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The Arkansas Drug Shuttle

What L.D. Brown, Clinton's fair-haired boy, has told me.

Arkansas State Trooper L. D. Brown was 28 years old in 1984. He was not only Gov. Bill Clinton's favorite bodyguard, but also a close friend. The other troopers called him Clinton's "fair-haired boy." They shared an interest in books, ideas, and night life. Brown still has books that Clinton gave him, one being a bar exam study book in which the politician had made some ironic underlinings. One passage discusses the deductibility of charitable donations, and another the length of residency required in Washington before tax liability is incurred. Like Clinton, Brown passed through a radical stage when he attended the



University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. Indeed, when Clinton was a law professor in Fayetteville, Brown was working on an off-campus magazine, the radical *Grapevine*.

In the autumn of 1984, Brown found himself seated on a bench inside a cavernous C-123K cargo plane roaring over a Central American jungle. The pilot of the plane was Barry Seal, a legendary drug trafficker. Two years later, he would be shot dead in Louisiana. Three Colombians eventually were arrested and convicted of the murder. The Louisiana attorney general would tell the Justice Department that Seal had "smuggled between \$3 billion and \$5 billion in drugs into the U.S."

The C-123K also had a history. It was originally an Air Force transport plane. Seal dubbed it "the Fat Lady." It would later be serviced and financed by Southern Air

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Transport, a CIA front company, and it was eventually shot down over Nicaragua in a doomed supply effort to the Contras that left an American, Eugene Hasenfus, a prisoner of the Sandinistas and the CIA link to the Contras revealed.

Brown recalls that on the morning of this particular flight, Seal had told him to drive to Mena Intermountain Regional Airport, a remote air strip near the Oklahoma border. He had expected to find, he says, a Baron or King Air, the kind of plane in which he had sometimes accompanied the Governor, and in which he had some training as a pilot. Instead, he says, he found this "huge military plane" that was not

actually a military plane. It was dark almost black, and had only the minimal tail markings necessary for civilian operation.

Inside the plane, according to Brown, were another pilot and two "beaners"—common laborers who looked like Central American Indians. Later Brown would come to know them as "kickers." All were wearing jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers. Seal, Brown says, had also prescribed the dress code, and insisted that no one carry identification, not even keys or jewelry. Then, he started the engines, and Brown remembers, "This . . . I mean just thunderous noise. Scared the s--- out of me just taking off." Brown says that when the plane took off, he was sitting on a bench behind the two pilots. At the rear of the plane, by the beaners, he says, were palettes on casters.

After it left Mena, the plane made a refueling stop—"Nobody got off," Brown says—and then resumed flight. Eventually, Brown recalls, Seal startled him by yelling, "Well, you all hang on." Then the plane dropped to what

Brown calls "an altitude a hell of a lot lower than what you'd think you'd fly." He suspected Seal was trying to evade radar. Then, he says, they regained altitude, but then they descended again, and "that's when these two crazy bastards get these palettes and roll them out on casters." Parachutes opened from the palettes. Later Seal confirmed Brown's suspicions: the palettes contained M-16s for the Contras.

Approximately 30 minutes later, Brown says, the C-123K landed in what he later learned was Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Then it was refueled while Seal and the kickers got off. Brown and the co-pilot, who never exchanged any more than a few words, remained on board. Then, Brown says, Seal and the kickers returned, carrying four duffel bags. Brown says he never saw the bags again.

Back at Mena, Brown says, he told Seal he had thought they were going to fly in a plane similar to the ones he had been on with the Governor. Seal, he says, laughed, and told Brown that all he had wanted him to do was "sit back for the ride." Then he gave Brown an envelope with \$2,500 in cash—"not marked money, not banded money, just twenties, fifties, mostly twenties, used money, like you just went out and spent."

When Brown returned to the Governor's mansion, he recalls, Clinton greeted him jovially, "You having any fun yet?" he asked. Clinton had been asking him a similar question for months, ever since, with Clinton's encouragement, he had applied for a job with the CIA. Indeed, Clinton had taken an active role in helping Brown. As part of the application process, Brown had written an essay: "Marxist Influence in Central America." Three early drafts of the essay contain interpolations in Clinton's handwriting. Clinton also suggested that Brown study Russian, a suggestion Brown took seriously enough to begin making entries in his daybook in Cyrillic. Clinton, Brown believed, was familiar with the CIA.

"When I got back from that first trip he knew I had been out doing something," Brown insists. "I mean I didn't have a chance to tell him anything about it. That's when he said, 'You having any fun yet.'"

The CIA does not talk about these things, and so Brown's exact relationship with the agency may never be known. It may also never be known whether CIA officials approved or knew of Seal's activities, or whether he was operating on his own. Some facts, however, are indisputable. An entry in Brown's daybook indicates that the flight with Seal took place on October 23, 1984. A month before that, the Southwest personnel representative for the CIA, Ken Cargile, in a letter to Brown, wrote that "I am pleased to nominate you for employment with the Central Intelligence Agency." Another entry in Brown's daybook indicates that he had met with another CIA representative only a few days before that. Brown has identified him as Dan Magruder, and says that he spoke admiringly of Clinton. Magruder, Brown says, asked him if he would be interested in "paramilitary, counterintelligence and narcotics." Brown, who had worked in narcotics enforcement as a police officer, said he was interested. He then, he says, signed a secrecy agreement, and was told he would be contacted further.

Subsequently, Brown says, Seal called him at home, and

set up a meeting at Cajun's Wharf, a popular Little Rock watering hole. Seal, according to Brown, was familiar with the biographical information he had given the agency. Seal, Brown says, talked knowledgeably about airplanes, and spoke of an "operation" he was planning. He also referred to Clinton, familiarly, as "the gov."

Brown's break with Clinton came after Brown made what he says was his second flight from Mena to Central America. Two duffel bags were put on board the plane at Tegucigalpa. Back at Mena, Brown says, he and Seal walked to Brown's car, a Datsun hatchback, and Seal put one of the duffel bags under the hatchback. Then both men got into the front seat of the car, and Seal reached back into the duffel bag, and pulled out a manila envelope with \$2,500 in it. He said the money had been brought back from Tegucigalpa. Then, Brown says, Seal reached again into the duffel bag and pulled out a kilogram of cocaine.

Brown, a narcotics cop, got upset. He says he feared he was being set up—made a conspirator in an operation he despised. He also says he told Seal he wanted no part of what was happening; then he left. When he returned to Little Rock, he called his brother Dwayne. Dwayne Brown says his brother seemed "terribly upset," and that he immediately drove over to the Governor's Mansion to meet him. Dwayne Brown says he knew his brother had made some unexplained trips out of the country. He suspected a CIA involvement, although his brother did not confirm it. But when he asked his brother, "Who's pushing this?" his brother, Dwayne Brown says, "nodded over towards the Governor's Mansion." From then on, until he left Clinton's security detail in June, Dwayne Brown says, his brother was at "a high level of despair." He says he had feared he might be suicidal.

Meanwhile, Brown says, he confronted Clinton, asking him if he knew that Seal was dealing in drugs and unreported currency. Brown says Clinton told him not to worry. He said, according to Brown, "That's Lasater's deal, that's Lasater's deal."

Dan Lasater, of course, was the celebrated Little Rock "bond daddy." As early as 1982, his firm had been censured by the Arkansas' security commissioner for cheating customers. In 1986, he was convicted of drug distribution, and lost his state securities license. At the time Seal's flights took place, Lasater was contributing to Clinton's political campaigns. He was also providing Clinton with the use of a private airplane, and entertaining him at various places, including his New Mexico resort, Angel Fire.

In the years that followed his split from Clinton, Brown investigated white-collar crime for the Arkansas State Police. He says that he wanted to go public with his revelations about Mena, but that he did not know whom to tell. He also says he was mindful of the secrecy agreement he had signed with the CIA. Whatever the case, of all the Arkansas troopers who would later admit to knowledge of Clinton's high life, Brown was the most hesitant to talk. Though the Clinton machine seemed to fear him the most, he showed no intention of breaking his silence until a chain of random events made it inevitable.

In 1994, Brown told Daniel Wattenberg of *The American*

Spectator that Jim Guy Tucker, then the Arkansas governor, had asked him and trooper Larry Patterson for compromising information on Clinton's private life in 1990, when Tucker was contemplating a race for governor. When Wattenberg reported this, an angry Tucker retaliated against Brown by demoting him from white-collar investigations to highway patrol. "I don't want to be getting any more reports from Brown" is the statement by Tucker that Colonel Tommy Goodwin, the recently retired head of the Arkansas state police, quoted in explaining the demotion to me in an interview.

Owing to a case that Brown was then working on that could have implicated Tucker, Brown believes the demotion was illegal. An indignant Brown began toying with the idea of exposing the corruption of Arkansas politics.

Subsequently, the special prosecutor investigating Whitewater subpoenaed Brown to disclose what he knew about Clinton's connections to David L. Hale. Clinton appeared to have pressured Hale, the head of an Arkansas lending agency, into making loans to Susan McDougal, the Clintons' Whitewater real estate partner.

Brown says he realized then that "everything is going to come out." Nonetheless, he still seemed reluctant to disclose all he knew. The irony is that he might have remained reluctant, but then the White House itself intervened.

When ABC News interviewed Brown in the fall of 1994, the White House tried to malign him. White House officials, as well as Clinton's lawyer, David Kendall, approached ABC. As *Time* reported, Kendall was "working very, very hard to keep Whitewater out of the headlines." Meanwhile, Betsey Wright, a Clinton political fixer, told ABC that Brown was a "pathological liar," even though his personnel file in Arkansas abounded with recommendations—some from Clinton, and even one from Dr. Joycelyn Elders. ABC was also told that Brown had failed a psychological test. Goodwin told me and ABC that Brown had passed it.

But of the charges levelled at Brown by the White House, the most unintentionally revealing was that Brown had flunked a CIA examination in the mid-1980's. That charge could only have come from the man—then Governor Clinton—who knew that his former bodyguard had dealings with the CIA ten years ago. Seemingly panicked, the White House mistakenly presumed that Brown was talking to ABC News about his involvement with Mena when he was actually discussing Whitewater. (Brown maintains that he never flunked the test; in fact, he was nominated four months after taking it for employment with the agency.)

An ABC producer told me at the time that "Brown is telling the truth. You can trust him," but the network apparently yielded to White House pressure. The interview with Brown, in which he had spoken only about Hale and not about Mena, was killed. Brown's patience had been strained beyond endurance. He decided to talk about Mena.

It must be noted now that Clinton's efforts to distance himself from Mena have persisted for years. At a press conference in October 1994, for instance, he was asked a rambling question about the remote air strip, and gave an equally

rambling answer. He concluded by saying that Mena was a federal, not a state, matter. "The state really had next to nothing to do with it. We had nothing—zero—to do with it, and everybody who's ever looked into it knows that."

But Brown says he is lying. His daybook records one visit to Mena by Clinton on May 21, 1984, and he says that he accompanied Clinton to Mena on several other occasions. Meanwhile, others are now coming forward to confirm a Clinton connection to Mena. Trooper Bobby Walker has told me that "sometime in the mid-1980s" he was at Mena with Clinton. Walker said a "huge dark-green military plane" was parked there, and that when he expressed surprise at seeing a military plane at Mena, Clinton said it was not military; it served another purpose.

Last March, in a legally binding deposition, trooper Larry Patterson also said that Clinton knew about Mena. Patterson said he had overheard conversations about "large quantities of drugs being flown into Mena airport, large quantities of guns, that there was an ongoing operation training foreign people in the area." When asked, "Were any of these conversations in the presence of Gov. Bill Clinton?" he replied: "Yes, sir."

Patterson was being deposed in a legal suit filed against Buddy Young, the former head of Clinton's security detail, and another man by Terry Reed, who says he trained Contra pilots, under Seal's supervision, at Nella, Arkansas. In another deposition in the case, John Bender, a mechanic, says he saw Clinton at Mena three times in the summer of 1985. There were no local dignitaries present, Bender says, and Clinton did not seem to be taking part in any official function. He says that Clinton arrived in a Beech aircraft, and was still there when he left for the day.

When he was deposed, Bender was shown a photograph of Buddy Young. He identified him as "Capt. Buddy Young—that little beady-faced fellow," and said he was with Clinton at Mena. Young has since been made head of the Federal Emergency Management Administration in Denton, Texas. In another deposition in the Reed case, Russell Welch, an Arkansas state police investigator who has looked extensively at Mena, says that Young asked him in 1992 if Clinton's name had ever come up in connection with Mena. Welch said it had not, but Young's concern was intriguing.

At this juncture, no one, including Brown, can say precisely what Clinton was doing at Mena. Brown's role, after all, was quite limited. After Brown told Seal—and Clinton—that he would no longer take part in the drug flights, Seal contacted Brown again. Brown says Seal told him "there's good money to be had." But Brown, says he was out of that game for good. It does seem, however, that Clinton was far less cautious. The Mena operation reveals the essential recklessness of our present president.

How much did Clinton know about what he called "Lasater's deal" in that conversation with L.D. Brown? Ultimately we may find out, as Brown tells us that he has been repeatedly questioned by lawyers working for the Whitewater independent counsel about Clinton's association with Lasater at a time when illicit drugs allegedly were flowing into Mena airport. □