THE MIGHTY WURLITZER PLAYS ON

by Gary Webb

Chapter 14 from In the Buzzsaw edited by Kristina Borjesson

Webb was an investigative reporter for nineteen years focusing on government and private sector corruption and winning more than thirty journalism awards. He was one of six reporters at the San Jose Mercury News to win a 1990 Pulitzer Prize for general news reporting for a series of stories on Northern California's 1989 earthquake. He also received the 1997 Media Hero Award from the 2nd Annual Media & Democracy Congress, and in 1996 was named Journalist of the Year by the Bay Area Society of Professional Journalists. In 1994, Webb won the H. L. Mencken Award given by the Free Press Association for a series in the San Jose Mercury News on abuses in the state of California's drug asset forfeiture program. And in 1980, Webb won an Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) Award for a series that he coauthored at the Kentucky Post on organized crime in the coal industry. Prior to 1988, Webb worked as a statehouse correspondent for the Cleveland Plain Dealer and was a reporter for the San Jose Mercury News where the "Dark Alliance" series broke in 1996. Months later, Webb was effectively forced out of his job after the San Jose Mercury News retracted their support for his story. He is now a consultant to the California State Legislature's Joint Audit Committee.

If we had met five years ago, you wouldn't have found a more staunch defender of the newspaper industry than me. I'd been working at daily papers for seventeen years at that point, doing no-holds barred investigative reporting for the bulk of that time. As far as I could tell, the beneficial powers the press theoretically exercised in our society weren't theoretical in the least. They worked.

I wrote stories that accused people and institutions of illegal and unethical activities. The papers I worked for printed them, often unflinchingly, and many times gleefully. After these stories appeared, matters would improve. Crooked politicians got voted from office or were forcibly removed. Corrupt firms were exposed and fined. Sweetheart deals were rescinded, grand juries were impaneled, indictments came down, grafters were bundled off to the big house. Taxpayers saved money. The public interest was served.

It all happened exactly as my journalism-school professors had promised. And my expectations were pretty high. I went to journalism school while Watergate was unfolding, a time when people as distantly connected to newspapering as college professors were puffing out their chests and singing hymns to investigative reporting.

Bottom line: If there was ever a true believer, I was one. My first editor mockingly called me "Woodstein," after a pair of Washington Post reporters who broke the Watergate story. More than once I was accused of neglecting my daily reporting duties because I was off "running around with your trench coat flapping in the breeze." But in the end, all the sub rosa trench coat-flapping paid off. The newspaper published a seventeen-part series on organized crime in the American coal industry and won its first national journalism award in half a century. From then on, my editors at that the subsequent newspapers allowed me to work almost exclusively as an investigative reporter.

I had a grand total of one story spiked during my entire reporting career. That's it. One. (And in retrospect it wasn't a very important story either.) Moreover, I had a complete freedom to pick my own shots, a freedom my editors wholeheartedly encouraged since it relieved them of the burden of coming up with story ideas. I wrote my stories the way I wanted to write them, without anyone looking over my shoulder or steering me in a certain direction. After the lawyers and editors went over them and satisfied themselves that we had enough facts behind us to stay out of trouble, they printed them, usually on the front page of the Sunday edition, when we had our widest readership.

In seventeen years of doing this, nothing bad had happened to me. I was never fired or threatened with dismissal.
if I kept looking under rocks. I didn't get any death threats that worried me. I was winning awards, getting raises, lecturing college classes, appearing on TV shows, and judging journalism contests.

So how could I possibly agree with people like Noam Chomsky and Ben Bagdikian, who were claiming the system didn't work, that it was steered by powerful special interests and corporations, and existed to protect the power elite? Hell, the system worked just fine, as far as I could tell. It encouraged enterprise. It rewarded muckraking.

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. It turned out to have nothing to do with it. The truth was that, in all those years, I hadn't written anything important enough to suppress.

In 1996, I wrote a series of stories, entitled Dark Alliance, that began this way:

For the better part of a decade, a Bay Area drug ring sold tons of cocaine to the Crips and Bloods Street Gangs of Los Angeles and funneled millions in drug profits to a Latin American guerrilla army run by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, a Mercury News investigation has found.

This drug network opened the first pipeline between Colombia's cocaine cartels and the black neighborhoods of Los Angeles, a city now known as the "crack" capital of the world. The cocaine that flooded in helped spark a crack explosion in urban America -- and provided the cash and connections needed for L.A.'s gangs to buy automatic weapons.

It is one of the most bizarre alliances in modern history: the union of a U.S. backed army attempting to overthrow a revolutionary socialist government and the Uzi-toting "gangstas" of Compton and South Central Los Angeles.

The three-day series was, at its heart, a short historical account of the rise and fall of a drug ring and its impact on black Los Angeles. It attempted to explain how shadowy intelligence agencies, shady drugs and arms dealers, a political scandal, and a long-simmering Latin American civil war had crossed paths in South Central Los Angeles, leaving behind a legacy of crack use. Most important, it challenged the widely held belief that crack use began in African American neighborhoods not for any tangible reason but mainly because of the kind of people who lived in them. Nobody was forcing them to smoke crack, the argument went, so they only have themselves to blame. They should just say no.

That argument never seemed to make much sense to me because drugs don't just appear magically on street corners in black neighborhoods. Even the most rabid hustler in the ghetto can't sell what he doesn't have. If anyone was responsible for the drug problems in a specific area. I thought, it was the people who were bringing the drugs in.

And so Dark Alliance was about them -- the three cocaine traffickers who supplied the South Central market with literally tons of pure cocaine from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. What made the series so controversial is that two of the traffickers I named were intimately involved with a Nicaraguan paramilitary group known as the Contras, a collection of ex-military men, Cuban exiles, and mercenaries that the CIA was using to destabilize the socialist government of Nicaragua. The series documented direct contact between the drug traffickers who were bringing the cocaine into South Central and the two Nicaraguan CIA agents who were administering the Contra project in Central America. The evidence included sworn testimony from one of the traffickers -- now a valued government informant -- that one of the CIA agents huddled in the kitchen of a house in San Francisco with one of the traffickers and had interviewed the photographer, who confirmed its authenticity. Pretty convincing stuff, we thought.

Over the course of three days, Dark Alliance advanced five main arguments: First, that the CIA-created Contras had been selling cocaine to finance their activities. This was something the CIA and the major media had
dismissed or denied since the mid-1980s, when a few reporters first began writing about Contra drug dealing. Second, that the Contras had sold cocaine in the ghettos of Los Angeles and that their main customer was L.A.'s biggest crack dealer. Third, that elements of the U.S. government knew about this drug ring's activities at the time and did little if anything to stop it. Fourth, that because of the time period and the areas in which it operated, this drug ring played a critical role in fueling and supplying the first mass crack cocaine market in the United States. And fifth, that the profits earned from this crack market allowed the Los Angeles-based Crips and bloods to expand into other cities and spread crack use to other black urban areas, turning a bad local problem into a bad national problem. This led to panicky federal drug laws that were locking up thousands of small-time, black crack dealers for years but never denting the crack trade.

It wasn't so much a conspiracy that I had outlined as it was a chain-reaction--bad ideas compounded by stupid political decisions and rotten historical timing.

Obviously this wasn't the kind of story that a reporter digs up in an afternoon. A Nicaraguan journalist and I had been working on it exclusively for more than a year before it was published. And despite the topic of the story, it had been tedious work. Spanish-language undercover tapes, court records, and newspaper articles were laboriously translated. Interviews had to be arranged in foreign prisons. Documents had to be pieed from unwilling federal agencies, or specially declassified by the National Archives. Ex-drug dealers and ex-cops had to be tracked down and persuaded to talk on the record. Chronologies were pieced together from heavily censored government documents and old newspaper stories found scattered in archives from Managua to Miami.

In December 1995, I wrote a lengthy memo to my editors, advising them of what my Nicaraguan colleague and I had found, what I thought the stories would say, and what still needed to be done to wrap them up. It also to help my editor explain our findings to her bosses, who had not yet signed off on the story, and most of whom had no idea I'd been working on it.

**Two months ago, in an unheard-of response to a Congressional vote, black prison inmates across the country staged simultaneous revolts to protest Congress' refusal to make sentences for crack cocaine the same as for powder cocaine. Both before and after the prison riots, some black leaders were openly suggesting that crack was part of a broad government conspiracy that has imprisoned or killed an entire generation of young black men.

Imagine if they were right. What if the US government was, in fact, involved in dumping cocaine into California -- selling it to black gangs in South Central Los Angeles, for instance -- sparking the most destructive drug epidemic in American history?

That's what this series is about.

With the help of recently declassified documents, FBI reports, DEA undercover tapes, secret grand jury transcripts and archival records from both here and abroad, as well as interviews with some of the key participants, we will show how a CIA-linked drug and stolen car network -- based in, of all places, the Peninsula -- provided weapons and tons of high-grade, dirt cheap cocaine to the very person who spread crack through LA and from there into the hinterlands.

A bizarre -- almost fatherly -- bond between an elusive CIA operative and an illiterate but brilliant car thief from LA's ghettos touched off a social phenomenon -- crack and gang-power -- that changed our lives in ways that are still to be felt. That day these two men met was literally ground zero for California's crack explosion, and the myriad of calamities that have flowed from it (AIDS, homelessness, etc.)

This is also the story of how an ill-planned and oftentimes irrational foreign policy adventure -- the CIA's "secret" was in Nicaragua from 1980 to 1986 -- boomeranged back to the streets of America, in the long run doing far more damage to us than to our supposed "enemies" in Central America.

For, as this series will show, the dumping of cocaine on LA's street gangs was the "back-end" of a covert effort to
arm and equip the CIA's ragtag army of anti-Communist "Contra" guerrillas. While this has long been solid -- if largely ignores -- evidence of a CIA-Contra-cocaine connection, no one has ever asked the question: "Where did all the cocaine go once it got here?"

Now we know.

Moreover, we have compelling evidence that the kingpins of this Bay Area cocaine ring -- men connected to the assassinated Nicaraguan dictated dictator Anastasio Somoza and his murderous National Guard -- enjoyed a unique relationship with the U.S. government that has continued to this day.

*In a meeting to discuss the memo, I recounted to my editors the sorry history of how the Contra-cocaine story had been ridiculed and marginalized by the Washington press corps in the 1980s, and that we could expect similar reactions to this series. If they didn't want to pursue this, now was the time to pull back, before I flew down to Central America and started poking around finding drug dealers to interview. But if we did, we needed to go full-bore on it, and devote the time and space to tell it right. My editors agreed. My story memo made the rounds of the other editors' offices and, as far as I know, no one objected. I was sent to Nicaragua to do additional reporting, and the design team at Mercury Center -- the newspaper's online edition -- began mapping our a Web page.

At the end of my memo, I'd suggested to my editors that we use the Internet to help us demonstrate the story's soundness and credibility which, based on past stories critical of the CIA, was sure to come under attack by both the government and the press.

**I have proposed to Bob Ryan [director of Mercury Center] that we do a special Merc Center/World Wide Web version of this series. The technology is extant to allow readers to download the series' supporting documentation through links to the actual text. For example, when we are quoting grand jury testimony, a click of the mouse would allow the reader to see and/or download the actual grand jury transcript.

Since this whole subject has such a high unbelievability factor built into it, providing our backup documentation to our readers -- and the rest of the world over the Internet -- would allow them to judge the evidence for themselves. It will also make it all the more difficult to dismiss our findings as the fantasies of a few drug dealers.

To my knowledge, this has never been attempted before. It would be a great way to showcase Merc Center and, at the same time use computer technology to set new standards for investigative reporting.

* The editors jumped at the idea. From our perch as the newspaper of Silicon Valley, we could see the future the World Wide Web offered. Newspapers were scrambling to figure out a way to make the transition to cyberspace. The Mercury's editors were among the first to do it right, and were looking for new barriers to break. A special Internet version of Dark Alliance was created as a high-profile way of advertising the Mercury's Web presence and bringing visitors into the site. Plus, the newspaper could boast (and later did) that it had published the first interactive online expose in the history of American journalism.

I remember being almost giddy as I sat with Merc Center's editors and graphics designers, picking through the pile of once-classified information we were going to unleash on the world. We had photos, undercover tape recordings, and federal grand jury testimony. In addition, we had interviews with guerrilla leaders, tape-recorded Supreme Court files, Congressional records, and long-secret documents unearthed during the Iran-Contra investigation. For the first time, any reader with a computer and a sound card could see what we'd found -- could actually read it for themselves -- and listen in while the story's participants plotted, scheme, and confessed. And they could do it from anywhere in the world, even if they had no idea where San Jose, California, was.

After four months of writing, rewriting, editing, and reediting, my editors pronounced themselves satisfied and signed off. The first installment of Dark Alliance appeared simultaneously on the streets and on the Web on August 18, 1996.
The initial public reaction was dead silence. No one jumped up to deny any of it. Nor did the news media rush to share our discoveries with others. The stories just sat there, as if no one seemed to know what to make of them.

Admittedly, Dark Alliance was an unusual story to have appeared in a mainstream daily newspaper, no just for what it said, but for what it was. It wasn't a news story per se; nearly everything I wrote about had happened a dozen years earlier. Because my editors and I had sometimes vehemently disagreed about the scope and nature of the stories during the writing and editing process, the result was a series of compromises, an odd mixture of history lesson, news feature, analysis, and expose. It was not an uplifting story: it was a sickening one. The bad guys had triumphed and fled the scene unscathed, as often happens in life. And there was very little anyone could do about it now, ten years after the fact.

So, I wasn't really surprised that my journalistic colleagues weren't pounding down the follow-up trail. Hell, I thought it was a strange story myself.

Had it been published even a year of two earlier, it likely would have vanished without a trace at that point. Customarily, if the rest of the nation's editors decide to ignore a particular story, it quickly withers and dies, like a light-starved plant. With the exception of newspapers in Seattle, some small cities in Northern California, and Albuquerque, Dark Alliance got the silent treatment big time. No one would touch it.

But no one had counted on the enormous popularity of the Web site. Almost from the moment the series appeared, the Web page was deluged with visitors from all over the world. Students in Denmark were standing in line at their college's computer waiting to read it. E-mails came in from Croatia, Japan, Colombia, Harlem, and Kansas City, dozens of them, day after day. One day we had more than 1.3 million hits. (The site eventually won several awards from computer journalism magazines.)

Once Dark Alliance became the talk of the Internet (in large part because of the technical wizardry and sharp graphics of the Web page), talk radio adopted the story and ran with it. For the next two months, I did more than one hundred radio interviews, in which I was asked to sum up what the three-day long series said in its many thousands of words. Well, I would reply, it said a lot of things. Take your pick. Usually, the questions focused on the CIA's role, and whether I was suggesting a giant CIA conspiracy. We didn't know the CIA's exact role yet, I would say, but we have documents and court testimony showing CIA agents were meeting with these drug traffickers to discuss drug sales and weapons trafficking. An so, figure it out. Did the CIA know or not? The response would come back --So you're saying that the CIA "targeted" black neighborhoods for crack sales? Where's your evidence of that? And it would go on and one.

There were other distractions as well. Film agents and book agents began calling. One afternoon Paramount Studios whisked me down to have lunch with two of the studio's biggest producers, the men who brought Tom Clancy's CIA novels to the screen, to talk about "film possibilities" for the still-unfolding story. This was about the time I realized the wind speed of the shit storm I had kicked up.

The rumbles the series was causing from black communities was unnerving a lot of people. College students were holding protest rallies in Washington, D.C., to demand an official investigation. Residents of South Central marched on city hall and held candlelight vigils. The Los Angeles City Council soon joined the chorus, as did both of California's U.S. senators, the Oakland city council, the mayor of Denver, the Congressional Black Caucus, Jesse Jackson, the NAACP, and at least a half dozen congressional members, mostly African American women whose districts included crack-ridden inner cities. Black civil rights activists were arrested outside the CIA after sealing off the agency's entrance with yellow crime scene tape. The story was developing a political momentum all of its own, and it was happening despite a virtual news blackout from the major media.

Some Washington journalists were alarmed. Where is the rebuttal? Why hasn't the media risen in revolt against this story? CNN's Reliable Sources, Kalb expressed frustration that the story was continuing to get out despite the best efforts of the press to ignore it. "It isn't a story that simply got lost" Kalb complained, during the show,
"It, in fact, has resonated and echoed and echoed and the question is, Where is the media knocking it down?"

It was an interesting comment because it foretold the way the mainstream press finally did respond to Dark Alliance. A revolt by the biggest newspapers in the country, something columnist Alexander Cockburn would later describe in his book White Out as "one of the most venomous and factually insane assaults...in living memory."

I remember arguing with a producer at an CNN news show shortly before I was to go on the air that I didn't want him asking me to explain "my allegations" because these stories weren't my allegations. I was a journalist reporting events that had actually occurred. You could document them, and we had.

"Well, you got understand my position," he mumbled. "The trafficking, CNN's position is that these events may not have napped?" I snapped, "What the fuck is that? When did we give the CIA the power to define reality?"

After nearly a month of silence, the CIA responded. It admitted nothing. It was confident that its agents weren't dealing drugs. But to dispel all the rumors and unkind suggestions my series had raised, the agency would have its inspector general take a look into the matter.

The black community greeted this pronouncement with unconcealed contempt. "You think you can come down here and tell us that you're going to investigate yourselves, and expect us to believe something is actually gone happen?" one woman yelled at CIA director John Dutch, who appeared in Compote, California, in November 1996 to personally promise the city a thorough investigation. "How stupid do you think we are?"

The conservative press and right-wing political organizations were equally hostile to the idea of a CIA crack investigation, but for different reasons. It meant the story was gaining legitimacy, and might lead to places that supporters of the Regain and Bush administrations would rather not see it go. John Dutch was blasted on the front page of the Washington Times (which had also helped finance the Contras, hosting fundraisers and speaking engagements for Contra leaders while supporting their cause editorially) as a dangerous liberal who was undermining morale at the CIA by even suggesting there might be truth to the stories.

Ultimately, it was public pressure that forced the national newspapers into the fray. Protests were held outside the building by media watchdogs and citizens groups, who wondered how the Los Angeles Times building by media watchdogs and citizens groups, who wondered how the Times could continue to ignore a story that had such an impact on the city's black neighborhoods. In Washington, black media outlets were ridiculing the Post for its silence, considering the importance the story held for most of Washington's citizens.

When the newspapers of record spoke, they spoke in unison. Between October and November, the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times published lengthy stories about the CIA drug issue, but spent precious little time exploring the CIA's activities. Instead, my reporting and I became the focus of their scrutiny. After looking into the issue for several weeks, the official conclusion reached by all three papers: Much ado about nothing. No story here. Nothing worth pursuing. The series was "flawed," they contended. How?

Well, there was no evidence the CIA knew anything about it, according to unnamed CIA officials the newspapers spoke to. The drug traffickers we identified as Contras didn't have "official" positions with the organization and didn't really give them all that much drug money. This was according to another CIA agent, Adolfo Calero, the former head of the Contras, an the man whose picture we had just published on the Internet, huddled in a kitchen with one of the Contra drug traffickers. Calero's apparent involvement with the drug operation was never mentioned by any of the papers; his decades-long relationship with the CIA was never mentioned either.

Additionally, it was argues, this quasi-Contra drug ring was small potatoes. One of the Contra traffickers had only sold five tons of cocaine during his entire career, the Washington Post sniffed, badly misquoting a DEA report we'd posted on the Web site. According to the Post's analysis, written by a former CIA informant, Walter Pincus, who was then covering the CIA for the Post, this drug ring couldn't have made a difference in the crack market because five tons wasn't nearly enough to go around. Eventually, those assertions would be refuted by
"I'm disappointed in the 'what's the big deal' tone running through the Post's critique," Mercury News editor Jerry Ceppos complained to the Post in a letter it refused to publish. "If the CIA knew about these illegal activities being conducted by its associates, federal law and basic morality required that it notify domestic authorities. It seems to me that this is exactly the kind of story that a newspaper should shine a light on."

Ceppos posted a memo on the newsroom bulletin board, stating that the Mercury News would continue "to strongly support the conclusions the series drew and will until someone proves them wrong." It was remarkable, Ceppos wrote, that the four Post reporters assigned to debunk the series "could not find a single significant factual error."

Privately, though, my editors were getting nervous. Never before had the three biggest papers devoted such energy to kicking the hell out of a story by another newspaper. It simply wasn't done, and it worried them. They began a series of maneuvers designed to deflect or at least stem the criticism from the national media. Five thousand reprints of the series were burned because the CIA logo was used as an illustration. My follow-up stories were required to contain a boilerplate disclaimer that said we were not accusing the CIA of direct knowledge, even though the facts strongly suggested CIA complicity. But those stunts merely fueled the controversy, making it appear as if we were backing away from the story without admitting it.

Ironically, the evidence we were continuing to gather was making the story even stronger. Long-missing police records surfaced. Cops who had tried to investigate the Contra drug ring and were rebuffed came forward. We tracked down one of the Contras who personally delivered drug money to CIA agents, and he identified them by name, on the record. He also confirmed that the amounts he'd carried to Miami and Costa Rica were in the millions. More records were declassified from the Iran-Contra files, showing that contemporaneous knowledge of this drug operation reached to the top levels of the CIA's covert operations division, as well as into the DEA and the FBI.

But the attacks from the other newspapers had taken the wind out of my editors' sails. Despite the advances we were making on the story, the criticism continued. We were being "irresponsible" by printing stories suggesting CIA complicity without any admissions or printing stories suggesting CIA complicity without any admissions of "a smoking gun." The series was now described frequently as "discredited," even though nothing had surfaced showing that any of the facts were incorrect. At my editor's request, I wrote another series following up on the first three parts: a package of four stories to run over two days. They never began to edit them.

Instead, I found myself involved in hours-long conversations with editors that bordered on the surreal.

"How do we know for sure that these drug dealers were the first big ring to start selling crack in South Central?" editor Jonathan Krim pressed me during one such confab. "Isn't it possible there might have been others before them?"

"There might have been a lot of things, Jon, but we're only supposed to deal in what we know," I replied. "The crack dealers I interviewed said they were the first. Cops in South Central said they were the first. and that they controlled the entire market. They wrote it in reports that we have. I haven't found anything saying otherwise, not one single name, and neither did the New York Times, the Washington Post or the L.A. Times. So what's the issue here?"

"But how can we say for sure they were the first?" Krim persisted. "Isn't it possible there might have been someone else and they never got caught and no one ever knew about them? In that case, your story would be wrong."

I had to take a deep breath to keep from shouting. "If you're asking me whether I accounted for people who might never have existed, the answer is no," I said. "I only considered people with names and faces. I didn't take phantom drug dealers into account."
A few months later, the Mercury News officially backed away from Dark Alliance, publishing a long column by Jerry Ceppos apologizing for "shortcomings" in the series. While insisting that the paper stood behind its "core findings," we didn't have proof that top CIA officials knew about this, and we didn't have proof that millions of dollars flowed from this drug ring, Ceppos declared, even though we did and weren't printing it. There were gray areas that should have been fleshed out more. Some of the language used could have led to misimpressions. And we "oversimplified" that outbreak of crack in South Central. The New York Times hailed Ceppos for setting a brave new standard for dealing with "egregious errors" and splashed his apology on their front page, the first time the series had ever been mentioned there.

I quit the Mercury News not too long after that.

When the CIA and Justice Department finished their internal investigations two years later, the classified documents that were released showed just how badly I had fucked up. The CIA's knowledge and involvement had been far greater than I'd ever imagined. The drug ring was even bigger than I had portrayed. The involvement between the CIA agents running the Contras and the drug traffickers was closer than I had written. And agents and officials of the DEA had protected the traffickers from arrest, something I'd not been allowed to print. The CIA also admitted having direct involvement with about four dozen other drug traffickers or their companies, and that this too had been known and effectively condoned by the CIA's top brass.

In fact, at the start of the Contra war, the CIA and Justice Department had worked out an unusual agreement that permitted the CIA not to have to report allegations of drug trafficking by its agents to the Justice Department. It was a curious loophole in the law, to say the least.

Despite those rather stunning admissions, the internal investigations were portrayed in the press as having uncovered no evidence of CIA involvement in drug trafficking and no evidence of a conspiracy to send crack to black neighborhoods, which was hardly surprising since I had never said there was. What I had written -- that individual CIA agents working within the Contras were deeply involved with this drug ring -- was either ignored or excised from the CIA's final reports. For instance, the agency's decade-long employment of two Contra commanders --Colonel Enrique Bermudez and Adolfo Calero--was never mentioned in the declassified CIA reports, leaving the false impression that they had no CIA connection. This was a critical omission, since Bermudez and Calero were identified in my series as the CIA agents who had directly involved with the Contra Drug pipeline. Even though their relationship with the agency was a matter of public record, none of the press reports I saw celebrating the CIA's self-absolution bothered to address this gaping hole in the official story. The CIA had investigated itself and cleared itself, and the press was happy to let things stay that way. No independent investigation was done.

The funny thing was, despite all the furor, the facts of the story never changed, except to become more damning. But the perception of them did, and in this case, that is really all that mattered. Once a story became "discredited," the rest of the media shied away from it. Dark Alliance was consigned to the dustbin of history, viewed as an Internet conspiracy theory that had been thoroughly disproved by more responsible news organizations.

Why did it occur? Primarily because the series presented dangerous ideas. It suggested that crimes of state had been committed. If the story was true, it meant the federal government bore some responsibility, however indirect, for the flood of crack that coursed through black neighborhoods in the 1980s. And that is something no government can ever admit to, particularly one that is busily promoting a multibillion-dollar-a-year War on Drugs.

But what of the press? Why did our free and independent media participate with the government's disinformation campaign? It had probably as many reasons as the CIA. The Contra-drug story was something the top papers had dismissed as sheer fantasy only a few years earlier. They had not only been wrong, they had been terribly wrong, and their attitude had actively impeded efforts by citizens groups, journalists, and congressional investigators to bring the issue to national attention, at a time when its disclosure may have done some good. Many of the same reporters who declined to write about Contra drug trafficking in the 1980s -- or
wrote dismissively about it -- were trotted out once again to do damage control.

Second, the San Jose Mercury News was not a member of the club that sets the national news agenda, the elite group of big newspapers that decides the important issues of the day, such as big newspapers that decides the important issues of the day, such as which stories get reported and which get ignored. Small regional newspapers aren't invited. But the Merc had broken the rules and used the Internet to get in by the back door, leaving the big papers momentarily superfluous and embarrassed, and it forced them to readdress an issue they'd much rather have forgotten. By turning on the Mercury News, the big boys were reminding the rest of the flock who really runs the newspaper business, Internet or no Internet, and the extends to which they will go to protect that power, even if it meant rearranging reality to suit them.

Finally, as I discovered while researching the book I eventually wrote about this story, the national news organizations have had a long, disappointing history of playing footsie with the CIA, printing unsubstantiated agency leaks, giving agents journalistic cover, and downplaying or attacking stories and ideas damaging to the agency. I can only speculate as to why this occurs, but I am not naive enough to believe it is mere coincidence.

The scary thing about this collusion between the press and the powerful is that it works so well. In this case, the government's denials and promises to pursue the truth didn't work. The public didn't accept them, for obvious reasons, an the clamor for an independent investigation continued to grow. But after the government's supposed watchdogs weighed in, public opinion became divided and confused, the movement to force congressional hearings lost steam and, once enough people came to believe the stories were false or exaggerated, the issue could safely be put back at the bottom of the dead-story pile, hopefully never to rise again.

Do we have a free press today? Sure we do. It's free to report all the sex scandals it wants, all the stock market news we can handle, every new health fad that comes down the pike, and every celebrity marriage or divorce that happens. But when it comes to the real down and dirty stuff -- stories like Tailwind, the October Surprise, the El Mozote massacre, corporate corruption, or CIA involvement in drug trafficking -- that's where we begin to see the limits of our freedoms. In today's media environment, sadly, such stories are not even open for discussion.

Back in 1938, when fascism was sweeping Europe, legendary investigative reporter George Seldes observed (in his book, The Lords of the Press) that "it is possible to fool all the people all the time -- when government and press cooperate." Unfortunately, we have reached that point.

Gary Webb
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