

A Concise History of Consortium News by Robert Parry

During the 2011 Winter Fund Drive, ex-CIA analyst (and peace activist) Ray McGovern suggested that the late Bob Parry write a brief narrative to explain Consortium News' history and goals.

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A Brief Narrative of Consortium News

By Robert Parry

Special to Consortium News



In 1995, after more than two decades in the mainstream news media (AP, Newsweek and PBS), I founded Consortiumnews.com as a home for the serious journalism that no longer had a place in an American news business that had lost its way.

At the time, I was the lead journalist on what had become known as the Iran-Contra scandal, and I had watched first-hand as senior news executives chose to squelch that inquiry apparently out of fear that it would cause another impeachment crisis around another Republican president, Ronald Reagan.

Such a possibility was deemed “not good for the country,” a view held both inside Congress and in the boardrooms of the elite national news media. But I refused to accept the judgment. I continued to pursue the many loose ends of the scandal, from evidence of drug trafficking by Reagan’s beloved Nicaraguan Contras to suspicions that the arms-for-hostages deals with Iran started much earlier, possibly even during the 1980 presidential campaign.

My insistence on getting to the bottom of this historically important story alienated me from my senior editors at Newsweek and from many of my journalistic colleagues who simply wanted to keep their jobs and avoid trouble. But it offended me that the national press corps was signing off on what amounted to a high-level cover-up.

The era of Watergate had come full circle. Instead of exposing crimes and cover-ups, the Washington press corps' job had changed into harassing and mocking serious investigators the likes of Iran-Contra special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh who stayed on the trail.

Consistency and persistence were oh so passe'. The Washington news media had drifted into a culture of careerism where top jobs paid well into the six- and even seven-figures. Your hair style and glib presentation on TV were far more important than the quality of your reporting. And the most important thing was to avoid the wrath of right-wing attack groups who would "controversialize" you.

By the mid-90s, it had become clear to me that there was no feasible way to do the work that had to be done within the confines of the mainstream media. The pressures on everyone had grown too intense. No matter how solid the reporting, many issues were simply off limits, particularly scandals that reflected badly on the admired duo of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

Even when I obtained highly classified government documents in 1994-95 shedding light on how U.S. policies toward Iraq and Iran had evolved at the start of the Reagan-Bush era, this information could find no home even in the liberal outliers of the mainstream media.

Quitting the Mainstream

So, on the advice of my oldest son Sam, who told me about this strange new phenomenon called the Internet, I started this Web site in fall 1995.

Besides seeing Consortiumnews.com as a place for serious journalism, I also envisioned it as a refuge for quality journalists who faced the same frustrations that I did. I thought we could provide editing and financial support, as well as an outlet that would distribute their stories to the public. Hence, the rather clunky name, Consortiumnews. At the time, I thought I could raise a significant amount of money for the project.

However, during my initial contacts with public-interest and liberal foundations, I was told that a major objection to funding journalism was the cost. The feeling was that information was an expensive luxury. But I thought I could prove that assumption wrong by applying old-fashioned journalistic standards to this new medium.

To start the Web site the first of its kind on the Internet I cashed out my Newsweek retirement fund and we began producing groundbreaking reporting original to the Web. Over time, we showed that quality journalism could be done at a bargain-basement price.

Yet, despite our journalistic success, foundations and large funders remained skittish. We became an IRS-recognized 501-c-3 non-profit in 1999 (as the Consortium for Independent Journalism) and received some modest grants, but we have never been funded at the level that I had hoped.

Indeed, at the start of the crucial 2000 presidential campaign, our financial situation had grown so dire that I was forced to take an editing job at Bloomberg News and put the Web site on a part-time basis. We still published some important stories about the campaign, including how unfairly the Washington press corps was treating Al Gore and how outrageous the Florida recount was, but we didn't have the impact that we could have had.

During the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002-03, we also challenged Washington's conventional wisdom, which was solidly behind George W. Bush's case for war. But again our voice was

muted.

Finally, in early 2004, I felt it was important to pull together our volumes of original material about the Bush Family before that year's election. For personal financial reasons, I couldn't leave Bloomberg News until April (and I must admit it wasn't easy stepping away from a six-figure salary). But I felt I had no choice.

After quitting, I accelerated the pace at Consortiumnews.com and got to work on a book that became *Secrecy & Privilege*, the history of the Bush Dynasty.

After George W. Bush got his second term, we still kept at it at Consortiumnews.com, contesting his claims about the Iraq War and his broader neoconservative strategy, which combined violence in the Middle East with an assault on civil liberties at home. I felt it was especially crucial to explain the real history of U.S. relations with Iran and Iraq, a narrative that had been grossly distorted by the cover-ups in the 1980s and early 1990s.

MSM and CIA Parallels

To my great satisfaction, we also began developing what might be regarded as unlikely relationships with former CIA analysts, such as Ray McGovern, Peter Dickson, Melvin Goodman and Elizabeth Murray. Though these CIA folks had been trained not to talk to journalists like me, it turned out they also were looking for places to impart their important knowledge.

I found that our experiences had run on parallel tracks. In the 1980s, as the Washington press corps was facing intense pressure to toe the Reagan-Bush line, the CIA analysts were experiencing the same thing inside their offices at Langley. It became clear to me that the Right's central strategy of that era had been to seize control of the information flows out of Washington.

To do so required transforming both CIA analysts and Washington

journalists into propagandists. The crowning achievement of that project had been the cowering CIA “analysis” and the fawning “journalism” that had been used to whip up popular support for George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq in 2003.

And that is where I fear we still stand, stuck in a dangerous swamp of disinformation, spin and lies.

Though the election of Barack Obama in 2008 showed that the Right’s propaganda machine is not all-powerful, it remains the most intimidating political force in the United States. It can literally create scandals out of nothing, like the “birther” controversy that persuaded many Americans that Obama was born in Kenya despite clear evidence to the contrary. On economic topics, millions of Americans are convinced to oppose their own best interests.

Today, the Right along with much of the Washington mainstream media is reprising the propagandistic treatment of Iraq regarding Iran, with a new conflict increasingly likely as the American public again gets whipped up into a war frenzy.

Still, my hope remains that we can finally gain the financial backing that we need at Consortiumnews.com to be a strong voice for truth and a way to maintain the best principles of journalism in order to counteract the exaggerations and hysteria that are again taking hold in America.

If you want to help us, you can make a donation by credit card at the Web site or by check to Consortium for Independent Journalism (CIJ); 2200 Wilson Blvd.; Suite 102-231; Arlington VA 22201. Or you can use PayPal (our account is named after our e-mail address “consortnew@aol.com”).

Since we are a 501-c-3 non-profit, your donation may be tax-deductible. We appreciate any size donation that you can afford.

Here are some other ways you can help us continue our work:

If you'd rather spread out your support in smaller amounts, you can sign up for a monthly donation.

As always, thanks for your support.

Robert Parry

The late Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 as the Internet's first investigative magazine. He saw it as a way to combine modern technology and old-fashioned journalism to counter the increasing triviality of the mainstream U.S. news media.

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