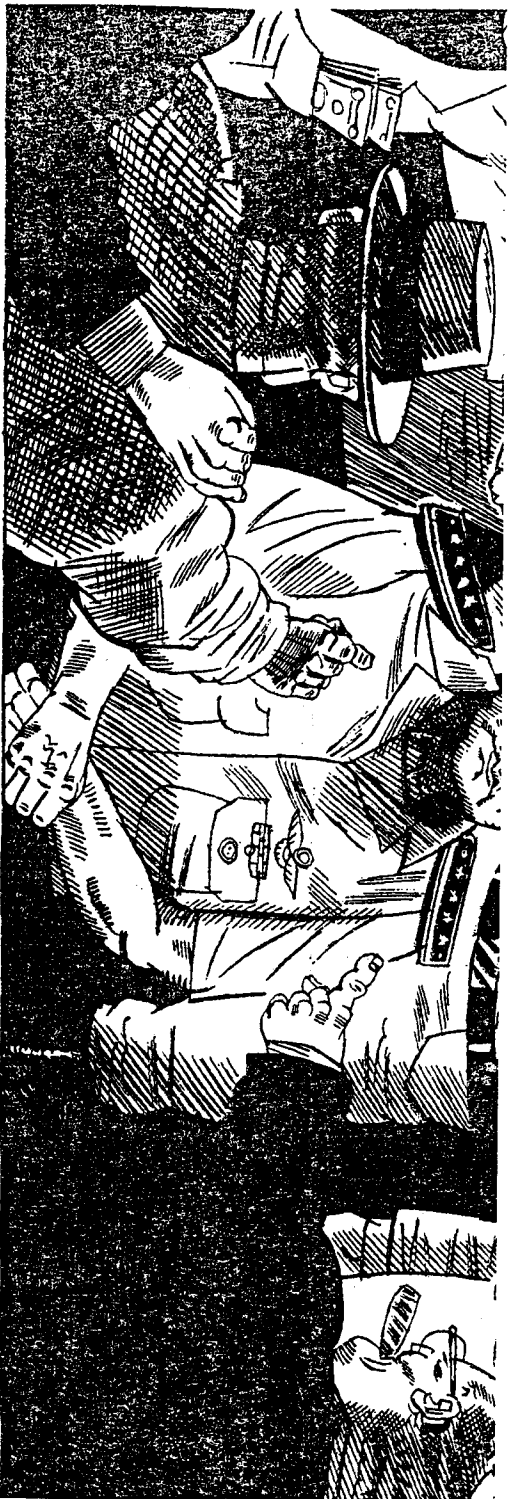




OUTLOOK

Commentary and Opinion



MARTIN KOLOSON FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The Sleaze Connection

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Noriega's Trial Showcases a Network of Smarmy Deals That Underlies the Government's Case

By Guy Gugliotta

THE DRUG TRIAL of Manuel Antonio Noriega has finally begun and will bring justice, one hopes, to one of the least appealing foreign leaders the United States has ever counted as an ally.

Those who welcome the opportunity to throw the book at this ugly man with the pitted face should know that he is probably no more awful than most of the people who are supposed to testify against him—and that one high cost of the prosecutorial effort against Noriega has been to reward some of the smartest dealers in the drug trade.

And those who think the entire Noriega affair is a gigantic conspiratorial whitewash to cover up more than a decade of misdeeds by the U.S. government are also in for a disappointment.

Even a short visit with some of the characters

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who are going to testify at Miami's U.S. District Court shows that the Noriega affair, and Washington's role in it, looks worse—not better—the deeper you dig. In fact, it is hard to imagine a worse performance by the U.S. government—several U.S. governments—over a longer period of time.

We used to like Noriega; then we got impatient with him; then we overthrew him; then we arrested him; now we hate him, and now we're going to try him. This one really stinks, and the smell is rubbing off on all of us. If it shows anything at all, the trial should demonstrate that we get the governments that we deserve.

Many of the outlaws who are going to testify against Noriega are likely to dismiss him as a minor leaguer in the drug business, a buyable official who, for a few hundred thousand dollars—or even a few million—would let the biggest criminals in the world use Panama to transship billions of dollars worth of cocaine to the United States. Noriega was just skimming a little off the top of a very large vat. What's the big deal?

The big deal is that transshipment—finding way

stations along the cocaine trail from South America to South Florida, or South Texas or Southern California—is vitally important for the drug lords. The reason it comes so cheap is that there is so much competition. There are dozens of islands and nations between South America and the U.S. mainland, and every one of them has corrupt officials ready to offer an airstrip, a gas pump or a warehouse in return for a new car or a down payment on a house. *(M.C.I. U.S.M.A. M.F. 1/1/91)*

What made Noriega so attractive to the traffickers, the prosecution will say, is that he could guarantee fast, efficient and regular service because he called the shots in Panama. Why should the cartels bother with a police chief or a farmer when they can put a whole government in their pocket?

Nobody understands the system better than the people who used it. And these are the tattletales that the U.S. attorney's office is going to use to try to put the screws on Noriega.

This is the way drug cases are made in United States in 1991: Let the lower-downs plead out to

See NORIEGA, C2, Col. 1

Sleaze Connection

NORIEGA, From C1

get the higher-ups, then use everyone to make more cases in the future. Prosecutors have discovered that this is the only thing that works, but that doesn't make it pretty to watch.

The setting of a federal courtroom has in fact intensified, not diluted, the reek of the Noriega-and-us thing. Last week, the first of the trial, the jury heard from Max Mermelstein—a convicted shipper for Colombia's Medellín cocaine cartel who has made a second career living clandestinely under the Federal Witness Protection Program and giving testimony whenever a big one comes up.

Mermelstein, arrested in 1985, served two years in jail before flipping to become a federal informant. Since then the government has dropped numerous weapons, drug trafficking and tax evasion charges against him and agreed not to pursue questions about his possible involvement in five murders, including the 1986 killing of drug pilot Barry Seal (a brilliant witness in his day) by a Colombian hit team.

Mermelstein held the original \$500,000 contract on Seal, but has also done quite well since 1987 as a

witness-informant, earning, by his own estimate, \$670,245 from the federal government for living expenses and services. He also makes occasional public appearances and has written a book about his adventures.

Mermelstein had only tidbits to offer the Noriega jury in Miami—he has been out of circulation for years, after all—but he impressed his audience, as usual, with his street-smart New York accent and his wise-guy attitude.

Still, he was only the appetizer, and there is much more to come. Just as famous as Mermelstein, and much more knowledgeable, for instance, is former drug- and gunrunner Floyd Carlton Caceres, whose grand jury testimony formed a big chunk of the indictment against Noriega.

Carlton, a Panamanian, flew the cartel's cocaine and, he says, delivered the cartel's money to Noriega. He has been interviewed countless times, appeared in several trials and starred as an anti-Noriega source in many contexts. He created his first international incident in 1980 when he crash-landed a plane load of M-16 assault rifles he was delivering to El Salvador's guerrillas.

This is just the beginning of a cascade of plea-bargainers; the trial will highlight how drug cases are made in 1991: Plead the lesser de-

fendants to get the big fish, then use the underlings as informants—forever, if you can. As a result, everyone feeds at the same trough.

The feeders make up a rogue's gallery of remarkable sleaze. Among those scheduled to make a cameo appearance is Steven Michael Kalish, another frequent witness arrested for drug trafficking in 1984. He is expected to testify about payments he made to Noriega to allow him to fly marijuana from Colombia's Caribbean coast in and out of Panama on its way to the United States.

There are many more pilots, very popular in drug trials because they know quite a bit about cocaine shipping and because a lot of them get caught. Today's prisoner might very likely become tomorrow's witness.

The jury likely will hear from Tony Aizprua, a onetime Carlton Caceres sidekick who tried to escape the Feds by landing on I-75 in South Florida and running into a swamp. He has received \$510,921 in informant-witness "fees" from U.S. government. Next is Eduardo Pardo, a Noriega co-defendant released from prison after he agreed to testify about flying \$800,000 in drug money from Fort Lauderdale to Panama in 1983.

Roberto Striedinger and Gabriel Taboada, also co-defendants looking for a break, say they witnessed Noriega in the summer of 1983 talking cocaine in Medellín with drug lords Pablo Escobar and Jorge Ochoa. Striedinger, whose name was misspelled in the Noriega indictment,



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gave himself up in 1990 after living for two years on Key Biscayne property once used as a weekend getaway by Richard Nixon.

David Rodrigo Ortiz claims to have taught Carlton how to fly and is serving 14 years in jail in France. He agreed to testify in Miami in return for favors. Prosecutors have also recommended a deal for pilot/co-defendant Daniel Miranda that may get him out of jail after less than a month in prison. In addition, Miranda wants a green card and a pilot's license. Prosecutors are working on it.

The really good, new stuff, however, is likely to come from a pair of prominent non-pilots, co-defendants Lt. Col. Luis del Cid and Ricardo Bilonick. Del Cid, a Noriega protege and erstwhile bagman, is expected to talk about carrying envelopes full of cartel money destined for his boss. He had been looking at 70 years in jail on four counts of drug trafficking and racketeering. Prosecutors dropped three counts, recommended a maximum 19 years on the fourth and have promised not to deport him when he gets out of jail.

Bilonick, a rising star and onetime ambassador-at-large under Noriega's predecessor Gen. Omar Torrijos, surrendered less than a month before the trial. He says, according to the prosecution, that he cut \$10 million worth of drug deals for Noriega with the Medellin cartel.

U.S. law enforcement officials

have been hunting Bilonick for years in connection with a 1,100 pound shipment of cocaine seized in Florida in 1984. But now they have agreed to drop the charge and allow Bilonick to plead to one count of racketeering. A possible 60 years in prison has shrunk to a maximum of 10 with a possibility of parole in seven.

The guess here is that Bilonick will manage to work this down even further in the future. He's bright, brash and glib, a combination of

traits that can go far for a professional witness. Reporters from the 1970s will remember the young Bilonick as a personable diplomat-cum-press secretary at the Panama Canal Treaty negotiations.

But the most ballyhooed debut—is it comes off—is the advertised appearance of Colombian Carlos Lehder Rivas, cocaine transporter extraordinaire, charter member of the Medellin cartel and the biggest drug trafficker ever put behind bars by the U.S. government.

Lehder was sentenced in Jacksonville, Fla., to life imprisonment plus 135 years after a 1988 trial that rivaled the current Noriega proceedings for sheer spectacle. A sociopathic admirer of Adolf Hitler and fluent speaker of at least four languages, Lehder began lobbying for a spot in the Noriega trial less than a month after the general's arrest, sending out letters and angling for interviews after more than a year of silence.

By all accounts, he doesn't have much to offer beyond the contention, according to chief prosecutor Michael Sullivan, that "from Lehder's perspective, Noriega was a nobody. He was in his words 'just a crooked cop.'" What Lehder hopes to get from testifying is unclear. Since sentencing he has been under lockdown at the maximum security federal penitentiary in Marion, Ill. At the very least, one supposes, he will seek a new address.

If all of this makes you feel a bit queasy, it should. Mermelstein testified against Lehder, and now both are testifying against Noriega. If the general is found guilty and if Escobar or Ochoa ever makes it to a U.S. court, expect Noriega to join

this unsavory band of brothers.

Still, there is a lot to dislike about the trial of Manuel Noriega beyond the rogues and cutthroats who will testify in it. Noriega is much more than drugs, much more than his involvement with the Nicaraguan contra war, much more than prurient tales of corruption, double-dealing and sleaze.

The United States—both governments and interested others—knew plenty about Noriega for at least a decade and chose to say nothing. The trial is just one more obscenity on a long, ignominious road.

As far back as 1984 the leaders of the Medellin cocaine cartel—worth billions even then—were hanging out in Panama City and even conducting publicized meetings with top Colombian officials. There wasn't a ripple of interest in the United States, and U.S. officials were pretending it didn't happen.

Prosecutors may chew on 1984 for weeks during the trial, painting Noriega as the Machiavellian facilitator for vast cartel plots to ship

cocaine in and out of Panama. It will be easy to forget that most of what comes out was common knowledge when it occurred.

But Noriega got away with it then, because he was our friend. He was also an intelligence asset—receiving \$320,000 from the CIA and U.S. Army for information, according to U.S. government documents submitted to the court. He let the DEA use Panamanian territory to run countless investigations—the mash notes the DEA sent him will almost certainly be entered as evidence by the defense—as long as they didn't interfere with his own alleged activities. He helped the Reagan administration run guns to the Contras, and he got himself photographed with every high-ranking U.S. official he could lay hands on or drink a Scotch with.

(3) certain when he understood the situation
All of this began at least during the Carter administration when Noriega served as Panama's chief of military intelligence, and for the reason that he contributed to the only thing the United States really cared about—political stability for the area surrounding the Panama Canal.

It is noteworthy that Noriega's decline and fall began only in 1987, not because of drugs and not because of bad vibes from the Reagan administration over the contras, but because Panamanians got fed up and started rioting in the streets, creating an unpleasant and embarrassing atmosphere for the 13,000-strong U.S. forces guarding the canal.

As our clients, Panamanians throughout history have looked to Uncle Sam to arbitrate their disputes, and when Noriega lost control, Uncle Sam switched preference and invasion followed, Gulliver versus the Lilliputians.

This glorious victory was not our finest hour. Panama is almost as much a mess today as it was before Dec. 20, 1990, but the Guillermo Endara government is our horse now, so we're riding it.

Noriega, sitting in the dock in Miami, is probably still trying to figure out what happened. His lawyers like the idea of a conspiracy, that he knew too much about the U.S. government's dirty tricks in Central America. Maybe he shares this view, or maybe he is chalking it off to strange, Anglo-Saxon cultural twists, an analysis that Latins often use when the gringos work a double-cross of this magnitude.

But things aren't likely to clear up much for Noriega during the next few months. Instead, as he watches the jury take sworn testimony from former henchmen, business associates and friends, he will probably ask himself: Why me, and not them?