

Vindicating Gary Webb

Justice Dept. Report Confirms Contra Cocaine Ties

In barely a twitch of the calendar we'll be at the second anniversary of a news paper series that stirred up a huge uproar and saw a news reporter virtually drummed out of the trade. And since, this summer, we've seen other reporters — working for CNN and for the Cincinnati Enquirer — come under savage attack and their careers blighted, it's useful to see the aftermath of the firestorm provoked by Gary Webb's series, published in August of 1996, in the San Jose Mercury News, about the conniving of the CIA in the drug trafficking of Nicaraguan Contras.

Amid furious denials by the Agency, its then-director, John Deutch promised a thorough internal report. At the start of this year, after much delay the Inspector General, Fred Hitz, finally released the first of two volumes, heavily censored.

The censored first volume was made public at the end of January of this year and, far from being an exoneration, proved on close reading to buttress Webb's accusations. In mid-July, the CIA has now launched a repeat of its propaganda maneuver of last December. The second volume of the CIA Inspector General's report has yet to be released, but on July 17 the New York Times published a news report, by James Risen, about it.

Instead of describing the volume's contents, or quoting from it, the Times's story offered no direct quotes, spent only three paragraphs describing its contents, and devoted much space to yet another attack on Gary Webb, replete with an unattributed quote from someone described only as "a US intelligence official", to the effect that the Agency had clean hands.

It should come as no surprise that James Risen should write such a dismissive account. Back in December Risen was working for the Los Angeles Times when he co-wrote an article with Doyle McManus, titled "CIA Absolves Itself of Crack Cocaine Claims". The article quoted unnamed intelligence sources who claimed that the then classified report "concludes that charges that the CIA actively protected drug traffickers in California who funded the Nicaraguan rebels known as Contras are 'without foundation'".

Risen's former employer, the Los An-

geles Times, unfurled its latest assault on Gary Webb with a July 25 story purporting to describe the contents of a review of the Mercury News series by Michael Bromwich, the Inspector General of the Justice Department. Bromwich, a former member of Lawrence Walsh's Iran/Contra team, was asked by Attorney General Janet Reno in September of 1996 to look into charges that federal law enforcement officers and prosecutors exhibited a startling degree of tolerance for the illicit activities of several Nicaraguan exiles who actively backed the Contra cause, namely Danilo Blandon and Norwin Meneses.

The ten-paragraph Times story parroted Bromwich's conclusion that his

"It is also believed by the FBI...that Norwin Meneses was, and may still be, an informant for the CIA", wrote FBI agent Donald Hale in 1988.

review—which had been kept classified since December of 1997— "did not substantiate the main allegations suggested by the San Jose Mercury News articles".

But the Los Angeles Times story, which uses the occasion to take a few more whacks at Webb, shows no evidence that the paper's reporters even opened Bromwich's 500-page report, choosing instead merely to quote from the press release. A close reading of the report reveals that the document is replete with evidence of cocaine-dealing by Contras and Contra supporters who were protected and, at times, even employed by the federal government.

Bromwich strains to clear the Justice Department and its subsidiaries (including the FBI, Immigration and Naturalization Service, Drug Enforcement Agency and US Attorney's Office) of any direct implication in the multi-million dollar drug enterprises operated by Meneses and Blandon. But the Inspector General is forced to concede that the foundations of Webb's story were true. The men had fled Nicaragua to California after the

Sandinista revolution, where they almost immediately joined Contra support groups in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Meneses was allowed to enter the US despite knowledge by the FBI, INS, CIA and DEA of a robust criminal rap sheet, including allegations of drug trafficking. Bromwich confirms that both men attended several meetings with Contra leaders Enrique Bermudez and Eden Pastora, both of whom pleaded for money. The Justice Department review acknowledges that the two men soon developed "a large scale drug ring" and cycled portions of the profits to the Contras. Bromwich concedes that both men were not inconvenienced by prosecution through the height of the Contra war. When Blandon was finally arrested and convicted, he was given an inexplicably light sentence. Both men ended up as paid government informants for the DEA.

The Justice Department's Inspector General attempts to minimize the damage by discounting the amount of drug money the Nicaraguans forwarded to the Contras. Bromwich claimss Webb exaggerated the amount, although he admits that the exact figure remains "unclear". In the end, Bromwich remarks lightly, as though he were discussing charitable dispermments to the United Way, "both gave some contributions to the Contras, in the way any successful exiled businessman might—only in this case, their successful businesses were cocaine distribution networks".

Bromwich portrays Meneses and Blandon as cocaine dealers first, who were also willing to donate "modest sums" to the Contra effort. After 1986 this may have been the case. But in the beginning, according DEA and FBI sources and interviews conducted by the Inspector General, both Meneses and Blandon seem to have played a more active role in the Contra cause. For example, Blandon admitted to the Inspector General's investigators that the reason he got started in the cocaine business was to find a way to send money to the fledgling Contra movement. Blandon said the plan was concocted by Meneses and that he agreed to go along because he "had nothing to lose" and was "willing to do anything to get back to Nicaragua".

A big smoking gun in the report comes with a passage recording that a trusted FBI

informant had told special agent Douglas Aukland in 1986 that Meneses and Blandon were more than bit players, that they were, in fact, "founding members of the FDN" and were steering their drug profits to the Contras. The informant, who was paid \$10,000 by the FBI for the information, said that in January of 1985 Contra leader Eden Pastora met with Blandon in Miami "to seek cocaine funds from Blandon to fund Contra operations". This is no less than three years after the Los Angeles Times and other papers critical of Webb have claimed Blandon stopped sending drug money to the Contras.

Although early press stories by the Washington Post's man on the CIA beat, Walter Pincus, among others, asserted that after an unrelenting search neither Blandon nor Meneses showed up in CIA files, Bromwich's review shows that the CIA had been aware of Norwin Meneses' unsavory reputation since at least 1968. In that year, the CIA was asked what it knew about Meneses by the Nicaraguan attorney general's office. The Nicaraguan authorities were investigating Menese for involvement in the murder of a "money changer". The CIA communicated the request to the FBI, which provided the agency with Meneses' rap sheet of crimes committed on his trips to San Francisco, including arrests for shoplifting, misuse of slot machines and statutory rape.

Then in 1976 the FBI and the CIA developed information that Meneses was the head of a stolen car ring in Managua and that he was also head of an operation that was smuggling cocaine and marijuana into the US inside cars and planes. The Agency also suspected Meneses of arranging the assassination of former Nicaraguan customs official Oscar Reyes. Even so, Meneses was allowed to travel freely in the United States.

The reason Meneses enjoyed such freedom may be hinted at in a 1986 memo written by US Attorney Rodolfo Orjales. Orjales said that Meneses had ongoing dealings with Contra commander Enrique Bermudez, noting that Meneses "dealt with Contra leaders to promote his cocaine enterprise". The memo also stated that Menese "negotiated an arrangement with Honduran military police to export 20 kilos of cocaine a month from Honduras". The memo makes reference to a 1985 FBI report stating that Meneses had a reputation "as a gun runner and may have worked for the CIA".

In his report the Inspector General of

the Justice Department reveals that the FBI, for one, wasn't always pleased to hear disparaging information about Contra drug running, even when it came from people sympathetic to the Contra cause. A retired economics professor named Dennis Ainsworth became disturbed that many of the Contra leaders in the San Francisco area seemed to be involved in criminal enterprises, including the skimming of Contra funds into personal accounts and involvement in the drug trade. Ainsworth took his concerns to the FBI. When he mentioned that Norwin Meneses was involved with drugs, he told the IG investigators that he was shouted down by two FBI agents. "How dare you accuse Mr. Meneses of anything," Ainsworth recalled one of the agents screamed. "There are no files against Mr. Meneses in any government agency. Who the hell are you?"

There is a reason the FBI may have

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been somewhat touchy on the subject. A January 1988 memo written by FBI Special Agent Donald Hale notes, "It became apparent to the FBI that Norwin Meneses was, and may still be, an informant of the DEA. It is also believed by the FBI, SF, that Norwin Meneses was, and may still be, an informant for the CIA." The implications of the explosive memo is not explored by Inspector General Bromwich, who notes the convenient fact that Hale is now dead.

Then there is the intriguing case of Ivan Torres. Torres was a member of the Blandon ring and an official of the FDN's California office. According to a memo in the Inspector General's report, Torres told an informant for the DEA that he had received CIA training and boasted that the "the CIA looks the other way and in essence allows them (the Contras) to engage in narcotics trafficking as long as it is done outside the US." The informant also said that Torres claimed the Blandon ring had been supplying weapons to Eden Pastora.

The DEA agent who prepared the memo of the Torres interview wrote, "the

CIA wants to know about drug trafficking but only for their own purposes and not necessarily to assist law enforcement agencies...*Torres told [DEA] that CIA representatives are aware of his drug-related activities and that they don't mind. He said they have gone so far as to encourage cocaine trafficking by members of the Contras because they know it is a good source of income.*" (Our italics.) This single sentence would surely leap out at any reporter who was taking the trouble to read the report as opposed to the press release accompanying it.

In the end, Bromwich's investigation appears to have turned up an amazing trove of evidence of drug dealing by Contras and their supporters. But the Inspector General failed to develop most of these leads, claiming it was outside his jurisdiction. "It is undeniable that individuals who had ties to the Contras or were Contra sympathizers were convicted of drug trafficking, either in the US or Central America," Bromwich writes. "There is undeniable evidence that certain groups associated with the Contras engaged in drug trafficking. The pervasiveness of such activities within the Contra movement and the US government's knowledge of those activities remains unclear."

Don't wait for those CIA press agents at the New York Times, the Washington Post or the Los Angeles Times to fill in the blanks. ■

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(Adidas, continued from page 1)

weekends. If the prisoner was not capable of meeting the quota, the guards punished him by making him stand up for 24-hour stretches. Inmates were often subject to beating, torture and other inhumane treatment by the guards while making Adidas balls. Targeted prisoners were forced to stand in two lines facing each other and were forced to slap each other's faces. Belts, wood sticks, iron spades and high-voltage electric prods were all used as tools of torture by the guards, punishing the prisoners who were unable to meet the quota of Adidas balls. Screams and moans came from the cells, as if from hell.

"Shanghai First Labor Re-education Camp never paid the prisoners who were forced to produce Adidas products. They were given Chinese Yuan as living subsidies for toothpaste or other necessities. The food prisoners ate was worse than the food that prison guards fed their dogs. Rice with mixed vegetable soup was the main dish, which is made of odious rice, hard to swallow, and dirty vegetable leaves and a bit of salt. Prisoners were allowed to bathe only twice a year."

"Adidas was grossly negligent in choosing its partner, grossly negligent in profiting from slave labor and political prisoners, and in ignoring the horrifying prison conditions of the manufacturing process...The game of soccer brings no happiness to those who are making the balls. There are thousands of slave laborers who are shedding tears and blood in China, though luckily I survived."

YANG QINHANG

"[Prisoners] endured untold pain and suffering and often were tortured by prison guards. We called [the camp] 'Hell on Earth.' Guards kicked and beat inmates, even whipped them, because they did not follow the guard's instructions or failed to meet the daily quota set by the authorities. In order to avoid beatings, they worked very hard, attempting to meet the quota. I often saw inmates collapse because they were too tired to stand up. I remember one time that one of the inmates worked continuously for two days, couldn't work any longer and fell

"The game of soccer brings no happiness to those who are making the balls", says Chinese political prisoner Bao Ge.

to the ground and slept. I was often woken up in the night by the noise and cries of the inmates, and the prison guards yelling from the work place where my colleagues were still busy trying to finish the contracts with Adidas and Shanghai Union. Some prisoners' hands were full of bleeding punctures from needle wounds, which quickly became swollen because there is no medical care. Never will I forget what happened at the camps."

When Bao Ge initially made his charges, Adidas denied that any of its subcontractors had employed inmates at the Shanghai camps. "We respect him as a person but he probably just does not understand the marketing of [soccer balls]," Peter

Csanadi, an Adidas spokesman, said. "We think he probably mixed us up with another company."

But Bao Ge's statement gives a full description of the soccer balls he was making, from one panel with the words "France '98" to another panel with the word "Adidas" clearly printed. Meanwhile, the European Wall Street Journal found a manager of the factory attached to the Shanghai labor camp who admitted that prisoners there stitched together thousands of soccer balls for Adidas's subcontractor. "Some of the work is done by workers and some by criminals undergoing reform through labor", Zhang Caiyu told the newspaper.

Adidas now concedes that some of its contractors "likely" used Chinese prison labor to make commemorative World Cup balls. The company promises to centralize its subcontracting procedures in the future in order to ensure that its products aren't made with slave labor.

That probably won't appease Bao Ge and the other plaintiffs. The complaint compares Adidas executives to the defendants in the dock at Nuremberg, and says that company officials are guilty of "completely perverse and totally criminal" actions.

So it seems that Nike's got competition. And don't go looking to Reebok for moral guidance. The company that hosts an annual ceremony to honor human rights activists was found last year to have used, via a subcontractor, Pakistani children to manufacture soccer balls. It's all part of the new global economy, in which multinationals shop for workers in the world's "free labor markets": the slums of Haiti, the Chinese gulag and the tenements of Brooklyn. For those doing the hiring, bargains abound. ■

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