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Posted June 9, 2023. Editor's Headline: Remembering Reagan and the War on Drugs

When Ronald Reagan became President in 1981, my husband was ecstatic. As the former Governor of California, Reagan enjoyed Darold's unstinting admiration. Not knowing any better, I nodded assent. We lived on the central coast of California and passed the Regan ranch on outings to Santa Barbara. Although we never saw the former B-movie actor on horseback, his imagined presence was why Darold decided our three boys needed to learn horseback riding.

Ever since Reagan, the religious right has shaped the Republican Party, which Darold didn't seem to mind one bit. Many people condemned marijuana while using "legal" substances prodigiously. President Nixon was a heavy drinker, which may have contributed to his increasingly distorted worldview. Nancy Reagan was addicted to prescription tranquilizers, but it never kept her from her "Just Say No" campaign, while hubby invited the religious right into the White House, including Moral Majority founder and leader Jerry Falwell. Daughter Patti Davis reacted to her parents' preaching by publicly smoking pot.

The dirtiest secret concerns CIA arms supplies to Contra guerrillas who funneled cocaine and heroin into the U.S. Indeed, the pilots who took cargos of munitions into Nicaragua flew the drugs homeward in the same planes, writes Malcolm Byrne in his 2014 *Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power*.

Reagan shared the obsession of his predecessor Nixon with "pinkos, hippies, student radicals, and black militants," convinced that the Evil Empire used these elements for nefarious purposes. To beat the Soviets to it, both presidents empowered the CIA to destabilize left-leaning governments, Nixon in Chile and Reagan in Nicaragua. Reagan's vice president, the elder Bush, was in charge of the National Border Interdiction System, which was supposed to stem the flow of drugs into the country—but just as now, immigrants had nothing to do with it; the stuff arrived by plane. Reagan had vowed to cut government spending but, once in office, did the opposite by granting the Drug Enforcement Agency no-holds-barred authority in its battle. As early as 1982, Director Casey took steps to shield the Contras from legal scrutiny.

In 1986, Reagan signed a directive declaring drugs a national threat. His successor, George Bush, sang from the same hymnal. The ostensible rationale of the resurrected Nixonian drug war rested on "the ever-growing quantity of cocaine entering the USA from South America and the emergence of crack," writes Byrne, "a particularly ironic rationale, as it has become increasingly clear that the influx of cocaine into the USA during the 1980s was . . . thanks to the country's foreign policy in South America, where it was hell-bent on the overthrow of the left-wing Sandinista regime through support, by any means, of the Contras."

At first the Reagan administration supported the Contras openly, but in 1982, Congress had passed the Boland Amendment expressly prohibiting the use of taxpayer money in the Contras' efforts to overthrow their government. In 1984 Congress broadened the bill to prohibit all CIA

involvement with the sycophants of Nicaragua's deposed dictator. Reagan used the CIA anyway, with Oliver North in charge of the operation. North also oversaw the infamous "arms to Iran" operation, the profits from which brought grief to Nicaragua.

By mid-September 1986, "virtually daily missions . . . were delivering thousands of pounds of supplies [to the Contras]," writes Byrne. Then, on October 5, a soldier of the Sandinista government shot down a C-123 carrying a Contra radio operator and three U.S. crew with about 10,000 pounds of munitions headed for a drop inside Nicaragua. The crash's sole survivor spilled the beans to his Nicaraguan captors, which blew up Reagan's ploy. At the Iran-Contra congressional hearings in 1987, protesters unfurled banners reading "Ask about cocaine."

In 1996, the San Jose Mercury News published a series of articles, "Dark Alliance," in which journalist Gary Webb detailed the Contras' drug trafficking actions in the 1980s. His research indicated that the CIA, and by implication the U.S. government, were well aware of the dirty works.

Julian Durlacher in his 2000 book, *Cocaine: Its History and Lore*, says no one should be surprised at U.S. foreign policies that promote drug trafficking through CIA covert operations. In its fight against Communism, the U.S. financed the Sicilian Mafia and the Corsicans in Marseilles to thwart the left's taking power, enabling the groups to seize the heroin industry. "They were free to run [the drugs] so long as they remained a thorn in the side of the left. The notorious French Connection was only able to thrive because of the CIA's magnificence," writes Durlacher.

The author also lists covert operations in Southeast Asia, where anti-communist guerrillas were funded to destabilize the spread of Communism. "They effectively created the drug barons who run Southeast Asia's heroin trade today."

The CIA's operatives in Central America were especially two-faced, given how they paid lip service to the drug war at home. George Bush's drug czar, William Bennet, fomented hysteria over the "crack epidemic" via a well-orchestrated media blitz that, by 1989, had convinced the American public that drugs were the country's prime concern. Senator Kerry's Sub-committee investigation into the government's violations of Boland was systematically discredited; indeed, the Sub-committee received sworn testimony from the Miami prosecutor handling the Neutrality and gun-running cases that the Justice Department had met in 1986 to discuss how to undermine Senator Kerry's attempts to have hearings regarding the allegations."

In her introduction to *Dark Alliance*, Gary Webb's book about his findings and the backlash he suffered, California Representative Maxine Waters says, doubtless "the CIA, DEA, DIA, and FBI knew of the drug trafficking in South Central Los Angeles. They were either part of the trafficking or turned a blind eye to it."

Louis Farrakhan, a prominent African American activist, threatened to sue the U.S. government on behalf of crack users, their families, and the victims of crack-related crime. If CIA involvement brought drugs and guns into the Black community, "there's a need for atonement there," Durlacher quotes Farrakhan.

The full story of the Contra/cocaine/CIA connection may never be known, says the author, but the Contra story is only the most recent in a series of involvements where the political (read: anti-Communist) aims of the United States “have resulted in yet more drugs flowing into the country. If we want South American nations to get behind our “war on drugs” we must own up to our own part of the problem, he concludes.

The Contra Affair shows the highest level of our government financing agitation against the Sandinistas at the cost of dozens of drug plane loads smuggled into our country. Pretending these activities didn't exist was the government at its most cynical. Even as plane load after plane load brought cocaine into the U.S., draconian laws sprang up to selectively penalize its use; that is to say, possession of crack cocaine, which was used mostly by Blacks, incurred prison sentences out of all proportions, while powder cocaine, which was more expensive than crack and used mostly by whites, produced slaps on the wrist.

On Page 61, Durlacher quotes a District Court Judge in 1994:

This one provision, the Crack Statute, has been directly responsible for incarcerating nearly an entire generation of young black men for very long periods. It has created a situation that reeks with inhumanity and injustice. The scales of justice have been turned topsy-turvy so that the masterminds, the kingpins of drug trafficking, escape detection while those whose roles are minimal, even trivial, are hoisted on the spears of an enraged electorate and at the pinnacle of their youth are imprisoned for years . . . “

The crack laws were iniquitous in the extreme. The author describes the case of a 20-year-old college student and small-time dealer. In 1990, Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) operatives supplied the Black man with a cellular phone in exchange for crack. Through this phone they traced his sales, and the youngster was sentenced to 19 years and seven months without possibility of parole.

“This was three times the prison sentence handed down for most murders in the USA,” observes the author.

The war on drugs is still with us, devolved into mass incarcerations of people of color—teen boys thrown in the slammer for selling loose cigarettes on a street corner; girls, for selling their bodies for food; for-profit prisons exploiting their labor. This war has cost taxpayers billions. President Biden is making noises about a war on opioids, with seemingly no insight that such a war is as unwinnable as it is costly.

Former First Lady Betty Ford acknowledged her dependency on Valium, “Mother's little helper” as a pop song had it. Valium was the first medical “solution” deceptively offered by young Arthur Sackler who would soon make false advertisements his life's work—and his family's wealth. (President Ford came after Richard Nixon.)

An award-winning Rehab Center in Colorado named Hazeladen Betty Ford offers addiction treatment programs as well as services for families and children who are residents of Colorado.

