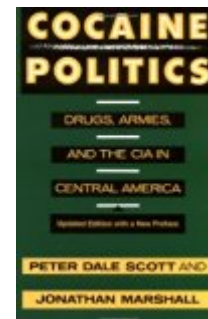


Peter Dale Scott, Jonathan Marshall. *Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies, and the CIA in Central America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. xxiii + 279 pp. \$15.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-21449-1.



Reviewed by Arthur Schmidt

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For years, historian William O. Walker has doggedly and wisely argued that "the history of drug control plays an essential part in our understanding of United States-Latin American relations in much of the twentieth century. To ignore that reality is to overlook the reason for one of the now-chronic problems in hemispheric relations." [1] Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall would agree with Walker, but add a powerful twist to his view. The new paperback edition of *Cocaine Politics. Drugs, Armies, and the CIA in Central America*, originally published in hardback in 1991 and first issued in paper in 1992, reiterates their contention that U.S. intelligence agencies have readily and willfully sacrificed drug control efforts in Latin America when they conflicted with perceived national security interests. They go so far as to argue that the single-minded U.S. pursuit of anti-Communism actually promoted drug trafficking in the Americas. "In country after country, from Mexico and Honduras to Panama and Peru, the CIA helped set up or consolidate intelligence agencies that became forces of repression, and whose intelligence connections

to other countries greased the way for illicit drug shipments" (pp. vii-viii).

The 1986-88 investigations and public hearings conducted by Senator John Kerry (D-Massachusetts) and the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics and International Operations of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate provide the foundation for Scott and Marshall's study. (Roughly one-fifth of the citations in *Cocaine Politics* list the hearings of the Subcommittee and its report). [2] Yet Scott and Marshall were not happy with what they call the "Kerry report." "Unfortunately," they lament, "constraints of time, resources, and politics cut the report short. Staff and committee disputes, editing decisions, and stonewalling from the executive branch also took their toll. The result was a nearly unassailable, but incomplete account" (p. 15). Scott and Marshall set out *Cocaine Politics* to be what the Kerry report should have been in their view, one that provides a more thorough treatment of the issues and one that does not shrink back from politically sensitive conclusions.

Cocaine Politics consists of Part I, "Right-Wing Narcoterrorism, the CIA, and the Contras," about two-thirds of the text, and Part II, "Exposure and Coverup." In all, Scott and Marshall use newspaper and magazine accounts, secondary literature, and Congressional documents from the Kerry subcommittee and the Iran-Contra hearings in roughly equal proportions to lay out what they call the "lesson of the Contra period"--that "far from considering drug networks their enemy, U.S. intelligence organizations have made them an essential ally in the covert expansion of American influence abroad. The most dramatic increases in drug smuggling since World War II have occurred in the context of, and indeed partly because of, covert operations in the same regions. CIA involvement in Southeast Asia contributed to the US heroin epidemic of the late 1960s, just as CIA involvement in Central America contributed to the cocaine epidemic of the 1980s. Although the CIA did not actually peddle drugs, it did form gray alliances with right-wing gangs deemed helpful against a common enemy" (p. 4).

Scott and Marshall make essentially five arguments in *Cocaine Politics*. First, that the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George Bush ultimately considered Sandinista Nicaragua more dangerous to U.S. security than narcotics. Accordingly, they were willing to work with well-known drug traffickers in order to support the Contra cause, particularly given Congressional restrictions (the Boland Amendments of 1982 and 1984) on U.S. governmental support to military and paramilitary operations against the government of Nicaragua. Scott and Marshall claim that the CIA's past dealings with drug traffickers and money launderers in Florida, New Orleans, and throughout the Caribbean Basin offered a ready network to be applied to the issue of halting insurgency in Central America.

Once Argentina withdrew its active assistance to the Contras, the CIA moved in to reorganize the Contra leadership in Honduras in 1983 while the

DEA office in that country was closed. Over the next few years, U.S. intelligence operatives cooperated with Hondurans and Cuban Americans with active records in drug trafficking and money laundering in order to assure transport, weapons, and supplies for the Honduran-based Contras. Further assistance for the Contras on the southern front in Costa Rica was engineered through Manuel Noriega and various cohorts of U.S. expatriates and Cuban Americans. Neither Oliver North in the operation of his "Enterprise" nor the Department of State with its contracts to suppliers of "humanitarian aid" to the Contras showed any reluctance in dealing with individuals and firms whose involvement in drug trafficking and money laundering was well known to various agencies of the U.S. government such as the Department of Justice or the Bureau of Customs.

Second, Scott and Marshall contend that the Reagan and Bush administrations were willing to use the so-called "War on Drugs" as a front for their anti-Sandinista aims in Central America, even when it meant weakening drug control efforts. As chair of the South Florida Task Force, they argue, George Bush helped force the Medellin cartel out of Florida, but took no action against the drug peddling and money laundering of anti-Castro Cubans. U.S. officials invented the image of narcoterrorism, alleging an anti-American conspiracy among Fidelista Cuba, Sandinista Nicaragua, Colombian guerrilla groups, and the Medellin cartel. In reality, as other analysts have noted, such a grand coalition never existed. In the words of Rensselaer Lee, "the [Reagan] Administration's ideological and security concerns in the Hemisphere led it to ignore a more fundamental reality: the increasing penetration by drug traffickers of noncommunist governments, regimes, and movements." [3]

Third, Scott and Marshall argue that the prosecutions of drug traffickers under the Reagan and Bush administrations actually complemented their toleration of drug commerce in the name of

anti-Communism. U.S. efforts against the Sandinistas employed unstable networks of "assets" in the Caribbean Basin. Traffickers working with the U.S. did so for opportunistic, not ideological reasons. The management of the various machineries of clandestine operations always remained complex. Once an individual was no longer useful to Washington, he might find himself subject to prosecution in the name of the War on Drugs. The strongest example of this phenomenon was Manuel Noriega, no longer needed after the Iran-Contra scandal erupted in 1986. Once Noriega lost his closest patrons, CIA Director William Casey and Oliver North, his prosecution could serve a new set of political interests in Washington.

Fourth, integral to the success of Reagan-Bush policies was their ability to cover up their unsavory ties to drug interests. Scott and Marshall devote a third of their text to the efforts employed by North to intimidate witnesses and otherwise to obstruct the work of the Kerry subcommittee as well as to the broader public relations offensives that both administrations constantly employed. The two authors strongly criticize the unwillingness of most of the U.S. Congress to take the drug links to Central American policy seriously. In addition, they insist that the electronic news media as well as the major newspapers like the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* consistently ignored or underplayed the issues in ways that worked to the favor of the U.S. government. Here their contentions echo those of media critics like Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, and Michael Perenti.[4]

Fifth, Scott and Marshall argue that the U.S. will have to dismantle the national security state if it is to cope effectively with drug issues. "A root cause of the governmental drug problem in this country (as distinguished from the broader social drug problem) is the National Security Act of 1947, and subsequent orders based on it. These, in effect, have exempted intelligence agencies and their personnel from the rule of law, an exemp-

tion that in the course of time has been extended from the agencies themselves to their drug trafficking clients. This must cease" (pp. xi-xii). They advocate programs of "controlled decriminalization" accompanied by a shift of anti-drug expenditures from military and police actions to scientific and medical measures as the best approach for coping with the social problems of narcotics. The two authors are not optimistic about any likely shift in public policy. "For the CIA to target international drug networks," they write, "it would have to dismantle prime sources of intelligence, political leverage, and indirect financing for its Third World operations. If this book shows nothing else, it should indicate the folly of expecting such a total change of institutional direction" (p. 5).

How should one evaluate the republication of *Cocaine Politics* eight years after its original appearance? It is not a book that can claim to be definitive. After all, as Scott and Marshall note, "even the most reputable sources cannot guarantee accuracy in an area as murky as the narcotics traffic" (p. 7). As in federal racketeering trials, the charges are enormous and the witnesses of unsavory background. It is hard to avoid agreeing with much of what *Cocaine Politics* says about the Central American wars—that elements of the U.S. government willfully cooperated with known drug traffickers and money launderers against what Ronald Reagan declared as the "unusual and extraordinary threat" of Sandinista Nicaragua.[5] It is certainly clear that the U.S. government successfully obstructed efforts of the Kerry subcommittee and the Iran-Contra prosecutors to get to the bottom of U.S. foreign policy scandals.[6] In addition, the ability of the Reagan administration to use the tactic of "the big lie" to obscure the political reality of its actions in Central America is well known.[7] While these weighty allegations from *Cocaine Politics* are valid, much of substance—questions of degree, levels of individual

responsibility, and causal linkages, for example--remains murky.

Cocaine Politics needs higher standards of analysis. Scott and Marshall seem content to see Contra-CIA drug linkages in the Central American wars as simply business as usual, something that the CIA has always routinely done. By this perspective, many of their more hazy connections of the Central American conflict to anti-Castro Cubans, Colombian cartels, and Israeli agents are transformed from speculation into evidence. To paraphrase Barry Goldwater, Scott and Marshall seem to hold that error in the defense of thesis is no vice; exactitude in the pursuit of historical truth is no virtue. "If, despite our best efforts," they assert, "history proves a few of our assertions wrong, it will hardly overthrow the larger conclusions of the study" (p. 7). Some readers may be content with such a stance, but for the broad public, the exposure of erroneous claims can discredit an entire work. (Relatively few audiences are like those obtained by the labor activist Michael Moore. On tour, Moore jokingly told one group that General Motors ought to go into cocaine dealing if really it was interested in nothing more than profits. A member of the audience immediately shouted back that the CIA had already taken over that activity.)[8]

The experience of journalist Gary Webb offers a relevant case in point. In August, 1996, Webb published a three-part series in the *San Jose Mercury* on drug trafficking in the Contra war and its linkages with the consumption of crack cocaine in California.[9] Webb's articles argued that a Nicaraguan drug ring that worked with the CIA in Central America created an inner-city crack cocaine market in California in order to finance the Contra war. While widely ignored at first, Webb's reportage created a sensation in African-American communities across the United States, eventually generating pressure that brought attention from both Washington and the mainstream media. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

held hearings, while ABC's *Nightline* show aired then CIA Director John Deutch's tumultuous meeting with Congresswoman Maxine Waters' constituents in Los Angeles. In the end, however, little happened other than a series of discrediting attacks on Webb's articles by more powerful newspapers, particularly the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*. [10]

Webb's experience amply demonstrates the accusations of Scott and Marshall that the mainstream press willfully neglects the issue of drug involvement in U.S. policy during the Central American wars. It continues to treat possible CIA linkages to drug traffickers lightly, even when the CIA itself now admits a repeated failure to investigate allegations of Contra drug trafficking or to report them to other U.S. agencies or to Congress. [11] In the words of Peter Kornbluh, the *San Jose Mercury News* "accomplished something that neither the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, nor *The New York Times* had been willing or able to do--revisit a significant story that had been inexplicably abandoned by the mainstream press, report a new dimension to it, and thus put it back on the national agenda where it belongs ... Indeed, if the major media had devoted the same energy and ink to investigating the contra drug scandal in the 1980s as they did to attacking the *Mercury News* in 1996, Gary Webb might never have had his scoop." [12]

Yet Webb's series was rife with journalistic weaknesses that made it a ready target for its critics and nullified its potential impact. Kornbluh characterizes it as "an overwritten and problematically sourced piece of reporting. It repeatedly promised evidence that, on close reading, it did not deliver." [13] *Cocaine Politics* certainly does not merit such harsh criticism. Nevertheless, the book contains shortcomings that weaken its case, flaws that were in the power of the authors to have avoided originally or to have corrected in the new edition. Some are simply matters of annoyance to the reader, such as the lack of a bibli-

ography, a genuine sin of omission in a book that relies so heavily on secondary works. Others are more serious—for example, the failure to demonstrate to the reader a critical evaluation of sources. Newspaper citations simply contain the name of the newspaper and publication date, a form of notation that communicates nothing about the authorship of the material to readers. Readers need to know the identity of journalistic sources since U.S. reporting from Central America during this period exhibited great variations in quality. An article by Raymond Bonner or Julia Preston, for example, would be likely to offer superior material to one by Lindsey Gruson, although all three wrote for the same newspaper, the *New York Times*.

Scott and Marshall do a better job in their notes of commenting on some of their primary source selections from the Kerry report or from Iran-Contra congressional documents. Still, a critical reader is likely to lack confidence that *Cocaine Politics* fully escapes the injudicious use of sources and argumentation that tripped up Gary Webb. Arguments in *Cocaine Politics* often suffer from loose construction, while the book's quantity of detail sometimes obscures the forest for the trees. Causation rests heavily on conjecture or on coincidences in timing more than it does upon explanations that knit together evidence, source, and conclusion tightly. Given the covert nature of the subject matter, many of these deficiencies may be inevitable, but the republication of *Cocaine Politics* does not convey the sense that Scott and Marshall have done all they might to minimize them. While the 1998 title page bears the wording "Updated Edition with a New Preface," the "Preface to the 1998 Edition" constitutes the only change from the 1992 paperback. In reality, the 1998 edition has not been "updated" at all. The eight pages of the new preface simply state that several events subsequent to the book's original publication (including Webb's series and the trial of Noriega) have validated its contentions.

Cocaine Politics thus remains the book that it was eight years ago: an important starting point for examining the role of narcotics in U.S. policy toward Central America and the relationship between the CIA and drug trafficking. Unfortunately, it does not fill the current need for scholarship that would bring the drug-Contra story up to date in the context of present U.S. narcotics control efforts in the Western Hemisphere. The United States currently supports a complex of supply-side programs that involve it deeply in the internal conflicts of Bolivia, the Caribbean, Central America, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru.[14] These settings intertwine U.S. security agencies with local paramilitary, police, and military forces. The mixture of human rights and narcotics issues yields a context ripe for abuse.[15] This situation requires that the accusations raised by Scott and Marshall in *Cocaine Politics* obtain a more definitive answer.

If further studies in this field are to gain the broad reception that is needed, they must transcend the scholarly weaknesses of *Cocaine Politics*. At the present time, an unfortunate gap exists between two different approaches to the matter of CIA ties to drug trafficking during the Central American wars. The critical populist school takes the CIA-drug nexus as almost a matter of faith, while the critical institutional approach scarcely discusses the question at all. Following the path of *Cocaine Politics*, critical populists may lament their lack of impact, but they do not seem convinced of the need to raise their scholarly standards. The influence of vested interests and the success of the coverup alone suffice in their view to account for the impunity enjoyed by crimes of power. Even when the powerful admit guilt, their sins are ignored. "Down the decades the CIA has approached perfection in one particular art, which we might term the 'uncover-up,'" writes Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair. "This is the process whereby, with all due delay, the Agency first denies with passion, then concedes in profoundly muffled tones, charges leveled against

it." [16] A vicious circle emerges whereby the agents of the U.S. national security state commit hideous deeds that are righteously denounced by muckracking journalism, whose findings are then ignored by the mainstream news media and the political establishment, thus leading to more muckracking journalism.

The critical institutional literature has generally stayed away from the Contra-CIA drug questions, not because it has been part of the coverup, but because it has not found the standards of proof employed by the critical populists convincing. William LeoGrande's recent study of U.S. policy during the Central American wars devotes less than three of its seven hundred seventy-three pages to the matter, concluding that while indications of Contra links to drug trafficking and money laundering were "highly suggestive, there was no solid proof implicating senior contra leaders in the drug trade." [17] Like LeoGrande, the authors of other works critical of U.S. foreign policy in Central America and its violation of law and human rights have also given relatively little attention to the Contra-CIA drug matter. [18] The same has been true of prosecutors. [19] Similarly, scholars generally not sympathetic to the approach of U.S. drug-control policies in Latin America have also shrunk back from the issue. Recent work on the drug trade in the region barely mentions possible criminal activity by the CIA and the other U.S. intelligence arms. [20]

The gap between the critical populists and the critical institutionalists constitutes an unhealthy prescription for accurately comprehending the Central American wars, for bringing recent history to bear on the human costs of contemporary U.S. drug control measures in Latin America, and for incorporating narcotics into the history of U.S.-Latin American relations in the twentieth century. It is time for these two types of literature to emphasize the common elements they often hold--recognition of the abuses of power at home and abroad by the national security state; the dangers

inherent in U.S. drug control policies in Latin America; and the abdication of responsibility by the established news media. The critical institutionalists should make it a priority to seek out where the "solid proof" lies amid the Contra-CIA drug questions while the critical populists should raise their analytical standards.

NOTES:

[1]. William O. Walker III, *Drug Control in the Americas*, rev. ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), xii. Walker has also noted that "drug cultures are not at all alien to the Americas; they have been and will likely remain an integral, though misrepresented, aspect of its history ... With equal certainty, the conflict over drugs in the Americas will persist into its second century." William O. Walker III, "Introduction: Culture, Drugs, and Politics in the Americas," *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere. An Odyssey of Cultures in Conflict*, ed. William O. Walker III (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 1996), xv and xxiv.

[2]. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Drugs, Law Enforcement, and Foreign Policy*, Report by the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics and International Operations, Committee on Foreign Relations, 100th Cong., 2d sess., December 1988 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989).

[3]. Rensselaer W. Lee III, *The White Labyrinth. Cocaine and Political Power* (New Brunswick, N.J. and London: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 184. Lee's book was sponsored by the right-leaning Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia. On this same point, Lee went on to say: "In South America, Central America, and the Caribbean, the cocaine industry's money and power support established political regimes. (Funding for the Nicaraguan Contras may be an interesting exception). To pretend otherwise, as some Reagan administration officials have done, is either to carry on an exercise in self-deception or to make a deliberate misrepresentation of reality."

[4]. For example, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent. The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988) and Michael Perenti, *Inventing Reality. The Politics of the Mass Media* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

[5]. In imposing economic sanctions on Nicaragua in 1985, the Reagan administration declared Nicaragua "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States."

[6]. See Lawrence E. Walsh, *Iran-Contra. The Final Report* (New York: Times Books, 1994).

[7]. Robert Parry and Peter Kornbluh, "Iran-Contra's Untold Story," *Foreign Policy* (fall 1988), 3-30.

[8]. See Moore's most recent video, *The Big One* (Miramax, 1998).

[9]. Webb has published an expanded version of his reportage and experience as *Dark Alliance. The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998).

[10]. The best account of the controversy is offered by Peter Kornbluh, "The Storm over 'Dark Alliance,' *Columbia Journalism Review*, January-February 1997, 33-39.

[11]. James Risen, "CIA Said to Ignore Charges of Contra Drug Dealing in the '80s," *New York Times*, 10 October 1998. The *Times* covered the declassified report by the CIA Inspector General that admitted these agency failings with this one story on an interior page.

[12]. Kornbluh, "The Storm," 32.

[13]. Ibid.

[14]. See "Just the Facts: A Civilian's Guide to U.S. Defense and Security Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean," available at <http://www.ciponline.org/facts/>; Internet; accessed 16 January 1999; and Mathea Falco, "U.S. Drug Policy: Addicted to Failure," *Foreign Policy* (spring 1996): 120-133.

[15]. See, for example, Human Rights Watch, *War Without Quarter. Colombia and International Humanitarian Law* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1998).

[16]. Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, *Whiteout. The CIA, Drugs, and the Press* (New York: Verso, 1998), 385.

[17]. William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard. The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 464. *Cocaine Politics* is not listed in LeoGrande's bibliography while the Kerry report is.

[18]. For example, Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line. The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991) and Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History*, A National Security Archive Documents Reader (New York: The New Press, 1993).

[19]. For example, Walsh, *Iran-Contra*.

[20]. Recent cases include Peter H. Smith, ed., *Drug Policy in the Americas* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1992) and Elizabeth Joyce and Carlos Malamud, eds., *Latin America and the Multinational Drug Trade*, Institute of Latin American Studies Series, University of London (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

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