

Running With The CIA Story

Readers Put Their Own Spin
On Report of Drug Trafficking

10/11/96

By Howard Kurtz
Washington Post Staff Writer

For more than a month, some journalists and politicians have been trumpeting a San Jose Mercury News series that they say links the CIA to drug trafficking in the United States.

The articles have been hailed by writers, broadcasters and ordinary people who say they show that the government allowed Nicaraguan contras to introduce crack cocaine to inner-city Los Angeles, thereby raising money to fight communism while devastating American communities. Black radio hosts have talked about such charges day after day. Readers have taken to the Internet to denounce the rest of the news media for ignoring the allegations.

There's just one problem: The series doesn't actually say the CIA knew about the drug trafficking, as the author, Gary Webb, admits.

"We've never pretended otherwise," Webb said in a telephone interview yesterday. "This doesn't prove the CIA targeted black communities. It doesn't say this was ordered by the CIA. . . . Essentially, our trail stopped at the door of the CIA. They wouldn't return my phone calls."

To be sure, Webb does not quote any CIA official or any government document in the articles as say-

See MEDIA NOTES, B8, Col. 3

MEDIA NOTES, From B1

ing the agency knew that two contra supporters were selling drugs in Los Angeles, or that proceeds were being used to fund the Nicaraguan rebels.

Yet anyone glancing at the logo for the "Dark Alliance" series—the CIA's insignia superimposed over a man smoking crack—might be forgiven for thinking the two are connected. And Webb's repeated use of the phrase "the CIA's army"—referring to the former Nicaraguan contra supporters who were involved in drug trafficking—clearly suggests that the agency was involved.

Webb writes, for example, that crack "was virtually unobtainable in black neighborhoods before members of the CIA's army started bringing it into South-Central [L.A.] in the 1980s at bargain-basement prices."

Mercury News Executive Editor Jerry Ceppos said he is "disturbed" by the "leap" that many people have made about the CIA's involvement, which he said Webb "was so careful not to make. . . . Certainly talk radio in a lot of cities has made the leap. We've tried to correct it wherever we could. . . . People [have been] repeating the error again and again and again."

He said the series "raised the question" of CIA involvement in drug trafficking and showed "at the very least, the CIA was not very careful about the people with whom it dealt."

The main players in the series are two former contra sympathizers, Oscar Danilo Blandon and Juan Norwin Meneses, convicted dealers who sold drugs in L.A. But Webb said people reading and hearing about the series often find more in it than he claimed—including CIA knowledge of the drug dealing. "A lot of people say the story says a lot of things it doesn't

say. People have spun it that way, either because they believe that themselves or because they want the story to say that so they can say it doesn't prove that at all."

The closest the articles come to directly charging CIA complicity is when Webb quotes ex-convict Blandon, now a government informant, as saying he sold drugs on "orders . . . from other people." Blandon's lawyer told Webb that his client was "probably" involved with the CIA, citing the "atmosphere" surrounding the Nicaraguan rebels. The series says Blandon

Webb says people reading and hearing about the series often find more in it than he claimed.

and Meneses sold cocaine to L.A. dealer "Freeway Rick" Ross, who sold it to the Crips and Bloods street gangs.

The fact that some Nicaraguan rebels were involved in drug trafficking has been known for a decade. The Reagan administration acknowledged as much in the 1980s, but subsequent investigations failed to prove that the CIA condoned or even knew about it. CIA Director John Deutch says there is "no substance to the allegations in the Mercury News" and that the agency had no relationship with Blandon or Meneses, but he has ordered an investigation. The Justice Department is also investigating.

From the beginning, Webb appeared conscious of making news. In a July letter to the imprisoned dealer

Ross, he wrote that "in terms of generating public interest," it was best to publish the series "as near as possible to a newsworthy event—in this case, your sentencing. . . . That way, the San Diego and L.A. papers can use the news angle of the sentencing as a way of getting into the story themselves—without having to give the San Jose Mercury News any credit. (That's the way this business works, unfortunately.)"

The questions surrounding the series haven't stopped some activists and columnists from turning the Mercury News articles into a *cause célèbre*, often going far beyond what the California paper reported.

Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) told a Los Angeles rally last month that "people in high places were winking and blinking, and our children were dying. . . . We are going to make somebody pay for what they did to our community."

Joe Madison, a Washington radio host and NAACP board member, told his listeners yesterday: "Clinton doesn't want to take on the CIA. The Republicans don't want to expose the contras as drug smugglers and thugs. And the CIA doesn't want to admit it trampled all over the Constitution." Madison was arrested with activist Dick Gregory last month in a protest outside CIA headquarters.

Derrick Z. Jackson, a Boston Globe columnist who is black, declared: "The only conclusion is that Ronald Reagan said yes to crack and the destruction of black lives at home to fund the killing of Commies abroad."

Some white journalists have also jumped on the bandwagon. New York Observer Editor Joe Conason praised the "stunning articles," saying: "If Bob Dole or Bill Clinton actually cared about drug addiction . . . they would start asking tough questions about the role of the Central Intelligence Agency."

In Internet postings complaining about the lack of coverage, one person said: "Why is The Post quiet about the CIA/LA Cocaine Connection?" Another questioned whether the paper's black writers have been "muzzled."

In fact, Post columnist William Raspberry has written that he does not know if the charges are true but is struck by the "willingness . . . of so many black leaders to take the story literally." The Post has run three news stories and several items and columns on the controversy. Webb, who has conducted numerous broadcast interviews and is now getting calls from the likes of Montel Williams, sees a clear racial split in the reaction.

"When I've done TV and radio things, the producers who have been pushing the story have been predominantly black or other minorities," Webb said. "They have thanked me. It was networking by minority journalists that got this thing out to the general public."

Conservative journalists, for their part, have dismissed the allegations of CIA involvement as a conspiratorial fantasy. Arnaud de Borchgrave, the Washington Times editor-at-large, said that "the same old pro-Marxist CIA bashers" had "snookered the San Jose Mercury News with a preposterous tale." Tucker Carlson of the Weekly Standard wrote that "after a year of research, Webb came up with no evidence to support his claim."