

PABLO ESCOBAR ON A TRAIN USING DATA FOR OTHER PURPOSES

Yesterday, AP reported that the DEA paid an Amtrak secretary \$854,460 over 20 years to hand over train passenger lists.

According to a report released Monday by Amtrak's inspector general, the DEA paid an Amtrak secretary \$854,460 to be an informant. The employee was not publicly identified except as a "secretary to a train and engine crew."

Amtrak's own police agency is already in a joint drug enforcement task force that includes the DEA. According to the inspector general, that task force can obtain Amtrak confidential passenger reservation information at no cost.

There's a lot that's weird about this story. That Amtrak's IG, and not DEA's IG (that is, DOJ's) IG found this problem. That the secretary was permitted to just fade into retirement.

But I'm most intrigued that DEA treated the secretary taking these bribes as an informant – with an anonymous federal law enforcement official justifying such an approach by pointing to the chemical company informant that helped bust Pablo Escobar.

It's not unprecedented for law enforcement to have professional people who are informants employed in transportation and other industries, said a federal law enforcement official who is familiar with the incident involving Amtrak. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the person was not authorized to speak on the record.

The official said that years ago during

the investigation of drug lord Pablo Escobar, an informant at a U.S. chemical company provided a major assist to law enforcement by informing authorities that thousands of gallons of acetone were being shipped to Colombia. Acetone is used to manufacture cocaine.

DEA could have gotten this information for free, but it instead chose to dump 850K into getting it via other means, and the law enforcement side of this picture (DOJ) has not checked to see what DEA did with this data.

I can imagine why DEA would want to work via "informant" rather than regular law enforcement information sharing venues (and Amtrak is definitely part of that network). At the very least, it would permit them to shield the source of their data (as they shield the source of their data in the AT&T Hemisphere program). But it would also permit them to use the information for other off-book purposes.

But that appears not to be the concern of the IGs involved.