

Dope bank cops plea; Bush off the hook

by Joseph Brewda

The Luxembourg-based Bank of Commerce and Credit International (BCCI), which was to have gone on trial in the middle of January in a Tampa, Florida federal court on charges of laundering over \$32 million in drug money, agreed to a last-minute plea bargain on Jan. 16. The trial, which might have brought to light President George Bush's connection to the cocaine trade, is now off. On Feb. 4, U.S. District Judge William Hodges sealed the administration deal, by slapping the bank on the wrist with a \$15 million fine. He could have doubled the fine, if he had chosen to do so. If the government pressed ahead with a trial, and if the bank was convicted, all of its estimated \$20 billion in assets could have been seized. No bank officer will now go to jail, and no one will talk about the role BCCI played in Bush's Iran-Contra operations.

Although Panama's Gen. Manuel Noriega was not mentioned in the BCCI indictment, handed down in Tampa in October 1988, U.S. prosecutors had been running around saying that the BCCI trial would highlight Noriega's supposed drug dealings with the bank. However, in a recent court filing, BCCI's lawyers threatened that, if prosecutors brought Noriega's activities into the case, they would request government documents to "demonstrate that much of the money in the accounts in question came from United States government agencies, not drug transactions."

In next to no time, federal prosecutors saw the light, and agreed to the slap-on-the-wrist deal. What did BCCI attorneys mean to imply with their threat?

Ollie North's bank

The BCCI was established in 1972 in cooperation with the Bank of America and some of the cronies of the late Pakistani President Gen. Zia ul-Haq. From the beginning, BCCI was a dope money-laundering bank. But, for the same reasons, BCCI was also closely tied to several intelligence agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency, which George Bush used to direct. With such connections, BCCI grew explosively, expanding its \$2.5 million in assets upon its founding, to at least \$4 billion eight years later. BCCI's top investors included such figures as Sheikh Kamal Adham,

formerly the director of Saudi Arabia's intelligence services, and some of the shadiest characters operating out of the Persian Gulf.

These are among the reasons why Adnan Khashoggi, the CIA-linked wheeler-dealer deployed to work with the ayatollahs in Iran, used the BCCI to launder the seed-money for the Reagan-Bush administration's sale of arms to Khomeini, beginning in the 1985 period. Documents showing BCCI's role are now a matter of public record, and are even appended to the Senate Iran-Contra hearing testimony. While no senator had the courage to follow up these BCCI leads at the time, times have changed. The upcoming trial of Adnan Khashoggi is just one of Bush's concerns, on this count.

Being a dope and intelligence front, BCCI was, not surprisingly, the first foreign bank to set up shop in Beijing, shortly after Henry Kissinger, George Bush, and others began to play the "China card." China is the world's biggest opium producer—a fact President Bush has always forgotten to mention in motivating his "war on drugs." China also was one of the key arms suppliers to Iran during the Iran-Contra deals, under U.S. sponsorship. It maintains the same connection today.

And a Democratic connection

Within the United States, BCCI has been closely associated with the Democratic Party side of the international narcotics cartel. One front-man for BCCI has been Georgia banker Bert Lance, a crony of Jimmy Carter. Another has been Clark Clifford, a prominent adviser to every Democratic President since Harry Truman, and like Bush, no stranger to the intelligence world. Yet another has been Armand Hammer, the Soviet-linked businessman who has remained close to the leadership of both the Democratic and Republican parties. In 1983, BCCI took over the Democratic Party-linked Financial General Bank Shares as its first U.S. arm—a bank reported to have been a U.S. intelligence proprietary run by Gen. George Olmstead. It was this Carter administration group which put Ayatollah Khomeini into power in the first place. This Carter connection to the dope bank has remained unbroken to the present day. Following the plea bargain, Carter assured reporters that he would continue to accept BCCI funds for his Global 2000 program, which is based at his Carter Presidential center in Atlanta, Georgia. Without BCCI funds, "we would have to cancel all our projects in Africa and Asia," he complained.

BCCI was busted just a few days before the 1988 presidential elections—some say to try to block narco-funds from flowing into the Dukakis presidential campaign. Feeling forced at least to do something, against at least one bank, in its so-called "war on drugs," the Reagan-Bush administration naturally preferred hitting one tied more closely to Democrats than Republicans. Now, at the same time Bush was spending millions of dollars to kidnap Noriega supposedly for "drug-running," even that one bank has been let off.