

A Tribute to Robert Parry: Independent Journalism at Its Best

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Journalism lost one of its most valuable investigators when Robert Parry died from pancreatic cancer on January 27, at the age of 68. He was the first reporter to reveal Oliver North's operation in the White House basement (AP, 6/10/1985), and the co-author of the first report on Contra drug-smuggling (AP, [12/21/1985](#)). He did some of the most important work investigating the 1980 Reagan campaign's efforts to delay the return of US hostages held in Iran, a scandal known as the [October Surprise](#).

After breaking his first big stories with the Associated Press, Bob moved on to Newsweek and then later PBS's Frontline. Frustrated with the limits and compromises of corporate media—he was once told that a story on Contra financial skullduggery had to be watered down because Newsweekowner Katharine Graham was having Henry Kissinger as a weekend guest (Media Beat, [4/23/98](#))—Bob launched his own online outlet, [Consortium News](#).

"He was a pioneer in bringing maverick journalism to the Internet," FAIR founder Jeff Cohen [wrote](#) after Bob's death. "Bob was a refugee from mainstream media who, like Izzy Stone, went on to build an uncensored and uncensorable outlet."

Bob believed deeply in journalism, both as a vital force for shaping the world and as a moral imperative. In a moving tribute to his father, Nat Parry (Consortium News, [1/29/18](#)) wrote that one of his earliest memories

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."

FAIR was blessed to have Bob not just as an inspiration and ally but as an occasional contributor. As a practitioner of journalism at its best, his insights into what happened when journalism went wrong were always valuable. In gratitude and fond memory, we offer some excerpts from a small part of an enduring body of work.

Even Nixon, the grand strategist, could never have guessed how well his plans would have worked out a quarter century later—and how much of his chip-on-the-shoulder paranoia would still resonate today in a powerful conservative press establishment.

In the 25 years since Nixon started “pushing” this project, the conservatives have constructed a truly intimidating media machine. It ranges from nationwide radio talk shows by Rush Limbaugh and scores of Limbaugh-wannabes, to dozens of attack magazines, newspapers, newsletters and right-wing opinion columns, to national cable television networks propagating hard-line conservative values and viewpoints, to documentary producers who specialize in slick character assassination, to mega-buck publishing houses that add footnotes to white-supremacist theories anti a veneer of respectability to journalistic fabrications, and even to narrowly focused organizations that exist simply to hurt the surviving mainstream journalists who still won’t toe the line.

This conservative media machine now rivals—and may well surpass—the power and the influence of the old-line press. Both directly and indirectly, this right-wing media machine holds sway over much of the national agenda, deciding which ideas and individuals are accepted and which are marginalized.

—“The Rise of the Right-Wing Media Machine” (Extra!, [3-4/1995](#))

The [Wall Street] Journal editorial page, of course, was not alone in missing or misreporting aspects of Iran-Contra-connected investigations, nor in exaggerating the Whitewater affair. But the Journal’s editorial page stands out as a master of journalistic hypocrisy in the two controversies. On Iran/Contra, the Journal exploited its national influence to hamper and harass investigators and journalists examining serious crimes, including—by the Journal’s own belated admission—drug-trafficking, money-laundering and obstruction of justice. On Whitewater, conversely, the editorial page has served as the principal sounding board for baseless rumors.

—“Hast Seen the Whitewater Whale?” (Extra!, [9-10/1995](#))

Image on the right: Colin Powell touring the conquered nation of Panama.



[Colin] Powell's justification for the cold-blooded murder of unarmed Vietnamese civilians is chilling. It is not only "brutal"—no need for a question mark—to murder an unarmed civilian in the manner Powell described; it is a war crime. Further, the killing is not excused by the fact that American soldiers, including Powell's friends, were dying in combat. The death of American soldiers was exactly the rationale used by Lt. William Calley for the slaughter of hundreds of Vietnamese villagers, including babies, in My Lai.

The Powell memoirs offer similar defenses for the practice of applying Zippo lighters to the hooches of Vietnamese civilians during his first tour in Vietnam, as an adviser to South Vietnam's army, in 1963. But when journalists who yearned for Colin Powell read his memoirs, they took almost no note of Powell's stunning lack of compassion when civilians were dying: whether Vietnamese, Nicaraguan, Panamanian or Iraqi.

—"Powell Media Mania," with Norman Solomon (Extra!, [1-2/1996](#))

When Gary Webb revived the Contra/cocaine issue in August 1996 with a 20,000-word, three-part series entitled "Dark Alliance" ([8/18-20/1996](#)), editors at major newspapers already had a powerful self-interest to slap down a story that they had disparaged for the past decade.

The challenge to their earlier judgments was doubly painful because the [San Jose] Mercury News' sophisticated website ensured that Webb's series made a big splash on the Internet, which was just emerging as a threat to the traditional news media. Also, the African-American community was furious at the possibility that U.S. government policies had contributed to the crack-cocaine epidemic.

In other words, the mostly white, male editors at the major newspapers saw their preeminence in judging news challenged by an upstart regional newspaper, the Internet and common American citizens who also happened to be black. So even as the CIA was prepared to conduct a relatively thorough and honest investigation, the major newspapers seemed more eager to protect their reputations and their turf.

—"America's Debt to Gary Webb" (Extra!, [3-4/05](#))

Tactical retreats by "humbled" pro-war columnists focused on US ineptness in waging the

war, not on the illegality, immorality and insanity of invading a major Arab country that wasn't threatening the United States. By failing to expand the criticism of Bush beyond success or failure, the mainstream US news media continued to embrace implicitly Bush's assertion of a special American right to attack wherever and whenever the president says.

It was still out of bounds to discuss how the Iraq invasion violated the Nuremberg principle against aggressive war and the United Nations Charter, which bars attacking another country except in cases of self-defense or with the approval of the UN Security Council. To one extent or another, nearly all major US news outlets had bought into the imperial neoconservative vision of an all-powerful United States that operates outside of international law.

—"Journalists 'Humbled' but Unrepentant," with Sam and Nat Parry (Extra!, [11-12/07](#))

Ultimately, the GOP cover-up strategy proved highly effective, as Democrats grew timid and neoconservative journalists—then emerging as a powerful force in the Washington media—took the lead in decrying the October Surprise allegations as a "myth." The Republicans benefited, too, from a Washington press corps that had grown weary of the complex Iran/Contra scandal. Careerist reporters in the mainstream press had learned that the route to advancement lay more in "debunking" such complicated national security scandals than in pursuing them.

—"Debunking the Debunkers of the October Surprise" (Extra!, [3/13](#))

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