

# Libyan Women Losing Rights

When rebels challenged Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the West and its media adopted a “good-guy/bad-guy” dichotomy, hyping dubious claims about Gaddafi and ignoring troubling extremism among the rebels. Now, the new Libya is clamping down on women’s rights, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

On Dec. 3, [BBC News reported](#) on the plight of Libyan activist Magdulien Abaida, who played an important part in developing a positive image of last year’s Libyan revolt among European audiences and helped arrange material aid for the rebel forces.

She did this against the backdrop of Western governments describing the rebellion as one that sought “democratic rights” for the Libyan people. Upon the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, the [U.S. State Department](#) issued a statement applauding the rebel victory as a “milestone” in the country’s “democratic transition.” This matched Ms. Abaida’s expectations. Unfortunately, her subsequent experience belied the optimism.

With the rebel victory in October 2011, Abaida returned to Libya to help with the “democratic transition” and promote her particular cause of women’s rights. However, what she found in her homeland was chaos. The tribalism that underlies social organization in Libya had come to the fore.

[According to Amnesty International](#), that tribalism is reflected in the activities of “armed militias ... acting completely out of control. ... There are hundreds of them across the country, arresting people without warrant, detaining them incommunicado, and torturing them. ... This is all happening while the government is unwilling or unable to rein the militias in.”

Abaida adds that “during the revolution everyone was united, all were working together.” That, of course, was when many of the tribes had a common enemy the Gaddafi regime. Now the common enemy is gone.

As it turned out, Muammar Gaddafi’s dictatorship had served for 41 years as a center of gravity a center that kept the centrifugal tribal forces in check. The National Transitional Council (NTC), which took over after the defeat of the regime and the parliamentary elections that followed, were supposed to fill the void, but proved insufficient to the task. Ms. Abaida and her cause have become victims of that failure.

Upon her return to Libya, she advocated for gender equality to be incorporated

into any new Libyan constitution. She never had a chance. The tribes are tied to traditions that are strongly patriarchal. Also, the chaotic nature of post-revolution Libyan politics allowed free play to extremist Islamic forces that saw gender equality as a Western perversion.

In October 2011, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, who was a prominent face for the revolution and a leader of the NTC gave his first public speech after Gaddafi's fall to propose making it easier for men to have more than one wife. For Ms Abaida this was a "big shock. ... We wanted more rights, not to destroy the rights of half of society."

Worse was yet to come. When Abaida came to Benghazi in the summer of 2012 to attend a conference on the status of women in the new Libya, she was twice abducted by an extremist militia that saw her and the conference as anti-Islamic.

During her abduction she was pointedly told that she could be killed and "nobody would know." But they did not kill her. They just beat her up and turned her loose. She was left with the strong impression that, if she stayed politically active in Libya, she would indeed die and no one would know.

### **Rush to Judgment**

Was what happened to Ms Abaida's predictable? Or, to put it more broadly, could those Western leaders who spent billions of taxpayer dollars assisting in the "liberation" of Libya have predicted, with reasonably high probability, that victory for the rebels would result in political breakdown and the empowerment of extremist groups such as the one that kidnapped and assaulted Magdulien Abaida?

I think that the answer to this is yes. Indeed, I suspect that the prediction was actually made yet ignored by the powers that be.

U.S. intelligence services such as the CIA, and their equivalents in other countries, have middle-level professionals who know a great deal about almost every country in the world. They know the languages, read the local newspapers, listen to the radio and television stations, and have other sources of information that come through diplomatic and private channels.

When it comes to Libya, it is beyond doubt that the relevant intelligence workers knew the nature of this society and the divergent tribal forces that had been so long kept in check by the Gaddafi dictatorship. It is also beyond doubt that, at this country-specific level, operatives in these intelligence agencies knew and were reporting about the relative strengths and weaknesses of extremist religious elements held in check by the regime.

The normal routine is to pass such intelligence up a hierarchical bureaucratic channel. The information deemed important enough is then packaged into daily updated reports that end up, in the case of the U.S., with the president and his national security staff. Again, in the face of a serious rebellion against Gaddafi, it is more than reasonable to assume such information did get that far.

Yet, it would seem that such information caused no serious second thoughts about quickly jumping into the fray and backing the rebellion. Even with the historic consequences of our having armed al-Qaeda and similar groups during the Afghan-Soviet war, it does not appear that anyone in authority stopped long enough to ask if the U.S. might risk repeating this mistake in Libya.

Instead, Washington and its allies rallied NATO, rammed through a UN resolution that allowed intervention and, in short order, was aiding and abetting the rebellion. One of the ways it did this was in supplying an almost unlimited amount of weapons to rebel forces through a conduit set up by Qatar.

No one paid attention to just whom the Qataris were giving the guns to. Sure enough, some of them were given to al-Qaeda-like elements.

Thus, the move to get involved in Libya occurred very quickly. The allure of destroying Muammar Gaddafi, who had for so long been the *bête noire* of the U.S. (though for the past few years he had reversed policy and cooperated with the West), must have been just too strong.

Even Italy, which had found the Gaddafi government a dependable economic partner and secure source of affordable oil, dropped its support of the regime without much protest. In the rush to judgment, the question of who might gain power afterwards was, apparently, left to the middle echelon intelligence agents to worry about.

Now Gaddafi is gone, murdered to the acclaim of Hillary Clinton, and the tribal warlords and their militias have largely taken his place. The central government in Libya is weak and, under the present conditions, has little real chance of reining them in.

The aggressive extremists have our guns, as well as Gaddafi's, and some of them are probably migrating to Syria to carry on their battle. As for Magdulien Abaida, she is too afraid to return to the land she tried so diligently to help.

As intelligence agencies go, the CIA and its like are fairly good at collecting information, analyzing it, and rendering reasoned judgments as to its meaning. (They can be, of course, utterly evil when it comes to killing and torturing, but that is not the "mission" I am presently speaking of).

Usually, the advice rendered by the middle-level folks who do the analyzing and reporting errs on the side of caution. The problem is the political leaders all too often ignore the intelligence reports when they don't fit with their political goals.

Those goals reflect ideological and electoral concerns as well as the need to appear to be acting in strong and determined ways more assertive protectors of "freedom" than their competitors in the opposition party. This works to make presidents and prime ministers prone to opportunism and short-sightedness.

Thus, the rush to judgment in Iraq, in Libya and maybe soon in Iran. In the end, Washington has repeatedly proven that Mark Twain was wrong when he asserted "all you need in this life is ignorance and confidence, then success is sure."

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## The Warning in Gary Webb's Death

**From the Archive:** Modern U.S. history is more complete because journalist Gary Webb had the courage to revive the dark story of the Reagan administration's protection of Nicaraguan Contra cocaine traffickers in the 1980s. But Webb ultimately paid a terrible price, as Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry (Originally published Dec. 9, 2011)

Every year since investigative journalist Gary Webb took his own life in 2004, I have marked the anniversary of that sad event by recalling the debt that American history owes to Webb for his brave reporting, which revived the Contra-cocaine scandal in 1996 and forced important admissions out of the Central Intelligence Agency two years later.

But Webb's suicide on the evening of Dec. 9, 2004, was also a tragic end for one man whose livelihood and reputation were destroyed by a phalanx of major newspapers the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* serving as protectors of a corrupt power structure rather than as sources of honest information.

In reviewing the story again this year, I was struck by how Webb's Contra-

cocaine experience was, in many ways, a precursor to the subsequent tragedy of the Iraq War.

In the 1980s, the CIA's analytical division was already showing signs of politicization, especially regarding President Ronald Reagan's beloved Contras and their war against Nicaragua's Sandinista government and the U.S. press corps was already bending to the propaganda pressures of a right-wing Republican administration.

Looking back at CIA cables from the early-to-mid-1980s, you can already see the bias dripping from the analytical reports. Any drug accusation against the leftist Sandinistas was accepted without skepticism and usually with strong exaggeration, while the opposite occurred with evidence of Contra cocaine smuggling; then there was endless quibbling and smearing of sources.

So, to put these reports in anything close to an accurate focus, you would need special lenses to correct for all the politicized distortions. Yet, the U.S. news media, which itself was under intense pressure not to appear "liberal," worsened the Reagan administration's fun-house reflection of reality and attacked any dissident journalist who wouldn't go along.

Thus, Americans heard a lot about how the evil Sandinistas were trying to "poison" America's youth with cocaine, although there was not a single interception of a drug shipment from Nicaragua during the Sandinista reign, except for one planeload of cocaine that the United States flew into and out of Nicaraguan in a clumsy "sting" operation.

On the other hand, substantial evidence of Contra-related cocaine shipments out of Costa Rica and Honduras was kept from the American people with Reagan's Justice Department and CIA intervening to head off investigations and thus prevent embarrassing disclosures. The chief role of the big newspapers in this upside-down world was to heap ridicule on anyone who told the truth.

During that time frame of the early-to-mid-1980s, the patterns were set for CIA analysts to advance their careers (by giving the president what he wanted) and mainstream journalists to protect theirs (by accepting propaganda). By 2002-2003, these patterns had become deeply engrained, leaving almost no one to protect the American people from a new round of falsehoods aimed at Iraq.

Though I was not in touch with Webb in the last months of his life in 2004, I have always wondered if he saw this connection between his own valiant efforts to correct the historical record about Contra-cocaine trafficking in 1996 and the victory of lies over truth regarding Iraq's WMD in 2002-2003.

In the weeks before Webb's suicide, there also was the intervening fact of

George W. Bush's reelection and with it, the dashed expectation that the CIA analysts and the mainstream journalists who played along with the Iraq-WMD fabrications might face some serious accountability. At the moment when Webb picked up his father's pistol and put it to his head, there must have appeared little hope that anything would change.

Indeed, we are now seeing yet another replay of this systematic distortion of information, this time regarding Iran and its alleged nuclear weapons program. Any tidbit of information against Iran is exaggerated, while exculpatory data is downplayed or ignored.

So, it may be timely again to recount what happened to Gary Webb and to reflect on the dangers of allowing this corrupt disinformation system to press ahead unchecked.

### **Dark Alliance**

For me, the tragic story of Gary Webb began in 1996 when he was working on his "Dark Alliance" series for the *San Jose Mercury News*. He called me at my home in Arlington, Virginia, because, in 1985, I and my Associated Press colleague Brian Barger had been the first journalists to reveal the scandal of Reagan's Nicaraguan Contras funding themselves in part by collaborating with drug traffickers.

Webb explained that he had come across evidence that one Contra-connected drug conduit had funneled cocaine into Los Angeles, where it helped fuel the early crack epidemic. Unlike our AP stories a decade earlier, which focused on the Contras helping to ship cocaine from Central America into the United States, Webb said his series would examine what happened to the Contra cocaine *after* it reached the streets of Los Angeles and other cities.

Besides asking about my recollections of the Contras and their cocaine smuggling, Webb wanted to know why the scandal never gained any real traction in the U.S. national news media. I explained that the ugly facts of the drug trafficking ran up against a determined U.S. government campaign to protect the Contras' image. In the face of that resistance, I said, the major publications, the likes of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, had chosen to attack the revelations and those behind them rather than to dig up more evidence.

Webb sounded confused by my account, as if I were telling him something that was foreign to his personal experience, something that just didn't compute. I had a sense of his unstated questions: Why would the prestige newspapers of American journalism behave that way? Why wouldn't they jump all over a story that important and that sexy, about the CIA working with drug traffickers?

I took a deep breath, sensing that he had no idea of the personal danger he was about to confront. Well, he would have to learn that for himself, I thought. It surely wasn't my place to warn a journalist away from a significant story just because it carried risks.

So, I simply asked Webb if he had the strong support of his editors. He assured me that he did. I said their backing would be crucial once his story was out. He sounded perplexed, again, as if he didn't know what to make of my cautionary tone. I wished him the best of luck, thinking that he would need it.

### **The Safe Route**

When I hung up, I wasn't sure that the *Mercury News* would really press ahead with the story, considering how the big national news outlets had dismissed and ridiculed the notion that President Reagan's beloved Contras had included a large number of drug traffickers.

It never seemed to matter how much evidence there was. It was much easier, and safer, career-wise, for Washington journalists to reject incriminating testimony against the Contras, especially when it came from other drug traffickers and from disgruntled Contras. Even U.S. law-enforcement officials who discovered evidence were disparaged as overzealous and congressional investigators were painted as partisan.

In 1985, as we were preparing our first AP story on this topic, Barger and I knew that the evidence of Contra-cocaine involvement was overwhelming. We had a broad range of sources both inside the Contra movement and within the U.S. government, people with no apparent ax to grind who had described the cocaine-smuggling problem.

One source was a field agent for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); another was a senior official on Reagan's National Security Council (NSC) who told me that he had read a CIA report about how a Contra unit based in Costa Rica had used cocaine profits to buy a helicopter.

However, after our AP story was published in December 1985, we came under attack from the right-wing *Washington Times*. That was followed by dismissive stories in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The notion that the Contras, whom President Reagan had likened to America's Founding Fathers, could be implicated in the drug trade was simply unthinkable.

Yet, it was always odd to me that many of the same newspapers had no problem accepting the fact that the CIA-backed Afghan mujahedeen were involved in the heroin trade, but bristled at the thought that the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Contras might be cut from the same cloth.

A key difference, which I learned both from personal experience and from documents that surfaced during the Iran-Contra scandal, was that Reagan had assigned a young group of ambitious intellectuals such as Elliott Abrams and Robert Kagan to oversee the Contra war.

These neoconservatives worked with old-line anticommunists from the Cuban-American community, such as Otto Reich, and CIA propagandists, such as Walter Raymond Jr., to aggressively protect the Contras' image. And the Contras were always on the edge between getting congressional funding or having it cut off.

So, that combination, the propaganda skills of Reagan's Contra-support team and the fragile consensus for continuing Reagan's pet Contra war, meant that any negative publicity about the Contras would be met with a fierce counterattack.

### **Going to Editors**

The neoconservatives were also bright, well-schooled, and skilled in their manipulation of language and information, a process they privately called "perception management." They proved adept, too, at ingratiating themselves with senior editors at major news outlets.

By the mid-1980s, these patterns had become well-worn in Washington. If a journalist dug up a story that put the Contras in a negative light, he or she could expect the Reagan administration's propaganda team to make contact with a senior editor or bureau chief and lodge a complaint, apply some pressure, and often offer up some dirt about the offending journalist.

Also, many news executives in that time frame were sympathetic toward Reagan's hard-line foreign policy, especially after the humiliations of the Vietnam War and the Iranian revolution. Supporting U.S. initiatives abroad, or at least not allowing your reporters to undercut those policies, was seen as patriotic.

At the *New York Times*, executive editor Abe Rosenthal was one of the news media's most influential neoconservatives, declaring that he was determined to steer the newspaper back to "the center," by which he meant to the right.

At AP, general manager Keith Fuller was known to be a strong Reagan supporter and his preferences were sometimes expressed forcefully to AP's Washington bureau where I worked. At the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek* (where I went to work in 1987), there was also a strong sense that Reagan-era scandals should not reach the president, that it would not be "good for the country."

In other words, on the issue of Contra drug trafficking, there was a confluence of interests between the Reagan administration, which was determined to protect the Contras' public image, and senior news executives, who wanted to adopt a



“patriotic” posture after convincing themselves that the country shouldn’t endure another wrenching battle over wrongdoing by a Republican president.

The popular image of courageous editors standing up for their reporters in the face of government pressure was not the reality, especially not where the Contras were concerned.

### **Reverse Rewards**

So, instead of a process that outsiders might imagine, where journalists who dug out tough stories got rewarded, the actual system worked in the opposite way. The careerists in the news business quickly grasped that the smart play when it came to the Contras was either to be a booster or at least to pooh-pooh evidence of the Contras’ brutality or drug traffickers.

The same rules applied to congressional investigators. Anyone who pried into the dark corners of the Nicaraguan Contra war faced ridicule, as happened to Democratic Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts when he followed up the early AP stories with a courageous investigation that discovered more ties between cocaine traffickers and the Contras.

When his Contra-cocaine report was released in 1989, its findings were greeted with yawns and smirks. News articles were buried deep inside the major newspapers and the stories focused more on alleged flaws in his investigation than on his revelations.

For his hard work, *Newsweek* summed up the prevailing “conventional wisdom” on Kerry by calling him a “randy conspiracy buff.” Being associated with breaking the Contra-cocaine story was also regarded as a black mark on my own career.

To function in this upside-down world, where reality and perception often clashed and perception usually won the big news outlets developed a kind of cognitive dissonance that could accept two contradictory positions.

On one level, the news outlets did accept the undeniable reality that some of the Contras and their backers, including the likes of Panamanian General Manuel Noriega, were implicated in the drug trade, but then simultaneously treated this reality as a conspiracy theory.

### **Squaring the Circle**

Only occasionally did a major news outlet seek to square this circle, such as during Noriega’s drug-trafficking trial in 1991 when U.S. prosecutors called as a witness Colombian Medellín cartel kingpin Carlos Lehder, who, along with implicating Noriega, testified that the cartel had given \$10 million to the

Contras, an allegation first unearthed by Sen. Kerry.

“The Kerry hearings didn’t get the attention they deserved at the time,” a *Washington Post* editorial on Nov. 27, 1991, acknowledged. “The Noriega trial brings this sordid aspect of the Nicaraguan engagement to fresh public attention.”

However, the *Post* offered its readers no explanation for why Kerry’s hearings had been largely ignored, with the *Post* itself a leading culprit in this journalistic misfeasance. Nor did the *Post* and the other leading newspapers use the opening created by the Noriega trial to do anything to rectify their past neglect.

And, everything quickly returned to the status quo in which the desired perception of the noble Contras trumped the clear reality of their criminal activities.

So, from 1991 until 1996, the Contra-cocaine scandal remained a disturbing story not just about the skewed moral compass of the Reagan administration but also about how the U.S. news media had lost its way.

The scandal was a dirty secret that was best kept out of public view and away from a thorough discussion. After all, the journalistic careerists who had played along with the U.S. government’s Contra defenders had advanced inside their media corporations. As good team players, they had moved up to be bureau chiefs and other news executives. They had no interest in revisiting one of the big stories that they had downplayed as a prerequisite for their success.

## **Pariahs**

Meanwhile, those journalists who had exposed these national security crimes mostly saw their careers sink or at best slide sideways. We were regarded as “pariahs” in our profession. We were “conspiracy theorists,” even though our journalism had proven to be correct again and again.

The *Post*’s admission that the Contra-cocaine scandal “didn’t get the attention it deserved” didn’t lead to any soul-searching inside the U.S. news media, nor did it result in any rehabilitation of the careers of the reporters who had tried to put a spotlight on this especially vile secret.

As for me, after losing battle after battle with my *Newsweek* editors (who despised the Iran-Contra scandal that I had worked so hard to expose), I departed the magazine in June 1990 to write a book (called *Fooling America*) about the decline of the Washington press corps and the parallel rise of the new generation of government propagandists.

I was also hired by PBS *Frontline* to investigate whether there had been a prequel to the Iran-Contra scandal, whether those arms-for-hostage deals in the mid-1980s had been preceded by contacts between Reagan's 1980 campaign staff and Iran, which was then holding 52 Americans hostage and essentially destroying Jimmy Carter's reelection hopes. [For more on that topic, see Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege and America's Stolen Narrative.*]

Then, in 1995, frustrated by the pervasive triviality that had come to define American journalism, and acting on the advice of and with the assistance of my oldest son Sam, I turned to a new medium and launched the Internet's first investigative news magazine, known as *Consortiumnews.com*. The Web site became a way for me to put out well-reported stories that my former mainstream colleagues seemed determined to ignore or mock.

So, when Gary Webb called me that day in 1996, I knew that he was charging into some dangerous journalistic terrain, though he thought he was simply pursuing a great story. After his call, it struck me that perhaps the only way for the Contra-cocaine story to ever get the attention that it deserved was for someone outside the Washington media culture to do the work.

When Webb's "Dark Alliance" series finally appeared in late August 1996, it initially drew little attention. The major national news outlets applied their usual studied indifference to a topic that they had already judged unworthy of serious attention.

It was also clear that the media careerists who had climbed up their corporate ladders by accepting the conventional wisdom that the Contra-cocaine story was a conspiracy theory weren't about to look back down and admit that they had contributed to a major journalistic failure to inform and protect the American public.

### **Hard to Ignore**

But Webb's story proved hard to ignore. First, unlike the work that Barger and I did for AP in the mid-1980s, Webb's series wasn't just a story about drug traffickers in Central America and their protectors in Washington. It was about the on-the-ground consequences, inside the United States, of that drug trafficking, how the lives of Americans were blighted and destroyed as the collateral damage of a U.S. foreign policy initiative.

In other words, there were real-life American victims, and they were concentrated in African-American communities. That meant the ever-sensitive issue of race had been injected into the controversy. Anger from black communities spread quickly to the Congressional Black Caucus, which started

demanding answers.

Secondly, the *San Jose Mercury News*, which was the local newspaper for Silicon Valley, had posted documents and audio on its state-of-the-art Internet site. That way, readers could examine much of the documentary support for the series.

It also meant that the traditional "gatekeeper" role of the major newspapers, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, was under assault. If a regional paper like the *Mercury News* could finance a major journalistic investigation like this one, and circumvent the judgments of the editorial boards at the Big Three, then there might be a tectonic shift in the power relations of the U.S. news media. There could be a breakdown of the established order.

This combination of factors led to the next phase of the Contra-cocaine battle: the "get-Gary-Webb" counterattack. The first major shot against Webb and his "Dark Alliance" series did not come from the Big Three but from the rapidly expanding right-wing news media, which was in no mood to accept the notion that some of President Reagan's beloved Contras were drug traffickers. That would have cast a shadow over the Reagan Legacy, which the Right was elevating to mythic status.

It fell to Rev. Sun Myung Moon's right-wing *Washington Times* to begin the anti-Webb vendetta. Moon, a South Korean theocrat who fancied himself the new Messiah, had founded his newspaper in 1982 partly to protect Ronald Reagan's political flanks and partly to ensure that he had powerful friends in high places. In the mid-1980s, the *Washington Times* went so far as to raise money to assist Reagan's Contra "freedom fighters."

### **Self-Interested Testimony**

To refute Webb's three-part series, the *Washington Times* turned to some ex-CIA officials, who had participated in the Contra war, and quoted them denying the story. Soon, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* were lining up behind the *Washington Times* to trash Webb and his story.

On Oct. 4, 1996, the *Washington Post* published a front-page article knocking down Webb's series, although acknowledging that some Contra operatives did help the cocaine cartels.

The *Post's* approach was twofold, fitting with the national media's cognitive dissonance on the topic of Contra cocaine: first, the *Post* presented the Contra-cocaine allegations as old news, "even CIA personnel testified to Congress they knew that those covert operations involved drug traffickers," the *Post* sniffed, and second, the *Post* minimized the importance of the one Contra smuggling

channel that Webb had highlighted in his series, saying that it had not “played a major role in the emergence of crack.”

A *Post* sidebar story dismissed African-Americans as prone to “conspiracy fears.”

Next, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* weighed in with lengthy articles castigating Webb and “Dark Alliance.” The big newspapers made much of the CIA’s internal reviews in 1987 and 1988, almost a decade earlier, that supposedly had cleared the spy agency of any role in Contra-cocaine smuggling.

But the CIA’s cover-up began to weaken on Oct. 24, 1996, when CIA Inspector General Frederick Hitz conceded before the Senate Intelligence Committee that the first CIA probe had lasted only 12 days, and the second only three days. He promised a more thorough review.

### **Mocking Webb**

Webb, however, had already crossed over from being a serious journalist to a target of ridicule. Influential *Post* media critic Howard Kurtz mocked Webb for saying in a book proposal that he would explore the possibility that the Contra war was primarily a business to its participants. “Oliver Stone, check your voice mail,” Kurtz chortled.

However, Webb’s suspicion was no conspiracy theory. Indeed, White House aide Oliver North’s chief Contra emissary, Robert Owen, had made the same point in a March 17, 1986, message about the Contras leadership. “Few of the so-called leaders of the movement . . . really care about the boys in the field,” Owen wrote. “THIS WAR HAS BECOME A BUSINESS TO MANY OF THEM.” [Emphasis in original.]

In other words, Webb was right and Kurtz was wrong, even Oliver North’s emissary had reported that many Contra leaders treated the conflict as “a business.” But accuracy had ceased to be relevant in the media’s hazing of Gary Webb.

In another double standard, while Webb was held to the strictest standards of journalism, it was entirely all right for Kurtz, the supposed arbiter of journalistic integrity who was also featured on CNN’s *Reliable Sources*, to make judgments based on ignorance. Kurtz would face no repercussions for mocking a fellow journalist who was factually correct.

The Big Three’s assault, combined with their disparaging tone, had a predictable effect on the executives of the *Mercury News*. As it turned out, Webb’s confidence in his editors had been misplaced. By early 1997, executive editor Jerry Ceppos, who had his own corporate career to worry about, was in retreat.

On May 11, 1997, Ceppos published a front-page column saying the series “fell

short of my standards.” He criticized the stories because they “strongly implied CIA knowledge” of Contra connections to U.S. drug dealers who were manufacturing crack cocaine. “We did not have enough proof that top CIA officials knew of the relationship,” Ceppos wrote.

Ceppos was wrong about the proof, of course. At AP, before we published our first Contra-cocaine article in 1985, Barger and I had known that the CIA and Reagan’s White House were aware of the Contra-cocaine problem.

However, Ceppos had recognized that he and his newspaper were facing a credibility crisis brought on by the harsh consensus delivered by the Big Three, a judgment that had quickly solidified into conventional wisdom throughout the major news media and inside Knight-Ridder, Inc., which owned the *Mercury News*. The only career-saving move career-saving for Ceppos even if career-destroying for Webb was to jettison Webb and his journalism.

### **A ‘Vindication’**

The big newspapers and the Contras’ defenders celebrated Ceppos’s retreat as vindication of their own dismissal of the Contra-cocaine stories. In particular, Kurtz seemed proud that his demeaning of Webb now had the endorsement of Webb’s editor.

Ceppos next pulled the plug on the *Mercury News’* continuing Contra-cocaine investigation and reassigned Webb to a small office in Cupertino, California, far from his family. Webb resigned from the paper in disgrace.

For undercutting Webb and other *Mercury News* reporters working on the Contra-cocaine investigation, Ceppos was lauded by the *American Journalism Review* and was given the 1997 national Ethics in Journalism Award by the Society of Professional Journalists.

While Ceppos won raves, Webb watched his career collapse and his marriage break up. Still, Gary Webb had set in motion internal government investigations that would bring to the surface long-hidden facts about how the Reagan administration had conducted the Contra war.

The CIA published the first part of Inspector General Hitz’s findings on Jan. 29, 1998. Though the CIA’s press release for the report criticized Webb and defended the CIA, Hitz’s *Volume One* admitted that not only were many of Webb’s allegations true but that he actually understated the seriousness of the Contra-drug crimes and the CIA’s knowledge of them.

Hitz conceded that cocaine smugglers played a significant early role in the Contra movement and that the CIA intervened to block an image-threatening 1984

federal investigation into a San Franciscobased drug ring with suspected ties to the Contras, the so-called "Frogman Case."

After *Volume One* was released, I called Webb (whom I had met personally since his series was published). I chided him for indeed getting the story "wrong." He had understated how serious the problem of Contra-cocaine trafficking had been.

It was a form of gallows humor for the two of us, since nothing had changed in the way the major newspapers treated the Contra-cocaine issue. They focused only on the press release that continued to attack Webb, while ignoring the incriminating information that could be found in the body of the report. All I could do was highlight those admissions at *Consortiumnews.com*, which sadly had a much, much smaller readership than the Big Three.

### **Looking the Other Way**

The major U.S. news media also looked the other way on other startling disclosures.

On May 7, 1998, for instance, Rep. Maxine Waters, a California Democrat, introduced into the Congressional Record a Feb. 11, 1982, letter of understanding between the CIA and the Justice Department. The letter, which had been requested by CIA Director William Casey, freed the CIA from legal requirements that it must report drug smuggling by CIA assets, a provision that covered both the Nicaraguan Contras and the Afghan mujahedeen.

In other words, early in those two covert wars, the CIA leadership wanted to make sure that its geopolitical objectives would not be complicated by a legal requirement to turn in its client forces for drug trafficking.

The next break in the long-running Contra-cocaine cover-up was a report by the Justice Department's Inspector General Michael Bromwich.

Given the hostile climate surrounding Webb's series, Bromwich's report also opened with criticism of Webb. But, like the CIA's *Volume One*, the contents revealed new details about government wrongdoing. According to evidence cited by Bromwich, the Reagan administration knew almost from the outset of the Contra war that cocaine traffickers permeated the paramilitary operation. The administration also did next to nothing to expose or stop the crimes.

Bromwich's report revealed example after example of leads not followed, corroborated witnesses disparaged, official law-enforcement investigations sabotaged, and even the CIA facilitating the work of drug traffickers.

The report showed that the Contras and their supporters ran several parallel

drug-smuggling operations, not just the one at the center of Webb's series. The report also found that the CIA shared little of its information about Contra drugs with law-enforcement agencies and on three occasions disrupted cocaine-trafficking investigations that threatened the Contras.

As well as depicting a more widespread Contra-drug operation than Webb had understood, the Justice Department report provided some important corroboration about a Nicaraguan drug smuggler, Norwin Meneses, who was a key figure in Webb's series.

Bromwich cited U.S. government informants who supplied detailed information about Meneses's drug operation and his financial assistance to the Contras. For instance, Renato Pena, a money-and-drug courier for Meneses, said that in the early 1980s the CIA allowed the Contras to fly drugs into the United States, sell them, and keep the proceeds.

Pena, who was the northern California representative for the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) Contra army, said the drug trafficking was forced on the Contras by the inadequate levels of U.S. government assistance.

### **DEA Troubles**

The Justice Department report also disclosed repeated examples of the CIA and U.S. embassies in Central America discouraging DEA investigations, including one into Contra-cocaine shipments moving through the international airport in El Salvador.

Inspector General Bromwich said secrecy trumped all. "We have no doubt that the CIA and the U.S. Embassy were not anxious for the DEA to pursue its investigation at the airport," he wrote.

Bromwich also described the curious case of how a DEA pilot helped a CIA asset escape from Costa Rican authorities in 1989 after the man, American farmer John Hull, had been charged in connection with Contra-cocaine trafficking.

Hull's ranch in northern Costa Rica had been the site of Contra camps for attacking Nicaragua from the south. For years, Contra-connected witnesses also said Hull's property was used for the transshipment of cocaine en route to the United States, but those accounts were brushed aside by the Reagan administration and disparaged in major U.S. newspapers.

Yet, according to Bromwich's report, the DEA took the accounts seriously enough to prepare a research report on the evidence in November 1986. In it, one informant described Colombian cocaine off-loaded at an airstrip on Hull's ranch. The drugs were then concealed in a shipment of frozen shrimp and transported to



the United States.

The alleged Costa Rican shipper was Frigorificos de Puntarenas, a firm controlled by Cuban-American Luis Rodriguez. Like Hull, however, Frigorificos had friends in high places. In 1985-86, the State Department had selected the shrimp company to handle \$261,937 in non-lethal assistance earmarked for the Contras.

Hull also remained a man with powerful protectors. Even after Costa Rican authorities brought drug charges against him, influential Americans, including Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Indiana, demanded that Hull be let out of jail pending trial. Then, in July 1989 with the help of a DEA pilot and possibly a DEA agent Hull managed to fly out of Costa Rica to Haiti and then to the United States. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[John Hull's Great Escape](#)."] ]

Despite these new disclosures, the big newspapers still showed no inclination to read beyond the criticism of Webb in the press release and the executive summary.

### **Major Disclosures**

By fall 1998, Washington was obsessed with President Bill Clinton's Monica Lewinsky sex scandal, which made it easier to ignore even more stunning Contra-cocaine disclosures in the CIA's *Volume Two*, published on Oct. 8, 1998.

In the report, CIA Inspector General Hitz identified more than 50 Contras and Contra-related entities implicated in the drug trade. He also detailed how the Reagan administration had protected these drug operations and frustrated federal investigations throughout the 1980s.

According to *Volume Two*, the CIA knew the criminal nature of its Contra clients from the start of the war against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government. The earliest Contra force, called the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ADREN) or the 15th of September Legion, had chosen "to stoop to criminal activities in order to feed and clothe their cadre," according to a June 1981 draft of a CIA field report.

According to a September 1981 cable to CIA headquarters, two ADREN members made the first delivery of drugs to Miami in July 1981. ADREN's leaders included Enrique Bermúdez and other early Contras who would later direct the major Contra army, the CIA-organized FDN which was based in Honduras, along Nicaragua's northern border.

Throughout the war, Bermúdez remained the top Contra military commander. The CIA later corroborated the allegations about ADREN's cocaine trafficking, but

insisted that Bermúdez had opposed the drug shipments to the United States that went ahead nonetheless.

The truth about Bermúdez's supposed objections to drug trafficking, however, was less clear. According to Hitz's *Volume One*, Bermúdez enlisted Norwin Meneses, a large-scale Nicaraguan cocaine smuggler and a key figure in Webb's series, to raise money and buy supplies for the Contras.

*Volume One* had quoted a Meneses associate, another Nicaraguan trafficker named Danilo Blandín, who told Hitz's investigators that he and Meneses flew to Honduras to meet with Bermúdez in 1982. At the time, Meneses's criminal activities were well-known in the Nicaraguan exile community. But Bermúdez told the cocaine smugglers that "the ends justify the means" in raising money for the Contras.

After the Bermúdez meeting, Contra soldiers helped Meneses and Blandín get past Honduran police who briefly arrested them on drug-trafficking suspicions. After their release, Blandín and Meneses traveled on to Bolivia to complete a cocaine transaction.

There were other indications of Bermúdez's drug-smuggling tolerance. In February 1988, another Nicaraguan exile linked to the drug trade accused Bermúdez of participation in narcotics trafficking, according to Hitz's report. After the Contra war ended, Bermúdez returned to Managua, Nicaragua, where he was shot to death on Feb. 16, 1991. The murder has never been solved.

### **The Southern Front**

Along the Southern Front, the Contras' military operations in Costa Rica on Nicaragua's southern border, the CIA's drug evidence centered on the forces of Edmundo Pastora, another top Contra commander. But Hitz discovered that the U.S. government may have made the drug situation worse, not better.

Hitz revealed that the CIA put an admitted drug operative, known by his CIA pseudonym "Ivan Gomez", in a supervisory position over Pastora. Hitz reported that the CIA discovered Gomez's drug history in 1987 when Gomez failed a security review on drug-trafficking questions.

In internal CIA interviews, Gomez admitted that in March or April 1982, he helped family members who were engaged in drug trafficking and money laundering. In one case, Gomez said he assisted his brother and brother-in-law in transporting cash from New York City to Miami. He admitted that he "knew this act was illegal."

Later, Gomez expanded on his admission, describing how his family members had

fallen \$2 million into debt and had gone to Miami to run a money-laundering center for drug traffickers. Gomez said "his brother had many visitors whom [Gomez] assumed to be in the drug trafficking business." Gomez's brother was arrested on drug charges in June 1982. Three months later, in September 1982, Gomez started his CIA assignment in Costa Rica.

Years later, convicted drug trafficker Carlos Cabezas alleged that in the early 1980s, Ivan Gomez was the CIA agent in Costa Rica who was overseeing drug-money donations to the Contras. Gomez "was to make sure the money was given to the right people [the Contras] and nobody was taking . . . profit they weren't supposed to," Cabezas stated publicly.

But the CIA sought to discredit Cabezas at the time because he had trouble identifying Gomez's picture and put Gomez at one meeting in early 1982 before Gomez started his CIA assignment.

While the CIA was able to fend off Cabezas's allegations by pointing to these discrepancies, Hitz's report revealed that the CIA was nevertheless aware of Gomez's direct role in drug-money laundering, a fact the agency hid from Sen. Kerry in his 1987 investigation.

### **Cocaine Coup**

There was also more to know about Gomez. In November 1985, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) learned from an informant that Gomez's two brothers had been large-scale cocaine importers, with one brother arranging shipments from Bolivia's infamous drug kingpin Roberto Suarez.

Suarez already was known as a financier of right-wing causes. In 1980, with the support of Argentina's hard-line anticommunist military regime, Suarez bankrolled a coup in Bolivia that ousted the elected left-of-center government. The violent putsch became known as the Cocaine Coup because it made Bolivia the region's first narco-state.

By protecting cocaine shipments headed north, Bolivia's government helped transform Colombia's Medellín cartel from a struggling local operation into a giant corporate-style business for delivering cocaine to the U.S. market.

Flush with cash in the early 1980s, Suarez invested more than \$30 million in various right-wing paramilitary operations, including the Contra forces in Central America, according to U.S. Senate testimony by an Argentine intelligence officer, Leonardo Sanchez-Reisse.

In 1987, Sanchez-Reisse said the Suarez drug money was laundered through front companies in Miami before going to Central America. There, other Argentine

intelligence officers, veterans of the Bolivian coup, trained the Contras in the early 1980s, even before the CIA arrived to first assist with the training and later take over the Contra operation from the Argentines.

Inspector General Hitz added another piece to the mystery of the Bolivian-Contra connection. One Contra fund-raiser, Jose Orlando Bolanos, boasted that the Argentine government was supporting his Contra activities, according to a May 1982 cable to CIA headquarters. Bolanos made the statement during a meeting with undercover DEA agents in Florida. He even offered to introduce them to his Bolivian cocaine supplier.

Despite all this suspicious drug activity centered around Ivan Gomez and the Contras, the CIA insisted that it did not unmask Gomez until 1987, when he failed a security check and confessed his role in his family's drug business. The CIA official who interviewed Gomez concluded that "Gomez directly participated in illegal drug transactions, concealed participation in illegal drug transactions, and concealed information about involvement in illegal drug activity," Hitz wrote.

### **Protecting Gomez**

But senior CIA officials still protected Gomez. They refused to refer the Gomez case to the Justice Department, citing the 1982 agreement that spared the CIA from a legal obligation to report narcotics crimes by people collaborating with the CIA who were not formal agency employees.

Gomez was an independent contractor who worked for the CIA but was not officially on staff. The CIA eased Gomez out of the agency in February 1988, without alerting law enforcement or the congressional oversight committees.

When questioned about the case nearly a decade later, one senior CIA official who had supported the gentle treatment of Gomez had second thoughts. "It is a striking commentary on me and everyone that this guy's involvement in narcotics didn't weigh more heavily on me or the system," the official acknowledged to Hitz's investigators.

A Medellín drug connection arose in another section of Hitz's report, when he revealed evidence suggesting that some Contra trafficking may have been sanctioned by Reagan's NSC. The protagonist for this part of the Contra-cocaine mystery was Moises Nunez, a Cuban-American who worked for Oliver North's NSC Contra-support operation and for two drug-connected seafood importers, Ocean Hunter in Miami and Frigorificos De Puntarenas in Costa Rica.

Frigorificos De Puntarenas was created in the early 1980s as a cover for drug-money laundering, according to sworn testimony by two of the firm's principals,

Carlos Soto and Medellín cartel accountant Ramon Milian Rodriguez. (It was also the company implicated by a DEA informant in moving cocaine from John Hull's ranch to the United States.)

Drug allegations were swirling around Moises Nunez by the mid-1980s. Indeed, his operation was one of the targets of my and Barger's AP investigation in 1985. Finally reacting to these suspicions, the CIA questioned Nunez about his alleged cocaine trafficking on March 25, 1987. He responded by pointing the finger at his NSC superiors.

"Nunez revealed that since 1985, he had engaged in a clandestine relationship with the National Security Council," Hitz reported, adding: "Nunez refused to elaborate on the nature of these actions, but indicated it was difficult to answer questions relating to his involvement in narcotics trafficking because of the specific tasks he had performed at the direction of the NSC. Nunez refused to identify the NSC officials with whom he had been involved."

After this first round of questioning, CIA headquarters authorized an additional session, but then senior CIA officials reversed the decision. There would be no further efforts at "debriefing Nunez."

Hitz noted that "the cable [from headquarters] offered no explanation for the decision" to stop the Nunez interrogation. But the CIA's Central American Task Force chief Alan Fiers Jr. said the Nunez-NSC drug lead was not pursued "because of the NSC connection and the possibility that this could be somehow connected to the Private Benefactor program [the Contra money handled by North] a decision was made not to pursue this matter."

Joseph Fernandez, who had been the CIA's station chief in Costa Rica, confirmed to congressional Iran-Contra investigators that Nunez "was involved in a very sensitive operation" for North's "Enterprise." The exact nature of that NSC-authorized activity has never been divulged.

At the time of the Nunez-NSC drug admissions and his truncated interrogation, the CIA's acting director was Robert Gates, who nearly two decades later became President George W. Bush's second secretary of defense, a position he retained under President Barack Obama.

## **Drug Record**

The CIA also worked directly with other drug-connected Cuban-Americans on the Contra project, Hitz found. One of Nunez's Cuban-American associates, Felipe Vidal, had a criminal record as a narcotics trafficker in the 1970s. But the CIA still hired him to serve as a logistics coordinator for the Contras, Hitz reported.

The CIA also learned that Vidal's drug connections were not only in the past. A December 1984 cable to CIA headquarters revealed Vidal's ties to Rene Corvo, another Cuban-American suspected of drug trafficking. Corvo was working with Cuban anticommunist Frank Castro, who was viewed as a Medellín cartel representative within the Contra movement.

There were other narcotics links to Vidal. In January 1986, the DEA in Miami seized 414 pounds of cocaine concealed in a shipment of yucca that was going from a Contra operative in Costa Rica to Ocean Hunter, the company where Vidal (and Moises Nunez) worked. Despite the evidence, Vidal remained a CIA employee as he collaborated with Frank Castro's assistant, Rene Corvo, in raising money for the Contras, according to a CIA memo in June 1986.

By fall 1986, Sen. Kerry had heard enough rumors about Vidal to demand information about him as part of his congressional inquiry into Contra drugs. But the CIA withheld the derogatory information in its files. On Oct. 15, 1986, Kerry received a briefing from the CIA's Alan Fiers Jr., who didn't mention Vidal's drug arrests and conviction in the 1970s.

But Vidal was not yet in the clear. In 1987, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Miami began investigating Vidal, Ocean Hunter, and other Contra-connected entities. This prosecutorial attention worried the CIA. The CIA's Latin American division felt it was time for a security review of Vidal. But on Aug. 5, 1987, the CIA's security office blocked the review for fear that the Vidal drug information "could be exposed during any future litigation."

As expected, the U.S. Attorney's Office did request documents about "Contra-related activities" by Vidal, Ocean Hunter, and 16 other entities. The CIA advised the prosecutor that "no information had been found regarding Ocean Hunter," a statement that was clearly false. The CIA continued Vidal's employment as an adviser to the Contra movement until 1990, virtually the end of the Contra war.

### **FDN Connections**

Hitz also revealed that drugs tainted the highest levels of the Honduran-based FDN, the largest Contra army. Hitz found that Juan Rivas, a Contra commander who rose to be chief of staff, admitted that he had been a cocaine trafficker in Colombia before the war.

The CIA asked Rivas, known as El Quiche, about his background after the DEA began suspecting that Rivas might be an escaped convict from a Colombian prison. In interviews with CIA officers, Rivas acknowledged that he had been arrested and convicted of packaging and transporting cocaine for the drug trade in

Barranquilla, Colombia. After several months in prison, Rivas said, he escaped and moved to Central America, where he joined the Contras.

Defending Rivas, CIA officials insisted that there was no evidence that Rivas engaged in trafficking while with the Contras. But one CIA cable noted that he lived an expensive lifestyle, even keeping a \$100,000 Thoroughbred horse at the Contra camp. Contra military commander Bermúdez later attributed Rivas's wealth to his ex-girlfriend's rich family. But a CIA cable in March 1989 added that "some in the FDN may have suspected at the time that the father-in-law was engaged in drug trafficking."

Still, the CIA moved quickly to protect Rivas from exposure and possible extradition to Colombia. In February 1989, CIA headquarters asked that the DEA take no action "in view of the serious political damage to the U.S. Government that could occur should the information about Rivas become public." Rivas was eased out of the Contra leadership with an explanation of poor health. With U.S. government help, he was allowed to resettle in Miami. Colombia was not informed about his fugitive status.

Another senior FDN official implicated in the drug trade was its chief spokesman in Honduras, Arnoldo Jose "Frank" Arana.

The drug allegations against Arana dated back to 1983 when a federal narcotics task force put him under criminal investigation because of plans "to smuggle 100 kilograms of cocaine into the United States from South America." On Jan. 23, 1986, the FBI reported that Arana and his brothers were involved in a drug-smuggling enterprise, although Arana was not charged.

Arana sought to clear up another set of drug suspicions in 1989 by visiting the DEA in Honduras with a business associate, Jose Perez. Arana's association with Perez, however, only raised new alarms. If "Arana is mixed up with the Perez brothers, he is probably dirty," the DEA said.

### **Drug Airlines**

Through their ownership of an air services company called SETCO, the Perez brothers were associated with Juan Matta-Ballesteros, a major cocaine kingpin connected to the murder of a DEA agent, according to reports by the DEA and U.S. Customs. Hitz reported that someone at the CIA scribbled a note on a DEA cable about Arana stating: "Arnold Arana . . . still active and working, we [CIA] may have a problem."

Despite its drug ties to Matta-Ballesteros, SETCO emerged as the principal company for ferrying supplies to the Contras in Honduras. During congressional Iran-Contra hearings, FDN political leader Adolfo Calero testified that SETCO

was paid from bank accounts controlled by Oliver North. SETCO also received \$185,924 from the State Department for ferrying supplies to the Contras in 1986. Furthermore, Hitz found that other air transport companies used by the Contras were implicated in the cocaine trade as well.

Even FDN leaders suspected that they were shipping supplies to Central America aboard planes that might be returning with drugs. Mario Calero, the chief of Contra logistics, grew so uneasy about one air freight company that he notified U.S. law enforcement that the FDN only chartered the planes for the flights south, not the return flights north.

Hitz found that some drug pilots simply rotated from one sector of the Contra operation to another. Donald Frixone, who had a drug record in the Dominican Republic, was hired by the CIA to fly Contra missions from 1983 to 1985. In September 1986, however, Frixone was implicated in smuggling 19,000 pounds of marijuana into the United States. In late 1986 or early 1987, he went to work for Vortex, another U.S.-paid Contra supply company linked to the drug trade.

By the time that Hitz's Volume Two was published in fall 1998, the CIA's defense against Webb's series had shrunk to a fig leaf: that the CIA did not *conspire* with the Contras to raise money through cocaine trafficking. But Hitz made clear that the Contra war took precedence over law enforcement and that the CIA withheld evidence of Contra crimes from the Justice Department, Congress, and even the CIA's own analytical division.

Besides tracing the evidence of Contra-drug trafficking through the decade-long Contra war, the inspector general interviewed senior CIA officers who acknowledged that they were aware of the Contra-drug problem but didn't want its exposure to undermine the struggle to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

According to Hitz, the CIA had "one overriding priority: to oust the Sandinista government. . . . [CIA officers] were determined that the various difficulties they encountered not be allowed to prevent effective implementation of the Contra program." One CIA field officer explained, "The focus was to get the job done, get the support and win the war."

Hitz also recounted complaints from CIA analysts that CIA operations officers handling the Contras hid evidence of Contra-drug trafficking even from the CIA's analysts.

Because of the withheld evidence, the CIA analysts incorrectly concluded in the mid-1980s that "only a handful of Contras might have been involved in drug trafficking." That false assessment was passed on to Congress and to major news



organizations, serving as an important basis for denouncing Gary Webb and his "Dark Alliance" series in 1996.

### **CIA Admission**

Although Hitz's report was an extraordinary admission of institutional guilt by the CIA, it went almost unnoticed by the big American newspapers.

On Oct. 10, 1998, two days after Hitz's Volume Two was posted on the CIA's Web site, the *New York Times* published a brief article that continued to deride Webb but acknowledged the Contra-drug problem may have been worse than earlier understood. Several weeks later, the *Washington Post* weighed in with a similarly superficial article. The *Los Angeles Times* never published a story on the release of Hitz's *Volume Two*.

In 2000, the House Intelligence Committee grudgingly acknowledged that the stories about Reagan's CIA protecting Contra drug traffickers were true. The committee released a report citing classified testimony from CIA Inspector General Britt Snider (Hitz's successor) admitting that the spy agency had turned a blind eye to evidence of Contra-drug smuggling and generally treated drug smuggling through Central America as a low priority.

"In the end the objective of unseating the Sandinistas appears to have taken precedence over dealing properly with potentially serious allegations against those with whom the agency was working," Snider said, adding that the CIA did not treat the drug allegations in "a consistent, reasoned or justifiable manner."

The House committee, then controlled by Republicans, still downplayed the significance of the Contra-cocaine scandal, but the panel acknowledged, deep inside its report, that in some cases, "CIA employees did nothing to verify or disprove drug trafficking information, even when they had the opportunity to do so. In some of these, receipt of a drug allegation appeared to provoke no specific response, and business went on as usual."

Like the release of Hitz's report in 1998, the admissions by Snider and the House committee drew virtually no media attention in 2000, except for a few articles on the Internet, including one at *Consortiumnews.com*.

### **Unrepentant Press**

Because of this misuse of power by the Big Three newspapers, choosing to conceal their own journalistic failings regarding the Contra-cocaine scandal and to protect the Reagan administration's image, Webb's reputation was never rehabilitated.

After his original "Dark Alliance" series was published in 1996, Webb had been inundated with attractive book offers from major publishing houses, but once the vilification began, the interest evaporated. Webb's agent contacted an independent publishing house, Seven Stories Press, which had a reputation for publishing books that had been censored, and it took on the project.

After *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion* was published in 1998, I joined Webb in a few speaking appearances on the West Coast, including one packed book talk at the Midnight Special bookstore in Santa Monica, California. For a time, Webb was treated as a celebrity on the American Left, but that gradually faded.

In our interactions during these joint appearances, I found Webb to be a regular guy who seemed to be holding up fairly well under the terrible pressure. He had landed an investigative job with a California state legislative committee. He also felt some measure of vindication when CIA Inspector General Hitz's reports came out.

However, Webb never could overcome the pain caused by his betrayal at the hands of his journalistic colleagues, his peers. In the years that followed, Webb was unable to find decent-paying work in his profession, the conventional wisdom remained that he had somehow been exposed as a journalistic fraud. His state job ended; his marriage fell apart; he struggled to pay bills; and he was faced with a move out of a modest rental house near Sacramento, California.

On Dec. 9, 2004, the 49-year-old Webb typed out suicide notes to his ex-wife and his three children; laid out a certificate for his cremation; and taped a note on the door telling movers, who were coming the next morning, to instead call 911. Webb then took out his father's pistol and shot himself in the head. The first shot was not lethal, so he fired once more.

Even with Webb's death, the big newspapers that had played key roles in his destruction couldn't bring themselves to show Webb any mercy. After Webb's body was found, I received a call from a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* who knew that I was one of Webb's few journalistic colleagues who had defended him and his work.

I told the reporter that American history owed a great debt to Gary Webb because he had forced out important facts about Reagan-era crimes. But I added that the *Los Angeles Times* would be hard-pressed to write an honest obituary because the newspaper had not published a single word on the contents of Hitz's final report, which had largely vindicated Webb.

To my disappointment but not my surprise, I was correct. The *Los Angeles Times*

ran a mean-spirited obituary that made no mention of either my defense of Webb, nor the CIA's admissions in 1998. The obituary was republished in other newspapers, including the *Washington Post*.

In effect, Webb's suicide enabled senior editors at the Big Three newspapers to breathe a little easier, one of the few people who understood the ugly story of the Reagan administration's cover-up of the Contra-cocaine scandal and the U.S. media's complicity was now silenced.

To this day, none of the journalists or media critics who participated in the destruction of Gary Webb has paid a price for their actions. None has faced the sort of humiliation that Webb had to endure. None had to experience that special pain of standing up for what is best in the profession of journalism, taking on a difficult story that seeks to hold powerful people accountable for serious crimes, and then being vilified by your own colleagues, the people that you expected to understand and appreciate what you had done.

On the contrary, many were rewarded with professional advancement and lucrative careers. For instance, Howard Kurtz still hosts the CNN program, "Reliable Sources," which lectures journalists on professional standards. He is described in the program's bio as "the nation's premier media critic."

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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## John Hull's Great Escape

**From the Archive:** The U.S. political/media world often operates without justice. Truth-tellers get punished and the well-connected get off. On this eighth anniversary of journalist Gary Webb's suicide, we are re-posting one of the stories that Webb's brave work forced out, albeit without a satisfying ending.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on Aug. 2, 1998)

John Hull, the American farmer in Costa Rica whose land became a base for Contra raids into Nicaragua, averted prosecution for alleged drug trafficking by fleeing Costa Rica in 1989 with the help of U.S. government operatives.

A 1998 report by Justice Department Inspector General Michael Bromwich disclosed that Hull escaped from Costa Rica in a plane flown by a pilot who worked for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. The report, however, could not reconcile conflicting accounts about the direct involvement of a DEA officer and concluded, improbably, with a finding of no wrongdoing.

The finding makes Bromwich's report one more chapter in a long saga of U.S. government protection of Hull, a fervent anti-communist who became a favorite of the Reagan-Bush administrations. (Bromwich's disclosure regarding Hull's escape was one of many that resulted from federal investigations prompted by a 1996 investigative series in the San Jose Mercury News written by Gary Webb.)

For years, Contra-connected witnesses had cited Hull's ranch as a cocaine transshipment point for drugs heading to the United States. According to Bromwich's report, the DEA even prepared a research report on the evidence in November 1986. In it, one informant described Colombian cocaine off-loaded at an airstrip on Hull's ranch. The drugs were then concealed in a shipment of frozen shrimp and transported to the United States, the informant said.

The alleged Costa Rican shipper was Frigorificos de Puntarenas, a firm controlled by Cuban-American Luis Rodriguez. Like Hull, however, Frigorificos had friends in high places. In 1985-86, the State Department had selected the shrimp company to handle \$261,937 in non-lethal assistance earmarked for the Contras. In 1987, the DEA in Miami opened a file on Rodriguez, but soon concluded there was no case.

However, as more evidence surfaced in 1987, the FBI and Customs indicted Rodriguez for drug trafficking and money-laundering. But Hull remained untouchable, although five witnesses implicated him during Sen. John Kerry's investigation of Contra-drug trafficking. The drug suspicions just glanced off the pugnacious farmer, who had cultivated close relationships with the U.S. Embassy and conservative Costa Rican politicians.

In January 1989, however, Costa Rican authorities finally acted. They indicted Hull for drug trafficking, arms smuggling and other crimes. Hull was jailed, a move that outraged some U.S. congressmen. A letter, signed by Rep. Lee Hamilton, a senior Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and other members, threatened to cut off U.S. economic aid if Hull were not released.

[In a 1992 congressional investigation, Hamilton also played a central role in covering up evidence of Republican collaboration with Iran during the 1980 hostage crisis. See Robert Parry's *America's Stolen Narrative*.]

Costa Rica complied, freeing Hull pending trial. But Hull didn't wait for his

day in court. In July 1989, he hopped a plane, flew to Haiti and then to the United States. Hull got another break when one of his conservative friends, Roberto Calderon, won the Costa Rican presidency. On Oct. 10, 1990, Calderon informed the U.S. embassy that he could not stop an extradition request for Hull's return but signaled that he did not want to prosecute his pal.

The embassy officials got the message and fired off a cable noting that the new president was "clearly hoping that Hull will not be extradited." President George H.W. Bush's administration fulfilled Calderon's hope by rebuffing Costa Rican extradition requests, effectively killing the case against Hull.

### **DEA Airways**

While not objecting to that maneuvering, Bromwich's report revealed that behind the scenes, another drama was playing out: an internal investigation into whether DEA personnel had conspired to thwart Hull's drug prosecution.

That phase of the story began on May 17, 1991, when a Costa Rican journalist told a DEA official in Costa Rica that Hull was boasting that a DEA special agent had assisted in the 1989 flight to Haiti. DEA launched an internal inquiry, headed by senior inspector Anthony Ricevuto.

The suspected DEA agent, whose name was withheld in Bromwich's report, admitted knowing Hull but denied helping him escape. Inspector Ricevuto learned, however, that one of the agent's informants, a pilot named Harold Wires, had flown the plane carrying Hull.

When interviewed on July 23, 1991, Wires said the DEA agent had paid him between \$500 and \$700 to fly Hull to Haiti aboard a Cessna. In Haiti, Wires said, they met another DEA pilot Jorge Melendez and Ron Lippert, a friend of the DEA agent; Melendez accompanied Wires back to Costa Rica; and Lippert flew with Hull to the United States.

From DEA records, Ricevuto confirmed that Melendez had been a DEA informant and freelance pilot. But when questioned, Melendez denied seeing Hull in Haiti. Then, 20 days later, Ricevuto got a call from Wires who reversed his initial story. Wires suddenly was claiming that the DEA agent did not know that Hull was on the Cessna.

Later, Wires amended the story again, saying that the agent gave him \$700 to pay for the Cessna's fuel but only for the return flight. Wires also claimed it was the agent's friend, Lippert, who asked Wires to fly Hull out of Costa Rica, not the agent. Wires added that he took the assignment because he felt the CIA had abandoned Hull. Yet, Wires also acknowledged that he had received an angry call from Hull who wanted to clear the agent of suspicion.

Though Hull's overheard comments about the DEA agent's role had started the investigation, Hull weighed in on Oct. 7, 1991, with a letter. "I have no idea if [the accused agent] knew how and when I was leaving Costa Rica," Hull wrote. He then added, cryptically, "I assumed the ambassador was fully aware of my intentions."

For his part, Lippert told Inspector Ricevuto that the DEA agent indeed had helped plan Hull's escape. But a DEA polygrapher was brought in to test Lippert and judge him "deceptive." No polygraphs apparently were ever administered to Wires, Hull or the DEA agent.

So, despite the evidence that DEA personnel conspired in the flight of an accused drug trafficker, the DEA cleared the agent of any wrongdoing. Bromwich endorsed that finding as "reasonable."

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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