

The New York Times's Belated Admission on the Contra-Cocaine Scandal

The Times' review of "Kill the Messenger," the tragic tale of journalist Gary Webb

By [Robert Parry](#)

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Since the Contra-cocaine scandal surfaced in 1985, major U.S. news outlets have disparaged it, most notably when the big newspapers destroyed Gary Webb for reviving it in 1996. But a New York Times review of a movie on Webb finally admits the reality, writes Robert Parry.

Nearly three decades since the stories of Nicaraguan Contra-cocaine trafficking first appeared in 1985, the New York Times has finally, forthrightly admitted the allegations were true, although this belated acknowledgement comes in a movie review buried deep inside Sunday's paper.

The review addresses a new film, "Kill the Messenger," that revives the Contra-cocaine charges in the context of telling the tragic tale of journalist Gary Webb who himself revived the allegations in 1996 only to have the New York Times and other major newspapers wage a vendetta against him that destroyed his career and ultimately drove him to suicide.



Ronald Reagan's statue at Washington's National Airport, which was renamed in his honor after his scandals were excused and suppressed.

The Times' [movie review](#) by David Carr begins with a straightforward recognition of the long-denied truth to which now even the CIA has confessed: "If someone told you today that there was strong evidence that the Central Intelligence Agency once turned a blind eye to accusations of drug dealing by operatives it worked with, it might ring some distant, skeptical bell. Did that really happen? That really happened."

Although the Times' review still quibbles with aspects of Webb's "Dark Alliance" series in the San Jose Mercury-News, the Times appears to have finally thrown in the towel when it comes to the broader question of whether Webb was telling important truths.

The Times' resistance to accepting the reality of this major national security scandal under President Ronald Reagan even predated its tag-team destruction of Webb in the mid-1990s, when he was alternately pummeled by the Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times. The same Big Three newspapers also either missed or dismissed the Contra-cocaine scandal when Brian Barger and I first disclosed it in 1985 for the Associated Press — and even when an investigation led by Sen. John Kerry provided more proof in 1989.

Indeed, the New York Times took a leading role in putting down the story in the mid-1980s just as it did in the mid-1990s. That only began to change in 1998 when CIA Inspector General Frederick Hitz conducted the spy agency's first comprehensive internal inquiry into the allegations and found substantial evidence to support suspicions of Contra-cocaine smuggling and the CIA's complicity in the scandal.

Though the Times gave short-shrift to the CIA's institutional confession in 1998, it did at least make a cursory acknowledgement of the historic admissions. The Times' co-collaborators in the mugging of Gary Webb did even less. After waiting several weeks, the Washington Post produced an inside-the-paper story that missed the point. The Los Angeles Times, which had assigned 17 journalists to the task of destroying Webb's reputation, ignored the CIA's final report altogether.

So, it is perhaps nice that the Times stated quite frankly that the long-denied scandal "really happened" — even though this admission is tucked into a movie review placed on page AR-14 of the New York edition. And the Times' reviewer still can't quite face up to the fact that his newspaper was part of a gang assault on an honest journalist who actually got the story right.

Still Bashing Webb

Thus, the review is peppered with old claims that Webb hyped his material when, in fact, he understated the seriousness of the scandal, as did Barger and I in the 1980s. The extent of Contra cocaine trafficking and the CIA's awareness — and protection — of the criminal behavior were much greater than any of us knew.

The Times' review sums up the Webb story (and the movie plot) this way: "'Kill the Messenger,' a movie starring Jeremy Renner due Oct. 10, examines how much of the story [Webb] told was true and what happened after he wrote it. 'Kill the Messenger' decidedly remains in Mr. Webb's corner, perhaps because most of the rest of the world was against him while he was alive.

"Rival newspapers blew holes in his story, government officials derided him as a nut case and his own newspaper, after initially basking in the scoop, threw him under a bus. Mr. Webb was open to attack in part because of the lurid presentation of the story and his willingness to draw causality based on very thin sourcing and evidence. He wrote past what he knew, but the movie suggests that he told a truth others were unwilling to. Sometimes, when David takes on Goliath, David is the one who ends up getting defeated. ...

"Big news organization like The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times and The Washington Post tore the arms and legs off his work. Despite suggestions that their zeal was driven by professional jealousy, some of the journalists who re-reported the story said they had little choice, given the deep flaws.

"Tim Golden in The New York Times and others wrote that Mr. Webb

overestimated his subjects' ties to the contras as well as the amount of drugs sold and money that actually went to finance the war in Nicaragua."

The reviewer gives Golden another chance to take a shot at Webb and defend what the Big Papers did. "Webb made some big allegations that he didn't back up, and then the story just exploded, especially in California," Golden said in an email. "You can find some fault with the follow-up stories, but mostly what they did was to show what Webb got wrong."

But Golden continues to be wrong himself. While it may be true that no journalistic story is perfect and that no reporter knows everything about his subject, Webb was if anything too constrained in his chief conclusions, particularly the CIA's role in shielding the Contra drug traffickers. The reality was much worse, with CIA officials intervening in criminal cases, such as the so-called Frogman Case in San Francisco, that threatened to expose the Contra-related trafficking.

The CIA Inspector General's report also admitted that the CIA withheld evidence of Contra drug trafficking from federal investigators, Congress and even the CIA's own analytical division. The I.G. report was clear, too, on the CIA's motivation.

The inspector general interviewed senior CIA officers who acknowledged that they were aware of the Contra-drug problem but didn't want its exposure to undermine the struggle to overthrow Nicaragua's Sandinista government. According to Inspector General 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."

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 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."

Yet, like the Hitz 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.

Space for Ceppos

The Times' review also gives space to Webb's San Jose Mercury-News editor Jerry Ceppos, who caved after the Big Media attacks, shut down Webb's ongoing investigation and rushed to apologize for supposed flaws in the series.

In the Times' review, Ceppos is self-congratulatory about his actions, saying good news organizations should hold themselves accountable. "We couldn't support some of the statements that had been made," Ceppos said. "I would do exactly the same thing 18 years later that I did then, and that is to say that I think we overreached."

Despite acknowledging the truth of the Contra-cocaine scandal, the review was short on interviews with knowledgeable people willing to speak up strongly for Webb. I was one of Webb's few journalistic colleagues who defended his work when he was under assault in 1996-97 and - every year on the anniversary of Webb's death - have published articles about the shameful behavior of the mainstream media and Ceppos in destroying Webb's life.

I was e-mailed by an assistant to the Times' reviewer who asked me to call to be interviewed about Webb. However, when I called back, the assistant said she was busy and would have to talk to me later. I gave her my cell phone number but never heard back from her.

But the review does note that "Webb had many supporters who suggested that he was right in the main. In retrospect, his broader suggestion that the C.I.A. knew or should have known that some of its allies were accused of being in the drug business remains unchallenged. The government's casting of a blind eye while also fighting a war on drugs remains a shadowy part of American history."

The review also notes that when the Kerry report was issued, "major news outlets gave scant attention to the report" and that: "Mr. Webb was not the first journalist to come across what seemed more like an airport thriller novel. Way back in December 1985, The Associated Press reported that three contra groups had 'engaged in cocaine trafficking, in part to help finance their war against Nicaragua.' In 1986, The San Francisco Examiner ran a large exposé covering similar terrain.

"Again, major news outlets mostly gave the issue a pass. It was only when Mr. Webb, writing 10 years later, tried to tie cocaine imports from people connected to the contras to the domestic crisis of crack cocaine in large cities, particularly Los Angeles, that the story took off."

Despite recognizing the seriousness of the Contra-cocaine crimes that Webb helped expose, the review returns to various old saws about Webb's alleged exaggerations.

"The headline, graphic and summary language of 'Dark Alliance' was lurid and overheated, showing a photo of a crack-pipe smoker embedded in the seal of the C.I.A.," the review said. However, in retrospect, the graphic seems apt. The CIA was knowingly protecting a proxy force that was smuggling cocaine to criminal networks that were producing crack.

Yet, despite this hemming and hawing - perhaps a reflexive attempt to not make the New York Times look too bad - the review ends on a strong note, concluding: "However dark or extensive, the alliance Mr. Webb wrote about was a real one."

[To learn more about the Contra-cocaine scandal and 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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