



# CIA COVERT ACTIONS & DRUG TRAFFICKING

by Alfred McCoy

Excerpted from testimony before the Special Seminar focusing on allegations linking CIA secret operations and drug trafficking-convened February 13, 1997, by Rep. John Conyers, Dean of the Congressional Black Caucus

Let's look at the heroin boom of the 1980s. In the 1980s, CIA operations again played a role in the revival of the U.S. drug problem. In 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and the Sandinistas seized power in Nicaragua, prompting two more CIA operations with some revealing similarities. Let us now pay particularly close attention to the CIA's Afghan operation. Not only is the Afghan operation simultaneous and similar to the controversial contra operation, but its direct and negative impact on U.S. drug supply is beyond question or controversy.

In 1980 and 1981, heroin production in Southwest Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan suddenly expanded to fill gaps in the global drug market. Although Pakistan and Afghanistan had zero-zero-heroin production in the mid-1970s, by 1981 Pakistan had suddenly emerged as the world's number one heroin supplier. Reporting from Teheran in the mid 1970s, U.S. Ambassador Richard Helms, the former CIA Director, insisted that there was no heroin production in this region, only localized opium trade. This region, he said, then supplied zero percent of the U.S. heroin supply. In 1981, by contrast, the U.S. Attorney General announced that Pakistan was now supplying sixty percent of the U.S. demand for heroin. Inside Pakistan itself the results were even more disastrous. Rising from zero heroin addicts in 1979, Pakistan had five thousand addicts in 1980 and one million two hundred thousand addicts in 1985, the world's highest number in any terms. Why was Pakistan able to capture the world's heroin market with such surprising speed and ease?

After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the White House assigned the CIA to mount a major operation to support the Afghan resistance. Working through Pakistan Inter-Service Intelligence, the CIA began supplying covert arms and finance to Afghan forces. As they gained control over liberated zones inside Afghanistan, the Afghan guerrillas required that its supporters grow opium to support the resistance. Under CIA and Pakistani protection, Pakistan military and Afghan resistance opened heroin labs on the Afghan and Pakistani border. According to The Washington Post of May 1990, among the leading heroin manufacturers were Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an Afghan leader who received about half of the covert arms that the U.S. shipped to Pakistan. Although there were complaints about Hekmatyar's brutality and drug trafficking within the ranks of the Afghan resistance of the day, the CIA maintained an uncritical alliance and supported him without reservation or restraint.

Once the heroin left these labs in Pakistan's northwest frontier, the Sicilian Mafia imported the drugs into the U.S., where they soon captured sixty percent of the U.S. heroin market. That is to say, sixty percent of the U.S. heroin supply came indirectly from a CIA operation. During the decade of this operation, the 1980s, the substantial DEA contingent in Islamabad made no arrests and participated in no seizures, allowing the syndicates a de facto free hand to export heroin. By contrast, a lone Norwegian detective, following a heroin deal from Oslo to Karachi, mounted an investigation that put a powerful Pakistani banker known as President Zia's surrogate son behind bars. The DEA in Islamabad got nobody, did nothing, stayed away.

Former CIA operatives have admitted that this operation led to an expansion of the Pakistan-

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Afghanistan heroin trade. In 1995 the former CIA Director of this Afghan operation, Mr. Charles Cogan, admitted sacrificing the drug war to fight the Cold War. "Our main mission was to do as much damage to the Soviets. We didn't really have the resources or the time to devote to an investigation of the drug trade," he told Australian television. "I don't think that we need to apologize for this. Every situation has its fallout. There was fallout in terms of drugs, yes, but the main objective was accomplished. The Soviets left Afghanistan."

Again, distance insulated the CIA from political fallout. Once the heroin left Pakistan, the Sicilian Mafia exported it to the U.S., and local gangs sold it on the street. Eventually U.S. drug agents arrested a bunch of middle-aged Sicilians migrants at pizza parlors from Boston, MA to Milton, WI in the famous pizza connection case of the 1980s. Not surprisingly, most Americans did not make the equation between Afghan drug lords, the pizza parlors and the heroin in their cities. Hence, there was no controversy over this Afghan operation.

In Central America, however, simple proximity has made the fallout from the CIA operations explosive. Unlike the CIA's Asian warlords, Nicaragua's Contras did not produce drugs and had to make their money by participating in the smuggling of cocaine directly into the U.S. Proximity brought these operations to the attention of Congress in the late 1980s, when Senator John Kerry's subcommittee investigated the Contra-cocaine links. His investigators established that four Contra-connected corporations hired by the U.S. State Department to fly humanitarian relief goods to Central America were also involved in cocaine smuggling. The DEA operative assigned to Honduras, Mr. Thomas Zepeda, testified that his office had been closed in June 1983 since it was gathering intelligence that the local military, the Honduran military, was involved in cocaine smuggling. His reports were threatening the CIA's relationship with the Honduran military in this key frontline state for Contra operation. In effect, Agency operations had once again created a de facto zone of protection closed to investigators from outside agencies. Read closely, the Kerry Committee established a pattern of CIA complicity in Central America strikingly similar to the one we saw in Laos and Afghanistan: tolerance for drug dealing by assets and concealment to protect larger covert operations.

The Mercury story tries to go the next step. It tries to establish a direct link between CIA operations and drug distribution in the U.S. According to Mercury reporter Gary Webb, this dark alliance began in the early 1980s when the contra revolt against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government was failing for want of funds. Here is his scenario.

In 1981 the CIA hired ex-Nicaraguan army colonel Enrique Bermudez to organize the main Contra force known as the FDN. Bermudez turned to two Nicaraguan exiles in the U.S. to supposedly supplement meager agency support with drug profits. In California, Danilo Bandon, the former director of Nicaragua's foreign marketing program, used his business skills to open a crack distribution network for the Contras in Los Angeles. During its decade of operation this crack network supposedly enjoyed a de facto immunity from prosecution. The people involved in this network were somehow miraculously exempted from investigation or arrest despite substantial involvement in the traffic.

While the Agency's relations with Asian opium lords were lost in the mists of far-off mountains, Representative Maxine Waters, the Black Caucus leader from Los Angeles, has police documents to charge the CIA with protecting Contra leaders.

Let us now return to the four questions we asked at the outset. Question one: Did the Agency ever ally with drug traffickers? Yes. Beyond any doubt. Once controversial, not even the CIA any longer bothers to deny that it has often allied with major and minor drug dealers. Question two: Did the CIA protect these allies from prosecution? Yes. There is a recurring pattern of protection. During a major CIA operation, the operational zone becomes a special de facto protected area where everything is subordinated to the protection of this covert operation. To protect the integrity of the operation, the CIA blocks all investigation, by the DEA, Customs, Congress and local police. Whenever anyone connected with this effort is arrested outside of the protected area, the CIA often blocks prosecution that will compromise its operation. And lest we forget, there is only one element that any criminal needs to become a powerful entrepreneur of vice and violence: protection against prosecution.

Question three: Did such alliances and protections contribute significantly to an expansion of the global drug trade and U.S. drug supply over the past fifty years? This is a question that is open to interpretation. If we were to place perfect information on the tables of two academics, they would

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probably produce two books with two very different answers to two very different interpretations. I would argue, with my imperfect information, that in Burma, Laos and Afghanistan, CIA operations provided critical elements, logistics, arms and political protection that facilitated the rapid growth of heroin and opium production in both areas. Clearly the CIA alliance was central to the rise of some major drug dealers and catalytic in the expansion, production and processing in certain drug zones. It would not be unreasonable to conclude, therefore, that such CIA operations led to an increase in the production and processing of illicit drugs in these covert war zones. But it is difficult to state unequivocally that these individual dealers and these zones did or did not shape the long-term trajectory of supply and demand within the vastness and complexity of the global drug traffic.

Question four: Did the CIA encourage drug smugglers to target African American communities? This pattern of CIA complicity in drugs proceeds from the internal logic of its covert operations, an inadvertent consequence of a style of indirect intervention abroad. There is a striking similarity in the patterns of CIA complicity with drug dealers in Laos, Afghanistan and Central America. Just as I can find no evidence, nor any logic, to the proposition that the CIA in Laos during the Vietnam War wanted one-third of the American soldiers in South Vietnam to become heroin addicts, so I can see no evidence nor any logic of any CIA targeting of blacks in South Central Los Angeles. During the 1980s, however, there is every indication that the CIA was aware that its Afghan operations contributed to the export of heroin to the U.S. and did nothing-nothing-to slow this drug flow. At the same time, the same agency, the same division of the same agency, mounting an operation of a very similar character in Central America, may or may not have known. This is something that needs to be pressed. But in Afghanistan it's very clear that they knew.

Since a substantial portion of the African American community already suspects the worse, that the CIA willfully flooded their communities with drugs, the time has come for an unflinching search for answers to these questions. As Congress investigates, I have a good idea of what it will find. I doubt that there is evidence the CIA actually trafficked in drugs or targeted any Americans, whether GIs in South Vietnam or blacks in South Central. But investigators will discover CIA alliances with warlords, colonels and criminals who used this protection to deal drugs. Suffering from what I call "mission myopia," CIA agents, in Mr. Charles Cogan's words, regarded narcotics as "mere fallout." For CIA agents in Laos, the heroin epidemic among GIs in Vietnam was only fallout. For agents in Pakistan, drug shipments to America were just fallout. In the case of the CIA's Afghan operation, it is clear that the Agency created a zone of protection for heroin production, and agents tolerated trafficking by local assets that supplied much of the entire U.S. heroin markets. For Vietnam veterans and for African Americans who live with the pain of this fallout, these findings will be profoundly disturbing. That the CIA apparently regarded increased drug shipments to the U.S. as acceptable fallout may spark considerable controversy. But these findings will be better for this nation's political health than the CIA's blanket denials, which can only fan the flames of allegations that have willfully targeted black communities for drug distribution.

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The 2-tape set and/or the complete transcript of the special seminar, focusing on allegations linking CIA secret operations and drug trafficking, can be ordered directly from Alternative Radio by calling David Barsamian's 800 number, 1-(800) 444-1977, or writing Alternative Radio, 2129 Mapleton, Boulder, CO 80304.