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## The CIA, the drug dealers, and the tragedy of Gary Webb

In 1996, journalist Gary Webb began looking into links between Nicaragua's drug-running Contra rebels and the CIA. As a recent film shows, what he found killed him



The man who knew too much: Jeremy Renner (left) plays Gary Webb (right) in Kill the Messenger

By **Alex Hannaford**

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Gary Webb knew his story would cause a stir. The newspaper report he'd written suggested that a US-backed rebel army in Latin America was supplying the drugs responsible for blighting some of Los Angeles's poorest neighbourhoods – and, crucially, that the CIA must have known about it.

Dark Alliance was a series written by California-based reporter Webb and published in the San Jose Mercury News in 1996. In it, he claimed the Contra rebels in Nicaragua were shipping cocaine into the US, which was then flooding Compton and South-Central Los Angeles in the mid-Eighties after being turned into crack – a relatively new and highly addictive substance sold in 'rocks' that could be smoked. Webb also said the CIA was aware that proceeds from the sales of those drugs were being funnelled back to help fund the Contras.

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Dark Alliance has been called one of the most explosive and controversial exposés in American journalism, and was the first investigative story to "go viral". Webb didn't anticipate some of this, but he wasn't prepared for the level of uproar it would cause in LA's black communities, incredulous that their own government could in some way be responsible for the crack epidemic plaguing their homes; that it would force the US government on the PR defensive; that the mainstream press, scooped by a tiny upstart, would attack Webb rather than try to dig deeper into the scandal they uncovered; or that the fallout would eventually lead to Webb taking his own life.

Nineteen years on, the story of Webb's investigation and its aftermath has been given the full Hollywood treatment. **Kill the Messenger**, based on his account of what happened and a book of the same name about the saga by journalist **Nick Schou** was recently released in cinemas. And with it, some believe, came the full vindication that Webb deserves.

**Gary Webb caught the writing bug** in his early teens and started to hone his craft on his high school newspaper in Indiana. That's where he met his future wife, Sue, but work took Webb's father to Ohio and the rest of the family followed. Webb never finished his journalism degree — instead landing a job with the Kentucky Post in 1978 and marrying Sue a year later. A decade on, after moving around a couple of different newspapers in Ohio, Webb and his family relocated to California where he was offered a job with the San Jose Mercury News.

Just a year after he started working for the paper, an earthquake destroyed an area in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains, killing 63 and injuring thousands. The Mercury News's coverage of the Loma Prieta quake, to which Webb contributed, earned the paper a **Pulitzer prize**, the highest honour in American journalism.



Smear campaign: Jeremy Renner as Gary Webb, in Kill The Messenger

But the story that would make Webb's name — and then contribute to his (many would say) unwarranted downfall, and then untimely death — began more than a decade earlier. In 1979 the **Sandinista National Liberation Front** (known colloquially as the Sandinistas) overthrew Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Debayle. Fearing the creation of a Communist state

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allied with Cuba and the Soviet Union, the US government under President Ronald Reagan, began funding and arming groups of rebels opposed to the Sandinistas — known as the Counterrevolutionaries, or Contras.

In his book *A Twilight Struggle*, **Robert Kagan**, one of the architects of Latin American foreign policy in the Reagan administration, wrote that when the Americans began their covert support of the contras, these armed militants numbered less than 2,000. By the end of 1983 there were up to 6,000. Opponents of America's support for the contras pointed to the groups' numerous human rights abuses - and that was essentially the gist of Webb's story.

### Read Tim Robey's review of *Kill The Messenger*

Webb arrived to the Contra story fairly late. There had even been mention in the press of the Contra's link with the drug trade in the U.S. – and by default, CIA involvement. But what Webb did that nobody else had was to follow the supply chain – right to the poverty stricken streets of Los Angeles. He showed what happened to the cocaine after it had been smuggled in by the Contras, focusing in on the human impact, and then revealing what became of the money made from its sales.

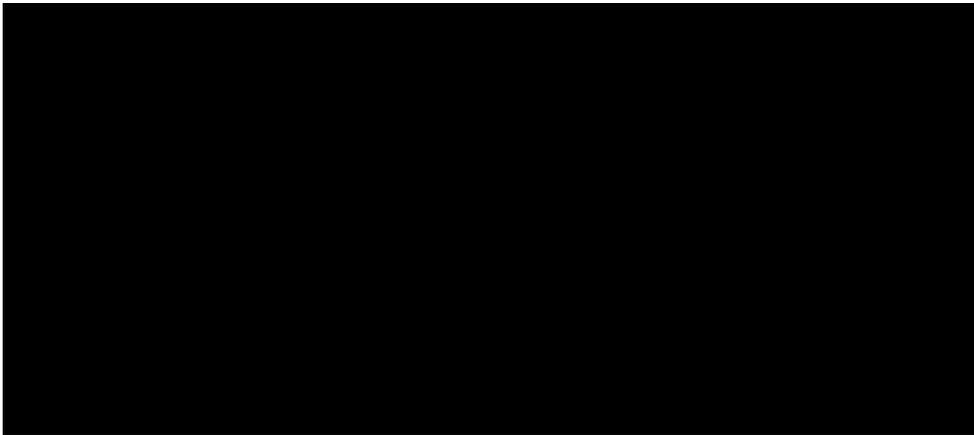
Webb summed up the heart of his **Dark Alliance** series thus: “It is one of the most bizarre alliances in modern history. The union of a U.S. backed army attempting to overthrow a revolutionary socialist government and the uzi-toting “gangstas” of Compton and South-Central Los Angeles.”

Perhaps most damningly, Webb wrote that crack was virtually unobtainable in the city's black neighbourhoods before “members of the CIA's army” began supplying it at rock-bottom prices in the Eighties.

“For the better part of a decade,” he wrote in the intro to the first piece in the trilogy, “a San Francisco Bay Area drug ring sold tonnes of cocaine to the **Crips and Bloods** street gangs of Los Angeles, and funnelled millions in drug profits to a Latin American guerrilla army run by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.”

He wrote about the cocaine trafficking trial of a former Contra leader named Oscar Danilo Blandon Reyes who he said testified that the CIA agent who commanded the guerrilla army told them that “the ends justify the means,” and that they sold almost a tonne of cocaine in 1981 alone, the profits of which were going to the Contra revolution.

Webb's series was published on the Mercury News's fledgling website, but it wasn't exactly an instant sensation.



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Webb's then-wife Sue remembers coming home from the shops and finding her husband extremely excited as he was nearing the end of writing the Dark Alliance. "He worked from home a lot," Sue tells me over the phone from her home in California one morning in late February. "He said you're not going to believe what I figured out. He was maybe a little nervous but he was very excited. No one had ever got this far with the story. Nobody had traced it to where drugs were actually going and that was the first inkling we probably both had that this was a really big story. It made me a little nervous too."

When Webb filed his story, the family were about to leave for a holiday in North Carolina and Indiana. It was published shortly after their return, and Sue says they were all a little surprised that at first there was hardly any reaction. "It was really quiet," she says. "Then the phone started ringing."

Nick Schou heard Gary Webb interviewed on the radio before he read the Dark Alliance series. He was a cub reporter in Southern California and in awe of this fellow hack who had managed to expand a story that a lot of journalists on the big national papers had tried and failed to do. Schou read the story online and was struck by the effort the Mercury News team had put in to making it a big splash on the internet.

"It certainly was one of most ostentatious early journalism exposes that was published online," Schou says now. Because the Mercury News was in Silicon Valley the paper boasted a talented web and graphics team, and so Schou says when you clicked on the site "all you saw was the seal of the CIA with a crack smoker superimposed on top of it and this very ominous lettering that read 'Dark Alliance'."

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Webb, he says, became something of a celebrity. A publicist, working full time at the Mercury News, fielded media inquiries. When Shou first contacted Webb he was in Washington, D.C. for a talk show appearance to promote the story. Unfortunately, Schou says, that was also its undoing — Gary Webb had become the story. "Once series was attacked, Webb obviously had his entire career and credibility invested in this thing. And everyone else involved [at the Mercury News] found it easy to back away out of spotlight and let him take the brunt of the criticism. They didn't really support the story once the papers of record began to tear it apart."

Talk radio — specifically African American talk radio — helped spread word of Webb's story. There were demonstrations in Los Angeles. In the U.S. Congress, the black caucus began talking about the Dark Alliance in session. Black legislators and community leaders demanded answers.

Schou says that probably for the first time in history then-director of the CIA John Deutch flew to L.A. to make an appearance in a gymnasium in South Central promising a full enquiry into the story and its implications — at the same time denying there had been a deliberate effort on behalf of the agency to introduce crack cocaine into the area. "He was booed and jeered," Schou recalls.



Jeremy Renner, Michael Kenneth Williams and Tim Blake Nelson in Kill the Messenger

**By October, Schou says it had become** such a huge story that other newspapers felt they had to weigh in. But when the Washington Post, New York Times, and Los Angeles Times began writing about Dark Alliance, Schou says they did so in a way that was “deliberately trying to undermine the claims [it] had made, and not just whitewash their own failure to fully report the story, but attack Gary Webb’s credibility as a reporter.”

The question was why. Schou says although many of the reporters who criticised Webb had solid credentials in terms of chasing after the Contras and their human rights violations, the Iran Contra affair (in which officials in the Reagan administration clandestinely facilitated the sale of arms to Iran, using the proceeds to fund the Contras in Nicaragua) was such a complex scandal that Americans didn’t really understand its many implications. “There was very little willpower on the part of the press to chase after that and really give it the attention it deserved.”

In 1989, a Senate inquiry into America’s involvement in the drug trade chaired by **John Kerry** found that the U.S. State Department had paid drug traffickers with funds authorized by Congress for “humanitarian assistance to the Contras.” Schou says that much of what Kerry explored in his hearings was classified “and so basically there wasn’t a whole lot for the media to sink teeth its teeth into. But they never really figured out exactly how much drugs the contras were responsible for smuggling and how they did it and what the CIA’s role was, and so when Gary came along and tried to pin it down... that’s why it was such an explosive scandal.”

Meanwhile the CIA itself began conducting its own damage limitation exercise. In July last year, the agency approved the release of a once-secret document titled “Managing a Nightmare: CIA Public Affairs and the Drug Conspiracy Story.” The document revealed that “early in the life of this story, one major news affiliate, after speaking with a CIA media spokesman, decided not to run the story.

It said Dark Alliance caused many Americans to believe the CIA was “guilty of at least complicity, if not conspiracy” in the crack cocaine outbreak in U.S. inner cities. Although it says Webb’s story “did not state outright that CIA ran the drug trade or even knew about it... CIA complicity was heavily

implied by the graphics accompanying the story and by the frequent use of the phrase 'the CIA's army' to describe the Contras.”

In 1999 Webb took to the stage at the First United Methodist Church in Eugene, Oregon, to talk about the series he'd written and his subsequent book, also called *Dark Alliance*. “I look like an idiot up here with all these mikes,” he told the audience, adding to laughter: “the CIA agents are probably behind one or the other.”

Webb wanted to clarify something: that he didn't believe that the crack explosion was any kind of conscious CIA conspiracy to decimate black America – something his critics had intimated. “But,” he said, “that isn't to say that the CIA's hands or the U.S. Government's hands are clean in this matter ... far from it.”

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Webb said that after spending three years of his life looking into it, he was more convinced than ever that the U.S. Government's responsibility for the drug problems in South Central L.A. was “greater than I ever wrote in the newspaper.”

Nevertheless, Nick Schou says that *Dark Alliance* was not a perfect work of journalism. “There were actually a lot of loose ends to the story, but it brought up a lot of interesting characters and made some very bold claims. And had the press really sunk its teeth into this and done its job there would have been a lot of people getting fired from the CIA. But none of that happened.”

Schou says one of the key errors, in his opinion, was the way in which the story was presented graphically “with the CIA seal and the crack smoker [which] tended to imply that the agency had invented crack cocaine and it led people to assume the story asserted things that it had never actually asserted. Also the first few paragraphs tended to overstate the evidence that the story actually contained.”

Webb's former wife Sue says the reaction from the mainstream press was hurtful more than anything, but as if that wasn't bad enough, Webb's own paper began distancing itself from his story. “He'd say he couldn't believe what they were writing. He was shocked. He kept defending himself in these interviews, and it was crushing to him when [the *Mercury News*] started backpeddling.”

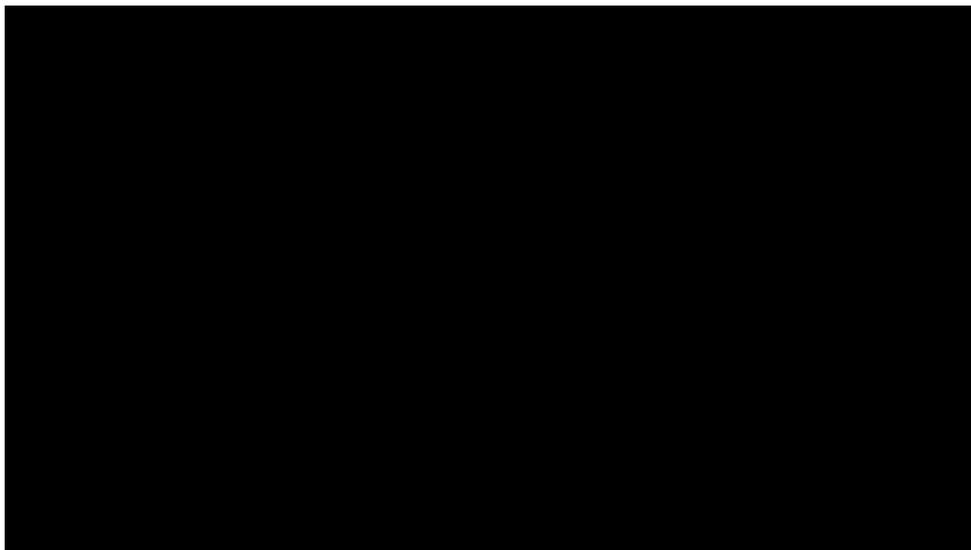
In May 1997 Jerry Ceppos, the *Mercury News*'s executive editor, wrote a piece admitting to deficiencies in the *Dark Alliance* series, saying it “fell short” of the newspaper's standards.

For the eight months preceding Ceppos's public volte-face, Sue says the paper backed Webb one hundred percent. “He had book offers, a movie offer, but he told me it seemed like the paper wanted him to continue with the story — to go back down to Nicaragua, dig for more information.”

But Sue says Webb didn't want to let his newspaper down; didn't want to take the leave of absence a book or movie would require. He was too conscientious. Sue is sure that his eventual resignation from the newspaper - before which he was taken off the story and reassigned to a suburban bureau - and inability to land another plum job in journalism afterwards, forced him into a downward spiral and that ultimately led to him taking his

own life.

“Gary did suffer from depression on and off,” she tells me. “I was married to him for 21 years and knew him for 27. But it was nothing severe. He took antidepressants maybe once or twice. But he loved writing and loved being an investigative newspaper reporter. That was his passion. So yes, I think what happened made him go into a deep depression and kill himself. Our marriage broke up, he acted more and more depressed, there were affairs ... he even talked to his mother about the fact he couldn’t make a living any more in the newspaper business the night before he died.”



**Webb killed himself on December 10, 2004**, at his home in Carmichael, California. The night before he typed suicide notes to Sue and his three children and taped a handwritten note to the front door instructing anyone letting themselves in to instead call the police. He then shot himself in the head.

Nick Schou says after Webb committed suicide he read his obituary in the LA Times calling him a discredited reporter. Disturbed, he decided somebody needed to write a book about Webb. “That’s how I approached the family, and based on their willingness to cooperate on a biography, I wrote that book and also took a hard look at the story he’d written, its strength and its weaknesses.

Schou’s book, *Kill The Messenger*, together with Webb’s own book expanding on the *Dark Alliance* series, form the basis of the film. *Kill the Messenger* stars **Bourne Legacy’s Jeremy Renner as Webb**, Rosemarie DeWitt (*Cinderella Man*, *The Watch*, *Mad Men*) as Sue, and British actor **Michael Sheen** and veteran Hollywood leading men **Andy Garcia** and **Ray Liotta** all in supporting roles.

Renner, who produced the film, said Webb’s story took place 70 miles from where he grew up in California. “I did more research,” he told *The Hollywood Reporter*, “and it became something I had to go do.”

“I would say the movie vindicates him,” Schou tells me. “But he’s a very divisive figure. There’s the Gary-Webb-is-a-saint-and-could-do-no-wrong crowd, and the Gary-Webb-was-a-fraud side.”

I ask Sue whether she’s happy with the Gary Webb she sees on screen. “I am,” she tells me. “So are the kids. It shows he was a flawed man, but it

also shows both his personal and professional sides.”

The Webbs' youngest son, Eric, is following in his father's footsteps and training to become a journalist. He's also compiled his father's articles outside of the Dark Alliance trilogy into a book. At the tail end of February, Eric sent me a brief message via Facebook. “He was much much more than one story,” he wrote.

## Kill the Messenger is on release now

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