

Contra-Cocaine Was a Real Conspiracy

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The 50th anniversary of the JFK assassination saw a mainstream media blackout of nearly all evidence of conspiracy in that case. But New York Magazine went even further, mocking the proven Contra-cocaine scandal as a “conspiracy theory.”

In the insular world of Manhattan media, there’s [much handwringing](#) over the latest blow to print publications as New York Magazine scales back from a weekly to a biweekly. But the real lesson might be the commercial failure of snarky writing, the kind that New York demonstrated in its recent hit piece on “conspiracy theories.”

What was most stunning to me about [the article](#), pegged to the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, was that it began by ridiculing what is actually one of the best-documented real conspiracies of recent decades, the CIA’s tolerance and even protection of cocaine trafficking by the Nicaraguan Contra rebels in the 1980s.



Journalist Gary Webb (right).

According to New York Magazine, the Contra-cocaine story – smugly dubbed “the last great conspiracy theory of the twentieth century” – started with the claim by “crack kingpin” Ricky Ross that he was working with a Nicaraguan cocaine supplier, Oscar Danilo Bandon, who had ties to the Contras who, in turn, had ties to the CIA.

Author Benjamin Wallace-Wells writes: “The wider the aperture around this theory, the harder its proponents work to implicate Washington, the shakier it seems: After several trials and a great deal of inquiry, no one has been able to show that anyone in the CIA condoned what Bandon was doing, and it has never been clear exactly how strong Bandon’s ties to the *contraleadership* really were, anyway.”

So, it was all a goofy “conspiracy theory.” Move along, move along, nothing to see here. But neither Wallace-Wells nor his New York Magazine editors seem to have any idea about the actual history of the Contra-cocaine scandal. It did not begin with the 1996 emergence of Ricky Ross in a series of articles by San Jose Mercury-News investigative reporter Gary Webb, as Wallace-Wells suggests.

The Contra-cocaine scandal began more than a decade earlier with a 1985 article that Brian Barger and I wrote for the Associated Press. Our article cited documentary evidence and witnesses – both inside the Contra movement and inside the U.S. government – implicating nearly all the Contra groups fighting in Nicaragua under the umbrella of Ronald Reagan’s CIA.

Our Contra-cocaine article was followed up by a courageous Senate investigation led by Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts who further documented the connections between cocaine traffickers, the Contras and the Reagan administration in a report issued in 1989.

Yet, part of the scandal always was how the Reagan administration worked diligently to undercut investigations of the President's favorite "freedom fighters" whether the inquiries were undertaken by the press, Congress, the Drug Enforcement Administration or federal prosecutors. Indeed, a big part of this cover-up strategy was to mock the evidence as "a conspiracy theory," when it was anything but.

Big Media's Complicity

Most of the mainstream news media played along with the Reagan administration's mocking strategy, although occasionally major outlets, like the Washington Post, had to concede the reality of the scandal.

For instance, during the drug-trafficking trial of Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega in 1991, U.S. prosecutors found themselves with no alternative but to call as a witness Colombian Medellín cartel kingpin Carlos Lehder, who — along with implicating Noriega — testified that the cartel had given \$10 million to the Contras, an allegation first unearthed by Sen. Kerry.

"The Kerry hearings didn't get the attention they deserved at the time," a *Washington Post* editorial on Nov. 27, 1991, acknowledged. "The Noriega trial brings this sordid aspect of the Nicaraguan engagement to fresh public attention."

Yet, despite the Washington Post's belated concern about the mainstream news media's neglect of the Contra-cocaine scandal, there was no serious follow-up anywhere in Big Media — until 1996 when Gary Webb disclosed the connection between one Contra cocaine smuggler, Danilo Blandon, and the emergence of crack cocaine via Ricky Ross.

But the premier news outlets — the likes of the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times — didn't take this new opportunity to examine what was a serious crime of state. That would have required them to engage in some embarrassing self-criticism for their misguided dismissal of the scandal. Instead, the big newspapers went on the attack against Gary Webb.

Their attack line involved narrowing their focus to Blandon — ignoring the reality that he was just one of many Contras involved in cocaine smuggling to the United States — and to Ross — arguing that Ross's operation could not be blamed for the entire crack epidemic that ravaged U.S. cities in the 1980s. And the newspapers insisted that the CIA couldn't be blamed for this cocaine smuggling because the agency had supposedly examined the issue in the 1980s and found that it had done nothing wrong.

Because of this unified assault from the major newspapers — and the corporate timidity of the San Jose Mercury-News editors — Webb and his continuing investigation were soon abandoned. Webb was pushed out of the Mercury-News in disgrace.

That let the mainstream U.S. media celebrate how it had supposedly crushed a nasty "conspiracy theory" that had stirred up unjustified anger in the black community, which had been hit hardest by the crack epidemic. The newspapers also could get some brownie points

from Republicans and the Right by sparing President Reagan's legacy a big black eye.

But Webb's disclosure prompted the CIA's Inspector General Frederick Hitz to undertake the first real internal investigation of the ties between the Contra-cocaine smugglers and the CIA officers overseeing the Contra war in Nicaragua.

The CIA's Confession

When Hitz's final investigative report was published in fall 1998, the CIA's defense against Webb's series had shrunk to a fig leaf: that the CIA did not *conspire* with the Contras to raise money through cocaine trafficking. But Hitz made clear that the Contra war had taken precedence over law enforcement and that the CIA withheld evidence of Contra drug-smuggling crimes from the Justice Department, Congress, and even the CIA's own analytical division.

Besides tracing the extensive evidence of Contra trafficking through the entire decade-long Contra war, the inspector general interviewed senior CIA officers who acknowledged that they were aware of Contra-drug smuggling but didn't want its exposure to undermine the struggle to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

According to Hitz, the CIA had "one overriding priority: to oust the Sandinista government. . . [CIA officers] were determined that the various difficulties they encountered not be allowed to prevent effective implementation of the Contra program." One CIA field officer explained, "The focus was to get the job done, get the support and win the war."

Hitz also recounted complaints from CIA analysts that CIA operations officers handling the Contras hid evidence of Contra-drug trafficking even from the CIA's analysts. Because of the withheld evidence, the CIA analysts incorrectly concluded in the mid-1980s that "only a handful of Contras might have been involved in drug trafficking." That false assessment was passed on to Congress and to major news organizations — serving as an important basis for denouncing Gary Webb and his disclosures in 1996.

Although Hitz's report was an extraordinary admission of institutional guilt by the CIA, it went almost unnoticed by the big American newspapers. On Oct. 10, 1998, two days after Hitz's final report was posted on the CIA's Web site, the *New York Times* published a brief article that continued to deride Webb but acknowledged the Contra-drug problem may have been worse than earlier understood.

Several weeks later, the Washington Post weighed in with a similarly superficial article. The Los Angeles Times never published a story on the contents of Hitz's findings though Los Angeles had been "ground zero" of the Ross-Blandon connection.

In 2000, the Republican-controlled House Intelligence Committee grudgingly acknowledged that the stories about Reagan's CIA protecting Contra drug traffickers were true. The committee released a report citing classified testimony from CIA Inspector General Britt Snider (Hitz's successor) admitting that the spy agency had turned a blind eye to evidence of Contra-drug smuggling and generally treated drug smuggling through Central America as a low priority.

"In the end the objective of unseating the Sandinistas appears to have taken precedence over dealing properly with potentially serious allegations against those with whom the agency was working," Snider said, adding that the CIA did not treat the drug allegations in

“a consistent, reasoned or justifiable manner.”

The House committee’s majority Republicans still downplayed the significance of the Contra-cocaine scandal, but the panel acknowledged, deep inside its report, that in some cases, “CIA employees did nothing to verify or disprove drug trafficking information, even when they had the opportunity to do so. In some of these, receipt of a drug allegation appeared to provoke no specific response, and business went on as usual.”

Like the release of Hitz’s report in 1998, the admissions by Snider and the House committee drew virtually no media attention in 2000 — except for a few articles on the Internet, including one at Consortiumnews.com. Because the confirmation of the Contra-cocaine scandal received so little mainstream media coverage, Gary Webb remained a pariah in his profession of journalism, making it next to impossible for him to land a decent-paying job and contributing to his suicide in 2004. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Warning in Gary Webb’s Death.”](#)]

What’s a Conspiracy Theory?

So, what is one to make of New York Magazine’s decision 15 years after the CIA’s confession and nearly a decade after Webb’s death to lead off its snarky ridicule of “conspiracy theories” with such a grossly inaccurate account of what was undeniably a real conspiracy?

One might have hoped that a publication that fancies itself as iconoclastic would have had the journalistic courage not to simply reinforce a fake conventional wisdom – and have the human decency not to join in the mainstream media’s dancing on Webb’s grave. But that is apparently too much to expect of New York Magazine.

There is another problem in New York’s sneering takedown of “conspiracy theories” – and that is the magazine lacks a decent definition of what a “conspiracy theory” is, especially given the pejorative implications of the phrase.

In my view, a “conspiracy theory” is a case of fanciful, usually fact-free speculation positing some alternative explanation for an event. Usually, a “conspiracy theory” not only lacks any real evidence but often ignores compelling evidence that goes in other directions. For instance, the current conspiracy theory about President Barack Obama being born in Kenya despite birth certificates and birth notices of his birth in Hawaii.

By contrast, a real conspiracy can be defined as a collaboration among individuals to engage in criminal or scandalous behavior usually in a secretive manner. There are many such examples involving high government officials, including Richard Nixon’s Watergate and Ronald Reagan’s Iran-Contra Affair.

The difference between a “conspiracy theory” and a real conspiracy is that the latter is supported by substantial evidence and the former is reliant on someone simply thinking something up, often with partisan or ideological motivation.

There is, of course, much gray area between those two poles. There are cases in which some evidence exists indicating a conspiracy but it’s short of conclusive proof. In such cases of legitimate doubt, aggressive investigations are warranted – and the U.S. news media should welcome, not punish, these lines of inquiry.

Instead, the role of the mainstream press often has been to ridicule journalists and other

investigators who venture into these murky waters. Often, that ridicule leads to serious cases of journalistic malfeasance as occurred with the mistreatment of Gary Webb and the Contra-cocaine story.

Other times the smug “anti-conspiracism” makes it impossible to get at the facts and to inform the American public about wrongdoing in a timely fashion. That can allow corrupt government officials to go unpunished and sometime to return to government in powerful positions.

The other important lesson to take from New York Magazine’s lumping real conspiracies and possible conspiracies in with fanciful conspiracy theories is that each case is unique and should be treated as such. Each set of facts should be examined carefully.

Just because one conspiracy can be proven doesn’t substantiate every claim of conspiracy. And the opposite is also true, just because one fact-free conspiracy theory is nutty doesn’t mean all suspected conspiracies deserve ridicule.

Through its anti-journalistic behavior, New York Magazine makes it hard to mourn its current financial predicament as it cuts back to publishing every other week. Indeed, the magazine is making a case that few tears should be shed if it disappeared entirely.

*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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