Correlation between US military Involvement and world-wide drug trafficking

A contemplation with the help of Robert Parry and others

Robert Gorter, MD, PhD. was very much involved in taking care of drug addicts since the very early 1971's when, as a young medical doctor in Amsterdam, he started the very first Methadone Project in the European continent. Later, it became part of the formal Drug Prevention and Treatment Center of the City of Amsterdam (see Appendices at the end of this chapter). Part of his professional life was dedicated to the phenomenon of addiction with an emphasis on Heroin and Cocaine.

During the 1980's and 1990's Robert Gorter assisted the HIV/AIDS program at San Francisco General Hospital to build programs directed towards intravenous drug users to contain the spread of HIV in that population by offering low-threshold methadone programs and free needle-exchange programs. As the medical director of the Department of AIDS Epidemiology and Biostatistics of the University of California San Francisco Medical School (UCSF), Robert Gorter and his team could prove that these programs worked and that within 12-18 months the transmission of HIV was even less than in the population of gay men in the San Francisco Bay Area.

It struck him that whatever politicians and Law Enforcement officers promised to do about drug use, there were no noticeable changes in the availability of heroin, cocaine and crack. Especially during the US military involvement in Central America (Nicaragua) the streets of San Francisco and even "high security" prisons (like in Vacaville, California) were flooded with cocaine.

Then, the Contra-Cocaine scandal surfaced and for weeks there were broadcasted the public US Senate hearings of anybody involved, like those pilots testifying that they would weekly fly planes from Philadelphia to

Nicaragua loaded with weaponry and back to Philadelphia loaded with cocaine, to be sold in the streets of large US cities.

Robert Gorter listened to most of the hearings that were broadcasted by National Public Radio (NPR) and could not believe his ears. He had expected that there would be a big shake-up in Washington: but nothing much happened… and this has always puzzled him.

Robert Gorter as a physician taking care of drug users, can testify that drugs at that large scale can only be available in the streets of major cities in the USA and EU if there is a significant collaboration of governmental dignitaries, and the military.

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

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

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

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

The Times' movie review by David Carr begins with a straightforward recognition of the long-denied truth to which now even the CIA has confessed:

"If someone told you today that there was strong evidence that the Central Intelligence Agency once turned a blind eye to accusations of drug dealing by operatives it worked with, it might ring some distant, skeptical bell. Did that really happen? That really happened."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Rival newspapers blew holes in his story, government officials derided him as a nut case and his own newspaper, after initially basking in the scoop, threw him under a bus. Mr. Webb was open to attack in part because of the lurid presentation of the story and his willingness to draw causality based on very thin sourcing and evidence. He wrote past what he knew, but the movie

suggests that he told a truth others were unwilling to. Sometimes, when David takes on Goliath, David is the one who ends up getting defeated. …

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

“Tim Golden in The New York Times and others wrote that Mr. Webb overestimated his subjects’ ties to the contras as well as the amount of drugs sold and money that actually went to finance the war in Nicaragua.”

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

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

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

The inspector general interviewed senior CIA officers who acknowledged that they were aware of the Contra-drug problem but didn’t want its exposure to undermine the struggle to overthrow Nicaragua’s Sandinista government. According to Inspector General Hitz, the CIA had “one overriding priority: to oust the Sandinista government. . . . [CIA officers] were determined that the various difficulties they encountered not be allowed to prevent effective implementation of the Contra program.” One CIA field officer explained, “The focus was to get the job done, get the support and win the war.”

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

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

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

Yet, like the Hitz report in 1998, the admissions by Snider and the House committee drew virtually no media attention in 2000 — except for a few articles on the Internet, including one at Consortiumnews.com.

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

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

Despite acknowledging the truth of the Contra-cocaine scandal, the review was short on interviews with knowledgeable people willing to speak up strongly for Webb. I was one of Webb's few journalistic colleagues who defended his work when he was under assault in 1996-97 and – every year on the anniversary of

Webb's death – have published articles about the shameful behavior of the mainstream media and Ceppos in destroying Webb's life.

Jerry Ceppos

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

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

The review also notes that when the Kerry report was issued, "major news outlets gave scant attention to the report" and that: "Mr. Webb was not the first journalist to come across what seemed more like an airport thriller novel.

Way back in December 1985, The Associated Press reported that three contra groups had 'engaged in cocaine trafficking, in part to help finance their war against Nicaragua.' In 1986, The San Francisco Examiner ran a large exposé covering similar terrain.

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

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

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

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

The report by Robert Parry "Kill the Messenger" tells the tragic tale of journalist Gary Webb who revived the Contra-cocaine scandal in the 1990s and saw his life destroyed by the mainstream media. The question now is: "Will the MSM continue its cover-up of this sordid part of Ronald Reagan's legacy or finally accept the truth?" writes Robert Parry.

Actor Jeremy Renner portraying journalist Gary Webb in the movie, "Kill the Messenger"

The mainstream news media's reaction to the new movie, "Kill the Messenger," has been tepid, perhaps not surprising given that the MSM comes across as the film's most unsympathetic villain as it crushes journalist Gary Webb for digging up the Contra-cocaine scandal in the mid-1990s after the major newspapers thought they had buried it in the 1980s.

Not that the movie is without other villains, including drug traffickers and "men in black" government agents. But the drug lords show some humanity and even honesty as they describe how they smuggled drugs and shared the proceeds with the Nicaraguan Contra rebels, President Ronald Reagan's beloved "freedom fighters."

Jeremy Renner, portraying journalist Gary Webb, in a scene from the motion picture "Kill the Messenger"

By contrast, the news executives for the big newspapers, such as the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times, come across as soulless careerists determined to maintain their cozy relations with the CIA's press office and set on shielding their failure to take on this shocking scandal when it was playing out in the 1980s.

So, in the 1990s, they concentrated their fire on Webb for alleged imperfections in his investigative reporting rather than on U.S. government officials who condoned and protected the Contra drug trafficking as part of Reagan's Cold War crusade.

Webb's cowardly editors at the San Jose Mercury News also come across badly as frightened bureaucrats, cringing before the collective misjudgment of the MSM and crucifying their own journalist for the sin of challenging the media's wrongheaded conventional wisdom.

That the MSM's "group think" was upside-down should no longer be in doubt. In fact, the Contra-cocaine case was conclusively established as early as 1985 when Brian Barger and I wrote the first story on the scandal for the Associated

Press. Our sourcing included some two dozen knowledgeable people including Contras, Contra supporters and U.S. government sources from the Drug Enforcement Administration and even Reagan's National Security Council staff.

But the Reagan administration didn't want to acknowledge this inconvenient truth, knowing it would sink the Contra war against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government. So, after the AP story was published, President Reagan's skillful propagandists mounted a counteroffensive that elicited help from editors and reporters at the New York Times, the Washington Post and other major news outlets.

Thus, in the 1980s, the MSM treated the Contra-cocaine scandal as a "conspiracy theory" when it actually was a very real conspiracy. The MSM's smug and derisive attitude continued despite a courageous investigation headed by Sen. John Kerry which, in 1989, confirmed the AP reporting and took the story even further. For his efforts, Newsweek dubbed Kerry "a randy conspiracy buff."

This dismissive treatment of the scandal even survived the narcotics trafficking trial of Panama's Manuel Noriega in 1991 when the U.S. government called witnesses who implicated both Noriega and the Contras in the cocaine trade.

The Power of 'Group Think'

What we were seeing was the emerging power of the MSM's "group think," driven by conformity and careerism and resistant to both facts and logic. Once all the "smart people" of Official Washington reached a conclusion – no matter how misguided – that judgment would be defended at nearly all costs, since none of these influential folks wanted to admit error.

That's what Gary Webb ran into in 1996 when he revived the Contra-cocaine scandal by focusing on the devastation that one Contra drug pipeline caused by feeding into the production of crack cocaine. However, for the big newspapers to admit they had ducked such an important story – and indeed had aided in the government's cover-up – would be devastating to their standing.

So, the obvious play was to nitpick Webb's reporting and to destroy him personally, which is what the big newspapers did and what "Kill the

Messenger" depicts. The question today is: how will the MSM react to this second revival of the Contra-cocaine scandal?

Of the movie reviews that I read, a few were respectful, including the one in the Los Angeles Times where Kenneth Turan wrote: "The story Webb related in a series of articles … told a still-controversial tale that many people did not want to hear: that elements in the CIA made common cause with Central American drug dealers and that money that resulted from cocaine sales in the U.S. was used to arm the anti-communist Contras in Nicaragua.

"Although the CIA itself confirmed, albeit years later, that this connection did in fact exist, journalists continue to argue about whether aspects of Webb's stories overreached."

A normal person might wonder why – if the CIA itself admitted (as it did) that it was collaborating with drug dealers – journalists would still be debating whether Webb may have "overreached" (although in reality he actually understated the problem). Talk about missing "the lede" or the forest for the trees.

What kind of "journalist" obsesses over dissecting the work of another journalist while the U.S. government gets away with aiding and abetting drug traffickers?

Turan went on to note the same strange pattern in 1996 after Webb's series appeared: "what no one counted on was that the journalistic establishment — including elite newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times — would attempt to discredit Webb's reporting. The other newspapers questioned the shakier parts of his story and proving the truth of what one of Webb's sources tells him: 'You get the most flak when you're right above the target.'"

Sneering Still

However, other reviews, including those in the New York Times and the Washington Post, continued the snarky tone that pervaded the sneering treatment of Webb that hounded him out of journalism in 1997 and ultimately drove him to suicide in 2004. For instance, the headline in the Post's weekend

section was “Sticking with Webb’s Story,” as in the phrase “That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

The review by Michael O’Sullivan stated: “Inspired by the true story of Gary Webb — the San Jose Mercury News reporter known for a controversial series of articles suggesting a link between the CIA, the California crack epidemic and the Nicaraguan Contras — this slightly overheated drama begins and ends with innuendo. In between is a generous schmear of insinuation.”

You get the point. The allegations, which have now been so well-established that even the CIA admits to them, are “controversial” and amount to “innuendo” and “insinuation.”

Similarly, the New York Times review by Manohla Dargis disparaged Webb’s “Dark Alliance” series as “much-contested,” which may be technically accurate but fails to recognize that the core allegations of Contra-cocaine trafficking and U.S. government complicity were true – something an earlier article by Times’ media writer David Carr at least had the decency to acknowledge. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “NYT’s Belated Admission on Contra-Cocaine.”]

In a different world, the major newspapers would have taken the opening created by “Kill the Messenger” to make amends for their egregious behavior in the 1980s – in discrediting the scandal when the criminality could have been stopped – and for their outrageous actions in the 1990s in destroying the life and career of Gary Webb. But it appears the big papers mostly plan to hunker down and pretend they did nothing wrong.

For those interested in the hard evidence proving the reality of the Contra-cocaine scandal, I posted a Special Report on Friday detailing much of what we know and how we know it. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga.”]

As for “Kill the Messenger,” I had the pleasure of watching it on Friday night with my old Associated Press colleague Brian Barger – and we both were impressed by how effectively the movie-makers explained a fairly complicated tale about drugs and politics. The personal story was told with integrity, aided immensely by Jeremy Renner’s convincing portrayal of Webb.

There were, of course, some Hollywood fictional flourishes for dramatic purposes. And it was a little weird hearing my cautionary advice to Webb – delivered when we talked before his "Dark Alliance" series was published in 1996 – being put into the mouth of a fictional Kerry staffer.

But those are minor points. What was truly remarkable about this movie was that it was made at all. Over the past three decades, many directors and screenwriters have contemplated telling the sordid story of Contra-cocaine trafficking but all have failed to get the projects "green-lighted."

The conventional wisdom in Hollywood has been that such a movie would be torn apart by the major media just as Webb's series (and before that the AP articles and Kerry's report) were. But so far the MSM has largely held its fire against "Kill the Messenger," relying on a few snide asides and knowing smirks.

Perhaps the MSM simply assumes that the old conventional wisdom will hold and that the movie will soon be forgotten. Or maybe there's been a paradigm shift – and the MSM realizes that its credibility is shot (especially after its catastrophic performance regarding Iraq's WMD) and it is losing its power to dictate false narratives to the American people.

The movie, "Kill the Messenger," is forcing the mainstream U.S. media to confront one of its most shameful episodes, the suppression of a major national security scandal implicating Ronald Reagan's CIA in aiding and abetting cocaine trafficking by the Nicaraguan Contra rebels in the 1980s and then the systematic destruction of journalist Gary Webb when he revived the scandal in the 1990s.

Hollywood's treatment of this sordid affair will likely draw another defensive or dismissive response from some of the big news outlets that still don't want to face up to their disgraceful behavior. The New York Times and other major newspapers mocked the Contra-cocaine scandal when Brian Barger and I first exposed it in 1985 for the Associated Press and then savaged Webb in 1996 when he traced some of the Contra-cocaine into the manufacture of crack which ravaged American cities.

Jeremy Renner, portraying journalist Gary Webb, in a scene from the motion picture "Kill the Messenger"

So, when you're watching this movie or responding to questions from friends about whether they should believe its storyline, you might want to know what is or is not fact. What is remarkable about this tale is that so much of it now has been established by official government documents. In other words, you don't have to believe me and my dozens of sources; you can turn to the admissions by the Central Intelligence Agency's inspector general or to evidence in the National Archives.

For instance, last year at the National Archives annex in College Park, Maryland, I discovered a "secret" U.S. law enforcement report that detailed how top Contra leader Adolfo Calero was casually associating with Norwin Meneses, described as "a well-reputed drug dealer."

Meneses was near the center of Webb's 1996 articles for the San Jose Mercury-News, a series that came under fierce attack from U.S. government officials as well as major news organizations, including the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times. The controversy cost Webb his career, left him nearly penniless and ultimately drove him to suicide on Dec. 9, 2004.

But the bitter irony of Webb's demise, which is the subject of "Kill the Messenger" starring Jeremy Renner as Webb, is that Webb's much-maligned "Dark Alliance" series eventually forced major admissions from the CIA, the Justice Department and other government agencies revealing an even-deeper relationship between President Reagan's beloved Contras and drug cartels than Webb (or Barger and I) ever alleged.

Typical of the evidence that the Reagan administration chose to ignore was the document that I found at the National Archives, recounting information from Dennis Ainsworth, a blue-blood Republican from San Francisco who volunteered to help the Contra cause in 1984-85. That put him in position to witness the strange behind-the-scenes activities of Contra leaders hobnobbing with drug traffickers and negotiating arms deals with White House emissaries.

Ainsworth also was a source of mine in fall 1985 when I was investigating the mysterious sources of funding for the Contras after Congress shut off CIA support in 1984 amid widespread reports of Contra atrocities inflicted on Nicaraguan civilians, including rapes, executions and torture.

Ainsworth's first-hand knowledge of the Contra dealings dovetailed with information that I already had, such as the central role of National Security Council aide Oliver North in aiding the Contras and his use of "courier" Rob Owen as an off-the-books White House intermediary to the Contras. I later developed confirmation of some other details that Ainsworth described, such as his overhearing Owen and Calero working together on an arms deal as Ainsworth drove them through the streets of San Francisco.

As for Ainsworth's knowledge about the Contra-cocaine connection, he said he sponsored a June 1984 cocktail party at which Calero spoke to about 60 people. Meneses, a notorious drug kingpin in the Nicaraguan community, showed up uninvited and clearly had a personal relationship with Calero, who was then the political leader of the Contra's chief fighting force, the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force (or FDN).

“At the end of the cocktail party, Meneses and Calero went off together,” Ainsworth told U.S. Attorney Joseph P. Russoniello, according to a “secret” Jan. 6, 1987 cable submitted by Russoniello to an FBI investigation code-named “Front Door,” a probe into the Reagan administration’s corruption.

After Calero’s speech, Ainsworth said Meneses accompanied Calero and about 20 people to dinner and picked up the entire tab, according to a more detailed debriefing of Ainsworth by the FBI. Concerned about this relationship, Ainsworth said he was told by Renato Pena, an FDN leader in the San Francisco area, that “the FDN is involved in drug smuggling with the aid of Norwin Meneses who also buys arms for Enrique Bermudez, a leader of the FDN.” Bermudez was then the top Contra military commander.

Corroborating Account

Pena, who himself was convicted on federal drug charges in 1984, gave a similar account to the Drug Enforcement Administration. According to a 1998 report by the Justice Department’s Inspector General Michael Bromwich, “When debriefed by the DEA in the early 1980s, Pena said that the CIA was allowing the Contras to fly drugs into the United States, sell them, and keep the proceeds. …

“Pena stated that he was present on many occasions when Meneses telephoned Bermudez in Honduras. Meneses told Pena of Bermudez’s requests for such things as gun silencers (which Pena said Meneses obtained in Los Angeles), cross bows, and other military equipment for the Contras. Pena believed that Meneses would sometimes transport certain of these items himself to Central America, and other times would have contacts in Los Angeles and Miami send cargo to Honduras, where the authorities were cooperating with the Contras. Pena believed Meneses had contact with Bermudez from about 1981 or 1982 through the mid-1980s.”

Bromwich’s report then added, “Pena said he was one of the couriers Meneses used to deliver drug money to a Colombian known as ‘Carlos’ in Los Angeles and return to San Francisco with cocaine. Pena made six to eight trips, with anywhere from $600,000 to nearly $1 million, and brought back six to eight kilos of cocaine each time. Pena said Meneses was moving hundreds of kilos a

week. ‘Carlos’ once told Pena, ‘We’re helping your cause with this drug thing … we are helping your organization a lot.”

Ainsworth also said he tried to alert Oliver North in 1985 about the troubling connections between the Contra movement and cocaine traffickers but that North turned a deaf ear. “In the spring some friends of mine and I went back to the White House staff but we were put off by Ollie North and others on the staff who really don’t want to know all what’s going on,” Ainsworth told Russoniello.

When I first spoke with Ainsworth in September 1985 at a coffee shop in San Francisco, he asked for confidentiality which I granted. However, since the documents released by the National Archives include him describing his conversations with me, that confidentiality no longer applies. Ainsworth also spoke with Webb for his 1996 San Jose Mercury-News series under the pseudonym “David Morrison.”

Though I found Ainsworth to be generally reliable, some of his depictions of our conversations contained mild exaggerations or confusion over details, such as his claim that I called him from Costa Rica in January 1986 and told him that the Contra-cocaine story that I had been working on with my AP colleague Brian Barger “never hit the papers because it was suppressed by the Associated Press due to political pressure primarily from the CIA.”

In reality, Barger and I returned from Costa Rica in fall 1985, wrote our story about the Contras’ involvement in cocaine smuggling, and pushed it onto the AP wire in December though in a reduced form because of resistance from some senior AP news executives who were supportive of President Reagan’s foreign policies. The CIA, the White House and other agencies of the Reagan administration did seek to discredit our story, but they did not prevent its publication.

An Overriding Hostility

The Reagan administration’s neglect of Ainsworth’s insights reflected the overriding hostility toward any information – even from a Republican activist like Ainsworth – that put the Contras in a negative light. In early 1987, when

Ainsworth spoke with U.S. Attorney Russoniello and the FBI, the Reagan administration was in full damage-control mode, trying to tamp down the Iran-Contra disclosures about Oliver North diverting profits from secret arms sales to Iran to the Contra war.

Fears that the Iran-Contra scandal could lead to Reagan's impeachment made it even less likely that the Justice Department would pursue an investigation into drug ties implicating the Contra leadership. Ainsworth's information was simply passed on to Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh whose inquiry was already overwhelmed by the task of sorting out the convoluted Iran transactions.

Publicly, the Reagan team continued dumping on the Contra-cocaine allegations and playing the find-any-possible-reason-to-reject-a-witness game. The major news media went along, leading to much mainstream ridicule of a 1989 investigative report by Sen. John Kerry, D-Massachusetts, who uncovered more drug connections implicating the Contras and the Reagan administration.

Only occasionally, such as when the George H.W. Bush administration needed witnesses to convict Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega did the Contra-cocaine evidence pop onto Official Washington's radar.

During Noriega's drug-trafficking trial in 1991, U.S. prosecutors called as a witness Colombian Medellín cartel kingpin Carlos Lehder, who — along with implicating Noriega — testified that the cartel had given $10 million to the Contras, an allegation first unearthed by Sen. Kerry. "The Kerry hearings didn't get the attention they deserved at the time," a Washington Post editorial on Nov. 27, 1991, acknowledged. "The Noriega trial brings this sordid aspect of the Nicaraguan engagement to fresh public attention."

But the Post offered its readers no explanation for why Kerry's hearings had been largely ignored, with the Post itself a leading culprit in this journalistic misfeasance. Nor did the Post and the other leading newspapers use the opening created by the Noriega trial to do anything to rectify their past neglect.

Everything quickly returned to the status quo in which the desired perception of the noble Contras trumped the clear reality of their criminal activities. Instead of recognizing the skewed moral compass of the Reagan administration, Congress was soon falling over itself to attach Reagan's name

to as many public buildings and facilities as possible, including Washington's National Airport.

Meanwhile, those of us in journalism who had exposed the national security crimes of the 1980s saw our careers mostly sink or go sideways. We were regarded as "pariahs" in our profession.

As for me, shortly after the Iran-Contra scandal broke wide open in fall 1986, I accepted a job at Newsweek, one of the many mainstream news outlets that had long ignored Contra-connected scandals and briefly thought it needed to bolster its coverage. But I soon discovered that senior editors remained hostile toward the Iran-Contra story and related spinoff scandals, including the Contra-cocaine mess.

After losing battle after battle with my Newsweek editors, I departed the magazine in June 1990 to write a book (called Fooling America) about the decline of the Washington press corps and the parallel rise of a new generation of government propagandists.

I was also hired by PBS Frontline to investigate whether there had been a prequel to the Iran-Contra scandal — whether those arms-for-hostage deals in the mid-1980s had been preceded by contacts between Reagan's 1980 campaign staff and Iran, which was then holding 52 Americans hostage and essentially destroying Jimmy Carter's reelection hopes. [For more on that topic, see Robert Parry's Secrecy & Privilege and America's Stolen Narrative.]

Finding New Ways

In 1995, frustrated by the growing triviality of American journalism — and acting on the advice of and with the assistance of my oldest son Sam — I turned to a new medium and launched the Internet's first investigative news magazine, known as Consortiumnews.com. The Web site became a way for me to put out well-reported stories that my former mainstream colleagues ignored or mocked.

So, when Gary Webb called me in 1996 to talk about the Contra-cocaine story, I explained some of this tortured history and urged him to make sure that his

editors were firmly behind him. He sounded perplexed at my advice and assured me that he had the solid support of his editors.

When Webb's "Dark Alliance" series finally appeared in late August 1996, it initially drew little attention. The major national news outlets applied their usual studied indifference to a topic that they had already judged unworthy of serious attention.

But Webb's story proved hard to ignore. First, unlike the work that Barger and I did for AP in the mid-1980s, Webb's series wasn't just a story about drug traffickers in Central America and their protectors in Washington. It was about the on-the-ground consequences, inside the United States, of that drug trafficking, how the lives of Americans were blighted and destroyed as the collateral damage of a U.S. foreign policy initiative.

In other words, there were real-life American victims, and they were concentrated in African-American communities. That meant the ever-sensitive issue of race had been injected into the controversy. Anger from black communities spread quickly to the Congressional Black Caucus, which started demanding answers.

Secondly, the San Jose Mercury-News, which was the local newspaper for Silicon Valley, had posted documents and audio on its state-of-the-art Internet site. That way, readers could examine much of the documentary support for the series.

It also meant that the traditional "gatekeeper" role of the major newspapers — the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times — was under assault. If a regional paper like the Mercury-News could finance a major journalistic investigation like this one, and circumvent the judgments of the editorial boards at the Big Three, then there might be a tectonic shift in the power relations of the U.S. news media. There could be a breakdown of the established order.

This combination of factors led to the next phase of the Contra-cocaine battle: the "get-Gary-Webb" counterattack. Soon, the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the Los Angeles Times were lining up like some tag-team wrestlers taking turns pummeling Webb and his story.

On Oct. 4, 1996, the Washington Post published a front-page article knocking down Webb's series, although acknowledging that some Contra operatives did help the cocaine cartels. The Post's approach fit with the Big Media's cognitive dissonance on the topic: first, the Post called the Contra-cocaine allegations old news — "even CIA personnel testified to Congress they knew that those covert operations involved drug traffickers," the Post said — and second, the Post minimized the importance of the one Contra smuggling channel that Webb had highlighted in his series, saying it had not "played a major role in the emergence of crack."

To add to the smug hoo-hah treatment that was enveloping Webb and his story, the Post published a sidebar story dismissing African-Americans as prone to "conspiracy fears."

Next, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times weighed in with lengthy articles castigating Webb and "Dark Alliance." The big newspapers made much of the CIA's internal reviews in 1987 and 1988 — almost a decade earlier — that supposedly had cleared the spy agency of any role in Contra-cocaine smuggling.

But the first ominous sign for the CIA's cover-up emerged on Oct. 24, 1996, when CIA Inspector General Frederick Hitz conceded before the Senate Intelligence Committee that the first CIA probe had lasted only12 days, and the second only three days. He promised a more thorough review.

Mocking Webb

But Webb had already crossed over from being treated as a serious journalist to becoming a target of ridicule. Influential Washington Post media critic Howard Kurtz mocked Webb for saying in a book proposal that he would explore the possibility that the Contra war was primarily a business to its participants. "Oliver Stone, check your voice mail," Kurtz smirked.

Yet, Webb's suspicion was no conspiracy theory. Indeed, Oliver North's chief Contra emissary, Rob Owen, had made the same point in a March 17, 1986 message about the Contra leadership. "Few of the so-called leaders of the

movement . . . really care about the boys in the field," Owen wrote. "THIS WAR HAS BECOME A BUSINESS TO MANY OF THEM." [Emphasis in original.]

Ainsworth and other pro-Contra activists were reaching the same conclusion, that the Contra leadership was skimming money from the supply lines and padding their personal wealth with proceeds from the drug trade. According to a Jan. 21, 1987 interview report by the FBI, Ainsworth said he had "made inquiries in the local San Francisco Nicaraguan community and wondered among his acquaintances what Adolfo Calero and the other people in the FDN movement were doing and the word that he received back is that they were probably engaged in cocaine smuggling."

In other words, Webb was right about the suspicion that the Contra movement had become less a cause than a business to many of its participants. Even Oliver North's emissary reported on that reality. But truthfulness had ceased to be relevant in the media's hazing of Gary Webb.

In another double standard, while Webb was held to the strictest standards of journalism, it was entirely all right for Kurtz — the supposed arbiter of journalistic integrity who was a longtime fixture on CNN's "Reliable Sources" — to make judgments based on ignorance. Kurtz would face no repercussions for mocking a fellow journalist who was factually correct.

The Big Three's assault — combined with their disparaging tone — had a predictable effect on the executives of the Mercury-News. As it turned out, Webb's confidence in his editors had been misplaced. By early 1997, executive editor Jerry Ceppos, who had his own corporate career to worry about, was in retreat.

On May 11, 1997, Ceppos published a front-page column saying the series "fell short of my standards." He criticized the stories because they "strongly implied CIA knowledge" of Contra connections to U.S. drug dealers who were manufacturing crack cocaine. "We did not have enough proof that top CIA officials knew of the relationship," Ceppos wrote.

Ceppos was wrong about the proof, of course. At AP, before we published our first Contra-cocaine article in 1985, Barger and I had known that the CIA and Reagan's White House were aware of the Contra-cocaine problem at senior levels. One of our sources was on Reagan's National Security Council staff.

However, Ceppos recognized that he and his newspaper were facing a credibility crisis brought on by the harsh consensus delivered by the Big Three, a judgment that had quickly solidified into conventional wisdom throughout the major news media and inside Knight-Ridder, Inc., which owned the Mercury-News. The only career-saving move – career-saving for Ceppos even if career-destroying for Webb – was to jettison Webb and the Contra-cocaine investigative project.

A 'Vindication'

The big newspapers and the Contras' defenders celebrated Ceppos's retreat as vindication of their own dismissal of the Contra-cocaine stories. In particular, Kurtz seemed proud that his demeaning of Webb now had the endorsement of Webb's editor. Ceppos next pulled the plug on the Mercury-News' continuing Contra-cocaine investigation and reassigned Webb to a small office in Cupertino, California, far from his family. Webb resigned from the paper in disgrace. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Hung Out to Dry."]

For undercutting Webb and other Mercury News reporters working on the Contra-cocaine project – some of whom were facing personal danger in Central America – Ceppos was lauded by the American Journalism Review and received the 1997 national Ethics in Journalism Award by the Society of Professional Journalists.

While Ceppos won raves, Webb watched his career collapse and his marriage break up. Still, Gary Webb had set in motion internal government investigations that would bring to the surface long-hidden facts about how the Reagan administration had conducted the Contra war.

The CIA published the first part of Inspector General Hitz's findings on Jan. 29, 1998. Though the CIA's press release for the report criticized Webb and defended the CIA, Hitz's Volume One admitted that not only were many of Webb's allegations true but that he actually understated the seriousness of the Contra-drug crimes and the CIA's knowledge of them.

Hitz conceded that cocaine smugglers played a significant early role in the Contra movement and that the CIA intervened to block an image-threatening

1984 federal investigation into a San Francisco–based drug ring with suspected ties to the Contras, the so-called “Frogman Case.”

After Volume One was released, I called Webb (whom I had spent some time with since his series was published). I chided him for indeed getting the story “wrong.” He had understated how serious the problem of Contra-cocaine trafficking had been, I said.

It was a form of gallows humor for the two of us, since nothing had changed in the way the major newspapers treated the Contra-cocaine issue. They focused only on the press release that continued to attack Webb, while ignoring the incriminating information that could be found in the full report. All I could do was highlight those admissions at Consortiumnews.com, which sadly had a much, much smaller readership than the Big Three.

The major U.S. news media also looked the other way on other startling disclosures.

On May 7, 1998, for instance, Rep. Maxine Waters, a California Democrat, introduced into the Congressional Record a Feb. 11, 1982 letter of understanding between the CIA and the Justice Department. The letter, which had been requested by CIA Director William Casey, freed the CIA from legal requirements that it must report drug smuggling by CIA assets, a provision that covered the Nicaraguan Contras and the Afghan mujahedeen.

In other words, early in those two covert wars, the CIA leadership wanted to make sure that its geopolitical objectives would not be complicated by a legal requirement to turn in its client forces for drug trafficking.

Justice Denied

The next break in the long-running Contra-cocaine cover-up was a report by the Justice Department’s Inspector General Michael Bromwich. Given the hostile climate surrounding Webb’s series, Bromwich’s report also opened with criticism of Webb. But, like the CIA’s Volume One, the contents revealed new details about serious government wrongdoing.

According to evidence cited by Bromwich, the Reagan administration knew almost from the outset of the Contra war that cocaine traffickers permeated the paramilitary operation. The administration also did next to nothing to expose or stop the crimes. Bromwich's report revealed example after example of leads not followed, corroborated witnesses disparaged, official law-enforcement investigations sabotaged, and even the CIA facilitating the work of drug traffickers.

The report showed that the Contras and their supporters ran several parallel drug-smuggling operations, not just the one at the center of Webb's series. The report also found that the CIA shared little of its information about Contra drugs with law-enforcement agencies and on three occasions disrupted cocaine-trafficking investigations that threatened the Contras.

As well as depicting a more widespread Contra-drug operation than Webb (or Barger and I) had understood, the Justice Department report provided some important corroboration about Nicaraguan drug smuggler Norwin Meneses, a key figure in Gary Webb's series and Adolfo Calero's friend as described by Dennis Ainsworth.

Bromwich cited U.S. government informants who supplied detailed information about Meneses's drug operation and his financial assistance to the Contras. For instance, Renato Pena, the money-and-drug courier for Meneses, said that in the early 1980s the CIA allowed the Contras to fly drugs into the United States, sell them, and keep the proceeds. Pena, the FDN's northern California representative, said the drug trafficking was forced on the Contras by the inadequate levels of U.S. government assistance.

The Justice Department report also disclosed repeated examples of the CIA and U.S. embassies in Central America discouraging DEA investigations, including one into Contra-cocaine shipments moving through the international airport in El Salvador. Bromwich said secrecy trumped all. "We have no doubt that the CIA and the U.S. Embassy were not anxious for the DEA to pursue its investigation at the airport," he wrote.

Bromwich also described the curious case of how a DEA pilot helped a CIA asset escape from Costa Rican authorities in 1989 after the man, American farmer

John Hull, had been charged in connection with Contra-cocaine trafficking. [See Consortiumnews.com's "John Hull's Great Escape."]

Hull's ranch in northern Costa Rica had been the site of Contra camps for attacking Nicaragua from the south. For years, Contra-connected witnesses also said Hull's property was used for the transshipment of cocaine en route to the United States, but those accounts were brushed aside by the Reagan administration and disparaged in major U.S. newspapers.

Yet, according to Bromwich's report, the DEA took the accounts seriously enough to prepare a research report on the evidence in November 1986. One informant described Colombian cocaine off-loaded at an airstrip on Hull's ranch.

The drugs were then concealed in a shipment of frozen shrimp and transported to the United States. The alleged Costa Rican shipper was Frigorificos de Puntarenas, a firm controlled by Cuban-American Luis Rodriguez. Like Hull, however, Frigorificos had friends in high places. In 1985-86, the State Department had selected the shrimp company to handle $261,937 in non-lethal assistance earmarked for the Contras.

Hull also remained a man with powerful protectors. Even after Costa Rican authorities brought drug charges against him, influential Americans, including Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Indiana, demanded that Hull be let out of jail pending trial. Then, in July 1989 with the help of a DEA pilot – and possibly a DEA agent – Hull managed to fly out of Costa Rica to Haiti and then to the United States.

Despite these startling new disclosures, the big newspapers still showed no inclination to read beyond the criticism of Webb in the press release.

Major Disclosures

By fall 1998, Washington was obsessed with President Bill Clinton's Monica Lewinsky sex scandal, which made it easier to ignore even more stunning Contra-cocaine disclosures in the CIA's Volume Two, published on Oct. 8, 1998.

In the report, CIA Inspector General Hitz identified more than 50 Contras and Contra-related entities implicated in the drug trade. He also detailed how the Reagan administration had protected these drug operations and frustrated federal investigations throughout the 1980s.

According to Volume Two, the CIA knew the criminal nature of its Contra clients from the start of the war against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government. The earliest Contra force, called the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ADREN) or the 15th of September Legion, had chosen "to stoop to criminal activities in order to feed and clothe their cadre," according to a June 1981 draft of a CIA field report.

According to a September 1981 cable to CIA headquarters, two ADREN members made the first delivery of drugs to Miami in July 1981. ADREN's leaders included Enrique Bermúdez and other early Contras who would later direct the major Contra army, the CIA-organized FDN which was based in Honduras, along Nicaragua's northern border.

Throughout the war, Bermúdez remained the top Contra military commander. The CIA later corroborated the allegations about ADREN's cocaine trafficking, but insisted that Bermúdez had opposed the drug shipments to the United States that went ahead nonetheless.

The truth about Bermúdez's supposed objections to drug trafficking, however, was less clear. According to Hitz's Volume One, Bermúdez enlisted Norwin Meneses – the Nicaraguan cocaine smuggler, the friend of Adolfo Calero, and a key figure in Webb's series – to raise money and buy supplies for the Contras.

Volume One had quoted another Nicaraguan trafficker, Danilo Blandón, a Meneses associate (and another lead character in Webb's series), as telling Hitz's investigators that he (Blandón) and Meneses flew to Honduras to meet with Bermúdez in 1982. At the time, Meneses's criminal activities were well-known in the Nicaraguan exile community, but Bermúdez told the cocaine smugglers that "the ends justify the means" in raising money for the Contras.

After the Bermúdez meeting, Meneses and Blandón were briefly arrested by Honduran police who confiscated $100,000 that the police suspected was to be a payment for a drug transaction. The Contras intervened, gained freedom for

the two traffickers and got them their money back by saying the cash, which indeed was for a cocaine purchase in Bolivia, belonged to the Contras.

There were other indications of Bermúdez's drug-smuggling complicity. In February 1988, another Nicaraguan exile linked to the drug trade accused Bermúdez of participation in narcotics trafficking, according to Hitz's report. After the Contra war ended, Bermúdez returned to Managua, Nicaragua, where he was shot to death on Feb. 16, 1991. The murder has never been solved.

The Southern Front

Along the Southern Front, the Contras' military operations in Costa Rica on Nicaragua's southern border, the CIA's drug evidence centered on the forces of Edén Pastora, another top Contra commander. But Hitz discovered that the U.S. government may have made the drug situation worse, not better.

Hitz revealed that the CIA put an admitted drug operative — known by his CIA pseudonym "Ivan Gomez" — in a supervisory position over Pastora. Hitz reported that the CIA discovered Gomez's drug history in 1987 when Gomez failed a security review on drug-trafficking questions.

In internal CIA interviews, Gomez admitted that in March or April 1982, he helped family members who were engaged in drug trafficking and money laundering. In one case, Gomez said he assisted his brother and brother-in-law transporting cash from New York City to Miami. He admitted he "knew this act was illegal."

Later, Gomez expanded on his admission, describing how his family members had fallen $2 million into debt and had gone to Miami to run a money-laundering center for drug traffickers. Gomez said "his brother had many visitors whom [Gomez] assumed to be in the drug trafficking business." Gomez's brother was arrested on drug charges in June 1982. Three months later, in September 1982, Gomez started his CIA assignment in Costa Rica.

Years later, convicted drug trafficker Carlos Cabezas alleged that in the early 1980s, Ivan Gomez was the CIA agent in Costa Rica who was overseeing drug-money donations to the Contras. Gomez "was to make sure the money was

given to the right people [the Contras] and nobody was taking . . . profit they weren't supposed to," Cabezas stated publicly.

But the CIA sought to discredit Cabezas at the time because he had trouble identifying Gomez's picture and put Gomez at one meeting in early 1982 before Gomez started his CIA assignment. While the CIA was able to fend off Cabezas's allegations by pointing to these minor discrepancies, Hitz's report revealed that the CIA was nevertheless aware of Gomez's direct role in drug-money laundering, a fact the agency hid from Sen. Kerry in his investigation during the late 1980s.

There was also more to know about Gomez. In November 1985, the FBI learned from an informant that Gomez's two brothers had been large-scale cocaine importers, with one brother arranging shipments from Bolivia's infamous drug kingpin Roberto Suarez.

Suarez already was known as a financier of right-wing causes. In 1980, with the support of Argentina's hard-line anticommunist military regime, Suarez bankrolled a coup in Bolivia that ousted the elected left-of-center government. The violent putsch became known as the Cocaine Coup because it made Bolivia the region's first narco-state.

By protecting cocaine shipments headed north, Bolivia's government helped transform Colombia's Medellín cartel from a struggling local operation into a giant corporate-style business for delivering vast quantities of cocaine to the U.S. market.

Flush with cash in the early 1980s, Suarez invested more than $30 million in various right-wing paramilitary operations, including the Contra forces in Central America, according to U.S. Senate testimony by an Argentine intelligence officer, Leonardo Sanchez-Reisse.

In 1987, Sanchez-Reisse said the Suarez drug money was laundered through front companies in Miami before going to Central America. There, other Argentine intelligence officers — veterans of the Bolivian coup — trained the Contras in the early 1980s, even before the CIA arrived to first assist with the training and later take over the Contra operation from the Argentines.

Inspector General Hitz added another piece to the mystery of the Bolivian-Contra connection. One Contra fund-raiser, Jose Orlando Bolanos, boasted that the Argentine government was supporting his Contra activities, according to a May 1982 cable to CIA headquarters. Bolanos made the statement during a meeting with undercover DEA agents in Florida. He even offered to introduce them to his Bolivian cocaine supplier.

Despite all this suspicious drug activity centered around Ivan Gomez and the Contras, the CIA insisted that it did not unmask Gomez until 1987, when he failed a security check and confessed his role in his family's drug business. The CIA official who interviewed Gomez concluded that "Gomez directly participated in illegal drug transactions, concealed participation in illegal drug transactions, and concealed information about involvement in illegal drug activity," Hitz wrote.

But senior CIA officials still protected Gomez. They refused to refer the Gomez case to the Justice Department, citing the 1982 agreement that spared the CIA from a legal obligation to report narcotics crimes by people collaborating with the CIA who were not formal agency employees. Gomez was an independent contractor who worked for the CIA but was not officially on staff. The CIA eased Gomez out of the agency in February 1988, without alerting law enforcement or the congressional oversight committees.

When questioned about the case nearly a decade later, one senior CIA official who had supported the gentle treatment of Gomez had second thoughts. "It is a striking commentary on me and everyone that this guy's involvement in narcotics didn't weigh more heavily on me or the system," the official told Hitz's investigators.

Drug Path to the White House

A Medellín drug connection arose in another section of Hitz's report, when he revealed evidence suggesting that some Contra trafficking may have been sanctioned by Reagan's National Security Council. The protagonist for this part of the Contra-cocaine mystery was Moises Nunez, a Cuban-American who worked for Oliver North's NSC Contra-support operation and for two drug-

connected seafood importers, Ocean Hunter in Miami and Frigorificos De Puntarenas in Costa Rica.

Frigorificos De Puntarenas was created in the early 1980s as a cover for drug-money laundering, according to sworn testimony by two of the firm's principals — Carlos Soto and Medellín cartel accountant Ramon Milian Rodriguez. (It was also the company implicated by a DEA informant in moving cocaine from John Hull's ranch to the United States.)

Drug allegations were swirling around Moises Nunez by the mid-1980s. Indeed, his operation was one of the targets of my and Barger's AP investigation in 1985. Finally reacting to the suspicions, the CIA questioned Nunez about his alleged cocaine trafficking on March 25, 1987. He responded by pointing the finger at his NSC superiors.

"Nunez revealed that since 1985, he had engaged in a clandestine relationship with the National Security Council," Hitz reported, adding: "Nunez refused to elaborate on the nature of these actions, but indicated it was difficult to answer questions relating to his involvement in narcotics trafficking because of the specific tasks he had performed at the direction of the NSC. Nunez refused to identify the NSC officials with whom he had been involved."

After this first round of questioning, CIA headquarters authorized an additional session, but then senior CIA officials reversed the decision. There would be no further efforts at "debriefing Nunez."

Hitz noted that "the cable [from headquarters] offered no explanation for the decision" to stop the Nunez interrogation. But the CIA's Central American Task Force chief Alan Fiers Jr. said the Nunez-NSC drug lead was not pursued "because of the NSC connection and the possibility that this could be somehow connected to the Private Benefactor program [the Contra money handled by the NSC's Oliver North] a decision was made not to pursue this matter."

Joseph Fernandez, who had been the CIA's station chief in Costa Rica, confirmed to congressional Iran-Contra investigators that Nunez "was involved in a very sensitive operation" for North's "Enterprise." The exact nature of that NSC-authorized activity has never been divulged.

At the time of the Nunez-NSC drug admissions and his truncated interrogation, the CIA's acting director was Robert Gates, who nearly two decades later became President George W. Bush's second secretary of defense, a position he retained under President Barack Obama.

Drug Record

The CIA also worked directly with other drug-connected Cuban-Americans on the Contra project, Hitz found. One of Nunez's Cuban-American associates, Felipe Vidal, had a criminal record as a narcotics trafficker in the 1970s. But the CIA still hired him to serve as a logistics coordinator for the Contras, Hitz reported.

The CIA also learned that Vidal's drug connections were not only in the past. A December 1984 cable to CIA headquarters revealed Vidal's ties to Rene Corvo, another Cuban-American suspected of drug trafficking. Corvo was working with Cuban anticommunist Frank Castro, who was viewed as a Medellín cartel representative within the Contra movement.

There were other narcotics links to Vidal. In January 1986, the DEA in Miami seized 414 pounds of cocaine concealed in a shipment of yucca that was going from a Contra operative in Costa Rica to Ocean Hunter, the company where Vidal (and Moises Nunez) worked. Despite the evidence, Vidal remained a CIA employee as he collaborated with Frank Castro's assistant, Rene Corvo, in raising money for the Contras, according to a CIA memo in June 1986.

By fall 1986, Sen. Kerry had heard enough rumors about Vidal to demand information about him as part of his congressional inquiry into Contra drugs. But the CIA withheld the derogatory information in its files. On Oct. 15, 1986, Kerry received a briefing from the CIA's Alan Fiers, who didn't mention Vidal's drug arrests and conviction in the 1970s.

But Vidal was not yet in the clear. In 1987, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Miami began investigating Vidal, Ocean Hunter, and other Contra-connected entities. This prosecutorial attention worried the CIA. The CIA's Latin American division felt it was time for a security review of Vidal. But on Aug. 5, 1987, the CIA's

security office blocked the review for fear that the Vidal drug information "could be exposed during any future litigation."

As expected, the U.S. Attorney's Office did request documents about "Contra-related activities" by Vidal, Ocean Hunter, and 16 other entities. The CIA advised the prosecutor that "no information had been found regarding Ocean Hunter," a statement that was clearly false. The CIA continued Vidal's employment as an adviser to the Contra movement until 1990, virtually the end of the Contra war.

Hitz also revealed that drugs tainted the highest levels of the Honduran-based FDN, the largest Contra army. Hitz found that Juan Rivas, a Contra commander who rose to be chief of staff, admitted that he had been a cocaine trafficker in Colombia before the war.

The CIA asked Rivas, known as El Quiche, about his background after the DEA began suspecting that Rivas might be an escaped convict from a Colombian prison. In interviews with CIA officers, Rivas acknowledged that he had been arrested and convicted of packaging and transporting cocaine for the drug trade in Barranquilla, Colombia. After several months in prison, Rivas said, he escaped and moved to Central America, where he joined the Contras.

Defending Rivas, CIA officials insisted that there was no evidence that Rivas engaged in trafficking while with the Contras. But one CIA cable noted that he lived an expensive lifestyle, even keeping a $100,000 Thoroughbred horse at the Contra camp. Contra military commander Bermúdez later attributed Rivas's wealth to his ex-girlfriend's rich family. But a CIA cable in March 1989 added that "some in the FDN may have suspected at the time that the father-in-law was engaged in drug trafficking."

Still, the CIA moved quickly to protect Rivas from exposure and possible extradition to Colombia. In February 1989, CIA headquarters asked that the DEA take no action "in view of the serious political damage to the U.S. Government that could occur should the information about Rivas become public." Rivas was eased out of the Contra leadership with an explanation of poor health. With U.S. government help, he was allowed to resettle in Miami. Colombia was not informed about his fugitive status.

Another senior FDN official implicated in the drug trade was its chief spokesman in Honduras, Arnoldo Jose “Frank” Arana. The drug allegations against Arana dated back to 1983 when a federal narcotics task force put him under criminal investigation because of plans “to smuggle 100 kilograms of cocaine into the United States from South America.” On Jan. 23, 1986, the FBI reported that Arana and his brothers were involved in a drug-smuggling enterprise, although Arana was not charged.

Arana sought to clear up another set of drug suspicions in 1989 by visiting the DEA in Honduras with a business associate, Jose Perez. Arana’s association with Perez, however, only raised new alarms. If “Arana is mixed up with the Perez brothers, he is probably dirty,” the DEA said.

Drug Airlines

Through their ownership of an air services company called SETCO, the Perez brothers were associated with Juan Matta-Ballesteros, a major cocaine kingpin connected to the 1985 torture-murder of DEA agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena, according to reports by the DEA and U.S. Customs. Hitz reported that someone at the CIA scribbled a note on a DEA cable about Arana stating: “Arnold Arana . . . still active and working, we [CIA] may have a problem.”

Despite its drug ties to Matta-Ballesteros, SETCO emerged as the principal company for ferrying supplies to the Contras in Honduras. During congressional Iran-Contra hearings, FDN political leader Adolfo Calero testified that SETCO was paid from bank accounts controlled by Oliver North. SETCO also received $185,924 from the State Department for delivering supplies to the Contras in 1986. Furthermore, Hitz found that other air transport companies used by the Contras were implicated in the cocaine trade as well.

Even FDN leaders suspected that they were shipping supplies to Central America aboard planes that might be returning with drugs. Mario Calero, Adolfo Calero’s brother and the chief of Contra logistics, grew so uneasy about one air freight company that he notified U.S. law enforcement that the FDN only chartered the planes for the flights south, not the return flights north.

Hitz found that some drug pilots simply rotated from one sector of the Contra operation to another. Donaldo Frixone, who had a drug record in the Dominican Republic, was hired by the CIA to fly Contra missions from 1983 to 1985. In September 1986, however, Frixone was implicated in smuggling 19,000 pounds of marijuana into the United States. In late 1986 or early 1987, he went to work for Vortex, another U.S.-paid Contra supply company linked to the drug trade.

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

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

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

Hitz also recounted complaints from CIA analysts that CIA operations officers handling the Contras hid evidence of Contra-drug trafficking even from the CIA's analysts.

Because of the withheld evidence, the CIA analysts incorrectly concluded in the mid-1980s that "only a handful of Contras might have been involved in drug trafficking." That false assessment was passed on to Congress and to major news organizations — serving as an important basis for denouncing Gary Webb and his "Dark Alliance" series in 1996.

CIA Admission

Although Hitz's report was an extraordinary admission of institutional guilt by the CIA, it went almost unnoticed by the big American newspapers.

On Oct. 10, 1998, two days after Hitz's Volume Two was posted on the CIA's Web site, the New York Times published a brief article that continued to deride Webb but acknowledged the Contra-drug problem may have been worse than earlier understood. Several weeks later, the Washington Post weighed in with a story that simply missed the point of the CIA's confession. Though having assigned 17 journalists to tear down Webb's reporting, the Los Angeles Times chose not to publish a story on the release of Hitz's Volume Two.

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

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

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

Like the release of Hitz's report in 1998, the admissions by Snider and the House committee drew virtually no media attention in 2000 — except for a few articles on the Internet, including one at Consortiumnews.com. Because of this journalistic misconduct by the Big Three newspapers — choosing to conceal their own neglect of the Contra-cocaine scandal and to protect the Reagan administration's image — Webb's reputation was never rehabilitated.

After his original “Dark Alliance” series was published in 1996, I joined Webb in a few speaking appearances on the West Coast, including one packed book talk at the Midnight Special bookstore in Santa Monica, California. For a time, Webb was treated as a celebrity on the American Left, but that gradually faded.

In our interactions during these joint appearances, I found Webb to be a regular guy who seemed to be holding up fairly well under the terrible pressure. He had landed an investigative job with a California state legislative committee. He also felt some measure of vindication when CIA Inspector General Hitz’s reports came out.

But Webb never could overcome the pain caused by his betrayal at the hands of his journalistic colleagues, his peers. In the years that followed, Webb was unable to find decent-paying work in his profession — the conventional wisdom remained that he had somehow been exposed as a journalistic fraud. His state job ended; his marriage fell apart; he struggled to pay bills; and he was faced with a forced move out of a house near Sacramento, California, and in with his mother.

On Dec. 9, 2004, the 49-year-old Webb typed out suicide notes to his ex-wife and his three children; laid out a certificate for his cremation; and taped a note on the door telling movers — who were coming the next morning — to instead call 911. Webb then took out his father’s pistol and shot himself in the head. The first shot was not lethal, so he fired once more.

Even with Webb’s death, the big newspapers that had played key roles in his destruction couldn’t bring themselves to show Webb any mercy. After Webb’s body was found, I received a call from a reporter for the Los Angeles Times who knew that I was one of Webb’s few journalistic colleagues who had defended him and his work.

I told the reporter that American history owed a great debt to Gary Webb because he had forced out important facts about Reagan-era crimes. But I added that the Los Angeles Times would be hard-pressed to write an honest obituary because the newspaper had ignored Hitz’s final report, which had largely vindicated Webb.

To my disappointment but not my surprise, I was correct. The Los Angeles Times ran a mean-spirited obituary that made no mention of either my defense

of Webb, nor the CIA's admissions in 1998. The obituary was republished in other newspapers, including the Washington Post.

In effect, Webb's suicide enabled senior editors at the Big Three newspapers to breathe a little easier — one of the few people who understood the ugly story of the Reagan administration's cover-up of the Contra-cocaine scandal and the U.S. media's complicity was now silenced.

To this day, none of the journalists or media critics who participated in the destruction of Gary Webb has paid a price. None has faced the sort of humiliation that Webb had to endure. None had to experience that special pain of standing up for what is best in the profession of journalism — taking on a difficult story that seeks to hold powerful people accountable for serious crimes — and then being vilified by your own colleagues, the people that you expected to understand and appreciate what you had done.

On the contrary, many were rewarded with professional advancement and lucrative careers. For instance, for years, Howard Kurtz got to host the CNN program, "Reliable Sources," which lectured journalists on professional standards. He was described in the program's bio as "the nation's premier media critic." (His show has since moved to Fox News, renamed "MediaBuzz.")

The rehabilitation of Webb's reputation and the correction of this dark chapter of American history now rest on how the public responds to the presentation of Webb's story in the film, "Kill the Messenger." It's also unclear how the Big Media will react. Last Sunday, New York Times' media writer David Carr continued some of the old quibbling about Webb's series but did acknowledge the Contra-cocaine reality.

Carr's movie review began with a straightforward recognition of the long-denied truth: "If someone told you today that there was strong evidence that the Central Intelligence Agency once turned a blind eye to accusations of drug dealing by operatives it worked with, it might ring some distant, skeptical bell. Did that really happen? That really happened."

Yes, that really happened !

Appendices

Jerry Ceppos

Jerry Ceppos became dean of the Manship School of Mass Communication at LSU in July 2011. For 3-1/2 years before that, he was dean of the Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Although Jerry spent most of his career in newspapers, he has been interested in journalism education for years. He has been a member of the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, which sets standards and accredits journalism schools, for 23 years. For six of those years, he served as president of the council. He has been chair of the journalism-education committees of the two largest national newspaper organizations, the Associated Press Managing Editors and the American Society of News Editors. He has written and spoken for years about the similarities and differences between practicing journalists and journalism educators.

In the profession, Jerry was vice president for news of Knight Ridder, then the second-largest newspaper company; he helped direct editorial content, hiring of top editors and ethical behavior of the company's 32 daily newspapers, which included the San Jose Mercury News, the Miami Herald, the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Kansas City Star. Before that, he was managing editor and

executive editor of the Mercury News; assistant managing editor of the Herald, and a reporter and editor at the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle.

He served twice as president of the California Society of Newspaper Editors and was president of the Associated Press Managing Editors. He has been active with First Amendment issues and is a former board member of the Student Press Law Center and of the First Amendment Coalition. He was one of three winners of the first Ethics in Journalism Award of the Society of Professional Journalists. He also won the Knight Ridder Excellence Award for Diversity for diversifying the staff and pages of the San Jose Mercury News. He is a distinguished alumnus of the University of Maryland.

***Robert Parry** (1949)*

Robert Parry (born June 24, 1949) is an American investigative journalist best known for his role in covering the Iran-Contra affair for the Associated Press and Newsweek, including breaking the Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare (CIA manual provided to the Nicaraguan contras) and the CIA and Contras cocaine trafficking in the US scandal in 1985. He was awarded the George Polk Award for National Reporting in 1984. He has been the editor of ConsortiumNews.com since 1995.

Parry joined the Associated Press in 1974, moving to its Washington bureau in 1977. After the 1980 presidential election he was assigned to its Special Assignment (investigative reporting) unit, where he began working on Central America. In 1982, Parry noted the treatment received by the New York Times' Raymond Bonner, who was vilified and pushed out after reporting on the El Mozote massacre, an incident deeply unhelpful to the US government's effort to support the El Salvador government.

Parry was awarded the George Polk Award for National Reporting in 1984 for his work with the Associated Press on Iran-Contra, where he broke the story that the Central Intelligence Agency had provided an assassination manual to the Nicaraguan Contras (Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare). In mid-1985 he wrote the first article on Oliver North's involvement in the affair, and, together with Brian Barger, in late 1985 he broke the CIA and Contras cocaine trafficking in the US scandal, helping to spark Senator John Kerry's interest in investigating Iran-Contra. The Associated Press had refused to publish the drug trafficking story, and only relented when its Spanish-language newswire service accidentally published a translation. Barger and Parry continued to press their investigation of North even as most of the media declined to follow it up, eventually publishing a story in mid-1986, based on 24 sources, which led to a Congressional committee asking questions of North. After North denied the allegations, Barger was pushed out of Associated Press, and Parry was unable to

publish any further follow-ups to the story until after Eugene Hasenfus' plane (Corporate Air Services HPF821) was shot down in Nicaragua in October 1986.

After finding out that his boss had been "conferring with [Oliver] North on a regular basis", Parry left AP in 1987 to join Newsweek. At Newsweek an early story concerned United States National Security Council staff being ordered by the White House to cover up aspects of the Iran-Contra affair, which Newsweek, under great political and media pressure, asked Parry to retract, despite his source holding firm. Parry refused, and he eventually left in Newsweek in 1990.

In August 1990, PBS' Frontline asked Parry to work on the October Surprise conspiracy theory, leading to Parry making several documentaries for the program, broadcast in 1991 and 1992. He continued to pursue it after a Congressional investigation had concluded the story was untrue, turning his Frontline research into a book published in 1993, and in 1994 he unearthed "a treasure-trove of government documents" supporting the theory, "showing that the [Congressional] task force suppressed incriminating CIA testimony and excluded evidence of big-money links between wealthy Republicans and Carter's Iranian intermediary, Cyrus Hashemi." In 1996 Salon.com wrote about his work on the theory, saying that "his continuing quest to unearth the facts of the alleged October Surprise has made him persona non grata among those who worship at the altar of conventional wisdom."

When journalist Gary Webb published his newspaper series Dark Alliance in 1996 alleging that the Reagan administration had allowed the Contras to smuggle cocaine into the US to make money for their efforts, Parry supported Webb amidst heavy criticism from the media.

Webb, ca. Webb, circa 2002 *2002*

Gary Stephen Webb (August 31, 1955 – December 10, 2004) was an American investigative reporter best known for his 1996 Dark Alliance series of articles written for the San Jose Mercury News and later published as a book. In the three-part series, Webb investigated Nicaraguans linked to the CIA-backed Contras who had smuggled cocaine into the U.S. Their smuggled cocaine was distributed as crack cocaine in Los Angeles, with the profits funneled back to the Contras. Webb also alleged that this influx of Nicaraguan-supplied cocaine sparked, and significantly fueled, the widespread crack cocaine epidemic that swept through many U.S. cities during the 1980s. According to Webb, the CIA was aware of the cocaine transactions and the large shipments of drugs into the U.S. by Contra personnel. Webb charged that the Reagan administration shielded inner-city drug dealers from prosecution in order to raise money for the Contras, especially after Congress passed the Boland Amendment, which prohibited direct Contra funding.

Webb's reporting generated fierce controversy, and the San Jose Mercury News backed away from the story, effectively ending Webb's career as a mainstream-media journalist.

In 2004, he was found dead from two gunshot wounds to the head, which the coroner's office judged a suicide. Though he was criticized and shunned by the

mainstream journalism community, in 2013 Nick Schou, a journalist writing for the LA Weekly who wrote the book Kill the Messenger, stated that Webb's reportage was eventually vindicated; since his death mainstream news organizations, such as the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune, have reversed course and defended his "Dark Alliance" series. Esquire wrote that a report from the CIA inspector general "subsequently confirmed the pillars of Webb's findings." Geneva Overholser, who served as the ombudsman for The Washington Post, wrote that major media outlets including the Washington Post had "shown more passion for sniffing out the flaws in the Mercury News's answer than for sniffing out a better

USA Prison System and HIV Infection

With focus on Vacaville, California

Incarceration in the United States of America is one of the main forms of punishment, rehabilitation (for those few lucky inmates who can receive it), for the commission of felony and other offenses. The United States has the highest documented incarceration rate in the world. Only China may have higher rate than the USA but reliable data is not available).

At end of the year of 2009, it was 743 adults incarcerated per 100,000 population.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), 2.266.800 adults were incarcerated in U.S. federal and state prisons, and county jails at the end of 2011 – about 0.94% of adults in the U.S. resident population. Additionally, 4.814.200 adults at year-end 2011 were on probation or on parole. In total, 6.977.700 adults were under correctional supervision (probation, parole, jail, or prison) in 2011 – about 3% of all adults in the U.S. resident population.

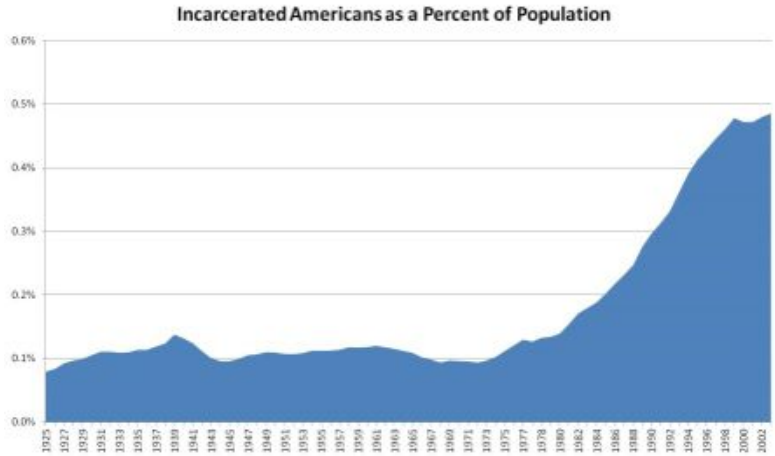
In addition, there were 70.792 juveniles in juvenile detention in 2010.

Although debtor's prisons no longer exist in the United States, residents of some U.S. states can still be incarcerated for debt as of 2014.

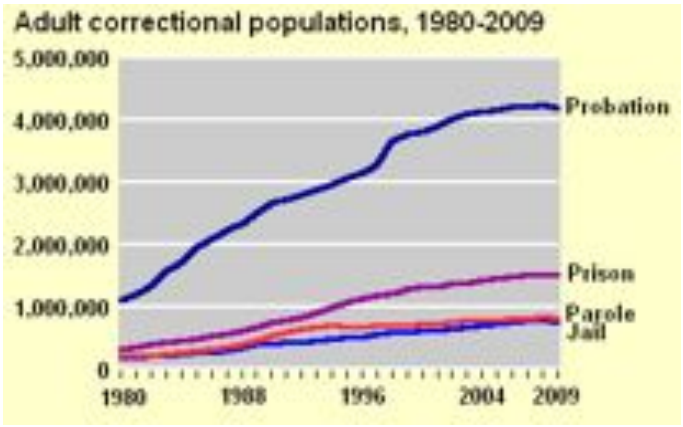
In contrast to all countries in the EU that have abonded the death penalty a long time ago as inhumane and inconsequent (100-150 years), most states in the USA still have capital punishment (death by electrical chair or poisons injected by a medical doctor !). One can hear the opinon in the USA that death penalty will keep people from committing horendous crimes. But the USA has the highest

incarceration rate of all developed nations; thus there is something is wrong in this reasoning.

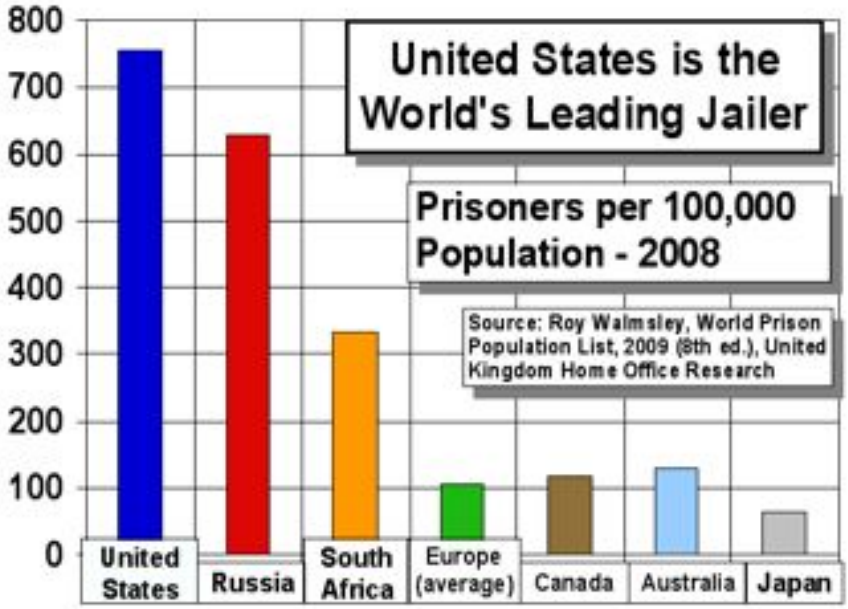
Number of inmates. 1920 to 2006 (absolute numbers). The general US population grew 2.8 times in the same period. The number of inmates increased more than 20 times



Sentenced USA prisoners under jurisdiction of State and Federal correctional authorities, as a Percent of Population. 1925–2003 (with the trend going up each year). Does not include prisoners held in the custody of local jails, inmates out to court, and those in transit.



6,977,700 adults were under correctional supervision (probation, parole, jail, or prison) in 2009



The source of these statistics is the World Prison Population List. 8th edition. Prisoners per 100,000 population

The United States has the highest documented incarceration rate in the world (743 per 100,000 population), Russia has the second highest rate (577 per

100,000), followed by Rwanda (561 per 100,000). As of year-end 2009, the USA rate was 743 adults incarcerated in prisons and jails per 100,000 population. At year-end 2007, the United States had less than 5% of the world's population and 23.4% of the world's prison and jail population (adult inmates). Incarceration rate in the USA for federal and state prisons in 2007 was probably the highest in history of the country. It was 5.5 times greater than the sharp peak that occurred during the Great Depression at 137 per 100,000 in 1939.

By comparison the incarceration rate in England (UK) in October 2011 was 155 people imprisoned per 100,000 residents; the rate for Norway in May 2010 was 71 inmates per 100,000; Netherlands in April 2010 was 94 per 100,000; Australia in June 2010 was 133 per 100,000; and New Zealand in October 2010 was 203 per 100,000.

How inmates are housed (often for life-long)

Row of inmates walking to the cafeteria or another facility inside the building. Notice the yellow line: no inmate is allowed to cross the yellow line

Discussions among inmates.....

Each inmate has a mattress and a locker that can be locked

This inmate is relatively lucky to have a cell like this one but a single cell usually also means single confinement (isolation)

This prisoner had a relatively light sentence and got a few days leave for good conduct

Dogs sniffing for drugs: why?

At the dentist

Notice the yellow line that should not be crossed by inmates

Watching television as one way of killing time

Gang rape and other abuses are daily practices to kill time and to set the picking order

Human Rights Watch estimated in 2010 that 140,000 US inmates per year have been raped. Shaun Attwood has written three books on life inside and his latest, Prison Time, details the sex – consensual or otherwise – the prostitution, the pimping and the equal, loving relationships behind bars.

Sexual abuse and rape and being forced to participate in special (sado-masorchistic) role plays

Inmates testified: “The crook of another man's elbow is on my Adam's apple, pressing down, choking me. After just a couple of seconds, I panic and gasp.”

Shaun Attwood as photographed by a fellow inmate at Buckeye Prison, Arizona, 2004

Mr. Shaun Attwood, who spent more than five years in some of America's toughest prisons, including Arizona's infamous Maricopa Jail, has clearly and reliably documented how men in prison are raped and abused.

"Generally they put the victim to sleep with a choke hold – locking the windpipe like this," he says, rendering me unable to reply. "Within about 20 to 30 seconds you're unconscious."

Attacks don't always begin like this. Sometimes, "they'll lure them with drugs and get them really high – 90% of all prisoners shoot-up drugs". Sometimes they'll trick the victim into a debt and then make them repay it with sex (and not only inmates but also prison guards demand sex for privileges or ignore a violation of prison rules. Other times, it can start with a beating or stabbing.

Human Rights Watch estimated in 2010 – three years after Attwood left jail – that 140,000 US individual inmates have been raped: each inmate several to numerous times. Other studies have helped fill in the quantitative picture: 21 per cent of prisoners in the Midwest reported being forced into some form of sexual activity, according to Prison Journal. Young inmates are five times more likely to be sexually assaulted, says Just Detention International, an organization devoted to ending prison rape. Similar statistics aren't available in the UK but in the year 2011 – there were 103 male and female prisoner-on-prisoner sexual assaults.

The statistics, then, we know. The jokes, of course, we know, too: "Don't drop the soap!" is repeated so often by so many as to become Britain and America's prison-rape refrain – a chorus of discomfort to muzzle the horror.

But the total picture of prison rape in America, the how and why and what happens next, is scarcely uttered because those who survive the system almost invariably have no voice. Attwood, however, a tall, skinny, somewhat geeky 43-year-old from Widnes, doesn't just have a voice, but has written three books on

life inside. And his latest, Prison Time, details the sex – consensual or otherwise – the prostitution, the pimping and the equal, loving relationships behind bars.

The details of which cast fresh light not only on the culture, politics and dynamics in America's penitentiary system, but on the nature of male sexuality itself. Heterosexual? Bi? Gay? Transgender? Labels erode, irrelevant, in the absence of women and societal constraints, and then anything goes.

"I was constantly mentally preparing to fight to the death to stop it happening to me," he says. "I would leave pens out [in my cell] – I was getting ready to, you know..." his voice trails off. Pens can be a deadly weapon. They can also blind you. (A transgender inmate called She-Ra, whom Attwood became friends with, was so broken by gang rapes she finally stopped them by popping an eyeball out of one of her attackers.)

"I had a profound determination to stop it happening because once that's happened to you, everyone finds out and the whole prison society will treat you differently. From then on you are game for anyone to do anything to do you. Not only sexually, but in any way you will be taken advantage of."

Shaun Attwood after release from jail

It's not only young men who are more likely to be raped, but obviously gay ones, too. What are the chances, then, that a young-ish gay man such as myself would be raped? Attwood looks down.

"It is inevitable," he says quietly. "And no one on the outside is interested. Until someone's son is calling them from prison saying, 'I've got a cellmate with a padlock in a sock who is threatening to rape me,' they couldn't care less."

In 2003 – a year after Attwood's incarceration for dealing ecstasy on the Arizona rave scene – a federal law was passed, the Prison Rape Elimination Act, decreeing statistics must be compiled nationally and grants given to prisons to help reduce rape. This manifested in what Attwood calls "rape classes".

"It involved us being taught about rape and being told we have to report rape," he says with a snort of derision. "Everyone laughed throughout and said to the teacher, 'We are not going to report rape!'. If you report anything in prison you're deemed a snitch and it's KOS – kill on sight – for snitches. At the end of the class everyone was saying, 'They might as well give us rape kits' – a how-to."

Not that they needed it. Immediately after the class, "a mentally-ill prisoner was gang-raped. No one reported a thing".

Is there anything, then, that could be done to stop it?

"When you've got two guards watching hundreds of prisoners – to keep costs down – prisoners can do whatever they want. The US prison system cultivates rape.

If you treat people like animals, they behave like it."

Unsurprisingly, in such an epidemic, sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates are sky-high. Attwood says in one prison, he counted up the cons with hepatitis C: it came to two-thirds. Many had HIV. The only ones receiving treatment

were those who had taken legal action. And thus, some prisoners had full-blown AIDS.

Without realizing, Attwood himself illustrates how normalized inmates become to rape and sexual assault, to the extent they don't even recognize it as such.

In his book “Prison Time”, Attwood describes walking in on a young man being forced to fellate another prisoner, an act considered rape in several states and many countries. But when I ask if Attwood ever witnessed a rape, he says no. And when I ask if he felt he had been assaulted when another lag grabbed him, French-kissed him and groped him with hands moist with lubricant Attwood replies: "No, not at all. If I did that to a woman in a bar, that's sexual assault, but in prison the limits are completely different from society."

The man who grabbed him he had nicknamed Jeeves. This is because Jeeves was his "butler". Jeeves was sexually obsessed with Attwood and so offered to work for him cleaning his cell and looking after all domestic concerns – a dynamic from which he derived sexual kicks. There was no payment, just the thrill of it. He would make advances to Attwood fairly regularly, but was always rebutted. To the English inmate, Jeeves was comparatively harmless – before being moved to this cell, Attwood would have to walk past another every day in which resided a prisoner called Booga. He documents their first meeting:

"I'm pulled into a cell reeking of backside sweat and masturbation, a cheese-tinted funk. 'I'm Booga. Let's fuck,' says a squat man in urine-stained boxers, with WHITE TRASH tattooed on his torso...I can't believe my eyes when he drops his boxers and waggles his penis... He grabs me. We scuffle... When I feel his penis rub against my leg, my adrenalin kicks in so forcefully I experience a burst of strength and wriggle free."

For Attwood, escaping rape, as well as "murder, or even having bones broken or teeth knocked out", for nearly six years was "freakishly" lucky, and thanks in

part to his "English wit" and "people skills" as well his friendships with some of the gang leaders. Other prisoners avoid rape – or at least consider themselves to be avoiding it – by becoming a "punk".

This relates to the word's original meaning – the receptive male partner in anal sex – but in prison becomes a job, an identity. You are a receptacle, owned by another. If your main (rape-)partner is a macho man or a gang leader, you receive a certain protection and other inmates will not think of assaulting you in fear of the man who owns you: the gang leader.

"They tend to be the younger, prettier inmates – or the transsexual ones," explains Attwood. "If you're a big, bad gang member, who gives you the right to have a punk to use for sex, as long as you're the 'giver', it's not considered remotely gay."

The particulars of this relationship can vary. The higher up in the prison picking-order (which generally means the more violent) the gangster, the better looking his punk.

"But he's got to fight to maintain that punk. It's a warrior society."

The punk becomes their property. And as such, can either be kept for their sole use or pimped.

"Some will allow their punks to be unfaithful with other punks only, which is called 'bumping pussies'. It's all tied up in notions of property ownership, with sexual jealousy a secondary factor."

The rules of ownership are also governed by race. With most prisoners grouping socially on racial lines, so, too, must their punks.

"A punter – say a Mexican American – might rent a white punk from a white pimp, but a Mexican American wouldn't be running a white punk."

As Attwood utters these words in his rather resonant Cheshire tones – an excitable Gary Barlow if you will – he attracts several glances. We are in a vegetarian restaurant called The Beano, in Guildford, where he now lives. Tables of slate-haired women are seemingly unused to hearing about sexual slavery as they chow down on mushroom lasagna.

They look round again when he describes a prisoner regularly selling his semen to another who used it in ways perhaps unsuitable to describe in a newspaper. And again when he enthuses about the aforementioned She-Ra melting down bits of plastic to make dildos. Needs must.

Robert Gorter tries to make a difference in the high security prison of Vacaville, California

(1984-1989)

By US law, inmates are not allowed to have sex. Thus, in the hay days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) was rampant (and still pretty much is). Since any sexual activity inside the prison system is forbidden, no condoms or other tools for safe-sex practices could be provided. And, during the rapid spread of HIV in the USA, also education about routes of infection was taboo: inmates should not have sex and thus, education on STDs were considered of being of no use and by some prison wardens even a felony …….

Together with **Dr. Jan Diamond**, a colleague of Robert Gorter who worked for the Contra-Costa Health Department as a family Practitioner, Robert Gorter started to visit the high security prison of Vacaville with the purpose to take care of inmates of this prison with HIV infection.

San Francisco Bay Bridge at that time in both directions

Usually, Robert Gorter would drive in his pick-up truck from his home in down town San Francisco across the Bay Bridge to Berkeley where Jan Diamond lived. Then they would travel together in one car to Vacaville.

The High Security Prison of Vacaville in California (between San Francisco and Sacramento)

Upon arrival, they were routinely checked three times: body and hand bag by hand; then through a metal detector (like at airports); and through a third gate for possible drugs and other substances.

One day, in the hand bag of Dr. Jan Diamond one condom was found (for sure not for in-prison use) but she was suspended for one week.

Robert Gorter and Jan Diamond did what they could and slowly on, they were more and more accepted by inmates and prison personnel alike.

Essentially, both Diamond and Gorter were left alone once they entered the prison itself. They were given two rooms to see patients with no guard supervision. Both received an iron whistle and were instructed to blow their whistles if they felt threatened. Through the years, Robert Gorter and Jan Diamond never felt (or were) threatened and thus, never needed to blow their whistles! It was a clear phenomenon that when Jan Diamond and Robert Gorter approached the inmates with respect as they would do with any other patient anywhere, all inmates treated them with respect as well.

The prison doctor at that time as a very nice and realistic and co-operative man and let Jan and Robert free to (half-secretly) educate about HIV transmission. But how can one effectively educate when (gang)-rape are daily events and distribution of condoms and written information was forbidden?

Also, half-a-year later, a special ward was set up for patients who had progressed to final stages of AIDS and needed round-the clock medical- and nursing care. Robert Gorter and Jan Diamond were allowed to prescribe anti-HIV medications ***only*** as the prison doctor condoned it.

Drugs Inside High Security Prisons in the USA

Robert Gorter and Jan Diamond were soon confronted with the availability of heroin and Cocain/Crack (and sometimes prescription drugs) among the prison population in Vacaville. Drugs were available and usually available more or less on a regular basis. This was the conclusion as Diamond and Gorter were never confronted with acute withdrawal symptoms among the inmates they saw.

Also in other prisons and High-Security Prisons, drugs are widely available. Therefore, Robert Gorter always said:

"How can one control illegal (intravenous) drug use in the streets

if one cannot control it in High-Security Prisons?"

Robert Gorter and Jan Diamond would never take a public stand but privately, they would express their doubts and could tell you stories how drugs were a commodity used both by inmates and prison personnel for bargaining, obtaining privileges, prevent punishments, sexual favors, etc.