

The Bottom Line/Christopher Byron

THE GREAT PRETENDER

CHARGES FILED IN PAN AM 103 HOAX

IT HAS TAKEN A WHILE, BUT ONE OF THE most outrageous con jobs imaginable—the hustling of the media over the United States government's alleged secret role in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103—is finally beginning to unravel.

Last year, I published a series of articles on the subject in this magazine. The stories exposed how some of the country's biggest and most prestigious media outlets, including *Time*, ABC News, and NBC News, had been hoodwinked into accusing the U.S. government of what amounted to mass murder of American citizens.

Last week, the Justice Department became involved: It issued the first of what may well become a series of indictments against various people involved in the hoax. The first man on the spot: Lester Knox Coleman, a failed journalist turned international fugitive, who now stands accused of eight counts of perjury in connection with the case.

Beginning in the summer of 1990, Coleman worked his way into the confidence of journalists at the networks, and eventually those at *Time*, with a bizarre but beguiling yarn. Then, at the behest of Pan Am's lawyers, he swore out a court affidavit to give credence to his otherwise unsupported claims.

The perjury charges relate to what the Justice Department says are knowingly false and misleading statements made by Coleman in his affidavit. A onetime low-level informant for the Drug Enforcement Administration and U.S. Army Intelligence, Coleman portrayed himself in his affidavit as actually having been a superspy. Moreover, he claimed to possess personal knowledge implicating the government in the Pan Am 103 bombing through a bungled narcotics "sting" operation—which the Justice Department also says is a fabrication and never occurred.

Having submitted bogus documents to a Chicago federal court in 1990, hoping to avoid prosecution on passport-fraud charges, Coleman fled the country; he's now hiding out in Sweden. If he returns to the U.S., he faces a possible 40 years in prison and \$2 million in fines on last week's indictment, and further penalties on a fugi-

tive warrant awaiting him in Chicago.

Indictments of more individuals may be on the way. For months, a federal grand jury in Brooklyn has been looking into the Pan Am 103 matter. Sources familiar with the probe say the grand jury wants to know whether the hoax may have been part of a scam in which the insurance company that had issued the policy on the doomed Pan Am flight tried to avoid paying off on the resulting claims.

Coleman is of interest in all this because of his involvement with the Pan Am defense team. The group's mission was to rebut charges, filed in a federal civil suit by

agent. In the aftermath of the Pan Am 103 bombing, Aviv approached the airline's lawyers and claimed inside knowledge that the CIA had been behind the attack. To prove it, Aviv wrote a 27-page "confidential" report for Pan Am on the matter and was hired as a consultant, eventually being paid what Pan Am's own court documents state was "probably hundreds of thousands of dollars."

In fact, no sooner had Aviv handed over his report than he appears to have become involved in helping leak it to the press. The document first turned up in the hands of supporters of right-wing presidential hopeful Lyndon LaRouche, for whom Aviv had once worked. The LaRouche group passed the report along to an Ohio congressman, James Traficant. And Traficant called a press conference and disclosed its contents to the world. Aviv has denied he leaked anything.

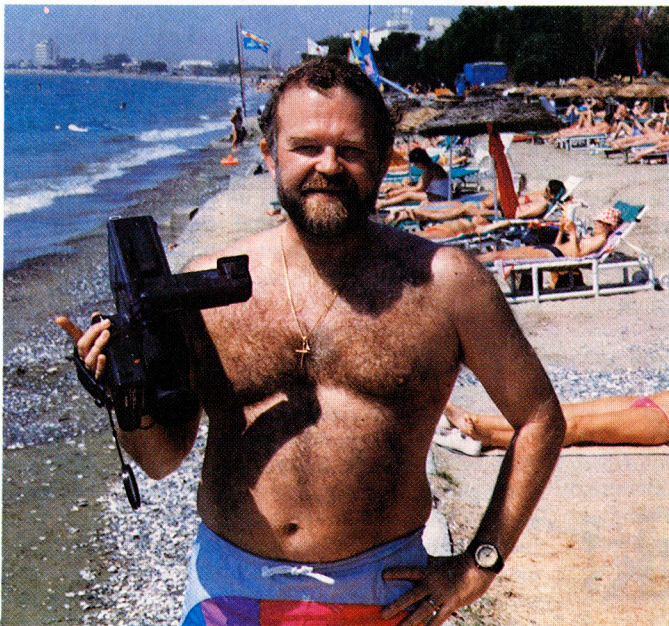
A year later, in September 1990, Aviv succeeded in promoting himself as an expert on Pan Am 103 to Pierre Salinger, then of ABC News. At around the same time, Lester Coleman, who by now was himself being used by the Pan Am defense team, also contacted Salinger, spinning essentially the same yarn Aviv was telling. Weeks later, Salinger ran a breathless exposé alleging a Washington role in the bombing of the aircraft.

Eventually, Coleman and Aviv met jointly with *Time*

magazine and told their story all over again. The resulting *Time* cover story, which mirrored the essential charges in the earlier ABC News exposé, went to press on the eve of the civil trial.

Lawyers for the family members howled that the story had been leaked to the press in violation of a court order, and for the express purpose of influencing the jury on behalf of the defendants. But their protestation was unnecessary, because the jury ruled unanimously for the family members, finding that willful misconduct had indeed enabled the bombing to occur. Now the Pan Am defense team is appealing, and a decision is expected momentarily from the U.S. Court of Appeals.

Virtually every lie the government is now accusing Coleman of perpetrating in this affair came to light first in *New York Magazine's* series on the hoax last



CONSPIRACY THEORIST: Lester Coleman faces a perjury indictment.

Pan Am 103 family members in 1989, that the airline had engaged in willful misconduct in allowing a terrorist's bomb to be smuggled aboard the plane. As developed by the group, the Pan Am defense boiled down to the claim that the airline hadn't been negligent at all, and that rogue elements of the U.S. intelligence community had penetrated Pan Am's security systems and blown up the aircraft.

From the start of the civil suit, both the plaintiffs and the defendants in the case were under a court-imposed gag order not to talk to the press. Yet members of the Pan Am defense team appear to have repeatedly violated the directive.

One member of the group was a New York-based private investigator named Juval Aviv—a controversial figure who gained notoriety in the mid-eighties by claiming a past for himself as a Mossad



Was there a time when you could run 5 miles?

Was it only 2 weeks ago?

If a sprain, strain, or other injury has made you want to forget about running, why not bring it to The Mount Sinai Sports Therapy Center?

Operated by our Department of Rehabilitation Medicine, our facility includes state-of-the-art equipment and a staff of highly-trained physical and occupational therapists. All located at Madison Avenue and 59th Street, and easily accessible to all public transportation.

So whether your injury was sustained recently or some time ago, have your physician write a referral, and bring it with you on your first visit.

After all, we think running should be something you look forward to, not look back on.

The Mount Sinai Sports Therapy Center

625 Madison Avenue at 59th Street, 2nd Floor,
New York, N.Y. 10022. (212) 891-2160

year. But *New York* was not alone in nailing Coleman. He was exposed as a fabricator in an article by investigative writer Steven Emerson that appeared at around the same time in the *Washington Journalism Review*. And not long afterward, *60 Minutes* did its own exposé on the Pan Am scam and Coleman's role in it.

Now even one of those who got taken in by Coleman seems to doubt his claims. Pierre Salinger told me last week that he no longer believes there was a drug sting operation involved in the bombing—the central feature of Coleman's thesis. By contrast, *Time* magazine, which is facing a \$26-million libel suit for publishing the photograph of a Georgia man whom Coleman accused of being a CIA double agent in the bombing, declined to comment on Coleman at all.

Given all that, one might think that publishers would stop paying attention to Coleman. But doubters seem hardly to have slowed him down at all. Since negative publicity had ruined the book market for him in the U.S., Coleman turned to London; last year, from his hideout in Sweden, he struck a book deal with a British publisher, Bloomsbury Press.

Just how carefully did Bloomsbury check out what Coleman had to say? "We have complete confidence in Mr. Coleman" is all a spokeswoman for the publisher would say. In fact, "complete confidence" seems to be something of an understatement, for interviews last week with numerous people portrayed in Coleman's book failed to turn up even one person who'd been contacted by Coleman, the publisher, or anyone else regarding the yarn or how they allegedly fit into it.

"It's all crap," said one producer at ABC's *PrimeTime Live* about a passage in the book that dealt with her. "But no one at the publisher ever called me to find out the truth. It's amazing."

Efforts by Bloomsbury to sell publication rights in the U.S. seem to have failed. "We were offered the book on a confidential basis as recently as two or three weeks ago," says an official at New York's W. W. Norton & Company. "But after checking with Bloomsbury and making further inquiries on our own, we decided to pass. The book had trouble written all over it. I think it was shown to a number of other publishers around town as well, but so far as I know, no one made an offer."

Nonetheless, this week, bookstores in Britain begin selling Coleman's story about how the U.S. government blew up Pan Am 103 and is now hunting him down like a dog because he knows too much. The thesis will come as no surprise to those who've crossed Coleman's trail in the past. But the claim will certainly make the Justice Department more curious than ever to know why the folks at Pan Am were ready to listen for even one minute to a man capable of such ravings.

Jean Jacques Rachou

La Cote Basque

Luncheon • Dinner
Closed Sunday

5 East 55th Street, N.Y.C. Tel. 688-6525

NOISY NEIGHBORS?

At last! A remarkable breakthrough for noise relief:

THE QUIET MACHINE™

Free brochure. First & Co., 718-544-7563
P.O. Box 916 Dept.Y, Forest Hills, N.Y. 11375

SAN MARTIN'S CONTINENTAL CUISINE

Lunch & Dinner • Closed Sunday
ROOM FOR PRIVATE PARTIES

143 East 49 St. (Lex.- 3rd) 832-0888
Across the street from the Waldorf Astoria.

AQUAVIT

Scandinavian
Seafood and Game

13 West 54th Street. Telephone 307-7311