

# It Started Over Lunch and Led to the Exposure of One of the Greatest Scandals in U.S. History

The following are remarks at the memorial for Bob Parry delivered on Saturday by Brian Barger, who shared many bylines with Bob (and a drink or two) at the Associated Press, uncovering the Iran-Contra scandal, and provoking the ire of AP editors, nervous about what the two friends were finding out.

**By Brian Barger**



I remember it was a pleasure to meet Bob in 1984. The CIA was ramping up its covert war in Nicaragua. News reports from the region documented atrocities committed by President Reagan's "freedom fighters" and their CIA handlers. Congress was starting to take notice, and was threatening to cut off US aid.

I got a call from Betsy Cohn, a Latin America scholar from Georgetown University, saying I should meet this guy from the AP. Over lunch we shared notes. I'd done much of my reporting from Central America and Miami, and Bob from Washington. We agreed there was a lot of low-hanging fruit on this story, and we talked about why there was such reluctance to cover it, particularly among the Washington press corps. We agreed that this could be a good reporting partnership.

And it was in these early days that I learned some important lessons about journalism from Bob.

It started over that lunch, when Bob politely reminded me that I'd buried the lede in a recent story that should have received wide attention – but didn't. This was Bob Parry journalism lesson number one: Don't bury the lede.

The story was about a blue, cloth-covered manual produced by the CIA and distributed to contra commanders in Honduras. Bob wanted a copy. So, Bob Parry journalism lesson Number Two: Be persistent. I gave it to him, and Bob produced a deeply reported piece on what thereafter was known as the CIA assassination manual. Lesson number three: Make those ten extra phone calls before calling it a day.

This was the beginning of an enduring friendship that lasted 35 years. It was also the beginning of an enduring work relationship. Over the next two years, we

peeled back the story about White House aide Oliver North and the White House role orchestrating a secret war in Nicaragua.

As we dove deeper, the story got nuttier. North and the CIA had recruited Cuban Americans who moved on from the failed Bay of Pigs invasion to more lucrative endeavors such as drug trafficking. Soon, contra airstrips in Central America were being used for cocaine shipments. The North network recruited mercenaries from Alabama. They recruited pilots who flew guns down and drugs back. They recruited a DEA official in Costa Rica to fend off probing FBI agents. And they recruited a US Attorney in Miami to prevent a federal drugs-and-guns prosecution from moving forward.

And lots of people began to talk, inside and outside the North network.

So, Bob continually wondered, why wasn't the mainstream press jumping on this? That question would frame most of Bob's subsequent career. I think this story stripped away whatever naïveté Bob may have had left about U.S. journalism, and inspired him to see the government – and the press in a new light.

### **The Illusion of Winning**

Bob followed the bread crumbs. He discovered the hand of a senior CIA official, the longtime head of psychological operations, a guy named Walt Raymond. He was moved to the National Security Council to institutionalize what they called black propaganda against the American people. Formerly benign public affairs offices were transformed into "offices of public diplomacy." One of Raymond's urgent tasks, Bob reported, was to "paint white hats on the contras and black hats on the Sandinistas." Another was to systematically discredit journalists who failed to adhere to Washington's talking points on Central America.

If they couldn't win on the battlefield, they would at least create the illusion of winning. They called it perception management.

At the National Security Council, Bob was labelled an avowed liberal with close contacts inside the Democratic Party. It was the new red-baiting. I remember one afternoon Bob got off the phone with a State Department public diplomacy officer who had warned him that I might be a Bulgarian intelligence agent who was sleeping with Sandinista operatives. Two days after Bob insisted on evidence to back up such a wild accusation, a thick package arrived containing copies of stories I'd written over the past few years.

But as it turned out, this sort of tactic was enough to dissuade many career-minded journalists from touching the story.

### **The Story Was Sent Back**

During the time Bob and I worked together at the Associated Press in the mid-1980s, we met a wall of resistance to our stories that didn't make much sense. We turned in one story about the Oliver North network, citing more than two dozen sources, among them aides to North, contra leaders, and U.S. law enforcement officials. The story was sent back. "Can't you get North to just confess?" the AP bureau chief asked.

We turned in another story, nine months in the works, about contras involved in drug smuggling. The editing was excruciating, and even after our bureau chief edited out any references to CIA involvement, the story was killed. It was only published by accident on the Spanish-language wire before AP executives decided they couldn't hold it any longer.

It was about this time that we learned that our bureau chief was meeting regularly with North; they each were point-persons in efforts to free AP reporter Terry Anderson, being held hostage in Lebanon.

As sympathetic as Bob was to Terry Anderson's plight, he thought there might be a conflict of interest, since our bureau chief had insisted on personally editing out stories about North.

After Bob and I left the AP, we continued informally working together for many years.

### **A Plane Goes Down**

In early October 1986, I remember coming out of an interview with a drug pilot at Miami Correctional Center and called Bob to go over what I'd learned. Bob interrupted and asked whether I'd heard the news: A U.S. plane ferrying weapons to the contras had been shot down, and there was a survivor.

That afternoon Bob and I were on a flight to Managua, where we spent the night pouring over boxes of documents, IDs and flight logs that mapped out an elaborate air resupply operation flown out of El Salvador's Ilopango air base. The operation was run by two CIA operatives: Felix Rodriguez, a close friend of CIA veteran Donald Gregg, then the chief of staff to Vice President George Bush, and Luis Posada Carriles, another CIA operative and veteran bomb-maker who had just escaped, with the help of the CIA and Rodriguez, from a Venezuelan prison where he was serving time for bombing a commercial airliner.

Fast forward to 2018, in one of our last conversations, Bob told me what he'd found in another of his visits to the Reagan library: More documents about Walt Raymond and his efforts to use disinformation as a standard-issue weapon in taming the press.

Bob was not an ideologue. His zeal was in pursuing the truth. There was a lot he didn't like about the political right, and he didn't have much patience for the left.

### **Uncensored Reporting**

Since the late 1980s, Bob saw the interventionist neoconservative movement as the biggest threat to US democracy and to stability in the world. And he saw Consortium News as a vehicle for uncensored reporting and an avenue to pursue the kind of historical narrative rare in American journalism today.

Of course, there was also the humorous side of Bob, who kept me laughing many long hours, often at Larry's, Bob's favorite gay bar around the corner from my house.

And that reminds me of at least one project Bob and I hadn't gotten to before he died. We'd come up with this brilliant idea of cashing in on everything we'd learned. We would launch a PR firm. We'd call it Psy-Ops Inc. And to prove our worth, we would select the most unlikely characters we could find, and turn them into winning candidates, using Walt Raymond's playbook. It sounded like a great idea, but then we had the Tea Party. And then, well, the rest is history.

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