

# “Dark Alliance”

## The Controversy and the Legacy, Twenty Years On

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*[T]he presentation of truth is awesome; to speak it requires courage, to write the truth is very often dangerous, to live it guarantees an early death.*

—Reverend Wyatt T. Walker<sup>1</sup>

It was one of the most explosive news stories of 1993: Officials of the United States government’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had been caught red-handed in helping years earlier to import more than a ton of pure cocaine worth an estimated billions of dollars from Venezuela into the US, destined for American streets.

The CIA, denying any criminal complicity, acknowledged the whole affair as “a most regrettable incident” involving “instances of poor judgment and management on the part of several CIA officers” that resulted in lots of cocaine slipping into the country.<sup>2</sup> The US Department of Justice launched a major investigation into the case.<sup>3</sup>

The media outlet that broke this big story? The CBS News program *60 Minutes*, in a hard-hitting, thirteen-minute segment titled “The CIA’s Cocaine,” which named names and was televised nationwide.<sup>4</sup> The episode went on to earn *60 Minutes* a prestigious American journalism award for “perform[ing] a vital public service” in the airing of such stories.<sup>5</sup>

A mere three years later in November 1996, around the time of a US federal indictment against a top Venezuelan military official in that case,<sup>6</sup> a journalist covering a much different angle of the CIA and international drug trafficking was receiving his own recognition. Gary Webb, a staff reporter for the *San Jose Mercury News*, the daily

newspaper of record in northern California's Silicon Valley, strode up to the podium to receive a "Journalist of the Year" award from a local chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, one of the oldest and most respected press-support organizations in the US. He was given a round of applause by his peers in the audience, a number of them rising to their feet in a standing ovation.<sup>7</sup>

The groundbreaking three-part series Webb investigated and reported for the *Mercury News* had by then been dominating the nation's headlines and airwaves in the US for several months. "Dark Alliance: The Story behind the Crack Explosion," as the series was billed, incited passionate debate and public outrage nationwide not only about the American government's role in drug trafficking, but also about the ongoing outbreak of crack cocaine use across the US and the government's highly touted "war on drugs" at home and abroad.

Standing alongside Webb and basking in the glow that evening was his boss, *Mercury News* executive editor Jerry Ceppos. "There's still a lot more life in this story," Ceppos reassured the audience of media people, promising even more disclosures to come in the "Dark Alliance" reportage.<sup>8</sup>

But within a few months, the celebratory mood would dramatically change: the "Dark Alliance" series would be killed off by Ceppos's own hand and, in stark contrast to the widespread media approval of the CBS report on the CIA and cocaine trafficking just three years before, Webb and his investigative series would be maligned by some of America's most influential news media companies. The US corporate press, by the mid-1990s, had become its own worst enemy.

August 2016 marks two decades since Webb's "Dark Alliance" investigation took the world by storm as one of the most compelling US news stories in the latter half of the twentieth century. This report takes a critical look back at the controversy that was "Dark Alliance," zooming in for a close-up view of specific episodes and events that were overlooked or omitted in US corporate media reporting. The critical lens is also zoomed-out to reveal the much wider media landscape surrounding "Dark Alliance"—vital context and background that have been all but invisible in the US establishment press over the past twenty years.

And lastly, this report looks at the long-term legacy of Gary Webb's "Dark Alliance" investigation and its place among the acts of journalistic truth-seeking in modern times.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SERIES

"Dark Alliance" was originally published in three parts from August 18 to 20, 1996, in the *San Jose Mercury News* and carried on its high-tech Mercury Center website.<sup>9</sup> This was significant because it marked the first time for a US newspaper to make use of the new technology known as the Internet as part of a major news investigation.

Webb had wanted to use the newspaper's website particularly to show the hard evidence and detailed documentation he had amassed as a way to counterbalance what he called the "high unbelievability factor" of his investigation—a true story that the public would literally find too hard to believe unless it was documented in great detail.

And that is where the next significant aspect of "Dark Alliance" comes in: it was the first news media investigation to expose the links between the CIA, the contras, and the rise of crack cocaine use in the United States.

Other journalists, most notably Associated Press (AP) reporters Brian Barger and Robert Parry in the mid-1980s, had reported on the ties between the CIA and large-scale cocaine trafficking by the anti-communist paramilitary forces in Nicaragua known as the "contras."<sup>10</sup> In his "Dark Alliance" investigation a decade later in the summer of 1996, Webb provided the crucial missing piece of the puzzle: what happened to the powdered cocaine once it had been smuggled into the United States by Nicaraguan contra supporters and turned into dried "crack" cocaine, and how the money made from such crack sales on American streets made its way back to the contras in their CIA-sponsored campaign to overturn the new socialist government of Nicaragua.

While "Dark Alliance" did not implicate the CIA in specific incidents of drug smuggling into and within the United States—a point Webb was always clear in publicly emphasizing—his series did present strong circumstantial evidence that the CIA at least knew of the cocaine smuggling into the US by the Nicaraguans and did not act

to stop it. As Webb also demonstrated in “Dark Alliance,” some US government agencies went as far as offering bureaucratic cover and legal protection to some of the most infamous cocaine traffickers in the Western hemisphere.

Webb had specifically documented in his series how the crossing of paths of three main characters—Nicaraguan wholesale drug traffickers Norwin Meneses and Danilo Blandón, along with a young African-American street-level drug dealer named “Freeway” Rick Ross—had eventually led to an outbreak of crack cocaine use and abuse in Los Angeles that then spread to other US cities, hitting African-American communities the hardest.

Webb’s “Dark Alliance” series was also significant in the way it was treated by the influential Big Three newspapers. Instead of building on Webb’s groundbreaking investigation and moving the story forward, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *New York Times* attacked the “Dark Alliance” series for often self-serving reasons and sought to tarnish both Webb’s credibility as a journalist and his investigation. This was unprecedented, certainly in contemporary US press history.

## THE GREAT AMERICAN LAPDOG ATTACK

In October 1996, a month and a half after “Dark Alliance” had been published in the *San Jose Mercury News*, igniting a firestorm of public protest over its findings, the Big Three newspapers started striking back. They gave an abundance of column inches in their pages to news and opinion articles that dismissed the core facts of the “Dark Alliance” series, often relying on the weakest of sources, and essentially defended the US government in its denial of complicity in the entire affair.

A review of the attacks by the three newspapers reveals the astounding amounts of time, space, and human resources they had invested in debunking the “Dark Alliance” story. Far from serving the role of a watchdog for the public over centers of political and corporate power, the Big Three newspapers were now ready to prove themselves as media lapdogs guarding the gates of such power from public intruders and from smaller, rival news organizations.

## **The *Washington Post*: “No CIA Plot”**

Howard Kurtz, media affairs reporter for the *Washington Post*, took aim at “Dark Alliance” in early October with a critical opinion column that paved the way for the big media attacks to follow.<sup>11</sup>

“Allegations” of CIA involvement in narcotics trafficking were old news that had been laid to rest a long time ago, Kurtz maintained. What Kurtz conveniently left out was the fact that big newspaper companies such as the *Washington Post* had downplayed or ignored that very same controversy a full decade earlier—both the AP news reports at the time by reporters Parry and Barger, as well as a congressional investigation into the matter in 1988 by then-Massachusetts senator John Kerry.<sup>12</sup> Kurtz also cast the first stone of doubt at Gary Webb’s journalistic credibility.

Two days later on October 4, the *Washington Post* brought out its big guns in a major five-story takedown of the *Mercury News*’ “Dark Alliance” series. It was led by a front-page story cowritten by the *Post*’s veteran national security affairs reporter, Walter Pincus, under the headline, “The CIA and Crack: Evidence is Lacking of Alleged Plot.”<sup>13</sup> The 4,000-word story cleverly rejected claims of a CIA “plot” that Webb’s investigation had never made.

The CIA links to Nicaraguan coke trafficker Danilo Blandón, as well as Blandón’s influence on Los Angeles-based drug dealer “Freeway” Rick Ross, and Ross’s influence in turn on the crack cocaine market at the time, were all rejected out of hand by the *Post*. The story also contained the curious assertion that no more than five tons of cocaine were ever smuggled into South Central Los Angeles over the course of a decade (challenging the much higher figures that “Dark Alliance” reported). And who were the sources cited by the *Post* for all these claims? Anonymous government officials.

Included in that set of five stories by the *Post* attacking “Dark Alliance” was another shorter article by *Post* staff reporter Douglas Farah from Managua, Nicaragua, which focused mainly on jailed Nicaraguan drug kingpin Norwin Meneses and his connections with the CIA-sponsored contra forces.<sup>14</sup> Farah’s story, by and large, corroborated what Webb had reported in “Dark Alliance” about Meneses as a major trafficker and his dubious relationship with the US

government's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) back in the 1980s—which may well be the reason why the *Post* substantially cut Farah's article and buried it deep inside the newspaper that day.<sup>15</sup>

Farah remembers having to fight like hell with *Post* editors back in Washington DC, and with Pincus in particular, to get his story into the paper. Farah attributed the closeness of the *Post* to the national power structure in Washington DC as a factor in how the newspaper had handled such news reports by him in the past: "There was so much Washington influence [at the *Post*] that it ends up dominating the story no matter what the reality on the ground was."

Looking back today, Farah, who has since left the *Washington Post*, acknowledges Gary Webb's reporting in "Dark Alliance" as accurate and on target. "The contra-drug stuff, I think, was there," Farah said. "Largely, I think it [Webb's story] was right."<sup>16</sup>

### ***The Los Angeles Times: "Get Gary Webb"***

A couple weeks after the *Post*'s takedown of "Dark Alliance," the *Los Angeles Times* was next to check in with a hefty three-day series of articles titled "The Cocaine Trail" that ran from October 20 to 22, 1996. The newspaper enlisted fifteen reporters and two editors—a "get Gary Webb team," as one *Times* staffer called it—to go after the *Mercury News*' "Dark Alliance" investigation as well as its author.<sup>17</sup> The idea behind this group effort had reportedly come from the very top: *Los Angeles Times* editor in chief Shelby Coffey III.<sup>18</sup>

The three-day series opened with a lengthy article by Jesse Katz, the *Times*' self-described gang reporter, that focused on "Freeway" Rick Ross.<sup>19</sup> Katz's story downplayed the role of Ross, the young African-American dealer of crack cocaine, in the nationwide crack cocaine outbreak as outlined in "Dark Alliance." But what the *Times* ended up revealing even more with this article was how low a newspaper would stoop to disprove a journalistic competitor that stepped onto its own turf, even if it meant rewriting history.

Katz had reported two years earlier in 1994 on Ross's dominance of the Los Angeles crack market in an article with this lead paragraph: "If there was an eye to the storm, if there was a criminal mastermind behind crack's decade-long reign, if there was one outlaw capitalist most respon-

sible for flooding Los Angeles' streets with mass-marketed cocaine, his name was Freeway Rick [Ross]."<sup>20</sup> Two years later in 1996, kicking off the *Times*' serial knockdown of Webb's "Dark Alliance" investigation, Katz totally reversed himself with this front-page lead paragraph: "The crack epidemic in Los Angeles followed no blueprint or master plan. It was not orchestrated by the Contras or the CIA or any single drug ring. No one trafficker, even the kingpins who sold thousands of kilos and pocketed millions of dollars, ever came close to monopolizing the trade."<sup>21</sup>

Doyle McManus, the *Times* bureau chief in Washington DC, opened the second day of coverage with a long article that challenged Webb's assertion in "Dark Alliance" that "millions [of dollars] in drug profits" had been funneled from the sale of crack on American streets to the CIA-sponsored Nicaraguan contras.<sup>22</sup> Quoting three anonymous Nicaraguan associates of drug dealers Norwin Meneses and Danilo Blandón, McManus put Webb's figure of "millions" of dollars down much lower to a questionable figure of \$50,000, thus reducing in one fell swoop the huge impact of the cocaine smuggled by the Nicaraguans into the US on the overall American crack market.

Two decades after "Dark Alliance," the only journalist among the US major news companies to express anything remotely resembling regret for the way in which Webb and his investigation were treated back then was, appropriately enough, the reporter who had arguably gone the farthest in rewriting the facts of the CIA-contra-crack cocaine story: Jesse Katz, then of the *Los Angeles Times*.

"Overkill" is how Katz today describes his ex-newspaper's three-day attack on Webb's series back in October 1996. "[W]e did it in a way that I think most of us who were involved in it would look back on that and say it was overkill. We had this huge team of people at the *L.A. Times* and we kind of piled on to one lone muckraker [Webb] up in northern California. . . . But we really didn't do anything to advance his work or add or illuminate much to the ['Dark Alliance'] story," Katz said. "It was a really kind of tawdry exercise."<sup>23</sup>

### ***The New York Times: "Only Bit Players"***

The last of the Big Three newspapers to jump into the fray was the *New York Times* on October 21, with a well-timed takedown of "Dark Alli-

ance” that was published on the middle day of the *Los Angeles Times*’ three-day series. *The New York Times* gave one of its top reporters, Tim Golden, a full news page inside the paper to do the hatchet job with two lengthy articles.

In one of the stories, Golden followed the course laid by the earlier *Washington Post* knockdown of “Dark Alliance” in citing one current or former US government or narcotics official after another—but not disclosing their names.<sup>24</sup> Readers of the story were left to take the word of those CIA, DEA, and other US government sources that the major Nicaraguan cocaine traffickers Webb had exposed in “Dark Alliance” were seemingly “only bit players” in the whole controversy and not a major influence in the overall spread of crack cocaine in the US during the 1980s.

The longer of the two *New York Times* articles by Golden was dated Compton, California—the area at the center of the crack cocaine outbreak in Los Angeles—and fed into what was perhaps the most disreputable aspect of the whole US establishment media furor over “Dark Alliance”: the racial profiling of the African-American community.

### **“BLACK PARANOIA”**

A key component of the US corporate media response to “Dark Alliance” was a steady flow of news and opinion stories that reduced the justified public outrage to little more than the paranoid imaginings of a secret US government plan to destroy African-American lives. Black America, or at least part of it, was in effect being disparaged right alongside journalist Gary Webb for being gullible enough to believe the contents of Webb’s “Dark Alliance” reporting.

*The Washington Post* was the first of the big US news companies to set the “black paranoia” tone in national coverage.<sup>25</sup> This was done in an article carried in the *Post* in mid-September 1996, nearly a month after “Dark Alliance” was published.

In the story, reporter Michael A. Fletcher quoted an authoritative source, a black university professor of political science, who had an explanation for all the fuss being made over “Dark Alliance”: “When these horrible things happen in the black community, people feel there must be someone behind it. Being unable to explain it, it



becomes a conspiracy theory, the work of an unseen hand.”<sup>26</sup> Cited as proof of this were the “suspicions” still lingering in the 1990s over the actual Tuskegee Institute syphilis experiment of the 1930s to 1970s, in which hundreds of African-American men went untreated for syphilis by US government researchers studying the disease.

Another shot came from *Time* magazine a couple weeks later, in an article by reporter Jack E. White.<sup>27</sup> In addressing the black public reaction to “Dark Alliance,” White belittled “conspiracy theorists, who blame every plague that afflicts the black community on racist government plots.” He took particular aim at both black talk-radio programs and the so-called “black telegraph”—the informal word-of-mouth network of communication long used in the African-American community—for recently being “a font of bizarre fantasies.”

A few days later on October 4, Michael A. Fletcher of the *Washington Post* returned with another story on black paranoia—this time on the front page, as part of the *Post*’s major five-story takedown of the *Mercury News* “Dark Alliance” investigation.<sup>28</sup> Fletcher once again trotted out the Tuskegee syphilis experiment as a factor in black paranoia, and also pointed to unfounded suspicions in black America of a conspiracy in tainted food such as fast-food fried chicken and soft drinks, not to mention the longstanding suspicions of a US government hand in the creation of the AIDS virus and the 1968 assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. “Dark Alliance,” Fletcher wrote, had “highlight[ed] an inclination, born of bitter history and captured in polls, to accept as fact unsubstantiated reports or rumors about conspiracies targeting blacks.”

A second article on black paranoia, carried the same day in an inside section of the *Washington Post* by staff reporter Donna Britt, assumed a less subtle tone.<sup>29</sup> The whole CIA-contra-crack cocaine scenario “just may not have happened,” Britt surmised, but that would not stop paranoia, among both blacks and whites, from rearing its ugly head. “They know the truth, or one truth, anyway: It doesn’t matter whether the [‘Dark Alliance’] series’ claims are ‘proved’ true. To some folks—graduates of Watergate, Iran-contra and FBI harassment of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.—they feel so true that even if they’re refuted, they’ll still be fact to them.”

The Associated Press wire service chimed in on black paranoia

the very next day, citing, like the other stories, the Tuskegee experiment and adding a few more items to the list of “black fears.”<sup>30</sup> “For years, rumors have swirled about body bags of black GIs being sent home [from overseas] laden with opium to resupply drug sellers of the ghetto,” the AP explained.

Then came the massive three-day knockdown of “Dark Alliance” by the *Los Angeles Times*, from October 20 to 22, which included a lengthy article with graphics on black paranoia. In a front-page story that led the *Times*’ third and final day of its series, reporters John L. Mitchell and Sam Fulwood III wheeled out once more the example of Tuskegee, among others, often interweaving African-American suspicions over factual incidents like US government spying on Martin Luther King Jr. and the radical Black Panthers group with suspicions over other unrelated issues like tainted food.<sup>31</sup>

Not to be outdone, the main story by the *New York Times*—in its full-page, two-story hatchet job on “Dark Alliance” by reporter Tim Golden on October 21, 1996—opened with the issue of black paranoia.<sup>32</sup> Just how much of the truth the *New York Times* was willing to stretch was evident in reporter Golden’s assertion that back in 1990, “long before any major news organizations had connected crack and the CIA,” a joint telephone poll with the *Times* and a local television station of about a thousand African-American New Yorkers had found that some respondents suspected a US government role in the flow of drugs into poor black neighborhoods, and that more blacks than whites believed in a US government role behind the AIDS epidemic.

But what the *Times* failed to remind readers of this story on black paranoia is that by 1990, other news outlets such as the Associated Press and CBS News (not to mention a host of credible published books on the subject) had already reported on CIA ties to international drug trafficking.<sup>33</sup> This was not something new.

In the meantime, the *Washington Post* kept the momentum of black paranoia going with an October 24 opinion article by columnist Richard Cohen, whose rants were widely syndicated to other news media.<sup>34</sup> Cohen made this sweeping racial observation: “It should come as no surprise, then, that a piece of black America remains hospitable to the most bizarre rumors and myths—the one about the CIA and crack being just one.” Cohen took the media’s argument on

black paranoia one step further by tying it into religious discrimination, blasting the African-American Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan, head of the Nation of Islam, and other influential black leaders who “embrace his every paranoid theory, including his anti-Semitism.”

From inside the distorted bubble of white American racism, what routinely looks like black paranoia is actually a high degree of black consensus on given issues, according to writer/activist Bruce A. Dixon, and it was that strong consensus that the major media companies sought to diminish in regard to the “Dark Alliance” story. “A gargantuan, racist lie was deployed to swallow and conceal the truths that Gary Webb had labored so diligently to bring to light. ‘Black paranoia’ was a very useful diagnosis, tailor-made to convince the white public that further examinations of the CIA connection to crack cocaine were pointless,” Dixon noted.<sup>35</sup>

Yet one fact complicated the whole black paranoia clamor in the press as being just another case of racism: some of the worst offenders in the corporate media’s rush to play up black paranoia in attacking “Dark Alliance” were themselves of African-American heritage—reporters Fletcher and Britt of the *Washington Post*, reporters Mitchell and Fulwood of the *Los Angeles Times*, and reporter White of *Time* magazine. In explaining why he and other African-American journalists had played the black paranoia card at the time, White later pleaded pressure from white colleagues in the media who were dismissing the veracity of the original “Dark Alliance” series on one side, and angry conspiratorial blacks on the other.<sup>36</sup> He did recognize, though, that “to many blacks, pushing the paranoia angle looked like a plot to write off their suspicions as delusions.”

Beyond the race of the reporters who wrote the stories, however, the issue over black paranoia in the sustained media bashing of “Dark Alliance” raises a fundamental question: is the racial profiling of an entire group of people any more acceptable in society when it is done in the press than by police on the street? The answer, of course, is no, with the final responsibility resting with the elite, white-owned media conglomerates that promoted such racially offensive stories on black paranoia in the first place.

## ADVANCING THE STORY

With the Big Three newspapers' attacks on Gary Webb's investigation now concluded by November 1996, and the follow-up stories by these and other major US news companies continuing to tag the "Dark Alliance" investigation with the D-word—"discredited"—the American public could be forgiven for thinking that "Dark Alliance" was now gone for good.

It was not. Within the United States, among the few journalists who were consistently following the "Dark Alliance" series and/or advancing forward its original investigation were, on the East Coast, former Associated Press reporter Robert Parry (who had first broken the story on Nicaraguan contras and cocaine trafficking back in 1985), and weekly newspaper reporter Nick Schou, who had cooperated with Webb on part of the "Dark Alliance" investigation, on the West Coast.<sup>37</sup>

In late November 1996, two reporters from the *Dallas Morning News* in Texas, David LaGessee and George Rodrigue, broke a related story that revived the contra-drug issue from a decade earlier in the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> The story focused on former DEA agent Celerino Castillo III and how he had confirmed links between the CIA-supported Nicaraguan contras and cocaine trafficking while investigating an airport in the Central American nation of El Salvador—and how he had come under internal DEA pressure to back off his investigation.

More importantly, outside the United States, the "Dark Alliance" investigation had been read worldwide on the Internet and was being followed with particular interest by news organizations in Europe. The December 12, 1996 edition of the *Independent*, one of the major British newspapers, gave a heads-up to its readers about a television documentary to be aired that same evening on the Independent Television (ITV) network of England that would advance the CIA-contracrack cocaine story beyond what had already been reported by Gary Webb in the *San Jose Mercury News*.<sup>39</sup>

When the half-hour documentary, titled "The Crack Conspiracy," aired that night on ITV's *The Big Story* program, potentially watched by millions of viewers in Europe, it lived up to the British print media publicity, and then some. The ITV report (an archived copy of which was obtained by this author) included on-camera interviews with the

key players in the still-unfolding “Dark Alliance” drama—*Mercury News* reporter Gary Webb, “Freeway” Rick Ross in prison in California, cocaine trafficker Norwin Meneses in prison in Nicaragua, Castillo of the DEA, and others related to the story.<sup>40</sup> The program respectfully addressed African-American beliefs about the CIA and the rise of crack cocaine as natural concerns rather than as illogical symptoms of black paranoia.

While Webb’s “Dark Alliance” series had shown that the CIA, at the very least, knew about contra drug trafficking into the US and let it continue, the ITV report went further with what it called “major new revelations”: the CIA, it asserted, was an active participant in that drug smuggling. ITV’s prime witness was one that Gary Webb had not yet tracked down in his “Dark Alliance” investigation (but soon would)—Carlos Cabezas, a Nicaraguan attorney and former pilot who had trafficked cocaine into the United States in the 1980s and served time for that in a US prison. Cabezas told ITV in an off-camera interview in Nicaragua that he had had dealings directly with a Costa Rican-based CIA agent, a Venezuelan named Ivan Gómez, who was making sure that drug profits from the sales of cocaine within the US ended up going back to the CIA-sponsored Nicaraguan contras in Central America instead of into the pockets of Nicaraguan drug traffickers. Said Cabezas: “They told me who he [Gómez] was and the reason that he was there. It was to make sure that the money was given to the right people and nobody was taking advantage of the situation and nobody was taking profit that they were not supposed to. And that was it. He was making sure that the money goes to the contra revolution.”<sup>41</sup>

ITV also did an on-camera interview with the ex-CIA official who oversaw the agency’s Nicaraguan contra-support program back in the 1980s, Duane Clarridge. He denied knowing anything about such cocaine smuggling under his watch at the time. When the ITV reporter, Dermot Murnaghan, suggested to Clarridge that he was being less than truthful, Clarridge thrust his fist in front of the reporter, threatening with an expletive to physically assault him in the face. Clarridge ended up walking out of the interview, more expletives flying.

The British television report had backed up Webb’s “Dark Alliance” series and taken it even further. But American media on the

whole were not interested. The ITV report barely registered on the radar of US independent/alternative media at the time, and no US corporate press company appears to have acknowledged the ITV program and its major advance of Webb's story. One US government agency, on the other hand, had no such trouble gaining the attention of the American media when it came to "Dark Alliance."

## THE PRESS AND "PRODUCTIVE RELATIONS"

Just how closely the CIA was monitoring the public firestorm over the *Mercury News* investigative series back in 1996 as it played out in real time was revealed by an in-house CIA journal report on the "Dark Alliance" investigation that was declassified and released in 2014. The report, originally written in 1997, also gives a glimpse into how the CIA milked the relationships it had built over time with journalists to effectively help shift the media glare away from the message—the CIA-*contra*-crack cocaine connections outlined in "Dark Alliance"—and onto Gary Webb and the *Mercury News* as the messenger.<sup>42</sup>

The six-page CIA report showed how, from the start, the agency went about deceiving and manipulating the news media during the press inquiries that began filtering in just after "Dark Alliance" was published.<sup>43</sup> ". . . CIA media spokesmen would remind reporters seeking comment that this series represented no real news, in that similar charges were made in the 1980s and were investigated by the Congress and were found to be without substance," stated the report.<sup>44</sup> In fact, "Dark Alliance" broke new investigative ground on several counts, and both the AP news reports and congressional Kerry investigation of the 1980s had uncovered much substantial evidence linking the CIA-backed Nicaraguan *contras* to cocaine trafficking.

A number of news organizations across the United States, to their credit, found "Dark Alliance" newsworthy enough when it first came out to reprint excerpts of the series in their own publications. But on at least one occasion, the CIA report noted, "one major news affiliate, after speaking with a CIA media spokesman, decided not to run the ['Dark Alliance'] story."

Then in late September 1996, after about a month of CIA assurances to journalists nationwide that there was no substance at all

to the “Dark Alliance” series, the media tide started turning in the agency’s favor. “Respected columnists, including prominent blacks, began to question the motives of those who uncritically accepted the idea that CIA was responsible for destroying black communities,” the report said. “Others took a hard look at the evidence provided by the *Mercury News*—something [CIA] Public Affairs encouraged from the beginning—and found it unconvincing.”<sup>45</sup>

The back-to-back attacks on “Dark Alliance” by the Big Three newspapers in October 1996, “especially the *Los Angeles Times*,” the CIA report said, were the decisive turning point. After that, other news stories in the US corporate press grew more skeptical of the claims of a CIA-drug conspiracy than they were of the CIA itself by a three-to-one margin.<sup>46</sup>

And the CIA was not beyond breaking its own institutional rule of neither confirming nor denying a suspected person’s links to the agency, the report divulged, when it came to helping the media to “undermine” Webb’s series: “[I]n order to help a journalist working on a story that would undermine the *Mercury News* allegations, [CIA] Public Affairs was able to deny any affiliation of a particular individual—which is a rare exception to the general policy that CIA does not comment on any individual’s alleged CIA ties.”

While media companies were inclined to take the CIA’s word, that kind of trusting attitude apparently cost some reporters their credibility among an angry public that was not fully buying the official denials. “Journalists who wrote articles skeptical of the charges against CIA were pilloried in print—one was accused of serving as a CIA lackey—and even threatened with physical harm over their articles,” according to the report.<sup>47</sup>

Understanding the decades-long relationship between the press and the US government’s premier spy agency goes a long way toward explaining such American public skepticism of the media during the “Dark Alliance” firestorm. In at least one case, there was a direct link between a former CIA asset in the media and the corporate press attacks on the “Dark Alliance” series. That link was in the person of Walter Pincus, the veteran national security affairs reporter for the *Washington Post*, the newspaper that did the most to let the CIA off the hook during the “Dark Alliance” controversy. It was Pincus who

cowrote the first extensive takedown of “Dark Alliance” in October 1996 that would be followed in short order by other media companies.

### **Assets in the Media**

As Gary Webb continued investigating “Dark Alliance” in the wake of those media attacks, he was tipped off to a news article in the archives of his own newspaper, the *San Jose Mercury News*, written by none other than *Washington Post* reporter Walter Pincus. In the lengthy article, which had been syndicated by the *Post* and carried in several American newspapers in February 1967, Pincus essentially outed himself as an ex-CIA media asset in the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>48</sup>

In that 1967 article he wrote how, as a young freelance writer, he had been recruited by a US-based student organization funded by the CIA to infiltrate an international youth conference in Vienna, Austria, and did so, later volunteering to testify if necessary about what he had observed to the anticommunist House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the United States.<sup>49</sup> Pincus also traveled to the African nations of Ghana and Guinea, and reported back to his CIA handler on the international youth conferences he joined there. “No one openly questioned my presence,” Pincus wrote of his Ghana experiences. “But I had been briefed in Washington on each of them. None was remotely aware of CIA’s interest.” Back home in the USA, Pincus added, he was offered steady work with the CIA but turned the job down.<sup>50</sup>

No matter. By the time that “Dark Alliance” came out in 1996, three decades later, *Washington Post* reporter Pincus had built up something of a reputation within the CIA, according to the right-wing *Washington Times* newspaper, as “the CIA’s house reporter.”<sup>51</sup>

The CIA and its network of cooperative media assets—both institutional and individual, and within the United States and internationally—has been the subject of several well-documented exposés in US news media circles in past decades, most notably in the respected *Columbia Journalism Review* by the late Stuart H. Loory, a former *Los Angeles Times* White House correspondent; in *Rolling Stone* magazine by former *Washington Post* Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein; and even in a front-page series over a few days in the *New York Times*.<sup>52</sup>



But despite those and other revelations in past years, ties between the press and the CIA have persisted at varying levels, with neither party being too eager to have the facts behind those longstanding links made public.

To be very clear: the only evidence that has surfaced so far of a direct link to a CIA media asset, past or present, in the “Dark Alliance” saga is that of Walter Pincus of the *Washington Post*. In any case, as the CIA’s recently released in-house journal report on “Dark Alliance” also makes clear, the agency’s “ground base of already productive relations with journalists” had paid off and the CIA managed to “prevent this story from becoming an unmitigated disaster.”<sup>53</sup> The US government could claim a limited victory in the battle over the truth. “In the world of public relations, as in war,” the report stated, “avoiding a rout in the face of hostile multitudes can be considered a success.”

## DISAPPEARING ACT

December 31, 1996, marked the end of a tumultuous year for the *San Jose Mercury News* and reporter Gary Webb. It was also the day that the last article under his name would make it into print in the newspaper as part of his “Dark Alliance” investigation.<sup>54</sup> Webb later submitted four additional follow-up stories to his editors as part of the investigation, but the stories never ran.

By May 1997, nine months after “Dark Alliance” had first appeared, the combined weight of the continuing public outrage over suspected US government involvement in the crack cocaine outbreak, the government’s vehement denials, and the corporate media’s discrediting of “Dark Alliance” was taking its toll. On May 11, *Mercury News* executive editor Jerry Ceppos announced in a 1,200-word open letter to the paper’s readers that he had reexamined the series and found several “shortcomings” in the presentation and wording of “Dark Alliance.”<sup>55</sup>

Ceppos’s personal column, carried on the front page of the paper’s Sunday opinion section, stands out as surely one of the oddest editorial retreats from a legitimate news story from among a long line of such retreats throughout US press history. Ceppos did not openly apologize to readers for anything in the article. He did not offer a



full retraction or recantation of the series or, for that matter, even a detailed correction of what Webb had originally investigated in “Dark Alliance.”

What he did do was list four relatively minor points on which the “Dark Alliance” series came up short in his view: omitting a single instance of conflicting court testimony that should have been included in the story (but which had been removed by Webb’s editors during the editing process); failing to explain that the figure of “millions” of dollars raised by the Nicaraguan traffickers in street drug sales in the US was just an estimate, not a hard fact; overestimating the influence of the Nicaraguan drug traffickers on the origins of the crack cocaine outbreak in Los Angeles and nationwide; and implying CIA knowledge of the whole thing. “I feel that we did not have proof that top CIA officials knew of the relationship,” Ceppos wrote, although the “Dark Alliance” series never alleged that they had known.

But in a key point, he emphasized that the “shortcomings” of the series did not detract from an otherwise well-done job: “Does the

presence of conflicting information invalidate our entire effort? I strongly believe the answer is no, and that this story was right on many important points.”

In the end, that was not enough to save the story, and with Ceppos’s final words on the matter—“But ultimately, the responsibility was, and is, mine”—the newspaper abandoned the “Dark Alliance” investigation. The entire “Dark Alliance” website was pulled down not long afterward. One of the most significant news stories in decades had disappeared without a trace in the vast digital expanse known as the information superhighway.

If that was not a white flag of journalistic surrender, it was certainly how other corporate media giants viewed it. *The New York Times* played up Ceppos’s retreat in a lengthy, front-page news article, the first time that the *Times* apparently found the snit over “Dark Alliance” worthy of printing on page one. “It is gratifying to see that a large segment of the media . . . has taken a serious and objective look at how this story was constructed and reported,” a thankful CIA spokesman was quoted as saying.<sup>56</sup>

“The Mercury News Comes Clean” gloated the headline of an editorial carried in the *Times* the next day.<sup>57</sup> America’s newspaper of record had nothing but praise for the way in which the *Mercury News* editor had handled the problem, saying, “His candor and self-criticism set a high standard for cases in which journalists make egregious errors.”

A few days later, the *New York Times* rolled out the royal carpet on its op-ed pages for Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) chemistry professor John M. Deutch, the beleaguered director of the CIA at the time of the uproar over “Dark Alliance.”<sup>58</sup> Deutch sniffed in an opinion article that he was “not impressed”—neither with the original “Dark Alliance” series and its suggestion of CIA links to drug trafficking, nor with the *Mercury News*’ retreat from the series now. The establishment press, he said, was missing the real story: the way that “Dark Alliance” had somehow managed to gain credibility among African-Americans. Raising once more the black paranoia specter, Deutch proffered the Tuskegee syphilis experiment and recalled an enraged black audience of hundreds that he had encountered a few months earlier during an unprecedented public appearance by him in South Central Los Angeles, ground zero of the crack

cocaine outbreak.<sup>59</sup> The ex-CIA chief also used his free podium in the *Times* to once again deny, unchallenged, that the agency ever “directed or knowingly condoned drug smuggling into the United States.”

One voice that was noticeably absent from the opinion pages of the *New York Times* and other corporate press at the time of the *Mercury News* retreat from “Dark Alliance” was that of Gary Webb. Denied a chance to respond in his own newspaper and virtually blacklisted by the big US media companies, Webb used the Internet to issue a formal rebuttal on behalf of himself and his colleague in the “Dark Alliance” investigation, Nicaragua-based Swiss journalist Georg Hodel—a rebuttal that seems to have gone unreported in both corporate and independent news media in the years since then. “The only ‘shortcoming’ in our Dark Alliance series is that it didn’t go far enough,” Webb wrote in a message posted to Usenet discussion groups.<sup>60</sup> “What Mr. Ceppos’ column fails to mention is that, as a result of our continuing investigation, we DO have evidence of direct CIA involvement with this Contra drug operation. . . . Perhaps one day Mr. Ceppos will allow us to share this information with the public.”

“Despite the efforts of the biggest newspapers in the country to discredit our work,” Webb continued, “our central findings [in ‘Dark Alliance’] remain unchallenged: After being instructed by a CIA agent to raise money in California for the Contras, two Contra drug dealers began selling vast amounts of cocaine in inner-city Los Angeles, primarily to the Crips and Bloods [street gangs]. Some of the profits went to pay for the CIA’s covert war against the Sandinistas. We wrote last year that the amounts were in the millions and we stand by that statement. . . . Only a fool could argue that this wasn’t a critical factor in the spread of crack from South Central to the rest of the country.”

## A LEGACY OF RESISTANCE

Gary Webb was later removed from the “Dark Alliance” investigation altogether by his editors, and ended up resigning from the *San Jose Mercury News* in disgust in December 1997. He got a job as an investigative writer for the California state government and continued to follow up the “Dark Alliance” leads on his own, eventually getting

the whole CIA-contra-crack cocaine story told in a book published in 1998 by New York-based Seven Stories Press (publisher of this *Censored* volume).

But the gilded gates to the US daily newspaper business that had raised Webb as one of the best investigative journalists of his generation were now closed, and he would never be accepted back there again. A slow, deep slide by Webb into financial instability and emotional depression followed. On December 10, 2004—seven years to the day after leaving the *San Jose Mercury News*—Webb was found dead at age forty-nine in his home in Sacramento, California, of two gunshot wounds to the head. The coroner's office ruled the death a suicide.

Three months after he died, the *Los Angeles Times*, not to be denied the last word on “Dark Alliance,” published a lengthy, often-unflattering feature article about Webb in the entertainment section of the newspaper that continued to besmirch the reputation of a fellow journalist who could no longer respond.<sup>61</sup>

Webb's rise and fall from corporate media grace was later told in the well-documented book *Kill the Messenger* by journalist Nick Schou and was dramatized in 2014 in a Hollywood movie of the same name. A nonfiction film by director Marc Levin that revisited “Dark Alliance” and the US crack cocaine explosion, *Freeway: Crack in the System*, was broadcast on the Al Jazeera America cable television network in March 2015.<sup>62</sup>

Looking back twenty years on the media brushfire of a controversy that was “Dark Alliance,” what did Gary Webb's investigative series achieve and what did it fail to do?

The groundswell of public opinion over “Dark Alliance,” especially from the African-American community, forced three separate US government investigations that eventually resulted in four internal reports being released: two by the CIA in 1998, one by the US Department of Justice that same year, and another by the US congressional House Intelligence Committee in 2000.<sup>63</sup> All the reports, not surprisingly, absolved the US government of wrongdoing and denied any illicit CIA connections to the main characters in “Dark Alliance.” But in their attempt at whitewashing history, the official reports contained valuable facts and background information that could be

gleaned in validating the central findings in “Dark Alliance,” showing that in many ways Webb’s series had only scratched the surface of ties between the CIA, the contras, and crack cocaine. Webb, through his investigation, did a commendable public service in recovering a piece of America’s recent lost history.

If “Dark Alliance” is remembered for any one thing, it is perhaps for the astonishing sight of the head of the CIA taking time out from other pressing top-secret priorities like military coups and proxy wars overseas to go and face reality on the American inner-city streets of Los Angeles. CIA director John M. Deutch had been invited on November 15, 1996, to address a town hall meeting called by African-American congresswoman Juanita Millender-McDonald (D-Carson), whose congressional district included the area where the crack cocaine explosion was shown by “Dark Alliance” to have first erupted.<sup>64</sup> Deutch was compelled to address the issues raised by “Dark Alliance” before a disbelieving, jeering crowd of hundreds of mostly African-American citizens—a rare display of US government accountability directly to the public.

What Gary Webb’s “Dark Alliance” series failed to do, despite much public assumption to the contrary, was offer a “smoking gun” of proof that conclusively tied together the US government and international drug trafficking. The evidence presented in “Dark Alliance” was strong and persuasive, but it was mostly circumstantial. “Dark Alliance” was not perfect in its presentation and there were several points on which the story could have been expanded or tightened up before publishing, oversights for which the *San Jose Mercury News* editors arguably deserved more blame than reporter Webb. Those editors, to this day, have not been called to account for their role in the whole debacle; all of them have instead gone on to illustrious careers in the media field and academia.<sup>65</sup>

Nearly two decades after “Dark Alliance” had been put in its proverbial grave by the influential US media establishment, an opinion poll found that public trust in the Fourth Estate had sunk to yet another all-time low.<sup>66</sup> Webb’s hard-hitting “Dark Alliance” investigation, meanwhile, has stood the test of time as a classic, high-quality work of investigative journalism.

But it would be a mistake to view the “Dark Alliance” controversy

as an isolated incident. Rather, the real legacy of Gary Webb's groundbreaking investigation is to be found as part of a continuum of resistance to the censorship of news and the suppression of truth that dates far back in the North American experience—from well before African-American journalist Ida B. Wells and her perilous reporting on lynchings in US southern states in the late 1800s,<sup>67</sup> to well after *New York Times* reporter Seymour M. Hersh being “reviled” by peers in the big news media companies for his 1974 front-page exposé of illegal CIA spying on US citizens.<sup>68</sup> Hersh, in 2015, would once again find himself before the US corporate media firing squad for a lengthy exposé, published in Britain, that reported the US government's account of its courageous killing of renowned Saudi Arabian evildoer Osama bin Laden to be untrue.<sup>69</sup>

As Columbia University professor and former journalist Anya Schiffrin has chronicled in her 2014 book *Global Muckraking*, wherever in the world there have been attempts to keep the truth from being reported, there have also been journalists, writers, editors, and other muckrakers who take great risks to report the truth, often in defiance of powerful corporate media interests.<sup>70</sup>

The “Dark Alliance” investigation of the 1990s is but one part of a long tradition of seeking out the truth and resisting news censorship and suppression, a tradition that continues up to the present day. Gary Webb, the author of that controversial series of twenty years ago, may have fallen, but in the Internet age of investigative journalism, which his “Dark Alliance” story helped to inaugurate in such a meaningful way, future generations of journalists are inspired to keep that rich tradition of international muckraking alive by continuing to investigate, report, and expose the truths that those in authority would rather keep hidden away. That, in the end, is the ultimate karmic justice.

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# **CENSORED 2016**

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The Top Censored Stories and Media Analysis of 2014–15

**Mickey Huff** and **Andy Lee Roth**  
with **Project Censored**

Foreword by  
**Nicholas Johnson**

Cartoons by  
**Khalil Bendib**



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