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CIA-Contra Cocaine Scandal: The Tragic Saga of Gary Webb

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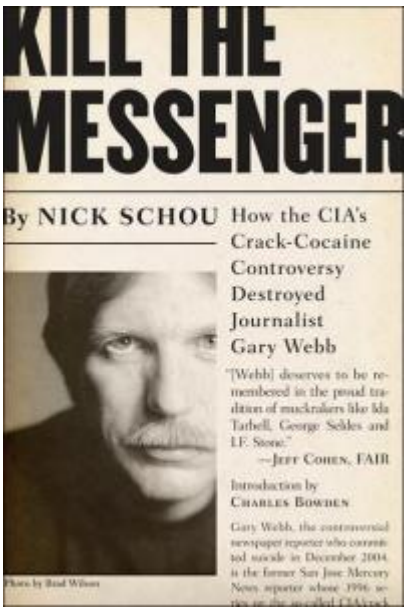
Starring Jeremy Renner as the late Gary Webb, the movie of Webb's investigation of the CIA's Contra-cocaine scandal – and of Webb's destruction by mainstream news outlets – is set to begin filming this summer. If Hollywood gets the story right, it will be a dark and enlightening tale.

While there was the usual glitz and glamour at this year's Oscars, the star not strolling down the red carpet was actually an intelligence arm of the U.S. government. By bestowing "Argo" with its top award, the Academy gave props to the CIA for the forgotten heroic mission to save six Americans trapped in Iran. "Zero Dark Thirty," also up for best picture, portrayed CIA analysts as heroes ridding the planet of a psychopathic murderer.

But the CIA is not likely to be singing "Hurrah For Hollywood" for long. The glow from Hollywood's bright lights the CIA has been basking in of late might fade to black as a new movie starts shooting this summer. "Killing The Messenger," starring Jeremy Renner of "The Hurt Locker," "The Avengers" and "The Bourne Legacy" as journalist Gary Webb, will focus on the CIA's not so flattering side, casting another shadow on the dark, murky world of warcraft.



So, why is Hollywood so interested in an "ancient" story that has traversed through time over the past three decades? Because Gary Webb, with a Hunter S. Thompson-esque swagger, was the quintessential investigative reporter – a dogged inquisitor with innately crazy-good skills. Because Gary Webb was tough. And because, eight years after his series

“Dark Alliance” which detailed tangential ties between crack kingpins and the CIA, Gary Webb fired two shots into his head killing himself. Two shots. Even in desperation Gary was determined.

Based on the book by Nick Schou, “Kill The Messenger” will focus on Gary Webb’s sad saga, forced to defend himself from withering criticism — not just from the government but from within the ranks of his own profession. Hollywood obviously cares about the tragic tale of Gary Webb because it has all the elements of an explosive drama: conflict, controversy, and political intrigue. It provides for worthy commentary fodder on a slew of our democratic institutions.

Beyond the immensely important aspects connecting the CIA to drug dealers, the rest of us should care because behind this little slice of history is a cautionary tale for all news gatherers and consumers of the New Media. Because, while on the surface, Webb’s “Dark Alliance” series for the San Jose Mercury News in 1996 was based on old-school gumshoe reporting techniques, it helped usher in the digital world of news dissemination.

Print media might be on its deathbed, but even in a twitterverse our quest — and thirst – for in-depth, explanatory journalism should never wane. As “computersumers,” we face a digital dilemma — one that sometimes pits expediency and quantity over content and quality.

To understand the importance of “Kill The Messenger” we have to spend some time with Gary’s story. To prepare, it’s necessary to travel back into history. We owe it to Gary Webb. More importantly, at a time when the way we are receiving our news is changing, we owe it to ourselves.

When I first read — back in the day — Webb’s 1996 account in the San Jose Mercury News linking the CIA to the funneling of cocaine into inner city Los Angeles, I thought, “Big Deal.” To me, this was old news. You see, I knew much of what Gary was reporting had been written before.

Soon, the firestorm erupted. My thinking changed: “Gary my boy, what the hell have you gotten into.” As a fellow journalist, I had both a personal and professional interest in Gary’s expose. But it was my reporter’s hat that I initially and instinctively put on my head. Thus, the cautionary tales begin.

My professional interest in Gary’s report dated back ten years prior, to the time of colorful Oliver North and the Reagan administration’s proxy war in Nicaragua. Better known as the Contra War, it culminated in humiliation for Reagan and the CIA when it was revealed they had been trading arms to Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages in Lebanon. The money Iran paid for American missiles was passed through covert back channels to the Contras fighting against the Nicaraguan socialist Sandinista government. Better known as the Iran-Contra scandal, all of this was, of course, against U.S. policy. At least that’s what Congress thought.

While Congress was going apoplectic, all of the reporters in Washington — myself included — were attempting to put flesh on the bones of the Reagan Administration’s skeleton officials were desperately trying to keep shoved in the proverbial closet.

(One of my stories prior to the Iran-Contra revelation found that CIA director William Casey,

Defense Department officials and a prominent U.S. senator had dealings with a Greek arms broker who was doing his best to ship U.S. made Cobra attack helicopters to Iran. The story, preserved in the Almanac of American Politics, caused a minor uproar. But such intelligence matters are almost always conducted in secret under the guise of national security. Due to such nebulous conditions we will probably never know if this case had any direct or indirect Iran-Contra implications.)

Iran-Contra wasn't the first big scandal, however, involving the CIA's-sponsored war in the dark forests of Central America. At least it shouldn't have been. A year before news of Iran-Contra made headlines, Associated Press reporters Robert Parry and Brian Barger broke a story saying the Contras were exporting drugs to the U.S. to help pay for the war effort. Big Media all but ignored the story. There was no follow-up or flushing out by the major newspapers, but there was by our new Secretary of State — then Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry.

Kerry and his band of merry staffers started digging. As part of the Foreign Relations Committee, Kerry confirmed the Contras were involved in the drug trade. The committee report stated unequivocally that U.S. government agencies knew about the drug trafficking. In fact, at least four companies paid $800,000 by the State Department to deliver aid to the Contras were known "fronts" owned by narcotics smugglers.

Thanks to Ollie North himself, other documentation was provided. North's handwritten meeting notes suggest the Contras got $14 million in financing from drug profits to buy a cache of Honduran weapons. One noted a Contra commander surrounded himself with people who are in the war not only to fight but to "make money," including some dealing drugs. Another memo said a Honduran airplane delivering supplies to the Contras from New Orleans was "probably" making return drug runs into the U.S. The list goes on.

Of course, the Reagan folks did their best to hush up the dirty details. Perhaps, given Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" to drugs pet project, they just didn't want the embarrassment. President Reagan, who publicly had all but compared these "freedom fighters" to our Founding Fathers is said to have privately complained they were little more than thugs. Reports were rampant the Contras had engaged in rape and pillage in border villages.

And, even though the work done by Parry, Barger and Kerry linking major narcotics dealing to the U.S. by an Army-sanctioned, paid for and blessed, by our government was — through the hindsight of history — arguably a bigger scandal than Iran-Contra itself, again Big Media basically ignored it. Just as, at best, U.S. government agencies looked the other way as the Contras helped deliver drugs to our streets, the media looked the other way, at best not realizing the importance of the story staring right at us.

Authors Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall pretty much put an exclamation point on the government's complicity in this sordid world of drug running in the 1991 book *Cocaine Politics*.

So, we fast-forward to Gary Webb and his "Dark Alliance" series. As I looked over the wire story, I immediately remembered the AP investigations and the Kerry Committee report. "This is old news," I thought. Then I realized what Gary had accomplished.

As any good investigative reporter working on the local level, Gary had taken forgotten dispatches from far off places and out-of-focus facts from government reports and put a

flesh and blood face on this sordid story. He provided needed context to a disturbing episode of out-of-control politics. Webb had done what other reporters probably should have done years before. Except now he was exposing the true damage wrought by the drug thugs — crack. In their twisted genius, pushers had transformed a mundane narcotic into this cheap hideously addictive monster.

Now working in television in Ohio, I witnessed the crack dens and the horribly harming impact crack was having, irreparably destroying lives — especially those lives of minorities in the urban corridors. But it was Gary who was providing some of the genesis for this scourge. His work should have been celebrated. But in Big Media circles it wasn't.

Webb and the Mercury News soon faced the cudgel of Big Media. Papers like the L.A. Times, The New York Times and even The Washington Post published page one stories critical of Webb's findings. Page one. Remember our history. These papers didn't cover the original reports of government complicity in drug dealing on page one.

Why the prominent journalistic lambasting? The big complaint from Big Media seemed to be that Webb and his paper had overreached in its writing and conclusions. They said he had implied the CIA, acting as a coke-crazed puppet master, orchestrated the Contra drug operation as if Langley had dispatched agents to help them unload the coke from the planes, set up the crack labs and stood cloaked in trench coats on street corners displaying the rock for sale. Therefore, Gary's entire supposition was tainted.

Except that's not really what his story said. Webb's piece said that the drug traffickers had ties to Contras backed by the CIA. It wasn't a CIA operational plot, but rather it sanctioned the Contras and failed to stop the illegally gotten gains. In fact, in one case the CIA asked the Department of Justice to give back funds confiscated during a Contra drug bust in California.

The big three papers harped on "Dark Alliance" conclusions that millions of dollars from the California coke ring went back into Contra coffers. They said that figure was hugely inflated. They also said the series was wildly off the mark in linking crack's insidious spread across the country to the L.A. Contra-connected pushers.

Perhaps the most disingenuous critique came from the L.A. Times which reported Webb had puffed up the importance of the local drug kingpin central to the story. "Even on the best day Ricky Ross had, there was way more crack cocaine out there than he could ever control," they quoted a police source. There's just one problem. Webb was echoing what the Times had said about this local dealer two years before.

"If there was a criminal mastermind behind crack's decade-long reign, if there was one outlaw capitalist most responsible for flooding Los Angeles streets with mass-marketed cocaine, his name was Freeway Rick," the Times' earlier story said. Credibility? Okay.

We know there were a number of cocaine pipelines into the U.S. — even from the Contras, but Ricky Ross did peddle the drug into my hometown of Cincinnati. Reports state his coke empire reached into Pennsylvania and New York. According to my GPS, that qualifies as spreading the epidemic.

And how do we know how much money was funneled to the Contras from any one particular drug deal? There is conflicting evidence. But it's not like the Contras, the CIA or Ollie North

were using Price Waterhouse CPA's to keep track. Simply, there are plenty of discrepancies between the statements of this band of thieves.

Some critics even got into the semantic quibble of what's the difference between a CIA officer, an agent, an asset and an operative. If it quacks does it matter if it's a Mallard or Daffy the Duck?

To be sure, the series did warrant a few criticisms for misplaced hyperbole, but not to be shish-kebob-ed on Big Media's skewer. The biggest mistake Webb made was not placing the perfunctory call to the CIA for comment. Who knows, maybe, like a reformed addict, it would have come clean. But by relying on CIA denials, many of which turned out not to be true, and contradictory court testimony to debunk "Dark Alliance," Big Media itself was guilty of overzealousness.

Steve Weinberg, one of the deans of investigative reporting wrote, "Even if Webb overreached in a few paragraphs — based on my careful reading, I would say his overreaching was limited, if it occurred at all — he still had a compelling, significant investigation to publish."

The Washington's Post own ombudsman said the paper should have concerned itself with advancing the story rather than tearing down a competitor. Interestingly, in another sign of the retrenching of print, the Post recently announced it is dissolving its reader's advocate position.

Yes, Gary Webb did have some supporters. The press' full-press attack took its toll, though. While at first editors at the Mercury News defended its series, it didn't take them long to cave from the pressure.

"We did not have proof that top CIA officials knew of the relationship (between Contras and coke)," the paper's editor wrote. Odd, since there was proof Langley knew. Odder still, other in-house criticism seemed to center on what a few well-placed qualifying adverbs, adjectives and attribution could have fixed. Fixes which editors are paid to make.

As a result, the Mercury News wouldn't run Webb's follow-up stories. True, they didn't fire him but the damage was done. Gary eventually quit the paper, feeling crushed from failing to land another daily paper job.

But his story had legs — at least inside government circles. The firestorm over "Dark Alliance" sparked an in-depth reviews by both the CIA's and Justice Department's Inspectors General. Of course they both took swipes at Webb while at the same time unearthing a torrent of unsettling material regarding nefarious dealings by those under the Agency's imprimatur.

The CIA IG reported that at least 50 Contras and Contra-related entities participated in the drug trade. These drug dealing Contras weren't just low-level grunts, some were in high command. It was with one of these military commanders that the drug lords in Webb's piece met in Nicaragua. Langley knew from Day One that Contras were using drug profits to fund operations.

In one bizarre case, a Honduran general tried to import $40 million worth of coke to the U.S. Incredibly, the money was to finance the assassination of the Honduran president. The general was caught but because he was a chief CIA liaison within the Contra network, he

was given a reduced sentence at “Club Fed” in Florida.

In another remarkable example, the Agency put a known drug operative with the CIA pseudonym “Ivan Gomez” in charge of a contra commander. It was a family affair, with “Mr. Gomez’s” two brothers bringing in large amounts of coke. According to some sources, the Gomez family supplier might have aided the mighty Medellin coke cartel in its nascent days.

Sticking by the apocryphal story of duplicitous deniability, the former CIA chief in charge of the Contras said in reference to Ollie North that it was a “moral outrage” to imply a Reagan Administration official “would have countenanced” drug trafficking. Then again, given such “groupthink,” perhaps this cast of characters was in actual psychological denial.

A former CIA Central American Station Chief told the Agency IG they knew early on that some Contras were “scoundrels” dealing drugs but at the direction of Director Casey they were “going to play with these guys.”

While insisting he doesn’t believe the CIA targeted any specific community, then-Sen. John Kerry told PBS, “There’s no question in my mind that people affiliated with or on the payroll of the CIA were involved in drug trafficking while in support of the Contras.”

There’s now practically a cargo plane full of records replete with connections between the CIA and drug trafficking. Was the CIA complicit in the Contra drug trade? Check. Did the CIA and the U.S. pay the same Contra contractors who were also shipping drugs to the U.S.? Check. Did CIA Director William Casey obtain a special dispensation from the Attorney General to allow his Contra-support team to “look the other way” regarding the drug dealing? Check. Did the CIA deliberately deny to other agencies knowledge of Contra-connected dealers? Check.

For more on this staggering litany of connections I recommend two sites: Robert Parry’s Consortiumnews.com site (and its stories on Webb’s case such as “The Warning in Gary Webb’s Death”).and George Washington University’s National Security Archive.

Not surprisingly, it wasn’t just in Central America where the CIA ignored drug trafficking. It seems they used the same template with the poppy-peddling Afghan mujahedeen during their fight against the Soviets.

By operating in the subterranean world of arms and drug smuggling, the CIA took us down the rabbit hole where narco-mad hatters weren’t about to give us any straight dope, where the spooks had no clue and didn’t care where this unfettered trafficking would lead and where they were powerless to predict how many lives would be ruined in the country they were sworn to protect.

At the same time, Gary Webb was sucked into his own crevasse, spiraling down to his demise. To me, that is personal. It’s personal because I was a college classmate of Gary’s. It’s personal because when Gary faced this struggle I wasn’t in any position to offer assistance. I had just waged my own personal battle with a media corporation — left high and dry by the outside press.

It should be personal when it makes you mad — when it makes you hurt. And it’s easy to be mad over this media debacle. Yes, I’m mad at Gary, the gruff, salty-talking swashbuckler who might have been too stubborn to accept that sometimes the personal, as well as the professional, message needs massaging.

Mostly, I'm mad at the rest of us. All too often reporters, editors and media bosses forget what our job is — the responsibility we have been entrusted with. Our responsibility isn't to our egos, to be first, to win awards or to any arbitrary agendas set by bosses. The media's responsibility is to pursue truth-telling with intellectual honesty and fairness. To understand that no one story, no singular investigation will encompass the entirety of truth's intricacies. If we follow that approach, debate and democracy will benefit.

As with all democracies, though, most of the responsibility lies with the content users, citizens who must decide if they play a passive or active role as information providers shift to the more interactive delivery of the New Media. To help them decide, I'll provide a starting point — a few lessons we can all learn from Gary Webb's sacrifice and his "Dark Alliance" cautionary tale:

Perhaps what really upset reporters and editors at the big papers was they had missed the thrust of "Dark Alliance," that the government could have done more to bust the early coke rings. And now, to top it off, African-American leaders in urban communities and members of the Congressional Black Caucus were outraged. They rightly demanded some answers.

This was all happening in the back yards of our greatest and most prestigious news outlets. Instead of using the Not-In-My-Backyard effect to further the story, Big Media used it to adopt a defensive mode. Whenever readers come across important news information — like ProPublica's Dollars for Docs study — they should contact their local media outlets to promote it and to put their own NIMBY imprint on it.

Green With Envy: Journalists are normally sincere, extremely talented and dedicated. But I'm going to say it: on occasion they can be a jumbled mess. Yes, fragile. Sure, stress is a factor, but I'm not referencing the physical or emotional aspects of getting the story. Reporters are trained to take the psychological heat that comes from editors and story subjects. It's more about fear of failure.

Reporting — especially with the New Media's never-ending news cycle — is as competitive as any sport or Wall Street wheeling-and-dealing. This competitiveness, inherent to the job, however, can produce great guilt — guilt of missing the big story, guilt for getting beat. Sometimes the symptom is jealousy. I know I was jealous of my old friend's "big get."

Sometimes the symptoms resulting from envy manifests in defensive postures. I believe it was this collective guilt that contributed to Big Media's obsession with proving Webb's piece wrong. Instead, we need to celebrate and participate in the reasoned risk-taking of colleagues. When journalists are fired or vilified, New Media consumers should use the Internet's connective voice as a review board, showing support by demanding transparent accountability.

Watchdogging The Watchdogs: From their own infamous foot-in-mouth examples, The New York Times and Washington Post certainly know there will always be a place for journalistic critique.

Reality dictates that in this brave New Media World, with ubiquitous "pseudo" news sites proliferating the Web, we need more rather than fewer media watchdogs. When sites like Drudge and Breitbart can spread headlines based on bogus reports, we need watchdoggers to keep the
Web honest.

But Gary Webb wasn't like those practitioners of the spurious. He was part of the team at the Mercury News that won a Pulitzer Prize. He was cocky and confident, with a perceived cowboy persona, but, like they say, this wasn't his first rodeo. With "Dark Alliance," Webb wasn't picking fantasy facts out of thin air. He had volumes of documentation.

In a kind of twisted irony, the Mercury News became one of the first to put a major news investigation online. As a companion to the "Dark Alliance" series, it added source material such as court records and audio interviews to the cloud.

While that didn't dissuade Webb's detractors, it showed the true power of the New Media. Hits on the series skyrocketed and we got our first glimpse of how the cloud could unleash unlimited potential for research. Because cloud storage is infinite, New Media reporting should not suffer from the space limitations of the past.

In looking back at Gary's career, it struck me that some of his best, award-winning investigations were conducted with the help or support of other journalists — either reporters or editors he respected. He might have lacked those close relationships at the Mercury News.

I urge reporters to always call on that mentor or colleague to peer review important pieces. Share a byline with someone in your shop, keep a wise editor up to speed on a regular basis or seek out an old college prof that can spend time going over your material. And access to a good First Amendment attorney is a must.

The public holds both journalists and attorneys in low regard, so it's an irony that we need to support each other in protecting the public's rights. Another irony is that while journalism is a defender of democracy it is not democratic. The competitive nature of journalists and the capitalistic companies they work for can place the reporter into a conflicting position. The support system can help diffuse such contention.

Former network anchor Tom Brokaw tells a story about a columnist at the New Republic complaining that the problem with journalists is they have glass jaws — they go down with the first punch of criticism.

In the "Dark Alliance" case, editors at the Mercury News caved when facing criticism from other news organizations. Gary Webb's jaw wasn't glass it was steel. It would have been better had it been made of rubber. Journalists not only need to absorb criticism but bend with it, finding a way to incorporate what are sometimes conflicting views and conclusions.

Twitter is, no doubt, a great resource. It can alert us to important events. But citizens need more content, not less. I'm talking about online journalists taking the time to tell a complete and thoroughly researched story. And I'm talking about citizens being responsible to take the time to digest fully realized pieces of reporting.

The New Media can provide this in-depth content to a mass market faster and in more forms than ever before. But it doesn't matter how content is delivered. It's no secret print publications are in peril, yet online users need to keep reading or viewing complex, long-form stories.

Be dedicated to democracy. Remember: Watergate wasn't told in Tweets. The press — in whatever form — is known as the Fourth Estate for a reason. Don't let that die. (Hint: You've made a start by reading this essay.) Save the Tweets for offering feedback to reporters and

editors. Better yet, send a lengthy email — you remember those.

As for the CIA's new starring role in Hollywood? I'm predicting "Killing The Messenger" won't have the same Oscar buzz as "Argo." Hollywood loved its feel-good part, producing a faux movie to flimflam the Iranian Mullahs.

This time around, the Agency will be playing the bad guy, willing to fool the American public in a Cold War super-sized paranoid pursuit of communists. The reversed roles are both accurate portrayals of our most complex and paradoxical agency. And so it is for our best and brightest in the media.

H. "Corky" Johnson is an award-winning investigative reporter/producer with more than 30 years of experience. His work has appeared in The Washington Post, on "60 Minutes" and in many other media outlets. [This story originally appeared at Op-Ed News and was reprinted with the author's permission.]

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