

## Anatomy of a Story

*Crack, the Contras, and the CIA:*

# The Storm over "Dark Alliance"



Gary Webb,  
author of  
"Dark Alliance"

by Peter Kornbluh

After Gary Webb spent more than a year of intense investigative reporting and weeks of drafting, his editors at the *San Jose Mercury News* decided to run his three-part series late last August, when the nation's focus was divided between politics and vacation. The series, DARK ALLIANCE: THE STORY BEHIND THE CRACK EXPLOSION, initially "sank between the Republican and Democratic Conventions," Webb recalls. "I was very surprised at how little attention it generated."

Webb needn't have worried. His story subsequently became the most talked-about piece of journalism in 1996 and arguably the most famous — some would say infamous — set of articles of the decade. Indeed, in the

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five months since its publication, "Dark Alliance" has been transformed into what *New York Times* reporter Tim Weiner calls a "metastory" — a phenomenon of public outcry, conspiracy theory, and media reaction that has transcended the original series itself.

The series, and the response to it, have raised a number of fundamental journalistic questions. The original reporting — on the links between a gang of Nicaraguan drug dealers, CIA-backed counterrevolutionaries, and the spread of crack in California — has drawn unparalleled criticism from *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Their editorial decision to assault, rather than advance, the *Mercury News* story has, in turn, sparked critical commentary on the priorities of those pillars of the mainstream press.

Yet in spite of the mainstream media, the allegations generated by the *Mercury News* continue to swirl, particularly through communities of color. Citizens and journalists alike are left to

weigh the significant flaws of the piece against the value of putting a serious matter, one the press has failed to fully explore, back on the national agenda.

### DRUGS AND CONTRAS REDUX

Although many readers of the *Mercury News* articles may not have known it, "Dark Alliance" is not the first reported link between the contra war and drug smuggling. More than a decade ago, allegations surfaced that contra forces, organized by the CIA to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, were consorting with drug smugglers with the knowledge of U.S. officials.

The Associated Press broke the first such story on December 20, 1985. The AP's Robert Parry and Brian Barger reported that three contra groups "have engaged in cocaine trafficking, in part to help finance their war against Nicaragua." Dramatic as it was, that story almost didn't run, because of pressure by Reagan administration officials (see "Narco-Terrorism: A

PHOTOS: SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

Tale of Two Stories," *CJR*, September/October, 1986). Indeed, the White House waged a concerted behind-the-scenes campaign to besmirch the professionalism of Parry and Barger and to discredit all reporting on the contras and drugs.

Whether the campaign was the cause or not, coverage was minimal. While regional papers like the *San Francisco Examiner* — which ran a June 23, 1986 front-page exposé on Norvin Meneses, a central figure in the *Mercury News* series — broke significant ground on contra-drug connections, the larger papers and networks (with the exception of CBS) devoted few resources to the issue. The attitude of the mainstream press was typified during the November 1987 press conference held to release the final report of the Congressional Joint Iran-Contra Committees. When an investigative reporter rose to ask the lead counsel of the committees whether the lawmakers had come across any connection between the contras and drug-smuggling, a *New York Times* correspondent screamed derisively at him from across the aisle: "Why don't you ask a serious question?"

Even when a special Senate subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations, chaired by Senator John Kerry, released its long-awaited report, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy*, big-media coverage constituted little more than a collective yawn. The 1,166-page report — it covered not only the covert operations against Nicaragua, but also relations with Panama, Haiti, the Bahamas, and other countries involved in the drug trade — was the first to document U.S. knowledge of, and tolerance for, drug smuggling under the guise of national security. "In the name of supporting the contras," the Kerry Committee concluded in a sad but stunning indictment, officials "abandoned the responsibility our government has for protecting our citizens from all threats to their security and well-being."

Yet when the report was released on April 13, 1989, coverage was buried in the back pages of the major newspapers and all but ignored by the three

major networks. *The Washington Post* ran a short article on page A20 that focused as much on the infighting within the committee as on its findings; *The New York Times* ran a short piece on A8; the *Los Angeles Times* ran a 589-word story on A11. (All of this was in sharp contrast to those newspapers' lengthy rebuttals to the *Mercury News* series seven years later



Juan Norvin Meneses Cantarero

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**Citizens and journalists are left to weigh the significant flaws of the series against the value of putting a serious matter back on the national agenda**

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— collectively totalling over 30,000 words.) ABC's *Nightline* chose not to cover the release of the report.

Consequently, the Kerry Committee report was relegated to oblivion; and opportunities were lost to pursue leads, address the obstruction from the CIA and the Justice Department that Senate investigators say they encountered, and both inform the public and lay the issue to rest. The story, concedes Doyle McManus, the Washington bureau chief of the *Los Angeles Times*, "did not get the coverage that it deserved."

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**EVOLUTION OF A METASTORY**

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The *Mercury News* series "touched a raw nerve in the way our stories hadn't," observes Robert Parry. One reason is that Parry and Barger's stories had focused on the more antiseptic smuggling side of drug trafficking in far-off Central America. Webb's tale brought the story home, focusing on what he

identified as the distribution network and its target, the inner cities of California. Particularly among African-American communities, devastated by the scourge of crack and desperate for information and answers, Webb's reporting found ready constituencies. From Farrakhan followers to the most moderate of black commentators, the story reverberated. "If this is true, then millions of black lives have been ruined and America's jails and prisons are now clogged with young African-Americans because of a cynical plot by a CIA that historically has operated in contempt of the law," wrote Carl T. Rowan, the syndicated columnist.

The wildfire-like sweep of "Dark Alliance" was all the more remarkable because it took place without the tinder of the mainstream press. Instead, the story roared through the new communications media of the Internet and black talk radio — two distinct, but in this case somewhat symbiotic, information channels.

With the Internet, as Webb put it, "you don't have *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* to bust a national story anymore." Understanding this media reality, Mercury Center, the *Mercury News's* sophisticated online service, devoted considerable staff time to preparing for simultaneous online publishing of the "Dark Alliance" stories on the World Wide Web. In the online version, many of the documents cited in the stories were posted on the Mercury Center site, hyperlinked to the story; audio recordings from wiretaps and hearings, follow-up articles from the *Mercury News* and elsewhere, and, for a time, even Gary Webb's media schedule were also posted.

As Webb began giving out his story's Mercury Center website address (<http://www.sjmercury.com/drugs/>) on radio shows in early September, the number of hits to the Center's site escalated dramatically, some days reaching as high as 1.3 million. Over all, Bob Ryan, who heads Mercury Center, estimates a 15% visitor increase since the stories appeared. "For us," he says, "it has certainly answered the question: Is there anyone out there listening?"

The demographics of Web traffic are unknown, but some media specialists believe that the rising numbers at Mercury Center in part reflect what the *Chicago Tribune* syndicated columnist Clarence Page calls an emerging "black cyber-consciousness." Online newsletters and other net services made the series readily available to African-American students, newspapers, radio stations, and community organizations. Patricia Turner, author of *I Heard it Through the Grapevine*, the definitive study on how information travels through black America, suggests that this marked the "first time the Internet has electrified African-Americans" in this way. "The 'black telegraph,'" noted Jack White, a *Time* magazine columnist, referring to the informal word-of-mouth network used since the days of slavery, "has moved into cyberspace."

**B**lack-oriented radio talk shows boosted this phenomenon by giving out the website address. At the same time, the call-in programs themselves became a focal point of information and debate. African-American talk-show hosts used their programs to address the allegations of CIA complicity in the crack epidemic, and the public response was forceful. The power of talk radio was demonstrated when Congresswoman Maxine Waters was a guest on WOL's Lisa Mitchell show in Baltimore on September 10, and announced that the Congressional Black Caucus meeting that week would address the issues raised by "Dark Alliance." Two hundred people were expected; nearly two thousand attended.

Political pressure, organized at the grassroots level around the country and channeled through the Black Caucus in Washington, pushed both the CIA and the Justice Department to initiate internal investigations into the charges of government complicity in the crack trade. In November, John Deutch, then the director of the CIA, even left the secure confines of Langley headquarters to travel to Watts and address a town meeting of concerned citizens on the *Mercury News* allegations — an unprecedented event.

By then, the "Dark Alliance" series had become the journalistic *Twister* of

1996, with information, misinformation, allegations, and speculations hurtling across the airwaves day after day. A common charge emerged on black talk-radio programs: the U.S. government had conspired to use the crack trade to deliberately harm the African-American community. "CIA" now meant "Crack in America," or as Rep. Cynthia McKinney stated on the floor of Congress, "Central Intoxication Agency." Thousands of copies of "Dark Alliance" were handed out at town meetings across the country, playing "into the deepest fears — sometimes plunging into paranoia — that have haunted the subject of race in America," *The Boston Globe* editorialized in October. "We've always speculated about this," said Joe Madison, a Washington talk-show host, who along with the activist Dick Gregory was arrested in front of the CIA in mid-September in an act of civil disobedience. "Now we have proof."

#### THE STORIES THEMSELVES

In the very first *Washington Post* treatment of the *San Jose Mercury News* phenomenon — appearing in the Style section on October 2 — media reporter Howard Kurtz noted "just one problem" with the controversy: despite broad hints, Gary Webb's stories never "actually say the CIA knew about the drug trafficking." In an interview with Kurtz, Webb stated that his story "doesn't prove the CIA targeted black communities. It doesn't say this was ordered by the CIA."

What did the *Mercury News* stories actually say? The long three-part series covered the lives and connections of three career criminals: "Freeway" Ricky Ross, perhaps L.A.'s most renowned crack dealer in the 1980s; Oscar Danilo Blandon Reyes, a right-wing Nicaraguan expatriate, described by one U.S. assistant district attorney as "the biggest Nicaraguan cocaine dealer in the United States"; and Juan Norwin (Norwin in some documents) Meneses Cantarero, a friend of the fallen dictator Anastasio Somoza, who allegedly brought Blandon into the drug business to support the contras and sup-

plied him, for an uncertain amount of time, with significant quantities of cocaine.

The first installment of the series, headlined 'CRACK' PLAGUE'S ROOTS ARE IN NICARAGUAN WAR, opened with two dramatic statements:

For the better part of a decade, a San Francisco Bay Area drug ring sold tons of cocaine to the Crips and Bloods street gangs of Los Angeles and funnelled millions in drug profits to a Latin American guerrilla army run by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

The second paragraph, which captured even more public attention, read:

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 rest of the article attempted to flesh out those assertions and explain "how a cocaine-for-weapons trade supported U.S. policy and undermined black America."

The second installment, entitled ODD TRIO CREATED MASS MARKET FOR 'CRACK,' provided far more detail on the alliance between Ross, Blandon, and Meneses and their role in the crack explosion. Part three, WAR ON DRUGS' UNEQUAL IMPACT ON U.S. BLACKS, focused on an issue that outrages many in the African-American community: sentencing discrepancies between blacks and whites for cocaine trafficking, as illustrated by the cases of Blandon and Ross. Ross received a life sentence without the possibility of parole; Blandon served twenty-eight months and became a highly paid government informant.

In a defense of Webb's work published in the *Baltimore Sun*, Steve Weinberg, a former executive director of Investigative Reporters & Editors (and a *CJR* contributing editor), argues that the reporter

took the story where it seemed to lead — to the door of U.S. national security and drug enforcement agencies. Even if Webb overreached in a few paragraphs — based on my careful reading, I would say his overreaching was limited, if it occurred at all — he still had a compelling, significant investigation to publish.

Indeed, the series did provide a groundbreaking and dramatic story of two right-wing Nicaraguans with clear — although not necessarily strong — connections to the FDN “freedom fighters,” who became major drug dealers, inexplicably escaped prosecution, and made a significant contribution to the thousands of kilos of coke that flowed into the inner cities of California. “They pay cash,” a wiretapped audio on the website records Blandon as telling an associate who complained he didn’t “like niggers.” Blandon continues: “I don’t deal with anybody else. They buy all the time. They buy all the time.” Blandon’s grand jury and trial testimony — which Webb often over-dramatically sources as “court records” — along with a 1986 sheriff’s department search warrant and affidavit and a 1992 Probation and Parole Department report, documented that an undetermined amount of drug funds was going into the contra coffers, possibly as late as 1986.

Far less compelling was the evidence the *Mercury News* presented to tie the Nicaraguans to the CIA itself. But not for lack of trying. Speculative passages like “Freeway Rick had no idea just how ‘plugged’ his erudite cocaine broker [Blandon] was. He didn’t know about Norwin Meneses or the CIA,” were clearly intended to imply CIA involvement. As implied evidence of CIA knowledge of and participation in the drug trade, the articles emphasized the meetings between Blandon and Meneses (identified without supporting evidence as FDN officials) and FDN leaders Adolfo Calero (identified without corroboration as “a longtime CIA operative”) and Enrique Bermudez (identified as a “CIA agent”). To be sure, the FDN was, as the articles described it, the “CIA’s army” — a paramilitary force created, trained, financed, equipped, and largely directed by the CIA. Nevertheless,

the articles failed to distinguish between CIA officers who ran the contra war — none of whom are identified or quoted in the articles — and Nicaraguan “agents” or “operatives” such as Calero and Bermudez, who were put on the CIA payroll for purposes of control, support, and/or information. While to some this may seem a trivial distinction — “It doesn’t make any difference whether [the CIA] delivered the kilo themselves,



Oscar Danilo Blandon Reyes

**Blandon’s statement was intriguing, but neither Webb nor his editor seemed to have noticed that it contradicted the thrust of “Dark Alliance”**

or they turned their heads while somebody else delivered it, they are just as guilty,” Representative Maxine Waters said in one L.A. forum — the articles did not even address the likelihood that CIA officials in charge would have known about these drug operations.

Moreover, a critical passage Webb wrote to suggest that Blandon himself had CIA connections that the government was trying to cover up, quoted court documents out of context. Webb reported that “federal prosecutors obtained a court order preventing [Ross’s] defense lawyers from delving into [Blandon’s] ties to the CIA.” He then quoted this motion to suppress as stating that Blandon “will admit that he was a large-scale dealer in cocaine, and there is no additional benefit to any defendant to inquire as to the Central Intelligence Agency.” But Webb omitted another part of that sentence, which reads, “the threat to so inquire is simply a gambit,” as well as the opening paragraph of the motion, which states:

The United States believes that such allegations are not true, and that the threat to make such allegations is solely intended to dissuade the United States from going forward with the prosecution. . . .

These omissions left the impression that Assistant U.S. Attorney L.J. O’Neale was attempting to conceal a CIA connection, when a reading of the full motion showed that his stated purpose was to keep Ricky Ross’s defense lawyer from sidetracking the prosecution.

Blandon, according to Webb’s story, implied CIA approval for the cocaine trafficking when he told a federal grand jury in San Francisco that after the contras started receiving official CIA funds, the agency no longer needed drug money. “When Mr. Reagan got in the power, we start receiving a lot of money,” he stated. “And the people that was in charge, it was the, the CIA, so they didn’t want to raise any [drug] money because they have, they had the money that they wanted.” At that point, he

said, “we started doing business by ourselves.”

Intriguing as that statement is, neither Webb nor his editors appear to have noticed that it contradicted the thrust of “Dark Alliance.” Ronald Reagan came to power in 1981; the CIA received its seed authorization of \$19.9 million later that year to organize the covert war against Nicaragua. If Blandon and Meneses stopped supporting the FDN at that point, it could not be true that “for the better part of a decade” drug profits in the millions were channeled to the contras. Nor, then, could it be true that this dark alliance with the contras was responsible for the crack epidemic in California in the early 1980s.

This inconsistency demonstrates the overarching problem in the series: the difficulty in using Blandon’s grand jury and court testimony, which is often imprecise — Blandon at one point appeared to date Reagan’s rise to power in 1983 — and contradictory. Particularly regarding the timeline of when he met Meneses, supported the contras, broke with Meneses, and became Ricky Ross’s mentor and supplier — a series of dates critical to the central allegation, that this

Nicaraguan drug ring opened the inner city market to the crack trade to finance the contra war — Blandon's testimony and other documents are vague or inconsistent or both.

In an unusual follow-up evaluating the controversy over "Dark Alliance," thirty-year *Mercury News* veteran Pete Carey reviewed the discrepancies in Blandon's testimony and other records. Webb, according to Carey, acknowledged that it would be damaging to the series "if you looked only at the [Blandon] testimony. But we didn't. We looked at other sources." The other evidence, Carey pointed out, included the 1986 L.A. County Sheriff's affidavit for searching the homes of Blandon in which "three confidential informants said that Blandon was still sending money to the contras." While Carey laid out all the differing evidence "for the readers to make up their own mind," he says, the original series did not. That omission left the series wide open to attack.

### THE MEDIA RESPONSE

Initially the national media greeted the series with a deafening silence. No in-depth articles were published in the major papers in the month of September on the growing controversy. The networks were similarly silent that month, with the exception of CNN, which ran several pieces, and NBC, which did an in-depth *Nightly News* report on September 27. Despite pressure from some staffers and outsiders, Ted Koppel's *Nightline* did nothing until November 15, when CIA Director Deutch held his town meeting in Watts; PBS's *NewsHour* with Jim Lehrer also used the Deutch peg for its first piece on the subject, on November 18.

In some cases, the absence or delay of coverage reflected the deep-rooted skepticism of veteran reporters who had covered the contra war. One newspaper reporter who has written on intelligence for a decade compared the articles to "a crime scene that has been tampered with," rendering the true story difficult to obtain. "Dark Alliance," he suggested, was "a stew of hard fact, supposition, and wild guesswork." For David Corn of *The Nation*, Webb's "claims were not well

substantiated; that was pretty obvious from reading the story." *The New York Times*'s Weiner agreed that the opening declaration that millions in drug funds had been kicked back to the contras "was unsupported in the body of the story." Upon first read, the *Los Angeles Times*'s Washington bureau chief, Doyle McManus, thought "Dark Alliance" was "a hell of a story"; after further review, he concluded that "most of the things that are new aren't true, and most of the things that are true aren't new." Of all the contra-war journalists polled, only the one who originally broke the contra/drug story, Robert Parry, felt "Dark Alliance" was credible. "It didn't strike me as 'Oh wow, that's outlandish.'"

It was public pressure that essentially forced the media to address Webb's allegations. *The Washington Post*, after an internal debate on how to handle the story, weighed in first on October 4 with **THE CIA AND CRACK: EVIDENCE IS LACKING OF ALLEGED PLOT**, a lengthy — and harsh — report written by Roberto Suro and Walter Pincus. "A *Washington Post* investigation," the article declared, had determined that "available information does not support the conclusion that the CIA-backed contras — or Nicaraguans in general — played a major role in the emergence of crack as a narcotic in widespread use across the United States" — an odd argument since "Dark Alliance" had focused mostly on the rise of crack in California. The article emphasized parts of Blandon's court testimony, where he limited the time he was connected to the contras to 1981-82, but failed to mention, let alone evaluate, contradictory evidence that Blandon's drug money was being laundered through a Miami bank for contra arms purchases possibly into 1986. The Suro/Pincus dismissal of the series, combined with a companion piece on the black community's susceptibility to conspiracy theories, only served to stir the controversy.

On October 21, *The New York Times* covered the same ground as the *Post* — finding "scant proof" for the *Mercury News*'s contentions — but with a more measured approach. A

lengthy article by Tim Golden, **THOUGH EVIDENCE IS THIN, TALE OF CIA AND DRUGS HAS LIFE OF ITS OWN**, examined how and why "Dark Alliance" had resounded throughout African-American communities, the problems with the evidence, and the politics surrounding the issue.

Long as it was, the Golden piece was overshadowed by a massive three-part rebuttal in the *Los Angeles Times* that began on October 20. Unlike the East Coast papers, the *Los Angeles Times* had been scooped in its own backyard about events that took place in its own city. "When I first saw the series," Leo Wolinsky, Metro editor for the *Times* told *L.A. Weekly*, "it put a big lump in my stomach." Still, it took almost a month for editors (who blame vacation plans and the conventions for the delay) to begin to focus on how to follow up on the *Mercury News*. A query to the Washington bureau for direction and advice brought a substantive memo, written by McManus, that made three points:

- The Washington bureau had no expertise on the history of crack in California; the L.A. desk would have to take up that issue on its own.
- There had been earlier reporting on the contras and drugs, including in California — most notably by Seth Rosenfeld of the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1986. Although the lead allegation of "millions" in drug revenues going to the contras was not substantiated, "There is something there."
- The allegations of government protection of Meneses and Blandon from prosecution were the "most convincing and troubling" part of the *Mercury News* exposé and fertile ground for further investigation. On that, the memo recommended a full-court press.

As McManus characterized his response, "I said: 'This goddamn thing is full of holes. There is no sourcing or terribly weak sourcing in the story. There is phraseology in here that is dishonest. But it is obviously worth going back and seeing what we can establish.'"

Both McManus and Wolinsky deny that the *Times* response was ever intended, as Wolinsky put it, "as a

knockdown of the *Mercury News* series." But one *Times* reporter characterized himself as being "assigned to the 'get Gary Webb team'" and another was heard to say "We're going to take away that guy's Pulitzer." The opening "About this series" teaser made it clear that the *Times* pieces would explicitly address, and deny, the validity of all the main assertions in "Dark Alliance."

For all the effort spent trying to highlight the shortcomings of the *Mercury News*, however, the *Times* stumbled into some of the same problems of hyperbole, selectivity, and credibility that it was attempting to expose. For example, the first installment highlighted many of the dealers who had played a role in the advent of crack in L.A. The point was to show that Ricky Ross may have been a *big* player, but was not *the* player, as Webb had suggested, in the arrival of crack into the black neighborhoods of L.A. "The story of crack's genesis and evolution . . . is filled with a cast of interchangeable characters, from ruthless billionaires to strung-out curb dealers, none of whom is central to the drama," Jesse Katz wrote, based on his reporting and that of six other *Times* reporters. "Even on the best day Ricky Ross had, there was way more crack cocaine out there than he could ever control," Katz quoted a San Fernando narcotics detective as stating, and then noted: "How the crack epidemic reached that extreme, on some level, had nothing to do with Ross. Before, during, and after his reign, a bewildering roster of other dealers and suppliers helped fuel the crisis."

Less than two years earlier, however, the same Jesse Katz had described Ross as the veritable Dr. Moriarty of crack. Katz's December 20, 1994 article, DEPOSED KING OF CRACK, opened with this dramatic statement:

If there was an eye to the storm, if there was a criminal mastermind behind crack's decade-long reign, if there was one outlaw capitalist most responsible for flooding Los Angeles streets with mass-marketed cocaine, his name was Freeway Rick. . . . Ricky Donnell Ross did more than anyone

else to democratize [crack], boosting volume, slashing prices, and spreading disease on a scale never before conceived.

Either Katz was guilty of vast exaggeration in 1994 or of playing down evidence that he had in 1996. If Ross was "key to the drug's spread in L.A.," as the *Times* said in 1994, then his key supplier, Blandon, bore at least some of the responsibility for the "democratization" of crack that Gary Webb ascribed to him.



Ricky Donnell Ross

**Less than two years ago, the *Los Angeles Times* described Ross as the veritable Dr. Moriarty of crack. Either it was guilty of vast exaggeration then, or of playing down evidence now**

The second installment, written by McManus, drew on three unnamed associates of Blandon and Meneses, who denied that the two had sent "millions" to the contras; they believed the figure closer to \$50,000, because the drug smugglers were awash in debt, not profit, in the early years. Perhaps more importantly, the *Los Angeles Times* obtained an admission from Dawn Garcia, who edited the piece at the *Mercury News*, that the "millions" figure was an extrapolation, based on the amount of coke Blandon and Meneses had sold between 1981 and 1986 combined with Blandon's testimony that everything went to the contras.

But the *Times*, like the *Post*, drew on the pieces of Blandon's court testi-

mony in which he confined his contra drug dealings to a short period in 1981 and 1982 — using the same kind of selectivity in highlighting evidence as the *Mercury News*, but to arrive at opposite conclusions, and failing to pursue leads in the other contradictory testimony and documents that Webb had used to present his case.

At the same time as it sought to undermine the specifics of "Dark Alliance," the McManus piece actually advanced its contra/crack connection thesis. To the two Nicaraguan drug dealers that Webb had written about, the *Times* added two more members of that ring: Meneses's nephew, Jairo Morales Meneses, and Renato Peña Cabrera. Both were arrested on cocaine charges in November, 1984. Unlike Blandon and Norvin Meneses, whose depiction in Webb's series as FDN officials was challenged by critics, Peña had a verifiable role, having served as an FDN press secretary in California.

The McManus piece credulously painted a portrait of the CIA as a law-abiding, conscientious agency. It included an abundance of denials from prominent CIA and Justice Department officials — while failing to inform readers of their roles in some of the scandals of the contra war — that the CIA would ever tolerate drug smuggling or that there had ever been any government interference with prosecuting drug smugglers connected to the contras. This despite documentation to the contrary.

Indeed, all three papers ignored evidence from declassified National Security Council e-mail messages and *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* ignored evidence, from Oliver North's notebooks, which lend support to the underlying premise of the *Mercury News* series — that U.S. officials would both condone and protect drug traffickers if doing so advanced the contra cause. The October 21 *New York Times* piece didn't even mention the Kerry Committee report. "A decade ago, the national media low-balled the contra-drug story," David Corn observed in *The Nation*. "Now it's, Been there, done that."

## IN THE AFTERMATH

On October 23, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence held its first hearing on the controversy surrounding contra-drug allegations. Jack Blum, the former lead investigator for the Kerry committee, was the lead witness. Blum testified that his investigators had found no evidence whatsoever that the African-American community was a particular target of a plot to sell crack cocaine or that high U.S. officials had a policy of supporting the contras through drug sales. But, he testified further, "if you ask whether the United States government ignored the drug problem and subverted law enforcement to prevent embarrassment and to reward our allies in the contra war, the answer is yes." In a long session, he also detailed the Reagan Administration's obstruction of the Kerry investigation.

A story on ABC's *World News Tonight* about the hearing led with Blum's "no evidence" statement but excluded any reference to the rest of his testimony. *The New York Times* ran an AP story on the hearing but cut references to Blum's testimony. The *Los Angeles Times* covered the hearing but failed even to mention the lead witness or his testimony.

For conspiracy buffs, this non-coverage raised the specter of a government/media collaboration to bury the contra-cocaine story. That is far-fetched. Yet the furor over "Dark Alliance" and the mainstream media's response to it dramatically raise the issue of responsible and irresponsible journalism — particularly in an era of growing public cynicism toward both government and the institutional press.

For many in the media, Webb's reporting remains at the core of the debate over journalistic responsibility. One veteran TV producer decried the impact of "Dark Alliance" on the profession: "Those stories have cheapened the coin of the realm." Another veteran reporter asks, "Can anyone doubt that Gary Webb added two plus two and came out with twenty-two?" At *The Washington Post*, senior management, led by Stephen Rosenfeld, deputy editorial-page editor, even refused to print

a letter to the editor written by Jerry Ceppos, the *Mercury News's* executive editor, regarding the *Post's* critique of the series. Although Ceppos had redrafted the letter several times at the demand of the *Post*, Rosenfeld disparaged it as "misinformation."

In her November 10 column, the *Post's* own ombudsman, Geneva Overholser, objected to that decision, as well as to the *Post's* response to "Dark Alliance." "There is another appropriate response, a more important one, and that is: 'Is there anything to the very serious question the series raised?'"

Overholser's point resonated inside the *Post*. "There was a lot of unhappiness," says one editor. "A lot of frustration.

Why pick on the *Mercury News*? There was a recognition that it would be appropriate to do something else." That recognition led to the publication of a follow-up piece headlined CIA, CONTRAS AND DRUGS: QUESTIONS ON LINKS LINGER. It reported that in 1984 the CIA had authorized a contra group in Costa Rica to take planes and cash from a prominent Colombian drug dealer then under indictment in the U.S. The planes, according to the drug dealers, were used to ferry arms to the contras and then drugs to the United States.

Clearly, there was room to advance the contra/drug/CIA story rather than simply denounce it. Indeed, at the *Post*, *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and other major oracles, the course of responsible journalism could have taken a number of avenues, among them: a historical treatment of drug smuggling as part of CIA covert operations in Indochina, Afghanistan, and Central America; an investigation into the alleged obstruction, by the Justice Department and the CIA, of the Kerry Committee's inquiry in the late 1980s; an evaluation of Oliver North's mendacious insistence, after the *Mercury News* series was published, that "no U.S. government official" ever "tolerated" drug smuggling as part of the contra war; and a follow-up on the various intriguing leads in "Dark Alliance." "The big question is still hanging out there," said one *Los Angeles Times* reporter who disagreed with his editors' decision to simply trash "Dark

Alliance." "What did the government know and when did they know it? This story is not put to rest by a long shot."

To be sure, the "Dark Alliance" series was an overwritten and problematically sourced piece of reporting. It repeatedly promised evidence that, on close reading, it did not deliver. In so doing, the *Mercury News* bears part of the responsibility for the sometimes distorted public furor the stories generated. (A thorough editing job might have spared the *Mercury News* such responsibility and still resulted in a major exposé.) "Webb has convinced thousands of people of assertions that are not yet true or not yet supported," McManus points out. "That pollutes the public debate."

Yet the *Mercury News* was single-handedly responsible for stimulating this debate. This regional paper accomplished something that neither the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, nor *The New York Times* had been willing or able to do — revisit a significant story that had been inexplicably abandoned by the mainstream press, report a new dimension to it, and thus put it back on the national agenda where it belongs. "We have advanced a ten-year story that is clearly of great interest to the American public," Ceppos could rightfully claim.

The unacknowledged negligence of the mainstream press made that possible. Indeed, if the major media had devoted the same energy and ink to investigating the contra drug scandal in the 1980s as they did to attacking the *Mercury News* in 1996, Gary Webb might never have had his scoop.

And having shown itself still unwilling to follow the leads and lay the story to rest, the press faces a challenge in the contra-cocaine matter not unlike the government's: restoring its credibility in the face of public distrust over its perceived role in the handling of these events. "A principal responsibility of the press is to protect the people from government excesses," Overholser pointed out. "The *Post* (and others) showed more energy for protecting the CIA from someone else's journalistic excesses." The mainstream press shirked its larger duty; thus it bears the larger burden. ♦