2 press conference. Reed said that Bush was definitely "in the loop" on the Contra drug operation, and that the Israeli agents he worked with in Mexico referred to Bush as "the man in charge" on several occasions. "That didn't shock me," Reed said. "Knowing Bush's background, he should be; he was probably the most qualified to run the Iran-Contra affair."

In *Compromised*, Reed identifies Rodriguez as running a guns-for-drugs operation through Guadalajara, Mexico. Reed discovered a large shipment of pure cocaine at a warehouse at Guadalajara Airport bound for the United States in August 1987. After he confronted Rodriguez, and tried to expose the operation, he was framed up by federal prosecutors in an unsuccessful effort to shut him up.

As to Bush, Castillo recounted the story about when he saw the vice president in January 1986 at a cocktail party at the U.S. ambassador's home in Guatemala City. Castillo identified himself and his job to Bush, and told Bush that "funny things" were going on at Ilopango. Bush "just smiled and walked away," Castillo said.

Asked how it was that North was never prosecuted, Castillo said there was a massive coverup, both from the DEA and from the Iran-Contra special prosecutor. No one ever contacted the DEA agents in Central America to find out what they knew, even though they had submitted numerous reports documenting the narcotics-trafficking activities of participants in the Contra operation.

## Ollie's notebooks

Castillo also pointed to the 543 pages of North's notebooks which make reference to drug trafficking, as identified by the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on narcotics and terrorism. One entry, for July 12, 1985, reads, "\$14 million to finance came from drugs." Others show, Castillo said, that Robert Owen, an assistant to North, "was warning him and advising him that the Contras were heavily involved in narcotics trafficking."

Castillo revealed that North is still under investigation by the DEA, in a case involving weapons smuggling into the Philippines, an operation which also involved known drug traffickers.