MENA, Ark. - What do Bill Clinton and Oliver North have in common, along with the Arkansas State Police and the Central Intelligence Agency? All probably wish they had never heard of Mena.

President Clinton was asked at his Oct. 7 press conference about Mena, a small town and airport in the wilds of Western Arkansas. Sarah McClendon, a longtime Washington curmudgeon renowned for her off-the-wall questions, wove a query around the charge that a base in Mena was "set up by Oliver North and the CIA" in the 1980s and used to "bring in planeload after planeload of cocaine" for sale in the U.S., with the profits then used to buy weapons for the Contras. Was he told as Arkansas governor? she asked.

"No," the president replied, "they didn't tell me anything about it." The alleged events "were primarily a matter for federal jurisdiction. The state really had next to nothing to do with it. The local prosecutor did conduct an investigation based on what was in the jurisdiction of state law. The rest of it was under the jurisdiction of the United States Attorneys who were appointed successively by previous administrations. We had nothing - zero - to do with it."

It was Mr. Clinton's lengthiest remark on the murky affair since it surfaced nearly a decade ago, in the middle of his long tenure as governor of Arkansas. And while the president may be correct to suggest that Mena is an even bigger problem for previous Republican administrations, he was wrong on just about every other count. The state of Arkansas had plenty to do with Mena, and Mr. Clinton left many unanswered questions behind when he to Washington.

Anyone who thinks that Mena is not serious should speak to William Duncan, a former Internal Revenue Service investigator who, together with Arkansas State Police Investigator Russell Welch, has fought a bitter 10-year battle to bring the matter to light. They pinned their hopes on nine separate state and federal probes. All failed.

"The Mena investigations were never supposed to see the light of day," says Mr. Duncan, now an investigator with the Medicaid Fraud Division of the office of Arkansas Attorney General Winston Bryant. "Investigations were interfered with and covered up, and the justice system was subverted."

The mysteries of Mena, detailed on this page on June 29, center on the activities of a drug-smuggler-turned-informant named Adler Berriman "Barry" Seal. Mr. Seal began operating at Mena Intermountain Regional Airport in 1981. At the height of his career, according to Mr. Welch, Mr. Seal was importing as much as 1,000 pounds of cocaine a month.

By 1984, Mr. Seal was an informant for the Drug Enforcement Agency and flew at least one sting operation to Nicaragua for the CIA, a mission known to have drawn the attention of Mr. North. By 1986, Mr. Seal was dead, gunned down by Colombian hitmen in Baton Rouge, La. Eight months after Mr. Seal's murder, his cargo plane, which had been based at Mena, was shot down over Nicaragua with Eugene Hasenfus and a load of Contra supplies aboard.

According to Mr. Duncan and others, Mr. Clinton's allies in state government worked to suppress Mena investigations. In 1990, for example, when Mr. Bryant made Mena an issue in the race for attorney general,
Clinton aide Betsey Wright warned the candidate "to stay away" from the issue, according to a CBS Evening News investigative report. Ms. Wright denies the report. Yet once in office, and after a few feints in the direction of an investigation, Mr. Bryant stopped looking into Mena.

Documents obtained by the Journal show that as Gov. Clinton's quest for the presidency gathered steam in 1992, his Arkansas allies took increasing interest in Mena. Marie Miller, then director of the Medicaid Fraud Division, wrote in an April 1992 memo to her files that she told Mr. Duncan of the attorney general's "wish to sever any ties to the Mena matter because of the implication that the AG might be investigating the governor's connection." The memo says the instructions were pursuant to a conversation with Mr. Bryant's chief deputy, Royce Griffin. In an interview, Mr. Duncan said Mr. Griffin put him under "intense pressure" regarding Mena.

Another memo, from Mr. Duncan to several high-ranking members of the attorney general's staff in March 1992, notes that Mr. Duncan was instructed "to remove all files concerning the Mena investigation from the attorney general's office." At the time, several Arkansas newspapers were known to be preparing Freedom of Information Act requests aimed at Gov. Clinton's administration.

A spokesman for Mr. Bryant, Lawrence Graves, said yesterday that he was not aware of the missing files or of pressure exerted on Mr. Duncan. In Arkansas, Mr. Graves said, the attorney general "does not have authority" to pursue criminal cases.

From February to May 1992, Mr. Duncan was involved in a series of meetings aimed at deciding how to use a $25,000 federal grant obtained by then-Rep. Bill Alexander for the Mena investigation. In a November 1991 letter to Arkansas State Police Commander Tommy Goodwin, Mr. Alexander urged that, at the current "critical stage" in the Mena investigation, the money be used to briefly assign Mr. Duncan to the Arkansas State Police to pursue the case full time with State Police Investigator Welch and to prepare "a steady flow of information" for Iran-Contra prosecutor Lawrence Walsh, who had received some Mena files from Mr. Bryant.

According to Mr. Duncan's notes on the meetings, Mr. Clinton's aides closely tracked the negotiations over what to do with the money. Mr. Duncan says a May 7, 1992, meeting with Col. Goodwin was interrupted by a phone call from the governor, though he does not know what was discussed. The grant, however, was never used. Col. Goodwin told CBS that the money was returned "because we didn't have anything to spend it on."

In 1988, local authorities suffered a similar setback after Charles Black, a Mena-area prosecutor, approached Gov. Clinton with a request for funds for a Mena investigation. "He said he would get on it and would get a man back to me," Mr. Black told CBS. "I never heard back."

In 1990, Mr. Duncan informed Col. Goodwin about Clinton supporter Dan Lasater, who had been convicted of drug charges. "I told Tommy Goodwin that I'd received allegations of a Lasater connection to Mena," Mr. Duncan said.

The charge, that Barry Seal had used Mr. Lasater's bond business to launder drug money, was raised by a man named Terry Reed. Mr. Reed and journalist John Cummings recently published a book—"Compromised Clinton Bush and the CIA"—charging that Mr. Clinton, Mr. North and others engaged in a massive conspiracy to smuggle cocaine, export weapons and launder money. While much of the book rests on slim evidence and already published sources, the Lasater-Seal connection is new. (Thomas Mars, Mr. Lasater's attorney, said yesterday that his client "has never had a connection" with Mr. Seal.) But when Mr. Duncan tried to check out the allegations, his probe went nowhere, stalled from lack of funds and bureaucratic hostility.
Not all of the hostility came from the state level. When Messrs. Duncan and Welch built a money-laundering case in 1985 against Mr. Seal's associates, the U.S. Attorneys in the case "directly interfered with the process," Mr. Duncan said. "Subpoenas were not issued, witnesses were discredited, interviews with witnesses were interrupted, and the wrong charges were brought before the grand jury."

One grand jury member was so outraged by the prosecutors' actions that she broke the grandjury secrecy covenant. Not only had the case been blatantly mishandled, she later told a congressional investigator, but many jurors felt "there was some type of government intervention," according to a transcript of the statement obtained by the Journal. "Something is being covered up."

In 1987, Mr. Duncan was asked to testify before a House subcommittee on crime. Two days before his testimony, he says, IRS attorneys working with the U.S. Attorney for Western Arkansas reinterpreted Rule 6(e), the grandjury secrecy law, forcing the exclusion of much of Mr. Duncan's planned testimony and evidence. Mr. Duncan also charges that a senior IRS attorney tried to force him to commit perjury by directing him to say he had no knowledge of a claim by Mr. Seal that a large bribe had been paid to Attorney General Edwin Meese. Mr. Duncan says he didn't make much of the drug dealer's claim, but did know about it; he refused to lie to Congress.

Mr. Duncan, distressed by the IRS's handling of Mena, resigned in 1989. Meanwhile, the affair was sputtering through four federal forums, including a General Accounting Office probe derailed by the National Security Council. At one particularly low point, Mr. Duncan, then briefly a Mena investigator for a House subcommittee, was arrested on Capitol Hill on a bogus weapons charge that was held over his head for nine months, then dismissed. His prized career in law enforcement in ruins, he found his way back to Arkansas and began to pick up the pieces.

Mr. Duncan does not consider President Clinton a political enemy. Indeed, he feels close to the president - a fellow Arkansan who shares the same birthday - and thinks Mena may turn out to be far more troublesome for GOP figures such as Mr. North than any Arkansas players.

These days, Mr. Duncan struggles to keep hope alive. "I'm just a simple Arkansan who takes patriotism very seriously," he says. "We are losing confidence in our system. But I still believe that somewhere, somehow, there is some committee or institution that can issue subpoenas, get on the money trail, find out what happened and restore a bit of faith in the system."

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