

Gary Webb and Media Manipulation

Many Americans still count on the mainstream media to define reality for them, but too often the MSM spins false narratives that protect the powerful and diminish democracy, as happened in the long-running denial of cocaine trafficking by President Reagan's beloved Nicaraguan Contra rebels, writes Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

The sad tale of the mainstream U.S. media's destruction of journalist Gary Webb for reviving the Contra-cocaine scandal in the 1990s a story recounted in the movie "Kill the Messenger" is important not only because of Webb's tragic demise but because the case goes to the central question of whether the American people are getting information and facts to which we are entitled in a free society, or whether we are being manipulated with half-truths, propaganda and straight-out lies.

What is ironic about the recent patronizing anti-Webb commentary by the *Washington Post's* Jeff Leen claiming that "an extraordinary claim requires extraordinary proof" is that the *Post* was a prime salesman for the Iraq War in 2002 and 2003. And just what "proof" did the *Post* require for the "extraordinary claim" about Iraq hiding stockpiles of WMD, the chief selling point to the American people? Apparently nothing more than "jingoism," the beating of war drums and empty assurances from the Bush administration's neocons.

As journalist Michael Massing pointed out in February 2004 after the U.S. invasion force failed to find the promised stockpiles "'Iraq's Arsenal Was Only on Paper,' declared a recent headline in *The Washington Post*."

But Leen's commentary in response to "Kill the Messenger" was just the latest example of the mainstream press covering its own tracks for its failure to pursue the Contra-cocaine scandal and for its complicity in destroying Gary Webb.

It's now clear that the CIA has long been trying to fend off the reality of the Contra-cocaine scandal, often with the help of what a newly released CIA report described as its "productive relations with journalists."

Americans need to know about such "dark alliances," the title that Webb gave his original series at the *San Jose Mercury News* and later his book. This posting is about two such "dark alliances": 1) The Contra-cocaine scandal that surfaced in 1985 when then Associated Press colleagues Robert Parry and Brian Barger first broke the news. 2) The concerted effort by U.S. major news media, specifically,

the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* to not only disparage the scandal but also discredit investigative reporter Gary Webb who, in 1996, revived the story by explaining the Contra cocaine's impact on U.S. cities in the 1980s.

'Just Say No'

Webb's revelations, of course, flew in the face of the conventional wisdom that President Ronald Reagan was a stern enemy of drugs and a fierce threat to drug traffickers. On Oct. 27, 1986, Reagan budgeted \$1.7 billion for the drug war and federalized Rockefeller law-style mandatory-minimum sentences. The message was: "Just say no."

It also turned out that the CIA's "productive relations with journalists" proved so strong that it didn't even seem to matter when official government investigations confirmed key facts about the Contra-cocaine scandal.

For instance, Sen. John Kerry chaired a 2 ½-year investigation of the Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations that reported in 1989: "It is clear that individuals who provided support for the Contras were involved in drug trafficking ... and elements of the Contras themselves knowingly received financial and material assistance from drug traffickers."

Commenting on Kerry's investigation and the major U.S. media's response, journalism professor Jeff Cohen wrote: "Contra drug dealing was tolerated in the U.S. frenzy to overthrow Nicaragua's leftwing Sandinista government. Kerry's work was ignored or attacked in big media – *Newsweek* labeled him a 'randy conspiracy buff.' "

With Kerry and his investigation dismissed as irrelevant by the big newspapers, the scandal remained largely suppressed for the next seven years until Webb revived it in 1996.

Webb (1955-2004) was an investigative journalist whose awards included a Pulitzer in 1990, as part of a team at the *San Jose Mercury News*, and at least four other major prizes for his solo work. Webb tried to reveal the impact that some of the cocaine that came through the Nicaraguan Contra pipeline had on American cities, saying:

"It's not a situation where the government or the CIA sat down and said okay, let's invent crack and sell it in black neighborhoods and let's decimate black America. It was a situation where we need money for a covert operation. The quickest way to raise it is to sell cocaine and you guys go sell it somewhere. We don't want to know anything about it. And you had this bad luck of them doing it right around the time people were figuring out how to make crack."

A Sad But True Tale

“This, sadly, is a true story,” Webb wrote in his 1999 book, *Dark Alliance*. It is a story now told in the Hollywood film, “Kill the Messenger,” based on the book of the same name by Nick Schou and Webb’s *Dark Alliance*.

The story begins with Webb’s 1996 series “Dark Alliance” in California’s *San Jose Mercury News*. Webb investigated and told how for a better part of a decade, in a “wildly successful conspiracy,” a San Francisco Bay area drug ring sold tons of cocaine to Los Angeles street gangs and funneled millions of dollars in drug profits from those sales to the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Contras.

For his investigation, Webb drew from newly declassified documents, newly released undercover DEA audio and videotapes, federal court testimony, and interviews, and he demonstrated how the federal government knowingly allowed massive amounts of drugs and money to change hands at the expense of U.S. communities.

The “Dark Alliance” *Mercury News* series “might have vanished without a trace had the paper not chosen this story to create a splash for its website, complete with graphics and links to original source documents,” wrote Dan Simon, editor of Webb’s book and publisher of Seven Stories Press.

“It became, arguably, the first big Internet news story, with as many as 1.3 million hits on a single day. Talk radio picked it up off the Internet, and citizens’ groups and media watchdogs soon followed. The CIA launched its own internal investigation. Gary’s star had never shone more brightly

“The mainstream print media was ominously silent until October and November 1996,” Simon continued, “when *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* all finally picked up the story. But instead of launching their own investigations into whether the CIA had shielded drug traffickers, these papers went after Gary’s reporting, although they ‘could not find a single significant factual error,’ as Gary’s then-editor at *The Mercury News*, Jerry Ceppos, would write in an internal memo.

“But after that, the series was described frequently as ‘discredited.’ Soon the story and Gary himself were spoiled goods. Gary’s editor switched sides and penned an apologia distancing the paper from the series. Gary was forced out of his job, even though the body of evidence supporting Gary’s account was actually growing. Two years later, the CIA’s internal investigation would prove to be a vindication of Gary’s work.”

African-American Outrage

There was also an important social and political dimension to Webb's revelations. "The investigative series sparked protests in African-American and congressional probes," noted *Democracy Now!* "It also provoked a fierce reaction from the media establishment, which denounced the series. The *Los Angeles Times* alone assigned 17 reporters to probe Webb's report and his personal life.

"Recently declassified CIA files show the agency used a 'a ground base of already productive relations with journalists [at other newspapers]' to counter what it called 'a genuine public relations crisis.'

"Following the controversy, the *San Jose Mercury News* demoted Webb. He then resigned and pushed his investigation even further in his book, *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion*.

"The CIA's inspector general later corroborated Webb's key findings, but, by then, his career was wrecked. The newspapers that denounced Webb largely ignored the CIA's own report, it was released in 1998 amid the scandal over President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky."

"The second CIA report not only vindicates me," wrote Gary Webb to a fellow journalist in July 24, 1998, "but all the other reporters and activists who have been trying to bring this to the public's attention for the last 13 years. It also proves that, once again, the CIA lied to the American public and was assisted in this effort by our national news media, which denigrated anyone who challenged the official denials."

Rep. Maxine Waters, D-California, an outspoken member of the Congressional Black Caucus, recalled that "The night that I read [Webb's] 'Dark Alliance' series, I was so alarmed, that I literally sat straight up in bed, poring over every word. I reflected on the many meetings I attended throughout South Central Los Angeles during the 1980s, when I constantly asked, 'Where are all the drugs coming from?' I asked myself that night whether it was possible for such a vast amount of drugs to be smuggled into any district under the noses of the community leaders, police, sheriff's department, FBI, DEA and other law enforcement agencies

"The time I spent investigating the allegations of the 'Dark Alliance' series led me to the undeniable conclusion that the CIA, DEA, DIA, and FBI knew about drug trafficking in South Central Los Angeles. They were either part of the trafficking or turned a blind eye to it, an effort to fund the Contra war and that the drug money was used by both sides

"It may take time, but I am convinced that history is going to record that Gary Webb wrote the truth. The establishment refused to give Gary Webb the credit

that he deserved. They teamed up in an effort to destroy the story, and very nearly succeeded. We will not let this story end until the naysayers and opponents are forced to apologize for their reckless and irresponsible attacks on Gary Webb.”

A Disgraceful Episode

Charles P. Pierce, a political writer for Esquire.com, said: “Of all the disgraceful episodes regarding the press and the Reagan administration, the discrediting of Gary Webb was probably the worst, given the fact that so much of the elite press was complicit in what was done to him.”

But Webb’s brave reporting had a lasting historical impact because it finally forced the Central Intelligence Agency to conduct a serious investigation of the Contra-cocaine problem and what the CIA knew about the scandal and what actions the agency took or didn’t take.

“[CIA Inspector General Frederick] Hitz completed his investigation in mid-1998 and the second volume of his two-volume investigation was published on Oct. 8, 1998. In the report, 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,” reported journalist Robert Parry.

Andrew Hehir of Salon.com wrote: “Here’s the important thing to say about Webb’s big story: In general terms, and in most of its specifics, it was true. Virtually no one would deny that today; congressional commissions, internal CIA investigations and scholarly articles by historians have reached similar conclusions, shrouded in more lawyerly or diplomatic language.

“You can say that the CIA was apparently complicit in drug-dealing but not directly involved; you can say that the agency ‘turned a blind eye’ to evidence that smuggling revenue was being used to fund the Contras; you can say that ‘the CIA knew or should have known that some of its allies were accused of being in the drug business,’ in the exceedingly careful phrasing of *New York Times* media reporter David Carr.

“If the tone of Webb’s reporting was sometimes inflammatory, what he said happened pretty much happened. Webb never stated or implied that the CIA had deliberately imported crack cocaine into African-American neighborhoods; that construction or interpretation came later, from other people.”

Filmmaker Marc Levin noted at HuffingtonPost, “The idea that the CIA works with drug traffickers and other criminals and sometimes facilitates their operations and protects them as assets in return for their help in defeating our enemies

(i.e. Communists during the Cold War and now Islamic fundamentalists) is not 'an extraordinary claim.' It's a fact."

See the Movie

I believe each one of us can do something of value: we can go see the film, "Kill the Messenger," encourage others to do so, read and share the references in the "recommended reading" list below among others and come to our own conclusions.

This issue is not only about a movie and what it reveals, but it is about what *Alternet's* Don Hazen states has become a basic tenet of American politics: "that corporate power rules the roost. Nothing significant that will become law in America if corporate power, profits, global competitive advantage, military might, national security and privatization are in any significant way threatened."

DemocracyNow's Amy Goodman added: "That's really what will save us, is when we really know what's going on, not filtered through the lens or the microphone of the corporation."

In 2004, rejected by his profession, essentially unemployable, impoverished, divorced, alone, and facing eviction, the 49-year-old Webb prepared for his own cremation and sent suicide notes to family members. He was found dead at his Sacramento County, California home with two gunshot wounds to his head, an apparent suicide.

"Now when I reread the opening sentence of the 'Dark Alliance' series," writes book editor Dan Simon, "I realize Gary had found the big story, the one about the betrayal of a people by its own government. A monumental sadness remains."

Simon added, "The alternative media, to its credit, honored Gary. But the community of his peers in corporate journalism never again embraced him. He could never quite get over their betrayal. When you are an investigative reporter armed with the truth, the gun often fires backwards."

America is not what we think it is.

Beverly Bandler's public affairs career spans some 40 years. Her credentials include serving as president of the state-level League of Women Voters of the Virgin Islands and extensive public education efforts in the Washington, D.C. area for 16 years. She writes from Mexico.

VIDEOS

"Kill the Messenger" Resurrects Gary Webb, Journalist Maligned for Exposing CIA

Ties to Crack Trade” on *Democracy Now!* The video includes an extended clip from the 2012 documentary “Shadows of Liberty” that talks about how freedom of the press in the United States is eroding under increasing corporate control.

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“Freeway: Crack in the System.” Documentary by Marc Levin. October 2014. Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AE4JQkRuQlM>

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Washington Post ombudsman, criticized Pincus and other reporters working for the newspaper: 'A principal responsibility of the press is to protect the people from government excesses. The Washington Post (among others) showed more energy for protecting the CIA from someone else's journalistic excesses.' "When Gary Webb committed suicide, French journalist, Paul Moreira, made a television documentary for France's Canal Plus. He interviewed Pincus and asked him why in October, 1998, he had not reported on the CIA's inspector general report admitting the agency worked with drug dealers throughout the 1980s. Pincus was unable to explain why he and other mainstream journalists completely ignored this report that helped to support Webb's case against the CIA."

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