

#19 Jack Blum: Lies, and Richard Brennecke

Jack Blum: As important as the ability to ferret out bad guys and stories about what was going on was the importance of identifying people who were just spreading nonsense and stories that were kind of like the rabbit at the greyhound track that had a whole pack of people chasing after them that fundamentally weren't true and would discredit any real work that was going on.

Naomi Fowler: It's 1986 and 87, and Jack Blum's back working with the Senate. Information was surfacing about the role of the Contras in the war in Nicaragua, and the direct involvement of the US government. The evidence suggested they were finding ways to get around the Boland Amendment, which was meant to stop the US supporting the Contras.

This is Jack Blum: The Corruption Diaries from the Tax Justice Network. I'm Naomi Fowler.

Jack Blum: Senator Kerry's staff came to me because there were a couple of people who'd come to his office to talk about what became the Iran Contra Affair and he needed some experienced help in sorting through who the people were and whether this was credible, whether there was something worth pursuing. Then it became clear that this was going to become a full time investigation that was really interesting, and much more interesting than hustling around to find private clients, even though I had some pretty interesting private clients, that might make me more money. This was really a major piece of business that had to be undertaken and I had the experience and there were very few people around who'd run as many hearing days or knew how to put together an investigation.

All the way through the investigations we ran there were people who showed up who were fundamentally crazy, who were lying, who wanted to get publicity and one after another you had to push them aside, no matter what the press was saying, because they were listening to these idiots. One of the most amazing of these liars was a man named Richard Brennecke. Brennecke claimed to have been a pilot for Air America back in the days of Vietnam and he claimed to have been flying loads of cocaine from Colombia to the U.S. and that that was being used, that cocaine was being used to fund the Contras. And he got a whole flurry of attention from reporters who were all following Brennecke and listening to, to everything he had to say.

So, first there was the business of interviewing Brennecke. And this is where the ability to interrogate and listen is so important. I started asking him about, you know, what he did, how he made a living, so forth and so on. He had designed various computer systems, he designed a computer system for the Costa Rican government, for other governments to check on people who are entering the country and keep track of passports, and the more I started asking him about how the systems worked and what vendors he was using, it became clear that he was absolutely lying, that there was no substance to it. Then he went into a story of, well, I have details about why I was here and I flew there and so forth and so on. Well, we found that the Customs Service had kept pretty good records of people going in and out of the country, and occasionally when somebody who looked like they were off, or doing something illegal would come through, Customs would use its authority to copy the contents of a briefcase or a folder or whatever that that person was carrying. And sure enough, Brennecke came through Customs and had his briefcase searched and it was

copied. And the Customs Service had the records of it. And what really put the kibosh on everything that Brennecke had to say was that there were receipts in the briefcase that showed he'd stayed at certain hotels in Europe, that he had, you know, had dinners in Europe, that he'd done various things, and they were all in the, in the briefcase. But the problem was the dates on the receipts coincided with when he said he was flying drugs for George Bush. So, it was obvious the guy was lying and it was just a total waste of time to continue pursuing it. The press guys who had been chasing him around like crazy were very upset, you know, like, how, how can you say that he's a liar? Well, we have the hard, the hard evidence and sorry, this is a waste of time.

Naomi Fowler: The Corruption Diaries is a production of The Tax Justice Network, made by Naomi Fowler and Jo Barratt. Interviews with Jack Blum were recorded over several days at Jack's home in Maryland by Zoe Sullivan.