

# CIA caught in a 'crack' conundrum

by Gregory Vistica

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Did the Central Intelligence Agency play a role in launching the crack-cocaine epidemic? A powerful series by investigative reporter Gary Webb of the *San Jose Mercury News* says the answer may be yes – and the charge, reviving old rumours about the agency's complicity in cocaine smuggling during the Reagan administration's covert war in Nicaragua, has angered some black leaders.

"I think it is unconscionable that the intelligence community or the CIA could think so little of people of colour that they would be willing to destroy generations in an effort to try to win the war in Nicaragua," Democratic representative Maxine Waters told *The Christian Science Monitor* last

week. Minister Louis Farrakhan's weekly paper, *The Final Call*, went further. "How the US Government spread crack cocaine in the black ghetto," a recent headline said.

Behind the uproar is a three-part series, *Dark Alliance*, that appeared in the *Mercury News* in mid-August. In it, Webb, a 40-year-old investigative specialist, traces the story of a notorious Los Angeles drug dealer, "Freeway Ricky" Ross, who created one of South-Central's biggest crack-distribution rings in the early 1980s.

As Webb tells it, Ross built his

empire on an abundant supply of cheap cocaine provided by two Nicaraguan refugees, Oscar Danilo Blandon and Juan Norwin Meneses.

Though Meneses denies it, Blandon said they trafficked in cocaine to raise money for the Contra cause. According to the series, Blandon was distributing thousands of kilograms of Colombian cocaine to black dealers like Ross.

Enter the CIA, which at the urging of its director, the late William Casey, was covertly supporting the war in Nicaragua during the early 80s. Mr Casey's obsession with the Sandinistas later led to the Iran-contra scandal.

Webb, citing previously secret reports and sources, suggests the CIA must have been aware of the Nicaraguan connection, which reportedly included shipments on board Salvadoran Air Force planes to an unnamed US Air Force base in Texas.

But that is his supposition: Webb does not say anyone in the

CIA knew about the Nicaraguans' cocaine trafficking or that any CIA operative took part.

So how much did the CIA know, and when did it know it? Black opinion leaders like Ms Waters have mounted a furious campaign to force the agency to tell everything it knows.

A panel discussion on the *Mercury News* series drew an overflow crowd at the Washington Convention Centre, and comedian Dick Gregory and National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People board member Joseph Madison were arrested during a

demonstration at CIA headquarters the day before.

Mr Madison, who hosts a radio talk show in Washington, says: "We're standing up for all the crack babies, all the innocent bystanders hit by stray bullets during gang-related warfare over this poisonous white powder."

Ms Waters has demanded an investigation of the *Mercury News*'s report – and last week she said House Speaker Newt Gingrich promised that the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence would look at the issue.

There is a further twist: A de-

cade after he allegedly retired from the crack business, Ross was set up by a Drug Enforcement Agency informant – Blandon. Ross faces life in prison while Blandon, who served 26 months in jail for drug trafficking, is free in Managua.

Ross' sentencing has been delayed pending his lawyer's demand for more information about Blandon's association with the CIA. CIA director John Deutch, meanwhile, wants a report on the subject within 60 days.

The findings will be required reading for anyone concerned by the rise of crack, but given the CIA's habit of burying its past, undoubtedly not the final word.

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