

#25 Jack Blum: the War on Drugs

Jack Blum: The situation in Miami was completely shocking. It was like you'd travelled to another country. The joke was somebody said Miami's a really wonderful place to live. Well, why is that? It's so close to the United States. The things that were going on in Miami were really unbelievable.

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

Jack Blum: The notion that you can solve a problem by declaring war on it is a terribly inappropriate way of thinking of things. It's a very convenient political slogan but it takes complicated questions and reducing them to a level of simplicity that inevitably leads to disaster.

We had planes loaded with narcotics, cocaine, marijuana, landing on I95. We had boatloads of drugs coming up on the beach in fast boats along the Gold Coast. There were small planes that were showing up in all kinds of places loaded with drugs or, for that matter, having been chased, having the drugs dropped out of the plane. There was a story in the Miami Herald, which at the time I clipped, just to bring back to show people what lunacy was in progress in Miami. And the story was about a pilot for Eastern Airlines who'd been laid off. And he decided that the way he was going to make up for the fact that he didn't have a pension and didn't have a job was to fly a small plane loaded with cocaine up from Colombia and bring it in in Miami. Well, what happened to him was he was picked up on radar and the Coast Guard set up these chase helicopters to follow him and see where he landed and bust him.

But he then went into the landing pattern at Miami International Airport and positioned his plane below an incoming international flight, and then broke away and started to fly over South Miami, heading toward the Everglades and the south. As he's doing this, he's pushing, he's got the plane on autopilot, and he's pushing bags, mail bags, or duffle bags filled with cocaine out of the airplane. He drops one and it goes through the roof of a house, a house in South Miami. The occupants of the house don't complain. He drops another one, it bounces off a Baptist church and flattens the minister's car. And the minister's trying to file a claim with the insurance company and the insurance company says, what happened, right?! Another, another bag of cocaine dropped at a community swimming pool where somebody was in the process of explaining Neighborhood Crime Watch to a group of local residents. And finally, this plane goes down in the Everglades where alligators were seen dragging off the remaining duffle bags filled with cocaine. Now, this was a news item in the Miami Herald. If you took that and brought it to anybody anywhere north of, let's say, Fort Lauderdale, people would look at it and think somebody's gotten very imaginative here, and this is all just crazy stuff, and somebody's having fun with us, and it's all invented. But the fact was, it wasn't invented. That was the environment in Miami.

You also had the, the problem of you could be sitting outside on a pleasant night in parts of Miami, and you could hear machine gun fire. What?! You know, in an American city in the

middle of the night? Of course, now, unfortunately, we've become too accustomed to it, but at the time that was equally shocking.

And then, finally, there was the problem of the U.S. attorney in Miami who was threatened by the cartel and who went into hiding at a military base in South Florida. You're saying so, wait a minute, here's the chief federal law enforcement officer and he's so threatened by these drug traffickers, he's got to go into some kind of protection.

They had a little problem in the Miami Police Department, which was some bad guys had figured out that they could buy Miami police uniforms, and they dressed up as cops and used the uniforms and the disguises to do home invasion robberies. And for a period of time, the Miami Police Department was running commercials saying, if you see a cop at the door, call us before you let the cop in.

There were, there were other things that were happening in Miami that were equally breathtaking. There was a hotel on the Miami River. And the hotel on the Miami River had a bar that overlooked the river. And directly across from the bar was the customs enforcement dock where all the fast boats were and where they would bring in people who were smuggling, or suspected of smuggling, and that's where they'd conduct the search of the boat and so forth. You could, on any given evening, go to the bar and sit and watch as the customs guys hauled a boat in and tossed it to look for the drugs.

The 'war on drugs' for public consumption was really a political weapon. It was designed to create an animus against people of colour, and it was very effective because they were being portrayed as those criminals and there was a kind of perception of criminality, and it was an excellent substitute for the old fashioned direct racial assault. Now we could say instead of talking about Blacks and they shouldn't be allowed to vote, which used to be the theme, it's now, well, those people are criminals and we've got to get the criminals off the street, lock 'em up, hang 'em high, and it became an excuse for a political vendetta, in effect, against people of colour. This was principally a Republican piece of engineering courtesy of, among others, Richard Nixon and George Bush. And there was the famous Willie Horton ad, which is scare everybody.

When Michael Dukakis was running against George Bush in the 1988 presidential campaign, there was a commercial that ran that showed a black guy going through a revolving prison gate, and the commercial was about how this convicted felon was going in and out of the criminal justice system, and it really was targeted at - here is Dukakis who allowed that to happen, and he's just soft on crime, and it was the convergence of crime and color that made that so powerful.

Now, the, the real issues underneath, uh the drug problem were issues that people really didn't want to take on. I mean, one of the issues was, we've always had problems with drugs, but the problem in law enforcement and drugs is this: drug trafficking is a crime of adhesion, which means that both the supplier and the customer are happy.

The product is one of the few products you can buy that works as advertised. So, the customers are pretty happy with it until the drug's natural history begins to take over. Now, in the case of cocaine, it's usually about a five year period before cocaine goes out of fashion. And the reason is that at the opener, cocaine gives people the most powerful high that

anybody can imagine. But it keeps taking more and more cocaine to get the high and the depression and aftermath of the high gets worse and worse. And eventually the drug gets a rap that's appropriate to what it does and people stop buying it.

Heroin is a drug that people can be on for life. And a lot of addicts are and they seem to be able to get through it. The addiction is something that is manageable and the big threats come from somebody interfering with the quality of the supply or disease related to the needles or the situation surrounding the purchase.

Second thing about the whole drug problem is this. The definition of a problem addict is an addict who's run out of money. So, for the longest time, there were cab drivers who were running narcotics down to Wall Street, and people would pop out of trading at the New York Stock Exchange to buy drugs, but these were people who had plenty of money. And the people who were really being shoved into jail were people who had run out of money and were now doing things that were illegal and dangerous to get enough money to buy the drugs. I also will tell you that I became a, an opponent of legalization, and you might ask, well, how can you have just said all of that and say you're opposed to legalization? Well, it was the experience of being in Pakistan where, de facto, there were no controls on, on heroin coming from Afghanistan down into Pakistan. And the people in Pakistan who were buying the drugs and using them were the children of the upper middle class and narcotics addiction in Pakistan was growing exponentially, even though it was de facto legal, nobody was arresting anybody, there was no war on drugs. And there were people in Pakistan who were saying that our most promising youth are being towed under by this avalanche of of heroin. So there's, there's not a simple solution and certainly not a solution that involves politicizing or demonizing any group that's using, or targeting law enforcement in a way that turns out to be racially biased.

There was a piece of this that became quite notorious and led to further Senate hearings. This was in the 1990s and, and it's worth talking about. During the work we did, initially, in, in the Kerry-related hearings on Central America and drug trafficking, uh, there was a witness who showed up who talked about how a group involved in anti-revolutionary activities in Central America had, in fact, been smuggling drugs up to San Francisco and to Los Angeles and to a major drug trafficker in Los Angeles. And this was all going to be providing money to the Contras. And of course that was something we were quite interested in, but as we got into the detail of it, the story was completely overblown and although there were elements of it that were true, the totality of the story just didn't add up properly.

But various journalists picked up on it and tried to make more out of it than was there. And there was one journalist who came upon the story. He was writing for the San Jose Mercury. And he writes a story about how the, you know, in fact, this overlooked drug trafficker who was bringing all this cocaine into LA was the largest single supplier of cocaine to the LA market, and it was part of a plot to destroy the black community of Los Angeles. And it, it simply wasn't true and didn't, didn't hold together. But it became such a cause celeb because he wrote a book and people started believing and re-examining and looking at well is it possible that that happened and, uh, I had testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee laying out what I thought was the fact of the matter, which is, no, the CIA was not involved with those traffickers, that maybe, maybe not, some of the money went back to the Contras, but for the most part it went to the traffickers. And the problem that the Senate and

the body politic should be looking at was a pretty straightforward problem of different agencies with different purposes utterly ignoring the mission of the other agencies who were in operation at the time. So if you're working for the CIA, and you're trying to assist whatever is going on in Central America, your idea is I've got to do what I've got to do to get my job done. And if that means being in contact with, or dealing with bad guys, people who, who are flying questionable airplanes or playing around with bribing public officials, hey, that's my job, by definition, I'm doing illegal things. But my job is not drug law enforcement. That's the job of those guys at the DEA. And that is where the crazy cross purposes, uh, come into play and why there's such total misunderstanding of how these pieces fit together.

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.