

Parry's Speech at I.F. Stone Award

On Oct. 22, Consortiumnews Editor Robert Parry received the I.F. Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence from Harvard's Nieman Foundation. Stone was an iconoclastic journalist who published I.F. Stone's Weekly during the McCarthy era and the Vietnam War, setting a standard for independence that Parry has tried to follow.

By Robert Parry

I want to thank the Nieman Foundation for this honor, and especially Bill Kovach and Myra MacPherson for thinking I deserved it. It's a special honor for me because I admired I.F. Stone's independent journalism way back in college. I even lobbied the school library to subscribe to his newsletter. Reading it weekly shaped how I came to view journalism, as a profession that required endless skepticism.

And I had the privilege of meeting him once in the early 1980s. I was an investigative reporter for the Associated Press in Washington. I had gotten hold of some classified records about financial misconduct in El Salvador. He called and asked if he could read the documents. I said sure and he showed up at the AP office on K Street. Through his thick glasses, he spent a couple of hours poring through the papers.

Though I shared Stone's view that journalists should be the consummate outsiders, I came to the profession as a mainstream journalist. But I never forgot his insistence on maintaining your independence, whatever the pressures. To me, the core responsibility of a journalist is to have an open-mind toward information, to have no agenda, to have no preferred outcome. In other words, I don't care what the truth is; I just care what the truth is. That's the deal you make with your readers, to follow the facts wherever they lead.

I also consider this award a recognition of what we've accomplished at Consortiumnews.com over the past two decades. This honor goes to the many talented reporters and analysts who have written for us. They have made Consortiumnews a place where you can find thoughtful, well-researched, well-reported information, stories well worth reading nearly every day of the year.

For those of you who don't know much about Consortiumnews, here's a brief history. The project began out of my frustration with the mainstream news media where I spent many years. I worked at the AP from 1974 to 1987. I was perhaps best known for breaking many of the stories that we now know as the Iran-Contra

scandal. These included the first article about a little known Marine officer named Oliver North and with my AP colleague Brian Barger the first story about how some of the Nicaraguan Contras got themselves mixed up in the drug trade.

To say that these and other stories weren't always popular would be an understatement. But they were well-reported and borne out when the Iran-Contra scandal exploded in late 1986. I then got a job offer from Newsweek and felt it was time to move on. Sadly, I had burned many bridges at AP in the fights to push our stories to the wire.

But what I found at Newsweek was even more troubling, an allegiance more to the powerful than to the public. At senior levels, there was a stubborn reluctance to pursue the Iran-Contra scandal to its roots – out of fear that it could destroy another Republican president. This may sound odd, but the attitude inside Newsweek and the Washington Post Company was that “we don't want another Watergate.” Another constitutional crisis was not deemed good for the country.

So, I left Newsweek in 1990 and worked on some documentaries for PBS Frontline. But it was becoming increasingly clear to me that the space for serious investigative journalism was closing down. With the arrival of Bill Clinton, there was a market for silly, tawdry scandals. But there was even less interest in the unsolved mysteries of the 1980s – old, complicated stuff without much sex.

But a key moment occurred in late 1994 when I got access to the raw files of a congressional inquiry into an Iran-Contra spinoff scandal, the so-called October Surprise case, whether Ronald Reagan's campaign in 1980 sought an electoral advantage by secretly undermining President Jimmy Carter's negotiations to free 52 American hostages then held in Iran. After the 1994 elections when Republicans gained control of Congress but before they actually took power I saw an opportunity to get hold of the unpublished files.

I got approval from the House Foreign Affairs Committee and was directed to some offices that had been installed in the Rayburn House parking garage. When I got there, I was met by a young staffer who led me through the warren of cubicles to an abandoned ladies room. There, the boxes of files were piled up on the floor. He reminded me that I would be allowed to copy only 12 pages on an old copier machine around the corner in the office. He went back to his seat, calling a girlfriend about Christmas plans and I started ripping open the boxes.

To my surprise, some of the boxes contained secret and top secret documents. So, I volunteered to make the copies on the old machine which kept jamming. But I assured my watcher that I knew how to fix this kind of copier. Eventually, I had my dozen pages and got them out of the Capitol without anyone noticing. I

returned a couple of more times to copy more documents. Next, I prepared a summary that I felt would change the history of the 1980s. But I couldn't find anyone interested in publishing the material.

So, one day in 1995, I was grouching about this state of affairs when my oldest son Sam, who had just finished college, said that instead of complaining, why didn't I publish my information on the Internet. He said there were things called Web sites. I really knew next to nothing about these matters, but I listened. Sam though not a techie figured out how to build a Web site. With the Internet in its infancy, there were no templates back then. We launched our no-frills Web site without fanfare in November 1995 as the first investigative magazine based on the Internet.

The original idea was to provide a home for neglected investigative journalists and their work. I thought I could raise significant amounts of money from a variety of sources, hence the clunky name Consortiumnews. But I soon learned that "independent journalism" while popular in the abstract is not something people really want to invest much in. They'd prefer to know how the stories are likely to come out. So we always struggled with money, but we did build a loyal readership who kept us going with small donations.

To my pleasant surprise, I also discovered that a number of ex-CIA analysts were also looking for a place to publish their work. They shared our concern that the United States was veering away from fact-based policies. They felt that this decoupling from reality was careening the country toward international catastrophes. And they were right.

I'd be happy to respond to any questions about specific issues that we have dealt with over the past two decades, from world affairs to domestic politics. But suffice it to say that what we mostly do is take on mindless "group thinks" of which there are many in Official Washington. We are relentlessly independent. That may not make us popular with some people, but I think I.F. Stone would approve.

Thank you.

Parry to Appear Today on NPR's 'On Point'

Robert Parry will appear on NPR's *On Point with Tom Ashbrook* on Monday, October 26, 2015 at 11:00 am for an hour-long discussion. Parry will explore the current situation of American journalism and what we're not being told about the living history of our country.



You can stream the show [live online](#) or find a radio station [near you](#).

For more information about the appearance, [click here](#).
