

#22 Jack Blum: John Hal

Jack Blum: I was in the business of saying I know what you're doing. You think it's secret. It's about as secret as putting it up on a billboard somewhere. If I could find all this out, any fool who wanted to invest a little bit of time could find it out.

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

Jack Blum: They kept talking about how he had a ranch on the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua and John Hall was running drugs and guns and you know, this is something I ought to look into.

Naomi Fowler: In our previous episode, Jack Blum had been in Costa Rica on the trail of a New Jersey businessman named Robert Vesco who was involved in laundering the money used by President Nixon's people to pay off the Watergate burglars. He was eventually indicted in 1989 for smuggling a ton of cocaine through Cuba and he died while under house arrest there. While Jack was in Costa Rica he began to hear about a man who was getting a lot of press attention and who became his next target, John Hall.

Jack Blum: While I was in Costa Rica, I got an embassy car and driver and go up to John Hall's ranch. And, yes, there was an airstrip on the ranch and, yeah, here's John Hall himself and he lies, was lying to me like crazy, I don't think he said six words that were true. But what was very clear was this was not a terribly busy airstrip as people had described it. And it was really quite weird. And he was quite weird. And I'm thinking, what is this all about? Because it doesn't square with the news stories that have been written and the things that people have said.

Well, I started digging into who was John Hall and what was this all about, in fact. On the way back from visiting with John Hall I stumbled on a large antenna farm surrounded by a high barbed wire fence and guards and all sorts of things. And it had the appearance of being under U.S. government control. So I said to the driver, I want to go in there. So I get there and say I'm working for the Senate, this is an embassy car, I want to go in, I want to talk to whoever's in charge. People went crazy. And it was clear that what was going on there was some kind of signals intelligence operation that nobody wanted anybody to know anything about.

I later started digging into who John Hall was, where he came from, and what was going on underneath. And the first thing that showed up was that John Hall did not own John Hall's ranch. But in fact, he had put together a consortium of Canadians who invested in supposedly a ranch property in Costa Rica. They thought they owned John Hall's ranch. Second thing was, I discovered he had obtained a loan from the Overseas Private Investment Corporation and the loan was to build and operate a factory that made axe handles and wheelbarrow handles out of the woods

that were locally available. On investigation, he had gotten the loan all right, but there was no factory. In fact, what he had done was, when inspectors from OPIC had come to look at the factory, he'd gotten an existing factory to put up a sign that said it was his, and when they left, he took the sign down.

He had actually had the gall to hold a press conference in San Jose in which he called John Kerry a communist. And the more I learned about the guy and the axe handle business and where he is from and all the rest of it, I concluded this guy was a U.S. operative and he was doing a bunch of things that were completely crazy and designed to distract people from whatever was really going on around this situation. So, we actually held a hearing and laid out this whole saga of John Hall.

Now, there's one final twist to this story. As I said, the cover story was that John Hall was a farmer from Indiana who'd set up this branch on the border with Nicaragua and that he had an airstrip and so forth and so on. If you read Al McCoy's book, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, turns out there was a farmer from Indiana who owned an airstrip in Laos on the Plain of Jars that was said to be a hub for guns and narcotics. And I read it and I'm thinking to myself, these idiots can't even change the story, change the playbook, they use the same story over and over again. Talk about stupidity, this is it.

I wound up at one point calling the CIA Congressional Liaison and saying I wanted to talk to people from their Congressional Liaison Office. So there's all this protesting. We don't give information to anybody about the Intelligence Committee. I said, this isn't about you giving me information, it's me giving you information. In due course, a couple of flat feet show up, and I said to them, don't ever think about having somebody on your payroll call my boss a communist. And I reamed them out upside down and backwards. I said, you know, go read the Constitution. This is not for you to be doing. It's not something that works as a covert operation. You've got to get this under control and you'd better tell your boss and I want to tell you that my boss is going to talk to the head of your agency about this whole affair. Of course, that was the end of the denunciation of Kerry by Hall. My understanding is that Kerry met with the then head of the CIA and it all got sorted out. I mean, he sort of evaporated as a character. But that was just one of many crazy things that went on during the period.

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.