

The Contra-Cocaine Scandal: Washington Post's Assault on Gary Webb

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Jeff Leen, the Washington Post's assistant managing editor for investigations, begins [his renewed attack](#) on the late Gary Webb's Contra-cocaine reporting with a falsehood.

Leen insists that there is a journalism dictum that "an extraordinary claim requires extraordinary proof." But Leen must know that it is not true. Many extraordinary claims, such as assertions in 2002-03 that Iraq was hiding arsenals of WMDs, were published as flat-fact without "extraordinary proof" or any real evidence at all, including by Leen's colleagues at the Washington Post.

A different rule actually governs American journalism – that journalists need "extraordinary proof" if a story puts the U.S. government or an "ally" in a negative light but pretty much anything goes when criticizing an "enemy."

If, for instance, the Post wanted to accuse the Syrian government of killing civilians with Sarin gas or blame Russian-backed rebels for the shoot-down of a civilian airliner over Ukraine, any scraps of proof – no matter how dubious – would be good enough (as was the actual case in 2013 and 2014, respectively).



Image: Journalist Gary Webb

However, if new evidence undercut those suspicions and shifted the blame to people on "the U.S. side" – say, [the Syrian rebels](#) and [the Ukrainian government](#) – then the standards of proof suddenly skyrocket beyond reach. So what you get is not "responsible" journalism – as Leen tries to suggest – but hypocrisy and propaganda. One set of rules for the goose and another set for the gander.

The Contra-Cocaine Case

Or to go back to the Contra-cocaine scandal that Brian Barger and I first exposed for the Associated Press in 1985: If we were writing that the leftist Nicaraguan Sandinista government – the then U.S. "enemy" – was shipping cocaine to the United States, any flimsy claim would have sufficed. But the standard of proof ratcheted up when the subject of our

story was cocaine smuggling by President Ronald Reagan's beloved Contras.

In other words, the real dictum is that there are two standards, double standards, something that a careerist like Leen knows in his gut but doesn't want you to know. All the better to suggest that Gary Webb was guilty of violating some noble principle of journalism.

But Leen is wrong in another way – because there was “extraordinary proof” establishing that the Contras were implicated in drug trafficking and that the Reagan administration was looking the other way.

When Barger and I wrote the first story about Contra-cocaine trafficking almost three decades ago, we already had “extraordinary proof,” including documents from Costa Rica, statements by Contras and Contra backers, and admissions from officials in the Drug Enforcement Administration and Ronald Reagan's National Security Council staff.

However, Leen seems to dismiss our work as nothing but getting “tips” about Contra-cocaine trafficking as if Barger and I were like the hacks at the Washington Post and the New York Times who wait around for authorized handouts from the U.S. government.

Following the Money

Barger and I actually were looking for something different when we encountered the evidence on Contra-cocaine trafficking. We were trying to figure out how the Contras were sustaining themselves in the field after Congress cut off the CIA's financing for their war.

We were, in the old-fashioned journalistic parlance, “following the money.” The problem was the money led, in part, to the reality that all the major Contra organizations were collaborating with drug traffickers.

Besides our work in the mid-1980s, Sen. John Kerry's follow-on Contra-cocaine investigation added substantially more evidence. Yet Leen and his cohorts apparently felt no need to pursue the case any further or even give respectful attention to Kerry's official findings.

Indeed, when Kerry's report was issued in April 1989, the Washington Post ran a dismissive story by Michael Isikoff buried deep inside the paper. Newsweek dubbed Kerry “a randy conspiracy buff.” In Leen's new article attacking Gary Webb — published on the front-page of the Washington Post's Sunday Outlook section – Leen just says:

“After an exhaustive three-year investigation, the committee's report concluded that CIA officials were aware of the smuggling activities of some of their charges who supported the contras, but it stopped short of implicating the agency directly in drug dealing. That seemed to be the final word on the matter.”

But why was it the “final word”? Why didn't Leen and others who had missed the scandal as it was unfolding earlier in the decade at least try to build on Kerry's findings. After all, these were now official U.S. government records. Wasn't that “extraordinary” enough?

In this context, Leen paints himself as the true investigative journalist who knew the inside story of the Contra-cocaine tale from the beginning. He wrote: “As an investigative reporter covering the drug trade for the Miami Herald, ... I wrote about the explosion of cocaine in

America in the 1980s and 1990s, and the role of Colombia's Medellin Cartel in fueling it.

"Beginning in 1985, journalists started pursuing tips about the CIA's role in the drug trade. Was the agency allowing cocaine to flow into the United States as a means to fund its secret war supporting the contra rebels in Nicaragua? Many journalists, including me, chased that story from different angles, but the extraordinary proof was always lacking."

Again, what Leen says is not true. Leen makes no reference to the groundbreaking AP story in 1985 or other disclosures in the ensuing years. He just insists that "the extraordinary proof" was lacking — which it may have been for him given his lackluster abilities. He then calls the final report of Kerry's investigation the "final word."

But Leen doesn't explain why he and his fellow mainstream journalists were so incurious about this major scandal that they would remain passive even in the wake of a Senate investigation. It's also not true that Kerry's report was the "final word" prior to Webb reviving the scandal in 1996.

Government Witnesses

In 1991, during the narcotics trafficking trial of Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, the U.S. government itself presented witnesses who connected the Contras to the Medellin cartel.

Indeed, after testimony by Medellin cartel kingpin Carlos Lehder about his \$10 million contribution to the Contras, the Washington Post wrote in a Nov. 27, 1991 editorial that "The Kerry hearings didn't get the attention they deserved at the time" and that "The Noriega trial brings this sordid aspect of the Nicaraguan engagement to fresh public attention."

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

In other words, it didn't seem to matter how much "extraordinary proof" the Washington Post or Jeff Leen had. Nothing would be sufficient to report seriously on the Contra-cocaine scandal, not even when the U.S. government vouched for the evidence.

So, Leen is trying to fool you when he presents himself as a "responsible journalist" weighing the difficult evidentiary choices. He's just the latest hack to go after Gary Webb, which has become urgent again for the mainstream media in the face of "Kill the Messenger," a new movie about Webb's ordeal.

What Leen won't face up to is that the tag-team destruction of Gary Webb in 1996-97 – by the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times – represented one of the most shameful episodes in the history of American journalism.

The Big Papers tore down an honest journalist to cover up their own cowardly failure to investigate and expose a grave national security crime, the Reagan administration's tolerance for and protection of drug trafficking into the United States by the CIA's client Contra army.

This journalistic failure occurred even though the Associated Press – far from a radical news outlet – and a Senate investigation (not to mention the Noriega trial) had charted the way.

Leen's Assault

Contrary to Leen's column, "Kill the Messenger" is actually a fairly honest portrayal of what happened when Webb exposed the consequences of the Contra cocaine smuggling after the drugs reached the United States. One channel fed into an important Los Angeles supply chain that produced crack.

But Leen tells you that "The Hollywood version of [Webb's] story — a truth-teller persecuted by the cowardly and craven mainstream media — is pure fiction."

He then lauds the collaboration of the Big Three newspapers in destroying Webb and creating such enormous pressure on Webb's newspaper, the San Jose Mercury News, that the executive editor Jerry Ceppos threw his own reporter under the bus. To Leen, this disgraceful behavior represented the best of American journalism.

Leen wrote:

"The New York Times, The Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times, in a rare show of unanimity, all wrote major pieces knocking the story down for its overblown claims and undernourished reporting.

"Gradually, the Mercury News backed away from Webb's scoop. The paper transferred him to its Cupertino bureau and did an internal review of his facts and his methods. Jerry Ceppos, the Mercury News's executive editor, wrote a piece concluding that the story did not meet the newspaper's standards — a courageous stance, I thought."

"Courageous"? What an astounding characterization of Ceppos's act of career cowardice.

But Leen continues by explaining his role in the Webb takedown. After all, Leen was then the drug expert at the Miami Herald, which like the San Jose Mercury News was a Knight Ridder newspaper. Leen says his editors sought his opinion about Webb's "Dark Alliance" series.

Though acknowledging that he was "envious" of Webb's story when it appeared in 1996, Leen writes that he examined it and found it wanting, supposedly because of alleged overstatements. He proudly asserts that because of his critical analysis, the Miami Herald never published Webb's series.

But Leen goes further. He falsely characterizes the U.S. government's later admissions contained in inspector general reports by the CIA and Justice Department. If Leen had bothered to read the reports thoroughly, he would have realized that the reports actually establish that Webb – and indeed Kerry, Barger and I – grossly *understated* the seriousness of the Contra-cocaine problem which began at the start of the Contra movement in the early 1980s and lasted through the decade until the end of the war.

Leen apparently assumes that few Americans will take the trouble to study and understand what the reports said. That is why I published a lengthy account of the U.S. government's admissions – both after the reports were published in 1998 and as "Kill the Messenger" was

hitting the theaters in October. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga.](#)"]

Playing It Safe

Instead of diving into the reeds of the CIA and DOJ reports, Leen does what he and his mainstream colleagues have done for the past three decades, try to minimize the seriousness of the Reagan administration tolerating cocaine trafficking by its Contra clients and even obstructing official investigations that threatened to expose this crime of state.

Instead, to Leen, the only important issue is whether Gary Webb's story was perfect. But no journalistic product is perfect. There are always more details that a reporter would like to have, not to mention compromises with editors over how a story is presented. And, on a complex story, there are always some nuances that could have been explained better. That is simply the reality of journalism, the so-called first draft of history.

But Leen pretends that it is the righteous thing to destroy a reporter who is not perfect in his execution of a difficult story – and that Gary Webb thus deserved to be banished from his profession for life, a cruel punishment that impoverished Webb and ultimately drove him to suicide in 2004.

But if Leen is correct – that a reporter who takes on a very tough story and doesn't get every detail precisely correct should be ruined and disgraced – what does he tell his Washington Post colleague Bob Woodward, whose heroic Watergate reporting included an error about whether a claim regarding who controlled the White House slush fund was made before a grand jury.

While Woodward and his colleague Carl Bernstein were right about the substance, they were wrong about its presentation to a grand jury. Does Leen really believe that Woodward and Bernstein should have been drummed out of journalism for that mistake? Instead, they were lionized as heroes of investigative journalism despite the error – as they should have been.

Yet, when Webb exposed what was arguably an even worse crime of state – the Reagan administration turning a blind eye to the importation of tons of cocaine into the United States – Leen thinks any abuse of Webb is justified because his story wasn't perfect.

Those two divergent judgments – on how Woodward's mistake was understandably excused and how Webb's imperfections were never forgiven – speak volumes about what has happened to the modern profession of journalism at least in the mainstream U.S. media. In reality, Leen's insistence on perfection and "extraordinary proof" is just a dodge to rationalize letting well-connected criminals and their powerful accomplices off the hook.

In the old days, the journalistic goal was to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," but the new rule appears to be: "any standard of proof works when condemning the weak or the despised but you need unachievable 'extraordinary proof' if you're writing about the strong and the politically popular."

Who Is Unfit?

Leen adds a personal reflection on Webb as somehow not having the proper temperament to be an investigative reporter. Leen wrote:

"After Webb was transferred to Cupertino [in disgrace], I debated him at a conference of the Investigative Reporters and Editors organization in Phoenix in June 1997. He was preternaturally calm. While investigative journalists are usually bundles of insecurities and questions and skepticism, he brushed off any criticism and admitted no error. When asked how I felt about it all, I said I felt sorry for him. I still feel that way."

It's interesting - and sadly typical - that while Leen chastises Webb for not admitting error, Leen offers no self-criticism of himself for missing what even the CIA has now admitted, that the Contras were tied up in the cocaine trade. Doesn't an institutional confession by the CIA's inspector general constitute "extraordinary proof"?

Also, since the CIA's inspector general's report included substantial evidence of Contra-cocaine trafficking running through Miami, shouldn't Leen offer some *mea culpa* about missing these serious crimes that were going on right under his nose - in his city and on his beat? What sort of reporter is "preternaturally calm" about failing to do his job right and letting the public suffer as Leen did?

Perhaps all one needs to know about the sorry state of today's mainstream journalism is that Jeff Leen is the Washington Post's assistant managing editor for investigations and Gary Webb is no longer with us.

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

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

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