

The cracks in a drugs 'conspiracy'

A journalist's long-awaited probe has failed to prove a direct link between the CIA and drug-dealing Contras. Robert Lusetch reports

If he is smart enough to know what he has created, Gary Webb is certainly smart enough to not admit to it. After a year-long odyssey, investigating a long-rumoured link between the CIA and the crack cocaine epidemic which has plagued black urban America for the past decade, Webb wrote a controversial three-part series for his newspaper, the *San Jose Mercury News*.

It is a work which, though revealing in many ways, poses more questions than it answers.

In fact, the investigative journalist was most careful with what he did *not* say.

And that is, in short, that he has no evidence that the CIA approved of, or even knew of, a scheme concocted by high-ranking members of Nicaragua's right-wing Contra rebels to dump cheap cocaine on the streets of Los Angeles - which was turned into the highly-addictive crack - in order to fund their counter-revolution against the leftist Sandinistas.

"We've never pretended otherwise," Webb now says.

"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."

Yet the inference of the story's tone was clear, demonstrable in its title *The Dark Alliance* and the

choice of graphic: the CIA logo superimposed over the shadow of a black man smoking crack.

Turning Webb's article into a cause celebre, black America has virtually done away with the need for evidence in condemning the CIA.

"The origin of the crack cocaine trade in this country was led and designed by the CIA and their paid Nicaraguan agents, who introduced crack cocaine into south-central Los Angeles," shouted Congresswoman Maxine Waters after reading the story.

Black Americans have maintained for years that high-level government facilitation, or at the very least indifference, was necessary for anyone to smuggle tonnes of cocaine into Los Angeles.

"This crap has got to come from somewhere. We don't grow cocaine; we don't manufacture guns," says 69-year-old Richard Price, who lives in the gang-infested Watts area.

More radical theories among African-Americans include a government cabal to drug blacks, then give them guns to kill each other; a form of "social engineering".

"Is it a war on drugs or a war on black people?" asked Mark Roberts, who noted blacks were almost wholly both addicts and pushers of crack in America.

One black writer recently argued that white Americans do not especially care about crack pre-

cisely because it is a black problem. He quoted from *The Godfather* to describe white attitudes.

During a moral dilemma about whether the Corleone mafia family should get involved in drugs, another mafioso replied that they could satisfy their conscience by just selling to "the dark people, the coloureds. They are animals anyway, so let them lose their souls".

Bowing to political pressure from the black caucus, President Bill Clinton has ordered an independent inquiry into the allegations. The CIA, while denying the story as "ludicrous", has agreed to an outside investigation and Congress has referred the matter to its powerful intelligence committee.

Yet the irony is that there was not one source in the *Mercury News*' article who could directly link the CIA with two drug-dealing renegade Contras.

Webb's executive editor at the well-regarded northern California newspaper, Jerry Ceppos, even went so far as to say he was "disturbed" by the "leap" being made in regard to the series.

"Certainly, talk radio in a lot of cities has made the leap. We've tried to correct it wherever we could," he says.

Nonetheless, the "leap", and indeed the entire story, has come in for enormous criticism.

Leading news organisations have been conspicuous in their failure to follow up on the piece



Outrage ... Maxine Waters at the Los Angeles site where an alleged CIA drug-runner was said to have sold cocaine. Photo: Reuter

(though this in itself should suggest nothing; remember that no one thought Watergate a story other than the *Washington Post*).

This would tend to indicate they have looked into it and found it unworthy in some manner.

Some have been downright insulted by what *Washington Times* editor-at-large Arnaud de Borchgrave denounced as "conspiratorial fantasy".

"The same old pro-Marxist CIA bashers [had] ... snookered the *San Jose Mercury News* with a preposterous tale," he wrote.

Yet, on review, it seems anything but a preposterous tale.

Webb uncovered, if nothing more, the origins of crack cocaine's insidious spread throughout predominantly black areas in the US.

He found that two Nicaraguans - one a long-time drug trafficker and the other a former member of US-backed Somoza regime - saw

in cocaine an opportunity to raise money for their Contra army in its bloody war with the Sandinistas.

In the late 1970s, cocaine was becoming a popular drug among Americans. But it was prohibitively expensive.

But by 1981, ingenious street chemists discovered that just a small amount of the powder could be turned into rocks which, when smoked, would provide an intense 10-minute high.

However, there was not enough cocaine in America at the time for it to be a widespread problem.

Enter Oscar Danilo Blandon Reyes, who is now, ironically, working as a paid informant for the Drug Enforcement Agency.

Blandon, the educated son of a wealthy Managua slumlord, was heavily tied to the Contra movement, which in turn was propped up by the CIA.

Records show that then president Ronald Reagan secretly

green-lighted the CIA to orchestrate the Contra overthrow of the Sandinistas but only provided US\$19.9 million in funds.

Funding was a constant problem for the rebel army. Blandon, in league with drug trafficker Juan Norwin Meneses Cantarero, came up with the novel solution of raising money by dumping cheap cocaine on to Los Angeles.

Webb writes that the cost was cheap because there was barely any risk involved. A former associate of Meneses testified in court that the El Salvadoran Air Force provided planes to transport the cocaine to a US Air Force base in Texas where it was moved to LA. "There is a saying that the end justifies the means," Blandon is quoted as saying.

"And that's what Mr Bermudez [a CIA agent who commanded the largest of the Contra groups] told us in Honduras, okay?"

"So we started raising money

for the Contra revolution."

Tens of millions in profits were funnelled back to Nicaragua.

Meanwhile, the *Mercury News* series showed that almost every law enforcement agency in California knew of Blandon by the mid-1980s but were frustrated in their attempts to catch him. The newspaper quotes various sources as suspecting Blandon was being protected, perhaps by the CIA.

As tantalising as the circumstantial evidence is, getting to the truth in this case will take more than a newspaper article.

"We know the CIA was involved with the Contras. And we know that the Contras were making their money from the sale of drugs," Ross' lawyer, Alan Fenster said after reading the trilogy.

"We have A to B and B to C, so they are just saying that there is no connection between A and C. That's where I am hoping that congressional hearings will lay it out."