



Editorial: Another CIA disgrace: Helping the crack flow

Published: Aug. 21, 1996

THROUGHOUT its 49-year history, the CIA has defended having to deal with unsavory characters in the hope of furthering U.S. interests.

This usually has involved dictators and thugs who brutalized people in their own countries, which was bad enough. But now it appears that the CIA has done business with -- and protected -- criminals whose victims were not in foreign lands but in the inner cities of the United States of America.

Mercury News reporter Gary Webb detailed this disgraceful alliance in a three-part series that ended Tuesday. The criminals were key members of the Contras, the CIA-backed army that unsuccessfully battled the socialist Sandinistas in Nicaragua after they deposed dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979.

For almost a decade beginning in the early 1980s, a drug ring based in the Bay Area sold thousands of pounds of cut-rate cocaine to Los Angeles street gangs and then used the lucre to buy arms for the Contras, the so-called freedom fighters that Lt. Col. Oliver North all but canonized during the Reagan administration.

Tom Clancy himself couldn't have written a better story. He certainly couldn't have made up a more tragic ending.

As Webb's series indicated, the Contra-run drug network opened the first conduit between Colombia's notorious cocaine cartels and L.A.'s black neighborhoods. The flood of the insidious white powder helped to make crack affordable in poor communities where its use eventually became epidemic.

The local dealers' profits from the crack sales also made it easier for vicious street gangs such as the Bloods and the Crips to buy Uzis and other assault weapons. That, in turn, made it easier for the gangs to try to slaughter each other in turf wars, taking the lives of children and scores of other innocents in drive-by shootings.

It's impossible to believe that the Central Intelligence Agency didn't know about the Contras' fund-raising activities in Los Angeles, considering that the agency was bankrolling, recruiting and essentially running the Contra operation.

Later, the agency compounded its shame by encouraging U.S. prosecutors to allow drug kingpins to get off virtually scot-free. Agents from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. Customs, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and the California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement have complained that their investigations of key Contra figures were trammled by the CIA.

Take Oscar Danilo Blandon Reyes, the drug ring's Southern California distributor, who was released on unsupervised probation after spending a little over two years in custody. He now spends his time jetting between Managua and San Diego, running a business that exports precious woods -- a business he started with the help of the U.S. Justice Department, which made him a paid informant, to the tune of \$166,000.

This, while thousands of low-level African-American crack dealers rot in prison.

No doubt this country's crack epidemic would have occurred without the Contras. But the CIA-Contra story can only feed longstanding rumors in black communities that the U.S. government "created" the crack cocaine epidemic to kill and imprison African-Americans and otherwise wreak havoc in inner cities.

The CIA has a long history of embarrassing the country it is supposed to work for, from the Bay of Pigs in Cuba to the jungles of Vietnam. But no action that we know of can compare to the agency's complicity, however tacit, in the drug trade that has devastated whole communities in our own country.
