

## Media covered up Bush's cocaine connection

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Sometimes, the exception is the clearest demonstration of the rule. The rule, in this case, is an uncompromising top-down press censorship of crucial stories by a cabal of the major daily newspapers, wire services, and TV news departments. The exception of 1996 was the *San Jose Mercury News's* excellent series on the role of the U.S. government-backed Nicaraguan Contras in launching the crack cocaine epidemic in South Central Los Angeles in the mid-1980s.

In a three-part series by Sacramento-based reporter Gary Webb, published on Aug. 18-20, 1996, the West Coast flagship newspaper of the Knight-Ridder syndicate blew the story on a pipeline that ran from Colombia to San Francisco to Los Angeles. That pipeline poured tons of cheap, high-grade cocaine onto Los Angeles ghetto streets, fueled a drug turf war among a slew of street gangs, and funneled portions of the drug proceeds to the Nicaraguan Democratic Forces (FDN), the primary Contra military force waging a Reagan administration-sponsored surrogate war against the Sandinistas.

In a discussion with this writer shortly after the series was published, Webb acknowledged that his investigation had not

focused on the chain of command, in Washington, over the Contra program. He freely admitted that he had labeled the Contra program a "CIA-run" covert operation, without studying the documentation which had become available on the command structure of the FDN.

Thus, Webb never found, and, therefore, never reported on, the role of Vice President George Bush in supervising the entire "Central America Program" for the Reagan administration. Bush was, in effect, the commander-in-chief of the Contras, and, through a very clearly delineated chain of command involving less than a half-dozen people at the White House and on the ground in Central America, he maintained hands-on control over the operation, including the arms-for-drugs pipeline.

As *EIR* exclusively reported in a series of articles, and in a 120-page, multi-client *Special Report* entitled "Would a President Bob Dole Prosecute Drug Super-Kingpin George Bush?" Bush was the crack kingpin of the 1980s. With the exception of *EIR* and a handful of regional newspapers and talk-radio jockeys, the Bush story has been blacked out of the U.S. media. In contrast, when the editors of *EIR* held a Washington, D.C. press conference releasing the September 1996 *Special Report*, a dozen international news organizations turned out, and stories appeared all over Ibero-America, and in other parts of the world. South of the border, the notion that a former U.S. President had presided over a massive illegal drug operation, was deemed "newsworthy."

### The media gang up

Even though Webb's stories never touched on the Bush



*President George Bush signs a DARE (Drug Awareness Resistance Education) proclamation, Sept. 13, 1989. If he really wanted to "keep kids off drugs," he shouldn't have sponsored the cocaine Contras, who flooded America's cities with crack.*



Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) addresses the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Sept. 12, 1996, in Washington, D.C., on the subject of "Cocaine, Contras, and the CIA: How They Introduced Crack into the Inner City." The establishment newspapers call African-American leaders "paranoids" who think the "white power structure" is out to get them.

angle, and could have inadvertently led to a cover-up, based on a mistakenly exclusive focus on "the CIA," the big establishment newspapers responded to the series with a vengeance, launching a *jihad* against the *San Jose Mercury News*, its editor, and the reporter who dared to reopen ten-year-old wounds about the suspected role of U.S. government agencies in peddling crack in the ghetto.

Two developments ensured that the *Mercury News* story rapidly evolved into something "too big to bury." First, U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), whose district includes the South Central area of Los Angeles, immediately launched a high-visibility probe of the *Mercury News* allegations, and organized the Congressional Black Caucus to take up the issue of whether the U.S. government had helped establish the crack cocaine epidemic.

Second, *EIR* took responsibility for correcting the error of omission in Webb's original, otherwise excellent, investigative work, publishing and widely circulating the hard documentation that it was actually George Bush, operating out of the White House, and *not* the CIA, that ran the Contra supply-line, including the guns-for-drugs operations that were run in California, Arkansas, Central America, and many other parts of the hemisphere.

How did the rest of the media respond to the Webb series? Initially, there was silence; but, when Representative Waters wrote to CIA director John Deutch, demanding a probe of the allegations by the agency's Inspector General, and filed a similar demand with Attorney General Janet Reno; and when *EIR* began cranking out the details of the Bush involvement, a unified counterattack was launched by the Fourth Estate. It

was a most revealing bit of "self-policing."

The campaign to discredit the *San Jose Mercury News* story, and all the broader revelations that flowed from it, was kicked off by the *Washington Post* on Oct. 4, 1996, with a front-page broadside, "The CIA and Crack: Evidence Is Lacking of Alleged Plot." Authored by the *Post*'s "CIA beat" reporter, Walter Pincus, and Roberto Suro, the story asserted: "A *Washington Post* investigation into [Ricky] Ross, [Danilo] Blandón, [Norwin] Meneses and the U.S. cocaine market in the 1980s found that the available information does not support the conclusion that the CIA-backed Contras—or Nicaraguans in general—played a major role in the emergence of crack as a narcotic in widespread use across the United States."

The *Post* story took up more than two pages, aimed at nit-picking at specific pieces of the Webb account. At one point, the *Post*'s investigative team even argued, that since the West Coast Contra cocaine ring "handled a total of only about five tons of cocaine," it could not possibly have been responsible for single-handedly launching the crack epidemic.

### 'A uniquely egalitarian phenomenon'

The *Washington Post*'s sophistry was more than matched by the *Los Angeles Times*, which took its crack at the *San Jose Mercury News*, beginning on Oct. 20, 1996, with a lengthy three-part series. The *Los Angeles Times* brought their chief Washington, D.C. correspondent, Doyle McManus, back to the West Coast, to participate in their fine-tuned bit of damage control.

The lead-off article, "Tracking the Genesis of the Crack

Trade in L.A.,” made clear its contempt for the *San Jose Mercury News* probe: “Cocaine: The epidemic was not sparked by a single conspiracy, but by an array of suppliers, dealers, and networks. They followed their own agendas, driven by changing tastes and cold economics.” The article went on: “The crack epidemic in Los Angeles followed no blueprint or master plan. It was not orchestrated by the Contras or the CIA or any single drug ring. . . . Instead, a *Times* investigation has found that the explosion of cheap, smokable cocaine in the 1980s was a uniquely egalitarian phenomenon, one that lent itself more to makeshift mom-and-pop operations than to the sinister hand of a government-sanctioned plot.”

The second part of the series, penned by McManus, continued the same theme. It was entitled “Examining Charges of CIA Role in Crack Sales,” with the subhead, “Cocaine: Extensive interviews and review of records undercut contention that Nicaraguan-supplied ring in L.A. sent millions of dollars to CIA-backed Contras.” While the first of the series tried to debunk the idea that the Contra cocaine ring was a major early supplier of cocaine to the gangs in South Central Los Angeles, the second article tried, with similar sophistry to disprove the links between the known cocaine traffickers Meneses and Blandón, and the Contras.

### **Blatant racism**

The final part of the trilogy featured a flagrantly racist attack against the leadership of the African-American community, characterizing black leaders as raving paranoids who look for every excuse to spread the lie that the “white power structure” is out to commit genocide against them. After citing a string of recent books on the subject of racial injustice, the *Times* wrote, “It is this history that explains why allegations of government involvement in the Los Angeles crack cocaine trade have resonated so powerfully and with such credibility among African Americans. . . . The fact that the *Mercury News* did not uncover any direct link between CIA officers and crack trafficking in the United States has not diminished the suspicion—particularly since crack hit first, and hardest, in black neighborhoods.” The article rambled on for thousands of words, citing one psychiatrist or sociologist after another, rebuking the *San Jose Mercury News* for playing on the deep-seated paranoia of African Americans, and blaming the government and the CIA for a problem that ghetto blacks actually brought upon themselves.

Even as the *Los Angeles Times* was delivering its poison-pen attack, the East Coast “newspaper of record,” the *New York Times* was making its own, remarkably similar indictment of the Gary Webb articles. On Oct. 21, 1996, the *New York Times* ran a front-page, 3,000-word assault under the headline, “With Little Evidence to Back It, Tale of CIA-Drug Link Has Life of Its Own.” After starting with their own bit of armchair psychiatry, about the inherent paranoia and anti-government phobias of the black population in America, the meat of the *Times* story turns out to be leftovers from the *Post*

and the *Los Angeles Times*: “Court documents, past investigations and interviews with more than two dozen current and former [Contra] rebels, CIA officials and narcotics agents, as well as other law-enforcement officials and experts on the drug trade, all indicate that there is scant proof to support the paper’s contention that Nicaraguan rebel officials linked to the CIA played a central role in spreading crack through Los Angeles and other cities.”

### **Damning new evidence ignored**

Once the three “flagship” newspapers issued their attacks, many others followed suit, building to a crescendo by the middle of December. On Dec. 13, 1996, for example, the *Omaha World-Herald*, a newspaper closely allied to the George Bush political machine, uncorked a lead editorial, “CIA and False Rumors,” which picked up on phony media reports about a just-released study by the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, which also attempted to trash the *Mercury News* documentation. The *World-Herald* opined: “A report by the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department should have helped to lay to rest one of the most explosive and irresponsible accusations ever leveled against the Central Intelligence Agency.” The Los Angeles Sheriff’s report cited by the *World-Herald*, in fact, provided damning new evidence that other agencies of the federal government, including the Pentagon and the White House, were linked to one of the key players in the cocaine pipeline, precisely the point that *EIR* had been making for months.

The *Omaha World-Herald* article, like hundreds of almost identical news stories and editorials that appeared within the next few days, introduced another element into the cover-up: a personal attack against Gary Webb, accusing him of “corruption.” “A significant by-product of the investigation,” the *News-Herald* editorialized, “was the discovery of copies of letters from a New York literary agent to ‘Freeway’ Ricky Ross, a former crack dealer now serving a life sentence. The agent sought the rights to stories by Ross in which he claimed to have worked with the CIA. One of the literary agent’s letters was sent to Ross in care of Gary Webb, the writer of the stories in the San Jose paper. The literary agent told investigators that Webb was offered the same deal as Ross. . . . Indeed, the air has been let out of this conspiracy balloon. Sad to say, true believers have been known to embrace conspiracies long after the life has gone out of them, especially if there is something to gain.”

If there was any question that the national media cartel was imposing top-down discipline on one of its own, the final message was delivered by the *Washington Post*. When the editor-in-chief of the *San Jose Mercury News* wrote a letter to the editor of the *Washington Post*, protesting the *Post*’s persistent mis-characterizations of the *Mercury News* series, and the “unprofessional” editorial and managerial policies of the paper, the *Post* refused to run the letter. The editors determined that it was not “newsworthy.”