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titled "Though Evidence Is Thin, Tale of C.I.A. and Drugs Has a Life of Its Own."

The *L.A. Times*, which according to one of its reporters created a "get Gary Webb team," proved so eager to knock down the story it contradicted its own reporting. In criticizing Webb's focus on drug dealer Ricky Ross, a police source for reporter Jesse Katz insisted, "Even on the best day Ricky Ross had, there was way more crack cocaine out there than he could ever control." But two years earlier, Katz had written in the same newspaper that "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."

Similarly, the *Washington Post* attack on Webb was so one-sided it inspired the newspaper's ombudsman, Geneva Overholser, to accuse the paper of "misdirected" zeal. "The Post," she wrote, "showed more energy for protect[ing] the CIA from someone else's journalistic excesses" than it did "protecting the people from government excesses." In a textbook example of elite journalistic arrogance, the paper even refused to publish Jerry Ceppos's response to the critique of his newspaper.

The mainstream critique of Webb's reporting could be summed up in the reaction of *L.A. Times* Washington bureau chief Doyle McManus, who concluded that "most of the things that are new aren't true, and most of the things that are true aren't new." But as Peter Kornbluh demonstrated in a remarkably thorough examination of the evidence in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, each of the papers that so enthusiastically pounced on Webb's errors had systematically buried the story of *contra* cocaine-running back when it was new. *Contra* involvement in drug running across the United States was substantiated by entries in Oliver North's diaries and in an official 1989 report of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

This sensational news—that the National Security Council (in the person of North) and the C.I.A. had turned a blind eye to drug smuggling in the United States in order to further covert aims to destroy a government with which the country was officially at peace—did not receive one-thirtieth the space that the media devoted to knocking down the weaker aspects of Webb's work. Indeed, the story didn't make it to network news. One needn't be a Freudian to wonder whether the fact that Webb offered confirmation of an explosive story ignored by the mainstream media had inspired a wish to destroy both the right and the wrong in his reporting.

Now that Ceppos has apologized, however, *The New York Times* has decided that the story is front-page news, and even printed a condescending editorial commending the *Mercury News* for other solid work it has done. Doyle McManus called the apology "courageous." *The Washington Post* ran a lengthy story on page A7. In defending the story many months ago, however, Ceppos insisted that "the key finding of the series that people associated with the C.I.A. also sold many tons of cocaine has not been challenged." It still hasn't.

What did the agency know and when did it know it?  
 Don't expect answers any time soon.

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## EDITORIALS

### *C.I.A., Crack, the Media*

The never-ending saga of the *San Jose Mercury News*, the C.I.A., *contras* and crack dealers took yet another strange twist recently when the newspaper's editor saw fit to issue a public apology. Gary Webb's four-part series last year, "Dark Alliance," wrote editor Jerry Ceppos, "fell short of my standards for the Mercury News."

High-profile newspaper apologies, unprompted by lawsuits, are, generally speaking, a rare and welcome sight. Ceppos notes, "For too long, newspapers have believed that no one can disagree with them, that they must have the last word." What is curious about Ceppos's decision is that his apology ignored virtually everything that was right with his paper's remarkable scoop and focused only on those aspects of the story that overshot its goal. This focus perfectly mirrored that of the mainstream national press, as well as that of the C.I.A. itself. The agency, which usually keeps mum about newspaper stories involving its actions, issued a statement calling Ceppos's apology "gratifying."

It is fair to say that no regionally generated story has inspired so powerful a reaction as Webb's tangled tale of the introduction of crack into L.A. ghettos by drug dealers who helped fund the C.I.A.-backed and -created Nicaraguan *contras*. Initially ignored by the national media—even the *Los Angeles Times*—the story spread around the world on the Internet and ultimately led to Congressional investigations, vituperative town meetings featuring then-Director of Central Intelligence John Deutch and lengthy rebuttals in almost every national newspaper. Like

the O.J. verdict, the story revealed a growing racial divide in the perception of America's most powerful institutions. For many African-Americans, particularly poor ones, the idea that the C.I.A. deliberately introduced crack into America's ghettos in order to fund foreign wars against imaginary threats did not seem much of a stretch. "Dark Alliance" seemed to confirm their world view. For the rest of America, however, the notion went beyond what even the C.I.A. might consider. The agency was overzealous, perhaps, but criminal? That was going too far.

In fact, the series did go too far. As Ceppos's apology admitted, Webb "presented only one interpretation of complicated, sometimes-conflicting pieces of evidence." He "oversimplified the complex issue of how the crack epidemic in America grew." On the Internet in particular, the series used "imprecise language and graphics" to create "impressions that were open to misinterpretation." Webb never directly claimed that the C.I.A. ran the drug dealers, or even had direct knowledge of their drug dealing. Most of his reporting focused on the relationship between the crack dealers and the *contras*. But his over-hyped, sensationalized language contributed to misimpressions that his reporting could not support.

Webb gave his enemies a sword and they used it. Without exception, bigfoot reporters focused not on the portions of his reporting that were new and original but on the unsupportable allegations his story seemed to imply. Ignoring the story as it built steam, both on the Internet and through church and community group meetings in inner-city neighborhoods, the mainstream media finally fell on Webb's reporting with the subtlety of a panzer division. *The New York Times* published an article

# Mercury News series draws fire

## San Jose paper finds itself under scrutiny

BY JACQUELINE MYERS

A San Jose Mercury News series about a California drug ring's ties to the Latin American Contras—which were backed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency—spurred other newspapers to do their own stories in the classic print tradition of following up.

But this time was a bit unusual because the Mercury News series, which ran last August, has recently been covered almost as much as the subject. The series has received—and continues to receive—so much attention that the Mercury News set up a Web site to present the material and assigned reporter Pete Carey to evaluate the coverage the series has received.

The series, titled "Dark Alliance," focused on a Los Angeles drug ring trafficking through L.A. street gangs to raise funds for the Contras, the opposition to what was then a Sandinista-led government in Nicaragua.

Dark Alliance identified the street gang activity as the driving force behind the explosion of crack cocaine use that has swept across the United States in recent years. The heart of the subsequent controversy is whether the CIA participated in or had any knowledge of the drug ring's financial support of the Contra mission against the Sandinista government.

The Washington Post, New York Times and L.A. Times have all raised doubts about "Dark Alliance," saying there is no evidence to prove the CIA knew about or was in any way involved.

Mercury News Executive Editor Jerry Ceppos told Editor & Publisher magazine that his only regret about running the series was that it didn't contain a paragraph saying "clearly what the Mercury News doesn't know: whether the CIA indeed had knowledge of the drug dealing in Los Angeles." He said the paper had not reached or reported on a decision regarding CIA involvement or knowledge.

"Dark Alliance" reporter Gary Webb never reported that the Contra fund-raising was headed by the CIA, or that the agency was even aware of the efforts at rais-

ing funds to use against the Sandinista government. But the Washington, New York and Los Angeles newspapers began taking issue in October with Webb's references to the "CIA's army," the series title "Dark Alliance," the newspaper's use of an original logo that depicted a crack-smoker superimposed over the CIA seal, and other details, that were interpreted as suggestions of a link.

Other news organizations, including The Boston Globe, Accuracy in the Media, Columbia Journalism Review, Extra! and Newsweek, have since focused attention on the stories.

Robert Suro and Walter Pincus of The Washington Post said their own investigation found no evidence to "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."

Pincus, who covered the widely-publicized Iran-Contra affair in the 1980s, said the information found in the Mercury News series did not match the allegations it made.

Tim Golden of The New York Times said while there are indications, there is no evidence that Nicaraguan drug traffickers had anything to do with the CIA. He also said there is no proof that small amounts of cocaine possibly distributed for purposes of raising money for the Contras had increased significantly the use of crack in the United States.

Jesse Katz, Claire Spiegel, and Ralph Frammolino of the Los Angeles Times said there was no proof that profits from a Nicaraguan drug ring went to the Contras; that the Crips and the Bloods, Los Angeles street gangs, received profits from cocaine sales and that Nicaraguans weren't the first to take cocaine to L.A.

The Aim Report, a newsletter published by Accuracy in the Media, calls Webb's series "media malpractice."

"Splashed over page after page, with striking graphics and photographs, the series had the first-glance appearance of well-documented authenticity," the report reads. "But even a cursory reading shows that the articles are long on innuendo and

short on facts, and are rife with internal contradictions that undercut Webb's thesis."

But not all reaction is criticism. The National Association of Black Journalists heralded the Mercury News series, saying it became the "buzz of black America." Richard Prince, who wrote the "Journalisms" column in the September/October 1996 issue of NABJ Journal, said, "How long have black folks been saying all those drugs couldn't be coming into our communities without the government's knowledge?"

The cover story in the January/February 1997 issue of Extra! also came to the Mercury News' defense. Norman Solomon said "the elite media's attacks . . . were clearly driven by a need to defend their shoddy record on the Contra-cocaine story . . ."

Defending what he terms "solid journalism," Solomon denounces criticisms of Webb's references to the Contras as "the CIA's army." He says Webb's reference highlights "a relationship that is fundamentally relevant to the story."

Peter Kornbluh in the current issue of Columbia Journalism Review said the Mercury News series promised evidence, but did not deliver it. But, Kornbluh said, the Mercury News had done something the elites hadn't: "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."

The series also prompted another unanticipated buzz—online activity. The Associated Press reported that within days of the beginning of the "Dark Alliance" series, more than 2500 Web sites had linked directly to Mercury News Center, the online Mercury News edition.

The Dark Alliance collection can be found at <http://www.sjmercury.com/drugs>



*Jacqueline Myers is the Ward Neff intern for the Society.*