

“Dark Alliance”: The Story Behind the Crack Cocaine Explosion

By [Project Censored](#)

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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The newly released Hollywood film “[Kill the Messenger](#),” now showing in theaters across the United States, takes on a subject that some of the mightiest media corporations in the USA no doubt thought they had killed, buried, and delivered the eulogy for a long time ago — the “Dark Alliance” investigation by newspaper reporter Gary Webb.

A groundbreaking investigation at the dawn of the Internet age in 1996, the “Dark Alliance” series, like no other newspaper reportage had done before, documented the firm links between the United States government, Central American cocaine traffickers and a domestic U.S. cocaine epidemic that had ravaged entire American communities. It was a news story that shined the spotlight on U.S. government complicity in international drug trafficking and revealed the U.S. government’s much-vaunted “war on drugs” to be a sham.

But while the U.S. government agencies involved in those illegal activities — the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in particular — had plenty of reasons for wanting this story to go away, in the end it was elements of Webb’s own profession, the press, that had been offended most by “Dark Alliance” and worked hardest to not only debunk the findings reported in “Dark Alliance” but also to discredit and destroy the journalistic credibility of Webb himself.

But like a ghost that comes back to haunt its killers, “Dark Alliance” is now being revived and retold on the silver screen for a new audience, with actor Jeremy Renner starring in the role of Gary Webb. Nearly two decades on, “Dark Alliance” is still proving to be a story that is too big to be ignored and too important to forget.

Significance of the Series

“[Dark Alliance: The Story Behind the Crack Explosion](#)” was originally published in three parts on August 18-20, 1996 in the *San Jose Mercury News*, a respected daily newspaper in northern California’s Silicon Valley, and carried on its new Mercury Center website. This was significant because it marked the first time for a U.S. newspaper to make use of the rising new technology known as the Internet and the World Wide Web as part of a major news investigation.

Webb had wanted to use his newspaper’s website especially to show the detailed documentation and evidence he had gathered as a counterweight to what he called the “high unbelievability factor” of his investigation. And that is where the next significant aspect of “Dark Alliance” comes in: It was the first news media investigation to expose the ties between the “3Cs” — the CIA, the contras and crack cocaine.

Other journalists, most notably Associated Press reporters Brian Barger and Robert Parry, had [investigated and reported on the links](#) in the mid-1980s between the U.S. government's Central Intelligence Agency and large-scale cocaine trafficking by the anti-communist paramilitary forces in Nicaragua known as the "contras." ([original archived AP report here](#))

Webb, in his "Dark Alliance" investigation a decade later in 1996, provided the crucial missing leg of the triangle: what happened to the powdered cocaine once it had been smuggled into the United States by contra supporters and turned into dried "crack" cocaine, and how the money made from such crack sales on American streets reportedly found its way back to the contras in their CIA-backed campaign to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

Although "Dark Alliance" did not directly link the CIA itself to specific acts of drug smuggling into and within the United States (and Webb was always very clear in publicly emphasizing that point), his series did provide strong circumstantial evidence that the CIA, at the very least, knew of the cocaine smuggling into the U.S. by the Nicaraguans and did not halt the activities. As Webb also demonstrated in "Dark Alliance," some U.S. government agencies even went as far as offering legal protection and bureaucratic cover to some of the most notorious cocaine traffickers in the western hemisphere.

Webb had specifically documented in his series how the crossing of paths of three main characters — Nicaraguan drug traffickers Norwin Meneses and Danilo Blandón, along with a young American drug dealer named "Freeway" Rick Ross — had eventually led to an epidemic of the crack cocaine addiction in Los Angeles that then spread to other U.S. cities, invariably hitting African-American communities the hardest.

And thirdly, Webb's "Dark Alliance" investigation was significant in the way that it was treated by the influential Big Three newspapers. Instead of building on Webb's groundbreaking investigation and advancing the story forward, the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* attacked the "Dark Alliance" series and sought to discredit both the investigation and Webb himself as a journalist and as a person. This was unprecedented, certainly in modern American press history.

Attack of the Lapdogs

If there is one group of people that is portrayed in the new movie "Kill the Messenger" even more unflatteringly than the Nicaraguan drug traffickers and the CIA, it is the lapdog journalists of the American establishment media.

The film accurately recounts how a mere two months after "Dark Alliance" had been published in the *San Jose Mercury News*, igniting a firestorm of public outrage over its findings, the Big Three newspapers began to hit back. They gave ample space to news and opinion articles that dismissed the core facts of the "Dark Alliance" series, often relying on the shakiest of sources, and essentially defended the U.S. government in its denial of complicity in the whole affair.

Here are the main news reports (along with follow-up stories) that the Big Three newspapers originally used to knock down the "Dark Alliance" story:

Washington Post — October 4, 1996

- ["The CIA and Crack: Evidence is Lacking of an Alleged Plot"](#)

- “History Lends Credence to Conspiracy Theories: Among Blacks, Allegations Can Strike a Bitter Nerve”
- “CIA, Contras and Drugs: Questions on Links Linger” (October 31, 1996)
- “Drug Dealer Who Said CIA Aided Contra Traffickers Alters Claim” (November 16, 1996)

New York Times — October 21, 1996

- [“Pivotal Figures of Newspaper Series May Be Only Bit Players”](#)
- [“Though Evidence is Thin, Tale of C.I.A. and Drugs Has a Life of Its Own”](#)
- [“The C.I.A. and Drugs”](#) (November 5, 1996; editorial)

Los Angeles Times — October 20-22, 1996

- [“Tracking the Genesis of the Crack Trade”](#)
- [“Examining Charges of CIA Role in Crack Sales”](#)
- [“Ex-Associates Doubt Onetime Drug Trafficker’s Claim of CIA Ties”](#)
- [“History Fuels Outrage Over Crack Allegations”](#)
- [“Cyberspace Contributes to Volatility of Allegations”](#)
- [“CIA Says It Has No Record of Ties to Drug Trafficker”](#) (November 6, 1996)
- [“Sheriff’s Probe Sees No CIA Role in Crack Sales”](#) (December 11, 1996)

From that point on, the “Dark Alliance” series and Webb himself would be tagged by the American press with the D-word — “discredited” — an inaccurate label that has unfortunately stuck in the popular media to this day, as recent movie reviews of “Kill the Messenger” show. But the Big Three newspapers’ attacks did little at the time in 1996 to calm down the uproar in African-American communities over the “Dark Alliance” reports.

Which caused something astonishing to happen: The director of the CIA, John Deutch, [made a public appearance](#) in South Central Los Angeles, ground zero of the crack cocaine outbreak, in an attempt to put out the public firestorm then raging over the CIA-contra-crack connection as outlined in Webb’s “Dark Alliance” series.

Deutch denounced such a connection as “an appalling charge” and defended the CIA’s integrity. “I will get to the bottom of it, and I will let you know the results of what I’ve found,” he told an angry, heckling crowd of hundreds of African-American citizens. But whether Deutch and the CIA ever really intended to get to the bottom of anything may never be known: Deutch was fired exactly one month later by U.S. president Bill Clinton. (The CIA and the U.S. Justice Department did both later release internal reports, parts of which validated Webb’s key findings in “Dark Alliance.”)

Disappearing Act

By May 1997, nine months after “Dark Alliance” had first appeared, Webb’s newspaper was buckling under the combined weight of the continuing public outrage, the ongoing media criticisms and the U.S. government’s vehement denials. On May 11, Webb’s boss, *Mercury News* executive editor Jerry Ceppos (played in the new movie by actor Oliver Platt), announced in a 1,200-word open letter to the paper’s readers that there were several “shortcomings” in the wording and presentation of “Dark Alliance,” though Ceppos did not dispute the core reporting of the series.

Ceppos’ mea culpa was not an apology, nor was it a full retraction or a detailed correction of what Webb had originally written. What the letter amounted to was Ceppos falling on his editorial sword merely for the way in which “Dark Alliance” had been interpreted or misinterpreted, rightly or wrongly, by other parties. And with that act of journalistic cowardice by Ceppos, the plug was pulled and “Dark Alliance” was gone.

“If there was ever a chance of getting to the bottom of the CIA’s involvement with drug traffickers,” Webb later wrote, “it died on that day.” The “Dark Alliance” investigation disappeared entirely from the Mercury Center website not long afterward.

One noteworthy fact that seems to have been lost in the years since then is that Gary Webb actually rebutted Ceppos and the media establishment in a formal statement he [posted at the time on a Usenet newsgroup](#) (to which this writer was also then subscribed, and can vouch for its authenticity).

“The only ‘shortcoming’ in our Dark Alliance series is that it didn’t go far enough,” Webb wrote. “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. 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.”

“Messenger” Reviewed

But some fools, especially in the corporate press, had argued just that. A newly uncovered [CIA in-house report from that time](#) shows how well the agency’s relations with “journalists [who] tend to pay attention to the information CIA provides” had paid off, and how the CIA itself did not have to do much to openly defame Webb and his “Dark Alliance” investigation. By the mid-1990s, the American media establishment was happy to do the U.S. government’s dirty work for it.

Now, 18 years on, how are these same media companies treating the ghost of “Dark Alliance” in the form of the new movie, “Kill the Messenger”?

The first shot [came from an opinion article](#) in Gary Webb’s old newspaper, the *San Jose*

Mercury News, a year and a half before the movie was released. Webb had been treated as persona non grata by the *Mercury News* ever since he had been pushed to resign from the paper back in December 1997, and one of Webb's former colleagues, Scott Herhold, was not about to let things change. To date, the *Mercury News* has not written up its own review of "Kill the Messenger."

Of the Big Three newspapers, it was the *Los Angeles Times* in 1996 that had devoted the most human resources (an in-house "get Gary Webb team" of 17 reporters and editors, [including reporter Jesse Katz](#)) and the most space in its news pages to discredit Webb. In its recent [review of the movie](#), though, the *Times* gives only a passing mention of the newspaper's real-life role in discrediting Webb, while describing the new movie as a "cautionary tale for crusading journalists."

The *New York Times*, in [its review of the film](#), described the real-life Webb as "a journalist betrayed by many factors, including his own calling." The *Times* does not breathe a word in the review about the paper's own betrayal of Webb as a fellow journalist — not to mention the newspaper's betrayal of the public trust — in putting its institutional weight behind the discrediting of "Dark Alliance" back in 1996.

The headline of [a related story](#) by *New York Times* media affairs reporter David Carr calls Webb "wrongly disgraced," but does not elaborate on the *Times*' own sordid role in disgracing him. Carr, instead, puts the blame on Webb for his downfall: "Mr. Webb was open to attack in part because of the lurid presentation of the ["Dark Alliance"] story and his willingness to draw causality based on very thin sourcing and evidence" — a factually incorrect statement all the way through.

The most severe treatment of the new movie "Kill the Messenger" so far, however, has come from the *Washington Post*, the same newspaper that had led the charge against Webb and "Dark Alliance" nearly two decades before and that had done the most to let the CIA off the hook at the time.

["Sticking to Gary Webb's Story"](#) reads the headline of the *Post*'s review of the film (as if Webb's investigative "story" were somehow untrue). Webb in the film is characterized as "a misunderstood crusader whose reporting, while arguably flawed, was unfairly maligned by larger newspapers, the *Washington Post* among them."

A week later, Jeff Leen, an investigations editor for the *Post*, bolstered the paper's original 1996 attack on "Dark Alliance" with [a renewed attack](#) on Webb's credibility and on the new movie. It is a good thing that the *Post* ran Leen's article on an opinion page instead of on its news pages, since Leen got several of his facts wrong — including these basic ones: "Webb's ["Dark Alliance"] story made the extraordinary claim that the Central Intelligence Agency was responsible for the crack cocaine epidemic in America. What he lacked was the extraordinary proof."

Leen had made similar charges [in a panel discussion/debate](#) with Webb on the "Dark Alliance" controversy hosted by the press-support group Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) back in June 1997, just one month after the *Mercury News* had backed away from the story. Leen's criticism of Webb's work on "Dark Alliance," both then and now, is more than a little hypocritical in holding Webb to an exceedingly tough standard of "extraordinary proof" that Leen's own paper, the *Washington Post*, often falls far short of in its reporting (the [Private Jessica Lynch hoax](#) being one example).

Reaching a New Generation

In seeking to discredit Gary Webb as a journalistic colleague, the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times* and *Washington Post* had only undermined their own credibility in the public mind and among other working journalists in the field. These three news companies, like a number of others, are today struggling to maintain credibility at a time when U.S. [public trust in the news media](#) is at an all-time low.

Webb's former employer, the *San Jose Mercury News*, while still the paper of record in California's Silicon Valley, has long lost its luster as a bright, shining place to work for ambitious young reporters and editors climbing their way to the top of the news industry. If anything, the *Mercury News* is renowned these days for being the "[newspaper that almost seized the future](#)."

And as for the newspaper's groundbreaking "Dark Alliance" series: The late Gary Webb got the story right back then and he still has it right today. The 500-page book he researched and published after leaving the newspaper business, *Dark Alliance* (Seven Stories Press, 1998), sets the bar high for solid news reporting and has already become a classic work of American journalism.

The new Hollywood movie "Kill the Messenger," regardless of how the Big Media Feeds may rate it, sets the long-buried ghost of "Dark Alliance" free to haunt the corporate press giants that once killed it and to exact its own brand of karmic justice on them — the best kind of justice there is: inspiring a new generation of journalists in the Internet age to get out there and investigate, expose and report the truths that those in authority would rather keep hidden.

"The only way you're going to do effective journalism is to be truly independent," [Webb once said](#). "It's a difficult thing to do, but [investigative journalists] George Seldes and I.F. Stone did it. There's no reason modern-day journalists can't do it too. You don't get 401-Ks and health benefits, but at least you get to tell the truth."

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