

The Lesson Hollywood Cannot Teach Us

Gary Webb: Kill the Messenger

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[Jonathan Cook Blog](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Possibly the most insightful statement ever made by a journalist was from Gary Webb, who killed himself in 2004, years after the CIA and media rivals destroyed his career and credibility.

I was winning awards, getting raises, lecturing college classes, appearing on TV shows, and judging journalism contests. And then I wrote some stories that made me realize how sadly misplaced my bliss had been. The reason I'd enjoyed such smooth sailing for so long hadn't been, as I'd assumed, because I was careful and diligent and good at my job. The truth was that, in all those years, I hadn't written anything important enough to suppress.

Now Hollywood is making a film, called Kill the Messenger, about the San Jose Mercury News reporter. Webb briefly created a national scandal in 1996 by exposing how the CIA-backed Contras in Latin America had funded their guerrilla war through trafficking crack cocaine to African American communities in the US, with the knowledge of the CIA and other US agencies. The scandal quickly subsided because the CIA and other journalists – from the New York Times, the Washington Post and especially from the LA Times, who had been scooped on their own patch by Webb – waged a campaign of vilification. The toll eventually led Webb to take his own life.

It should be welcome news that his original revelations will be heard by a new generation, and that the US media's hand-in-glove relationship to the US intelligence agencies will get national exposure.

A story like Webb's ought to remind us that the CIA, the NSA and other US agencies are not there ultimately to "do good", not even to serve us, the people, but to help prop up a world order that benefits a small, greedy global elite and to spread fear and misinformation among the rest of us to keep us divided and obedient. And the media's role is to serve that same global elite, rarely to hold it to account. That was the mistake made by Webb and briefly by his news editors, who quickly abandoned Webb after more senior colleagues on bigger papers taught them what journalism is really about.

But I fear Hollywood's interest should be read in different terms. It signifies a realisation by movie execs that Webb's revelations are now old enough to constitute "history", no more threatening to the contemporary reputations of the CIA or the US media than filming Mutiny on the Bounty was to the modern British navy.

Hollywood knows that where there's a good story, there's money to be made from us –

audiences only too happy to be outraged at injustice but also only too willing to believe such “ancient” injustices offer no lessons for the present. For that reason, it is doubtful Kill the Messenger’s viewers will emerge from the film more critical news consumers. They will still trust their daily paper and the TV news, and still assume that when all the president’s men tell them of events on distant shores – from Venezuela to Iran, Syria and Ukraine – they are being told the unvarnished truth.

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