‘Kill the Messenger’: Rare Truth-telling

By James DiEugenio

I only met Gary Webb once in December 1996 at the late, great activist bookstore, The Midnight Special, in Santa Monica, California. I was writing at Probe Magazine then and had covered Webb’s groundbreaking San Jose Mercury News three-part series, titled “Dark Alliance.”

This fascinating, compelling series outlined a malevolent network which helped fund the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Contra forces with profits from the cocaine trade in California. The Nicaraguan supplier was a man named Norwin Meneses, who associated with top-level Contra leader Adolfo Calero.

Meneses’s agent, Danilo Blandon, distributed the cocaine in Los Angeles to a former high school tennis player named Ricky Ross. The Blandon/Meneses brand of cocaine was high grade but cheap, so Ross became a millionaire. He was nicknamed “Freeway Rick,” because he made so much money selling drugs that he purchased properties along the Harbor Freeway, including motels and theaters.

Webb’s story did not actually say the CIA was directly involved with this network. It said the Agency knew about it and turned a blind eye because the overriding objective had been to overthrow the leftist Sandinista government of Nicaragua even if that meant letting the CIA’s clients and their associates import large amounts of cocaine into California and elsewhere in the United States.

The end result was to financially bolster the Contras, while thousands of Americans who could not afford powder cocaine now found themselves addicted to low-cost but high-grade crack. This took the old political adage “the ends justify the means” to mind-boggling new heights. In fact, under oath, Blandon testified that Contra military leader Enrique Bermudez used precisely that phrase, “the ends justify the means.”

Webb’s series ran from Aug. 18-20, 1996. And, for several weeks, the story advanced unopposed through talk radio, cable TV and the Internet, which was then still in its formative stages. Webb’s compelling story gained further traction because the Mercury News had created a state-of-the-art, interactive web site which linked to scores of documents and hundreds of pages of supplemental
A Web Revolution

Aided by this web revolution, “Dark Alliance” progressed to the point that Webb’s radio and TV schedule was being printed daily by the Mercury News. And all this was going on outside and around the gatekeeping protective architecture of the MSM, the mainstream media, i.e., the major newspapers (Washington Post, New York Times, Los Angeles Times), magazines (Time, Newsweek, US News) and the big-three TV networks (CBS, NBC, ABC).

Webb’s story, in essence, pitted the nascent alternative media, anchored in the Internet and other lower-cost media outlets against the old-line, powerful corporate media. The public seemed to sense that the MSM was never going to report on this immensely important story that resonated with average Americans, many of whom had witnessed the devastation across the country and especially in black communities caused by the spread of crack.

After all, the major media had been ignoring or disparaging the Contra-cocaine story since it first bubbled to the surface in 1985 when it was reported by Robert Parry and Brian Barger of the Associated Press. During the Iran/Contra hearings in 1987, a protester disrupted the testimony by ex-White House aide Oliver North by yelling, “ask about the cocaine,” but no one did (at least not in open session).

The plea was ignored even though, during those same hearings, Rep. Les Aspin pointed out that the numbers in the Contra accounts did not check out. (Boston Globe, June 27, 1988) The available funds officially accrued were not sufficient to cover the reported weapons purchases. And it was not a small shortfall. For the fiscal year 1984-85, it was around $7 million. (Cocaine Politics, by Peter Scott and Jonathan Marshall, pgs. 210-11).

The MSM’s contempt for the Contra-cocaine story continued into the late 1980s when the major newspapers downplayed or disparaged a congressional investigation led by Sen. John Kerry that uncovered more evidence of ties between the Contras, cocaine traffickers and the Reagan administration, both Reagan’s CIA and the State Department.

“It is clear that individuals who provided support for the Contras were involved in drug trafficking,” Kerry’s investigation concluded, “and elements of the Contras themselves knowingly received financial and material assistance from drug traffickers.” Kerry’s report added, “In each case, one or another agency of the U. S. government had information regarding the involvement either while it was occurring or immediately thereafter.” (Introduction to the Kerry Committee
Just-Say-No Hypocrisy

But the notion that President Ronald Reagan’s just-say-no-to-drugs crowd was saying yes to cocaine traffickers as long as they chipped in money to the Contra coffers was something deemed unthinkable by the MSM. How could such a charge be true about these rebels whom Reagan had compared to America’s Founding Fathers? It was deemed the journalistically “responsible thing” in the 1980s to simply report the Reagan administration’s denials and ignore the mounting evidence.

But the MSM’s initial silence in 1996 after Webb revived the Contra-cocaine scandal was only the quiet before a very nasty storm. The MSM was going to write about the subject, but the big newspapers had no intention of furthering Webb’s good work or even acknowledging that this scandal deserved much greater attention than the MSM had given it in the 1980s.

To do so would have amounted to a self-indictment. After all, if the major newspapers had performed their journalistic responsibilities in the 1980s, much of the devastation and violence caused by the crack epidemic might have been averted. American lives could have been saved; American prisons might not have filled up with low-level drug dealers and users; American communities and families might not have been blighted and impoverished; the costly “war on drugs” might have been revealed as a failure much earlier than it eventually was.

Indeed, one of the reasons that Webb’s series seemed so new and shocking to the public in 1996 was because the MSM had largely ignored it. In the case of the Kerry investigation, the failure to fully air the committee’s public hearings and highlight its disclosures was especially disgraceful. After all, Kerry’s hearings and the Senate report were official U.S. government proceedings.

In 1996, by documenting some of the human consequences of the Contra drug trafficking and by circumventing the media gatekeepers Webb had issued his own indictment: that the U.S. government had, in effect, sanctioned the drug trade in America and that the major U.S. news media had failed to alert the public about this grave national security crime. Another implication of the series was that the MSM was in bed with the CIA.

More Voices

But the MSM’s behavior was actually even worse than that. Because of the sensation over Webb’s series, other ignored voices joined the fray with further exposures of Contra drug running. For example, former DEA agent Celerino Castillo, former CIA agent Bradley Ayers and former Los Angeles police officer
Mike Ruppert all began to speak out about CIA-sanctioned drug running.

The high point may have been Ruppert’s confrontation with CIA Director John Deutch at a large gathering at a Los Angeles high school. It was clear that a populist tidal wave was building. Therefore, a dam had to be built before this flood of public outrage engulfed such important institutions as Ronald Reagan’s Legacy, the National Security State and the Corporate Media.

Granted, it would have taken some professional courage and real integrity for the editors and bureau chiefs of the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times to put their journalistic duties ahead of their instincts for self-preservation. They would have had to face up to their earlier failures and make amends to millions of readers who had been betrayed. Thus, it was much easier and safer, career-wise to put Webb’s series under a microscope and claim to find fault with it, to make Webb “the story,” not the reality of the Reagan administration’s malfeasance and the MSM’s misfeasance.

Although the initial assaults on Webb’s series were mounted by the right-wing news media, including the Washington Times, the MSM soon prepared its own withering counterattack against Webb. It began on Oct. 4, 1996, with a front-page story, with sidebars, in the Washington Post. The lead article was written by Walter Pincus and Roberto Suro, entitled “The CIA and Crack: Evidence is Lacking of Alleged Plot.”

A relentless offensive followed designed to crush the populist uprising in its infancy. In short order, the New York Times joined in. Then came the Los Angeles Times with the most deliberate and vicious attack. Editor Shelby Coffey commissioned the equivalent of a journalistic SWAT team. No less than 17 reporters prepared a three-day series that was actually longer than Webb’s original “Dark Alliance” series. Internally, it was known as the “Get Gary Webb Team.” (LA Weekly, 9/29/14)

As the team worked, its common chorus was: “We’re going to take away this guy’s Pulitzer.” The hit team was headed by Doyle McManus and Leo Wolinsky. (A few months later, Coffey promoted Wolinsky to assistant managing editor.)

One of the most absurd assertions made by the L.A. Times was to dismiss the Blandon/Ross network as a relatively minor player in the crack trade and claim that it only managed to give $50,000 to the Contras. Yet, two years earlier, the Times had described Ross as the “king of crack” with his network selling half a million crack rocks per day, essentially a one-man Wal-Mart for crack retailing. However, when the need was to minimize Ross’s role and thus how much help his operation could have given the Contras, the reality was reshaped.
L.A. Times’ Cover-up

Further, it appears that the *Times* later cooperated in a cover-up with Sheriff Sherman Block about an important lead in the “Dark Alliance” series. Through the *Times*, Block announced that, unlike what Webb had reported, a shady and mysterious local character, one Ronald Lister, was not associated with the Contras or any drug running.

But an alternative publication, *Orange County Weekly*, investigated Lister and came up with something completely different, concluding that Lister a security consultant, former policeman and partner of Blandon’s had given Blandon weapons, which he sold to Ross, and helped the drug ring launder money and avoid law enforcement discovery. While Lister was doing all this, he was holding what he called “business meetings” with Salvadoran death squad leader Roberto D’Aubuisson and “retired” CIA agents locally. (*LA Weekly*, May 30, 2013)

But was there more to all this than just a vendetta against a reporter from a smaller northern California newspaper unearthing a huge scandal on the *Los Angeles Times’* home turf? While professional jealousy clearly played a role in the cruelty inflicted on Webb, the intensity of the counterattack also reflected the symbiotic relationship between the U.S. national security apparatus and Washington-based national security reporters who are dependent on official background briefings to receive pre-approved information that news organizations need, especially during foreign crises when access to on-the-ground events is limited.

Perception Management

A recently released CIA document on how the counterattack against Webb was promoted is revealing in this regard. Entitled “Managing a Nightmare: CIA Public Affairs and the Drug Conspiracy Story,” the six-page internal report described the CIA’s damage control in the wake of the publication of Webb’s story.

The report showed how the spy agency’s PR team exploited relationships with mainstream journalists who then essentially did the CIA’s work for it, mounting a devastating counterattack against Webb that marginalized him and painted the Contra-cocaine trafficking story as some baseless conspiracy theory.

Crucial to that success, the report credits “a ground base of already productive relations with journalists and an effective response by the Director of Central Intelligence’s Public Affairs Staff [that] helped prevent this story from becoming an unmitigated disaster.”

The Agency convinced friendly journalists to characterize Webb’s series as presenting “no real news, in that similar charges were made in the 1980’s and
were investigated by the Congress and were found to be without substance.” That, of course, was a lie. In fact, Kerry’s investigation confirmed many of the Contra-cocaine allegations first reported by Parry and Barger for the Associated Press.

According to the CIA’s “Managing a Nightmare” report, journalists were advised to read Webb’s series critically and the CIA considered the initial attack by the Washington Post the key moment in blunting Webb’s story. The CIA distributed the negative stories to other members of the press.

From there, other papers refused to pick up Webb’s articles, but they often carried the articles attacking him. The CIA’s report noted that the tide of the public relations battle had fully turned by October and soon became a rout. Even the American Journalism Review, which like similar publications is supposed to stand up for honest journalists under fire, instead joined the all-out charge against Webb.

The Agency crowed how easy it was to work with journalists to first blunt and then turn around this negative national security story. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “The CIA/MSM Contra-Cocaine Cover-up.”]

Webb wanted to reply to these attacks as he pressed ahead with his investigation. In fact, at that Midnight Special talk, he said his paper would soon publish new work backing up his original series. But panic was sweeping the Knight-Ridder corporation which then owned the Mercury News.

So, the newspaper’s executive editor Jerry Ceppos sounded retreat and abandoned Webb and his investigation. Not only did Ceppos not publish the new work, he began to dismantle the prodigiously successful web site. Then, in May 1997, he printed a letter that amounted to a public apology for publishing the story in the first place. He said the series fell short of the paper’s standards and failed to handle the “gray areas” with sufficient care.

Understandably, Webb was upset with this decision. When he aired his disagreement, Ceppos dispatched him to the newspaper’s back-water Cupertino office, separating Webb from his home and family during the week because of the long commute.

Out of Journalism

The writing was on the wall. Webb took a severance package from the paper in November 1997, effectively forced out “in disgrace.” For betraying Webb, Ceppos received an “Ethics in Journalism Award” in 1997 from the Society of Professional Journalists. He was also got a promotion from Knight-Ridder.
Though Webb’s journalistic career had gone down in flames, he had forced the U.S. government to conduct more thorough investigations of the Contra-cocaine scandal by Justice Department Inspector General Michael Bromwich and CIA Inspector General Frederick Hitz. Both reports, especially the latter, confirmed the gist of what Webb had written and, indeed, provided shocking new details, revealing a pervasive relationship between the Contras and major cocaine traffickers, including the Medellin cartel and other powerful drug smuggling operations.

The reports acknowledged that the CIA had cast a blind eye on the drug-running activities by the Contras for the entire decade of the 1980s and had even intervened to block potentially damaging investigations. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* gave short shrift to these damaging findings and the *Los Angeles Times* all but ignored them. There was not a word from Jerry Ceppos about Webb’s (too late) vindication. Gary Webb had become a non-person in his profession. [For details on these findings, see Consortiumnews.com’s “The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga.”]

Ceppos also sandbagged Webb’s best opportunity to enrich himself and his family over his important work. At the peak of the controversy over “Dark Alliance,” Webb was getting lucrative offers for a book deal. His wife told Webb biographer Nick Schou that publishing giant Simon and Schuster made an initial offer to Webb of a $100,000 advance for a book. Webb’s wife urged him to take it.

But Ceppos told Webb that he could not work on a book about his series while still being employed at the *Mercury News*. Misguided loyalty kept Webb at the paper as he shunned the offer. He ultimately did write a book, also titled *Dark Alliance*, for a small publisher, Seven Stories Press. Without the muscle of a large publishing house and with the MSM-enforced conventional wisdom about the Contra-cocaine issue being a “conspiracy theory” the book did not get much media play.

**A Downward Spiral**

Forced out of the only profession he really wanted to be part of, Webb became an investigator for the California legislature. But when there was a power shift in Sacramento, he was without a job. He could not find a new reporter’s position anywhere on any major newspaper. In fact, he could not even get an interview.

Because of his finances, and due to a divorce from his wife, she had garnished his wages. The only job he could get was with a weekly alternative journal called the *Sacramento News and Review*. And that position did not pay nearly enough for him to keep up his expenses, which included a $2,000 mortgage.
Webb had asked to move back in with his former wife, but she said she would feel uncomfortable with the situation. He also asked a former girlfriend the same. She first agreed but then changed her mind. The only alternative left was to move in with his mother. His one solace in life at this time was his motorcycle rides. But then someone stole his motorcycle.

Faced with a forced move out of his house, Webb arranged for his cremation and typed out letters to his former wife and his three children. Although the letters have never been made public, his wife said he declared that he never regretted any news article that he wrote. He then used his father’s gun to take his own life. The first shot only wounded him, so he fired again. He was 49 years old.

After Webb’s death, Sen. John Kerry wrote the Sacramento News and Review that “Because of Webb’s work the CIA launched an Inspector General investigation that named dozens of troubling connections to drug runners. That wouldn’t have happened if Gary Webb hadn’t been willing to stand up and risk it all.” (LA Weekly, May 30, 2013)

**Salvaging the Story**

And the story might have ended there, except for one of the reporters who had decided not to deride Gary Webb’s work, but to build on it. Nick Schou of the Orange County Weekly had met Webb and took a liking to him. Upon hearing the news of Webb’s death, Schou felt a personal loss. So he decided to write a biography of his former friend and colleague, called *Kill the Messenger*, originally published in 2006.

The book is not just a chronicle of the furious and mindless attack that destroyed both Webb and any hope of getting to the bottom of the Contra/crack scandal. It was also an attempt at a biography of the man whom the mainstream media had caricatured as an amateurish, hotheaded, gonzo-type journalist. Schou’s book followed Webb’s career in depth and included many comments from fellow journalists who had worked with him and recalled Webb as a dedicated, hard-working, intelligent reporter who took himself and his job seriously and hated government officials who duped the public and/or broke the law.

Coming alive in Schou’s book was a three-dimensional Gary Webb who fit the classic adage about what journalism should be, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. From the beginning of his career, in college at Northern Kentucky, Webb went on to win dozens of reporting awards, including an H. L. Mencken Award and a Pulitzer Prize for being part of the *Mercury News* team coverage of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.
For instance, when Walt Bogdanich of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* met Webb who was working at the *Kentucky Post*, Bogdanich was quickly impressed and told Schou, “I made it my job to try to get him to come to the *Plain Dealer*.”

In Cleveland, fellow reporter Steve Luttner told Schou, “I’ve never seen a more dogged reporter in thirty years.” Another reporter, Tom Suddes said, “He had an in-your-face spirit of journalism. He felt we weren’t there to nurture people, we were there to raise hell.”

Mary Anne Sharkey, who worked closely with Webb at the *Plain Dealer*, told Schou: “Gary was one of the most meticulous and dogged investigators. I’d come into the office, and he’d been there all night, reading documents.”

Bert Robinson at the *San Jose Mercury News* worked with Webb at the Sacramento office covering the state government. Robinson amplified on Sharkey’s comments about Webb’s ability to work with documents: “It seemed like a gift. He could pick up a 200-page report and skim through it and focus on one sentence on page 63 that suggested some huge outrage. It was amazing to watch. He was a hell of a reporter.”

**Unsmearing Webb**

Schou’s book also straightened out another smear about Gary Webb. When the “Dark Alliance” series began stirring up populist anger, the *New York Times* set up a hit team to go after Webb’s earlier reporting. One of the angles was to check on Webb’s past stories to see if he had ever caused his newspaper to defend itself in a legal action, which did happen on two occasions. And that is what the *Times* reported in order to create the image of an irresponsible reporter.

But Schou went back and interviewed the newspaper executives involved. The reason the papers settled the lawsuits was not because of any inaccuracy in Webb’s reporting, but because of some hyperbole in the headlines, which Webb did not write. Webb did not want his employers to pay out anything. He wanted to continue the legal process because he felt he could back up everything he wrote in each story.

According to Schou, another investigative journalist, Peter Landesman showed an interest in adapting his book, *Kill the Messenger*, for the screen shortly after it was published in 2006. Landesman was a writer for *New York Times* magazine who specialized in writing very long and expensive stories that often made the cover of the weekend journal. Some of the stories, like one he did in 2004 about an international sex trade in young girls, drew some controversy. This may have been his impetus for approaching Schou about adapting the Webb book into a screenplay.
But the script spent years languishing around Hollywood until actor Jeremy Renner got involved. Renner had a major breakthrough role in *The Hurt Locker* in 2009, for which he was nominated for an Oscar for Best Actor. This helped launch him into some big-budget films like *The Avengers*, *Mission Impossible-Ghost Protocol*, *The Bourne Legacy* and *American Hustle*.

**Renner’s Intervention**

It was on the strength of that kind of roll that he turned actor/producer and decided to make *Kill the Messenger*. As he told interviewer Elizabeth Thorp, he was immediately drawn to the David and Goliath aspect of the story. And once he was in, he was all in:

“It was going to be a big hill to climb to get it made. It’s not a movie that people were screaming to make. Having me as a part of it helped. I wanted to get it made, not just sit around and wait for someone else to make that happen.” He added that he was instrumental in acquiring the cast, the director, other producers and the rest of the production team.

What’s amazing is that this is Renner’s first film as a producer. Yet, it’s hard to detect where he made a false step anywhere. From the editing, to the direction, to the casting, everything about this film is extremely well chosen. And we sense that from the start.

The opening credit montage, largely in black and white stills, juxtaposes various presidents’ pledges to fight a war on drugs: Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan. Halfway through, it then breaks into another montage concerning America’s necessity to fight communism in Central America. Brian Kates edits this all very snappily, with a martial rhythm and appropriately loud and threatening music behind it. It is a gripping and pointed way to begin: a sort of visual topic sentence indicating the hypocrisy about to be exposed.

From that memorable opening, the promise is that we are in good hands, with people who understand the material and the forces involved. And we are. One reason I have detailed so much of the story behind Webb’s work and Schou’s biography is this: although the film is only 110 minutes long, what is remarkable is not how much was cut, but how much made it onto the screen.

It begins with the drug asset forfeiture story Webb worked on for the *Mercury News*. As Webb wrote in his book *Dark Alliance*, he was doing a story on how the police would file charges, burst into a home, seize property, and then drop the charges later, leaving the defendant much poorer. That story had created a lot of buzz.

A woman named Coral Baca called Webb. She had read his story and was impressed
by his honesty, since it had been done to her boyfriend, one Rafael Cornejo. But, she said, there was more to it than that. The government had enlisted a former drug trader turned informant, Blandon, to testify against Cornejo.

Or, as Baca told Webb, “One of the government’s witnesses is a guy who used to work for the CIA selling drugs. Tons of it. Four tons! And if that’s what he’s admitted to, you can imagine how much it really was.” She promised Webb some official records, so Webb showed up in court to see who Blandon was. And this is what got him interested in the story. All of this is faithfully depicted in the film.

**Telling the Story**

Approximately the first half of the picture pieces together Webb’s search for the story. It’s an interesting and skillfully handled piece of filmmaking, even for those already familiar with the tale. Besides the inherent drama of the subject, director Michael Cuesta makes it all move very quickly and adroitly through several different locales from Washington D.C., to a prison in Nicaragua, to South Central Los Angeles.

Renner has also gotten some fairly famous actors to take parts that are rather small, but well-delineated: Andy Garcia as Meneses; Oliver Platt as Ceppos; Ray Liotta as a kind of Jack Terrell, CIA soldier of fortune type; and Michael Sheen as a composite of Kerry investigators, based on Jonathan Winer, Ron Rosenblith and Jack Blum, with a mix of journalist Robert Parry who warned Webb about the career risks from the Contra-cocaine story before “Dark Alliance” was published.

Since the movie is done from Webb’s point of view, a mass audience will, for the first time, see what Webb saw, and how he saw it and how the major media caricatured his work by exaggerating what he actually had written (he never said the CIA plotted to bring crack into the Los Angeles ghetto).

The beauty of Webb’s storytelling is that he showed that, almost through a kind of strange serendipity, a cast of oddball characters who would never have met anywhere else, all coalesced in the background of this CIA-sponsored war in Central America. For instance, Ricky Ross didn’t even knew who Blandon really was. It was Webb’s ability to put names and histories on these faces, and to show not just why they did what they did, but how they did it, that’s what made his series so extraordinary.

And this is the thrill the audience gets as it watches this first half: a gifted reporter wearing out the proverbial shoe leather, as the story of a lifetime first falls into his lap and then assembles itself before him. Director Cuesta lays it all out for us, sometimes using a moving camera in close, sometimes with
vast panoramic shots in the jungle of Nicaragua, always keeping up a headlong tempo.

Renner as Webb

To match that directorial tempo, there is Renner as Webb. Renner is not the subtlest actor, but his energy and commitment are perfectly in tune in drawing a man who goes through three stages. The first is one of curiosity and growing interest, as a large, sinister tableau takes shape. Then, the experience of piecing together the dots on a board from Nicaragua to San Francisco begins to enthral him. (We actually see Renner arrange those dots in the film on a wall map.)

And finally, when he is thrown overboard by his newspaper, we see a man’s slow deterioration as he loses all that is dear to him in pursuit of a journalistic Holy Grail, which the powers-that-be don’t want him to have. Renner is convincing in all three stages of a difficult role.

Landesman’s script dexterously handles the various story lines of a complex subject without ever being confusing or laying on too much information. The sequence where the major newspapers decide to turn on Webb and the *Mercury News* is forcefully and concisely written. There is a realism to the MSM’s self-protective decision-making.

For example, we see the *Washington Post* interacting with the CIA’s Public Affairs Office, which, of course, we now know actually happened. We then cut to a conference room at the *Los Angeles Times* building, where the “Get Gary Webb Team” is getting chastised for letting a regional newspaper from Northern California steal the story of a generation out from under their noses.

There are other directorial touches showing a quiet, creative imagination at work. Towards the end of his life, one way Webb escaped his frustration was on his motorcycle. Near the end of the film, Cuesta does not shoot these from a distance or from the side with a car camera, *Easy Rider* style. Both of those would denote a freedom in the landscape. He shoots them head on with a static camera, with the very loud noise of the engine cranked up on the soundtrack. This conveys the tension building in a man as he drives headlong into a buzz-saw.

Some Fiction

There are some Hollywood-style fictional flourishes, of course, but they are not too distracting and make necessary points, such as the scene with the Liotta/Terrell CIA asset waking Webb as he sleeps in a small motel room after his banishment to Cupertino by Ceppos. Webb has brought his files there with him
to work on his book.

In the middle of the night, without any noise being made, Liotta is suddenly in the room. The scene is shot as if through a gauze, shadowy and dreamlike. It unfolds slowly, weirdly, inchoately, as if Webb is now in a supernatural netherworld. And it achieves its intended effect, even if it diverges from the realism of many other parts of the movie.

There are other cases of dramatic license. In addition to the pseudonym for the Kerry staffer, there is also one for the late Georg Hodel, a Swiss journalist who was helping Webb on the follow-up stories to his original series, the stories Ceppos failed to run. Although Hodel’s life was threatened in Nicaragua, it was never as blatant as at the end of a rifle as is shown in the movie. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Hung Out to Dry.”]

Webb did wound a man trying to steal his car. But it was not during this crisis period in his life, it was many years before he got to California. In the film, a fictional female character is used as Webb’s direct supervisor (who was actually Dawn Garcia.)

But these are all excusable since they are used to compress the story and to heighten the action and drama. The scene where Webb thinks he sees a man attempting to steal his car is another attempt by Cuesta to get inside Webb’s head: to show how the pressures of defending his story began to take a real toll on him.

I cannot conclude this review without mentioning the simple, moving and symbolic ending. It is one that will stay with me for awhile. Webb and his family appear at a journalism awards banquet at which Webb receives a prize from the California chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists for his “Dark Alliance” series. The state SPJ had announced the award before the cumulative MSM attacks pushed the Mercury News into its cowardly retreat.

What happened next was that the national SPJ pressured the state chapter to revoke the award to add to Webb’s personal humiliation, but the California SPJ refused to do so. That became the context for the national SPJ granting the “Ethics in Journalism” award to Mercury News executive editor Ceppos for his role in destroying Webb’s career. Since national SPJ could not coerce the state chapter to reverse itself, the special award was given to Ceppos to demonstrate the organization’s extraordinary disdain for Webb and his Contra-cocaine story.

In the movie, the award ceremony is first portrayed as what could have been, with Ceppos and other Mercury News executives celebrating Webb’s courageous reporting. But that dream sequence is replaced with a harsher reality in which
Webb walks to the lectern as most of the journalists in attendance sit on their hands.

The End

Webb’s acceptance speech is rather inelegant and leaves Ceppos wincing. Webb explains that he never realized why his pre-Contra-cocaine stories were so well received — because he hadn’t written anything that really mattered. When he steps down from the podium, Webb drops his letter of resignation in front of Ceppos and the editor who handled the series.

Webb and his family go outside. Realizing this is probably the end of his newspaper career, which it was, Webb apologizes to his wife for any pain his ordeal has caused her. Then, in a beautiful, metaphorical stroke, Cuesta has Renner ascend an open air escalator in the atrium of the building. The film ends with on-screen titles saying that Webb never got another newspaper position and later took his own life.

Over the credits, we watch a home movie with the real Gary Webb playing with his children in the kitchen of his house. That ending contains the kind of subtlety, restraint and quiet power that, in this age of Scorsese and Tarantino, has been missing from American cinema for too long.

In December 1996, after seeing Webb at his Midnight Special appearance with fellow journalist Robert Parry, I noted Webb’s still confident attitude in both his story and the corporate structure above him. Having studied the assassinations of the 1960s, I didn’t quite comprehend it. For like those assassinations, the link between CIA and drug running was a radioactive subject. It was on the short list of bête noires of the MSM.

I had seen what happened to people who had tried to get to the bottom of those kinds of stories in the past, e.g., New Orleans DA Jim Garrison and House Select Committee on Assassinations Chief Counsel Richard Sprague. As I walked out, I told the friend I had come with, “I don’t think he understands what is happening to him.” He didn’t. Which is why he took the story on in the first place.

Because of Jeremy Renner and the “Kill the Messenger” movie, Gary Webb has been redeemed.

Many cinema observers, including me, have complained of late about the declining quality of American film and the genre’s divorce from both fact and the socio-political realities of American life. Renner has worked the near-miracle. He has made a film that is not just technically and aesthetically excellent, but one that tells the truth about the ugly side of the modern American political system. It is a side that was covered up and enabled by the cronyism of the MSM.
The movie also shows the personal tragedy of what that system did to a reporter who wanted to root out the ugliness. See this film as soon as you can. And tell your friends about it. It’s the best and most important American picture I’ve seen in a long time.

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