

# Howard Kurtz's Belated Comeuppance

**Exclusive:** Media critic Howard Kurtz has lost his job as Washington bureau chief for Newsweek/Daily Beast after a blog post in which he falsely accused basketball player Jason Collins of hiding his past engagement to a woman while coming out as gay. But Kurtz's journalistic abuses have a much longer history, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

For nearly a quarter century, Howard Kurtz has served as hall monitor for Washington's conventional wisdom, handing out demerits to independent-minded journalists who don't abide by the mainstream rules. So, there is some understandable pleasure seeing Kurtz face some accountability in his ouster as bureau chief for Newsweek and The Daily Beast.

However, the more salient point is that Kurtz, who continues to host CNN's "Reliable Sources" show, should never have achieved the level of influence in journalism that he did. Throughout his career, he has consistently and unfairly punished journalists who had the courage to ask tough questions and pursue truly important stories.

When one looks at the mess that is modern journalism in the United States, a chief culprit has been Howard Kurtz. Yet, his downfall did not come because of his smearing of fellow journalists like Gary Webb and Helen Thomas but rather from a blog post that unfairly criticized basketball player Jason Collins after he revealed that he was gay.

Kurtz faulted Collins for supposedly not revealing that he had once been engaged to a woman, but Collins had mentioned those marriage plans. Twitter exploded with comments about Kurtz's sloppy error. On Thursday, The Daily Beast retracted the post, and the Web site's editor-in-chief Tina Brown announced that Kurtz would be departing.

However, Kurtz has committed far more serious offenses during his years destroying the careers of journalists who dared make life a bit uncomfortable for Official Washington's powerful elites. For instance, Kurtz played a key role in the destruction of investigative reporter Gary Webb, who had the courage to revive the long-suppressed Contra-cocaine story in the mid-1990s.

Working at the San Jose Mercury-News, Webb produced a multi-part series in 1996 revealing how cocaine that was smuggled into the United States by operatives

connected to the Nicaraguan Contra war of the 1980s had contributed to the “crack cocaine” epidemic that ravaged U.S. cities. Webb’s articles put the major U.S. news media on the spot because most mainstream outlets had dismissed the Contra-cocaine allegations when they first surfaced in the mid-1980s.

My Associated Press colleague Brian Barger and I wrote the first story about the Contra-cocaine scandal in 1985 and our work was met with a mix of condescension and contempt from the New York Times and the Washington Post, where Kurtz worked for many years. Even after an investigation by Sen. John Kerry confirmed and expanded upon our work, the big newspapers continued to dismiss and downplay the stories.

It didn’t matter how much evidence was developed on the Contra-cocaine smuggling or on the Reagan administration’s role covering up the crimes; the conventional wisdom was that the scandal must be a “conspiracy theory.” Journalists or government investigators who did their job, looking at the problem objectively, risked losing their job.

### **Career Consequences**

Journalistic up-and-comers, such as Michael Isikoff (then at the Washington Post), advanced their careers by focusing on minor flaws in Kerry’s investigation rather than on major disclosures of high-level government complicity with drug trafficking. Newsweek’s “conventional wisdom watch” mocked Kerry as “a randy conspiracy buff.”

So, when Gary Webb revived the Contra-cocaine scandal in 1996 by pointing out its real-world impact on the emergence of crack cocaine that ravaged inner cities across the United States in the 1980s, his stories were most unwelcome.

At first, the mainstream news media tried to ignore Webb’s work, but African-American lawmakers demanded investigations into the scandal. That prompted a backlash from the major news organizations. Webb’s articles were dissected looking for tiny flaws that could be exploited to again discredit the whole issue.

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

The Post’s approach was twofold: 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 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 his "Dark Alliance" series. 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 unravel 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.

### **Sealing Webb's Fate**

By then, however, Webb had already crossed over from being a serious journalist to an object of ridicule. Washington Post media critic Kurtz effectively sealed Webb's fate with a series of articles confirming Webb's new status as a laughable pariah.

For instance, 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 bashing of Gary Webb.

While Webb was held to the strictest standards of journalism, it was entirely all right for Kurtz, the supposed arbiter of journalistic standards, to make judgments based on ignorance. Kurtz faced no repercussions for disparaging an embattled journalist who was factually correct. (Kurtz's sloppiness regarding Webb was similar to Kurtz's cavalier approach to Collins's brave announcement as the first player in a major U.S. team sport to declare that he is gay.)

Yet, with Kurtz's imprimatur, the Big Three's assault on Webb, combined with their derogatory tone, had a predictable effect on the executives of the *Mercury-News*. By early 1997, executive editor Jerry Ceppos, who had his own

corporate career to worry about, was in retreat.

Webb was forced out of his job to the satisfaction of Kurtz and many in the mainstream media. Webb's humiliation served as a vindication to their longstanding dismissive treatment of the Contra-cocaine story.

Even when CIA Inspector General Hitz determined that, indeed, the Contra movement had been permeated with cocaine traffickers and that the CIA had shielded them from law enforcement, the mainstream media's focus remained the alleged shortcomings in Webb's journalism. [For details, see Robert Parry's *Lost History*.]

So, while Kurtz and other Contra-cocaine "debunkers" saw their careers soar, Webb couldn't find decent-paying work in his profession. Finally, in December 2004, despondent and in debt, Webb took his own life. Even after his death, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post and other major news outlets continued disparaging him. [See Consortiumnews.com's "The Warning in Gary Webb's Death."] ]

### **Hooting at Democracy**

As the 1990s ground to a close with the Washington news media obsessing over "important" issues like President Bill Clinton's failed Whitewater real-estate deal and his sex life, Kurtz and his fellow-travelers were setting the sorry standards for modern U.S. journalism. Many were swooning over the manly man George W. Bush and happily hazing the wonky Al Gore.

Though Gore won the national popular vote in Election 2000 and would have prevailed in the swing state of Florida if all the legal ballots had been counted, five Republicans on the U.S. Supreme Court stopped that counting and installed George W. Bush in the White House with little protest from the national news media.

That pro-Bush/anti-Gore attitude grew stronger after the 9/11 attacks when a group of news organizations completed an unofficial tally of the ignored Florida ballots, which showed that Gore would have carried that key state. Yet, instead of simply telling the American people that the wrong guy was in the White House, the major U.S. news outlets twisted their own findings to protect Bush's fragile "legitimacy."

Out front defending that journalistic malfeasance was Howard Kurtz. He rallied behind the decision of the Washington Post, New York Times, CNN and other heavy-hitters to focus on hypothetical partial recounts rather than what the Florida voters actually voted for, i.e., a Gore victory.

On Nov. 12, 2001, the Post's headline was "Florida Recounts Would Have Favored

Bush” and Kurtz backed that judgment up by dismissing anyone who actually looked at the statistical findings of the recount as a kook. Kurtz’s sidebar headlined, “George W. Bush, Now More Than Ever” ridiculed as “conspiracy theorists” those who thought Gore had won.

“The conspiracy theorists have been out in force, convinced that the media were covering up the Florida election results to protect President Bush,” Kurtz wrote. “That gets put to rest today, with the finding by eight news organizations that Bush would have beaten Gore under both of the recount plans being considered at the time.”

Kurtz also mocked those who believed that winning an election fairly, based on the will of the voters, was important in a democracy. “Now the question is: How many people still care about the election deadlock that last fall felt like the story of the century and now faintly echoes like some distant Civil War battle?” he wrote.

After reading Kurtz’s dismissive tone, it was a bit jarring to examine the actual results of the statewide review of 175,010 disputed ballots. “Full Review Favors Gore,” the Washington Post admitted in a box buried on page 10, showing that under all standards applied to the ballots, Gore came out on top. The New York Times’ graphic revealed the same outcome.

However, based on the “journalism” promoted by Howard Kurtz, any reporter who actually read and reacted to the real findings would be risking his or her career. Thus, millions of Americans continued to believe that Bush was the legitimate winner in Florida when the facts showed otherwise. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Sandra Day O’Connor’s ‘Maybe’ Regret.”](#)]

### **Demonizing Helen Thomas**

Given Kurtz’s history as hall monitor for the conventional wisdom, it surely should come as no surprise that he would join in the demonization of longtime White House correspondent Helen Thomas, known for her courage in asking uncomfortable questions and for her critical views toward Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians.

When Thomas made an impolitic remark about Israelis leaving what had been Palestine, her mainstream media colleagues joined the loud calls for her career to be brought to an ignominious end, her apology notwithstanding.

Kurtz penned a harsh [retrospective](#) on Thomas’s sudden retirement from journalism, giving Thomas’s critics a free shot at denouncing her for an alleged lack of “objectivity” and her supposedly off-the-wall questions to politicians.

"She asked questions no hard-news reporter would ask, that carried an agenda and reflected her point of view and there were some reporters who felt that was inappropriate," CBS correspondent Mark Knoller was quoted as saying. "Sometimes her questions were embarrassing to others."

"She's always said crazy stuff," added National Review Online columnist Jonah Goldberg, whose "journalism" career was launched as a defender of his mother, Lucianne Goldberg, after she advised disgruntled federal employee Linda Tripp to tape her conversations with President Clinton's girlfriend Monica Lewinsky and to save the semen-stained blue dress.

"I did my bit in the trenches of Clinton's trousers," Goldberg once wrote. So, in the funhouse-mirror world of today's Washington news media, Goldberg parlayed his time in Clinton's trousers into a slot as a frequent guest on high-profile TV news shows, such as ABC's "Good Morning America," "Nightline," MSNBC's "Hardball with Chris Matthews," CNN's "Larry King Live," and, of course, many Fox News programs.

As examples of Helen Thomas's "crazy stuff," Kurtz cited some of her questions as if the very words proved her unfitness to work as a national journalist. For instance, he wrote: "In 2002, Thomas asked [White House press secretary Ari] Fleischer: 'Does the president think that the Palestinians have a right to resist 35 years of brutal military occupation and suppression?'"

Apparently, no further comment was needed for Washington Post readers to understand how outlandish such a question was. Kurtz continued: "Four years later, Thomas told Fleischer's successor, Tony Snow, that the United States 'could have stopped the bombardment of Lebanon' by Israel, but instead had 'gone for collective punishment against all of Lebanon and Palestine.' Snow tartly thanked her for 'the Hezbollah view.'"

### **Praise for Critics**

Kurtz also praised some of Thomas's colleagues who alerted the world to the dangers of Helen Thomas earlier. He wrote: "A handful of journalists questioned her role over the years. In a 2006 New Republic piece, Jonathan Chait accused Thomas of 'unhinged rants,' noting that she had asked such questions as: 'Why are we killing people in Iraq? Men, women, and children are being killed there. It's outrageous.'"

Again, Kurtz appeared to believe that the absurdity of Thomas's statement was self-evident.

Yet, as President George W. Bush's unprovoked invasion and bloody occupation of Iraq claimed the lives of thousands of U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands

of Iraqis, perhaps the greater absurdity was that Helen Thomas was often alone in asking such impertinent questions.

Thomas also had the integrity to refuse to allow her name and reputation to be used by South Korean theocrat (and right-wing funder) Sun Myung Moon when he took over United Press International in 2000. Then the best-known journalist at UPI, she resigned as an act of principle.

Though Moon was a notorious propagandist who had founded the Washington Times in 1982 as a vehicle for supporting some American politicians (such as Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush) and for tearing down others (such as John Kerry, Bill Clinton and Al Gore), much of the “objective” Washington press corps tolerated and even promoted Moon’s curious newspaper.

In the mid-1980s, after Moon’s newspaper signed up for the Associated Press wire service, AP executives told AP staffers, including me, that we were no longer allowed to mention Moon’s connection to the newspaper when we cited the Washington Times’ reporting in AP copy. That policy change meant that readers of AP stories around the world wouldn’t be alerted to the propaganda element of Moon’s operation.

Other respected Washington news figures, such as C-SPAN’s Brian Lamb, actively promoted Moon’s newspaper by hoisting up its articles before viewers, many of whom had no idea that the Times’ owner was a religious cult leader with mysterious ties to foreign intelligence services and to international crime syndicates. [For details, see Robert Parry’s [\*Secrecy & Privilege\*](#).]

So, while Moon’s newspaper was influencing the U.S. political debate with propagandistic articles and while Moon was spreading around money for political and journalism conferences Helen Thomas was one of the few prominent figures in the Washington press corps to object. (After resigning from UPI, she took a job as a columnist for the Hearst newspapers.)

Nevertheless, at the end of her long and groundbreaking career as one of the first women to operate in the male-dominated Washington press corps, Helen Thomas was the one pilloried as crazy and unprofessional by the arbiter of all that is good in journalism, Howard Kurtz.

**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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