

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF MICHAEL LEVINE



Photos by Chris Cozzone

FROM FIGHTING THE DRUG WAR TO DRUG WAR DISSIDENT

A *Prison Life* interview by Richard Stratton

I read former undercover DEA agent Michael Levine's first book, *Deep Cover* (Delacorte, New York, 1990) while in prison serving a 25-year sentence for smuggling marijuana and hash. In those days I felt about DEA agents about the same way I imagine they felt about me: a mixture of loathing and fascination that is the nexus of the outlaw/lawman symbiosis and has more to do, I suspect, with how alike cops and criminals are than with how different they might be.

A few years later, I was standing in a book store in Los Angeles when my wife, Kim, who is also a former undercover narcotics agent and writer, handed me Levine's latest book, *The Big White Lie* (Thunder's Mouth, New York, 1993). I bought the book and added it to the stack on my desk — required reading on America's holy war on drugs. Like most ex-POW's, I am obsessed with trying to understand the events that resulted in my being locked in prison.

Some months passed and I still hadn't got around to reading the book. We were in the process of buying a home in upstate New York, and the real estate agent, after learning we were writers, asked if we had ever heard of Michael

Levine. He said his sister had sold Levine and his wife a home not far from where we were thinking of buying.

This inspired me to pull *The Big White Lie* out of my "must read" stack and dig into it. Two days later I closed the book and knew I had to meet this guy. The next day Kim and I drove to town to drop off some packages at Federal Express. As we were pulling away from the drive-through, I happened to look over at the driver in the opposite lane.

"That's Mike Levine," I said to Kim. I thought I recognized him from his picture on the book jacket; something just told me to look up and there was Levine.

Kim, who had been on "Larry King Live" with Levine when her book, *Rush*, was first published, thought I was hallucinating. "You just want to meet the guy so badly you're seeing him everywhere."

"No, that's him." I was sure of it. Kim got out of the car and, showing both hands so Levine could see she wasn't armed, walked toward his car.

"Mike?" she asked warily. Levine looked back at her. "Kim Wozencraft. We were on—"

"Oh, yeah. Hey, Kim. How ya'

doin'?" It was Levine, all right. The force was with me that day, and the force wanted me to meet Mike Levine.

Why did I want to meet this agent, this man who a decade or so ago was my sworn enemy and would have done everything within his large powers to lock my ass in a "cage," as Levine is fond of calling prison? This former comrade-in-arms of the men who in fact did put my ass in stir for the better part of the '80s? Because Mike Levine, with considerable help from his wife Laura Kavanau-Levine, wrote a book called *The Big White Lie*, a book that is essential reading for every Joe citizen dumb enough to believe the politicians and swallow whole government propaganda on this insane, bullshit war on drugs that is destroying our nation.

When former drug smugglers, who may know what they are talking about, come out and say that the biggest international dope dealers are either CIA assets or enjoy CIA protection, the statement is seen as self-serving. It helps the cause of truth considerably when scholars like Alfred McCoy write and publish well-researched, documented studies on the relationship between CIA and some of the world's major dope producers. (The

Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade, Lawrence Hill Books, New York, 1991.) But when a man with Levine's hard-earned credentials, a man who believed in the drug war and fought bravely and honestly for his government to the highest and most perilous levels, only to discover the shocking truth that he had been sold out by the very people he was working for, when such an insider comes forward and writes a book telling the truth, it is of monumental importance. Levine's writing *The Big White Lie* is the equivalent of General Norman Schwarzkopf writing a book proving the Army is full of shit and debunking the Gulf War as a bad joke all about big money.

So I met Mike Levine. It was eerie sitting across the table from him, breaking bread with him, talking about the drug war. Levine was a special brand of DEA agent. Levine worked undercover; he spent most of his 25-year career pretending to be a drug dealer. I spent a good part of my career pretending I was not a drug dealer. I wondered if I would have known the guy was an agent had someone introduced us back in the old days. I'm sure Levine would have made me.

Levine is big: over six feet, over two hun-

dred pounds. He's dark, they used to call him "El Judío Triqueño," the Dark Jew. He is strong and moves like an athlete poised on the balls of his feet. He's a martial arts expert, a tough, likable man with a rough-house boyish quality who, I have no doubt, could snap and instantly become deadly at the drop of a dime bag.

But why put the guy on the cover of *Prison Life* magazine? This guy put people in prison, over three thousand by his own count. He was a fuckin' cop! We decided to put Michael Levine on the cover because we believe what he has to say is vital to the American prison population. Most of the people reading this magazine are in prison on drug charges or for drug-related crimes. Many of the 1.5 million Americans behind bars wouldn't be there if more people would listen to what Mike Levine has to say about the drug war and withdraw their support for politicians who promote this sham. The war on drugs is a major part of what we know as the bloated and corrupt criminal justice system that costs taxpayers billions and is in fact a scam perpetrated on middle-class taxpayers and a form of genocide inflicted on the poor.

I got to know Mike Levine over the course of a long winter and had a number of in-depth discussions with him about the drug war. I may not agree with his ideas on how to solve the drug problem, but I trust Levine's information just as I have come to trust him as a man. Knowing Mike Levine has brought me to the hard realization that all cops are not necessarily bad people; some are just misguided.

From my own experience in the international drug trade I know what Levine has to say is true. When I was smuggling hash out of the Middle East during the long and bloody civil war in Lebanon, (a war that had more to do with fighting for control of the multi-billion dollar drug trade than it did with religion) I met and worked with intelligence operatives and major criminals who openly traded in arms and drugs with CIA connivance and protection. In fact, you couldn't

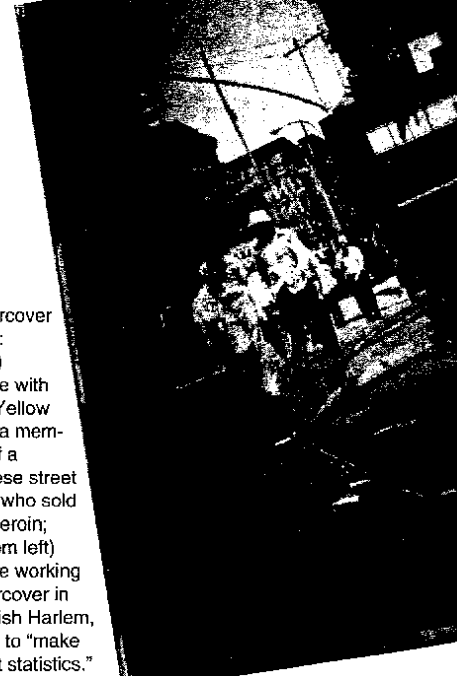
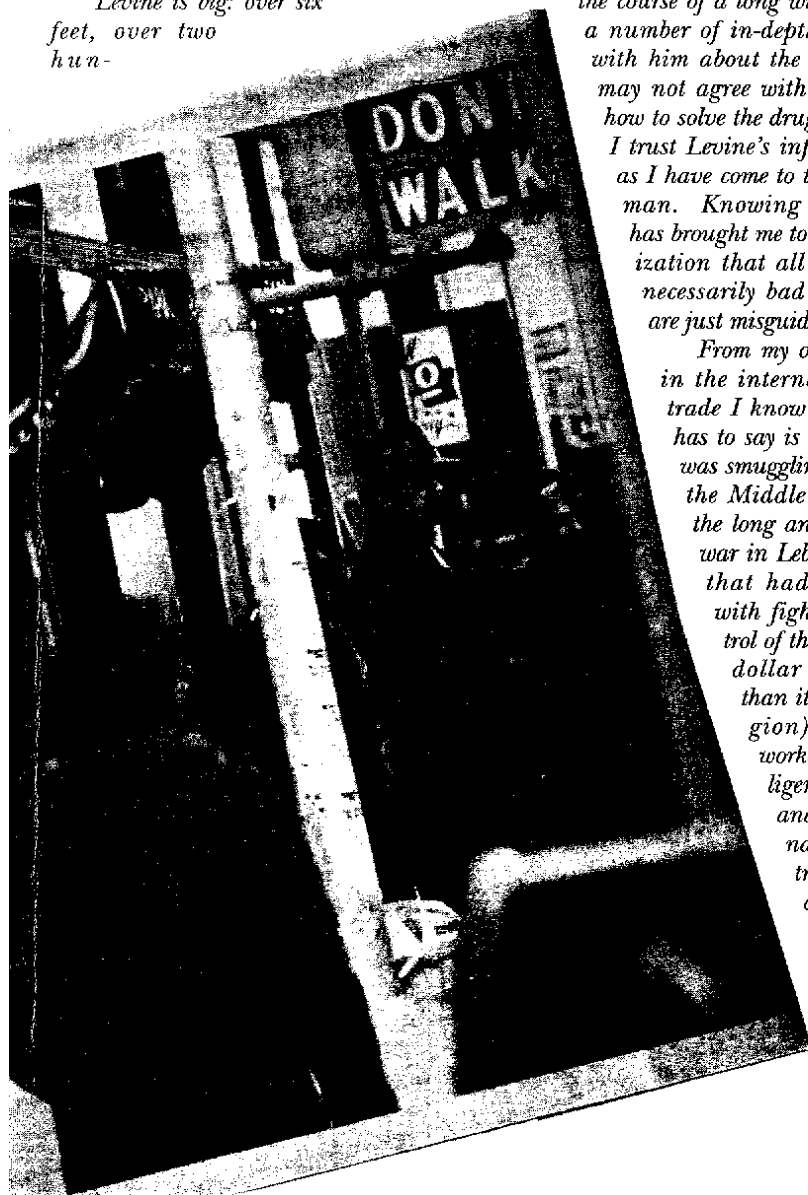
Undercover shots: (right) Levine with Billy Yellow Hair, a member of a Chinese street gang who sold him heroin; (bottom left) Levine working undercover in Spanish Harlem, trying to "make arrest statistics."

operate for long in the Middle East, or anywhere else for that matter, without CIA connections. Ostensibly, our government aids drug trafficking for political reasons, like supposedly fighting communism. But people in the business know that this rationale, if true at all, is clearly secondary to the profit motive.

Levine and I got together to record a distillation of our ongoing dialogue, a kind of précis of Levine's career, and the subject of his books. But it is to those books, and particularly to *The Big White Lie*, that I invite the reader. Read them if you care at all about why you are in prison.

I grew up on Tremont Avenue and Southern Boulevard in the Bronx, 48th precinct. I was a bad kid, really bad, arrested twice before I was 16. I was lucky enough to join the military before I got into serious trouble. I was a violent kid and looking back on it I was really afraid, scared to death. The neighborhood was changing from Italian, Jewish and Irish to Puerto Rican and Black. On the streets I used to lie and say that I was half Puerto Rican. You might say I was already undercover. I have a talent for picking up languages. My first girlfriend was Puerto Rican and I picked up street Spanish very quickly with a good accent. Later on, as an undercover narcotic agent in Bangkok, Thailand, within two months I had picked up enough Thai from bar girls to get around pretty good.

But what really started me toward my career in undercover was fate. I believe in fate, in destiny. In 1959 I was a military policeman assigned to Plattsburgh Air Force Base. I had joined the boxing team, I was 19 years old, over 6 feet and 227 pounds, and like all 19-year-olds, I couldn't con-



ceive of my own death. That's why 19-year-olds make such wonderful soldiers. I got into a fight with a guy named Heywood over a three-dollar hat. We were both military policemen. He pulled his gun, stuck it in my stomach and pulled the trigger. It misfired. There were a bunch of witnesses and he was arrested. Later, when they test-fired the gun, it fired every time.

What that incident taught me was the truth of an old Arab saying: "Any day is a good day to die." The saying became my mantra. From that moment on I had only one fear in life, that I would reach my final moment on earth and say the words: "I wish I had..." I was in a rush to live out every fantasy I could imagine; visit every country I was ever curious about; taste it, feel it, eat it, try everything my imagination could conjure before that final moment came. And what better way to live out a fantasy than to become an international undercover agent for the government? And that's exactly what I did, and I got quite good at it. The better I got the easier it was for me to create any fantasy I wanted and the government would fund it, as long as the bottom line was that someone went to jail.

I played every role you could imagine to bust dope dealers. I played a priest, an Arab sheik, a Cuban terrorist. I was an undercover member of both the American Nazi party and the Marxist Leninist branch of the Communist party at the same time. I even passed myself off as a Mafia don to two corrupt DEA agents who sold me the names of informers out of the DEA computer.

Around the time the kicks started wearing off, I found out that my brother was a heroin addict. I started listening to all the rhetoric of the politicians about this holy war on drugs, and about this evil, dark enemy that was destroying my baby brother. I developed a foaming-at-the-mouth hatred for drug dealers. I blamed them for destroying kids like my brother, destroying our country and all that shit, and I was on a fucking mission from God to destroy them, and I didn't care if I died doing it. We're all gonna die. If you could choose the

way you go, what would it be? Well, I chose undercover. That's how spaced out I was, until reality set in.

My first glimpse of reality was in 1971 when I went deep cover in Bangkok, Thailand. I spent about a month hanging with Chinese heroin dealers. We're talking about a time in history when the biggest heroin seizure was still the French Connection, less than 70 pounds. These guys were producing hundreds of pounds of heroin a week. They thought I was a represen-



tative of the Mafia and wanted to impress me; they were trying to talk me into buying heavy weight. So they invited me to visit what they called "the factory" up in Chiang Mai, the center of their heroin production. But in the middle of the night I was brought into the embassy and told that I would not be allowed to go to the heroin factory. The factory was part of the anti-communist support system and was protected by the CIA. As long as they did CIA's bidding, the guys who owned the factory had a license to support themselves by selling American kids drugs, and not only kids on the streets of the U.S., but GIs on the battlefield as well.

It was the first time in my life that I was stopped by my own government.

I didn't know what was going on back then. I was a good soldier, I wouldn't have believed it if anyone told me the truth. I was simply told that our government has other priorities and that the case had to end with the guys I was dealing with. They wound up delivering one kilo of heroin to me and were busted in front of the Siam Intercontinental Hotel along with some guy making false bottom suitcases. These guys were expendable, but the factory owners had CIA sanction to produce tons of dope, and all of it was going into the veins of Americans, including my brother.

The case ended up getting a lot of publicity. It was the first time one undercover agent arrested the smuggler and financier of a heroin-dealing organization in America, and then went overseas to bust their source. I was given a special Treasury Act award, and I let myself get carried away with my own press clippings. They made me feel like I had already won the drug war single-handedly. I shoved the reality of what I had just lived through along with my brother's slow death into a corner of my mind where it couldn't hurt me. Later I would learn that this heroin exporting organization used the dead bodies of our GIs killed in Vietnam to smuggle their junk. The stuff was hidden in body cavities and body bags.

I returned to the U.S. and to my job as a Special Agent in the Hard Narcotics Smuggling Group of Customs. There was a brutal turf war going on between Customs and the then Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. One of Nixon's last acts as President was to create the Drug Enforcement Administration to end the jurisdictional war. On the morning of July 1, 1973, I woke up as a DEA agent.

For a long while I did nothing but undercover work: hundreds of cases, back to back, cocaine and heroin, seven days a week, never going

home. I had blocked out the whole Bangkok experience and was back fighting my holy war with drug dealers. Black, white, yellow, Jew, Italian, it made no difference to me. If you sold dope you were my enemy, and I would do anything to destroy you.

My wake-up call seemed to begin with my brother's death in February, 1977. I was teaching a class on Narcotics Undercover Tactics to the Brooklyn district attorney's investigators when I was told that my brother had committed suicide. He left a note that read: "To my family and friends, I can't stand the drugs anymore." And, again, if you believe in fate as I do, almost immediately I received word that I was to be transferred to Buenos Aires, Argentina as the DEA attaché.

During those years the demand for cocaine, and later crack, had begun to explode. The South American producers couldn't even come close to meeting it. The biggest drug dealer alive was a man unknown to anyone in America, a Bolivian named Roberto Suarez. I was recently shown a transcript of secret testimony before a closed Senate committee chaired by Senator John Kerry. A man named Ramon Milian Rodriguez, who was the main money launderer for the Medellin cartel, told the Senators that Roberto Suarez is the biggest drug dealer who ever lived. Suarez was the Medellin Cartel's main supplier of cocaine base, and, according to Rodriguez, most of the coke that entered the U.S. that wasn't supplied directly by the Colombians came from the Suarez organization.

People think that cocaine is synonymous with Columbia but that's not true. In the '70s and '80s especially, Bolivia was producing 90 to 95 percent of the cocaine base in the world. You shut down Bolivia in the late 1970s and you shut down the world's cocaine supply. You win the drug war. The whole thing was under the control of one man, Roberto Suarez. When I got down to South America in 1978, Suarez's organization, then called La Mafia Cruzeña, The Santa Cruz Mafia, which later became *La Corporacion*, or the Corporation, couldn't fill 10% of the American demand. They needed to take control of the Bolivian government, which was then anti-drugs, so that cocaine production wouldn't be bothered by law enforcement. They needed to eliminate all the smaller dealers and improve production methods. To catch up with the \$100 billion

American demand, they had to create what became the General Motors of cocaine. That's what they started to do. They brought in neo-Nazis from Europe, all working for an escaped Nazi war criminal, a man named Klaus Barbie, known as "The Butcher of Leon," to handle their security. They began killing off the competition, improving production and buying off key government officials. My job was to penetrate this organization.

To do this, I created a fictitious Mafia family. We had a team of some 30 undercover agents posing as pilots, chauffeurs, chemists, bodyguards and collectors. A beautiful Puerto Rican agent was flown in from Los Angeles to pose as my wife. We had to rely on the Bolivian government to work with us secretly; they were the last vestiges of anti-drug feeling in South America, and they never betrayed us. They recognized the burgeoning power of drug trafficking and realized they could lose their country to drug dealers unless something was done.



When it began to look as if our sting operation was going to be wildly successful, our whole government turned on us. Our fake Mafia family was given a low-rent, three room bungalow to use as a Mafia mansion; we were given one beat-up old green Lincoln that had been seized and didn't have proper registration as our whole Mafia fleet; our undercover pilots were given a plane so inadequate that Suarez's people were taking bets it would never get off the ground with a load of drugs. I could go on for an hour with all the shit that was pulled to screw us up. It's all in my book, and the government has not denied a thing. They can't. They just pretend I never wrote it.

So, along with this group of undercover agents, I decided to make this case in spite of the DEA suits. In fact, that became our rallying cry: "Let's make this case in spite of DEA." And we did. While my undercover pilots picked up the then biggest load of drugs in history, about 900 pounds of cocaine, directly from Suarez in the



Bolivian jungle, I paid nine million dollars cash to two of the biggest drug dealers who ever lived, José Gasser and Alfredo "Cutuchi" Gutierrez. They were arrested leaving a Miami bank with the money. This was a first not only for DEA but for all law enforcement. Had we been allowed to let the buy go through, we could've been part of the Corporation. We could've just gobbled them up, the whole war on cocaine would've been over before it began. Instead, what happened was the government cut the whole operation short, made us do a buy-bust instead of a buy. I still felt we had done well. There was enough evidence to indict half the Suarez organization and half the Bolivian government that he'd bought off. The whole drug world was watching this case. DEA had given the U.S. war on drugs a respectability it would never again achieve. The arrest made worldwide news. It was called the greatest sting operation in law enforcement history. They based a lot of the Al Pacino movie *Scarface* on this case. Once again, I got swept away with my own press clippings. While the undercover team was basking in the lime-light, the case was quietly being destroyed by our own government.

José Gasser, one of the wealthiest men in Bolivia, whose family ran the government from behind the scenes for decades, was allowed to go free by Assistant United States Attorney Michael Sullivan, the man who, ironically, would later prosecute that other CIA asset, Manuel Noriega. Sullivan is still the chief of the criminal division of the Miami U.S. Attorney's office. All charges against Gasser were dropped. I couldn't believe it. The guy is busted walking out of a bank with nine million dollars in drug money and the chief assistant U.S. Attorney drops all charges! His co-defendant when he was arrested,

Cutierrez, said he was willing to make a full statement and testify against Gasser, and the United States Attorney didn't even put the case before a grand jury. Mysteriously, no one ever took the statement from Gutierrez. None of this was reported by the press.

Three months later, Judge Alcee Hastings lowered Gutierrez's bail to \$1 million. Gutierrez put the money up in cash and walked out of jail. I was making frantic phone calls from Buenos Aires and I couldn't even get DEA in Miami to follow him. Within hours, Gutierrez got on a private plane and left the country. It was the biggest cocaine seizure in U.S. history and no one was left in jail and no one in the media covered the story. Actually, the only member of the media who wrote that something strange was going on was *High Times* magazine. In any case, the first thing Gasser did when he got back to Bolivia was publish a full-page replica of his unconditional release from U.S. custody. DEA and the U.S. war on drugs became the laughing stock of the South American drug world. It has never recovered.

I started to complain with cables and phone calls to DEA, to the Department of Justice, to State. I was outraged. At the same time, I learned that the very people I had arrested were planning to overthrow the Bolivian government, which had been helpful to DEA. I was informed by Argentinean secret police, who were nothing but mass murderers on the payroll of both DEA and CIA, that they had people in Bolivia aiding the drug dealers and their neo-Nazi security force in fomenting the revolution, and that they were all working for the CIA. The CIA was helping the biggest drug dealers in the world take over Bolivia. How could this be? I investigated the Gasser family and learned that they were tied to the World Anti-Communist League since the early '60s and were well established CIA assets. I thought I was losing my mind. To keep myself from going crazy I began keeping notes and recording conversations that would eventually become the book, *The Big White Lie*. The evidence was indisputable. Yet back then, living through it, I couldn't believe what was happening. It was like I was living out "Seven Days of the Condor" or something.

Then the revolution actually happened. I warned DEA about it, but no one gave a shit. Once the revolution took place, the very people in the Bolivian government who helped us were tortured, killed and exiled from

their own country. It was the bloodiest revolution in Bolivia's history. To this day they call it "The Cocaine Coup." It was the first time in history that a government was taken over by drug traffickers, only what the press wasn't telling the world was that the traffickers had been released from a U.S. jail by the CIA. It was the beginning of what became the Corporation. Within months Bolivia would be exceeding the world's demand for cocaine. It was the beginning of the cocaine and later the crack epidemic. It was the end of the U.S. war on drugs.

I continued complaining to anyone who would listen, only no one wanted to hear what I had to say. I toyed with the idea of becoming a whistle blower, but I'd already had some experience with what phonies a lot of our political leaders are. When they use the word loyalty, they are not talking about loyalty to the American people. They mean loyalty to a political party. The American people, in the can or out, are the last thing in the world these guys care about.

**"The CIA
is America's
primary
supplier
of cocaine."**

Around this time, *Newsweek* published an article about the Cocaine Coup and the cocaine-dealing government of Bolivia, which had by now broken down into separate branches of government. The whole Bolivian government was now in the cocaine business, thanks to the CIA. In the article they named as the heads of the Bolivian drug-dealing factions José Gasser and Alfredo Gutierrez, the same guys I paid nine million bucks to, and a woman, who became an important part of my book, Sonia Atala, known as the Queen of Cocaine. I didn't know it then, but I would end up living with Sonia in a deep cover assignment called Operation Hun. Sonia, by the way, was Pablo Escobar's first source of cocaine base. If you read *The Big White Lie* you realize that Sonia and other key members of the drug-dealing Bolivian government were CIA assets, which makes the prime source of Escobar's cocaine the

CIA. The CIA is therefore America's primary supplier of cocaine. You can imagine that for me, as an undercover DEA agent putting my life on the line to fight the drug war, this realization came as a terrible blow.

Why do they do it? Why does CIA aid and abet certain international drug kingpins while men like you are sent out at considerable personal risk and huge expense to U.S. taxpayers to fight a war that in fact our government does not want to win?

If they were forced to answer that question they would probably say something like, "To defeat Communism." But the truth is they've never even been forced, publicly, to admit what they are doing. In my opinion, and the opinion of a lot of other people in law enforcement, a good many of these guys are just cashing in, like the one guy they recently caught, Aldrich Aimes, the guy who was spying for the Russians. They documented only a half million bucks paid to Aimes from the Russians, yet they found that he had spent around two-and-a-half million. Where do you think the rest of the money came from? The man was also the head of a CIA narcotics unit. Believe me, the government does not want to talk about that because it would be like lifting up a rock and exposing a whole slew of worms like Aldrich. The point is, our intelligence agencies don't answer to anyone, and when they're caught they hide behind National Security, or they just flat out lie. They lie to Congress, they lie in court, they even lie on "Larry King Live."

When *The Big White Lie* was published in October of '93, I was on "Good Morning America," and I leveled all my charges. "Good Morning America" was the only national television show that would put me on the air with *The Big White Lie*. A day later, Admiral Stansfield Turner, who was head of CIA during the Bolivian cocaine revolution, appeared on "Good Morning America," which was very unlike the CIA. He said he was there to "put the lie to the book." Almost every conversation in that book was tape-recorded, so there is no way he could contradict a word of what I wrote. He in fact admitted that he had never read my book. He said that when he was the head of Central Intelligence, he couldn't even get them interested in working drug investigations, which is a perfect example of how incredibly inept and naive both he and President Carter were in their han-

dling and understanding of CIA. Of course he couldn't get them interested in working drug cases—they'd have to investigate themselves. They were supporting the biggest drug dealers on the face of the earth, from the Mujihedeens in Afghanistan and the Contras and the drug-dealing Bolivian government to the drug-dealing tribes of Southeast Asia. None of these CIA people will sit face to face with me on these open talk shows, no one will attack my books on a factual basis. They'll never say Levine said this and it's not true. They'll just give this blanket statement that it never happened and the media accepts it without question. Every show I've ever appeared on has offered the government an opportunity to appear with me—I encouraged it—but they refuse because they have too much to hide, and I'm one of those who knows where all the bodies are buried.

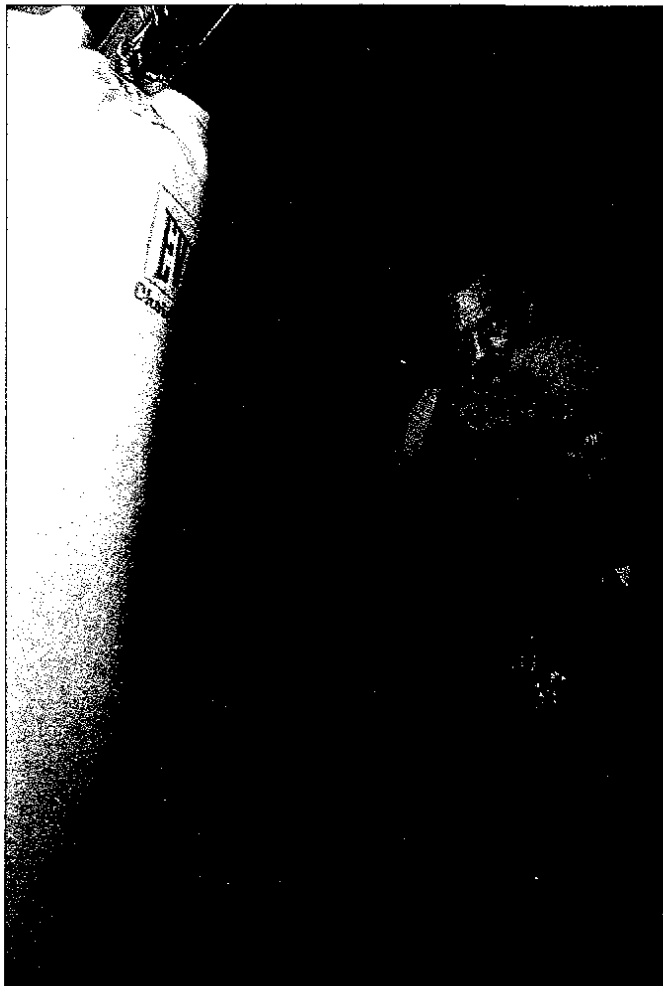
Three weeks after Stansfield Turner made his statement, the CIA was caught smuggling a ton of cocaine into the U.S. from Caracas, Venezuela. The story was on "60 Minutes" and on the front page of *The New York Times*, and if you blinked you missed it because the media dropped it like a hot potato. I was doing a radio show in California at the time, the "Michael Jackson Show," and I said, "What do you say now, Admiral Turner? Let's talk about this." Michael Jackson, to his credit, tried to get Turner on the air but he of course refused.

The next thing that happened, James Woolsey, the new head of Central Intelligence, who is nothing more than a defense attorney for the CIA, went on damage control media appearances around the country. Of course, every national show gave him an open mike with no hard questions, the kind of questions a disillusioned DEA agent could ask, and there are many of us. He appeared on "Larry King Live," looked into the camera and lied to several million Americans. He said that the cocaine—and there was over a ton—never hit the street. He said that it was an intelligence-gathering operation gone awry. Total, absolute lies. I checked with my own sources, and found that not only did CIA help run a ton of coke into the

U.S., but there may have been much more than that one ton smuggled into our country by the CIA.

The transcripts you mentioned, which record the secret testimony of Ramon Milian Rodriguez before a closed session of Senator John Kerry's Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism and Narcotics, make it clear that a good many public officials know the truth of the drug war yet they continue to lie to the American public, both for political reasons and because of the huge amounts of money involved in the international narcotics trade.

Of course they know. How else do you explain how a United States



Senator, John Kerry, could say things like, "Our covert agencies have converted themselves to channels for drugs," and "They have perverted our system of justice," which is what Kerry said after hearing witnesses like Milian Rodriguez lay out the evidence of CIA complicity in the illegal drug business. Yet none of these CIA-sanctioned drug dealers go to jail. Isn't what Kerry describing treason? How can he make a statement like that and not indict anyone?"

"You mean, like Oliver North?"

Look, in the Iran-contra report of an investigation, paid for by tens of millions of dollars of taxpayer money, our congress wrote: "All those who sought leniency for General Bueso-Rosa, a drug-smuggling murderer, and all those who looked the other way at Manuel Noriega's drug dealing are responsible for what is happening on the streets of America today." If you read the report you know that they are referring to none other than Ollie North, Presidents Bush and Reagan and the CIA, yet they wouldn't name them, nor would they move to indict a single government official for conspiracy to put drugs on our streets.

Conspiracy is an easy charge to prove. I've done it hundreds of times. And I'll bet there are a lot of people reading this magazine who know from first-hand experience just how easy it is to get convicted of drug conspiracy. All you've got to prove is knowledge, an agreement and an overt act. Unfortunately, our elected officials don't have the courage to protect us. This current crop of leaders will go down in history as the epitome of criminality and cowardice in government.

It's been proven: North had an interest in a Swiss bank account that was worth several million dollars. He bought a car with \$15,000 cash that he told Congress was part of a slush fund he had hidden in his closet, accumulated from throwing change in there, along with an old accident settlement. Since when are accident settlements paid in cash? Ask any of your readers behind bars what would have happened if they tried to tell DEA that bullshit. But North got away with it. He

had 543 pages in his personal diaries with notations in his own handwriting about drugs, including statements like, "Aircraft needed to pick up 1500 kilos." On one page he had the notation: "\$14 million to finance came from drugs." And that was after he had blacked out most of the statements he thought were incriminating. He refused to tell Congress what was on the pages he had blacked out; he took the Fifth. North was banned from Costa Rica by Oscar Arias, the

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Levine

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Nobel prize-winning president, for gun running and drug smuggling. My friend, another DEA agent named Cele Castillio, the agent who was in charge of El Salvador when North's Contras were running cocaine by the ton up to the U.S., has come out in a new book and told the truth: that DEA and the whole American embassy knew North's people were running dope up to the U.S. Cele was told to keep out of it by the U.S. Ambassador himself, Edwin Corr. He told Cele, "It's a White House operation."



North may well be elected Senator, some say he'll run for President. All Senator Kerry's rhetoric notwithstanding, no government official will ever stand trial for the tons and tons of drugs they helped flood this country with. Why? Because Americans don't know how to fight back, and they are content to swallow any shit the politicians throw at them.

The transcripts of the Rodriguez testimony account for only two of 12 executive sessions that were full of evidence of government cover-up of drug trafficking, all kept secret from the American people. Jack Blum, who was chief investigator for Senator Kerry, resigned from the committee and said, "I am sick to death about the truths I cannot tell." *The Big White Lie* is one of those truths. The transcripts tell an overpowering, nauseating truth.

In 1980, Ramon Milian Rodriguez, a man who is sitting in the Federal can right now for laundering over 200 million dollars a month in drug money, was so overcome by the amount of power he had—he said that he could virtually buy anyone, any country that he wanted—that he went to the CIA and told them what he was doing and the CIA told him to keep on doing it. He named the CIA agents he spoke to.

They later asked him for favors and money in return, including the \$10 million he paid to Felix Rodriguez, the CIA guy who worked directly for North. Milian Rodriguez testified that he made money-laundering deals with the heads of every major U.S. bank in Panama, and that they all knew it was drug money and none of them was indicted—not a banker, not a CIA agent, no one.

You and I both know, we've been there. This so-called drug war is all about money, big money. It's about money and power and political corruption and political cowardice. It's easy to get a street dope pusher and put his face on television, then put him away for 30 years. But if you have political power, if you are protected by the CIA or if you are the CIA or the head of a major U.S. bank, you've got a get-out-of-jail-free card.

I'll give you an example of how unfairly this bogus drug war is being waged, an example from my own career as a narcotic agent. It's the story of John Clemens. John Clemens is a good example of what happens if you're just a walking-around American with no power, and how easy it is to get an indictment and conviction for conspiracy.

On July 4, 1971 I arrested a guy named John Davidson smuggling three kilos of heroin at JFK Airport. He flipped and gave up the financier, a guy named Alan Trupkin, who was waiting for him and the dope in Gainesville, Florida. We were on a plane that night to deliver the heroin. We substituted powder for most of the smack, leaving about a gram of real stuff in the false bottom suitcase. We ended up in a trailer in the middle of a swamp outside of Gainesville. Davidson called Trupkin to tell him that he just got in. This, by the way, was his seventh trip that year. When he called Trupkin, I was taping the phone call. John Clemens, a 22-year-old unemployed musician, got on the phone during the conversation because Trupkin couldn't remember how to get to the trailer. Clemens got on the phone and said, "I know the way. I can show him." The statement was recorded. It was the only statement the kid ever made that could be used against him. So this kid who made absolutely nothing from the deal—they used to toss him a bag of heroin from time to time for favors—showed Trupkin the way to the trailer. He was in technical violation of the conspiracy law and in possession of about a gram of heroin. He was

there. He aided the guy. So he was indicted, convicted at trial and sentenced to 30 years in prison. The smuggler, Davidson, flipped and worked for the government. He got five years. The financier of the operation, Trupkin, got 15 years because he pled guilty in the middle of the trial and made a deal.

Now compare that to North, who's got 543 references to drugs in his personal hand-written notes, including statements like, "Aircraft needed for 1500 kilos," and "financed by drugs," as well as compelling evidence that he profited from his activities. None of this was investigated by professional narcotics investigators, none of it was put before a grand jury. North should be indicted, and some people are talking about him becoming the next President. Meanwhile, John Clemens, as far as I know, is still doing hard time.

You've worked with a lot of informants over the years as a DEA agent. Do you find them reliable? (I thought back to when I was on trial first in the District of Maine, then in the Southern District of New York. In both cases there was no physical evidence connecting me to the marijuana conspiracy, just the testimonies of some lying sacks of shit, yet I got convicted and sentenced to 25 years.)

I never met an informant who didn't lie. An informant will do anything to save his ass. Unfortunately, many informants are a lot slicker than some of the agents. And there are agents who just want to make cases and don't have much of a conscience. That happens all the time. I was hired as a consultant for the defense on one case where the informant was wanted in different countries and so he made a deal with government agents. He was supposed to deliver one Class One dope dealer in exchange for our government protecting him and paying him. So the guy went out and found an ignorant illegal alien who was working his butt off 70 hours a week as a parking lot attendant. The informant told the parking lot attendant that he had a bunch of dumb gringos who were willing to give him money for cocaine and that all he had to do was tell them he'd bring the dope later and these gringos would front him about \$300,000. So the parking lot attendant had a couple of meetings with undercover agents and he played the role the informant gave him. The undercover agent asked for a sample, but the parking lot attendant couldn't even come up with a line

of coke to give him. Next we cut to a hotel room where a hidden video camera caught the undercover agent sitting on one side of a table and the parking lot attendant on the other side. Between them was a briefcase containing \$300,000. They let the guy count the money. In Gomer Pyle Spanish the undercover agent then asked the guy if he would promise to deliver drugs for the money. The guy was nodding his head up and down, his eyes were bugged out. You can see him thinking: Can the gringos really be this stupid? The guy was busted and charged with conspiracy to deliver an enormous load of cocaine. The informant already got paid something like \$17,000 for the case.

Part of my testimony for the defense was that all of that government time and effort and money should be spent on the streets of America getting violent criminals and hard-core addicts off the streets—not illegal alien parking lot attendants. That's one of the big reasons we have 25,000 homicides a year in this country, why whole segments of our country are war zones. We're spending billions to fight a war that doesn't exist. In the last decade we spent more than \$100 billion on this bullshit war and got absolutely nothing for our money. If we had aimed that money at violent criminals and the treatment of hard-core addicts instead of things like the half billion dollars we spent on military radar last year, which didn't even catch a single drug smuggler, and the thousands of bullshit drug seizures and arrests paraded as drug war "victories," millions of lives and billions of dollars would have been saved—including the life of my son who was a New York City police officer killed by a crack addict, and my brother who was a life-long heroin addict. Yet this year our latest "leader," President Clinton, has budgeted more money than ever before, 13.5 billion, for more of the same crap.

In The Big White Lie you recount how you became a total paranoid. You were investigated by your own agency; he began to wonder what side he was on; he came to fear for his life after he wrote a letter to Newsweek exposing the CIA's role in the Bolivian cocaine coup.

I think I'm still alive because I was so paranoid. I didn't tell people I was leaving Argentina because I no longer trusted anyone. While I was cooling my heels in Puerto Rico, the Argentine secret police, the same

killers who worked for the CIA and who were also working for DEA, broke into my house, only, surprise, I was not there. So they sat around all night waiting for me to come home, drinking my booze just like they did when they visited me. The gardener showed up in the morning and they split, leaving the bottle of Scotch and glasses on the floor, just the way they usually did. That's the kind of arrogance these guys have—they literally had a license to kill. Paranoia for a DEA agent working in South America is a healthy emotion.

I wrote a letter on U.S. Embassy stationery to *Newsweek*, return-receipt-requested, telling them that they missed the real story. I told them that the real story was the CIA's secret support of this drug running government in Bolivia and escaped Nazi war criminals. But more than that, I told them the real story was the ultimate betrayal of the American people. Weeks went by and I received the postcard indicating that *Newsweek* had received the letter. Then nothing. A month later, within a 24-hour period, first the Argentines tried to kill me, and when that failed I was placed under investigation by DEA's Internal Security Division. I was falsely accused of everything from black marketing and stealing government funds, to having sex with my undercover partner, a married DEA agent assigned to play my wife. They even wrote me up for playing rock music on my radio and disturbing other people at the embassy.

Then they force-transferred me to Washington, D.C., where I was kept under investigation, followed, my phones tapped, you name it. As a government agent you have no rights, you are literally at the mercy of these people. I was holding on for dear life. In the middle of this madness, I was asked to go undercover to pose as the lover and business partner of Sonia Atala, the woman known as The Queen of Cocaine. When *The Washington Post* reviewed *The Big White Lie*, they called it an "edge-of-the-seat thriller," but questioned how the government could have me under investigation and at the same time send me undercover on their most sensitive case. I have proof backing up every single event that I wrote about. The question should not be posed to me; it should be posed to the people who sent me out on the assignment.

Sonia Atala was one of the people running the Bolivian government, and she was one of my targets. In

Bolivia she had a Nazi paramilitary unit under her command, her house was the main government torture chamber, and suddenly she turns up in the U.S. working for DEA. As it turned out she was also a CIA asset, protected by them. And while she was working as an informant, she never stopped selling dope. She in fact was arrested for selling cocaine to DEA undercover agents while working for DEA and CIA. Of course she was never tried for the arrest because she had *carte blanche* to sell Americans dope.

I am probably one of the most investigated men in the agency because I was one of the most outspoken, and because I represent a threat. I represent a threat to giant bureaucracies making a big buck off this drug war. I don't remember who said it but the quote goes, "If you create a bureaucracy, the bureaucracy's first enemy are the people who created it." That's the nature of bureaucracy. In the drug war, these bureaucracies are created to try and solve the problem, but that would put them out of a job. Now if you think they are going to put themselves out of a job, I've got a Class One cocaine dealer posing as a parking lot attendant I want you to meet.

We've gone from two federal agencies enforcing all the federal drug laws and a \$20 million budget in 1965, when I started in the business, to an \$11.5 billion budget and 54 federal and military agencies screaming for more money when I retired in 1989. The American people have gotten absolutely nothing for their money, but the bureaucracies have profited handsomely; they gobble up this gush of taxpayer funds like hungry animals. Who's paying for it? All of us. And it's not just the police agencies, it is a lot of the so-called "good guys," the treatment-on-demand programs that have absolutely no effect on hard-core drug addicts but which make a hell of a lot of money. According to the *Village Voice*, the guy who heads up Phoenix House makes a \$600,000 a year salary. The Partnership for A Drug Free America and other federally-funded programs that churn out television ads and informational booklets and hold rallies and marches and fund drives really don't want this phony war to go away. There are a lot of people who make a lot of money, which can only be justified as long as we have a drug problem. I'm a threat to all of these so-called good guys. I can very well understand why they would come after me.

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