

Commentary

CIA's Challenge in South-Central

■ **Drugs:** In meeting the public, Deutch will be expected to explain the Contra/crack connection.

By PETER KORNBLOH

As CIA director John Deutch reviews his briefing papers for today's town meeting in Watts on the Contra/drug scandal, he faces a challenge and an opportunity. His challenge is to overcome the deep distrust of a community that firmly believes the CIA played some role in the advent of crack in the inner cities; his opportunity is to commit his furtive agency to a process of disclosure and accountability that is necessary to lay this scandal to rest.

Deutch's trip to South-Central Los Angeles is unprecedented; never before has a director of Central Intelligence left the CIA's heavily guarded headquarters in Langley, Va., to face intense public questions about the impact at home of a covert war abroad.

Many of those questions are likely to be harsh and accusatory. As I witnessed while testifying at a hearing last month in Compton held by Rep. Juanita Millender McDonald, citizens of South-Central are outraged by press allegations linking CIA-backed counterrevolutionary groups in Nicaragua with drug traffickers involved in the proliferation of crack cocaine in California. Standard assurances that the agency will fully investigate the charges are unlikely to satisfy a community already suspicious of a cover-up.

To bridge the deep fissures of distrust and to establish his agency's credibility, Deutch will

have to do something that his predecessor, the late William Colby, attempted. Colby revealed the "family secrets," secrets about the CIA scandals of domestic spying, assassination and coup plots in the mid-1970s. Deutch must commit himself to do the same on the CIA Contra war.

He can start by acknowledging that the CIA did, in fact, knowingly and willingly work with drug dealers. CIA officials, according to the Contras themselves, did authorize one rebel group to take money and airplanes from a major Colombian trafficker; CIA officials did seek to protect a key Honduran "asset"—convicted of conspiracy to smuggle \$40 million worth of cocaine into the U.S. to finance the assassination of the president of Honduras—from a lengthy prison sentence for fear he might spill the beans on covert operations; CIA officials did scheme with the White House to help Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega clean up his image, stained by a 20-year career as a henchman for the Medellin cartel, in return for Noriega's help in destabilizing the Sandinista government.

To counter extreme charges that the CIA targeted communities of color for crack distribution to finance the Contra war, Deutch must concede a different, but equally scandalous truth: the willingness of national security officials to consort with dope peddlers simply because they had a contribution to make to the covert war against Sandinista Nicaragua. It will be up to Deutch to convince those who have suffered from this chilling set of Cold War priorities that the CIA is now committed to preventing the criminalization of national security doctrine.

He can begin with three steps

toward openness and accountability: First, announce the immediate declassification of two previous, albeit cursory, CIA internal reviews of the Contras and drug trafficking. Although these are reported to exonerate the agency, they are likely to show what CIA officials knew and when they knew it. Second, commit to declassifying the forthcoming major report by the agency's inspector general, as well as all supporting documentation. Without full public access, there can be no accountability on the process, conclusions and recommendations of this investigation.

Finally, Deutch should invite those at today's town meeting and citizens across the country to engage the debate over the future of CIA "dirty wars," such as those fought in Indochina, Afghanistan and Central America, that incorporated drug trafficking as a byproduct.

"In the name of supporting the Contras," the Senate committee that investigated the Contra-drug connection in the late 1980s concluded, U.S. officials "abandoned the responsibility our government has for protecting our citizens from all threats to their security and well-being." At minimum, Deutch will have to explain how and why this happened, and how he intends to keep it from happening again.

Presumably, when the director returns from Watts to Langley, he and his agency will have a better understanding of the real threats to the security and well-being of the citizens, communities and cities that our government purports to protect.

Peter Kornbluh is coauthor of "The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History."