

The Price of Indifference to Cocaine

By JILL JONNES

Last month the San Jose Mercury News series **"Dark Alliance: The Story Behind the Crack Explosion"** asserted that cocaine "was virtually unobtainable in black neighborhoods before members of the CIA's army brought it into South-Central [Los Angeles] in the 1980s at bargain basement prices." The message: We would not have the devastation of crack without the CIA. Not one but three investigations are now under way.

Rampant rumors of CIA-backed Central American Contra cocaine trafficking are nothing new; such reports sparked Senate hearings in the late 1980s. Sen. John Kerry's (D., Mass.) 1989 report concluded that certain Contras were trafficking in cocaine, and that "some officials may have turned a blind eye to these activities." By all means we should investigate the CIA and its dubious relations with drug traffickers.

But let's also look at the less conspiratorial explanations for the crack epidemic.

First, some early cocaine history. The U.S. had its first romance with cocaine in the late 1880s, when companies like Parke-Davis were bruiting it as an all-around wonder drug that would "make the coward brave, the silent eloquent [and] free the victims of alcohol and opium habit from their bondage." No one knew at first that cocaine was extremely addictive, but the lesson was painfully learned, especially as use spread to city slums. By 1909 the magazine *Everyday Life* was declaring, "Squalor, poverty,

starvation, theft, prostitution and murder: these are the inevitable concomitants of cocaine."

The federal government was well aware that cocaine use was spreading rapidly, but it bought into a pre-yuppie view of cocaine as a safe recreational drug. In September 1975 the Ford White House issued a disastrous "white paper" that would set drug policy for the next decade: "Priority in both supply and demand reduction should be directed toward those drugs, which inherently pose a greater risk—heroin, amphetamines (particularly when used intravenously) and mixed barbiturates." Cocaine was officially declared not worth worrying about.

One DEA official remembers arguing fruitlessly with the Ford officials. "We asked them to talk to some of the agents who were seeing what this stuff [cocaine] did to people. But . . . they weren't going to listen." The White House instructed the DEA to focus on Mexico, a source of heroin, rather than Florida, where cocaine was starting to pour in. The Carter administration's drug policy chief described cocaine as "probably the most benign of illicit drugs." During the Ford-Carter period, the U.S. went from importing maybe 100 kilos of cocaine annually to using 200 tons a year.

By 1984, New York Times columnist Jane Brody was warning her readers that the glamour drug of the 1970s could turn them into "impotent, emaciated, thieving, hostile, paranoid, groveling ad-

dicts who live for nothing more than another dose." Then in 1986 basketball star Len Bias died a highly publicized death from snorting cocaine. The middle-class market would soon die, too, as people became convinced that no high was worth one's life.

But, of course, the cartels were not going to close up shop. They refocused their heretofore expensive product on the traditional American drug market. While it's true that the crack form of cocaine did not appear in L.A. until 1985, it had already been reported working its evil way through the Bahamas in 1980, Miami soon thereafter and New York City in 1983. The agents for crack's early spread were not from the CIA but members of Jamaican and Dominican gangs. The federal government's further failure to control our borders meant that Colombian, Jamaican and Dominican criminals were wreaking havoc by spreading crack far and wide. In the mid-1980s, black street gangs on the West Coast joined in.

You don't need a conspiracy theory to explain the crack epidemic. The baby boomer romance with cocaine—a romance that fueled the rise of the cartels—and disastrous inaction by top federal officials are largely responsible for the terrible spread of cocaine. Sometimes the truth is that mundane.

Ms. Jonnes is author of "Hep-Cats, Narcs and Pipe Dreams: A History of America's Romance With Illegal Drugs" (Scribner, 1996).