

What really went on at the Mena airport?

by Edward Spannaus

According to more than one description, one of the world centers of the drug trade in the 1980s was a small town in western Arkansas called Mena. But drugs were only part of the story. The airfield at Mena was also a major transshipment point for arms going to the Nicaraguan Contras, and the wilderness around Mena was a training ground for Contra guerrillas and pilots.

In 1985, two local officials, an Internal Revenue Service agent and a State Police investigator, began looking into and compiling information on Mena. Out of the investigation, at least 30 federal indictments were drawn up by 1987, but the cases were suppressed.

By 1987, the allegations around the Mena drugs-for-guns operation were well-known, at least in Arkansas. Local television and newspapers attempted to probe the story. An article in the *Arkansas Gazette* in late 1987, for example, reported that a Congressional investigator had arrived in western Arkansas to interview people about the activities in Mena. "We're looking at various things pertaining to drugs and guns," the investigator stated.

The 1988 report "Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy," produced by the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee chaired by Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) (known as the "Kerry Committee"), stated that, in connection with grand jury investigations of drug trafficking in Mena: "Despite the availability of evidence sufficient for an indictment on money-laundering charges, and over the strong objections of state and federal law enforcement officials, the indictments were dropped. The apparent reason was that the prosecution might have revealed national security information."

At least a half-dozen other investigations of the operations in and around Mena were also undertaken, and killed, in the mid- to late-1980s—in the name of "national security." Who had the power to suppress so many federal investigations? Certainly not the governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton.

Drugs for guns

As with any major scandal, it is necessary to sort out the wheat from the chaff. The Mena story has been embellished with spin and disinformation by those who want to either discredit it, or to divert attention from the actual culprits onto

others, such as Bill Clinton, who played tertiary roles in the whole affair. For example, although much of what Terry Reed reports in his 1994 book *Compromised* is clearly accurate and is confirmed by other sources, *EIR* has been unable to independently confirm the allegations made by Reed, that Oliver North and Bush's Attorney General, William Barr, were *personally* on the scene, in and around Mena.

But it is beyond dispute that Mena was the hub of a major Contra support operation, centering around a guns-for-drugs operation, run under the supervision of George Bush, Bush's National Security Adviser Donald Gregg, Gregg's longtime crony and former CIA operative Felix Rodriguez, and Bush's flunky Oliver North. Their key on-the-scene agent was Barry Seal, a documented operative for the CIA and an informant for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The Mena operation ran from 1981 up through October 1986, when one of Seal's planes which had often flown out of Mena, and which had been recently transferred, was shot down over Nicaragua carrying a load of arms for the Contras. (When the plane went down, Rodriguez placed a call to Bush's office to inform Gregg of the shootdown.)

George Bush was in charge

As to the notion that this was a "CIA" operation, we remind that reader that under the provisions of Executive Order 12333 and National Security Decision Directives Number 2 and Number 3, it was Vice President George Bush who was formally in charge of all such intelligence operations. The handwritten notes of a participant in an Aug. 12, 1986 meeting in Gregg's office include the following, which sheds light on who Rodriguez's actual boss was: "Felix claims working w/ VP blessing for CIA."

When Seal was indicted for drug trafficking in 1984, he flew to Washington to make a deal with Bush's staff, according to a number of published reports. By the spring of 1984, Seal had DEA informant status, which provided the cover for him to carry on his drugs-for-guns operation.

This was recently brought to public light by Richard Ben-Veniste, the minority counsel in the Senate Whitewater hearings, who was once also an attorney for Seal. On March 11, 1996, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, in the course of a long attack on Ben-Veniste, wrote the following: "Mr. Ben-Veniste told us one other intriguing thing. To wit, 'I did my part by launching Barry Seal into the arms of Vice President Bush, who embraced him as an undercover operative.'"

The Denton-Morris article

Much additional information about the Mena operation was disclosed in an article by former National Security Council official Roger Morris and investigative reporter Sally Denton; the article was fact-checked and edited for three months at the end of 1994 by the *Washington Post*, before the *Post*'s editors killed it for political reasons in January 1995. After a

search for another publisher, the Denton-Morris article was finally published in the July issue of *Penthouse* magazine, and elaborated in Morris's book *Partners in Power*. It is based on a study of over 2,000 pages of Seal's personal documents.

Denton and Morris comment that, although Mena "has been a topic of ubiquitous anti-Clinton diatribes circulated by right-wing extremists," the irony is that "the Mena operation was the apparent brainchild of the two previous and Republican administrations." They also show that some nine different investigations of Mena, from 1987 on, went nowhere, "from allegedly compromised federal grand juries to Congressional inquiries suppressed by the National Security Council in 1988 under Ronald Reagan to still later Justice Department inaction under George Bush."

The Denton-Morris article documents how one of the largest drug-smuggling operations in U.S. history was centered in Mena in 1981-86, involving at least \$3-5 billion worth of drugs. Some indication of what was actually involved, is shown by the fact that, after Seal's death, the IRS determined that the money earned by Seal in 1984-85 (the last two years of his life) was not illegal, because of his "CIA-DEA employment." Seal had been a member of the U.S. Army Special Forces, and had ties to the CIA dating to the early 1970s, according to Denton and Morris.

The article also referenced a Fayetteville, Arkansas gun manufacturer, William Holmes, who delivered 250 automatic pistols to Seal in Mena. According to Holmes, the purchase order for the guns was provided by the Department of Defense. Seal's Mena operations used airplanes and other equipment formerly owned by the CIA proprietary Air America, and the Mena project was described in FBI memos as something "the CIA had going in Mena" involving Southern Air Transport. The Seal papers also showed that Seal was running guns from Mena to the Contras, and also into Bolivia, Argentina, Peru, and Brazil. And the drugs he smuggled into the United States found their way onto the streets of New York City, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, and various cities in Arkansas.

Much of the Mena coverage since 1992 has been used to attempt to smear President Clinton with the allegations that he was on top of a massive drug operation in Arkansas. The comments of former U.S. Rep. Bill Alexander of Arkansas are instructive in this regard, because he was one individual who was pressing in 1988 for an investigation of what was going on in Mena. In March 1996, Alexander made public his collection of documents on Mena. "Mena was a U.S. government staging area to support the Contras in Central America," running weapons out, and drugs back, Alexander told the *New York Post*. "So far, it doesn't touch Clinton. This is pre-Clinton."

Hollinger dumps Bush

Confirmation of the role of George Bush in the Mena operation recently came from an unlikely source, the new

book *Boy President*,* by Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., the editor-in-chief of the *American Spectator*. Tyrrell's magazine (which operates as an asset of London's Hollinger Corp.) has been among the most virulent anti-Clinton media outlets in the United States; it broke the "Troopergate" story in December 1993, and hasn't let up on Clinton since. When Tyrrell puts Bush in the middle of the Mena operation, it should not be dismissed lightly.

Arkansas State Trooper L.D. Brown was one of the *American Spectator*'s original "Troopergate" sources, although in the early published accounts, there was no reference to Mena. But in Tyrrell's book, there is a description of Brown's recruitment to the "CIA" in 1984, by Seal and a man who identified himself as "Dan Magruder." Magruder, Brown later learned, was actually Bush's National Security Adviser Donald Gregg. Brown also described meeting Felix Rodriguez, alias "Max Gomez," in Arkansas.

Brown says in the book that he was sent by Rodriguez to Mexico to assassinate Terry Reed in June 1986; the details coincide with Reed's account of what he was doing in Mexico at the time, although Reed apparently had no idea about the assassination plot.

Tyrrell, to be sure, does not implicate Gregg and Rodriguez in the drug-running side of Mena, only the gun-running side; he tap-dances around the drug issue by suggesting that Barry Seal and perhaps even Clinton had corrupted a nice, clean gun-running racket by using it to run narcotics on the side.

(Ironically, Reed's book contains a lengthy description of a conversation he supposedly had with Seal, in which Seal told him that Bush's sons were involved in drugs, and that, as insurance, the "Bush family" wanted Seal to "dirty up" some Democrats. Seal allegedly told Reed that the Bushes wanted to "neutralize" some Democrats in Arkansas, and thus he was directed to provide cocaine to Clinton's friend Dan Lasater and Clinton's brother Roger.)

In any event, Tyrrell's account of the Bush network involvement in Mena was publicly endorsed by the Hollinger's *Sunday Telegraph*'s Ambrose Evans-Pritchard. In a review of Tyrrell's book published in the September issue of the *American Spectator*, Pritchard praises Tyrrell for his courage in following the trail all the way to Bush. "No one can accuse Tyrrell of ideological prejudice against the CIA," Pritchard wrote. "He was a friend of the late [CIA director] Bill Casey . . . and, as readers of the *American Spectator* know, he has been a tireless defender of Republican foreign policy. Yet he did not back away from the truth when his research into Clinton took him, unexpectedly, into Republican terrain. He deserves great credit for his intellectual honesty, not to mention his courage."

It seems that George Bush may have become expendable.

* *Boy Clinton: The Political Biography*, by Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1996).