

## Panama report by Carlos Wesley

### The Noriega papers

*Court filings are showing that U.S. officials encouraged drug trafficking to finance the Contras. Did Bush know?*

Gen. Manuel Noriega could yet end up being the reason for the downfall of George Bush. A 107-page memorandum filed by his attorneys before Judge William Hoeverler of the U.S. District Court of Southern Florida, provides strong evidence that it was the U.S. government, not Noriega, that engaged in illegal drug trafficking.

According to the documents, submitted under the Classified Information Procedures Act (CIPA), "cocaine and marijuana were flown directly into the U.S. [military] bases in South Florida" by pilots employed by the United States for the illegal Nicaraguan Contra resupply operation. "Intriguingly, the head of the South Florida Drug Task Force interdiction project during these years was none other than Vice President George Bush."

Did Bush know that drugs were being brought into the United States, by American agents, during his watch? That's the sort of question that should be posed to CIA director nominee Robert Gates during his Senate confirmation hearings. The evidence in the Noriega papers certainly suggests Bush knew or should have known about this traffic.

Besides the South Florida task force, "Bush held a variety of high-profile anti-drug positions in the Reagan administration," say the documents, which were released by the Justice Department in mid-May, after it excised extensive portions, particularly in the sections relating to Bush's contacts with Noriega. However, "the priority item on Bush's agenda was not to be drugs, but America's pro-

insurgency campaign in Nicaragua."

This campaign against the Sandinistas "was funded with drug money," the papers continue. "The U.S. was clearly involved in a 'guns for drugs' policy. Whatever it took to win in Nicaragua" (emphasis in original). "The logic of having drug money pay for the pressing needs of the Contras appealed to a number of people who became involved in the covert war. Indeed, senior U.S. policymakers were not immune to the idea that drug money was a perfect solution to the Contras' funding problems," they say.

"The State Department selected four companies owned and operated by narcotics traffickers to supply humanitarian assistance to the Contras. The companies were:

- "SETCO Air, a company established by Honduran drug trafficker Ramón Matta Ballesteros;

- "DIACSA, a Miami-based air company operated as the headquarters of a drug-trafficker enterprise for convicted drug traffickers Floyd Carlton and Alfredo Caballero;

- "Frigoficos de Puntarenas, a firm owned and operated by Cuban-American drug traffickers who were also CIA operatives;

- "Vortex, an air service and supply company partly owned by admitted drug trafficker Michael Palmer."

The court papers also show that Drug Enforcement Administration officials testified last July before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, that "Lt. Col. Oliver North suggested to the DEA in June 1985 that \$1.5 million in drug money carried

aboard a plane piloted by DEA informant Barry Seal and generated in a sting of the Medellín Cartel and Sandinistas officials, be provided to the Contras."

Also, what does former CIA director Bush know about the charge made in the court documents, that "The Central Intelligence Agency has a long history of assistance to narcotics traffickers"? Or about the charge that "CIA agents who branched out on their own into the opium-smuggling business were protected by the Agency"?

Despite Noriega's warnings, the CIA used pilots to illegally transport weapons to the Contras, although it was aware that those same pilots "were also transporting drugs to the United States."

It was not because of his alleged drug trafficking that Noriega incurred the wrath of George Bush. In fact, "United States law enforcement agencies considered Noriega to be a friend of the United States" a view "articulated by DEA Administrator Jack Lawn, who in the past had written Noriega letters of commendation for his help in fighting the war on drugs." Noriega got in trouble because he refused to go along with the U.S. Contra policy. (It was also because of his opposition to the Contra policy that American presidential candidate Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. was thrown in jail by the Bush government.) "General Noriega is first and foremost a Panamanian nationalist," the court papers affirm. "In order to maintain the independence and sovereignty of Panama, General Noriega struggled to maintain in balance, American Imperialism on the right, and Cuban Expansionism on the left." To this end, he even "became the CIA's man in Panama" and, although "ultimately, this balancing act failed . . . Noriega succeeded in maintaining his country's independence longer than any other national figure since the end of the Second World War."