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More Evidence: U.S. Attempted To Use Gen. Noriega To Assist Nicaraguan Contras After Links With Drug Trade Known

by Deborah Tyroler
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A new document made public April 6 at Oliver North's trial provided new evidence to support charges that the Reagan administration attempted to use Panamanian Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega to assist the Nicaraguan contras at a time when questions were being raised about Noriega's links to the drug trade. The document contains details of Noriega's attempts to aid the contras, including an offer to assassinate the Sandinista leadership or help sabotage Nicaraguan targets. The document reports that North, with approval from then-Asst. Secretary of State Elliott Abrams and then-Secretary of State George Shultz, traveled to London in September 1986 to meet Noriega to talk about assisting the contras. The trip occurred just before the secret contra supply effort and the Iran arms sales diversion grabbed headlines and North was fired from the staff of the National Security Council. At that time, extensive news reports had already linked Noriega to drug trafficking, and an internal State Department policy review on the issue had been distributed. The document is comprised of a summary of still-classified government material that North had requested for use in his defense. For purposes of the trial, the government has acknowledged the account is true. Noriega was indicted by a Florida grand jury in February 1988, and the Reagan administration subsequently attempted various tactics to depose him. According to numerous critics, until that point the Reagan administration had effectively ignored its own intelligence about Noriega's drug trade activities because he was an intelligence source for the CIA and because of his role in providing assistance to the contras. Last year, in testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Francis McNeil, a former high-ranking State Department official who served as US ambassador to Costa Rica, said that Reagan administration officials looked the other way because of Noriega's aid to the contra effort. "A decision was made to put Noriega on the shelf until Nicaragua was settled," McNeil said. In late 1985, said McNeil, then-CIA Director William J. Casey met with Noriega and did not raise the issue of narcotics because the general was needed for the Nicaraguan effort. McNeil testified that Noriega was also a source for Cuban intelligence and that he often made promises to the US that he did not intend to fulfill. The document traces efforts by Reagan and senior advisers to raise funds for the contras from other countries during the period Congress had cut off military aid. According to a CIA report cited in the document, as early as July 1984, Noriega is reported to have given $100,000 to an unidentified contra leader. Former Noriega aide Jose Blandon has said that Noriega also helped train contra fighters in 1985 and 1986 in Panama. According to the document, in August 1986 North told then national security adviser John Poindexter that a Noriega representative had asked North to meet with him. The document partially based on North's own accounts of his actions reads: "Noriega's representative proposed that, in exchange for a promise from the USG (US government) to help clean up Noriega's image and a commitment to lift the USG ban on military sales to the Panamanian Defense Forces, Noriega would assassinate the Sandinista leadership for the US government... "North had told Noriega's representative that US law forbade such actions. The representative responded that Noriega had numerous assets in place in Nicaragua and could accomplish many essential things, just as Noriega had helped the USG the
previous year in blowing up a Sandinista arsenal." North then told Poindexter that the sabotage against the arsenal had been carried out using a Panamanian civilian ordnance expert. North "noted that Noriega had the capabilities that he had proffered and that the cost of any operations could be borne by" the contra effort. "Admiral Poindexter responded that if Noriega had assets inside Nicaragua, he could be helpful. The USG could not be involved in assassination, but Panamanian assistance with sabotage would be another story," according to the document. Poindexter said North should meet with Noriega. In late September, North told Poindexter after his London meeting that Noriega "would try to take immediate actions against the Sandinistas and offer a list of priorities, including an oil refinery, an airport, and the Puerto Sandino off-load facility." According to the congressional report on the Iran-contra affair, the plan was never carried out because North was fired. (Basic data from Washington Post, 04/09/89)

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