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Malcolm Byrne's "Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power," was a shock to read. Ronald Reagan, admired as governor of California by my lawyer husband and, later, as the President of the United States—that same Reagan was facilitating the flow of cocaine into the US, even as he revived Nixon's War on Drugs? I resolved to consult another source.

Tom Feiling's "Cocaine Nation" is just as unsparing on the subject as Byrne's book. Ronald Reagan became president in 1980, which galvanized conservative Americans into a firm rebuttal of liberal America. The following year, his vice-president, George Bush Sr., launched a special task force to invigorate Nixon's war on drugs, in hindsight quite a sanctimonious gesture that nevertheless cost billions.

The Contras were a group of Nicaraguans fighting a guerilla war against the social-minded Sandinistas who had come to power when the country's dictator was ousted. The Reagan Administration saw the Contras as allies in the American fight against communism; "the President even went so far as to describe them as the latter-day equivalent of the founding fathers," writes **Feiling**. Congress, however, enacted prohibitions against using government funds "for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua."

Reagan resorted to subterfuge. Colonel Oliver North sold weapons to the Iranian government, supposedly an enemy of the White House, to raise money for the Contras.

"A lesser-known chapter in the story, and one that throws the integrity of the Republicans' war on drugs into real doubt," writes Feilig, "is that the CIA also approved and supported the Contras' trafficking of cocaine into the United States." The author, who spent years in Colombia to create documentaries, interviewed a number of former CIA operatives.

"[Cocaine] was coming up through Los Angeles," the author quotes Russ, a secret service operative from San Jose, California. "There were boatloads of it coming up through San Francisco. . . . The money they were making was filtered back to support the Contras in their fight in Nicaragua."

DEA Agent Celerino Castillo III told the author, "They gave the coke to Norwin Meneses and Danilo Bandon, who was a CIA asset. He in turn fronted all that stuff to Ricky Ross. Ross became the Walmart of crack, distributing to the Bloods and the Crips and everybody else . . . They fucked up all of California with the crack epidemic."

"Hangars 4 and 5 at Ilopango airport in San Salvador were used as a trampoline for drugs coming in from Colombia and Costa Rica," Castillo told the author. "Oliver North and a Cuban exile named Felix Rodriguez were running one of them, and the other was owned by the CIA."

Rodriguez was on the CIA payroll and was present at the killing of Che Guevara in Bolivia in 1967.

“Rodriguez and North used a plane called the Fat Lady, which was also owned by the CIA, to load up with arms at Ilopango and then airdrop to the Contras in the jungle. Then the Fat Lady got shot down by the Sandinistas. The only survivor was the pilot, Gene Hasenfus, who was also working for the CIA. He was captured and said that it was a covert operation run by the White House, and that’s when the story broke that the US government was supporting the Contras.”

“The shit hit the fan and everybody ran for cover, trying to deny it. Even Reagan tried to deny it,” Castillo told the author. Still, Reagan put pressure on Congress until it approved a \$100 million aid package to the Contras.

Meanwhile Senator John Kerry chaired a congressional committee investigating the Iran-Contra affair. Castillo again: “Then I started getting calls from the DEA saying, ‘Don’t close the Contra files.’ I asked why, and they said, once the file was closed, the congressional investigators would have access to it. So when Senator Kerry had his hearings I wasn’t called because he hadn’t seen my report.”

Feiling uncovered more than you’d ever want to know about the American government’s clandestine drug operations. The cocaine-Contra scandal “brings to mind earlier cases in which the US government allowed drug traffickers to sell drugs in the United States, usually in pursuit of the same anti-communist agenda that animated their strategy in Nicaragua,” writes the author. He cites as an example the Italian-American mafioso Lucky Luciano of 1943. “United States intelligence agencies not only arranged for Luciano, then the world’s preeminent heroin dealer, to be released from prison, they also allowed him to rebuild his drug-smuggling business, watched as heroin flowed into New York and Washington DC, and then lied about what they had done.”

A few decades later, in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, the CIA “facilitated opium and heroin trafficking to the United States.”

They also “turned a blind eye to heroin trafficking by Mujahidin rebels in Afghanistan, because trafficking paid for resistance to the Soviet Union’s occupation of the country in the 1980s.”

The author adds that, prior to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when Israel’s only allies in the country were the Christian Phalangists, the CIA deliberately foiled the DEA investigations of the Phalangists’ smuggling heroin into New York City, so as to allow them to raise funds for their assault of the PLO in Beirut.

“Each of these drug-trafficking operations had a direct and significant effect on heroin and cocaine use in the United States,” writes the author; nevertheless, “they were all protected by the CIA and, by extension, the US government.”

The collusion is shocking but often overlooked, as are the “roots that drug-fuelled crime has sunk in American soil,” writes **Feiling**. He cites a statistic dating to 1991 as “the only one I

have,” according to which the number of Americans selling drugs was then 1.8 million. How have drug markets become such big employers in so many US cities? “Organized crime moved into the drugs business because it was the only entity able to absorb the rising human and financial costs,” he quotes from a University of California at Davis Law Review of 1991, written by David Henderson under the title, “A Humane Economist’s Case for Drug Legalization.”

Feiling takes a dim view of First Lady Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign.

“If the likes of . . . Nancy Reagan were looking for a social problem, why didn’t they target the daily use of crack by the destitute?” He explains the de-industrialization of American cities, from steel production to clothing manufacture, begun in the 1960s, which wiped out good jobs for city dwellers.

That Nancy Reagan's anti-drug messaging failed to include prescription-drug abuse was with good reason: Nancy herself abused these drugs. Her daughter Patti Davis wrote in her 1992 memoir that her mother was “dependent” on prescription drugs. Patti said she stole the tranquilizers Miltown, Librium, Valium and Quaaludes from her mother's bathroom and traded them for amphetamines to fuel her own drug addiction.

When I emigrated to America, the country seemed the land of opportunity. I never questioned my husband’s admiration for Republican presidents; why would I? He was the educated one; I was the newcomer. In turn, our sons accepted their dad’s beliefs while growing up. Some of these family norms have changed or are changing now. Still, I regret my former political apathy. I said some stupid things when I was young.