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NEWS

By
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Surprise hearings in House Intelligence Committee Backfire on CIA

Maxine Waters not alone in criticizing Agency

More hearings certain

In a move which caught many by surprise, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence held a surprise hearing on Monday March 16, to officially receive and review Volume One of the long awaited report by CIA Inspector General Frederick P. Hitz investigating allegations of CIA involvement in drug trafficking. Volume One of the report, which examines allegations of CIA drug ties during the Contra era, focuses specifically on Southern California connections while the uncompleted Volume Two will look at the broader involvement of CIA during the eighties. The announcement of the hearing was so sudden that key House members who have been leaders on the issue, such as Maxine Waters, were not present in the Committee chamber as the hearing began. The suddenness of the rare public hearing, however, did not prevent Waters, (D) California, and Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, from arriving with a sling full of arrows which she promptly shot through the heart of the C.I.A. report.

Committee Chairman, Porter Goss, (R), FL, himself retired from C.I.A., announced that the hearing was prompted in part by the imminent retirement of Hitz who is scheduled to teach at Princeton. Hitz was charged in 1996 by then CIA Director John Deutch with thoroughly investigating charges that CIA had been involved in cocaine trafficking to support Contra rebels in the 1980s. As the hearing unfolded it became apparent that what started out to be a fete for the departing Hitz was going to be a major embarrassment for the Agency. The suddenness of the hearing precluded coverage by any electronic media organizations other than C-SPAN, which covered the hearing from gavel to gavel.

In remark after remark from Democratic members of the Committee, opinions ranging from mild skepticism to outright disbelief of the hundred plus page Volume One were expressed. Julian Dixon (D) California, while stating that, "no matter how thorough any investigation may be, there will be skeptics who will challenge any conclusions which are reached" added, "This is only one step in our investigation".

Other members such as Nancy Pelosi, (D), Ca, whose bay area district has demonstrated a long and deep felt concern over the issue and Norman Dicks (D), WA. who is the ranking member of the Committee were far more open in their skepticism. The bay area of California was the focal point of one 1983 aspect of the investigation known as the Frogman case, which turned up direct links to C.I.A. after a massive cocaine seizure. Dicks represents an area north of Seattle which has felt a dramatic and painful incursion of L.A. based street gangs in recent years. All members of the Committee who spoke, including California gubernatorial candidate Jane Harman, (D) Torrance; Ike Skelton, (D) Mo.; David Skaggs (D), Co.; and Jim Gibbons (R), Nev., were clear in their statements that Congressional examination of C.I.A. involvement in drug dealing was far from over.

After opening remarks from Committee members present, almost all of whom were

democrats, Goss took testimony from the two L.A. area Congresswomen, not Committee members, who had been outspoken on the issue.

California Congresswoman Juanita Millender-McDonald, (D) Ca, who had sponsored two town hall meetings on the subject from her Compton area district, delivered a mildly rebuking statement about the C.I.A.'s effort by raising questions as to the Agency's ability to investigate itself and questioning the timing of the hearings. "C.I.A. turned a blind eye at best to drug connections," she said. "I look forward to subsequent hearings."

Having arrived with an aide, several large stacks of documents, photographs, charts and former San Jose Mercury News reporter Gary Webb in tow Maxine Waters testified next and turned a ten minute allotment from the Chairman into a thirty plus minute evisceration of the C.I.A. report. "I am here to talk about the failure of the C.I.A. to conduct a serious and thorough investigation into allegations of C.I.A. drug trafficking," she said in her opening sentence.

"The Inspector General's report lacks credibility. It is fraught," she continued, "with contradictions and illogical conclusions. The report's sweeping denial of the CIA's knowledge of drug traffickingÉ defies the evidence and the logic that the CIA should have known." Waters continued on a point by point basis to refute Hitz's own conclusions in the report and his methodology by using both evidence which CIA had included in the report and which she had produced during her own investigations. She criticized the Agency for not interviewing key witnesses and for not disclosing the names of the people they had interviewed. She listed meetings and relationships, which the Agency had previously documented, to show concrete relationships between CIA assets and drug traffickers. In a particularly angry portion of her statement she referred to the 1986-7 Senate hearings Chaired by John Kerry and the eleven hundred page report which clearly documented CIA's ties to drug traffickers.

"How can this report include these incriminating findings by elected officials including Senators Kerry, Brock and Moynihan while simultaneously dismissing any CIA knowledge or involvement in Contra drug trafficking in the U.S.," she said to an attentive panel. "This is a damning contradiction."

Goss interrupted Waters once as she was fifteen minutes over her allotted time and asked her to conclude her remarks. He acquiesced as Waters continued for another five minutes stating that it was simply not possible for her to present all the evidence in ten minutes. Waters concluded her remarks by stating that as a public servant, neither she nor the Committee could rest until the American people were given what they deserved, a fair but honest investigation of this long festering and improperly addressed scandal.

Several surprises followed. In one of the strongest statements made, Norman Dicks promised that as ranking member of the Committee he would see that credible hearings would take place. He then dropped a bomb by pointing out that Oliver North had never been questioned about drugs in the previous Iran-Contra investigations. After having that fact conformed by Hitz he added, "Well we won't be doing our job unless we hear from him, will we?"

Hitz, in a stunning revelation, which occurred during his testimony, foreshadowed the contents of Volume Two of his report, by disclosing the existence of a secret agreement between CIA and then Reagan Attorney General William French-Smith. The agreement stated that the Agency was absolved from reporting drug-related activities of its assets or agents during the Contra years to the Justice Department.

Porter Goss, who holds the power to determine the course of future hearings announced that there would be a continuing investigation and that the matter was not concluded with

this hearing. He acknowledged a great many unresolved questions and contradictory facts. He did not state whether future hearings would be open or closed and he did not give a date certain for those hearings. Volume Two of the Inspector General's report is due sometime in May.