

Robert Parry's Legacy and the Future of Consortiumnews

Robert Parry, editor and publisher of Consortiumnews.com, died peacefully Saturday evening. In this tribute, his son Nat Parry describes Robert's unwavering commitment to independent journalism.

By Nat Parry

It is with a heavy heart that we inform Consortiumnews readers that Editor Robert Parry has passed away. As regular readers know, Robert (or Bob, as he was known to friends and family) suffered a stroke in December, which – despite his own speculation that it may have been brought on by the stress of covering Washington politics – was the result of undiagnosed pancreatic cancer that he had been unknowingly living with for the past 4-5 years.

He unfortunately suffered two more debilitating strokes in recent weeks and after the last one, was moved to hospice care on Tuesday. He passed away peacefully Saturday evening. He was 68.

Those of us close to him wish to sincerely thank readers for the kind comments and words of support posted on recent articles regarding Bob's health issues. We read aloud many of these comments to him during his final days to let him know how much his work has meant to so many people and how much concern there was for his well-being.

I am sure that these kindnesses meant a lot to him. They also mean a lot to us as family members, as we all know how devoted he was to the mission of independent journalism and this website which has been publishing articles since the earliest days of the internet, launching all the way back in 1995.

With my dad, professional work has always been deeply personal, and his career as a journalist was thoroughly intertwined with his family life. I can recall kitchen table conversations in my early childhood that focused on the U.S.-backed wars in Central America and complaints about how his editors at The Associated Press were too timid to run articles of his that – no matter how well-documented – cast the Reagan administration in a bad light.

One of my earliest memories in fact was of my dad about to leave on assignment in the early 1980s to the war zones of El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala, and the heartfelt good-bye that he wished to me and my siblings. He warned us that he was going to a very dangerous place and that there was a possibility that he might not come back.

I remember asking him why he had to go, why he couldn't just stay at home with us. He replied that it was important to go to these places and tell the truth about what was happening there. He mentioned that children my age were being killed in these wars and that somebody had to tell their stories. I remember asking, "Kids like me?" He replied, "Yes, kids just like you."

Bob was deeply impacted by the dirty wars of Central America in the 1980s and in many ways these conflicts – and the U.S. involvement in them – came to define the rest of his life and career. With grisly stories emerging from Nicaragua (thanks partly to journalists like him), Congress passed the Boland Amendments from 1982 to 1984, which placed limits on U.S. military assistance to the contras who were attempting to overthrow the Sandinista government through a variety of terrorist tactics.

The Reagan administration immediately began exploring ways to circumvent those legal restrictions, which led to a scheme to send secret arms shipments to the revolutionary and vehemently anti-American government of Iran and divert the profits to the contras. In 1985, Bob wrote the first stories describing this operation, which later became known as the Iran-Contra Affair.

Contra-Cocaine and October Surprise

Parallel to the illegal arms shipments to Iran during those days was a cocaine trafficking operation by the Nicaraguan contras and a willingness by the Reagan administration and the CIA to turn a blind eye to these activities. This, despite the fact that cocaine was flooding into the United States while Ronald Reagan was proclaiming a "war on drugs," and a crack cocaine epidemic was devastating communities across the country.

Bob and his colleague Brian Barger were the first journalists to report on this story in late 1985, which became known as the contra-cocaine scandal, and became the subject of a congressional investigation led by then-Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) in 1986.

Continuing to pursue leads relating to Iran-Contra during a period in the late 80s when most of Washington was moving on from the scandal, Bob discovered that there was more to the story than commonly understood. He learned that the roots of the illegal arm shipments to Iran stretched back further than previously known – all the way back to the 1980 presidential campaign.

That electoral contest between incumbent Jimmy Carter and challenger Ronald Reagan had come to be largely dominated by the hostage crisis in Iran, with 52 Americans being held at the U.S. embassy in Tehran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The Iranian hostage crisis, along with the ailing economy, came to

define a perception of an America in decline, with former Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan promising a new start for the country, a restoration of its status as a “shining city on a hill.”

The hostages were released in Tehran moments after Reagan was sworn in as president in Washington on January 20, 1981. Despite suspicions for years that there had been some sort of quid pro quo between the Reagan campaign and the Iranians, it wasn't until Bob uncovered a trove of documents in a House office building basement in 1994 that the evidence became overwhelming that the Reagan campaign had interfered with the Carter administration's efforts to free the hostages prior to the 1980 election. Their release sooner – what Carter hoped would be his “October Surprise” – could have given him the boost needed to win.

Examining these documents and being already well-versed on this story – having previously travelled three continents pursuing the investigation for a PBS *Frontline* documentary – Bob became increasingly convinced that the Reagan campaign had in fact sabotaged Carter's hostage negotiations, possibly committing an act of treason in an effort to make sure that 52 American citizens continued to be held in a harrowing hostage situation until after Reagan secured the election.

Needless to say, this was an inconvenient story at a time – in the mid-1990s – when the national media had long since moved on from the Reagan scandals and were obsessing over new scandals, mostly related to President Bill Clinton's sex life and failed real estate deals. Washington also wasn't particularly interested in challenging the Reagan legacy, which at that time was beginning to solidify into a kind of mythology, with campaigns underway to name buildings and airports after the former president.

At times, Bob had doubts about his career decisions and the stories he was pursuing. As he wrote in *Trick or Treason*, a book outlining his investigation into the October Surprise Mystery, this search for historical truth can be painful and seemingly thankless.

“Many times,” he wrote, “I had regretted accepting *Frontline*'s assignment in 1990. I faulted myself for risking my future in mainstream journalism. After all, that is where the decent-paying jobs are. I had jeopardized my ability to support my four children out of an old-fashioned sense of duty, a regard for an unwritten code that expects reporters to take almost any assignment.”

Nevertheless, Bob continued his efforts to tell the full story behind both the Iran-Contra scandal and the origins of the Reagan-Bush era, ultimately leading to two things: him being pushed out of the mainstream media, and the launching of Consortiumnews.com.

I remember when he started the website, together with my older brother Sam, back in 1995. At the time, in spite of talk we were all hearing about something called “the information superhighway” and “electronic mail,” I had never visited a website and didn’t even know how to get “on line.” My dad called me in Richmond, where I was a sophomore at Virginia Commonwealth University, and told me I should check out this new “Internet site” he and Sam had just launched.

He explained over the phone how to open a browser and instructed me how to type in the URL, starting, he said, with “http,” then a colon and two forward slashes, then “www,” then “dot,” then this long address with one or two more forward slashes if I recall. (It wasn’t until years later that the website got its own domain and a simpler address.)

I went to the computer lab at the university and asked for some assistance on how to get online, dutifully typed in the URL, and opened this website – the first one I had ever visited. It was interesting, but a bit hard to read on the computer screen, so I printed out some articles to read back in my dorm room.

I quickly became a fan of “The Consortium,” as it was called back then, and continued reading articles on the October Surprise Mystery as Bob and Sam posted them on this new and exciting tool called “the Internet.” Sam had to learn HTML coding from scratch to launch this online news service, billed as “the Internet’s First Investigative ‘Zine.” For his efforts, Sam was honored with the Consortium for Independent Journalism’s first Gary Webb Freedom of the Press Award in 2015.

X-Files and Contra-Crack

At some point along the way, Bob decided that in addition to the website, where he was not only posting original articles but also providing the source documents that he had uncovered in the House office building basement, he would also take a stab at traditional publishing. He compiled the “October Surprise X-Files” into a booklet and self-published it in January 1996.

He was also publishing a newsletter to complement the website, knowing that at that time, there were still plenty of people who didn’t know how to turn a computer on, much less navigate the World Wide Web. I transferred from Virginia Commonwealth University to George Mason University in the DC suburbs and started working part-time with my dad and Sam on the newsletter and website.

We worked together on the content, editing and laying it out with graphics often culled from books at our local library. We built a subscriber base through networking and purchasing mailing lists from progressive magazines. Every two weeks we would get a thousand copies printed from Sir Speedy and would spend

Friday evening collating these newsletters and sending them out to our subscribers.

The launching of the website and newsletter, and later an even-more ambitious project called *I.F. Magazine*, happened to coincide with the publication in 1996 of Gary Webb's "Dark Alliance" series at the *San Jose Mercury-News*. Webb's series reopened the contra-cocaine controversy with a detailed examination of the drug trafficking networks in Nicaragua and Los Angeles that had helped to spread highly addictive crack cocaine across the United States.

The African-American community, in particular, was rightly outraged over this story, which offered confirmation of many long-standing suspicions that the government was complicit in the drug trade devastating their communities. African Americans had been deeply and disproportionately affected by the crack epidemic, both in terms of the direct impact of the drug and the draconian drug laws and mandatory minimum sentences that came to define the government's approach to "the war on drugs."

For a moment in the summer of 1996, it appeared that the renewed interest in the contra-cocaine story might offer an opportunity to revisit the crimes and misdeeds of the Reagan-Bush era, but those hopes were dashed when the "the Big Media" decided to double down on its earlier failures to cover this story properly.

Big Papers Pile On

The *Los Angeles Times* launched the attack on Gary Webb and his reporting at the *San Jose Mercury-News*, followed by equally dismissive stories at the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. The piling on from these newspapers eventually led *Mercury-News* editor Jerry Ceppos to denounce Webb's reporting and offer a mea culpa for publishing the articles.

The onslaught of hostile reporting from the big papers failed to address the basic premises of Webb's series and did not debunk the underlying allegations of contra-cocaine smuggling or the fact that much of this cocaine ended up on American streets in the form of crack. Instead, it raised doubts by poking holes in certain details and casting the story as a "conspiracy theory." Some of the reporting attempted to debunk claims that Webb never actually made – such as the idea that the contra-cocaine trafficking was part of a government plot to intentionally decimate the African-American community.

Gary Webb and Bob were in close contact during those days. Bob offered him professional and personal support, having spent his time also on the receiving end of attacks by journalistic colleagues and editors who rejected certain

stories – no matter how factual – as fanciful conspiracy theories. Articles at The Consortium website and newsletter, as well as *I.F. Magazine*, offered details on the historical context for the “Dark Alliance” series and pushed back against the mainstream media’s onslaught of hostile and disingenuous reporting.

Bob also published the book *Lost History* which provided extensive details on the background for the “Dark Alliance” series, explaining that far from a baseless “conspiracy theory,” the facts and evidence strongly supported the conclusion that the Reagan-Bush administrations had colluded with drug traffickers to fund their illegal war against Nicaragua.

But sadly, the damage to Gary Webb was done. With his professional and personal life in tatters because of his courageous reporting on the contra-cocaine story, he committed suicide in 2004 at the age of 49. Speaking about this suicide later on *Democracy Now*, Bob noted how painful it is to be ridiculed and unfairly criticized by colleagues, as his friend had experienced.

“There’s a special pain when your colleagues in your profession turn on you, especially when you’ve done something that they should admire and should understand,” he said. “To do all that work and then have the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* attack you and try to destroy your life, there’s a special pain in that.”

In consultation with his family, Bob and the Board of Directors for the Consortium for Independent Journalism launched the Gary Webb Freedom of the Press Award in 2015.

The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush

The presidency of George W. Bush was surreal for many of us, and no one more so than my dad.

In covering Washington politics for decades, Bob had traced many stories to “Dubya’s” father, George H.W. Bush, who had been implicated in a variety of questionable activities, including the October Surprise Mystery and Iran-Contra. He had also launched a war against Iraq in 1991 that seemed to be motivated, at least in part, to help kick “the Vietnam Syndrome,” i.e. the reluctance that the American people had felt since the Vietnam War to support military action abroad.

As Bob noted in his 1992 book *Fooling America*, after U.S. forces routed the Iraqi military in 1991, President Bush’s first public comment about the victory expressed his delight that it would finally put to rest the American reflex against committing troops to far-off conflicts. “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all,” he exulted.

The fact that Bush-41's son could run for president largely on name recognition confirmed to Bob the failure of the mainstream media to cover important stories properly and the need to continue building an independent media infrastructure. This conviction solidified through Campaign 2000 and the election's ultimate outcome, when Bush assumed the White House as the first popular-vote loser in more than a century.

Despite the fact that the U.S. Supreme Court had halted the counting of votes in Florida, thus preventing an accurate determination of the rightful winner, most of the national media moved on from the story after Bush was sworn in on Jan. 20, 2001. Consortiumnews.com continued to examine the documentary record, however, and ultimately concluded that Al Gore would have been declared the winner of that election if all the legally cast ballots were counted.

At Consortiumnews, there was an unwritten editorial policy that the title "President" should never precede George W. Bush's name, based on our view that he was not legitimately elected. But beyond those editorial decisions, we also understood the gravity of the fact that had Election 2000 been allowed to play out with all votes counted, many of the disasters of the Bush years – notably the 9/11 tragedy and the Iraq War, as well as decisions to withdraw from international agreements on arms control and climate change – might have been averted.

As all of us who lived through the post-9/11 era will recall, it was a challenging time all around, especially if you were someone critical of George W. Bush. The atmosphere in that period did not allow for much dissent. Those who stood up against the juggernaut for war – such as Phil Donahue at MSNBC, Chris Hedges at the *New York Times*, or even the Dixie Chicks – had their careers damaged and found themselves on the receiving end of death threats and hate mail.

While Bob's magazine and newsletter projects had been discontinued, the website was still publishing articles, providing a home for dissenting voices that questioned the case for invading Iraq in late 2002 and early 2003. Around this time, former CIA analyst Ray McGovern and some of his colleagues founded Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity and a long-running relationship with Consortiumnews was established. Several former intelligence veterans began contributing to the website, motivated by the same independent spirit of truth-telling that compelled Bob to invest so much in this project.

At a time when almost the entire mainstream media was going along with the Bush administration's dubious case for war, this and a few other like-minded websites pushed back with well-researched articles calling into question the rationale. Although at times it might have felt as though we were just voices in the

wilderness, a major groundswell of opposition to war emerged in the country, with historic marches of hundreds of thousands taking place to reject Bush's push for war.

Of course, these antiwar voices were ultimately vindicated by the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the fact that the war and occupation proved to be a far costlier and deadlier enterprise than we had been told that it would be. Earlier assurances that it would be a "cakewalk" proved as false as the WMD claims, but as had been so often the case in Washington, there was little to no accountability from the mainstream media, the think tanks or government officials for being so spectacularly wrong.

In an effort to document the true history of that era, Bob, Sam and I co-wrote the book *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, which was published in late 2007. The book traced the work of Consortiumnews, juxtaposing it against the backdrop of mainstream media coverage during the Bush era, in an effort to not only correct the record, but also demonstrate that not all of us got things so wrong.

We felt it was important to remind readers – as well as future historians – that some of us knew and reported in real time the mistakes that were being made on everything from withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol to invading Iraq to implementing a policy of torture to bungling the response to Hurricane Katrina.

Obama Era

By the Obama presidency, Consortiumnews.com had become a home to a growing number of writers who brought new perspectives to the website's content. While for years, the writing staff had been limited primarily to Bob, Sam and me, suddenly, Consortiumnews was receiving contributions from journalists, activists and former intelligence analysts who offered a wide range of expertise – on international law, economics, human rights, foreign policy, national security, and even religion and philosophy.

One recurring theme of articles at the website during the Obama era was the enduring effect of unchallenged narratives, how they shaped national politics and dictated government policy. Bob observed that even a supposedly left-of-center president like Obama seemed beholden to the false narratives and national mythologies dating back to the Reagan era. He pointed out that this could be at least partially attributed to the failure to establish a strong foundation for independent journalism.

In a 2010 piece called "Obama's Fear of the Reagan Narrative," Bob noted that Obama had defended his deal with Republicans on tax cuts for the rich because

there was such a strong lingering effect of Reagan's messaging from 30 years earlier. "He felt handcuffed by the Right's ability to rally Americans on behalf of Reagan's 'government-is-the-problem' message," Bob wrote.

He traced Obama's complaints about his powerlessness in the face of this dynamic to the reluctance of American progressives to invest sufficiently in media and think tanks, as conservatives had been doing for decades in waging their "the war of ideas." As he had been arguing since the early 1990s, Bob insisted that the limits that had been placed on Obama – whether real or perceived – continued to demonstrate the power of propaganda and the need for greater investment in alternative media.

He also observed that much of the nuttiness surrounding the so-called Tea Party movement resulted from fundamental misunderstandings of American history and constitutional principles. "Democrats and progressives should be under no illusion about the new flood of know-nothingism that is about to inundate the United States in the guise of a return to 'first principles' and a deep respect for the U.S. Constitution," Bob warned.

He pointed out that despite the Tea Partiers' claimed reverence for the Constitution, they actually had very little understanding of the document, as revealed by their ahistorical claims that federal taxes are unconstitutional. In fact, as Bob observed, the Constitution represented "a major power grab by the federal government, when compared to the loosely drawn Articles of Confederation, which lacked federal taxing authority and other national powers."

Motivated by a desire to correct falsified historical narratives spanning more than two centuries, Bob published his sixth and final book, *America's Stolen Narrative: From Washington and Madison to Nixon, Reagan and the Bushes to Obama*, in 2012.

Along with revenues from book sales, growing donations from readers enabled Bob to not only pay writers but also to hire an assistant, Chelsea Gilmour, who began working for Consortiumnews in 2014. In addition to providing invaluable administrative support, Chelsea also performed duties including research, writing and fact-checking.

Political Realignment and the New McCarthyism

Although at the beginning of the Obama era – and indeed since the 1980s – the name Robert Parry had been closely associated with exposing wrongdoing by Republicans, and hence had a strong following among Democratic Party loyalists, by the end of Obama's presidency there seemed to be a realignment taking place among some of Consortiumnews.com's readership, which reflected more generally

the shifting politics of the country.

In particular, the U.S. media's approach to Russia and related issues, such as the violent ouster in 2014 of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, became "virtually 100 percent propaganda," Bob said.

He noted that the full story was never told when it came to issues such as the Sergei Magnitsky case, which led to the first round of U.S. sanctions against Russia, nor the inconvenient facts related to the Euromaidan protests that led to Yanukovich's ouster – including the reality of strong neo-Nazi influence in those protests – nor the subsequent conflict in the Donbass region of Ukraine.

Bob's stories on Ukraine were widely cited and disseminated, and he became an important voice in presenting a fuller picture of the conflict than was possible by reading and watching only mainstream news outlets. Bob was featured prominently in Oliver Stone's 2016 documentary "Ukraine on Fire," where he explained how U.S.-funded political NGOs and media companies have worked with the CIA and foreign policy establishment since the 1980s to promote the U.S. geopolitical agenda.

Bob regretted that, increasingly, "the American people and the West in general are carefully shielded from hearing the 'other side of the story.'" Indeed, he said that to even suggest that there might be another side to the story is enough to get someone branded as an apologist for Vladimir Putin or a "Kremlin stooge."

This culminated in late 2016 in the blacklisting of Consortiumnews.com on a dubious website called "PropOrNot," which was claiming to serve as a watchdog against undue "Russian influence" in the United States. The PropOrNot blacklist, including Consortiumnews and about 200 other websites deemed "Russian propaganda," was elevated by the *Washington Post* as a credible source, despite the fact that the neo-McCarthyites who published the list hid behind a cloak of anonymity.

"The *Post's* article by Craig Timberg," Bob wrote on Nov. 27, 2016, "described PropOrNot simply as 'a nonpartisan collection of researchers with foreign policy, military and technology backgrounds [who] planned to release its own findings Friday showing the startling reach and effectiveness of Russian propaganda campaigns.'"

As Bob explained in an article called "Washington Post's Fake News Guilt," the paper granted PropOrNot anonymity "to smear journalists who don't march in lockstep with official pronouncements from the State Department or some other

impeccable fount of never-to-be-questioned truth.”

The *Post* even provided an unattributed quote from the head of the shadowy website. “The way that this propaganda apparatus supported [Donald] Trump was equivalent to some massive amount of a media buy,” the anonymous smear merchant said. The *Post* claimed that the PropOrNot “executive director” had spoken on the condition of anonymity “to avoid being targeted by Russia’s legions of skilled hackers.”

To be clear, neither Consortiumnews nor Robert Parry ever “supported Trump,” as the above anonymous quote claims. Something interesting, however, did seem to be happening in terms of Consortiumnews’ readership in the early days of the Trump presidency, as could be gleaned from some of the comments left on articles and social media activity.

It did appear for some time at least that a good number of Trump supporters were reading Consortiumnews, which could probably attributed to the fact that the website was one of the few outlets pushing back against both the “New Cold War” with Russia and the related story of “Russiagate,” which Bob didn’t even like referring to as a “scandal.” (As an editor, he preferred to use the word “controversy” on the website, because as far as he was concerned, the allegations against Trump and his supposed “collusion” with Russia did not rise to the level of actual scandals such as Watergate or Iran-Contra.)

In his view, the perhaps understandable hatred of Trump felt by many Americans – both inside and outside the Beltway – had led to an abandonment of old-fashioned rules of journalism and standards of fairness, which should be applied even to someone like Donald Trump.

“On a personal note, I faced harsh criticism even from friends of many years for refusing to enlist in the anti-Trump ‘Resistance,’” Bob wrote in his final article for Consortiumnews.

“The argument was that Trump was such a unique threat to America and the world that I should join in finding any justification for his ouster,” he said. “Some people saw my insistence on the same journalistic standards that I had always employed somehow a betrayal.”

He marveled that even senior editors in the mainstream media treated the unproven Russiagate allegations as flat fact.

“No skepticism was tolerated and mentioning the obvious bias among the never-Trumpers inside the FBI, Justice Department and intelligence community was decried as an attack on the integrity of the U.S. government’s institutions,” Bob wrote. “Anti-Trump ‘progressives’ were posturing as the true patriots

because of their now unquestioning acceptance of the evidence-free proclamations of the U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies.”

An Untimely End and the Future of Consortiumnews

My dad’s untimely passing has come as a shock to us all, especially since up until a month ago, there was no indication whatsoever that he was sick in any way. He took good care of himself, never smoked, got regular check-ups, exercised, and ate well. The unexpected health issues starting with a mild stroke Christmas Eve and culminating with his admission into hospice care several days ago offer a stark reminder that nothing should be taken for granted.

And as many Consortiumnews readers have eloquently pointed out in comments left on [recent articles](#) regarding Bob’s health, it also reminds us that his brand of journalism is needed today more than ever.

“We need free will thinkers like you who value the truth based on the evidence and look past the group think in Washington to report on the real reasons for our government’s and our media’s actions which attempt to deceive us all,” wrote, for example, “FreeThinker.”

“Common sense and integrity are the hallmarks of Robert Parry’s journalism. May you get better soon for you are needed more now than ever before,” wrote “T.J.”

“We need a new generation of reporters, journalists, writers, and someone always being tenacious to follow up on the story,” added “Tina.”

As someone who has been involved with this website since its inception – as a writer, an editor and a reader – I concur with these sentiments. Readers should rest assured that despite my dad’s death, every effort will be made to ensure that the website will continue going strong.

Indeed, I think that everyone involved with this project wants to uphold the same commitment to truth-telling without fear or favor that inspired Bob and his heroes like George Seldes, I.F. Stone, and Thomas Paine.

That commitment can be seen in my dad’s pursuit of stories such as those mentioned above, but also so many others – including his investigations into the financial relationship of the influential *Washington Times* with the Unification Church cult of Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the truth behind the Nixon campaign’s alleged efforts to sabotage President Lyndon Johnson’s Paris peace talks with Vietnamese leaders in 1968, the reality of the chemical attack in Syria in 2013, and even detailed examinations of the evidence behind the so-called “Deflategate” controversy that he felt unfairly branded his favorite football

team, the New England Patriots, as cheaters.

Reviewing these journalistic achievements, it becomes clear that there are few stories that have slipped under Consortiumnews.com's radar, and that the historical record is far more complete thanks to this website and Bob's old-fashioned approach to journalism.

But besides this deeply held commitment to independent journalism, it should also be recalled that, ultimately, Bob was motivated by a concern over the future of life on Earth. As someone who grew up at the height of the Cold War, he understood the dangers of allowing tensions and hysteria to spiral out of control, especially in a world such as ours with enough nuclear weapons to wipe out all life on the planet many times over.

As the United States continues down the path of a New Cold War, my dad would be pleased to know that he has such committed contributors who will enable the site to remain the indispensable home for independent journalism that it has become, and continue to push back on false narratives that threaten our very survival.

Thank you all for your support.

In lieu of flowers, Bob's family asks you to please consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Consortium for Independent Journalism.

The Charmed, Doomed Life of Barry Seal

Exclusive: Tom Cruise's portrayal of drug-smuggler-turned-government-informant Barry Seal is a fast-paced visit back to the Reagan era's shadowy world of the CIA, cocaine and secret wars, writes James DiEugenio.

By James DiEugenio

Barry Seal's life has become the stuff of legend. And much of that legend owes itself to the manner in which his life ended. Seal was killed on the evening of Feb. 19, 1986, machine-gunned in his automobile by agents of the Medellin Cartel, his former employers. There were photos taken of his bullet-riddled body in his car.

His violent and bloody death created headlines and nightly news stories throughout America. In fact, one can say that his murder gave him a higher profile in death than he had in life. And because of the unusual circumstances of his murder – more properly called an assassination – his life now has become

the fodder of legend.

Because of all the legerdemain that has sprouted up about Seal, it is not easy to separate fact from fiction. The current film about Seal, *American Made*, does not even try. In fact, it attempts to expand legend into myth. It then plays that myth for fast-action scenes, tongue-in-cheek comedy, and a plot line that moves as quickly as bowling pins falling during a ten-strike. Whatever the failings of director Doug Liman's movie, it is hard to imagine someone being bored by it.

Before assessing the virtues and faults of *American Made*, let us try and set up some kind of base line for who Seal was, what he did, and how he died. That way we will at least have some kind of basis to measure just how far Liman and screenwriter Gary Spinelli have tilted over into myth. At its start, the film says that it is based on a true story; but at the end it states that the characters are fictitious and any relation to real characters and events is coincidental. Talk about having it both ways.

American Made began as a script by Spinelli entitled *Mena*. Reportedly, in that version, the story was more heavily centered on the CIA operations from that infamous airport in Mena, Arkansas, during America's war in the 1980s against the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. Because of that focus, the role of then-Gov. Bill Clinton was accented, and he was even depicted in a strip-club getting a lap dance.

As the story evolved, the focus changed into a more panoramic view of the 1970s and 1980s through Seal's exploits. The picture begins with a montage of the late 1970s, with Jimmy Carter as president. It then picks up its story line when Ronald Reagan comes to the White House.

Cruise as Seal

When we first encounter Seal – played by Tom Cruise – he is a TWA airline pilot who is a bit bored with his job. He picks up some extra cash by smuggling Cuban cigars into the country. A CIA officer named Schafer (Domhnall Gleeson) approaches him in the airport lounge since he knows about this illegal activity. He tells the pilot he already has a file on him, and this is how he entices Seal to join up with their nascent efforts to militarize the struggle in Central America.

With this opening, one can rightly say that Liman and Spinelli have already romanticized and aggrandized Seal's character. Seal's promising career with TWA ended in the summer of 1972 for something more serious than cigar contraband. He was involved in a conspiracy to ship explosives to Mexico using a TWA plane.

Those explosives were reportedly headed for Cuba to be used against the Castro regime. Seal used his vacation time to arrange the deal. (*Smuggler's End*, by Del Hahn, pgs. 31-37)

This is why he was fired by TWA; he did not, as the film depicts, leave on his own accord. But the introduction of the CIA character allows Liman's film to depict CIA man Schafer helping set up Seal in what can only be called an Agency shell company for missions into Central America. And this is what the film says began Seal's career in Central America. According to *American Made*, it started with reconnaissance missions on rebel groups, and Seal picking up intelligence reports from Panama's Manuel Noriega.

In real life, the Schafer character never actually existed. But Seal had a connection with intelligence services as a pilot for the U.S. Army Special Forces division. (See the online essay "Air Cocaine" by Jeffrey St. Clair and Alexander Cockburn)

Seal joined TWA in 1964 and was fired over the explosives incident eight years later. Since the 14,000 pounds of explosives were destined for Cuban exiles on the island, one has to wonder if, at the very least, the CIA knew about it, or perhaps even sanctioned it. After all, one of the excuses for not proceeding with the later trial of Seal was that it would "threaten national security interests." (ibid)

By several accounts, after his termination Seal began his criminal career in the mid-1970s, smuggling small quantities of marijuana. He built up his business by purchasing a fleet of planes and recruiting several pilots. He quickly became a successful entrepreneur in the black markets of guns and drugs.

By 1978, Seal made a key business decision: he shifted from marijuana to cocaine. Cocaine was less bulky and had a higher profit margin. At this point, with several pilots working for him running several planes across the border into Central America, Barry Seal became a wealthy man. It is not possible to make a serious estimate of how much he was really worth, but he later pegged his wealth at \$50 million. But more than one investigator later said that \$50 million was considerably below the actual figures the Seal operation generated. (ibid)

Meeting the Cartel

In December 1979, Seal was arrested in Honduras on suspicion of drug smuggling, and he was convicted of arms smuggling. Liman's film briefly depicts this incident as something like an overnight stay. In fact, Seal was in prison for eight months.

It is not easy to determine when Seal actually met up with the members of the Medellin Cartel in Colombia and became a key pilot. But almost every commentator says the association came after this prison incident. The film places the prison term while Seal was already doing business with Medellin.

To give a differing example: Roger Reaves was a major cocaine smuggler who was working with the Medellin Cartel when he first met Seal on a plane leaving Honduras after Seal was released. Reaves invited Seal to his home in California and became very impressed with his flying skills. He offered to sub-contract out some of his work for the cartel, which, at that time, consisted of the Ochoa brothers, Carlos Lehder and Pablo Escobar. (Reaves, *Smuggler*, pgs. 293-298. Reaves is not depicted in the film.)

Differing from the film, Reaves wrote that it was Seal, not CIA officers, who wanted to move the drop point for the incoming shipments of cocaine from Louisiana to the small airfield in Mena. This 1982 move was likely based on the fact that Seal was a Louisiana citizen with a residence in Baton Rouge, and was therefore well known to law enforcement in the Bayous. A second likely reason is because Seal thought it would be easy to buy anonymity in a small town like Mena.

There is little doubt that the CIA followed Seal to Mena. For, as the film shows, Mena doubled as a training base for the Contras, the American-backed rebels trying to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. (Jim Naureckas, *FAIR*, October 10, 2017)

It was with this operation, subsidized by the CIA – shipping arms down to the Contras, bringing back tons of cocaine for Medellin – with which Barry Seal redefined the word wealth in the world of smuggling. He further expanded his fleet and pilot corps, since each flight was packed with between 200-500 kilos of cocaine. That kind of load would capture multi-millions on the street, and Seal was paid at least \$2,000 per kilo. As the film depicts, banks had to build new deposit rooms for the rest of their clients, while dedicating their regular deposit repositories solely to Seal's massive holdings.

Government Protection

Somehow, Seal managed to acquire protection for his operation. As a Senate investigation led by Sen. John Kerry noted in 1989, Seal's associates at the Mena airport were targets of grand jury probes into narcotics trafficking. But even though there was evidence sufficient for an indictment on money laundering charges, and despite the willingness of state and federal officials to proceed, the cases were dropped.

Kerry's investigation concluded that the "apparent reason might have revealed national security information." (ibid) That usually means CIA involvement. Another indication of such involvement is the uncovering of a Customs official's report where he explains that a drug inquiry into a pilot had to be cancelled because he "works for Seal and cannot be touched because Seal works for the CIA." (ibid)

Seal's operations also provided work for some local citizens. For instance, automatic pistols were made in Fayetteville by a gunsmith named William Holmes, who later testified that the CIA asked him to make 250 pistols for Seal. Holmes described the smuggler as "the ramrod of the Mena gun deal." (St. Clair and Cockburn.)

But in 1983, Seal's world began to crumble. Operation Screamer was an undercover sting that caught Seal shipping 200,000 Quaaludes into a Fort Lauderdale airport, a key incident that is not depicted in the film. *American Made* simply states that because the Contra resupply effort was not going well, the CIA decided to pull the plug on Seal's Mena operation.

Seal quickly understands he is being made the fall guy and tries to get everything out. While doing so he is caught by at least four teams of agents: FBI, DEA, state and local police. This scene, with flashlights piercing the darkness and its Keystone Kops overtones, is pure Hollywood invention to create both humor and drama. But, admittedly, it makes for better cinema than a Quaalude bust.

In keeping with Liman's choice of Hollywood tinsel vs. reality, once Seal is detained, he is taken to the state attorney's office in handcuffs with about 14 agents around him. The local Arkansas attorney is eager to indict him. But she then gets a call from Gov. Clinton. After taking the call, she walks outside and Seal, who is caught with enough evidence to put him away forever, is set free. The implication in Liman's film is that Clinton then referred Seal to the White House and Vice President George H.W. Bush's drug task force.

In reality, Seal was indicted – there was no saving phone call from Clinton or anyone else. After the indictment, it was Seal who approached the DEA offering to turn informant in return for a suspended sentence. His offer was refused and Seal was convicted and faced ten years in prison.

The Danger Zone

At this point, some have surmised that he got some advice from the CIA, for he initiated a call to Vice President Bush's task force on drugs. (See St. Clair and Cockburn) From there, he was referred to the Miami office of the DEA and

worked with two agents for the rest of his life: Ernst Jacobsen and Robert Joura, who are not in Liman's film.

There is little doubt that Seal was one of the most important, if not the most important, informer the DEA ever had. They thought so highly of him that they paid him \$800,000 per year. To use just one example among many: it was Seal's work that helped convict Norman Saunders, prime minister of the Turks and Caicos Islands, on drug smuggling charges.

The most famous incident Seal was involved in was a sting operation against the Sandinista government. The idea was to show that somehow the Sandinistas were involved with transshipping drugs through Nicaragua for the Medellin Cartel. Seal had his plane outfitted with automatic cameras as he unloaded a large cargo of cocaine on a Nicaragua runway.

The camera took rather grainy and indistinct photos that appeared to show Seal, Pablo Escobar and a man named Frederico Vaughan, who was allegedly an assistant to a Sandinista cabinet member. In reality, the delivery did not take place at a military base as the Reagan administration claimed, and Vaughan was, to say the least, a very mysterious personage. Some even suspected he was a CIA double agent, in part, because he was calling his American drug contacts from a phone located at either the U.S. or other Western embassies. (Later, the DEA acknowledged that – except for this flight flown into and out of Nicaragua by the U.S. government – there were no other known cases of illicit drugs transiting Nicaragua during the Sandinista reign in the 1980s.)

Blowing Seal's Cover

But the incident capsized Seal's life because the White House was so eager to smear the Sandinistas with this ersatz proof of their supposed drug dealing with the Medellin Cartel that the information was promptly leaked to the media with a front page story in The Washington Times in July 1984. The Reagan administration milked the story for all it was worth, with President Reagan going on TV to accuse top Sandinistas of "exporting drugs to poison our youth." But this exposure ended Seal's value as a DEA informant while also making him a marked man in the eyes of the Medellin Cartel.

In this reviewer's opinion, the film does not do a good job spelling out how this all played out, and its full range of dark overtones. Many have long suspected that the man who leaked the information about Seal's Sandinista sting was White House aide Oliver North, who was overseeing the Contra war.

Liman depicts that Sandinista-sting as part of Seal's downfall, but discounts the machinations around Seal's two trials, one in Florida and one in Louisiana.

By this time, Seal had begun to distrust the DEA and had expressed his doubts in a filmed video segment on a Baton Rouge television station.

The judge in the Florida Operation Screamer case cooperated with the DEA and those charges were suspended. But there was a second case in Louisiana, which in keeping with the film's fable, Liman has taking place in Arkansas. This charge was over marijuana importation, and some believe it was manufactured by Louisiana authorities with the help of a dubious witness.

Seal had decided to plead guilty, thinking the judge would go along with the precedent in Florida and simply suspend the charges. But the smuggler was taken by surprise when Judge Frank Palazola sentenced him to probation, a \$35,000 fine, and six months of community service at a local Salvation Army in Baton Rouge. The judge also refused to let Seal have armed bodyguards. And the judge refused to let Seal secretly serve the community service out of state. (See the 1986 special, *Murder of a Witness*, WBRZ TV, Baton Rouge)

This decision, which made Seal in his own words a "clay pigeon," plus the failure of Attorney General Edwin Meese to intercede has caused decades of controversy over Seal's murder. In keeping with its comic overtones, the film does not raise any of these serious issues.

A Fast-Paced Adventure

Despite these shortcomings, the film is exceptionally well made. Liman did a lot of thinking beforehand, because although the picture is fast paced, there is little, if any, wasted motion. This extends all the way down to brief animated sequences with maps to demonstrate American foreign policy in Central America.

In addition to the animated sequences, the film skillfully inserts documentary news scenes of Ronald and Nancy Reagan preaching "Just say not to drugs"; stop action shots of Seal trying to find hiding places for his accumulating cash; and a steadicam scene, the camera arcing widely around Seal as he is introduced by the CIA to the empty expanse of Mena.

All of these devices – and more – are edited with a sure, supple hand into a kind of waterfall of forward motion. I don't think sitting through this film could bore anyone. As pure entertainment, taken on its own terms, it's as tasty as eating your favorite candy bar.

And that description fits the performance of Tom Cruise. The first time I saw Cruise was in his second film in 1981, *Taps*, a leaden-footed pretentious dud of a film about a student rebellion at a military academy. But I waited around past the end to catch the casting list because I was impressed with his performance in the film's most unattractive role as a psychotic sniper. Cruise took

possession of that part, to the point that he overshadowed the likes of Sean Penn and George C. Scott.

As far as acting goes, Cruise's subsequent films didn't fulfill that promise, but his talent peaked out again in 1989 for Oliver Stone in *Born on the Fourth of July*. Since then, his career has largely been a series of actor-star turns, which are heavier in the star quality than the acting.

In this film, unlike in the World War II drama *Valkyrie*, for example, he does try to capture his character's voice and its southern twang. He gives us Seal's good nature and some humor, but that's about it. Seal was a complex, multi-layered individual who was very hard to figure out because he was so involved in deception, even self-deception. Cruise only gets the surface.

It's instructive to compare *American Made* with an earlier film version of Seal's life, a 1991 HBO television film entitled *Doublecrossed*. That film did not have anywhere near the budget that Liman and Cruise had. But director Roger Young's effort is a much more straightforward telling of Seal's smuggling career than *American Made*. It includes many important points and personages that the current film leaves out. It does not have the sheer entertainment value this film has, but one understands the complexities of Seal's life more than one does with *American Made*. And one can at least ask the proper questions about his assassination.

Hiding the Contra Crimes

At the end of the *American Made*, we see that Doug Liman dedicated the picture to his deceased father, attorney Arthur Liman, who was the Senate's chief counsel to the 1987 Iran/Contra investigation, which is probably why, near the end, the CIA character Schafer suggests to his CIA boss that the way to get funding for the Contras is to sell arms to Iran. At the very end, the film notes the plane that took Seal out of Nicaragua after the staged drug sting was the same plane that was shot down over Nicaragua on Oct. 5, 1986, exposing Oliver North's illegal Contra supply operation.

During those congressional Iran-Contra hearings, a protester screamed for the panel to "ask about the cocaine" before being dragged out of the proceedings. Unfortunately, neither Arthur Liman nor the members of Congress did, leaving the issue of the Reagan administration's collusion with cocaine traffickers largely unexplored.

Despite news articles by The Associated Press and the investigation by Sen. Kerry, the Contra-Cocaine scandal became one of Official Washington's dirty secrets treated by the mainstream news media as a kooky conspiracy theory. The

story was finally revived by journalist Gary Webb of the San Jose Mercury News in 1996, but the result was a fierce counterattack against Webb spearheaded by The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Los Angeles Times, resulting in the destruction of Webb's career and contributing to his eventual suicide in 2004. But one result was a belated admission by the CIA's inspector general that, indeed, CIA officers were aware of the Contras' cocaine trafficking but chose to look the other way and protect these CIA clients. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga.](#)"]

Doug Liman tips his hat to this disturbing reality ever so briefly when he has the Contra political leader Adolfo Calero meet with Seal and Ochoa and mention Calero's role in drug smuggling for the Contras.

If you want to be entertained about a serious subject then *American Made* is your film. If you wish to learn something more definitive about Barry Seal, see *Doublecrossed*. If you want to be educated about the whole sordid Reagan intervention in Central American, rent *Kill the Messenger*, the fine film that Jeremy Renner made about the tragedy that befell Gary Webb when he dared revive the ugly story of the CIA's complicity in the Contra-cocaine network.

James DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era. His most recent book is [Reclaiming Parkland](#).

Oliver Stone Receives Gary Webb Award

For his brave work in the field of documentaries, director Oliver Stone was the 2016 recipient of the Gary Webb Freedom of the Press Award, which he received from Consortiumnews.com's editor Robert Parry on June 3.

Robert Parry: Everyone knows Oliver Stone is a great screenwriter, director and producer. He's done famous movies. But I also thought people should recognize that he has done very significant support for documentary projects. He has been involved in them, he has helped fund them.

What he's done, which is almost unique at this moment in American history, is he tries to deal with people who are often leaders of other countries that are under attack by the United States, or being harshly criticized. Some of these leaders are being demonized and they're being turned into cardboard characters that can be easily denounced and dismissed.

And what Oliver Stone has done, like in his documentary about some of the leaders of South America [*South of the Border*], is to show this from their side, what they're thinking, what makes them tick. And that is so important at a time when the United States can engage in horrible wars. We've seen the effects of demonizing leaders. And it's not to say these leaders are great guys, no one's suggesting that, but that when we demonize and make them not into human beings anymore, then it becomes very easy to go to war with them and their countries. We saw this happen with Saddam Hussein for instance, in Iraq, and to the horrible cost to the people of that region and to the American soldiers who had to execute this war.

So we've seen the consequences of not dealing honestly and fairly with people and not trying to explain to the public that these are multi-dimensional leaders. They are people that you may end up not liking, that you may disagree with, but you should at least know what drives them.

Oliver Stone is really one of the very few people with the courage to say, "I'm going to do this, I'm going to present these people as real people, and we can factor that in to how the American people want to feel about this issue."

He supported a documentary project that I was interviewed in regarding Ukraine [*Ukraine on Fire*], trying to offer a more subtle, more nuanced view of what happened there and now he's doing a program for Showtime, which will deal with interviews with Russian President Vladimir Putin, another person who, even more importantly than some of the others, we have to understand [*The Putin Interviews*].

Because the idea of rushing into a conflict with Russia in this kind of blind way that we did in Iraq and have done in other countries, dealing with a nuclear-armed Russia, is even more dangerous. Not just for the American people, but for all people. So this is why we wanted to honor Oliver Stone with this award.

I want to thank him for coming and accepting it.

Oliver Stone: Thank you very much. I'm very honored. I know who Gary Webb is and that's a great story. That's how I look at it as a dramatist, I suppose I'm a little cold that way. But it was a sad story. They made a movie, it died at the box office, it wasn't happy, but it was a pretty good movie [*Kill the Messenger*]. Jeremy Renner played Gary Webb.

It just shows you how movies that go against the American image sometimes just don't make it. First of all they don't get made, it was very hard for those people to make that movie, it took many years, it died at the box office. I've

been there. And you can make a movie that somehow is pro-American, put Tom Hanks in it, and you do pretty well, judging from the last Clinton Eastwood film about the pilot [*Sully*], which made a lot of money.

Making a film about Edward Snowden was another lesson for me in disappointment. It's like making a film about [NSA whistleblower] Tom Drake. It took three years, actually, and when we finished all the work and had been talking to Ed, getting his side of the story, in fact it was his story, it was his point of view, it was not NSA in anyway, they wouldn't cooperate.

But many people helped us, and Ed approved it and so on, [and then] we couldn't get any financing out of America at first. We got everything to get started out of Germany and France and some other European countries. We made the movie with a limited budget, we got a small American distributor and the film died here.

We didn't want to distribute it here first. We wanted to distribute it in France and start there. They wouldn't let us because it was an American production and they wanted to stick to America first. But those are the kind of problems you have.

So it's very hard to get these movies made, very hard. And on television, almost forget it. Because they can criticize inside a family, but it's very rare that they will step outside and go to a broader criticism of our country. And we need this, we are filled with ourselves, we are filled with arrogance.

I'm even worse on this than Bob because Bob is tempered. It pisses me off sometimes, the arrogance of us, and the way we see the world. We so rarely are able to step outside of ourselves and have any empathy for "the other." The other is what terrifies us, the other is always "the other." There's always the Creature from the Black Lagoon, the Red Planet.

I grew up in the 1950s, I was born in '46, I still remember the first Cold War and it was horrifying. I was telling someone earlier that was younger than I that in the 1950s my father was social and he had many liberal friends from the 1930s who were socialists, Democrats, sometimes even ex-communists or communists.

They were in that society, the businessman, the "grey flannel suit society," but there was no future for them. They could not really say what they meant because it would be noted. It would be noted they were a pink-o, or whatever they called it at that time, and then promotions would not come to them. They always were on the lower-income side of the equation.

The people who made money were the people who talked the American Game and that was the only way to get to the top. So it was a scary world, a conformist world,

even more conformist than now. Far more conformist. People did not differ.

We – Peter [Kuznick], I, all these people here – we suffered in the American school system for that. I didn't know history until [I started researching] the *Untold History of the United States* in 2008, I really started to study American history and all the sources.

Peter Kuznick, my co-author, [and the research], they gave me a college education at the age of 60. I needed it. Americans have no idea [of] their history, no idea. It's really stunning. And we have taken this book and this documentary everywhere and we've made progress. Progressive people have supported this in reviews. The mainstream ignored it completely, completely. So these documentaries, going back to *Castro*, have been a struggle but they give me, sometimes, the best satisfaction I've ever had from my work.

I worry about Bob [Parry] very much. I'm a big supporter of his but I'm scared for him. I always say, "How can you say that and walk around your neighborhood?" This is Arlington, Virginia. Maybe he's safer here than he would be somewhere else. We need Bob's voice. He writes beautifully, first of all, which is important for a journalist. And he's compelling and he tells a narrative. And what's better is he repeats it, because you have to repeat as a teacher, for people to really start to memorize and remember. It's a sad narrative and it's so pathetic that we have reached this place of lying to ourselves. The lies do get bigger, more dangerous.

And now, in particular, perhaps because we're getting older, I feel that it's gotten to proportions of extreme exaggeration. Where now [the sentiment is] "Our president is a Manchurian Candidate for the Russians. The Russians are here, the Russians are in our schools, the Russians are in our businesses, the Russians are everywhere." Whatever went wrong is blame-able on the Russians.

This is what's really happened. That was somewhat the case with the hysteria of 1947, '48, '49, '50. It was a hysteria about not being strong enough. I don't know how to overcome that because if you don't feel strong enough, you're never going to feel strong. You're never going to have the weaponry, you're never going to have the muscle to go down to the beach and take on the bully that's always waiting for you.

Our fear is everywhere. It's in our souls. And as long as we're outwardly motivated to find an enemy, it'll be terrorism, it'll be Noriega, Hussein, Gaddafi, and Syria, of course, Mr. Assad. And now it'll be, "the Russians are back." It doesn't end.

I've never seen it so personal as the demonization of Mr. Putin. In the old days

we never insulted “Khrushchev’s Russia” or “Chernenko’s Russia.” Now it’s always Putin. There’s a death here, a gay person is killed there, it’s “Putin’s Russia.” It’s really crazy and bad journalism on top of that. Very bad.

So, we’ve got to hope for some of these young people to pick up the slack and start really investigating the news because you can get lazy very easily in this country. There’s a lot of consumerism, you can be happy and try to escape from this century. How long can we keep it up? I really don’t know. I think our karma is due. You can’t kill too many million people and get away with it forever. I’m surprised we got away with the Vietnam War, the way we did. And the reason I think we did was because we fought very hard against that reputation.

Mr. Reagan turned things around in his way and then of course Communism collapsed, so we always had a narrative to go. We ran out of a narrative from ’91 to about 2001, but we certainly made up a lot of lies. The kids don’t know this. So to them this is a new enemy.

I can tell you this from personal observation from being in Russia many times, is that the Russian people are not pushovers, at all. They did fight to the bitter end during World War II. They gave their lives in enormous quantities, they gave everything. They don’t give up. We can’t insult them and insult them and batter them like we have been doing and expect them to concede things that we expect. They won’t do it.

They will go to the end on this and it will be a big mistake for us. We will lose so much more than they do, because we’re so much richer. And I don’t understand why we can spend ten more times on our military than they do and still have this fear of them. It’s a fear that never goes away.

So, to the destruction of fear and to the enlightenment of the species, I salute you too [Robert Parry], for spreading the word. Thank you very much.

[To read Parry’s announcement of the award in May, [click here.](#)]

Oliver Stone Honored with Press Freedom Award

Director Oliver Stone – in recognition of his brave work in documentary films – has been selected as the winner of the 2016 Gary Webb Freedom of the Press Award, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Though most people know Oliver Stone as a famous screenwriter and movie director, he has also lent his talents and resources to a number of documentary films that embrace the core journalistic idea that there are usually two sides – if not more – to a story.

In doing so, Stone has taken on controversial subjects, both in challenging conventional history as with Showtime's "Untold History of the United States" and daring to treat foreign leaders – who were undergoing demonization by the U.S. government and media – as complex figures who deserve to have their say as well.

Not surprisingly, Stone has faced intense criticism for deviating from mainstream U.S. groupthink, which seek to portray international adversaries as cardboard villains deserving only of American hatred and bombs.

But Stone learned as a decorated young soldier in the Vietnam War how that propaganda process can lead to unspeakable horrors, including the unnecessary deaths of millions of people and the devastation of entire nations and regions.

The Vietnam War – and the U.S. government's lies that justified it – taught Stone a powerful lesson that is as true now as it was then, that a healthy democracy should encourage a diversity of viewpoints, appreciate all sides of a conflict, and have the courage to engage in serious self-criticism, not simply assume that what the authorities are saying is true.

Stone's documentaries have included close-up studies of Latin American leftist leaders challenging U.S. hegemony in the hemisphere, including Cuba's Fidel and Raul Castro, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Bolivia's Evo Morales, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, the Kirschners of Argentina, Brazil's Lula da Silva and Paraguay's Fernando Lugo.

Stone recently produced a documentary on the Ukraine crisis, entitled "Ukraine on Fire," which offered a nuanced understanding of Ukraine's modern history as well as explaining the behind-the-scenes story of the violent overthrow of elected President Viktor Yanukovich and the secret U.S. hand in turning Ukraine into a flashpoint for a new Cold War.

In June, Showtime is scheduled to release Stone's series of interviews with Russian President Vladimir Putin, spanning two years, entitled "The Putin Interviews."

Because of his courage and tenacity in presenting sides of important stories that many powerful interests in the United States would prefer the American

people not hear, the Board of Directors for the Consortium for Independent Journalism (which publishes Consortiumnews.com) presents Oliver Stone with the Gary Webb Freedom of the Press Award for 2016.

Background of Award

The award is named in honor of investigative reporter Gary Webb who in 1996 courageously revived interest in one of the darkest scandals of the 1980s, the Reagan administration's tolerance of cocaine trafficking by the CIA-organized Nicaraguan Contra rebels who were fighting to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

The Contra-Cocaine scandal was originally exposed by Associated Press reporters Robert Parry and Brian Barger in 1985, but the major U.S. newspapers accepted the Reagan administration's denials and treated the story as a "conspiracy theory."

So, when Webb revived the story in 1996 for the San Jose Mercury News and described how some of the Contra cocaine fueled the spread of crack across urban America, the major newspapers again rallied to the defense of the Contras and the Reagan administration's legacy.

The assault on Webb was led by The New York Times, The Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times – and was so ferocious that Webb's editors at the Mercury News sacrificed him to protect their own careers. Webb found himself cast out from the profession that he loved.

It didn't even matter that an internal CIA investigation by Inspector General Frederick Hitz confirmed, in 1998, that the CIA was aware of the Contra cocaine trafficking but had put its goal of ousting the Sandinistas ahead of any responsibility to expose the Contra criminality.

Because of the false impression that Webb had manufactured a fake story, he remained unemployable in mainstream journalism. In 2004, with his life in tatters and his financial resources spent, Webb took his own life, a tragic casualty in the difficult fight for a truly free press in America, a press that doesn't just rubber stamp government propaganda and accept official lies as truth.

[For more on that history, see Consortiumnews.com's "[The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga](#)."]]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#)

and barnesandnoble.com).

Big Media's Contra-Cocaine Cover-up

Special Report: Twelve years ago, a campaign of character assassination by the major U.S. newspapers drove an honest journalist to suicide. Now those papers claim to be paragons of truth-telling, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Amid the mainstream U.S. media's current self-righteous frenzy against "fake news," it's worth recalling how the big newspapers destroyed Gary Webb, an honest journalist who exposed some hard truths about the Reagan administration's collaboration with Nicaraguan Contra cocaine traffickers.

Webb's reward for reviving that important scandal in 1996 – and getting the CIA's inspector general to issue what amounted to an institutional confession in 1998 – was to have The New York Times, The Washington Post and Los Angeles Times lobby for, essentially, his banishment from journalism.

The major media pile-on was so intense and so effective that Webb lost his job at the San Jose Mercury-News and could never find regular work in his profession again. Betrayed by his journalistic colleagues, his money gone, his family broken and his life seemingly hopeless, Webb committed suicide on Dec. 9, 2004.

Even then, the Los Angeles Times wrote up his obituary as if the paper were telling the life story of an organized-crime boss, not a heroic journalist. The Times obit was then republished by The Washington Post.

In other words, on one of the most significant scandals of the Reagan era, major newspapers, which now want to serve as the arbiters of truth for the Internet, demonstrated how disdainful they actually are toward truth when it puts the U.S. government in a harsh light.

Indeed, if it had been up to the big newspapers, this important chapter of modern history would never have been known. A decade earlier, in 1985, Brian Barger and I first exposed the Contra-cocaine connection for The Associated Press – and we watched as the big papers turned their backs on the scandal then, too.

The main point that Webb added to the story was how some of the Contra cocaine fed into the production of crack-cocaine that had such a devastating effect on

America's black communities in particular. Webb's disclosure of the crack connection infuriated many African-Americans and the big papers acted as if it was their civic duty to calm down those inner-city folks by assuring them that the U.S. government would never do such a thing.

So, instead of doing their jobs as journalists, the major newspapers acted as the last line of defense against the people learning the truth.

A Solid Record

Yet, what's remarkable now about the Contra-cocaine scandal is that – despite the cover-up efforts of the big papers – the truth is out there, available in official government documents, including the CIA's inspector general's report.

Collectively, the information also represents a damning indictment of The New York Times, The Washington Post and Los Angeles Times and demonstrates why they are unfit to lecture anyone about what's real and what's "fake."

For instance, in 2013, at the National Archives annex in College Park, Maryland, I discovered a declassified "secret" U.S. law enforcement report that detailed how top Contra leader Adolfo Calero was casually associating with Norwin Meneses, described in the records as "a well-reputed drug dealer." Meneses was near the center of Webb's 1996 articles for the San Jose Mercury-News.

The report was typical of the evidence that the Reagan administration – and the big newspapers – chose to ignore. It recounted information from Dennis Ainsworth, a blue-blood Republican from San Francisco who volunteered to help the Contra cause in 1984-85. That put him in position to witness the strange goings-on of Contra leaders hobnobbing with drug traffickers and negotiating arms deals with White House emissaries.

Ainsworth also was a source of mine in fall 1985 when I was investigating the mysterious channels of funding for the Contras after Congress shut off CIA support in 1984 amid widespread reports of Contra atrocities inflicted on Nicaraguan civilians, including rapes, executions and torture.

Ainsworth's first-hand knowledge of the Contra dealings dovetailed with information that I already had, such as the central role of National Security Council aide Oliver North in aiding the Contras and his use of "courier" Rob Owen as an off-the-books White House intermediary to the Contras. I later developed confirmation of some other details that Ainsworth described, such as his overhearing Owen and Calero working together on an arms deal as Ainsworth drove them through the streets of San Francisco.

As for Ainsworth's knowledge about the Contra-cocaine connection, he said he

sponsored a June 1984 cocktail party at which Calero spoke to about 60 people. Meneses, a notorious drug kingpin in the Nicaraguan community, showed up uninvited and clearly had a personal relationship with Calero, who was then the political leader of the Contra's chief fighting force, the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force (or FDN).

"At the end of the cocktail party, Meneses and Calero went off together," Ainsworth told U.S. Attorney Joseph P. Russoniello, according to a "secret" Jan. 6, 1987 cable submitted by Russoniello to an FBI investigation code-named "Front Door," a probe into the Reagan administration's corruption.

After Calero's speech, Ainsworth said Meneses accompanied Calero and about 20 people to dinner and picked up the entire tab, according to a more detailed debriefing of Ainsworth by the FBI.

Concerned about this relationship, Ainsworth said he was told by Renato Pena, an FDN leader in the San Francisco area, that "the FDN is involved in drug smuggling with the aid of Norwin Meneses who also buys arms for Enrique Bermudez, a leader of the FDN." Bermudez was then the top Contra military commander.

Corroborating Account

Pena, who himself was convicted on federal drug charges in 1984, gave a similar account to the Drug Enforcement Administration. According to a 1998 report by the Justice Department's Inspector General Michael Bromwich, "When debriefed by the DEA in the early 1980s, Pena said that the CIA was allowing the Contras to fly drugs into the United States, sell them, and keep the proceeds.

"Pena stated that he was present on many occasions when Meneses telephoned Bermudez in Honduras. Meneses told Pena of Bermudez's requests for such things as gun silencers (which Pena said Meneses obtained in Los Angeles), cross bows, and other military equipment for the Contras. Pena believed that Meneses would sometimes transport certain of these items himself to Central America, and other times would have contacts in Los Angeles and Miami send cargo to Honduras, where the authorities were cooperating with the Contras. Pena believed Meneses had contact with Bermudez from about 1981 or 1982 through the mid-1980s."

Bromwich's report then added, "Pena said he was one of the couriers Meneses used to deliver drug money to a Colombian known as 'Carlos' in Los Angeles and return to San Francisco with cocaine. Pena made six to eight trips, with anywhere from \$600,000 to nearly \$1 million, and brought back six to eight kilos of cocaine each time. Pena said Meneses was moving hundreds of kilos a week. 'Carlos' once told Pena, 'We're helping your cause with this drug thing we are helping your

organization a lot.”

Ainsworth also said he tried to alert Oliver North in 1985 about the troubling connections between the Contra movement and cocaine traffickers but that North turned a deaf ear.

“In the spring some friends of mine and I went back to the White House staff but we were put off by Ollie North and others on the staff who really don’t want to know all what’s going on,” Ainsworth told Russoniello.

When I first spoke with Ainsworth in September 1985 at a coffee shop in San Francisco, he asked for confidentiality, which I granted. However, since the documents released by the National Archives include him describing his conversations with me, that confidentiality no longer applies. Ainsworth also spoke with Webb for his 1996 San Jose Mercury-News series under the pseudonym “David Morrison.”

Though I found Ainsworth to be generally reliable, some of his depictions of our conversations contained mild exaggerations or confusion over details, such as his claim that I called him from Costa Rica in January 1986 and told him that the Contra-cocaine story that I had been working on with my AP colleague Brian Barger “never hit the papers because it was suppressed by the Associated Press due to political pressure primarily from the CIA.”

In reality, Barger and I returned from Costa Rica in fall 1985, wrote our story about the Contras’ involvement in cocaine smuggling, and pushed it onto the AP wire in December though in a reduced form because of resistance from some senior AP news executives who were supportive of President Reagan’s foreign policies. The CIA, the White House and other agencies of the Reagan administration did seek to discredit our story, but they did not prevent its publication.

An Overriding Hostility

The Reagan administration’s neglect of Ainsworth’s insights reflected the overriding hostility toward any information even from a Republican activist like Ainsworth that put the Contras in a negative light. In early 1987, when Ainsworth spoke with U.S. Attorney Russoniello and the FBI, the Reagan administration was in full damage-control mode, trying to tamp down the Iran-Contra disclosures about Oliver North diverting profits from secret arms sales to Iran to the Contra war.

Fears that the Iran-Contra scandal could lead to Reagan’s impeachment made it even less likely that the Justice Department would pursue an investigation into drug ties implicating the Contra leadership. Ainsworth’s information was simply passed on to Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh whose inquiry was already

overwhelmed by the task of sorting out the convoluted Iran transactions.

Publicly, the Reagan team continued dumping on the Contra-cocaine allegations and playing the find-any-possible-reason-to-reject-a-witness game. The major news media went along, leading to much mainstream ridicule of a 1989 investigative report by Sen. John Kerry, D-Massachusetts, who uncovered more drug connections implicating the Contras and the Reagan administration.

Only occasionally, such as when the George H.W. Bush administration needed witnesses to convict Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega did the Contra-cocaine evidence pop onto Official Washington's radar.

During Noriega's drug-trafficking trial in 1991, U.S. prosecutors called as a witness Colombian Medellin cartel kingpin Carlos Lehder, who, along with implicating Noriega, testified that the cartel had given \$10 million to the Contras, an allegation first unearthed by Sen. Kerry. "The Kerry hearings didn't get the attention they deserved at the time," a Washington Post editorial on Nov. 27, 1991, acknowledged. "The Noriega trial brings this sordid aspect of the Nicaraguan engagement to fresh public attention."

But the Post offered its readers no explanation for why Kerry's hearings had been largely ignored, with the Post itself a leading culprit in this journalistic misfeasance. Nor did the Post and the other leading newspapers use the opening created by the Noriega trial to do anything to rectify their past neglect.

Everything quickly returned to the status quo in which the desired perception of the noble Contras trumped the clear reality of their criminal activities. Instead of recognizing the skewed moral compass of the Reagan administration, Congress was soon falling over itself to attach Reagan's name to as many public buildings and facilities as possible, including Washington's National Airport.

Meanwhile, those of us in journalism who had exposed the national security crimes of the 1980s saw our careers mostly sink or go sideways. We were regarded as "pariahs" in our profession.

As for me, shortly after the Iran-Contra scandal broke wide open in fall 1986, I accepted a job at Newsweek, one of the many mainstream news outlets that had long ignored Contra-connected scandals and briefly thought it needed to bolster its coverage. But I soon discovered that senior editors remained hostile toward the Iran-Contra story and related spinoff scandals, including the Contra-cocaine mess.

After losing battle after battle with my Newsweek editors, I departed the magazine in June 1990 to write a book (called *Fooling America*) about the decline

of the Washington press corps and the parallel rise of a new generation of government propagandists.

I was also hired by PBS *Frontline* to investigate whether there had been a prequel to the Iran-Contra scandal, whether those arms-for-hostage deals in the mid-1980s had been preceded by contacts between Reagan's 1980 campaign staff and Iran, which was then holding 52 Americans hostage and essentially destroying Jimmy Carter's reelection hopes. [For more on that topic, see Robert Parry's [Secrecy & Privilege](#) and [America's Stolen Narrative](#).]

Finding New Ways

In 1995, frustrated by the growing triviality of American journalism, and acting on the advice of and with the assistance of my oldest son Sam, I turned to a new medium and launched the Internet's first investigative news magazine, known as Consortiumnews.com. The Web site became a way for me to put out well-reported stories that my former mainstream colleagues ignored or mocked.

So, when Gary Webb called me in 1996 to talk about his upcoming series reviving the Contra-cocaine story, I explained some of this tortured history and urged him to make sure that his editors were firmly behind him. He sounded perplexed at my advice and assured me that he had the solid support of his editors.

When Webb's "Dark Alliance" series finally appeared in late August 1996, it initially drew little attention. The major national news outlets applied their usual studied indifference to a topic that they had already judged unworthy of serious attention.

But Webb's story proved hard to ignore. First, unlike the work that Barger and I did for AP in the mid-1980s, Webb's series wasn't just a story about drug traffickers in Central America and their protectors in Washington. It was about the on-the-ground consequences, inside the United States, of that drug trafficking, how the lives of Americans were blighted and destroyed as the collateral damage of a U.S. foreign policy initiative.

In other words, there were real-life American victims, and they were concentrated in African-American communities. That meant the ever-sensitive issue of race had been injected into the controversy. Anger from black communities spread quickly to the Congressional Black Caucus, which started demanding answers.

Secondly, the San Jose Mercury-News, which was the local newspaper for Silicon Valley, had posted documents and audio on its state-of-the-art Internet site. That way, readers could examine much of the documentary support for the series.

It also meant that the traditional “gatekeeper” role of the major newspapers, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and Los Angeles Times, was under assault. If a regional paper like the Mercury-News could finance a major journalistic investigation like this one, and circumvent the judgments of the editorial boards at the Big Three, then there might be a tectonic shift in the power relations of the U.S. news media. There could be a breakdown of the established order.

This combination of factors led to the next phase of the Contra-cocaine battle: the “get-Gary-Webb” counterattack. Soon, The Washington Post, The New York Times, and Los Angeles Times were lining up like some tag-team wrestlers taking turns pummeling Webb and his story.

On Oct. 4, 1996, The Washington Post published a front-page article knocking down Webb’s series, although acknowledging that some Contra operatives did help the cocaine cartels. The Post’s approach fit with the Big Media’s cognitive dissonance on the topic: first, the Post called the Contra-cocaine allegations old news, “even CIA personnel testified to Congress they knew that those covert operations involved drug traffickers,” the Post said, and second, the Post minimized the importance of the one Contra smuggling channel that Webb had highlighted in his series, saying it had not “played a major role in the emergence of crack.”

To add to the smug hoo-hah treatment that was enveloping Webb and his story, the Post published a sidebar story dismissing African-Americans as prone to “conspiracy fears.”

Next, The New York Times and Los Angeles Times weighed in with lengthy articles castigating Webb and “Dark Alliance.” The big newspapers made much of the CIA’s internal reviews in 1987 and 1988, almost a decade earlier, that supposedly had cleared the spy agency of any role in Contra-cocaine smuggling.

But the first ominous sign for the CIA’s cover-up emerged on Oct. 24, 1996, when CIA Inspector General Frederick Hitz conceded before the Senate Intelligence Committee that the first CIA probe had lasted only 12 days, and the second only three days. He promised a more thorough review.

Mocking Webb

But Webb had already crossed over from being treated as a serious journalist to becoming a target of ridicule. Influential Washington Post media critic Howard Kurtz mocked Webb for saying in a book proposal that he would explore the possibility that the Contra war was primarily a business to its participants. “Oliver Stone, check your voice mail,” Kurtz smirked.

Yet, Webb's suspicion was no conspiracy theory. Indeed, Oliver North's chief Contra emissary, Rob Owen, had made the same point in a March 17, 1986 message about the Contra leadership. "Few of the so-called leaders of the movement . . . really care about the boys in the field," Owen wrote. "THIS WAR HAS BECOME A BUSINESS TO MANY OF THEM." [Emphasis in original.]

Ainsworth and other pro-Contra activists were reaching the same conclusion, that the Contra leadership was skimming money from the supply lines and padding their personal wealth with proceeds from the drug trade.

According to a Jan. 21, 1987 interview report by the FBI, Ainsworth said he had "made inquiries in the local San Francisco Nicaraguan community and wondered among his acquaintances what Adolfo Calero and the other people in the FDN movement were doing and the word that he received back is that they were probably engaged in cocaine smuggling."

In other words, Webb was right about the suspicion that the Contra movement had become less a cause than a business to many of its participants. Even Oliver North's emissary reported on that reality. But truthfulness had ceased to be relevant in the media's hazing of Gary Webb.

In another double standard, while Webb was held to the strictest standards of journalism, it was entirely all right for Kurtz, the supposed arbiter of journalistic integrity who was a longtime fixture on CNN's "Reliable Sources," to make judgments based on ignorance. Kurtz would face no repercussions for mocking a fellow journalist who was factually correct.

The Big Three's assault, combined with their disparaging tone, had a predictable effect on the executives of the Mercury-News. As it turned out, Webb's confidence in his editors had been misplaced. By early 1997, executive editor Jerry Ceppos, who had his own corporate career to worry about, was in retreat.

On May 11, 1997, Ceppos published a front-page column saying the series "fell short of my standards." He criticized the stories because they "strongly implied CIA knowledge" of Contra connections to U.S. drug dealers who were manufacturing crack cocaine. "We did not have enough proof that top CIA officials knew of the relationship," Ceppos wrote.

Ceppos was wrong about the proof, of course. At AP, before we published our first Contra-cocaine article in 1985, Barger and I had known that the CIA and Reagan's White House were aware of the Contra-cocaine problem at senior levels. One of our sources was on Reagan's National Security Council staff.

However, Ceppos recognized that he and his newspaper were facing a credibility crisis brought on by the harsh consensus delivered by the Big Three, a judgment

that had quickly solidified into conventional wisdom throughout the major news media and inside Knight-Ridder, Inc., which owned the Mercury-News. The only career-saving move – career-saving for Ceppos even if career-destroying for Webb – was to jettison Webb and the Contra-cocaine investigative project.

A 'Vindication'

The big newspapers and the Contras' defenders celebrated Ceppos's retreat as vindication of their own dismissal of the Contra-cocaine stories. In particular, Kurtz seemed proud that his demeaning of Webb now had the endorsement of Webb's editor.

Ceppos next pulled the plug on the Mercury-News' continuing Contra-cocaine investigation and reassigned Webb to a small office in Cupertino, California, far from his family. Webb resigned from the paper in disgrace. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Hung Out to Dry.](#)"]

For undercutting Webb and other Mercury-News reporters working on the Contra-cocaine project – some of whom were facing personal danger in Central America – Ceppos was lauded by the American Journalism Review and received the 1997 national Ethics in Journalism Award by the Society of Professional Journalists.

While Ceppos won raves, Webb watched his career collapse and his marriage break up. Still, Gary Webb had set in motion internal government investigations that would bring to the surface long-hidden facts about how the Reagan administration had conducted the Contra war.

The CIA published the first part of Inspector General Hitz's findings on Jan. 29, 1998. Though the CIA's press release for the report criticized Webb and defended the CIA, Hitz's *Volume One* admitted that not only were many of Webb's allegations true but that he actually understated the seriousness of the Contra-drug crimes and the CIA's knowledge of them.

Hitz conceded that cocaine smugglers played a significant early role in the Contra movement and that the CIA intervened to block an image-threatening 1984 federal investigation into a San Francisco-based drug ring with suspected ties to the Contras, the so-called "Frogman Case."

After *Volume One* was released, I called Webb (whom I had spent some time with since his series was published). I chided him for indeed getting the story "wrong." He had understated how serious the problem of Contra-cocaine trafficking had been, I said.

It was a form of gallows humor for the two of us, since nothing had changed in the way the major newspapers treated the Contra-cocaine issue. They focused only

on the press release that continued to attack Webb, while ignoring the incriminating information that could be found in the full report. All I could do was highlight those admissions at Consortiumnews.com, which sadly had a much, much smaller readership than the Big Three.

The major U.S. news media also looked the other way on other startling disclosures.

On May 7, 1998, for instance, Rep. Maxine Waters, a California Democrat, introduced into the Congressional Record a Feb. 11, 1982 letter of understanding between the CIA and the Justice Department. The letter, which had been requested by CIA Director William Casey, freed the CIA from legal requirements that it must report drug smuggling by CIA assets, a provision that covered the Nicaraguan Contras and the Afghan mujahedeen.

In other words, early in those two covert wars, the CIA leadership wanted to make sure that its geopolitical objectives would not be complicated by a legal requirement to turn in its client forces for drug trafficking.

Justice Denied

The next break in the long-running Contra-cocaine cover-up was a report by the Justice Department's Inspector General Michael Bromwich. Given the hostile climate surrounding Webb's series, Bromwich's report also opened with criticism of Webb. But, like the CIA's *Volume One*, the contents revealed new details about serious government wrongdoing.

According to evidence cited by Bromwich, the Reagan administration knew almost from the outset of the Contra war that cocaine traffickers permeated the paramilitary operation. The administration also did next to nothing to expose or stop the crimes.

Bromwich's report revealed example after example of leads not followed, corroborated witnesses disparaged, official law-enforcement investigations sabotaged, and even the CIA facilitating the work of drug traffickers.

The report showed that the Contras and their supporters ran several parallel drug-smuggling operations, not just the one at the center of Webb's series. The report also found that the CIA shared little of its information about Contra drugs with law-enforcement agencies and on three occasions disrupted cocaine-trafficking investigations that threatened the Contras.

As well as depicting a more widespread Contra-drug operation than Webb (or Barger and I) had understood, the Justice Department report provided some important corroboration about Nicaraguan drug smuggler Norwin Meneses, a key

figure in Gary Webb's series and Adolfo Calero's friend as described by Dennis Ainsworth.

Bromwich cited U.S. government informants who supplied detailed information about Meneses's drug operation and his financial assistance to the Contras. For instance, Renato Pena, the money-and-drug courier for Meneses, said that in the early 1980s the CIA allowed the Contras to fly drugs into the United States, sell them, and keep the proceeds. Pena, the FDN's northern California representative, said the drug trafficking was forced on the Contras by the inadequate levels of U.S. government assistance.

The Justice Department report also disclosed repeated examples of the CIA and U.S. embassies in Central America discouraging DEA investigations, including one into Contra-cocaine shipments moving through the international airport in El Salvador. Bromwich said secrecy trumped all.

"We have no doubt that the CIA and the U.S. Embassy were not anxious for the DEA to pursue its investigation at the airport," he wrote.

Bromwich also described the curious case of how a DEA pilot helped a CIA asset escape from Costa Rican authorities in 1989 after the man, American farmer John Hull, had been charged in connection with Contra-cocaine trafficking. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[John Hull's Great Escape](#)."]]

Hull's ranch in northern Costa Rica had been the site of Contra camps for attacking Nicaragua from the south. For years, Contra-connected witnesses also said Hull's property was used for the transshipment of cocaine en route to the United States, but those accounts were brushed aside by the Reagan administration and disparaged in major U.S. newspapers.

Yet, according to Bromwich's report, the DEA took the accounts seriously enough to prepare a research report on the evidence in November 1986. One informant described Colombian cocaine off-loaded at an airstrip on Hull's ranch.

The drugs were then concealed in a shipment of frozen shrimp and transported to the United States. The alleged Costa Rican shipper was Frigorificos de Puntarenas, a firm controlled by Cuban-American Luis Rodriguez. Like Hull, however, Frigorificos had friends in high places. In 1985-86, the State Department had selected the shrimp company to handle \$261,937 in non-lethal assistance earmarked for the Contras.

Hull also remained a man with powerful protectors. Even after Costa Rican authorities brought drug charges against him, influential Americans, including Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Indiana, demanded that Hull be let out of jail pending trial. Then, in July 1989 with the help of a DEA pilot – and possibly a DEA

agent as well – Hull managed to fly out of Costa Rica to Haiti and then to the United States.

Despite these startling new disclosures, the big newspapers still showed no inclination to read beyond the criticism of Webb in the press release.

Major Disclosures

By fall 1998, Washington was obsessed with President Bill Clinton's Monica Lewinsky sex scandal, which made it easier to ignore even more stunning Contra-cocaine disclosures in the CIA's *Volume Two*, published on Oct. 8, 1998.

In the report, CIA Inspector General 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.

According to *Volume Two*, the CIA knew the criminal nature of its Contra clients from the start of the war against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government. The earliest Contra force, called the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ADREN) or the 15th of September Legion, had chosen "to stoop to criminal activities in order to feed and clothe their cadre," according to a June 1981 draft of a CIA field report.

According to a September 1981 cable to CIA headquarters, two ADREN members made the first delivery of drugs to Miami in July 1981. ADREN's leaders included Enrique Bermudez and other early Contras who would later direct the major Contra army, the CIA-organized FDN which was based in Honduras, along Nicaragua's northern border.

Throughout the war, Bermudez remained the top Contra military commander. The CIA later corroborated the allegations about ADREN's cocaine trafficking, but insisted that Bermudez had opposed the drug shipments to the United States that went ahead nonetheless.

The truth about Bermudez's supposed objections to drug trafficking, however, was less clear. According to Hitz's *Volume One*, Bermudez enlisted Norwin Meneses the Nicaraguan cocaine smuggler, the friend of Adolfo Calero, and a key figure in Webb's series to raise money and buy supplies for the Contras.

Volume One had quoted another Nicaraguan trafficker, Danilo Blandon, a Meneses associate (and another lead character in Webb's series), as telling Hitz's investigators that he (Blandon) and Meneses flew to Honduras to meet with Bermudez in 1982. At the time, Meneses's criminal activities were well-known in the Nicaraguan exile community, but Bermudez told the cocaine smugglers that

“the ends justify the means” in raising money for the Contras.

After the Bermudez meeting, Meneses and Blandon were briefly arrested by Honduran police who confiscated \$100,000 that the police suspected was to be a payment for a drug transaction. The Contras intervened, gained freedom for the two traffickers and got them their money back by saying the cash, which indeed was for a cocaine purchase in Bolivia, belonged to the Contras.

There were other indications of Bermudez’s drug-smuggling complicity. In February 1988, another Nicaraguan exile linked to the drug trade accused Bermudez of participation in narcotics trafficking, according to Hitz’s report. After the Contra war ended, Bermudez returned to Managua, Nicaragua, where he was shot to death on Feb. 16, 1991. The murder has never been solved.

The Southern Front

Along the Southern Front, the Contras’ military operations in Costa Rica on Nicaragua’s southern border, the CIA’s drug evidence centered on the forces of Eden Pastora, another top Contra commander. But Hitz discovered that the U.S. government may have made the drug situation worse, not better.

Hitz revealed that the CIA put an admitted drug operative, known by his CIA pseudonym “Ivan Gomez,” in a supervisory position over Pastora. Hitz reported that the CIA discovered Gomez’s drug history in 1987 when Gomez failed a security review on drug-trafficking questions.

In internal CIA interviews, Gomez admitted that in March or April 1982, he helped family members who were engaged in drug trafficking and money laundering. In one case, Gomez said he assisted his brother and brother-in-law transporting cash from New York City to Miami. He admitted he “knew this act was illegal.”

Later, Gomez expanded on his admission, describing how his family members had fallen \$2 million into debt and had gone to Miami to run a money-laundering center for drug traffickers.

Gomez said “his brother had many visitors whom [Gomez] assumed to be in the drug trafficking business.” Gomez’s brother was arrested on drug charges in June 1982. Three months later, in September 1982, Gomez started his CIA assignment in Costa Rica.

Years later, convicted drug trafficker Carlos Cabezas alleged that in the early 1980s, Ivan Gomez was the CIA agent in Costa Rica who was overseeing drug-money donations to the Contras. Gomez “was to make sure the money was given to the right people [the Contras] and nobody was taking . . . profit they weren’t supposed to,” Cabezas stated publicly.

But the CIA sought to discredit Cabezas at the time because he had trouble identifying Gomez's picture and put Gomez at one meeting in early 1982 before Gomez started his CIA assignment. While the CIA was able to fend off Cabezas's allegations by pointing to these minor discrepancies, Hitz's report revealed that the CIA was nevertheless aware of Gomez's direct role in drug-money laundering, a fact the agency hid from Sen. Kerry in his investigation during the late 1980s.

There was also more to know about Gomez. In November 1985, the FBI learned from an informant that Gomez's two brothers had been large-scale cocaine importers, with one brother arranging shipments from Bolivia's infamous drug kingpin Roberto Suarez.

Suarez already was known as a financier of right-wing causes. In 1980, with the support of Argentina's hard-line anticommunist military regime, Suarez bankrolled a coup in Bolivia that ousted the elected left-of-center government. The violent putsch became known as the Cocaine Coup because it made Bolivia the region's first narco-state.

By protecting cocaine shipments headed north, Bolivia's government helped transform Colombia's Medellin cartel from a struggling local operation into a giant corporate-style business for delivering vast quantities of cocaine to the U.S. market.

Flush with cash in the early 1980s, Suarez invested more than \$30 million in various right-wing paramilitary operations, including the Contra forces in Central America, according to U.S. Senate testimony by an Argentine intelligence officer, Leonardo Sanchez-Reisse.

In 1987, Sanchez-Reisse said the Suarez drug money was laundered through front companies in Miami before going to Central America. There, other Argentine intelligence officers, veterans of the Bolivian coup, trained the Contras in the early 1980s, even before the CIA arrived to first assist with the training and later take over the Contra operation from the Argentines.

Inspector General Hitz added another piece to the mystery of the Bolivian-Contra connection. One Contra fund-raiser, Jose Orlando Bolanos, boasted that the Argentine government was supporting his Contra activities, according to a May 1982 cable to CIA headquarters. Bolanos made the statement during a meeting with undercover DEA agents in Florida. He even offered to introduce them to his Bolivian cocaine supplier.

Despite all this suspicious drug activity centered around Ivan Gomez and the Contras, the CIA insisted that it did not unmask Gomez until 1987, when he

failed a security check and confessed his role in his family's drug business.

The CIA official who interviewed Gomez concluded that "Gomez directly participated in illegal drug transactions, concealed participation in illegal drug transactions, and concealed information about involvement in illegal drug activity," Hitz wrote.

But senior CIA officials still protected Gomez. They refused to refer the Gomez case to the Justice Department, citing the 1982 agreement that spared the CIA from a legal obligation to report narcotics crimes by people collaborating with the CIA who were not formal agency employees. Gomez was an independent contractor who worked for the CIA but was not officially on staff. The CIA eased Gomez out of the agency in February 1988, without alerting law enforcement or the congressional oversight committees.

When questioned about the case nearly a decade later, one senior CIA official who had supported the gentle treatment of Gomez had second thoughts. "It is a striking commentary on me and everyone that this guy's involvement in narcotics didn't weigh more heavily on me or the system," the official told Hitz's investigators.

Drug Path to the White House

A Medellin drug connection arose in another section of Hitz's report, when he revealed evidence suggesting that some Contra trafficking may have been sanctioned by Reagan's National Security Council. The protagonist for this part of the Contra-cocaine mystery was Moises Nunez, a Cuban-American who worked for Oliver North's NSC Contra-support operation and for two drug-connected seafood importers, Ocean Hunter in Miami and Frigorificos De Puntarenas in Costa Rica.

Frigorificos De Puntarenas was created in the early 1980s as a cover for drug-money laundering, according to sworn testimony by two of the firm's principals, Carlos Soto and Medellin cartel accountant Ramon Milian Rodriguez. (It was also the company implicated by a DEA informant in moving cocaine from John Hull's ranch to the United States.)

Drug allegations were swirling around Moises Nunez by the mid-1980s. Indeed, his operation was one of the targets of my and Barger's AP investigation in 1985. Finally reacting to the suspicions, the CIA questioned Nunez about his alleged cocaine trafficking on March 25, 1987. He responded by pointing the finger at his NSC superiors.

"Nunez revealed that since 1985, he had engaged in a clandestine relationship with the National Security Council," Hitz reported, adding: "Nunez refused to elaborate on the nature of these actions, but indicated it was difficult to

answer questions relating to his involvement in narcotics trafficking because of the specific tasks he had performed at the direction of the NSC. Nunez refused to identify the NSC officials with whom he had been involved.”

After this first round of questioning, CIA headquarters authorized an additional session, but then senior CIA officials reversed the decision. There would be no further efforts at “debriefing Nunez.”

Hitz noted that “the cable [from headquarters] offered no explanation for the decision” to stop the Nunez interrogation. But the CIA’s Central American Task Force chief Alan Fiers Jr. said the Nunez-NSC drug lead was not pursued “because of the NSC connection and the possibility that this could be somehow connected to the Private Benefactor program [the Contra money handled by the NSC’s Oliver North] a decision was made not to pursue this matter.”

Joseph Fernandez, who had been the CIA’s station chief in Costa Rica, confirmed to congressional Iran-Contra investigators that Nunez “was involved in a very sensitive operation” for North’s “Enterprise.” The exact nature of that NSC-authorized activity has never been divulged.

At the time of the Nunez-NSC drug admissions and his truncated interrogation, the CIA’s acting director was Robert Gates, who nearly two decades later became President George W. Bush’s second secretary of defense, a position he retained under President Barack Obama.

Drug Record

The CIA also worked directly with other drug-connected Cuban-Americans on the Contra project, Hitz found. One of Nunez’s Cuban-American associates, Felipe Vidal, had a criminal record as a narcotics trafficker in the 1970s. But the CIA still hired him to serve as a logistics coordinator for the Contras, Hitz reported.

The CIA also learned that Vidal’s drug connections were not only in the past. A December 1984 cable to CIA headquarters revealed Vidal’s ties to Rene Corvo, another Cuban-American suspected of drug trafficking. Corvo was working with Cuban anticommunist Frank Castro, who was viewed as a Medellin cartel representative within the Contra movement.

There were other narcotics links to Vidal. In January 1986, the DEA in Miami seized 414 pounds of cocaine concealed in a shipment of yucca that was going from a Contra operative in Costa Rica to Ocean Hunter, the company where Vidal (and Moises Nunez) worked. Despite the evidence, Vidal remained a CIA employee as he collaborated with Frank Castro’s assistant, Rene Corvo, in raising money for the Contras, according to a CIA memo in June 1986.

By fall 1986, Sen. Kerry had heard enough rumors about Vidal to demand information about him as part of his congressional inquiry into Contra drugs. But the CIA withheld the derogatory information in its files. On Oct. 15, 1986, Kerry received a briefing from the CIA's Alan Fiers, who didn't mention Vidal's drug arrests and conviction in the 1970s.

But Vidal was not yet in the clear. In 1987, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Miami began investigating Vidal, Ocean Hunter, and other Contra-connected entities. This prosecutorial attention worried the CIA. The CIA's Latin American division felt it was time for a security review of Vidal. But on Aug. 5, 1987, the CIA's security office blocked the review for fear that the Vidal drug information "could be exposed during any future litigation."

As expected, the U.S. Attorney's Office did request documents about "Contra-related activities" by Vidal, Ocean Hunter, and 16 other entities. The CIA advised the prosecutor that "no information had been found regarding Ocean Hunter," a statement that was clearly false. The CIA continued Vidal's employment as an adviser to the Contra movement until 1990, virtually the end of the Contra war.

Hitz also revealed that drugs tainted the highest levels of the Honduran-based FDN, the largest Contra army. Hitz found that Juan Rivas, a Contra commander who rose to be chief of staff, admitted that he had been a cocaine trafficker in Colombia before the war.

The CIA asked Rivas, known as El Quiche, about his background after the DEA began suspecting that Rivas might be an escaped convict from a Colombian prison. In interviews with CIA officers, Rivas acknowledged that he had been arrested and convicted of packaging and transporting cocaine for the drug trade in Barranquilla, Colombia. After several months in prison, Rivas said, he escaped and moved to Central America, where he joined the Contras.

Defending Rivas, CIA officials insisted that there was no evidence that Rivas engaged in trafficking while with the Contras. But one CIA cable noted that he lived an expensive lifestyle, even keeping a \$100,000 Thoroughbred horse at the Contra camp. Contra military commander Bermudez later attributed Rivas's wealth to his ex-girlfriend's rich family. But a CIA cable in March 1989 added that "some in the FDN may have suspected at the time that the father-in-law was engaged in drug trafficking."

Still, the CIA moved quickly to protect Rivas from exposure and possible extradition to Colombia. In February 1989, CIA headquarters asked that the DEA take no action "in view of the serious political damage to the U.S. Government that could occur should the information about Rivas become public."

Rivas was eased out of the Contra leadership with an explanation of poor health. With U.S. government help, he was allowed to resettle in Miami. Colombia was not informed about his fugitive status.

Another senior FDN official implicated in the drug trade was its chief spokesman in Honduras, Arnolando Jose "Frank" Arana. The drug allegations against Arana dated back to 1983 when a federal narcotics task force put him under criminal investigation because of plans "to smuggle 100 kilograms of cocaine into the United States from South America." On Jan. 23, 1986, the FBI reported that Arana and his brothers were involved in a drug-smuggling enterprise, although Arana was not charged.

Arana sought to clear up another set of drug suspicions in 1989 by visiting the DEA in Honduras with a business associate, Jose Perez. Arana's association with Perez, however, only raised new alarms. If "Arana is mixed up with the Perez brothers, he is probably dirty," the DEA said.

Drug Airlines

Through their ownership of an air services company called SETCO, the Perez brothers were associated with Juan Matta-Ballesteros, a major cocaine kingpin connected to the 1985 torture-murder of DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, according to reports by the DEA and U.S. Customs. Hitz reported that someone at the CIA scribbled a note on a DEA cable about Arana stating: "Arnold Arana . . . still active and working, we [CIA] may have a problem."

Despite its drug ties to Matta-Ballesteros, SETCO emerged as the principal company for ferrying supplies to the Contras in Honduras. During congressional Iran-Contra hearings, FDN political leader Adolfo Calero testified that SETCO was paid from bank accounts controlled by Oliver North. SETCO also received \$185,924 from the State Department for delivering supplies to the Contras in 1986. Furthermore, Hitz found that other air transport companies used by the Contras were implicated in the cocaine trade as well.

Even FDN leaders suspected that they were shipping supplies to Central America aboard planes that might be returning with drugs. Mario Calero, Adolfo Calero's brother and the chief of Contra logistics, grew so uneasy about one air freight company that he notified U.S. law enforcement that the FDN only chartered the planes for the flights south, not the return flights north.

Hitz found that some drug pilots simply rotated from one sector of the Contra operation to another. Donald Frixone, who had a drug record in the Dominican Republic, was hired by the CIA to fly Contra missions from 1983 to 1985. In September 1986, however, Frixone was implicated in smuggling 19,000 pounds of

marijuana into the United States. In late 1986 or early 1987, he went to work for Vortex, another U.S.-paid Contra supply company linked to the drug trade.

By the time that Hitz's *Volume Two* was published in fall 1998, the CIA's defense against Webb's series had shrunk to a fig leaf: that the CIA did not *conspire* with the Contras to raise money through cocaine trafficking. But Hitz made clear that the Contra war took precedence over law enforcement and that the CIA withheld evidence of Contra crimes from the Justice Department, Congress, and even the CIA's own analytical division.

Besides tracing the evidence of Contra-drug trafficking through the decade-long Contra war, the inspector general interviewed senior CIA officers who acknowledged that they were aware of the Contra-drug problem but didn't want its exposure to undermine the struggle to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

According to Hitz, the CIA had "one overriding priority: to oust the Sandinista government. . . . [CIA officers] were determined that the various difficulties they encountered not be allowed to prevent effective implementation of the Contra program." One CIA field officer explained, "The focus was to get the job done, get the support and win the war."

Hitz also recounted complaints from CIA analysts that CIA operations officers handling the Contras hid evidence of Contra-drug trafficking even from the CIA's analysts.

Because of the withheld evidence, the CIA analysts incorrectly concluded in the mid-1980s that "only a handful of Contras might have been involved in drug trafficking." That false assessment was passed on to Congress and to major news organizations, serving as an important basis for denouncing Gary Webb and his "Dark Alliance" series in 1996.

CIA Admission

Although Hitz's report was an extraordinary admission of institutional guilt by the CIA, it went almost unnoticed by the big American newspapers.

On Oct. 10, 1998, two days after Hitz's *Volume Two* was posted on the CIA's Web site, the New York Times published a brief article that continued to deride Webb but acknowledged the Contra-drug problem may have been worse than earlier understood. Several weeks later, the Washington Post weighed in with a story that simply missed the point of the CIA's confession. Though having assigned 17 journalists to tear down Webb's reporting, the Los Angeles Times chose not to publish a story on the release of Hitz's *Volume Two*.

In 2000, the House Intelligence Committee grudgingly acknowledged that the stories about Reagan's CIA protecting Contra drug traffickers were true. The committee released a report citing classified testimony from CIA Inspector General Britt Snider (Hitz's successor) admitting that the spy agency had turned a blind eye to evidence of Contra-drug smuggling and generally treated drug smuggling through Central America as a low priority.

"In the end the objective of unseating the Sandinistas appears to have taken precedence over dealing properly with potentially serious allegations against those with whom the agency was working," Snider said, adding that the CIA did not treat the drug allegations in "a consistent, reasoned or justifiable manner."

The House committee, then controlled by Republicans, still downplayed the significance of the Contra-cocaine scandal, but the panel acknowledged, deep inside its report, that in some cases, "CIA employees did nothing to verify or disprove drug trafficking information, even when they had the opportunity to do so. In some of these, receipt of a drug allegation appeared to provoke no specific response, and business went on as usual."

Like the release of Hitz's report in 1998, the admissions by Snider and the House committee drew virtually no media attention in 2000, except for a few articles on the Internet, including one at Consortiumnews.com.

Because of this journalistic misconduct by the Big Three newspapers, choosing to conceal their own neglect of the Contra-cocaine scandal and to protect the Reagan administration's image, Webb's reputation was never rehabilitated.

After his original "Dark Alliance" series was published in 1996, I joined Webb in a few speaking appearances on the West Coast, including one packed book talk at the Midnight Special bookstore in Santa Monica, California. For a time, Webb was treated as a celebrity on the American Left, but that gradually faded.

In our interactions during these joint appearances, I found Webb to be a regular guy who seemed to be holding up fairly well under the terrible pressure. He had landed an investigative job with a California state legislative committee. He also felt some measure of vindication when CIA Inspector General Hitz's reports came out.

But Webb never could overcome the pain caused by his betrayal at the hands of his journalistic colleagues, his peers. In the years that followed, Webb was unable to find decent-paying work in his profession, the conventional wisdom remained that he had somehow been exposed as a journalistic fraud. His state job ended; his marriage fell apart; he struggled to pay bills; and he was faced with

a forced move out of a house near Sacramento, California, and in with his mother.

On Dec. 9, 2004, the 49-year-old Webb typed out suicide notes to his ex-wife and his three children; laid out a certificate for his cremation; and taped a note on the door telling movers, who were coming the next morning, to instead call 911. Webb then took out his father's pistol and shot himself in the head. The first shot was not lethal, so he fired once more.

Even with Webb's death, the big newspapers that had played key roles in his destruction couldn't bring themselves to show Webb any mercy. After Webb's body was found, I received a call from a reporter for the Los Angeles Times who knew that I was one of Webb's few journalistic colleagues who had defended him and his work.

I told the reporter that American history owed a great debt to Gary Webb because he had forced out important facts about Reagan-era crimes. But I added that the Los Angeles Times would be hard-pressed to write an honest obituary because the newspaper had ignored Hitz's final report, which had largely vindicated Webb.

To my disappointment but not my surprise, I was correct. The Los Angeles Times ran a mean-spirited obituary that made no mention of either my defense of Webb, nor the CIA's admissions in 1998. The obituary was republished in other newspapers, including the Washington Post.

In effect, Webb's suicide enabled senior editors at the Big Three newspapers to breathe a little easier, one of the few people who understood the ugly story of the Reagan administration's cover-up of the Contra-cocaine scandal and the U.S. media's complicity was now silenced.

To this day, none of the journalists or media critics who participated in the destruction of Gary Webb has paid a price. None has faced the sort of humiliation that Webb had to endure. None had to experience that special pain of standing up for what is best in the profession of journalism, taking on a difficult story that seeks to hold powerful people accountable for serious crimes, and then being vilified by your own colleagues, the people that you expected to understand and appreciate what you had done.

On the contrary, many were rewarded with professional advancement and lucrative careers. For instance, for years, Howard Kurtz got to host the CNN program, "Reliable Sources," which lectured journalists on professional standards. He was described in the program's bio as "the nation's premier media critic." (His show later moved to Fox News, renamed "MediaBuzz.")

But the Webb tragedy and the Contra-cocaine case remain relevant today because

they underscore how the mainstream press cannot be trusted with decisions about what news is true and what is false. If such a Ministry of Truth had existed in the late 1990s, the dark chapter of the Reagan administration's dealings with Nicaraguan drug traffickers would still be just a vague and easily dismissed rumor.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Sam Parry Receives 'Gary Webb Award'

Sam Parry has received the "Gary Webb Freedom of the Press" award in recognition of Sam's central role in creating Consortiumnews.com as the first investigative news magazine based on the Internet. The award was granted by the Board of Directors of the Consortium for Independent Journalism as part of the site's 20th anniversary.

In 1995, Sam was the original architect of the Web site, building it from the ground up at a time when the Internet was still in its infancy and there were no convenient templates or easy-to-use how-to guides. Sam mastered how to write HTML code and scripts and how to implement them online. Though not a "techie," Sam demonstrated great persistence, patience and dedication in bringing this unique Web site to the public.

Journalist Robert Parry recalled how one day in 1995, after getting hold of "secret" and "top secret" documents from a congressional investigation into clandestine contacts between senior Republicans and Iranians dating back to 1980, he was frustrated by the disinterest that he encountered from mainstream news outlets.

"I was complaining about this dilemma when my oldest son Sam, who had just finished college, said there was this thing called the Internet where you could create a thing called a Web site where you could publish the articles and the documents," Robert Parry said. "At the time, I had only the faintest idea what the Internet was. But Sam took the lead in figuring out how to build the Web site. Without Sam, it couldn't have happened."

In the two decades since, as Internet technology evolved, Sam, now 42, remained

active in upgrading and designing the site into its present form. He also contributed a number of articles about the growing global environmental crisis, the crucial issues at stake in the pivotal Election 2000, and President George W. Bush's fallacious case for war with Iraq in 2002-03. (Sam was a co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.*)

The award stated, "Without his hard work, Consortiumnews.com and much of the important journalism that it has produced might well never have reached the public. We are indebted to Sam for his creative idea and diligent execution, thinking outside the box and experimenting with what was then a brand new medium the Internet.

"It is therefore with the deepest gratitude and appreciation that we grant Sam Parry the 'Gary Webb Freedom of the Press' award for his invaluable contribution to the creation of Consortiumnews.com, to the telling-of-truth, and to the betterment of the planet." (The Consortium for Independent Journalism is the non-profit that publishes Consortiumnews.com.)

The new award is named in honor of the late investigative reporter Gary Webb, who revived the Nicaraguan Contra-cocaine scandal in the mid-1990s and faced extreme hostility from the major U.S. newspapers that had ignored or dismissed the scandal when it first surfaced in the 1980s.

Rather than join Webb in finally exposing the depths of the Reagan administration's collaboration with Contra drug traffickers, the mainstream media destroyed Webb's reputation and career, a shameful campaign that continued even after the CIA's Inspector General admitted that the spy agency knew of the drug smuggling but chose to protect its clients rather than turn them in.

For Webb, the consequences for his courageous reporting were severe. He was driven out of mainstream journalism and made essentially unemployable in his profession. Unable to find decent-paying work and shunned by many of his former colleagues, Webb took his own life in 2004. Webb's ordeal was recounted in a book and movie, both named "Killing the Messenger."

[For more background on Gary Webb, see Consortiumnews.com's "[A Day When Journalism Died](#)" and "[The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga.](#)"]

A Day When Journalism Died

Exclusive: Dec. 9 has a grim meaning for the Republic, the date in 2004 when investigative reporter Gary Webb, driven to ruin by vindictive press colleagues

for reviving the Contra-cocaine scandal, took his own life, a demarcation as the U.S. press went from protecting the people to shielding the corrupt, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Looking back over my four decades in the national news media, it's hard to identify one moment when American journalism died. The process was a slow and ugly one, with incremental acts of cowardice accumulating until mainstream reporters were clearly part of the problem, not anything to do with a solution. But the date Dec. 9 has a special place in that sad progression.

It was on Dec. 9, 2004, when the mean-spirited mainstream media's treatment of investigative journalist Gary Webb led him his career devastated, his family broken, his money gone and his life seemingly hopeless to commit suicide. It was a moment that should have shamed all the big-shot journalists who had a hand in Webb's destruction, but it mostly didn't.

Webb's offense was to have revived the shocking story of the Reagan administration's tolerance of cocaine smuggling by the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Contra rebels in the 1980s. Though the scandal was real and had been partly exposed in real time the major newspapers had locked arms in defense of President Ronald Reagan and the CIA. The sordid scandal apparently was deemed "not good for the country," so it was buried.

My Associated Press colleague, Brian Barger, and I had written the first story exposing the Contras' involvement in cocaine smuggling in 1985, but our story was attacked by Reagan's skillful propaganda team, which got The New York Times and other major news outlets to buy into the denials.

Later that decade, a gutsy investigation by then-Sen. John Kerry filled in some of the gaps showing how the Reagan administration's collaboration with drug-tainted airlines and other parts of the Contras' cocaine smuggling apparatus had functioned. But Kerry's probe was also mocked by the major media. Sniffing out that conventional wisdom, Newsweek deemed Kerry "a randy conspiracy buff."

Kerry's brush with this near-political-death-experience over the Contra-cocaine scandal taught him some hard lessons about survival in Washington, which help explain why he was such a disappointing candidate during Election 2004 and why he has shown such timidity in challenging Official Washington's "group thinks" as Secretary of State.

For both U.S. journalists and politicians, there was no upside to doing the hard work of exposing this kind of crime of state. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[What's the Matter with John Kerry.](#)"]

Same Stonewall

In 1996, Gary Webb encountered the same stonewall when he stumbled onto evidence showing that some of the Contra cocaine, after being smuggled into the United States, had flowed into the production of “crack” cocaine in Los Angeles and contributed to the “crack epidemic” of the 1980s.

When he published his findings in a series for the San Jose Mercury News, the major newspapers had a choice: either admit that they had slinked away from one of the biggest scandals of the 1980s or redouble their efforts to discredit the story and to destroy anyone who dared touch it. They went with option two.

In a tag-team pummeling of Gary Webb, The Washington Post, The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times all denounced Webb and decried his reporting. Soon, Webb’s editors at the Mercury News were feeling the heat and rather than back their reporter, they sought to salvage their own careers. They sold Webb out and he was soon out of a job and unemployable in the mainstream media.

The bitter irony was that Webb’s reporting finally forced a relatively thorough and honest investigation by the CIA’s Inspector General Frederick Hitz, who concluded in 1998 that not only were the Contras involved in the drug trade from their start in 1980 and through the entire decade but that CIA officers were aware of the problem and helped cover it up, putting the goal of ousting Nicaragua’s Sandinista government ahead of blowing the whistle on these corrupt CIA clients.

Yet, even the CIA’s confession wasn’t enough to shame the major newspapers into admitting the truth and acknowledging their own culpability in the long-running cover-up. It remained easier to continue the demonization of Gary Webb.

At Consortiumnews, we were one of the few news outlets that examined the extraordinary admissions contained in the CIA’s two-volume report and in a corresponding Justice Department Inspector General’s report, which added more details about how criminal investigations of the Contras were thwarted. But, sadly, we lacked the reach and the clout of the major newspapers.

As the controversy bubbled in 1996, I also had joined with Webb in several speaking engagements on the West Coast. Though we sometimes spoke to large and enthusiastic crowds, the power of the Big Media overwhelmed everything, especially the truth. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga.”](#)]

Webb’s Demise

In the years after the Contra-cocaine story was buried once again, I lost touch

with Webb who had landed a job with a California state legislative committee. So, I didn't realize that after that job ended, Webb's life was spiraling downward. Even modest-sized newspapers refused to consider hiring the "disgraced" reporter.

Webb's marriage fell apart; he struggled to pay child-support and other bills; he was faced with a forced move out of a house near Sacramento, California, and in with his mother. Deeply depressed, according to his family members, Webb chose to end his life.

On Dec. 9, 2004, the 49-year-old Webb typed out suicide notes to his ex-wife and his three children; laid out a certificate for his cremation; and taped a note on the door telling movers, who were coming the next morning, to instead call 911.

Webb then took out his father's pistol and shot himself in the head. The first shot was not lethal, so he fired once more. (Yes, I know that conspiracy theorists have seized on the two shots to insist that Webb was murdered by the CIA, but there is no proof of that and by pushing that baseless account, people simply let the real culprits the big newspapers off the hook.)

After Webb's body was found, I received a call from a reporter for the Los Angeles Times who knew that I was one of Webb's few journalistic colleagues who had defended him and his work. I told the reporter that American history owed a great debt to Gary Webb because he had forced out important facts about Reagan-era crimes. But I added that the Los Angeles Times would be hard-pressed to write an honest obituary because the newspaper had essentially ignored Hitz's final report, which had largely vindicated Webb.

To my disappointment but not my surprise, I was correct. The Los Angeles Times ran a mean-spirited obituary that made no mention of either my defense of Webb, nor the CIA's admissions in 1998. The obituary was republished in other newspapers, including The Washington Post.

Even though Webb's reputation posthumously received some rehabilitation with a sympathetic portrayal of his ordeal in Jeremy Renner's 2014 movie, "Kill the Messenger," some news executives who aided the Contra-cocaine cover-up in the 1980s and abetted the destruction of Webb in the 1990s still won't admit their complicity in suppressing one of the most important stories of that era, people such as The Washington Post's Jeff Leen and Leonard Downie. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[WPost's Slimy Attack on Gary Webb](#) and "[How the Washington Press Turned Bad.](#)"]

A few journalists have continued to find nuggets of the Contra-cocaine scandal,

including from accounts by former CIA contract pilot Robert “Tosh” Plumlee, who supplied details about his work ferrying guns and drugs for Reagan’s Contras, as reported by John McPhaul of The Tico Times, based in San Jose, Costa Rica. Even Fox News poked into the Contra-cocaine connection in an article about alleged CIA complicity in the 1985 torture-murder of Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena.

But the resistance from the major U.S. news media and the ferocity from Reagan’s acolytes whenever their hero’s legacy is challenged have left this very real scandal in the netherworld of doubt and uncertainty, a key chapter of America’s Lost History in which Dec. 9, 2004, conveys a baleful message.

[As part of our end-of-year fund drive, Consortiumnews is offering a DVD of “Kill the Messenger” and a CD of Webb and Parry speaking about the Contra-cocaine scandal in 1996. For details on this special offer, click here.]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, click here.

A Unique Thank-You Gift

From Editor Robert Parry: As a unique thank-you gift for our spring drive, we are offering a DVD of last year’s feature film “Kill the Messenger” telling the tragic story of how the mainstream U.S. news media destroyed journalist Gary Webb plus a CD of Webb and me discussing the Contra-cocaine scandal in 1996.

That troubling scandal and the role of major U.S. newspapers in covering up U.S. government complicity marked a disturbing turning point in the course of American democracy, as it became clear that the American people could no longer trust the mainstream press to serve as a watchdog on government.

It was my recognition of that turn after a career at AP, Newsweek and PBS Frontline including work exposing the Contra-cocaine scandal in 1985 that led me to start Consortiumnews.com as a home for independent investigative journalism that put informing the public ahead of cozying up to officialdom.

To keep this Web site going, we are trying to raise \$35,000 in our spring fund drive and we are offering the DVD/CD gift to people who donate \$150 or more. If you can't give that much, we'd be happy to send you the CD of Webb and me for whatever you can afford to give.

To donate to our tax-exempt non-profit, you can use a [credit card online](#) (we accept Visa, Mastercard or Discover) or you can [mail a check](#) to Consortium for Independent Journalism (CIJ); 2200 Wilson Blvd., Suite 102-231; Arlington VA 22201. For readers wanting to use PayPal, you can address contributions to our account, which is named after our e-mail address: "consortnew@aol.com". (Since we are a 501-c-3 non-profit, donations by American taxpayers may be tax-deductible.)

If you wish to get one of the thank-you gifts, just follow up your donation with an email to us at consortnew@aol.com with instructions on where to mail it. We'll pay the shipping charges.

Another way to help Consortiumnews survive is to buy my three-book trilogy on the Bush dynasty *Secrecy & Privilege*, *Neck Deep* and *America's Stolen Narrative* for the discount price of only \$34, less than half the cover price. Just go to Consortiumnews.com's "[Donate](#)" button and make a \$34 "donation" using Visa, Mastercard or Discover. We will read a "donation" of that amount as an order for the trilogy. If your mailing address is the same as your credit card billing address, we will ship the books to that address. If your mailing address is different, just send us an e-mail at consortnew@aol.com and we will make the adjustment.

You can also take advantage of this trilogy offer by mailing a check for \$34 to The Media Consortium; 2200 Wilson Blvd.; Suite 102-231; Arlington VA 22201. Or you can use our PayPal account, "consortnew@aol.com." Just make sure you include your mailing address in the message. (A portion of each sale will go to support our investigative journalism.)

For U.S. orders of the trilogy, we will pay for the shipping. **(Regrettably, this three-book offer can only be made for the United States because of increased international postal rates.)**

Another contribution option is to donate stock or other equities, which can offer a tax advantage to you if the stock has appreciated in value. If this stock-donation option appeals to you, I suggest you discuss it with your broker and then contact me at consortnew@aol.com for specific instructions on how to transfer the stock.

Again, thanks for your support and for making our nearly two decades of honest

journalism possible.

Robert Parry is a longtime investigative reporter who broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for the Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 to create an outlet for well-reported journalism that was being squeezed out of an increasingly trivialized U.S. news media.

Spring Fund Drive Goal: \$35,000

From Editor Robert Parry: Over the past year, Consortiumnews.com's refusal to join the propaganda pack rushing into a dangerous war over Ukraine has made us a pariah in some circles, but we are doing what independent journalists are supposed to do: follow the facts, not the herd. But to survive we need your help.

For our spring fund drive, we are setting our goal at \$35,000 and we welcome donations of any size. We are also offering a unique thank-you gift for people who give \$150 or more the DVD of the new movie about the late Gary Webb, "Kill the Messenger," along with a CD of Webb and me discussing the Contra-cocaine scandal during a joint appearance in 1996.

To get this gift, just follow up your donation with an email to us at consortnew@aol.com with instructions on where to mail it. We'll pay the shipping charges.

To donate to our tax-exempt non-profit, you can use a [credit card online](#) (we accept Visa, Mastercard or Discover) or you can [mail a check](#) to Consortium for Independent Journalism (CIJ); 2200 Wilson Blvd., Suite 102-231; Arlington VA 22201. For readers wanting to use PayPal, you can address contributions to our account, which is named after our e-mail address: "consortnew@aol.com". (Since we are a 501-c-3 non-profit, donations by American taxpayers may be tax-deductible.)

Another way to help Consortiumnews survive is to buy my three-book trilogy on the Bush dynasty *Secrecy & Privilege*, *Neck Deep* and *America's Stolen Narrative* for the discount price of only \$34, less than half the cover price. Just go to Consortiumnews.com's "[Donate](#)" button and make a \$34 "donation" using Visa, Mastercard or Discover. We will read a "donation" of that amount as an order for the trilogy. If your mailing address is the same as your credit card billing address, we will ship the books to that address. If your mailing address is different, just send us an e-mail at consortnew@aol.com and we will make the

adjustment.

You can also take advantage of this trilogy offer by mailing a check for \$34 to The Media Consortium; 2200 Wilson Blvd.; Suite 102-231; Arlington VA 22201. Or you can use our PayPal account, "consortnew @ aol.com." Just make sure you include your mailing address in the message. (A portion of each sale will go to support our investigative journalism.)

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The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga

From the Archive: It's been a decade since the big U.S. newspapers hounded journalist Gary Webb to suicide because he exposed their failure to stop one of Ronald Reagan's worst crimes: drug trafficking by the Nicaraguan Contras. The sordid saga finally was told by a Hollywood movie, Robert Parry noted in October.

By Robert Parry

The movie, "Kill the Messenger," is forcing the mainstream U.S. media to confront one of its most shameful episodes, the suppression of a major national security scandal implicating Ronald Reagan's CIA in aiding and abetting cocaine trafficking by the Nicaraguan Contra rebels in the 1980s and then the systematic destruction of journalist Gary Webb when he revived the scandal in the 1990s.

Hollywood's treatment of this sordid affair will likely draw another defensive or dismissive response from some of the big news outlets that still don't want to face up to their disgraceful behavior. [It did at least at the Washington Post, see [here](#) and [here](#).]

The New York Times and other major newspapers mocked the Contra-cocaine scandal when Brian Barger and I first exposed it in 1985 for the Associated Press and then savaged Webb in 1996 when he traced some of the Contra-cocaine into the manufacture of crack which ravaged American cities.

So, when you're watching this movie or responding to questions from friends about whether they should believe its storyline, you might want to know what is or is not fact. What is remarkable about this tale is that so much of it now has been established by official government documents. In other words, you don't have to believe me and my dozens of sources; you can turn to the admissions by the Central Intelligence Agency's inspector general or to evidence in the National Archives.

For instance, last year at the National Archives annex in College Park, Maryland, I discovered a "secret" U.S. law enforcement report that detailed how top Contra leader Adolfo Calero was casually associating with Norwin Meneses, described as "a well-reputed drug dealer."

Meneses was near the center of Webb's 1996 articles for the San Jose Mercury-News, a series that came under fierce attack from U.S. government officials as well as major news organizations, including the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times. The controversy cost Webb his career, left him nearly penniless and ultimately drove him to suicide on Dec. 9, 2004.

But the bitter irony of Webb's demise, which is the subject of "Kill the Messenger" starring Jeremy Renner as Webb, is that Webb's much-maligned "Dark Alliance" series eventually forced major admissions from the CIA, the Justice Department and other government agencies revealing an even-deeper relationship between President Reagan's beloved Contras and drug cartels than Webb (or Barger and I) ever alleged.

Typical of the evidence that the Reagan administration chose to ignore was the document that I found at the National Archives, recounting information from Dennis Ainsworth, a blue-blood Republican from San Francisco who volunteered to help the Contra cause in 1984-85. That put him in position to witness the strange behind-the-scenes activities of Contra leaders hobnobbing with drug traffickers and negotiating arms deals with White House emissaries.

Ainsworth also was a source of mine in fall 1985 when I was investigating the

mysterious sources of funding for the Contras after Congress shut off CIA support in 1984 amid widespread reports of Contra atrocities inflicted on Nicaraguan civilians, including rapes, executions and torture.

Ainsworth's first-hand knowledge of the Contra dealings dovetailed with information that I already had, such as the central role of National Security Council aide Oliver North in aiding the Contras and his use of "courier" Rob Owen as an off-the-books White House intermediary to the Contras. I later developed confirmation of some other details that Ainsworth described, such as his overhearing Owen and Calero working together on an arms deal as Ainsworth drove them through the streets of San Francisco.

As for Ainsworth's knowledge about the Contra-cocaine connection, he said he sponsored a June 1984 cocktail party at which Calero spoke to about 60 people. Meneses, a notorious drug kingpin in the Nicaraguan community, showed up uninvited and clearly had a personal relationship with Calero, who was then the political leader of the Contra's chief fighting force, the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force (or FDN).

"At the end of the cocktail party, Meneses and Calero went off together," Ainsworth told U.S. Attorney Joseph P. Russoniello, according to a "secret" Jan. 6, 1987 cable submitted by Russoniello to an FBI investigation code-named "Front Door," a probe into the Reagan administration's corruption.

After Calero's speech, Ainsworth said Meneses accompanied Calero and about 20 people to dinner and picked up the entire tab, according to a more detailed debriefing of Ainsworth by the FBI. Concerned about this relationship, Ainsworth said he was told by Renato Pena, an FDN leader in the San Francisco area, that "the FDN is involved in drug smuggling with the aid of Norwin Meneses who also buys arms for Enrique Bermudez, a leader of the FDN." Bermudez was then the top Contra military commander.

Corroborating Account

Pena, who himself was convicted on federal drug charges in 1984, gave a similar account to the Drug Enforcement Administration. According to a 1998 report by the Justice Department's Inspector General Michael Bromwich, "When debriefed by the DEA in the early 1980s, Pena said that the CIA was allowing the Contras to fly drugs into the United States, sell them, and keep the proceeds.

"Pena stated that he was present on many occasions when Meneses telephoned Bermudez in Honduras. Meneses told Pena of Bermudez's requests for such things as gun silencers (which Pena said Meneses obtained in Los Angeles), cross bows, and other military equipment for the Contras. Pena believed that Meneses would

sometimes transport certain of these items himself to Central America, and other times would have contacts in Los Angeles and Miami send cargo to Honduras, where the authorities were cooperating with the Contras. Pena believed Meneses had contact with Bermudez from about 1981 or 1982 through the mid-1980s.”

Bromwich’s report then added, “Pena said he was one of the couriers Meneses used to deliver drug money to a Colombian known as ‘Carlos’ in Los Angeles and return to San Francisco with cocaine. Pena made six to eight trips, with anywhere from \$600,000 to nearly \$1 million, and brought back six to eight kilos of cocaine each time. Pena said Meneses was moving hundreds of kilos a week. ‘Carlos’ once told Pena, ‘We’re helping your cause with this drug thing we are helping your organization a lot.”

Ainsworth also said he tried to alert Oliver North in 1985 about the troubling connections between the Contra movement and cocaine traffickers but that North turned a deaf ear. “In the spring some friends of mine and I went back to the White House staff but we were put off by Ollie North and others on the staff who really don’t want to know all what’s going on,” Ainsworth told Russoniello.

When I first spoke with Ainsworth in September 1985 at a coffee shop in San Francisco, he asked for confidentiality which I granted. However, since the documents released by the National Archives include him describing his conversations with me, that confidentiality no longer applies. Ainsworth also spoke with Webb for his 1996 San Jose Mercury-News series under the pseudonym “David Morrison.”

Though I found Ainsworth to be generally reliable, some of his depictions of our conversations contained mild exaggerations or confusion over details, such as his claim that I called him from Costa Rica in January 1986 and told him that the Contra-cocaine story that I had been working on with my AP colleague Brian Barger “never hit the papers because it was suppressed by the Associated Press due to political pressure primarily from the CIA.”

In reality, Barger and I returned from Costa Rica in fall 1985, wrote our story about the Contras’ involvement in cocaine smuggling, and pushed it onto the AP wire in December though in a reduced form because of resistance from some senior AP news executives who were supportive of President Reagan’s foreign policies. The CIA, the White House and other agencies of the Reagan administration did seek to discredit our story, but they did not prevent its publication.

An Overriding Hostility

The Reagan administration’s neglect of Ainsworth’s insights reflected the overriding hostility toward any information even from a Republican activist like

Ainsworth that put the Contras in a negative light. In early 1987, when Ainsworth spoke with U.S. Attorney Russoniello and the FBI, the Reagan administration was in full damage-control mode, trying to tamp down the Iran-Contra disclosures about Oliver North diverting profits from secret arms sales to Iran to the Contra war.

Fears that the Iran-Contra scandal could lead to Reagan's impeachment made it even less likely that the Justice Department would pursue an investigation into drug ties implicating the Contra leadership. Ainsworth's information was simply passed on to Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh whose inquiry was already overwhelmed by the task of sorting out the convoluted Iran transactions.

Publicly, the Reagan team continued dumping on the Contra-cocaine allegations and playing the find-any-possible-reason-to-reject-a-witness game. The major news media went along, leading to much mainstream ridicule of a 1989 investigative report by Sen. John Kerry, D-Massachusetts, who uncovered more drug connections implicating the Contras and the Reagan administration.

Only occasionally, such as when the George H.W. Bush administration needed witnesses to convict Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega did the Contra-cocaine evidence pop onto Official Washington's radar.

During Noriega's drug-trafficking trial in 1991, U.S. prosecutors called as a witness Colombian MedellÃn cartel kingpin Carlos Lehder, who, along with implicating Noriega, testified that the cartel had given \$10 million to the Contras, an allegation first unearthed by Sen. Kerry. "The Kerry hearings didn't get the attention they deserved at the time," a Washington Post editorial on Nov. 27, 1991, acknowledged. "The Noriega trial brings this sordid aspect of the Nicaraguan engagement to fresh public attention."

But the Post offered its readers no explanation for why Kerry's hearings had been largely ignored, with the Post itself a leading culprit in this journalistic misfeasance. Nor did the Post and the other leading newspapers use the opening created by the Noriega trial to do anything to rectify their past neglect.

Everything quickly returned to the status quo in which the desired perception of the noble Contras trumped the clear reality of their criminal activities. Instead of recognizing the skewed moral compass of the Reagan administration, Congress was soon falling over itself to attach Reagan's name to as many public buildings and facilities as possible, including Washington's National Airport.

Meanwhile, those of us in journalism who had exposed the national security crimes of the 1980s saw our careers mostly sink or go sideways. We were regarded

as “pariahs” in our profession.

As for me, shortly after the Iran-Contra scandal broke wide open in fall 1986, I accepted a job at Newsweek, one of the many mainstream news outlets that had long ignored Contra-connected scandals and briefly thought it needed to bolster its coverage. But I soon discovered that senior editors remained hostile toward the Iran-Contra story and related spinoff scandals, including the Contra-cocaine mess.

After losing battle after battle with my Newsweek editors, I departed the magazine in June 1990 to write a book (called *Fooling America*) about the decline of the Washington press corps and the parallel rise of a new generation of government propagandists.

I was also hired by PBS *Frontline* to investigate whether there had been a prequel to the Iran-Contra scandal, whether those arms-for-hostage deals in the mid-1980s had been preceded by contacts between Reagan’s 1980 campaign staff and Iran, which was then holding 52 Americans hostage and essentially destroying Jimmy Carter’s reelection hopes. [For more on that topic, see Robert Parry’s *Secrecy & Privilege* and *America’s Stolen Narrative*.]

Finding New Ways

In 1995, frustrated by the growing triviality of American journalism, and acting on the advice of and with the assistance of my oldest son Sam, I turned to a new medium and launched the Internet’s first investigative news magazine, known as Consortiumnews.com. The Web site became a way for me to put out well-reported stories that my former mainstream colleagues ignored or mocked.

So, when Gary Webb called me in 1996 to talk about the Contra-cocaine story, I explained some of this tortured history and urged him to make sure that his editors were firmly behind him. He sounded perplexed at my advice and assured me that he had the solid support of his editors.

When Webb’s “Dark Alliance” series finally appeared in late August 1996, it initially drew little attention. The major national news outlets applied their usual studied indifference to a topic that they had already judged unworthy of serious attention.

But Webb’s story proved hard to ignore. First, unlike the work that Barger and I did for AP in the mid-1980s, Webb’s series wasn’t just a story about drug traffickers in Central America and their protectors in Washington. It was about the on-the-ground consequences, inside the United States, of that drug trafficking, how the lives of Americans were blighted and destroyed as the collateral damage of a U.S. foreign policy initiative.

In other words, there were real-life American victims, and they were concentrated in African-American communities. That meant the ever-sensitive issue of race had been injected into the controversy. Anger from black communities spread quickly to the Congressional Black Caucus, which started demanding answers.

Secondly, the San Jose Mercury-News, which was the local newspaper for Silicon Valley, had posted documents and audio on its state-of-the-art Internet site. That way, readers could examine much of the documentary support for the series.

It also meant that the traditional "gatekeeper" role of the major newspapers, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times, was under assault. If a regional paper like the Mercury-News could finance a major journalistic investigation like this one, and circumvent the judgments of the editorial boards at the Big Three, then there might be a tectonic shift in the power relations of the U.S. news media. There could be a breakdown of the established order.

This combination of factors led to the next phase of the Contra-cocaine battle: the "get-Gary-Webb" counterattack. Soon, the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the Los Angeles Times were lining up like some tag-team wrestlers taking turns pummeling Webb and his story.

On Oct. 4, 1996, the Washington Post published a front-page article knocking down Webb's series, although acknowledging that some Contra operatives did help the cocaine cartels. The Post's approach fit with the Big Media's cognitive dissonance on the topic: first, the Post called the Contra-cocaine allegations old news, "even CIA personnel testified to Congress they knew that those covert operations involved drug traffickers," the Post said, and second, the Post minimized the importance of the one Contra smuggling channel that Webb had highlighted in his series, saying it had not "played a major role in the emergence of crack."

To add to the smug hoo-hah treatment that was enveloping Webb and his story, the Post published a sidebar story dismissing African-Americans as prone to "conspiracy fears."

Next, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times weighed in with lengthy articles castigating Webb and "Dark Alliance." The big newspapers made much of the CIA's internal reviews in 1987 and 1988, almost a decade earlier, that supposedly had cleared the spy agency of any role in Contra-cocaine smuggling.

But the first ominous sign for the CIA's cover-up emerged on Oct. 24, 1996, when CIA Inspector General Frederick Hitz conceded before the Senate Intelligence

Committee that the first CIA probe had lasted only 12 days, and the second only three days. He promised a more thorough review.

Mocking Webb

But Webb had already crossed over from being treated as a serious journalist to becoming a target of ridicule. Influential Washington Post media critic Howard Kurtz mocked Webb for saying in a book proposal that he would explore the possibility that the Contra war was primarily a business to its participants. "Oliver Stone, check your voice mail," Kurtz smirked.

Yet, Webb's suspicion was no conspiracy theory. Indeed, Oliver North's chief Contra emissary, Rob Owen, had made the same point in a March 17, 1986 message about the Contra leadership. "Few of the so-called leaders of the movement . . . really care about the boys in the field," Owen wrote. "THIS WAR HAS BECOME A BUSINESS TO MANY OF THEM." [Emphasis in original.]

Ainsworth and other pro-Contra activists were reaching the same conclusion, that the Contra leadership was skimming money from the supply lines and padding their personal wealth with proceeds from the drug trade. According to a Jan. 21, 1987 interview report by the FBI, Ainsworth said he had "made inquiries in the local San Francisco Nicaraguan community and wondered among his acquaintances what Adolfo Calero and the other people in the FDN movement were doing and the word that he received back is that they were probably engaged in cocaine smuggling."

In other words, Webb was right about the suspicion that the Contra movement had become less a cause than a business to many of its participants. Even Oliver North's emissary reported on that reality. But truthfulness had ceased to be relevant in the media's hazing of Gary Webb.

In another double standard, while Webb was held to the strictest standards of journalism, it was entirely all right for Kurtz, the supposed arbiter of journalistic integrity who was a longtime fixture on CNN's "Reliable Sources", to make judgments based on ignorance. Kurtz would face no repercussions for mocking a fellow journalist who was factually correct.

The Big Three's assault, combined with their disparaging tone, had a predictable effect on the executives of the Mercury-News. As it turned out, Webb's confidence in his editors had been misplaced. By early 1997, executive editor Jerry Ceppos, who had his own corporate career to worry about, was in retreat.

On May 11, 1997, Ceppos published a front-page column saying the series "fell short of my standards." He criticized the stories because they "strongly implied CIA knowledge" of Contra connections to U.S. drug dealers who were manufacturing crack cocaine. "We did not have enough proof that top CIA officials knew of the

relationship," Ceppos wrote.

Ceppos was wrong about the proof, of course. At AP, before we published our first Contra-cocaine article in 1985, Barger and I had known that the CIA and Reagan's White House were aware of the Contra-cocaine problem at senior levels. One of our sources was on Reagan's National Security Council staff.

However, Ceppos recognized that he and his newspaper were facing a credibility crisis brought on by the harsh consensus delivered by the Big Three, a judgment that had quickly solidified into conventional wisdom throughout the major news media and inside Knight-Ridder, Inc., which owned the Mercury-News. The only career-saving move career-saving for Ceppos even if career-destroying for Webb was to jettison Webb and the Contra-cocaine investigative project.

A 'Vindication'

The big newspapers and the Contras' defenders celebrated Ceppos's retreat as vindication of their own dismissal of the Contra-cocaine stories. In particular, Kurtz seemed proud that his demeaning of Webb now had the endorsement of Webb's editor. Ceppos next pulled the plug on the Mercury-News' continuing Contra-cocaine investigation and reassigned Webb to a small office in Cupertino, California, far from his family. Webb resigned from the paper in disgrace. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Hung Out to Dry.](#)"]

For undercutting Webb and other Mercury News reporters working on the Contra-cocaine project some of whom were facing personal danger in Central America Ceppos was lauded by the American Journalism Review and received the 1997 national Ethics in Journalism Award by the Society of Professional Journalists.

While Ceppos won raves, Webb watched his career collapse and his marriage break up. Still, Gary Webb had set in motion internal government investigations that would bring to the surface long-hidden facts about how the Reagan administration had conducted the Contra war.

The CIA published the first part of Inspector General Hitz's findings on Jan. 29, 1998. Though the CIA's press release for the report criticized Webb and defended the CIA, Hitz's *Volume One* admitted that not only were many of Webb's allegations true but that he actually understated the seriousness of the Contra-drug crimes and the CIA's knowledge of them.

Hitz conceded that cocaine smugglers played a significant early role in the Contra movement and that the CIA intervened to block an image-threatening 1984 federal investigation into a San Franciscobased drug ring with suspected ties to the Contras, the so-called "Frogman Case."

After *Volume One* was released, I called Webb (whom I had spent some time with since his series was published). I chided him for indeed getting the story "wrong." He had understated how serious the problem of Contra-cocaine trafficking had been, I said.

It was a form of gallows humor for the two of us, since nothing had changed in the way the major newspapers treated the Contra-cocaine issue. They focused only on the press release that continued to attack Webb, while ignoring the incriminating information that could be found in the full report. All I could do was highlight those admissions at Consortiumnews.com, which sadly had a much, much smaller readership than the Big Three.

The major U.S. news media also looked the other way on other startling disclosures.

On May 7, 1998, for instance, Rep. Maxine Waters, a California Democrat, introduced into the Congressional Record a Feb. 11, 1982 letter of understanding between the CIA and the Justice Department. The letter, which had been requested by CIA Director William Casey, freed the CIA from legal requirements that it must report drug smuggling by CIA assets, a provision that covered the Nicaraguan Contras and the Afghan mujahedeen.

In other words, early in those two covert wars, the CIA leadership wanted to make sure that its geopolitical objectives would not be complicated by a legal requirement to turn in its client forces for drug trafficking.

Justice Denied

The next break in the long-running Contra-cocaine cover-up was a report by the Justice Department's Inspector General Michael Bromwich. Given the hostile climate surrounding Webb's series, Bromwich's report also opened with criticism of Webb. But, like the CIA's *Volume One*, the contents revealed new details about serious government wrongdoing.

According to evidence cited by Bromwich, the Reagan administration knew almost from the outset of the Contra war that cocaine traffickers permeated the paramilitary operation. The administration also did next to nothing to expose or stop the crimes. Bromwich's report revealed example after example of leads not followed, corroborated witnesses disparaged, official law-enforcement investigations sabotaged, and even the CIA facilitating the work of drug traffickers.

The report showed that the Contras and their supporters ran several parallel drug-smuggling operations, not just the one at the center of Webb's series. The report also found that the CIA shared little of its information about Contra

drugs with law-enforcement agencies and on three occasions disrupted cocaine-trafficking investigations that threatened the Contras.

As well as depicting a more widespread Contra-drug operation than Webb (or Barger and I) had understood, the Justice Department report provided some important corroboration about Nicaraguan drug smuggler Norwin Meneses, a key figure in Gary Webb's series and Adolfo Calero's friend as described by Dennis Ainsworth.

Bromwich cited U.S. government informants who supplied detailed information about Meneses's drug operation and his financial assistance to the Contras. For instance, Renato Pena, the money-and-drug courier for Meneses, said that in the early 1980s the CIA allowed the Contras to fly drugs into the United States, sell them, and keep the proceeds. Pena, the FDN's northern California representative, said the drug trafficking was forced on the Contras by the inadequate levels of U.S. government assistance.

The Justice Department report also disclosed repeated examples of the CIA and U.S. embassies in Central America discouraging DEA investigations, including one into Contra-cocaine shipments moving through the international airport in El Salvador. Bromwich said secrecy trumped all. "We have no doubt that the CIA and the U.S. Embassy were not anxious for the DEA to pursue its investigation at the airport," he wrote.

Bromwich also described the curious case of how a DEA pilot helped a CIA asset escape from Costa Rican authorities in 1989 after the man, American farmer John Hull, had been charged in connection with Contra-cocaine trafficking. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[John Hull's Great Escape](#)."]]

Hull's ranch in northern Costa Rica had been the site of Contra camps for attacking Nicaragua from the south. For years, Contra-connected witnesses also said Hull's property was used for the transshipment of cocaine en route to the United States, but those accounts were brushed aside by the Reagan administration and disparaged in major U.S. newspapers.

Yet, according to Bromwich's report, the DEA took the accounts seriously enough to prepare a research report on the evidence in November 1986. One informant described Colombian cocaine off-loaded at an airstrip on Hull's ranch.

The drugs were then concealed in a shipment of frozen shrimp and transported to the United States. The alleged Costa Rican shipper was Frigorificos de Puntarenas, a firm controlled by Cuban-American Luis Rodriguez. Like Hull, however, Frigorificos had friends in high places. In 1985-86, the State Department had selected the shrimp company to handle \$261,937 in non-lethal

assistance earmarked for the Contras.

Hull also remained a man with powerful protectors. Even after Costa Rican authorities brought drug charges against him, influential Americans, including Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Indiana, demanded that Hull be let out of jail pending trial. Then, in July 1989 with the help of a DEA pilot and possibly a DEA agent Hull managed to fly out of Costa Rica to Haiti and then to the United States.

Despite these startling new disclosures, the big newspapers still showed no inclination to read beyond the criticism of Webb in the press release.

Major Disclosures

By fall 1998, Washington was obsessed with President Bill Clinton's Monica Lewinsky sex scandal, which made it easier to ignore even more stunning Contra-cocaine disclosures in the CIA's *Volume Two*, published on Oct. 8, 1998.

In the report, CIA Inspector General 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.

According to *Volume Two*, the CIA knew the criminal nature of its Contra clients from the start of the war against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government. The earliest Contra force, called the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ADREN) or the 15th of September Legion, had chosen "to stoop to criminal activities in order to feed and clothe their cadre," according to a June 1981 draft of a CIA field report.

According to a September 1981 cable to CIA headquarters, two ADREN members made the first delivery of drugs to Miami in July 1981. ADREN's leaders included Enrique Bermúdez and other early Contras who would later direct the major Contra army, the CIA-organized FDN which was based in Honduras, along Nicaragua's northern border.

Throughout the war, Bermúdez remained the top Contra military commander. The CIA later corroborated the allegations about ADREN's cocaine trafficking, but insisted that Bermúdez had opposed the drug shipments to the United States that went ahead nonetheless.

The truth about Bermúdez's supposed objections to drug trafficking, however, was less clear. According to Hitz's *Volume One*, Bermúdez enlisted Norwin Meneses the Nicaraguan cocaine smuggler, the friend of Adolfo Calero, and a key figure in Webb's series to raise money and buy supplies for the Contras.

Volume One had quoted another Nicaraguan trafficker, Danilo Blandín, a Meneses associate (and another lead character in Webb's series), as telling Hitz's investigators that he (Blandín) and Meneses flew to Honduras to meet with Bermúdez in 1982. At the time, Meneses's criminal activities were well-known in the Nicaraguan exile community, but Bermúdez told the cocaine smugglers that "the ends justify the means" in raising money for the Contras.

After the Bermúdez meeting, Meneses and Blandín were briefly arrested by Honduran police who confiscated \$100,000 that the police suspected was to be a payment for a drug transaction. The Contras intervened, gained freedom for the two traffickers and got them their money back by saying the cash, which indeed was for a cocaine purchase in Bolivia, belonged to the Contras.

There were other indications of Bermúdez's drug-smuggling complicity. In February 1988, another Nicaraguan exile linked to the drug trade accused Bermúdez of participation in narcotics trafficking, according to Hitz's report. After the Contra war ended, Bermúdez returned to Managua, Nicaragua, where he was shot to death on Feb. 16, 1991. The murder has never been solved.

The Southern Front

Along the Southern Front, the Contras' military operations in Costa Rica on Nicaragua's southern border, the CIA's drug evidence centered on the forces of Edmundo Pastora, another top Contra commander. But Hitz discovered that the U.S. government may have made the drug situation worse, not better.

Hitz revealed that the CIA put an admitted drug operative, known by his CIA pseudonym "Ivan Gomez", in a supervisory position over Pastora. Hitz reported that the CIA discovered Gomez's drug history in 1987 when Gomez failed a security review on drug-trafficking questions.

In internal CIA interviews, Gomez admitted that in March or April 1982, he helped family members who were engaged in drug trafficking and money laundering. In one case, Gomez said he assisted his brother and brother-in-law transporting cash from New York City to Miami. He admitted he "knew this act was illegal."

Later, Gomez expanded on his admission, describing how his family members had fallen \$2 million into debt and had gone to Miami to run a money-laundering center for drug traffickers. Gomez said "his brother had many visitors whom [Gomez] assumed to be in the drug trafficking business." Gomez's brother was arrested on drug charges in June 1982. Three months later, in September 1982, Gomez started his CIA assignment in Costa Rica.

Years later, convicted drug trafficker Carlos Cabezas alleged that in the early 1980s, Ivan Gomez was the CIA agent in Costa Rica who was overseeing drug-money

donations to the Contras. Gomez "was to make sure the money was given to the right people [the Contras] and nobody was taking . . . profit they weren't supposed to," Cabezas stated publicly.

But the CIA sought to discredit Cabezas at the time because he had trouble identifying Gomez's picture and put Gomez at one meeting in early 1982 before Gomez started his CIA assignment. While the CIA was able to fend off Cabezas's allegations by pointing to these minor discrepancies, Hitz's report revealed that the CIA was nevertheless aware of Gomez's direct role in drug-money laundering, a fact the agency hid from Sen. Kerry in his investigation during the late 1980s.

There was also more to know about Gomez. In November 1985, the FBI learned from an informant that Gomez's two brothers had been large-scale cocaine importers, with one brother arranging shipments from Bolivia's infamous drug kingpin Roberto Suarez.

Suarez already was known as a financier of right-wing causes. In 1980, with the support of Argentina's hard-line anticommunist military regime, Suarez bankrolled a coup in Bolivia that ousted the elected left-of-center government. The violent putsch became known as the Cocaine Coup because it made Bolivia the region's first narco-state.

By protecting cocaine shipments headed north, Bolivia's government helped transform Colombia's Medellín cartel from a struggling local operation into a giant corporate-style business for delivering vast quantities of cocaine to the U.S. market.

Flush with cash in the early 1980s, Suarez invested more than \$30 million in various right-wing paramilitary operations, including the Contra forces in Central America, according to U.S. Senate testimony by an Argentine intelligence officer, Leonardo Sanchez-Reisse.

In 1987, Sanchez-Reisse said the Suarez drug money was laundered through front companies in Miami before going to Central America. There, other Argentine intelligence officers, veterans of the Bolivian coup, trained the Contras in the early 1980s, even before the CIA arrived to first assist with the training and later take over the Contra operation from the Argentines.

Inspector General Hitz added another piece to the mystery of the Bolivian-Contra connection. One Contra fund-raiser, Jose Orlando Bolanos, boasted that the Argentine government was supporting his Contra activities, according to a May 1982 cable to CIA headquarters. Bolanos made the statement during a meeting with undercover DEA agents in Florida. He even offered to introduce them to his

Bolivian cocaine supplier.

Despite all this suspicious drug activity centered around Ivan Gomez and the Contras, the CIA insisted that it did not unmask Gomez until 1987, when he failed a security check and confessed his role in his family's drug business. The CIA official who interviewed Gomez concluded that "Gomez directly participated in illegal drug transactions, concealed participation in illegal drug transactions, and concealed information about involvement in illegal drug activity," Hitz wrote.

But senior CIA officials still protected Gomez. They refused to refer the Gomez case to the Justice Department, citing the 1982 agreement that spared the CIA from a legal obligation to report narcotics crimes by people collaborating with the CIA who were not formal agency employees. Gomez was an independent contractor who worked for the CIA but was not officially on staff. The CIA eased Gomez out of the agency in February 1988, without alerting law enforcement or the congressional oversight committees.

When questioned about the case nearly a decade later, one senior CIA official who had supported the gentle treatment of Gomez had second thoughts. "It is a striking commentary on me and everyone that this guy's involvement in narcotics didn't weigh more heavily on me or the system," the official told Hitz's investigators.

Drug Path to the White House

A Medellín drug connection arose in another section of Hitz's report, when he revealed evidence suggesting that some Contra trafficking may have been sanctioned by Reagan's National Security Council. The protagonist for this part of the Contra-cocaine mystery was Moises Nunez, a Cuban-American who worked for Oliver North's NSC Contra-support operation and for two drug-connected seafood importers, Ocean Hunter in Miami and Frigorificos De Puntarenas in Costa Rica.

Frigorificos De Puntarenas was created in the early 1980s as a cover for drug-money laundering, according to sworn testimony by two of the firm's principals, Carlos Soto and Medellín cartel accountant Ramon Milian Rodriguez. (It was also the company implicated by a DEA informant in moving cocaine from John Hull's ranch to the United States.)

Drug allegations were swirling around Moises Nunez by the mid-1980s. Indeed, his operation was one of the targets of my and Barger's AP investigation in 1985. Finally reacting to the suspicions, the CIA questioned Nunez about his alleged cocaine trafficking on March 25, 1987. He responded by pointing the finger at his NSC superiors.

"Nunez revealed that since 1985, he had engaged in a clandestine relationship with the National Security Council," Hitz reported, adding: "Nunez refused to elaborate on the nature of these actions, but indicated it was difficult to answer questions relating to his involvement in narcotics trafficking because of the specific tasks he had performed at the direction of the NSC. Nunez refused to identify the NSC officials with whom he had been involved."

After this first round of questioning, CIA headquarters authorized an additional session, but then senior CIA officials reversed the decision. There would be no further efforts at "debriefing Nunez."

Hitz noted that "the cable [from headquarters] offered no explanation for the decision" to stop the Nunez interrogation. But the CIA's Central American Task Force chief Alan Fiers Jr. said the Nunez-NSC drug lead was not pursued "because of the NSC connection and the possibility that this could be somehow connected to the Private Benefactor program [the Contra money handled by the NSC's Oliver North] a decision was made not to pursue this matter."

Joseph Fernandez, who had been the CIA's station chief in Costa Rica, confirmed to congressional Iran-Contra investigators that Nunez "was involved in a very sensitive operation" for North's "Enterprise." The exact nature of that NSC-authorized activity has never been divulged.

At the time of the Nunez-NSC drug admissions and his truncated interrogation, the CIA's acting director was Robert Gates, who nearly two decades later became President George W. Bush's second secretary of defense, a position he retained under President Barack Obama.

Drug Record

The CIA also worked directly with other drug-connected Cuban-Americans on the Contra project, Hitz found. One of Nunez's Cuban-American associates, Felipe Vidal, had a criminal record as a narcotics trafficker in the 1970s. But the CIA still hired him to serve as a logistics coordinator for the Contras, Hitz reported.

The CIA also learned that Vidal's drug connections were not only in the past. A December 1984 cable to CIA headquarters revealed Vidal's ties to Rene Corvo, another Cuban-American suspected of drug trafficking. Corvo was working with Cuban anticommunist Frank Castro, who was viewed as a Medellín cartel representative within the Contra movement.

There were other narcotics links to Vidal. In January 1986, the DEA in Miami seized 414 pounds of cocaine concealed in a shipment of yucca that was going from a Contra operative in Costa Rica to Ocean Hunter, the company where Vidal

(and Moises Nunez) worked. Despite the evidence, Vidal remained a CIA employee as he collaborated with Frank Castro's assistant, Rene Corvo, in raising money for the Contras, according to a CIA memo in June 1986.

By fall 1986, Sen. Kerry had heard enough rumors about Vidal to demand information about him as part of his congressional inquiry into Contra drugs. But the CIA withheld the derogatory information in its files. On Oct. 15, 1986, Kerry received a briefing from the CIA's Alan Fiers, who didn't mention Vidal's drug arrests and conviction in the 1970s.

But Vidal was not yet in the clear. In 1987, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Miami began investigating Vidal, Ocean Hunter, and other Contra-connected entities. This prosecutorial attention worried the CIA. The CIA's Latin American division felt it was time for a security review of Vidal. But on Aug. 5, 1987, the CIA's security office blocked the review for fear that the Vidal drug information "could be exposed during any future litigation."

As expected, the U.S. Attorney's Office did request documents about "Contra-related activities" by Vidal, Ocean Hunter, and 16 other entities. The CIA advised the prosecutor that "no information had been found regarding Ocean Hunter," a statement that was clearly false. The CIA continued Vidal's employment as an adviser to the Contra movement until 1990, virtually the end of the Contra war.

Hitz also revealed that drugs tainted the highest levels of the Honduran-based FDN, the largest Contra army. Hitz found that Juan Rivas, a Contra commander who rose to be chief of staff, admitted that he had been a cocaine trafficker in Colombia before the war.

The CIA asked Rivas, known as El Quiche, about his background after the DEA began suspecting that Rivas might be an escaped convict from a Colombian prison. In interviews with CIA officers, Rivas acknowledged that he had been arrested and convicted of packaging and transporting cocaine for the drug trade in Barranquilla, Colombia. After several months in prison, Rivas said, he escaped and moved to Central America, where he joined the Contras.

Defending Rivas, CIA officials insisted that there was no evidence that Rivas engaged in trafficking while with the Contras. But one CIA cable noted that he lived an expensive lifestyle, even keeping a \$100,000 Thoroughbred horse at the Contra camp. Contra military commander Bermudez later attributed Rivas's wealth to his ex-girlfriend's rich family. But a CIA cable in March 1989 added that "some in the FDN may have suspected at the time that the father-in-law was engaged in drug trafficking."

Still, the CIA moved quickly to protect Rivas from exposure and possible extradition to Colombia. In February 1989, CIA headquarters asked that the DEA take no action "in view of the serious political damage to the U.S. Government that could occur should the information about Rivas become public." Rivas was eased out of the Contra leadership with an explanation of poor health. With U.S. government help, he was allowed to resettle in Miami. Colombia was not informed about his fugitive status.

Another senior FDN official implicated in the drug trade was its chief spokesman in Honduras, Arnolando Jose "Frank" Arana. The drug allegations against Arana dated back to 1983 when a federal narcotics task force put him under criminal investigation because of plans "to smuggle 100 kilograms of cocaine into the United States from South America." On Jan. 23, 1986, the FBI reported that Arana and his brothers were involved in a drug-smuggling enterprise, although Arana was not charged.

Arana sought to clear up another set of drug suspicions in 1989 by visiting the DEA in Honduras with a business associate, Jose Perez. Arana's association with Perez, however, only raised new alarms. If "Arana is mixed up with the Perez brothers, he is probably dirty," the DEA said.

Drug Airlines

Through their ownership of an air services company called SETCO, the Perez brothers were associated with Juan Matta-Ballesteros, a major cocaine kingpin connected to the 1985 torture-murder of DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, according to reports by the DEA and U.S. Customs. Hitz reported that someone at the CIA scribbled a note on a DEA cable about Arana stating: "Arnold Arana . . . still active and working, we [CIA] may have a problem."

Despite its drug ties to Matta-Ballesteros, SETCO emerged as the principal company for ferrying supplies to the Contras in Honduras. During congressional Iran-Contra hearings, FDN political leader Adolfo Calero testified that SETCO was paid from bank accounts controlled by Oliver North. SETCO also received \$185,924 from the State Department for delivering supplies to the Contras in 1986. Furthermore, Hitz found that other air transport companies used by the Contras were implicated in the cocaine trade as well.

Even FDN leaders suspected that they were shipping supplies to Central America aboard planes that might be returning with drugs. Mario Calero, Adolfo Calero's brother and the chief of Contra logistics, grew so uneasy about one air freight company that he notified U.S. law enforcement that the FDN only chartered the planes for the flights south, not the return flights north.

Hitz found that some drug pilots simply rotated from one sector of the Contra operation to another. Donaldo Frixone, who had a drug record in the Dominican Republic, was hired by the CIA to fly Contra missions from 1983 to 1985. In September 1986, however, Frixone was implicated in smuggling 19,000 pounds of marijuana into the United States. In late 1986 or early 1987, he went to work for Vortex, another U.S.-paid Contra supply company linked to the drug trade.

By the time that Hitz's *Volume Two* was published in fall 1998, the CIA's defense against Webb's series had shrunk to a fig leaf: that the CIA did not *conspire* with the Contras to raise money through cocaine trafficking. But Hitz made clear that the Contra war took precedence over law enforcement and that the CIA withheld evidence of Contra crimes from the Justice Department, Congress, and even the CIA's own analytical division.

Besides tracing the evidence of Contra-drug trafficking through the decade-long Contra war, the inspector general interviewed senior CIA officers who acknowledged that they were aware of the Contra-drug problem but didn't want its exposure to undermine the struggle to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

According to Hitz, the CIA had "one overriding priority: to oust the Sandinista government. . . . [CIA officers] were determined that the various difficulties they encountered not be allowed to prevent effective implementation of the Contra program." One CIA field officer explained, "The focus was to get the job done, get the support and win the war."

Hitz also recounted complaints from CIA analysts that CIA operations officers handling the Contras hid evidence of Contra-drug trafficking even from the CIA's analysts.

Because of the withheld evidence, the CIA analysts incorrectly concluded in the mid-1980s that "only a handful of Contras might have been involved in drug trafficking." That false assessment was passed on to Congress and to major news organizations, serving as an important basis for denouncing Gary Webb and his "Dark Alliance" series in 1996.

CIA Admission

Although Hitz's report was an extraordinary admission of institutional guilt by the CIA, it went almost unnoticed by the big American newspapers.

On Oct. 10, 1998, two days after Hitz's *Volume Two* was posted on the CIA's Web site, the New York Times published a brief article that continued to deride Webb but acknowledged the Contra-drug problem may have been worse than earlier understood. Several weeks later, the Washington Post weighed in with a story

that simply missed the point of the CIA's confession. Though having assigned 17 journalists to tear down Webb's reporting, the Los Angeles Times chose not to publish a story on the release of Hitz's *Volume Two*.

In 2000, the House Intelligence Committee grudgingly acknowledged that the stories about Reagan's CIA protecting Contra drug traffickers were true. The committee released a report citing classified testimony from CIA Inspector General Britt Snider (Hitz's successor) admitting that the spy agency had turned a blind eye to evidence of Contra-drug smuggling and generally treated drug smuggling through Central America as a low priority.

"In the end the objective of unseating the Sandinistas appears to have taken precedence over dealing properly with potentially serious allegations against those with whom the agency was working," Snider said, adding that the CIA did not treat the drug allegations in "a consistent, reasoned or justifiable manner."

The House committee, then controlled by Republicans, still downplayed the significance of the Contra-cocaine scandal, but the panel acknowledged, deep inside its report, that in some cases, "CIA employees did nothing to verify or disprove drug trafficking information, even when they had the opportunity to do so. In some of these, receipt of a drug allegation appeared to provoke no specific response, and business went on as usual."

Like the release of Hitz's report in 1998, the admissions by Snider and the House committee drew virtually no media attention in 2000, except for a few articles on the Internet, including one at Consortiumnews.com.

Because of this journalistic misconduct by the Big Three newspapers, choosing to conceal their own neglect of the Contra-cocaine scandal and to protect the Reagan administration's image, Webb's reputation was never rehabilitated.

After his original "Dark Alliance" series was published in 1996, I joined Webb in a few speaking appearances on the West Coast, including one packed book talk at the Midnight Special bookstore in Santa Monica, California. For a time, Webb was treated as a celebrity on the American Left, but that gradually faded.

In our interactions during these joint appearances, I found Webb to be a regular guy who seemed to be holding up fairly well under the terrible pressure. He had landed an investigative job with a California state legislative committee. He also felt some measure of vindication when CIA Inspector General Hitz's reports came out.

But Webb never could overcome the pain caused by his betrayal at the hands of his journalistic colleagues, his peers. In the years that followed, Webb was

unable to find decent-paying work in his profession, the conventional wisdom remained that he had somehow been exposed as a journalistic fraud. His state job ended; his marriage fell apart; he struggled to pay bills; and he was faced with a forced move out of a house near Sacramento, California, and in with his mother.

On Dec. 9, 2004, the 49-year-old Webb typed out suicide notes to his ex-wife and his three children; laid out a certificate for his cremation; and taped a note on the door telling movers, who were coming the next morning, to instead call 911. Webb then took out his father's pistol and shot himself in the head. The first shot was not lethal, so he fired once more.

Even with Webb's death, the big newspapers that had played key roles in his destruction couldn't bring themselves to show Webb any mercy. After Webb's body was found, I received a call from a reporter for the Los Angeles Times who knew that I was one of Webb's few journalistic colleagues who had defended him and his work.

I told the reporter that American history owed a great debt to Gary Webb because he had forced out important facts about Reagan-era crimes. But I added that the Los Angeles Times would be hard-pressed to write an honest obituary because the newspaper had ignored Hitz's final report, which had largely vindicated Webb.

To my disappointment but not my surprise, I was correct. The Los Angeles Times ran a mean-spirited obituary that made no mention of either my defense of Webb, nor the CIA's admissions in 1998. The obituary was republished in other newspapers, including the Washington Post.

In effect, Webb's suicide enabled senior editors at the Big Three newspapers to breathe a little easier, one of the few people who understood the ugly story of the Reagan administration's cover-up of the Contra-cocaine scandal and the U.S. media's complicity was now silenced.

To this day, none of the journalists or media critics who participated in the destruction of Gary Webb has paid a price. None has faced the sort of humiliation that Webb had to endure. None had to experience that special pain of standing up for what is best in the profession of journalism, taking on a difficult story that seeks to hold powerful people accountable for serious crimes, and then being vilified by your own colleagues, the people that you expected to understand and appreciate what you had done.

On the contrary, many were rewarded with professional advancement and lucrative careers. For instance, for years, Howard Kurtz got to host the CNN program, "Reliable Sources," which lectured journalists on professional standards. He was

described in the program's bio as "the nation's premier media critic." (His show has since moved to Fox News, renamed "MediaBuzz.")

The rehabilitation of Webb's reputation and the correction of this dark chapter of American history now rest on how the public responds to the presentation of Webb's story in the film, "Kill the Messenger." It's also unclear how the Big Media will react. In early October, New York Times' media writer David Carr continued some of the old quibbling about Webb's series but did acknowledge the Contra-cocaine reality.

Carr's [movie review](#) began with a straightforward recognition of the long-denied truth: "If someone told you today that there was strong evidence that the Central Intelligence Agency once turned a blind eye to accusations of drug dealing by operatives it worked with, it might ring some distant, skeptical bell. Did that really happen? That really happened."

Yes, that really happened.

[To learn how you can hear a December 1996 joint appearance at which Robert Parry and Gary Webb discuss their reporting, [click here](#).]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).
