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## Secrecy, Conspiracy, and the Media During the CIA-Contra Affair

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SECRECY, CONSPIRACY, AND THE MEDIA DURING THE CIA-CONTRA AFFAIR

by

Jakob Miller

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
Graduation with Honors from the  
South Carolina Honors College

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## Thesis Summary

In 1996, Gary Webb and the San Jose Mercury News unleashed a media firestorm over his “Dark Alliance” series of newspaper articles, which detailed CIA involvement in the Los Angeles crack cocaine epidemic in the 1980s. The series alleged that a drug ring in L.A. sold tons of crack to a primarily African-American population in the city, with profits then smuggled back to Nicaragua to a group of CIA-backed Contras. The series resulted in four separate investigations into CIA wrongdoing, including one by the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations, which concluded that there were “serious questions as to whether or not US officials... failed to address the drug issue for fear of jeopardizing the war against Nicaragua.”<sup>1</sup> I argue that the *Dark Alliance*, although flawed due to some exaggerated claims of causality, represents an important case study in press and CIA accountability and the ways in which newscraft and statecraft intersect. This thesis examines the validity of Webb’s claims of CIA wrongdoing, as well as the press coverage of the events of the series. Additionally, this thesis studies the effects of the crack cocaine epidemic on Los Angeles communities and how that drove conspiratorial beliefs after the publication of the *Dark Alliance*; largely because of Reagan-era drug enforcement policies and structural vulnerabilities within these communities, African-Americans were severely affected by the impact of crack cocaine, compounding conspiratorial beliefs. Finally, this thesis discusses the overarching themes of secrecy and conspiracy, including the ways in which mass media can play contradictory roles in the production of ‘public opinion’.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations, *Drugs, Law Enforcement, and Foreign Policy*, 1989, 136.  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000014976124&view=1up&seq=148&skin=2021>

### **Author's Note**

I would like to express my deep gratitude towards Dr. Jennifer Reynolds, who provided valuable insight and expertise, countless resources, and hours of her time to help me write this paper. The researching and writing skills I developed during this process will stay with me as I enter a new chapter in my life. I would also like to thank Dr.

Magdalena Stawkowski, my second reader, for her helpful comments as I began to revise my thesis, and I want her to know that I will be back for the seminar featuring the former KGB officer if at all possible.

## **On secrecy and the CIA**

Secrecy has long been used in the intelligence community to achieve domestic and foreign policy goals. The collection and processing of secret information has allowed the United States to succeed in wartime and diplomacy and has aided decision-making on the security and defense of the mainland US. At times, secrecy has been used to communicate essential and valuable information to operatives behind enemy lines, through the usage of ciphers and codes. Secrecy has also been critical to obtaining economic advantages over other competitors on the world stage and at home. However, over time, secrecy as it is related to intelligence services has taken on a more nefarious connotation. In this context, information withheld from the public in the name of secrecy has been associated with covering up governmental wrongdoing and illegal activities. Secrecy at the upper levels of intelligence seems to run Contrary to democratic ideals, because agencies like the CIA can cover up immoral acts under the guise of “protecting national security”. Adding credence to this theory, a Pew Research poll in 2018 found that 74% of Americans view governmental transparency as a very important part of democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Secrecy in intelligence is necessary, despite the possible consequences of over-classification. It is difficult for those outside the intelligence bubble to reconcile the differences between the level of secrecy that those organizations need to evaluate and respond to threats and the level of secrecy that citizens need to confirm that democratic ideals and ethics are being upheld. In order to allow these two groups to coexist without

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<sup>2</sup> “Views of American Democratic Values and principles,” *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*, April 26, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/04/26/2-views-of-american-democratic-values-and-principles/>

conflict, intelligence agencies must earn and maintain the trust of their constituents. In turn, constituents must recognize the level of threats that intelligence agencies respond to every day and realize the need for secrecy in these situations. Despite pledges by directors to increase transparency in intelligence agencies over the years, the results of these efforts have failed to impress.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as documents become declassified or leaked, it is clear that intelligence agencies, and the CIA specifically, have failed to uphold their end of the bargain. There have been countless violations of democratic ideals that were swept under the rug in the past, which has severely undermined trust in the organization today.

The CIA has been accused of numerous abuses of power by multiple scholars, going back to its inception in 1947. Although the organization managed to avoid serious catastrophe for a couple decades, a series of scandals in the early 1970s began a saga of Congressional committees and newspaper scrutiny that promised to bring further oversight to the secretive group. At the time, the CIA was already facing serious accusations of spying on American citizens using plainclothes Army intelligence operatives. These accusations were further investigated by Senator Sam Ervin in 1973, and the revelations were published in more than 40 newspapers around the US. In 1974, the hammer fell: a New York Times article by Seymour Hersh found that the CIA had been involved in abuses ranging from attempted assassinations of foreign leaders to domestic spying on at least 10,000 US citizens.<sup>4</sup> Former Director of Covert Intelligence (DCI) James Schlesinger originally compiled the internal documents, dubbed the

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<sup>3</sup> Nick Hopkins, "Former NSA chief: Western intelligence agencies must be more transparent," *The Guardian*, September 30, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/30/nsa-director-intelligence-public-support>

<sup>4</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, "Huge C.I.A. operation reported in U.S. against antiwar forces, other dissidents in Nixon years," *New York Times*, December 22, 1974, pp. 1–27.

“Family Jewels”, in response to public outcry over Watergate, which was carried out by a group of burglars that included two former CIA officers.<sup>5</sup> The next year, the so-called “Year of Intelligence” promised to finally expose CIA wrongdoing through a series of Congressional and presidential investigations.

The Senate (Church Committee), House of Representatives (Pike Committee) and the White House (Rockefeller Commission) all launched probes into the CIA and its intelligence counterparts, including the FBI, NSA, and IRS. These investigations uncovered some of the most infamous CIA programs: Operation MKULTRA, which used Americans as test subjects for mind control experiments; COINTELPRO, which surveilled American civil rights and political organizations without their knowledge; and the aforementioned “Family Jewels”. From the Family Jewels memos came another shocking allegation: the CIA had recruited journalists to manipulate news media and disseminate propaganda around the world. This program, referred to as Operation Mockingbird, would fuel theories that the CIA had control over domestic US news sources and their publishing output for years to come.

In his doctoral thesis, “The CIA & the cult of secrecy”, David McCarthy argues that in order to fully comprehend the impact of the events of 1975 on the US intelligence community, we must also consider what was going on outside Congress.<sup>6</sup> One of these events was a 1973 birthday party for Norman Mailer, a prominent author and politician, who mentioned in the invitations that he would be “making an announcement of

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<sup>5</sup> Karen DeYoung and Walter Pincus, “CIA to Air Decades of Its Dirty Laundry,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 2007, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/21/AR2007062102434\\_pf.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/21/AR2007062102434_pf.html)

<sup>6</sup> David S. McCarthy, “The CIA & the cult of secrecy,” PhD diss., (College of William and Mary, 2008). <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3126&context=etd>

national importance” that evening.<sup>7</sup> However, by the time he got up for his speech, he was too drunk to make much sense at all, and many left without understanding what he was trying to say.<sup>8</sup> He clarified the situation in a later press conference: he wanted a sort of ‘people’s intelligence’ called the Fifth Estate, which would act as a democratic watchdog for the FBI and CIA, who were experiencing rapidly growing public relations issues as the Watergate conspiracy was uncovered by investigative journalists.<sup>9</sup> He also suggested that the Fourth Estate, or the media, was unable to act effectively in this role because each big story required years of detailed investigative work to prove and even longer to publish.<sup>10</sup> Although he acknowledged that the Fourth and Fifth Estates could eventually work together, “the walled-in eyes of the poisoned Fourth” could not answer his central question: “Is our history developing into a string of connected conspiracies, or is there less ground finally for our national paranoia than any have supposed?”<sup>11</sup>

Unbeknownst to Mailer, one such organization already existed. A group of three former intelligence officers were behind the Committee for Action/Research on the Intelligence Community (CARIC) and published a magazine, *Counter-Spy*, that printed names and stations of intelligence officials implicated in the conspiracies that CARIC uncovered. This was a rarity, both because of the secrecy surrounding that information and because of the unwillingness to hold powerful government institutions accountable for fear of legal repercussions. Although the group published some conspiratorial beliefs

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<sup>7</sup> Hilary Mills, *Mailer: A Biography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 389.

<sup>8</sup> Sally Quinn, “Norman Mailer Turns 50,” *Washington Post*, February 7, 1973, B7.

<sup>9</sup> “Mailer Clarifies His ‘Fifth Estate’: Says Its Goals and Structure Are Still Not Decided On,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1973, 84. <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/02/07/archives/mailer-clarifies-his-fifth-estate-says-its-goals-and-structure-are.html>

<sup>10</sup> McCarthy, “The CIA & the cult of secrecy,” 18-19.

<sup>11</sup> Norman Mailer, “The Morning After,” *New York Times Book Review*, March 11, 1973.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1973/03/11/archives/the-morning-after-the-guest-word-morning-after.html>

that did not stand the test of time,<sup>12</sup> they described other programs that certainly did happen, including Operation Phoenix, a counter-insurgency program in Vietnam that the group believed operated as “a systematic murder program”.<sup>13</sup> The winter 1975 edition of *Counter-Spy* proved to be their most famous: in that issue, they identified over 100 suspected CIA station chiefs around the world.<sup>14</sup> On page 26, a short listing identified Richard S. Welch as the station chief in Lima, Peru.

On December 23, 1975, Welch was gunned down by terrorists in Athens, Greece, where he was actually serving as station chief. Although *Counter-Spy* was not in every American’s living room, some readers wondered what purpose the identification of undercover operatives served other than to encourage violence against them. The magazine’s editors claimed that they were attempting to force the CIA to withdraw their employees, which was a necessary step to abolishing covert action abroad.<sup>15</sup> However, the radical nature of this attempt was put under the microscope after the Fifth Estate penned an open letter in the days following the assassination of Welch, which read, in part, “if anyone is to blame for Mr. Welch's death it is the C.I.A. that sent him there to spy, perhaps even to intervene, in the affairs of the Greek Government.”<sup>16</sup> The CIA and its PR machine immediately responded, with DCI William Colby saying that the magazine had “issued a statement which can only be called a shocking attempt to use the death of a dedicated American as fuel for its irresponsible and paranoid [sic] attack

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<sup>12</sup> “Terrorist groups will either be formed or manipulated to justify the designs of those persons who have made security their lives.” *Counter-Spy 1* (June 1974): 2.

<sup>13</sup> “Pacification: The 100 Year Flight of the Phoenix,” *Counter-Spy 1* (May 1973): 21.

<sup>14</sup> “Chiefs of Station: Who’s Who and What They Do,” *Counter-Spy 2* (Winter 1975): 23.

<sup>15</sup> McCarthy, “The CIA & the cult of secrecy,” 32.

<sup>16</sup> “C.I.A. Blamed for Death,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1975, 3.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1975/12/25/archives/cia-blamed-for-death.html>

on other Americans serving their country here and abroad."<sup>17</sup> Although the magazine would withstand the initial attacks, there were important casualties: Mailer withdrew his support for the publication after they lost tax-exempt status, the original editors left one by one, and in 1982, with the death of Richard S. Welch in mind, Congress passed the Intelligence Identities Protection Act, which made it illegal to print the names of intelligence operatives. Two years later, the magazine was published for the last time.

Despite all of this, *Counter-Spy* proved to be a very impactful publication. For the first time, it was the citizens who were surveilling the CIA, and not the other way around. Colby and other high-level officials were also forced to answer tough questions about how easy it was for "a scruffy group of anti-CIA activists," as he called them, to identify undercover operatives who were not supposed to be identifiable.<sup>18</sup> Eventually, the CIA would 'embrace' more Congressional oversight, but never would they agree to what the editors at *Counter-Spy* pushed for: an end to covert action due to the abuses that intelligence services had engaged in previously. In fact, they actively fought against it, mainly with effective public relations strategies that convinced politicians and the American public alike that covert action and secrecy were necessary to ensure safety at home.

Established in 1977, the CIA Office of Public Affairs sought to minimize the damage that had been done to the CIA's public image during the "Year of Intelligence", ostensibly through honest public outreach. However, McCarthy argued that the agency used public relations mainly to divert the public's attention from the negative media

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> William Colby and Peter Forbath, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 450.

coverage they received.<sup>19</sup> The CIA would selectively declassify evidence and documents that portrayed their actions in a positive light while keeping other information under wraps, under the guise of protecting their valuable ‘culture of secrecy’.<sup>20</sup> They also utilized memoirs that cast the agency in a favorable view, like Colby’s *Honorable Men*, and the Association of Retired Intelligence Officers (ARIO) provided additional support that bolstered the CIA’s image.<sup>21</sup> The organization also became more involved in Hollywood, lending their expertise to a number of movies and television shows that portrayed the secretive world of the CIA as one with numerous successes and praiseworthy actions on behalf of agency operatives.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, these strategies would be “remarkably effective,” allowing the agency freedom to write its own history.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> David S. McCarthy, “Selling the CIA: Public Relations and the Culture of Secrecy” (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018), pp. 8-129.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-36.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57-76.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

## The Dark Alliance

### Chapter I

Gary Webb was born in Corona, California, on August 31, 1955.<sup>24</sup> He began his journalism career writing music reviews for the IUPUI school newspaper, *The Sagamore*.<sup>25</sup> Shortly thereafter, he moved to Cincinnati and got a job writing for the *Kentucky Post*, a smaller affiliate of the *Cincinnati Post*.<sup>26</sup> Webb covered many noteworthy stories during his time at the *Post* and, later on, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* quickly establishing a reputation as a hard-hitting investigative reporter with a penchant for misleading headlines.<sup>27</sup> Two stories that he wrote during his time at the *Plain Dealer* resulted in multimillion dollar libel settlements, even though none of the facts of either story were proven false; the headlines, instead, were deemed misleading and implied more wrongdoing than what actually occurred.<sup>28</sup>

In 1988, Webb moved on to the *San Jose Mercury News*, where he began work as a state government correspondent in Sacramento.<sup>29</sup> By this point, Webb had become a talented researcher and tenacious reporter, although it seemed that he quickly and definitively identified the good guys and bad guys in each story that he wrote, according to those who worked with him.<sup>30</sup> “That kind of innate sense of fairness didn’t come naturally to Gary,” said Scott Herhold, his former editor at the *Mercury News*. “He was

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<sup>24</sup> Nick Schou, *Kill The Messenger: How the CIA’s Crack Cocaine Controversy Destroyed Gary Webb* (Nation Books, 2006), 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-51.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-54.

<sup>30</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 58.

a crusader.”<sup>31</sup> That crusader mentality meant that he was often at loggerheads with other editors and reporters at the paper, and his tendency to draw sweeping conclusions without the requisite body of evidence would later damage his credibility. In 1995, Webb was contacted by Coral Baca, a woman whose boyfriend, Rafael Cornejo, was targeted by the asset forfeiture program established during the Reagan administration by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. Baca believed that the government had set Cornejo up on bogus charges that allowed them to seize his house and sell it. A drug dealer believing that they were innocent was not news, though, and Webb was initially hesitant to pursue the story.<sup>32</sup> That lasted until a phone call with Baca, in which she mentioned something that would catapult Gary Webb into the national spotlight just a few years later. “There’s something about Rafael’s case that I don’t think you would have done before,” she said. “One of the government’s witnesses is a guy who used to work with the CIA selling drugs.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

## *Chapter II*

The connections between Rafael Cornejo, drugs, and the CIA cannot be adequately understood without a knowledge of the Reagan administration and its involvement in the covert regime change in Nicaragua. Following the Nicaraguan Revolution, which resulted in the bloody overthrow of the Somoza family political dynasty in 1979, the Marxist Sandinista Junta of National Reconstruction, a leftist coalition government, came into power.<sup>34</sup> The Reagan administration considered the Sandinistas to be a threat to the American southern border,<sup>35</sup> and Reagan would later argue in his 1985 State of the Union address that “We must not break faith with those who are risking their lives—on every continent from Afghanistan to Nicaragua—to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth.”<sup>36</sup> Under the guidance of the Reagan Doctrine, as this idea would later be known, the U.S. government began providing arms, clothing and military supervision to a loosely affiliated group of rebel fighters, known as Contras.<sup>37</sup>

The Contras were made up of three distinct elements of Nicaraguan society. Some were former Nicaraguan National Guardsmen, who had worked for the Somoza government before its downfall after the civil war.<sup>38</sup> Others were anti-Somozista activists who became disillusioned with the new government’s policy making.<sup>39</sup> A third

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<sup>34</sup> Lee H. Hamilton, et al., "Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran/Contra Affair," November 17, 1987, 25. <https://archive.org/details/reportofcongress87unit/mode/2up>

<sup>35</sup> John A. Thompson, “The Exaggeration of American Vulnerability: An Anatomy of Tradition,” *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1992): p. 33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24912171>

<sup>36</sup> Chester Pach, “The Reagan Doctrine: Principle, Pragmatism, and Policy,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (March 2006): p. 75. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27552748?seq=1>

<sup>37</sup> Hamilton, “Report Investigating the Iran/Contra Affair,” 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

group was made up of ordinary Nicaraguans, who had managed to survive the revolution and opposed the Sandinistas.<sup>40</sup>

The first instance of covert US monetary aid to the group came in 1982, when Reagan signed the top secret National Security Decision Directive 17, which provided \$19 million for the CIA to recruit and train Contra fighters.<sup>41</sup> These activities were the most ambitious paramilitary undertaking that the CIA had attempted in a decade, and initially the Reagan administration found little support from Congress and the public for US involvement in Nicaragua.<sup>42</sup> \$24 million was approved by Congress in 1984 to continue Nicaraguan operations, but after a year in which the Contras failed to secure popular support in the country or win major military victories, funds for Contras were cut off with the ratification of the third Boland amendment, which prohibited US assistance to the group.<sup>43</sup> Still, in Washington, Reagan and the Heritage Foundation both expressed support for the Contras, who they believed could counter the spread of Soviet influence in South America.<sup>44</sup>

Around this same time, the first news reports of CIA involvement in Nicaraguan drug dealing began to come out. An Associated Press article published in 1985 stated that US government officials and American volunteers witnessed cocaine trafficking at clandestine airports in northern Costa Rica, which were then transported to other points around the country before being shipped to the U.S.<sup>45</sup> Officials had begun receiving

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> NSDD – National Security Decision Directives – Reagan Administration, May 30, 2008. <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-17.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> Hamilton, “Report Investigating the Iran/Contra Affair,” 33.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Johns, “The Lessons of Afghanistan,” *Policy Review* (March 1987): pp. 32-35.

<sup>45</sup> Brian Barger and Robert Parry, “Reports Link Nicaraguan Rebels to Cocaine Trafficking,” *Associated Press*, December 20, 1985. <https://apnews.com/article/c69eaf370de9884f907a39efd90337d3>

“reliable” reports of drug trafficking in 1984, around the time when Congress officially cut off aid to the rebel forces.<sup>46</sup> Among the allegations were those by an unnamed Contra leader in Costa Rica, who said that he was paid \$50,000 by Colombian cocaine traffickers to help transport 100 kilograms, with the money going back to the rebel groups to aid their war with the Nicaraguan government.<sup>47</sup> The rebel leader requested another \$50,000 from the US government in exchange for the smugglers.<sup>48</sup> That request was denied, and the Colombian operation eventually took place without any arrests.<sup>49</sup> Later that year, a CIA-prepared National Intelligence Estimate identified a commander with the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ARDE), one of the largest Contra groups receiving US aid, who spent \$250,000 in profits from cocaine smuggling on a helicopter and an arms shipment.<sup>50</sup> Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) officials knew about drug smuggling activity in northern Costa Rica, but had not associated them with any political organization.

The indifference towards these allegations by the CIA and DEA is puzzling, especially so because the Reagan administration placed such an emphasis on Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” initiative, which sought to reduce the use of illegal drugs. It is strange that at the same time that Reagan was championing “shortages of marijuana” and almost \$250 million in asset forfeitures by drug dealers back in the US, the DEA did not investigate accusations of government-backed forces transporting drugs into the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

country.<sup>51</sup> The DEA's response at the time was that they were focusing their efforts on the drug-producing countries of Latin America instead of places like Costa Rica, who merely functioned as stops on the route into the US.<sup>52</sup> "We are not aware of any evidence to support those charges," added US State Department deputy spokesman Charles Redman.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, Oliver North, a National Security Council (NSC) aide charged with running covert Contra operations, continued to search for ways to fund the loosely affiliated group despite the passage of the Boland amendment. Between 1984 and 1986, North was able to funnel almost \$37 million dollars to rebel forces by way of private donors and third countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>54</sup> North's Iran dealings were discovered later in 1986; the Iran-Contra affair, as it is known now, saw senior officials in the Reagan administration sell weapons to Iran in exchange for the release of several hostages, with a portion of the profits from each sale going back to the Contras.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the lack of involvement in drug investigations by the CIA and DEA, the FBI commissioned a probe into illicit activities by the Contras.<sup>56</sup> In the months leading up to April of 1986, twelve supporters of the Contra movement were questioned in relation to the drug smuggling allegations and reports of possible illegal shipments of arms from the US to rebel forces based in Honduras and Costa Rica.<sup>57</sup> In fact, the FBI had launched multiple investigations since 1984, including one into Lt. Col. North, the

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<sup>51</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the campaign against drug abuse," 1986. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-campaign-against-drug-abuse>

<sup>52</sup> Barger and Parry, "Reports Link Nicaraguan Rebels to Cocaine Trafficking," 1985.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Hamilton, "Report Investigating the Iran/Contra Affair," 4.

<sup>55</sup> "The Iran-Contra Affair 20 Years On," National Security Archive (George Washington University), November 24, 2006. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/>

<sup>56</sup> Brian Barger and Robert Parry, "FBI Reportedly Probes Contras on Drugs, Guns," *Associated Press*, April 10, 1986. <https://apnews.com/article/4c28d082f93d4d08d4fc2b41a968a1f4>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

White House official who led Contra operations after Congress prohibited US aid to the Contras.<sup>58</sup> The probe came at a particularly sensitive time for the Reagan administration, which was trying to pass a \$100 million aid package for the Contras that included a re-establishment of military aid by Congress.<sup>59</sup> Knowing that the publication of this information would damage their chances of passing the bill, the administration published a report of their own on the Contra-cocaine connections. The report acknowledged that there was “evidence of a limited number of incidents in which known drug traffickers have tried to establish connections with Nicaraguan resistance groups,” but that these incidents “took place during the period when the resistance was receiving no U.S. funding and was particularly hard pressed for financial support.”<sup>60</sup>

In response to these allegations, which were by this time public knowledge, Senators John Kerry and Christopher Dodd requested in April 1986 that hearings on the subject of Contra involvement in drug trafficking be conducted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics and International Operations. Once approved, the Kerry Committee, as it would become better known, investigated drug trafficking not only in Nicaragua, but in other South American and Caribbean countries as well. In October of 1986, Kerry’s office released a report outlining the illegal activities that Lt. Col. Oliver North engaged in, asserting that he had set up a “private network” of smugglers that illegally delivered arms to Contra rebels.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> “US Concedes Contras Linked to Drugs, But Denies Leadership Involved,” *Associated Press*, April 17, 1986. <https://apnews.com/article/bb7394e75625a363b8c0bf9b0d6cf969>

<sup>61</sup> “White House Official Linked to Arms Deliveries to Contras,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1986, A6. <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/15/world/white-house-official-linked-to-arms-deliveries-to-Contras.html?n=Top%2FReference%2FTimes+Topics%2FPeople%2FK%2FKerry%2C+John>

After three years of hearings, the Kerry Committee report was released in April 1989. The findings of the report would later fuel Gary Webb's interest in the Dark Alliance series. Three of the findings were particularly relevant to that reporting, and are outlined below.



*“The war in Central America contributed to weakening an already inadequate law enforcement capability which was exploited easily by a variety of mercenaries, pilots and cartel members involved in drug smuggling.”<sup>62</sup>*



Although the committee found no evidence that Contra leaders engaged in drug smuggling themselves, they did agree that there was “substantial evidence” of trafficking through war zones in Nicaragua from almost all facets of the combat apparatus, including mercenaries, pilots, Contras and Contra sympathizers.<sup>63</sup> Even more damning, there was evidence of US officials turning a blind eye to these acts, despite knowing that the war effort was being supported by proceeds from drug sales.<sup>64</sup> Payments totaling \$806,000 were made to known narcotics smugglers in order to get humanitarian supplies to the Contras; some of these smugglers had already been indicted on drug-related charges, while others were under active investigation.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Drugs, Law Enforcement, and Foreign Policy*, 1989, 136.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> GAO Analysis of NHAO Accounts, final figures provided by Department of State to the Subcommittee on Narcotics, Terrorism and International Operations, 1989. In *Drugs, Law Enforcement, and Foreign Policy*, 1989, 43. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000014976124&view=1up&seq=148&skin=2021>

The relationship between the drug smugglers and Contras appeared to be pragmatic. The strength of the Contra forces' military was deeply tied to US assistance, and for many fighters, the aid they received was the difference between life and death on the battlefield.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, the traffickers had the financial resources and necessary transportation to get just about anything where it needed to go, whether that be drugs or medical equipment or small arms. What they did not have was a way of legally transporting those drugs and arms to where they needed to go, or a cover for those activities, until the US federal government provided them with both. Pilots, who had previously covered up their drug shipments with mixed loads of arms, eventually began refueling at Contra airstrips even when their loads only contained drugs because they knew that law enforcement would not check their cargo since activities related to the war were "protected".<sup>67</sup> Even if they were not, it may not have mattered in some situations; for example, the airstrips in northern Costa Rica that the smugglers exploited had a police force of 50 "underpaid, easily bought... men to cover 400 kilometers maybe."<sup>68</sup> Some traffickers with indictments in the US looked to use contributions to the Contras as a get-out-of-jail-free card, while others simply saw it as another way to promote business.<sup>69</sup> On the American end, at least one agency of the federal government received information about these smuggling actions as they were happening or immediately afterwards, yet the traffickers rarely faced consequences.

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<sup>66</sup> Jill Smolowe, "Nicaragua: Is It Curtains?," *TIME*, December 22, 1986.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20111111011218/http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,963090-1,00.html>

<sup>67</sup> Interviews conducted by Senator John F. Kerry with current and former Costa Rican law enforcement officials, San Jose, Costa Rica (October 31, 1987). In *Drugs, Law Enforcement, and Foreign Policy*, 1989, 40.

<sup>68</sup> Subcommittee closed session with Werner Lotz, April 8, 1988, 690. *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Joan Mower, "Witness Claims Contra Drug Smuggling, Payoffs to Cuban, Bahamian Officials," *Associated Press*, July 16, 1987. <https://apnews.com/article/5f5dd485a6d6825e88496281a2b1711c>

Despite assurances from the federal government to the Contrary, it seems that a large fraction of the Contras profited from drugs. In fact, CIA Central American Task Force chief Alan Fiers said during questioning that “it is not a couple of people (engaged in drug trafficking). It is a lot of people.”<sup>70</sup> Later, while answering a question about Eden Pastora, a former Sandinista leader who eventually broke off to form the ARDE, Fiers noted that, “[w]e knew that everybody around Pastora was involved in cocaine... His staff and friends [redacted] they were drug smugglers or involved in drug smuggling.”<sup>71</sup>



*“There are serious questions as to whether or not US officials involved in Central America failed to address the drug issue for fear of jeopardizing the war against Nicaragua.”<sup>72</sup>*



One common underlying theme of the entire investigation was that the US government valued a successful outcome in the war in Nicaragua more highly than a successful “War on Drugs”. This theme was especially apparent at a meeting between a group of committee members and representatives from the Justice Department, DEA, CIA, FBI and State Department. They met to discuss alleged Neutrality Act violations, gun running and drug trafficking by organizations operating on the Southern Front of the conflict. In the days leading up to the meeting, Justice Department officials denied the

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<sup>70</sup> Iran-Contra testimony of Central American Task Force Chief, August 5, 1987, 100-11, pp. 182-183. In *Drugs, Law Enforcement, and Foreign Policy*, 1989, 38.

<sup>71</sup> Iran-Contra testimony of Central American Task Force Chief, Appendix B, Vol. 3, pp. 1121 - 1230. Ibid. See also North diary, March 26, 1984, Q1704, "Pastora revealed as drug dealer."

<sup>72</sup> *Drugs, Law Enforcement, and Foreign Policy*, 1989, 136.

allegations, saying that “the FBI had conducted an inquiry into all of these charges and none of them have any substance.”<sup>73</sup> Once at the meeting, however, Justice Department officials Contradicted those public statements, asserting that the statements were “inaccurate” and that there were ongoing investigations into the Neutrality Act allegations.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, at the same meeting, the CIA denied any Neutrality Act violations occurred, citing classified documents that they would not share with the committee.<sup>75</sup> However, the FBI had, by that point, amassed a large amount of evidence confirming those violations, including admissions from the suspected criminals.<sup>76</sup> Whether those lies were intentional or a product of limited communication between these organizations is unclear, but the ordeal certainly contributed to heightened mistrust of intelligence services at the time. If they could not truthfully answer these questions in front of a Congressional committee, why would they be expected to do so in front of the American public?

This was not the only finding from the investigation that supported the idea that the US avoided prosecuting drug-related crimes in order to preserve the Contra war. Manuel Noriega, who was the de facto head of the Panamanian government during the war, had been supplying Contra fighters with military assistance in exchange for what essentially amounted to immunity from the CIA.<sup>77</sup> When the DEA attempted to indict him on drug trafficking charges in 1971, which they had been investigating since the

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<sup>73</sup> Bill Buzenberg, National Public Radio, *All Things Considered*, May 5, 1986.

<sup>74</sup> *Drugs, Law Enforcement, and Foreign Policy*, 1989, 38.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>77</sup> Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, *Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press* (New York: Verso, 1998), pp. 287-290.

1960s, the CIA intervened and prevented the indictment.<sup>78</sup> Eventually, after a CIA pilot carrying arms and classified documents to Nicaragua was shot down and the connections between the CIA and Noriega began to come out, the organization finally determined that its relationship with Noriega was a PR liability and gave the DEA permission to seek an indictment, which it successfully did in 1989.<sup>79</sup>



*“A primary focus of the U.S. drug effort must be on the major narcotics trafficking organizations located in foreign havens. Law enforcement efforts concentrated on the pusher in the streets, the distributor in the U.S. and interdiction at our border have failed to stem the flow of drugs into this country.”<sup>80</sup>*



Although the War on Drugs began during Richard Nixon’s presidency with the passage of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970, it was not until the Reagan administration that harsher penalties, like the mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenders, were imposed. This was the result of the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984 and Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which also allowed police to impose harsher penalties for many drugs, including crack cocaine and marijuana possession, allocated 1.7 billion dollars to fight drugs, and established guidelines and procedures for civil asset forfeiture.<sup>81</sup> Bipartisan support for reducing the drug trade in

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> *Drugs, Law Enforcement, and Foreign Policy*, 1989, 137.

<sup>81</sup> Strom Thurmond, "S.1762 – 98th Congress (1983–1984): Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984." See also "Thirty Years of America’s Drug War," *PBS Frontline*.  
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/cron/>

the US allowed the FBI's drug enforcement units to receive a 1087% increase in their budget over four years from 1980 to 1984.<sup>82</sup> The deaths of Len Bias, a Maryland standout basketball player who overdosed on crack cocaine two days after being drafted second overall in the NBA draft by the Boston Celtics, and NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year Don Rogers a week later from another cocaine overdose, contributed to heightened awareness of a burgeoning epidemic of crack cocaine and increased support for these harsher penalties.<sup>83</sup>

With substantially increased funding and a friendly administration, authorities began to tally record numbers of drug arrests and seizures, which were sometimes publicly announced by Reagan himself.<sup>84</sup> However, these busts were largely of street dealers and domestic distributors in the US, allowing the cartels and large suppliers outside the country to simply replace the seller without interruption to their daily activities. Moreover, the 1986 legislation instituted much stricter penalties for drug users, and some historians argue that these penalties disproportionately affected African-Americans.<sup>85</sup> Despite these efforts to stop the trafficking of drugs into America, crack and other drugs continued to be smuggled across the Southern border. Witnesses described futile interdiction efforts there as “plugging a funnel from the wide end.”<sup>86</sup>

Because of these failing policies, which seemed to punish drug users and low-level members of drug trafficking organizations more than those running the operation,

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<sup>82</sup> 98th Congress, 1st Session, *Federal Budget of the United States Government*, 1984, p. 451.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Eric E. Sterling, *PBS Frontline*, 2015.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/snitch/procon/sterling.html>

<sup>84</sup> Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the campaign against drug abuse,” 1986.

<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: the Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 307-332.

<sup>86</sup> *Drugs, Law Enforcement, and Foreign Policy*, 1989, 138.

the Kerry report recommended that a “significant portion of the federal effort” go towards mutual legal assistance treaties and sanctions for foreign drug havens, which were both included in the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986.<sup>87</sup> The treaties would allow the US government to extradite drug traffickers more efficiently and monitor suspected money-laundering activity. The sanctions would show foreign officials that the US was serious about cracking down on the drug problem. Ultimately, none of these solutions were very effective; although adolescent drug use may have declined as a result of the War on Drugs,<sup>88</sup> the inability to take drugs off of the street in meaningful numbers combined with a rapidly increasing prison population meant that Reagan’s anti-drug policy was widely viewed as a failure.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, cartels continued to profit from across the border, while people like Rafael Cornejo took the fall in the US.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Jerald G. Bachman, et. al., *The Decline of Substance Abuse in Young Adulthood: Changes in Social Activities, Roles and Beliefs* (New York: Psychology Press, 2001), 237.

<sup>89</sup> Judith Havemann, “Reagan’s ‘Success Story’ On Drug War Disputed,” *Washington Post*, February 29, 1988. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/02/29/reagans-success-story-on-drug-war-disputed/c608762c-02e8-4341-8c94-06f4503a937a/>

### Chapter III

The witness to Cornejo's alleged crimes was named Oscar Blandón. After meeting with Baca and examining FBI and DEA documents that Cornejo's lawyers had obtained through discovery, Webb learned that Blandón was part of a well-off Nicaraguan family that fled the country for the US when the Sandinistas took over.<sup>90</sup> Afterwards, like many exiled Nicaraguans, he became a supporter of the Contras.<sup>91</sup> To supplant his fundraising, Blandón began selling cocaine in the 1980s as a result of a friendly relationship with Norwin Meneses, a large-scale trafficker who lived in San Francisco.<sup>92</sup> Meneses was also sympathetic to the Contras, and helped Blandón get his operation off the ground; by 1986, he was a significant drug dealer in Los Angeles and elsewhere.<sup>93</sup> By that time, his drug-related activities had caught the eye of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's department (LACSD), who worked with the FBI and DEA to bust his drug ring. When the raid was executed, however, police found negligible amounts of drugs at his residence, and charges were ultimately dropped.<sup>94</sup>

After that, Blandón moved to Florida, and it appeared that he was done dealing drugs. A joint effort from the FBI, DEA and IRS to investigate Blandón's drug trafficking ring in 1987 was unsuccessful for that reason and a number of others, including a lack of resources and coordination between the law enforcement agencies.<sup>95</sup> In the *Dark Alliance*, Webb implied that Blandón may have been tipped off by the CIA about the

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<sup>90</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 66-67

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Office of Inspector General and Michael R. Bromwich, *The CIA-Contra-crack controversy: a review of the Justice Department's investigations and prosecutions*, 1997.

<https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/archive/special/9712/exsump1.htm#II>.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

search warrants.<sup>96</sup> This was because Ronald Lister, who also had his home searched during the failed raid, made statements to LACSD suggesting that his drug-related activities were protected by the CIA.<sup>97</sup> A review by the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) after the articles were published challenged this assertion, arguing that changes in Blandón’s activities before the raid were because he correctly believed he was under investigation, and that Lister’s comments were made because he “thought such claims would be helpful rather than because they were true.”<sup>98</sup> Whatever the case, Blandón laid low in Florida for a few years before moving back to California in 1990 and returning to drug trafficking. That same year, another federal investigation into Blandón began, this time of his drug dealings in San Diego, and in May 1992 he was indicted for conspiracy to possess cocaine with intent to distribute.<sup>99</sup> In a motion filed against Blandón during the trial, Assistant U.S. Attorney L.J. O’Neale wrote that Blandón and Jairo Meneses were responsible for an additional 764 kilos of cocaine that were seized in Nicaragua in 1991.<sup>100</sup> Despite these facts, in addition to the government’s own admission that Blandón and the Meneses family were large-scale drug traffickers, a plea deal was arranged so that Blandón would only serve 48 months in prison in exchange for cooperation with U.S. authorities.<sup>101</sup> He would serve 28 months before being released. As a free man, he began working as an informant with the DEA.

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<sup>96</sup> Gary Webb, “War on drugs has unequal impact on black Americans,” *San Jose Mercury News*, August 20, 1996. <https://web.archive.org/web/19961220020830/http://www.sjmercury.com/drugs/day3main.htm>

<sup>97</sup> OIG and Bromwich, *The CIA-Contra-crack controversy*, 1997.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 70.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

This sentence was viewed as extremely lenient by Webb, who argued that his admissions would have meant a life sentence for others.<sup>102</sup> After the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act was passed, the penalty for possession of 5 grams of crack cocaine, or 500 grams of powder cocaine, was 5 years without parole. Blandón was linked to an exponentially larger amount, yet received preferential treatment, which Webb alleged was due to special consideration he received because of his contributions to the Contras.<sup>103</sup> He also pointed to Blandón's acquisition of a green card in 1994, which should not have been possible given his conviction for felony drug trafficking, as more evidence that the government had a special interest in Blandón.<sup>104</sup> Curious as to why Blandón and Meneses were not mentioned in the Kerry committee report, Webb contacted Jack Blum, who was Kerry's chief prosecutor during the investigations.<sup>105</sup> Blum said that he remembered the name, but that Reagan's Justice Department effectively stonewalled the investigators.<sup>106</sup> "[A]fter our experiences with Justice... we mainly concentrated on cocaine coming into the East," Blum said.<sup>107</sup> He was also critical of press coverage of the committee hearings: "We would have a day of hearings and the White House would call reporters and say, 'This is insane stuff – don't listen to them,' and by and large the press bought it," he said. "The coverage stunk."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Webb, "War on drugs has unequal impact," 1996; OIG and Bromwich, *The CIA-Contra-crack controversy*, 1997.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 72.

<sup>106</sup> Gary Webb, *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion* (New York: Seven Stories Press), 92.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 73.

This would not be the last time that the mainstream media or the federal government attempted to minimize reporting on the Contras. Robert Parry, who had written stories for the Associated Press about the external drug activities of the Contras, told Webb that after he and his coauthor Brian Barger published the first story alleging that the CIA knew of Contra drug trafficking activities, they were both personally attacked by the Reagan administration and other newspapers.<sup>109</sup> “The most aggressive attacks came from the news media,” he said, noting that the *Washington Times* claimed the story had been disproved, with other news organizations “piling on” afterwards.<sup>110</sup> Despite the obvious radioactivity of the story, Webb pressed on. All he needed was direct evidence of Blandón selling cocaine to support the CIA-backed Contras to begin writing his story. Another question needed to be answered, too: who ended up doing the drugs that Blandón supplied?

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

### *Chapter IV*

Webb got his answers during the trial of “Freeway” Ricky Ross. Ross was a former tennis prodigy who turned to selling cocaine because he was illiterate, and therefore unable to receive a scholarship to play in college.<sup>111</sup> After initially selling small amounts of cocaine, Ross was introduced to Ivan Arguellas, a large-scale supplier who allowed Ross to deal in ounces of cocaine instead of grams.<sup>112</sup> Arguellas was shot in the back and paralyzed just eight months later, and his brother-in-law Henry Corrales took over the business. It was then that Blandón, who had heard tell of the large amounts of cocaine that Ross had been moving, offered to supply Corrales with cocaine for a fifty-fifty split of the profits.<sup>113</sup> Once Corrales bowed out of drug dealing a few months later, Blandón and Ross began dealing directly with each other. Through his relationship with Blandón, Ross was introduced to Norwin Meneses, who supplied Blandón with high-quality, cheap Nicaraguan cocaine that Ross could sell on the streets of South Central LA.<sup>114</sup>

Ross quickly began making a fortune off of selling cocaine to Crips and Bloods in Los Angeles, and by 1982 was making up to three million dollars per day.<sup>115</sup> Ross expanded his business to cities all over the US, including Cincinnati, where he would eventually be arrested in 1988 after drug agents traced a load of cocaine intercepted in New Mexico back to him.<sup>116</sup> His conviction meant he would serve a mandatory 10-year sentence, which he began serving in 1990.<sup>117</sup> However, around the same time, a scandal

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<sup>111</sup> Webb, *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion*, 1998, 134.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-138.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>115</sup> Cockburn and St. Clair, *Whiteout*, 1999, 6-7.

<sup>116</sup> Webb, “War on drugs has unequal impact,” 1996.

<sup>117</sup> Mike Sager, “Say Hello to Rick Ross,” *Esquire*, September 25, 2013. <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a25818/rick-ross-drug-dealer-interview-1013/>

hit the LACSD and its elite narcotics division, and officers were accused of a range of violations including beating suspects, stealing drug money, and planting evidence.<sup>118</sup> In exchange for testifying for the government, Ross's sentence was reduced to four years and nine months, and he was released on parole in October 1994.<sup>119</sup>

His freedom did not last for long. While Ross was in prison, his old supplier Blandón had been preparing for his first assignment: a 'reverse sting' of Ross, which meant that the government would supply Blandón with cocaine and Ross would pay for the drugs.<sup>120</sup> Shortly after Ross's release, he was contacted by Blandón, who asked if Ross would be able to buy 100 kilos of cocaine from him. Ross was hauling trash for a living at the time and was behind on payments for a theater in South Central LA that he was attempting to convert into a youth center, so he initially refused.<sup>121</sup> Blandón countered with the option for Ross to find a buyer in exchange for a \$300,000 commission, which he successfully did. On March 2, 1995, Ross went to pick up a car, laden with 100 kilos of the DEA's cocaine, in a parking lot.<sup>122</sup> Police immediately surrounded him, and after a brief car chase, he was arrested. Blandón earned \$45,500 in government rewards for his help in catching Ross.<sup>123</sup>

Ross faced a penalty of life without parole for his role in his latest dealing with Blandón.<sup>124</sup> Webb, during his research on Blandón, was informed that he would be testifying against Ross in his upcoming trial and contacted Alan Fenster, Ross's

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<sup>118</sup> Webb, "War on drugs has unequal impact," 1996.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Sager, "Say Hello to Rick Ross," 2013.

attorney, to see what he knew about Blandón.<sup>125</sup> Fenster put Webb in touch with Ross, and Webb arranged to meet with both men in San Diego.<sup>126</sup> When Webb told them of his evidence that Blandón was funding the Contra effort with proceeds from his cocaine sales, Ross laughed. “They said I sold dope all over,” he said, “but man, I know he done sold ten times more than me.”<sup>127</sup> Shortly thereafter, Webb went to Nicaragua with Georg Hodel, a Swiss journalist, intent on getting information from Norwin Meneses. Meneses was happy to talk to Webb and described his activities with the Contras. He said that he began raising money for them in the early 1980s after a meeting with Enrique Bermudez, the leader of the FDN at the time.<sup>128</sup> Bermudez was also a CIA asset at the time, acting as one of the Reagan administration’s primary contacts within the Contras.<sup>129</sup> He reminisced about living a free life in the US, despite DEA records that Webb had collected showing that Meneses was implicated in no less than 45 investigations between 1974 and 1996.<sup>130</sup> Armed with this information, Webb and Fenster devised a series of questions to ask Blandón while on the stand, hoping that he would confess to his Contra links under oath.



**Fenster:** So you were running his (Meneses) Los Angeles operation, isn't that correct?

**Blandón:** Yes. Now remember, we were running, just ... whatever we were running in L.A., it goes ... the profit was going to the Contra revolution. I don't know ...

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<sup>125</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 81.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

**F:** I'm glad you reminded me of that.

**Fenster:** He (Meneses) said, "Hey, I'm selling drugs and I want you to help me" ...

**Blandón:** Yes.

**F:** ...in so many words. Is that right?

**B:** To raise the money for the Contra revolution.

*After acknowledging that he met with Bermudez and Meneses to discuss Contra fundraising efforts, Blandón turned to his translator:*

**Translator:** "There is a saying that the ends justify the means."

**Blandón:** And that's what Mr. Bermudez told us in Honduras. OK? So we started raising money for the Contra revolution.

**Fenster:** When you met with Mr. Bermudez, did you meet also with members of the United States government?

**Blandón:** No sir.

**F:** He was already working for the United States government when you met him, isn't that correct?

**Assistant US Attorney L.J. O'Neale, representing Blandón:** Object...

**Judge Marilyn L. Huff:** Let me sustain the objection at this point.



With that, Webb had all he needed. He could trace the flow of cocaine from Nicaragua all the way to predominantly black neighborhoods in South Central LA. He had direct

evidence, corroborated by sworn testimony, that the profits from those sales were funneled back to Contra forces in Nicaragua. That testimony also showed that a CIA asset was present when those decisions were made, but no action against the sales was taken by the CIA. In fact, most of the evidence that he had, albeit circumstantial, pointed towards the idea that those actions were protected by the CIA, possibly for the same reasons that Blandón got involved in the first place: “the ends justify the means.”

### Chapter V

The first installment of *The Dark Alliance* was published on August 18, 1996, after months of editing and rewriting. It appeared both in the *San Jose Mercury News* and online, where readers could also find links to Webb's documents and recordings of the testimony that he cited. The lede read as follows:

**“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 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.”<sup>131</sup>

The phrases “tons of cocaine” and “millions in drug profits” would be Webb's undoing. Although he and his editors certainly may have believed it, there was no evidence in the story that proved those assertions. Although Blandón admitted that he sold cocaine on behalf of the Contras, there was no way to tell just how much of the profits ended up back in Nicaragua and how much stayed in Blandón's bank account. When the OIG reviewed intelligence reports on Blandón and Meneses, they concluded that their role within the Contras was “marginal” and they likely contributed a small fraction of the total proceeds they made off of cocaine.<sup>132</sup> The next sentence didn't do Webb any favors, either: “This drug network opened the first pipeline between

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<sup>131</sup> Gary Webb, “America's ‘crack’ plague has roots in Nicaragua war,” *San Jose Mercury News*, August 18, 1996. <https://web.archive.org/web/19961220020751/http://www.sjmercury.com/drugs/day1main.htm>

<sup>132</sup> OIG and Bromwich, *The CIA-Contra-crack controversy*, 1997.

Colombia's cocaine cartels and the black neighborhoods of Los Angeles, a city now known as the 'crack' capital of the world."<sup>133</sup> Once again, although Webb may have believed it to be true, there was no way to prove that Blandón and Meneses were the first to introduce crack to Los Angeles, and nothing in the story supported the claim. In his pursuit of a dramatic headline, Webb had exaggerated many of the facts of a story that needed no exaggeration. He sought to tie the CIA directly to these drug traffickers when there was ultimately no proof that anyone employed by the agency participated in, or knew about, Blandón and Meneses' drug dealing. When combined with the fact that the veracity of the story hinged on the trustworthiness of three drug dealers, it made Webb a vulnerable target for anyone eager to discredit his reporting.

Over the next two days, the remainder of the story was published. The second installment profiled Blandón and Ross, while the third discussed the huge disparity in federal sentencing guidelines for crack versus powder cocaine and the resulting influx of inner-city, mostly African-American people residents into prisons. At first, there was not much of a reaction to the stories; after all, the *Mercury News* was still a regional paper, and the DNC and RNC were both coming up that week.<sup>134</sup> Then, it took off, largely thanks to the online version of the article, which caused visits to the *Mercury News* website to go from a couple thousand per day to over 500,000.<sup>135</sup> The initial response was mixed. Although most thought that the story itself was good, there were shortcomings: the evidence provided did not prove some of the claims that Webb was making, the story relied on unreliable sources, and there didn't seem to be much of an

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<sup>133</sup> Webb, "America's 'crack' plague has roots in Nicaragua war," 1996.

<sup>134</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 113.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

effort to get the CIA's response to his criticisms.<sup>136</sup> Still, he found plenty of supporters, including Maxine Waters, who was representative for California's 29th district in the House of Representatives. Waters called for an investigation into the article's claims, asking whether "U.S.-government paid or organized operatives smuggled, transported and sold it to American citizens."<sup>137</sup> Rumors that the US was responsible for the flood of drugs into inner cities were not new; in 1990, a New York Times phone poll found that a quarter of the 1,047 African-Americans surveyed thought that the government "deliberately makes sure that drugs are easily available in poor black neighborhoods in order to harm black people."<sup>138</sup>

Hearings on the matter began in October 1996 in front of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. CIA Inspector-General Frederick Hitz promised a full internal review of the allegations made in the *Dark Alliance* series.<sup>139</sup> Jack Blum, the former Kerry committee prosecutor, testified that the answer to the question of whether the CIA was selling cocaine in Los Angeles to finance the Contras was a "categorical no," although he later added that the agency knew about the drug trafficking and turned a blind eye to the activities.<sup>140</sup> Neither of these quelled the rage building in South Central LA, forcing CIA Director John Deutch to address the community at a town hall event. Deutch swore that there was "no evidence" that the CIA was involved with, or even supported, drug traffickers in Nicaragua during the Contra war.<sup>141</sup> This was a lie; in fact,

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Maxine Waters, Letter to Attorney General Janet Reno, August 30, 1996.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20081216121818/http://www.narconews.com/darkalliance/drugs/library/32.htm>

<sup>138</sup> Tim Golden, "Though Evidence Is Thin, Tale of C.I.A. and Drugs Has a Life of Its Own," *New York Times*, October 21, 1996. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/27/specials/cia-thin.html>

<sup>139</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 117.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 119.

the CIA had already admitted to dealing with drug traffickers in Central America, Laos, and Afghanistan, among others.<sup>142</sup> One man at the meeting stood up, dismissing Deutch's appearance as a PR stunt. "After all of the illegal stuff we know you CIA people have done around the world, you tell us now that you're honestly going to investigate yourselves about drug dealing? You gotta be crazy if you think we're gonna believe that," he said.<sup>143</sup>

Soon, the CIA's public relations issue turned into a nightmare. Webb was appearing on national broadcasts like *60 Minutes* to discuss the series' claims. Waters had shown up unannounced to the LA County Sheriff's Department and taken files related to Blandón's 1986 investigation, later announcing at an October 7 press conference that she had found further evidence pointing towards CIA complicity in the drug trafficking. Two famous African-American civil rights activists, Joe Madison and Dick Gregory, were arrested for trespassing at CIA headquarters during the course of a two-man protest in which they demanded to speak with Deutch about the contents of the series. When Madison was released two days later, he told his story at a meeting of the Congressional Black Caucus, who were shocked to hear that Gregory was still being held. "All hell broke loose," said Madison, who launched a public information campaign through his radio show, "Black Eagle," at one point agreeing to a debate with Oliver North.<sup>144</sup> The CIA needed a lifeline, and they got something even better: a complete deconstruction of the series' claims, written by major US news sources.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 124.

The first major newspaper to join the fray was the *Washington Post*. In an article titled, “The CIA and Crack: Evidence is Lacking of Alleged Plot,” *Post* writers Roberto Suro and Walter Pincus claimed that “the available information does not support the conclusion that the CIA-backed Contras... played a major role in the emergence of crack,” citing various unnamed law enforcement officials.<sup>145</sup> They focused mainly on the contradictions in Blandón and Ross’s testimony at the trial; for example, while Webb highlighted the parts that made it seem like Blandón’s Contra funding had lasted “for the better part of the decade,” Suro and Pincus wrote about another portion where he implied that he began keeping his drug profits after Reagan’s election.<sup>146</sup> The authors asserted that, according to their unnamed sources, Blandón only sent between \$30,000 and \$60,000 back to the Contras and sold five tons of crack during his career as a drug dealer; Webb claimed that these numbers were in the “hundreds of tons” and “millions of dollars.”<sup>147</sup> Ironically, the *Post* authors were guilty of the same practices that they were attacking Webb for: basing their conclusions off of the testimony of drug traffickers and selectively excluding information that would harm their narrative.

Jerry Ceppos, editor-in-chief of the *Mercury News*, sent a letter to the editor of the *Post* in the days that followed, angrily noting that “[w]hile there is considerable circumstantial evidence of CIA involvement with the leaders of this drug ring, we never reached or reported any definitive conclusion on CIA involvement.”<sup>148</sup> The *Post* refused

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<sup>145</sup> Roberto Suro and Walter Pincus, “The CIA and Crack: Evidence is Lacking of Alleged Plot,” *Washington Post*, October 4, 1996. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/10/04/the-cia-and-crack-evidence-is-lacking-of-alleged-plot/5b026731-c5de-4234-b3bd-9e0fd2e21225/>

<sup>146</sup> Webb, “America’s ‘crack’ plague has roots in Nicaragua war,” 1996; Suro and Pincus, “The CIA and Crack,” 1996.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 131.

to print the letter. Webb discovered after receiving a tip from a reader that Pincus was recruited by the CIA in the early 1960s to spy on student organizations, bringing into question the ethical implications of the story.<sup>149</sup>

While Webb and Ceppos did damage control, more stories were coming out. The *Los Angeles Times* published a three-day series of articles that were substantially longer than Webb's *Dark Alliance*, with the first two focusing on Webb's allegations and the last questioning whether African-Americans were predisposed to believe in conspiracy theories more than others. Doyle McManus, the *Times*' Washington, D.C. bureau chief, interviewed multiple high-level sources within the CIA, each of whom unsurprisingly categorically denied the allegations. Jesse Katz, another reporter who had, in a 1994 article for the paper, described Rick Ross as "a criminal mastermind behind crack's decade-long reign," now said he was merely part of a "cast of interchangeable characters."<sup>150</sup> Once again, Webb and his editors defended him against the stories, which seemed to now include personal attacks on Webb himself. One of his editors, Dawn Garcia, had to call the *Times* to get a correction on a story they wanted to run that claimed Webb and Ross had a movie deal; although one was drawn up, Webb refused to sign it.<sup>151</sup> At this point, it seemed that any piece of information that would harm the credibility of Webb was fair game.

The third paper to get involved was the *New York Times*. Like the articles before it, the two that appeared in the *Times* also relied on statements made by anonymous

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>150</sup> Jesse Katz, "Few Get Rich, Most Struggle in Crack's Grim Economy," *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 1994, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-12-20-mn-11058-story.html>; Jesse Katz, "Tracking the Genesis of the Crack Trade," *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1996. <http://byjessekatz.com/Tracking%20the%20Genesis%20of%20the%20Crack%20Trade.pdf>

<sup>151</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 137.

government sources. The author, Tim Golden, had reported on the Contra war from Honduras and Costa Rica for the *Miami Herald*, making him uniquely equipped to respond to the story. He didn't believe that drug dealing was a major part of the "bad things" that the Contras were involved in, saying that the premise of the articles – "that the Contra war and its funding needs fueled the crack epidemic" – was not supported by the evidence.

Still, Webb found a few defenders, mainly from those not affiliated with the corporate press. Even if they didn't necessarily agree with Webb's conclusions, there were others that defended him simply because of the amount of resources that these papers had dedicated to discrediting Webb's story.<sup>152</sup> "What they did... was to jump all over *Dark Alliance* without looking at the bigger issue of connections between the CIA-backed Contras and drug dealing," said David Corn, the Washington editor of *Nation* magazine.<sup>153</sup> Corn was present at the press conference where the final Senate report on the Iran Contra affair was announced and remembered an instance where a reporter asked if allegations of Contra drug-running had been investigated, to which a *New York Times* reporter responded, "Come on, let's talk about something serious."<sup>154</sup> "Those of us who followed this closely... knew there was a story to which the mainstream press had never paid serious attention," he said. When *Dark Alliance* was published, though, "[the press] were happy to... shoot it down without examining their own failings on that front."<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> "Editor Shelby Coffee III assigned more than two dozen reporters to the story." Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 134.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

The final nail in the coffin for Gary Webb and the *Dark Alliance* came from Jerry Ceppos and the *San Jose Mercury News*. Those at the paper realized that they needed to publish a follow-up piece responding to the criticism from the mainstream media, and Ceppos assigned the task to Pete Carey, the *Mercury News*'s most experienced investigative reporter.<sup>156</sup> Carey ultimately came to a similar conclusion to those papers: that Blandón, Meneses and Ross could not have been the “first pipeline” of the crack epidemic. After meeting with Carey, Ceppos, and other editors, Webb tried to corroborate some of the statements in the articles by going back to Central America and interviewing more sources, but the drafts he sent back to San Jose had little to do with the larger issues printed in the original series.<sup>157</sup> In lieu of Carey's article, Ceppos chose to run a letter from the editor on May 11, 1997, in which he acknowledged that although there were errors in the reporting and editing of *Dark Alliance*, specifically concerning the implications of CIA knowledge of drug dealing by Contra forces, there was still strong evidence that "a drug ring associated with the Contras sold large quantities of cocaine. . . . Some of the drug profits from those sales went to the Contras."<sup>158</sup> Predictably, the CIA was ecstatic: spokesman Mark Mansfield called the retraction “gratifying” and thanked the major newspapers for taking “a serious and objective look at the series.”<sup>159</sup> Indeed, the letter was almost universally received as a full retraction, despite the fact that it was not; headlines on the subject included “CIA Series ‘Fell Short,’ Editor Says,” and “The *Mercury News* Comes Clean”. Webb himself was

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 157-158.

<sup>158</sup> Howard Kurtz, “CIA Series ‘Fell Short,’ Editor Says,” *Washington Post*, May 13, 1997.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/05/13/cia-series-fell-short-editor-says/9bda5337-0358-4d33-a62c-ea8b232cb144/>

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

subjected to personal attacks, especially in an editorial by Iver Peterson for the *New York Times*, which cited some of his earlier libel cases with the *Plain Dealer* as proof of his penchant for being a loose cannon.<sup>160</sup>

After reading Ceppos' column, Webb was disgusted.<sup>161</sup> He thought he was being censored by the *Mercury News*, who had not published any of the four follow-up pieces he had written about some of his less-supported arguments.<sup>162</sup> He was also angry that the article was being used by the "establishment press... to absolve the CIA of any wrongdoing."<sup>163</sup> "The government side of the story is coming through the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*," he said in an interview in 1998.<sup>164</sup>

In June, Ceppos asked Webb to agree to a reassignment to Cupertino, where he covered small stories for a few months before resigning from the paper.<sup>165</sup> Over the next couple years, the CIA and Justice Department published internal reviews of the allegations; the CIA leaked an executive summary to the *Los Angeles Times* a week after Webb's resignation, which appeared under the headline, "CIA Probe Absolves Agency on L.A. Crack."<sup>166</sup> The full report, released several months later, admitted that the CIA had advance knowledge of Contra drug running, including in the activities of Enrique Bermudez, the CIA asset handpicked to lead the FDN.<sup>167</sup> The *L.A. Times* did not acknowledge this report, while the *New York Times* wrote off the admissions, arguing

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<sup>160</sup> Iver Peterson, "Repercussions from Flawed News Articles," *New York Times*, June 3, 1997. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/03/us/repercussions-from-flawed-news-articles.html>

<sup>161</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 162.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Barbara Bliss Osborn, "Are You Sure You Want to Ruin Your Career?," *Extra!*, March/April 1998. <https://web.archive.org/web/20050210081056/http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2056>

<sup>165</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 165.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 184.

that they “did not lend any new support” to the claims in the *Dark Alliance*.<sup>168</sup> Webb attempted to vindicate his reporting, writing a book in 1998 with an independent publisher, but all the while was falling deeper and deeper into depression. Six years later, Webb would be found dead from two gunshot wounds to the head in an apparent suicide.

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

## Conspiratorial beliefs and conclusions

The tragedy of Gary Webb played out on the world stage. He was hailed by some as a courageous whistleblower, brave enough to take on the CIA and its infinite resources for the greater good, while others dismissed him as a conspiracy theorist looking for connections that just weren't there. Whether you believed him or not, it was not hard to see that Webb's series had divided Americans, largely on racial divides. "By its disparate impact, the story has also underscored both the profound mistrust of government that history has engendered among many blacks and the difficulty that many whites have in understanding their views," read a portion of a *New York Times* article on the subject in 1996.<sup>169</sup> Subject matter like this was not uncommon in the press coverage of the *Dark Alliance*, as reporters attempted to discern the reason why the African-American community seemed to care so much about a story that the mainstream press deemed flawed and inaccurate. Don Middleton, who was interviewed for the *Times* story, summed it up: "The white press is pointing fingers at the black community, saying we're paranoid and quick to see conspiracy at every turn of the corner. Where have they been for the last 30 years? Can I just mention the Tuskegee syphilis study, Cointelpro, Watergate, Iran-Contra. Hello, America?"<sup>170</sup>

The question of what drives conspiratorial beliefs has been asked multiple times by academics throughout the years. Conspiratorial beliefs seem to appear in the greatest number during times of sociopolitical turmoil, or when there is "significant uncertainty in the world," said Sander van der Linden, a social psychologist at Cambridge.<sup>171</sup> This

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<sup>169</sup> Golden, "Tale of C.I.A. and Drugs Has a Life of Its Own," 1996.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Aja Romano, "Conspiracy theories, explained," *Vox*, November 18, 2020.

<https://www.vox.com/21558524/conspiracy-theories-2020-qanon-covid-conspiracies-why>

can be seen in cases from the Salem Witch Trials, which saw entire towns swept with a fear of a coven of witches meeting in secret and planning misdeeds, to more modern examples like McCarthyism and QAnon. Those who are more prone to believe in conspiracies may do so to preserve a sense of order about the world, said Ben Radford, a research fellow at the Center for Skeptical Inquiry. This epistemic benefit is just one of many that may cause someone to form conspiratorial beliefs; others include the existential benefit of distracting them from their fears, and the social benefit of joining a conspiracy-oriented community and finding like-minded individuals. Susceptibility to believing in conspiracies may also be driven by political cues. Data shows that partisanship may drive the ‘direction’ of conspiratorial beliefs, such that Democrats may believe that Republicans are working against them, but not the level of belief.<sup>172</sup>

*Dark Alliance* reaffirmed many of the beliefs and experiences that African-Americans in South Central LA had during the crack cocaine epidemic that was ripping through their community. The low level of skill needed to launch a successful career selling the drug, combined with the relative ease of finding enough to sell, contributed to the rapid rise of drug-related violence in these communities as dealers sought to defend their turf.<sup>173</sup> In an attempt to curb the sale of crack, the US government created a 100:1 sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine, which ultimately disproportionately affected African-Americans, who were more likely to use crack than their white counterparts.<sup>174</sup> When you combine this fact with the implications of CIA

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<sup>172</sup> Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, and Matthew D. Atkinson, “What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions,” *Political Research Quarterly* 69(1), March 2016, 57–71.

<sup>173</sup> James A. Inciardi and Anne E. Pottieger, “Crack Cocaine Use and Street Crime,” *Journal of Drug Issues* 24(2), April 1994, 273-292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002204269402400205>.

<sup>174</sup> “The Fair Sentencing Act corrects a long-time wrong in cocaine cases,” *Washington Post*, August 3, 2010. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/02/AR2010080204360.html>

involvement in the crack epidemic, it is easier to see why this particular story led to the formation of conspiratorial beliefs. “Everybody my age or older has always known that something like this was going on,” said Beverly Carr, a Compton resident during the 1990s. “Who down here in Watts or Compton has planes or boats to get these drugs up here? They’re targeting the young black men. It’s just ruining a whole generation.”<sup>175</sup>

Some anthropologists view these conspiratorial beliefs as a way of contesting power.<sup>176</sup> The communities most affected by the allegations of CIA drug trafficking were those that the state and its institutions and policies had already failed, so conspiracism became a form of resistance against those in power.<sup>177</sup> In general, research shows that those beliefs were likely shaped by two factors: the social infrastructure of bureaucracy, which influenced the content of the belief; and the architecture of the information that each person received, which structured the beliefs.<sup>178</sup> The specific architecture of the *Dark Alliance*, or way that the information was presented, is interesting because the *Mercury News* released print and online versions of the articles. The Internet was still a new invention in the late 1990s, so it was a new experience for many to get information from hyperlinks within the story. The digital culture was also overwhelmingly white, so an online story of this magnitude would have raised the consciousness of African-Americans of the Internet while allowing readers to conduct their own research and alter the structure of their beliefs based on research they conducted on their own.

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<sup>175</sup> Golden, “Tale of C.I.A. and Drugs Has a Life of Its Own,” 1996.

<sup>176</sup> Steven Sampson, “Cabal Anthropology – or whether the anthropology of belief helps us understand conspiracism,” *FOCAAL*, September 13, 2021. <https://www.focaalblog.com/2021/09/13/steven-sampson-cabal-anthropology/>

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Michael Vine and Matthew Carey, “Mimesis and Conspiracy: Bureaucracy, New Media and the Infrastructural Forms of Doubt,” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 35(2), 2017, 49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26877569>.

Another factor contributing to the skepticism on both sides was the trustworthiness of the CIA itself. The agency had gone through a reckoning of sorts both during and after Watergate, which saw the release of many classified documents admitting to, among other things, attempting to manipulate domestic media for its own propaganda during the Cold War. Although DCI George H. W. Bush swore in 1976 that the CIA would not enter into “any paid or Contractual relationship with any full-time or part-time news correspondent accredited by any U.S. news service, newspaper, periodical, radio or television network or station,” there was no reason to trust them, especially now.<sup>179</sup> The CIA is, by nature, a secretive organization, but it is difficult to trust what you cannot see. Because of the agency’s valuable intelligence-gathering activities, secrecy is understood to be a “legitimate dimension of government,” especially when it concerns the security and defense of the state.<sup>180</sup> However, the general assumption that “whatever is not public is a priori suspicious” is a common one among the public.<sup>181</sup> Secrets of the state are difficult to legislate, and the CIA’s history of deception and misdeeds fed into the belief among African-American communities in LA that the agency was using secrecy as a method of covering up abuses of power.<sup>182</sup>

On the flip side, there was little reason to trust Webb’s sources, either. He himself was initially unwilling to pursue the *Dark Alliance*, unsure of whether Rafael Cornejo was another drug dealer attempting to skirt the law or actually expose a wrong.<sup>183</sup> Once he decided to pursue the story, he was met with more drug dealers as his only source on

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<sup>179</sup> Church Committee Final Report, Vol 1: Foreign and Military Intelligence, p. 454

<sup>180</sup> Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, “Secrecy’s Softwares,” *Current Anthropology* 56(12), December 2015, S317.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Schou, *Kill the Messenger*, 63.

many crucial facts of the case. “I used to say to people... ‘Bring me a Lutheran pastor who was there when the drugs were unloaded in Miami and I’ll bring him in as a witness,’” said Jack Blum, chief prosecutor for the Kerry Committee hearings.<sup>184</sup> “[News coverage of the hearings] focused on how the witnesses weren’t credible because they were drug dealers. These were the only witnesses we had.”<sup>185</sup>

“Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it,” writes John Zaller in his book *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*.<sup>186</sup> This definition encapsulates why the *Dark Alliance* was so controversial: a person’s predisposition on the issue strongly influenced the conclusions they got from reading the articles. Although Webb did not definitively state that the CIA was transporting drugs to Los Angeles and selling them in African-American communities, that was certainly in the realm of possibility for those who knew of past CIA transgressions in which they were complicit in equally sinister plots. For those who had not been personally impacted, it was easy to spot holes in the reporting and decry the whole connection between the CIA and drug trafficking as circumstantial. The side that received the louder mouthpiece, in this case the support of the press, would have an upper hand when attempting to shift the consensus to their belief system, and the winner of that battle in this case is clear. The consequence of this relationship between the press and government is that accountability for both groups was diminished, and this is the true value of the *Dark Alliance* saga: it called attention to the many ways in

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Cambridge University Press, 6.

which the media can be manipulated to serve the interests of the government. Webb never explicitly said that the CIA was trafficking crack cocaine and selling it in Los Angeles, but the articles attacking his reporting insinuated as much, while minimizing or otherwise ignoring the rest of his research that still characterized the CIA as indifferent to the fact that crack cocaine sold in the US was supporting its war in Nicaragua. This allowed the government to begin sweeping a damning story under the rug without fear of the mainstream media acting as a watchdog, and that is how a lack of accountability in both the media and government can lead to misdeeds that go unpunished.

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