



Red-White-and-Blue Conspiracy

Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St Clair:
Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press (Verso, \$50).

IN THE *Weekend Australian* of 15–16 January 2000, Frank Campbell reviewed William De Maria's *Deadly Disclosures: Whistleblowing and the Ethical Meltdown of Australia*, painting a grim picture of the invariable fate of those who "see and report wrongdoing as if they lived in a working democracy". In contemporary western states, De Maria suggests, the whistleblowers *always* suffer; what they represent is a spike of conscience jammed in the machines of politics or corporatism, momentarily showing how the big end of town goes about its business. There is no end to the rich variety of ways in which exposers of public- or private-sector malpractice are damned, demonized and destroyed; and Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St Clair's *Whiteout* starts with such a study in classic American character assassination.

The book's springboard is the case of Gary Webb: the *San Jose Mercury News* journalist who first broke the story that the cocaine converted into crack and sold through street gangs in south-central Los Angeles could be traced back to a San Francisco syndicate. Webb revealed that major players in San Francisco – Nicaraguan 'refugees' – had strong links with the US intelligence community. The crack epidemic blighting America's ghettos had its origins in clandestine dirty operations: the CIA-driven war against the Sandanistas, in which the co-related traffic of arms and drugs, and the imperative of raising vast stashes of unaccountable cash, were the main structural features. As Webb's story gained a national profile, through his appearance on talkback radio, breakfast television and neighbourhood-hall stages – and the *Mercury News* website, logging 1.3 million hits per day – the initial positive interest in his claims evaporated. "Within a couple of weeks, the story that Webb laid [in late August 1996] would convulse black America and prompt the Central Intelligence Agency first to furious denials and then to one of the most ruthless campaigns of vilifica-

tion of a journalist" in American history. Through open accusation and newsmedia networks, where CIA-friendly journalists occupied influential positions, the Agency relayed counter-stories which undermined and eventually ruined Webb.

In many ways, the story uncovered by Webb was not totally new. Decades before, the CIA had mauled the historian Alfred W. McCoy, whose book on *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (1972) remains an indispensable study of American foreign-policy realities in the Vietnam era. Despite the Agency's attempt to ban it, *The Politics of Heroin* was published, archiving a 'tradition' of US intelligence involvement in narcotics trafficking. McCoy discovered that the cheap heroin peddled to American GIs in Saigon was an actual currency of the war-effort: a fulcrum of fundraising, which financed pro-US insurgents in Laos, bought hardware, bribed officials, and mitigated the unpopular conflict's cost to the American taxpayer. Quite simply, addiction in America's armed forces was a direct outcome of official political strategy. Gary Webb's *Mercury News* story had a similar flashpoint: that crack-cocaine use in US cities resulted from the CIA's Contra-supportive activities in Central America, and that the Agency allowed 'renegade' operatives to profit from the drug trade. This was quickly seized upon by African-American community leaders; escalating, at its most extreme, to the view that the nation's intelligence services tacitly utilized the white-crystal crack as an ethnic-cleanser of the black underclass.

Cockburn and St Clair's *Whiteout* inspects this controversy with balance and sound judgement. But Webb's crack-cocaine stories are only the merest beginning; setting up an argument which valuably extends work such as McCoy's. The argumentative core of *Whiteout* is that we must dispense with the idea of 'renegade elements' unaccountably running amok –

the image of 'mavericks', who take self-serving liberties above and beyond the supposed legal checks that regulate the behaviour of intelligence. When the CIA has been flushed into the open over misfired dirty-ops, its stereotypical defence is to characterize the guilty as field-agents acting without the knowledge or sanction of superiors, or as banana-republic brigadiers and brigands betraying American trust, exploiting the power given to them as paid CIA sub-contractors for private gain – drug pushing, election rigging, murdering, money laundering – as if these were preposterously outside their job descriptions.

The truth is that the CIA is a tight outfit, with a disciplined chain-of-command and communications system, employing people who are rigorously vetted and trained, whose task is precisely to capitalize on links with crime. As *Whiteout* puts it: "Organizations such as the CIA require immersion in criminal milieus, virtually unlimited supplies of 'black' or laundered money and a long-term cadre of entirely ruthless executives (some of them not averse to making personal fortunes from their covert activities). The drug trade is an integral part of such a world." From its foundation in 1947, the CIA's affiliations with mafiosi have been mutually expedient. In the late forties, the Agency employed the Corsican heroin gangs in Marseilles to smash socialist-communist factions in French politics and the union movement – largely so that American goods, flowing through the seaport to a growing European market, would pass without interruption. The Corsicans were paid in kind: with a blind-eye turned to their narcotics shipments, travelling via Havana to Miami and on to New York. If "drugs end up in American veins", Cockburn and St Clair conclude, that "has never deterred the Agency".

Guaranteeing a free market for American enterprise has been in the CIA's mission-statement since its inception. And as super-capitalists par excellence, "drug traders ... are often in opposition to the ruling power" in leftish or unstable states, and thus allies "of paramount interest to a body such as the CIA". As Billy Bragg says in 'The Marching Song of the Covert Battalions', one of the CIA's roles is "making the world safe for capitalism" – "And if you want narcotics we can get you those as well".

Drug trafficking, like many other forms of subversion – from the death-squad to the infiltration of trade unions – has been an officially-endorsed keystone in the architecture of US foreign policy since the end of

the Second World War. Even 'endemic' would not accurately describe the place of drugs in the CIA ethos: it suggests deviance or chronic illness. The shocking fact, Cockburn and St Clair assert, is the utterly quotidian nature of CIA operations. This is a healthy bureaucracy in which organizing drug transshipments, report-filing, business lunches and clocking-out of the office are the workaday routines of well-educated, well-spoken men in suits. In contrast to the glamorous Hollywood depiction of espionage culture, this is the sphere of public servants, who are bid to do the job of achieving American geopolitical aspirations as best they can: "it should again be emphasized," write Cockburn and St Clair, that the CIA works not as a "rogue' Agency but always as the expression of US government policy" dictated from the Oval Office.

All this might be dismissed as conspiracy theory were it not for the impressive research and documentation in *Whiteout*. Occasionally, this involves retelling episodes covered elsewhere, but Cockburn and St Clair manage to produce new supplementary material. They draw, for example, on Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain's *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, The Sixties, and Beyond* (1992), adding more victim-histories to the list of casualties in "Dr Gottlieb's House of Horrors". This was Sidney Gottlieb, the CIA subaltern who headed MK-ULTRA: a 1950s project investigating the potential of LSD as a weapon of mass derangement. In the course of this and other CIA mind-drug experiments, large numbers – possibly tens of thousands – of unsuspecting American army personnel and citizens were dosed with acid. Many were permanently maddened: as in the case of the young artist Stanley Glickman, discussed in *The Age's Good Weekend magazine* (20 February 1999) by Russ Baker. The CIA confessed this to Congress in the late 1970s; and since then, as *Whiteout* details, it has been forced to repeated admissions of "dark alliances" with drug cartels.

Whiteout draws on Congressional hearings, CIA papers, interviews with Agency employees, and many more reputable sources to construct an overview of systemic narco-miscreance; and there is little need for wild speculation when this is mostly a matter of public record. The value of *Whiteout* is its comprehensive survey of a series of historic CIA pacts with right-wing political movements which are, in the main, involved in drugs and indistinguishable from organized crime. Dating to its support for the notorious opium-trader

Chiang Kai-shek, through the guerrilla warlord Li Mi in Burma's Shan states, the CIA's Civil Air Transport and its successor, Air America, shuttled drugs and arms and helped build the infrastructure of what would become the 'Golden Triangle' – one of the world's biggest opium-heroin suppliers.

Then there is the tale of Colonel Oliver North – another 'rogue' patriot – who acted under instruction from the Reagan White House to set up the 'Iran-Contra' drugs-arms deals. This is a saga studied before – in Leslie Cockburn's *Out Of Control: The Story of the Reagan Administration's Secret War in Nicaragua, the Illegal Arms Pipeline, and the Contra Drug Connection* (1988), but *Whiteout* puts it in perspective by highlighting the simultaneity of policy-based narco-trafficking and America's domestic attack on its own hapless street junkies. As "The queen of the drug war, Nancy Reagan" preached to the people – "If you're a casual drug user, you're an accomplice to murder" – her husband and his intelligence corps were flying plane-loads of cocaine into Florida and California to pay for a Central American war which was reputedly not happening. The Reagan administration watched, unconcerned, as American pilots and 'investors', Columbian drug barons, and 'refugee' Nicaraguans in San Francisco (CIA-backed agents) banked narco-dollars as a reward for fighting communism. Given this, *Whiteout* maintains, the international narcotics industry is 'business as usual' – and what odds, it asks, of any single nation winning 'the war on drugs' in such circumstances?

The resonant 'whiteout' of the book's title is the trade in white powders – heroin and cocaine – which has been so useful to the red-white-and-blue conspiracies hatched by the CIA in many troubling parts of the world. 'Whiteout' is also the magic stuff that obliterates typescript, that over-writes the pages of history with blank denial, that creates a gap-in-sense where different words can be inserted. *Whiteout* discusses this kind of scripted re-invention in minute detail, showing how the CIA retains "journalistic assets" in high places; writers and broadcasters who willingly recycle misinformation supplied by the Agency as legitimate news, narratively masking what they know to be wrong and profiting from the déception.

A final lesson of *Whiteout*, embedded in the tale of Gary Webb's systematic ruination, is of the American

media establishment's corruption; its reluctance to probe the apparently improbable fringes of governmentality, and its processes of professionally excluding dissident voices in its own ranks. In this regard, an investigation of the proximity of drug trafficking to the corridors of power inside Washington's beltway or in Langley, Virginia, is only one volatile issue which demonstrates the long and continuing collapse of journalistic integrity. For years, Noam Chomsky has argued repeatedly that the media in countries like the US – and, indeed, Australia – deserve public disrespect for their cowed complicity and neglect of vital social responsibilities. Consequently, Chomsky – himself an outspoken critic of American aggression in Nicaragua and of US narco-warfare – has been universally berated in the press as a conspiracist, anarchist lunatic who should have stuck to linguistics.

The author biographies on *Whiteout's* dustjacket proudly note that Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St Clair are co-editors "of the muckraking newsletter *CounterPunch*". Muckraking smells bad; its habitus is the gutter and its motivation is money-grubbing. But as D.H. Lawrence memorably said, "culture" itself too often has "roots in the deep dung of cash": and *Whiteout* adds to that Lawrencean perception, demonstrating how the promotion of American culture and its democratic triumphalism is grounded in a squalid *realpolitik* which enables politicians, businessmen and gangsters to mint vast personal fortunes as a silent pay-off for their functionary allegiance. In this context, at least, 'muckraking' acquires a better odour. There should be more excavations of the policy dung-hill unearthed by Cockburn and St Clair – though future spadeworkers ought to know in advance that, for their trouble and conscience, they will be branded conspiracy-theorists (or worse), threatened, harassed, dragged through the courts, and greeted with mainstream-media disbelief. To anyone who is already conversant with the extensive literature on narco-politics, however, the revelations dug up by *White Out* will be sometimes familiar and generally credible. For those who wish to begin exploring this byzantine global underworld, *Whiteout* is an absorbing introduction.

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