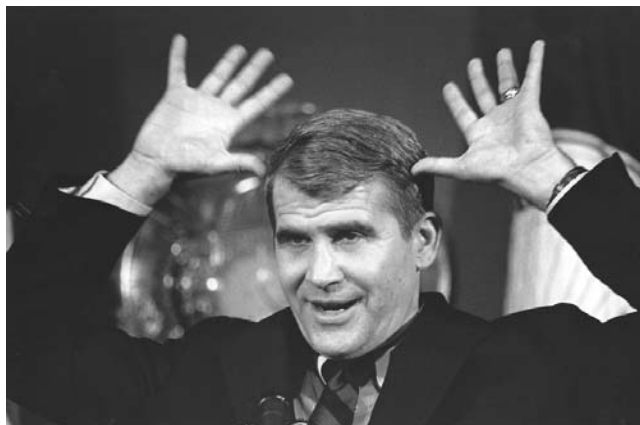


George H.W. Bush's drug backwaters

by Jeffrey Steinberg

When a C-130 cargo plane was shot down over Nicaraguan air space on Oct. 5, 1986, and crew member Eugene Hasenfus was captured by the Sandinistas, the lid blew off of the George Bush/Oliver North Contra guns-for-drugs "Enterprise." It later emerged that the Hasenfus plane had been used by a notorious marijuana and cocaine smuggler, Adler Barriman "Barry" Seal, and had been transferred to Central America for use by the Contras. Seal, before his assassination in early 1986 while in Federal work release custody in Louisiana, had been responsible for smuggling an estimated \$3-5 billion worth of illegal narcotics into the tiny Intermountain Airport in Mena, Arkansas.

The Mena story has been used for years to paint President Clinton as tied to the international drug cartels, because he was Governor of Arkansas during much of the period when Mena served as a hub of the Contra guns-for-drugs operations. However, evidence released in the Kerry Committee report ("Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy," produced in 1988 by a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee chaired by Sen. John Kerry [D-Mass.]), and from other Congressional probes, revealed that the Seal-Mena project was run, top down, by the Bush team at the White House. To wit: Moments after the Hasenfus crash, former CIA officer Felix Rodriguez placed an emergency call to Donald Gregg, chief national security aide to Vice President Bush, to alert him to the deba-



Oliver North's role in the Contra operation was vastly exaggerated, as part of the cover-up to protect George Bush. In reality, North was a junior staff officer in the chain of command, headed by the vice president.

cle. Upon being indicted by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) for drug trafficking, Seal sought to cut a deal, but was rebuffed. He then flew to Washington, where he met with a representative of Vice President Bush's Drug Task Force, and then with Lt. Col. Oliver North. Three separate sources related what happened next.

- A Louisiana State Police official involved in the Seal probe wrote to the DEA in 1986, reported that Seal "arrived in Miami upon the recommendation of the Vice President's Task Force on Drugs, piloting his own Lear jet."

- Richard Ben-Veniste, a former attorney for Seal, told the *Wall Street Journal*, "I did my part by launching Barry Seal into the arms of Vice President Bush, who embraced him as an undercover operative."

- According to IRS investigator Bill Duncan, who led the probe into the gun-for-drugs operations in Mena, "Seal used to brag he could call George Bush at any time."

Mena's isolated setting afforded precisely the kind of privacy that was needed for the Bush/North secret guns-for-drugs enterprise. However, it was but one of many such waystations for the Contra and related "secret team" operations. Others that dotted the rural landscape of the American South and Southeast included:

Other Menas

- Hawkins Air Field in Jackson, Mississippi was identified in the Kerry Committee report as another drop site for Contra drugs entering the United States.

- Loudoun County, Virginia, 35 miles northwest of Washington, D.C., was another drop zone. The U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia during the mid-1980s, Henry Hudson, was an intimate of the Bush/North team, and Federal prosecution of traffickers was always, therefore, a highly political affair. Furthermore, the local regime in Loudoun County was thoroughly corrupted, beginning with the County Sheriff, John Isom. The local Anglophile oligarchy, centered around the "horse country" set, including the Harrimans, the Mellons, the Hanes, and the Ohrstrom-Bryants, owned the County Sheriff, and the large estates and "gentlemen's farms" that took up most of western Loudoun County were known to be frequent sites of large drug soires, fundraisers for Oliver North, and, on some occasions, repositories for Contra drug shipments.

Eventually, the lid blew off of the Loudoun aristocracy's involvement in the Bush/North dope dealings. The DEA raided a large farm, owned by the Reckmeyer brothers, sons of a prominent Air Force colonel (whom some DEA officials reported was a suspect as well). To successfully carry out the bust, the DEA neglected to inform the local Sheriff about the pending drug sweep. When the DEA presented Hudson with extensive evidence that a local Loudoun branch of a prominent northern Virginia bank had been integral to the Reckmeyer dope ring, laundering the proceeds of the marijuana sales, Hudson refused to prosecute.