

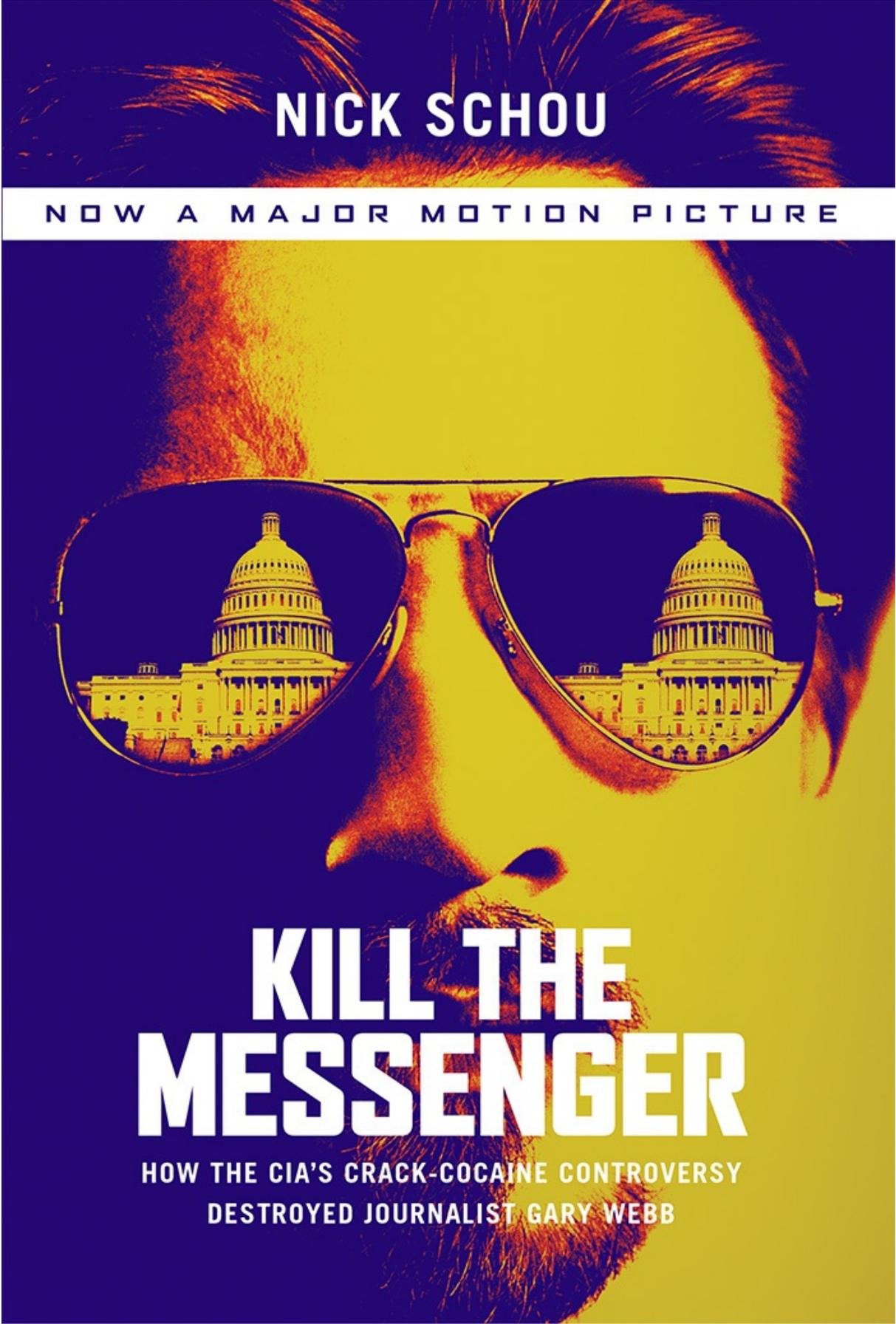


NICK SCHOU

NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

**KILL THE
MESSENGER**

**HOW THE CIA'S CRACK-COCAINE CONTROVERSY
DESTROYED JOURNALIST GARY WEBB**



NICK SCHOU

NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

**KILL THE
MESSENGER**

**HOW THE CIA'S CRACK-COCAINE CONTROVERSY
DESTROYED JOURNALIST GARY WEBB**

by **Nick Schou**

KILL THE MESSENGER

How the CIA's Crack-Cocaine Controversy Destroyed Journalist Gary Webb

NATION BOOKS • www.nationbooks.org • New York

Kill the Messenger: *How the CIA's Crack-Cocaine Controversy Destroyed Journalist Gary Webb*

Published by Nation Books
A Member of the Perseus Books Group
116 East 16th Street, 8th Floor
New York, NY 10003

www.nationbooks.org

Nation Books is a co-publishing venture of the Nation Institute and the Perseus Books Group

Copyright © Nick Schou 2006
Introduction © Charles Bowden 2006

Portions of Chapter 10 previously appeared in the *OC Weekly* and the *LA Weekly*.
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in a magazine, newspaper, or broadcast. For information, address the Perseus Books Group, 250 West 57th Street, 15th Floor, New York, NY 10107.

Books published by Nation Books are available at special discounts for bulk purchases in the United States by corporations, institutions, and other organizations. For more information, please contact the Special Markets Department at the Perseus Books Group, 2300 Chestnut Street, Suite 200, Philadelphia, PA 19103, or call (800) 810-4145, ext. 5000, or e-mail special.markets@perseusbooks.com.

Book design by Pauline Neuwirth, Neuwirth & Associates, Inc.

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

LCCN: 2007275820
ISBN 978-0-78673-526-6 (e-book)

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Claudia and Erik, for their love, support, and inspiration

CONTENTS

Introduction by Charles Bowden

Dramatis Personae

ONE Moving Day

TWO Guns and Girls

THREE Sin City

FOUR The Big One

FIVE Drug Stories

SIX Trial and Error

SEVEN Crack in America

EIGHT Feeding Frenzy

NINE Mea Culpa

TEN Lister

ELEVEN Exile

TWELVE Withdrawal

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Photo section appears after Chapter 7

INTRODUCTION

I MET HIM in a bar in Sacramento in April, 1998. His series on the CIA was almost two years old, and officially repudiated by the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. He'd lost his job and no one in the news business would hire him. I remember he entered the hotel saloon with a kind of swagger. I remember that he ordered Maker's Mark. And I remember idly mentioning conspiracy theories and that he instantly flared up and said, "I don't believe in fucking conspiracy theories, I'm talking about a fucking conspiracy."

I'd arrived there because early that winter at a New York restaurant I'd told a magazine editor that the only story worth writing about was: What in the hell had happened to Gary Webb? At that moment, I'd also said I thought his series was true and the editor snapped, "Of course, it is." So I'd spent months interviewing former DEA agents who'd brushed against the CIA, devoured mountains of documents and become convinced that Webb's discredited series was true. And that the papers and reporters who had destroyed him were wrong.

I'd spent years bumbling around the drug world and anyone who does that runs into whiffs of the CIA that can never be completely documented and that never seem to really go away. I know a narc in Dallas who had seized over twenty million dollars cash at the Dallas/Fort Worth airport from a courier flying out of Miami and was told by the Justice Department to return the money and let the man continue on his way. I have a friend who witnessed the first non-stop flight of cocaine and marijuana from Colombia to northern Mexico in 1986, a full-bodied plane without seats that landed at a desert airstrip. The pilot was from a CIA proprietary company in Florida. My friend got time in a federal prison. The pilot continued flying. I've talked to a DEA agent who saw a plane full of cocaine land at a U.S. Air Force base in the '80s. I've talked to a DEA agent who knew of numerous drug fields in Mexico that handled drug flights from Central America during the contra war and that were never bothered by DEA.

You either dismiss these stories out of hand as impossible or you look into them and slowly but surely become convinced. I became convinced and accept the implication that the CIA has for decades knowingly dealt with drug dealers and justified these actions by citing national security. Just as they have dealt with other criminal syndicates. Gary Webb stumbled upon one such instance, pursued it with tenacity, willed his account into print, and consequentially, was run out of the news business.

That's the guy I talked with in the bar in Sacramento. And that is the person you will meet in this book. He was the best investigative reporter I've ever known. But that hardly matters if you mess with our government's secret world without its consent.

When I met Webb I was deep into a book on the drug world of the U.S./Mexico border, a book that consumed almost eight years of my life. I amassed a lot of stuff on the CIA and drugs during those years, material I basically left out of the book because I did not want to become another Gary Webb and have my work pitched into the trash for the high crime of calling into question our national security bureaucracy.

So that's the deal: we now live in a country where reporters dread becoming Gary Webb. God help us.

When I first learned of his suicide, I shut down my life for two days, sat in my yard and drank. I'm not sure if I drank for Gary Webb or for the rest of us.

But I know Gary Webb got it right and that was the worst possible thing he could have done.

—CHARLES BOWDEN
2006

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE CONSPIRATORS

Danilo Bandon: Nicaraguan exile and cocaine trafficker, supplier of South Central dealer “Freeway” Ricky Ross. Became government informant against Ross.

Ronald Lister: Former Laguna Beach police detective, international arms merchant, security consultant and drug dealer with Bandon. Claimed to work for CIA.

Norwin Meneses: Known as King of drugs in Nicaragua during 1970s, major drug smuggler and supplier of Bandon.

“Freeway” Ricky Ross: First South Central crack dealer to become millionaire in 1980s. Sentenced to life in prison in 1996, but scheduled to be released from Lompoc Federal Penitentiary for good behavior in 2008.

THE OPERATORS

Adolfo Calero: CIA asset and political director of Nicaraguan Contras. Photographed with Meneses in San Francisco. Denied knowledge of drug dealing.

Roberto D’Aubuisson: Head of paramilitary death squads in El Salvador, business contact of Lister.

Enrique Bermudez: Contra commander and CIA asset who met with Bandon and Meneses in Honduras about fundraising, allegedly told them “ends justify the means.” Shot to death in 1991 by unknown assailants in Nicaragua.

Tim Lafrance: San Diego weapons dealer who has worked with CIA. Traveled to El Salvador with Lister.

Bill Nelson: Former security director at Fluor Corp. in Orange County, ex-deputy director of operations for CIA. Business contact of Lister in 1980s. Died of natural causes in 1995.

Eden Pastora: Former Sandinista turned contra commander. Associate of Bandon.

Scott Weekly: U.S. intelligence operative, ex-soldier of fortune. Traveled to El Salvador with Lister.

THE WHISTLEBLOWERS

Jack Blum: Lead prosecutor for Senator John Kerry's probe of contra cocaine activity in 1980s.

Martha Honey: Former *New York Times* stringer based in Costa Rica. Unsuccessfully sued Reagan administration officials for role in bombing injuries suffered by her husband.

Peter Kornbluh: Director of the National Security Archive at George Washington University, which has declassified countless government documents from Iran contra era.

Bob Parry: Former AP and *Newsweek* reporter who authored the first stories involving contras and cocaine.

Michael Ruppert: Former Los Angeles police detective. Claimed he uncovered CIA ties to city's drug epidemic; confronted CIA director John Deutch at South Central, L.A. town hall meeting.

Maxine Waters: L.A. Congresswoman who held hearings into CIA complicity with drug traffickers after "Dark Alliance."

THE MERCURY NEWS

Pete Carey: Veteran reporter assigned to investigate "Dark Alliance" after other papers criticized the series. Found no evidence of CIA involvement in drug ring.

Jerry Ceppos: Executive Editor who defended Webb, then published letter to readers backing away from "Dark Alliance."

Dawn Garcia: State Editor who worked directly with Webb on "Dark Alliance."

David Yarnold: Managing Editor who supervised "Dark Alliance." Stopped reading drafts halfway through editing process.

THE CRITICS

David Corn: Washington, D.C., editor of *The Nation*. Both criticized and defended "Dark Alliance."

Tim Golden: Former Central America correspondent for *Miami Herald*, wrote articles for *New York Times*, critical of "Dark Alliance."

Jesse Katz: *Los Angeles Times* writer who called Ross "mastermind" of crack cocaine two years before "Dark Alliance."

Joe Madison: National radio host also known as the "Black Eagle." Dedicated six months of daily coverage to "Dark Alliance," arrested outside CIA headquarters.

Doyle McManus: Washington Bureau Chief of the *Los Angeles Times*. Directed paper's response to "Dark Alliance."

Walter Pincus: Wrote articles critical of "Dark Alliance" for the *Washington Post*. Spied on student groups for CIA in 1950s.

ONE

Moving Day

AFTER DAYS OF unrelenting winter rain from a powerful Pacific Storm, the clouds moved east and the skies cleared above the Sacramento valley. The snowcapped peaks of the western range of the Sierra Nevada glowed pink in the glinting early morning sun. On days like this, Gary Webb normally would have taken the day off to ride his motorcycle into the mountains.

Although it was a Friday morning, Webb didn't need to call in sick. In fact, he hadn't been to work in weeks. When his ex-wife garnished his wages seeking child support for their three kids, Webb asked for an indefinite leave from the small weekly alternative paper in Sacramento where he had been working the past four months. He told his boss he could no longer afford the \$2,000 mortgage on his house in Carmichael, a suburb twenty miles east of the state capital.

There was no time for riding. Today, December 10, 2004, Webb was going to move in with his mother. It wasn't his first choice. First, he asked his ex-girlfriend if he could share her apartment. The two had dated for several months, and continued to live together until their lease expired a year earlier, when Webb had bought his new house. They had remained friends, and at first she had said yes, but she changed her mind at the last minute, not wanting to lead him on in the hope that they'd rekindle a romance.

Desperate, Webb asked his ex-wife, Sue, if he could live with her until he regained his financial footing. She refused. "I don't feel comfortable with that," she said.

"You don't?"

Sue recalls that her ex-husband's words seemed painfully drawn out. "I don't know if I can do that," she said. "Your mother will let you move in. You don't have any other choice."

Besides losing his house, Webb had also lost his motorcycle. The day before he was to move, it had broken down as he was riding to his mother's house in a nearby retirement community. After spotting Webb pushing the bike off the road, a helpful young man with a goatee and a spider-web tattoo on his elbow had given him a lift home. Webb arranged to get a pickup truck, but when he went back to retrieve his bike, it had disappeared.

That night, Webb spent hours at his mother's house. At her urging he typed up a description of the suspected thief. But Webb didn't see much point in filing a police

report. He doubted he'd ever see his bike again. He had been depressed for months, but the loss of his bike seemed to push him over the edge. He told his mother he had no idea how he was going to ever make enough money to pay child support and pay rent or buy a new home.

Although he had a paying job in journalism, Webb knew that only a reporting gig with a major newspaper would give him the paycheck he needed to stay out of debt. But after sending out fifty resumes to daily newspapers around the country, nobody had called for an interview. His current job couldn't pay the bills, and the thought of moving in with his mother at age forty-nine, was more than his pride would allow. "What am I going to do with the rest of my life?" he asked. "All I want to do is write."

It was 8 p.m. by the time Webb left his mother's house. She offered to cook him a dinner of bacon and eggs, but Webb declined, saying he had to go home. There were other things he had to do. She kissed him goodbye and told him to come back the next day with a smile on his face. "Things will be better," she said. "You don't have to pay anything to stay here. You'll get back on your feet."

The next morning, Anita Webb called her son to remind him to file a police report for the stolen bike. His phone rang and rang. She didn't bother leaving a message, figuring the movers already had arrived. They had. It's possible they heard the phone ring inside his house. As they approached his house, they noticed a note stuck to his front door. "Please do not enter," it warned. "Call 911 for an ambulance. Thank you."

When her son failed answer the phone for more than an hour, Anita Webb began to panic. Finally, she let the answering machine pick up. "Gary, make sure you file a police report," she said. Before she could finish, the machine beeped and an unfamiliar voice began to speak: "Are you calling about the man who lives here?"

It is normally the policy of the Sacramento County Coroner's office not to answer the telephone at the scene of a death, but apparently the phrase "police report" startled the coroner into breaking that rule. At some point early that morning, Gary Webb had committed suicide.

The coroners found his body in a pool of blood on his bed, his hands still gripping his father's 38-caliber pistol. On his nightstand were his social security card—apparently intended to make it easier for his body to be identified—a cremation card and a suicide note, the contents of which have never been revealed by his family. The house was filled with packed boxes. Only his turntable, DVD player, and TV were unpacked.

In the hours before he shot himself in the head, Webb had listened to his favorite album, *Ian Hunter Live*, and had watched his favorite movie, the Sergio Leone spaghetti western, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. In a trashcan was a poster Webb had saved from his first journalism job with the *Kentucky Post*. The poster was an open letter to readers from Vance Trimble, Webb's first editor. Decades earlier, Webb had clipped it from the pages of the paper. Although he had always admired its message, something about it must have been too much to bear in his final moments. Trimble had written that, unlike some newspapers, the *Kentucky Post* would never kill a story under pressure from powerful interests. "There should be no fetters on reporters, nor must they tamper with the truth, but give light so the people will find their own way," his letter stated.

That morning, Sue Webb was at home in Folsom, just minutes away from

Carmichael, when her cell phone started ringing. She was about to walk out the door to bring her fourteen-year-old daughter Christine to school. Because Sue was running late for a business meeting in Stockton, she didn't answer. But when she recognized the number of the caller as Kurt, her ex-husband's brother, she began to worry. "I was standing in the bathroom, and when I saw that number, I knew something had happened," she says. "I kept saying, 'No, this is not happening, this is not happening.' I was afraid to pick up the phone."

Thoughts raced through her mind. Two days earlier, Webb had taken Christine to a doctor's appointment. At the doctor's office, there was a copy of Dr. Seuss' *Green Eggs and Ham*, which Webb had loved reading to her years earlier. He jokingly asked her if she wanted him to read it aloud to her. When he dropped Christine off at Sue's house later that day, Christine said her father made a special point of walking up to the door to kiss her goodbye. "He told her to be good to her mom," Sue says. "And he handed her some little bottles of perfume and said 'I love you.' When she asked him if he wanted to come in, he said no."

Sue put her daughter in the car and drove a few blocks to the entrance of the middle-class neighborhood of tract houses where she lives on a wooded hillside on the outskirts of town. "I couldn't stand it anymore, because the phone kept ringing," she says. "It was Anita, and she was just sobbing. And I said, 'Is he gone?' and she said 'Yes.' And I just pulled off the road and started crying and said 'Christine, your daddy's dead.' We had to get out of the car and we sat on the grass together and just started crying. I don't even know how long we sat there."

A woman driving by pulled over and asked what was wrong. Sue gave her the number of the healthcare company where she worked as a sales agent. She asked the woman to call and let them know she wouldn't be able to keep her appointments that day. Then she called her twenty-year-old son Ian and Eric, her sixteen-year-old, who was already at school, to tell them to meet her and Christine at Anita's house. "I had to tell them on the phone what had happened because they wouldn't let me hang up," she says.

When she arrived at Anita's house, Ian was sitting on the front lawn, tears streaming down his face. "The police had already left," she says. "I told him not to go inside." A block away from the house was a bench with a view of a duck pond. The tranquil scene seemed surreal, dreamlike, frozen in time. "I remember feeling this sense of loss. It was the weirdest thing in the world. I had moved to California to be with Gary and had left my family behind and suddenly I felt alone. And I knew almost immediately that he had killed himself."

That afternoon, Sue met Kurt at the coroner's office. "They took us into a room and the coroner came in and told us that Gary had shot himself and what gun he had used," she says. "It was his dad's gun that he had found when he was a security guard at a hospital in Cincinnati. Some patient had left it there and his dad had kept it. He used to keep it under the bed. I'd get mad because we had kids and he'd stick it in the closet."

Kurt asked the coroner if he was certain it was a suicide. "There's no doubt in my mind," he answered. He added that sometimes, people who shoot themselves have bruises on their fingers from squeezing the trigger. Apparently the will to live is so strong that suicide victims often grip the gun so tightly and for so long they lose blood

circulation in their hands. “Gary had bruises on his fingers,” Sue says.

A few days later, four letters arrived at Sue’s house, one each for her and the three kids. Webb had mailed them before he died. He sent a separate letter to his mother, and a last will and testament to his brother Kurt. He told his children that he loved them, that Ian would make a woman happy someday, and that he didn’t want his death to dissuade Eric from considering a career in journalism. His will divided his assets, including his just-sold house, between his wife and children. His only additional wish was that his ashes be spread in the ocean so he could “bodysurf for eternity.”

WHILE IT WAS Gary Webb who pulled the trigger, the bullet that ended his life was a mere afterthought to the tragic unraveling of one of the most controversial and misunderstood journalists in recent American history. A college dropout with twenty years of reporting experience and a Pulitzer Prize on his resume, Webb broke the biggest story of his career in August 1996, when he published “Dark Alliance,” a three-part series for the *San Jose Mercury News* that linked the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to America’s crack-cocaine explosion.

Webb spent more than a year uncovering the shady connection between the CIA and drug trafficking through the agency’s relationship with the Nicaraguan contras, a right-wing army that aimed to overthrow the leftist Sandinista government during the 1980s. The Sandinistas were Marxist rebels who came to power in 1979 after the collapse of decades of U.S.-backed dictatorship at the hands of the Somoza family. President Reagan called the contras “freedom fighters” and compared them to America’s founding fathers. Even as Reagan uttered those words, the CIA was aware that the many of the contras’ supporters were deeply involved in cocaine smuggling, and were using the money to fund their army, or, as more often proved the case, to line their own pockets.

Many reporters had written about the CIA’s collusion with contra drug smugglers, but nobody had ever discovered where those drugs ended up once they reached American soil. “Dark Alliance” provided the first dramatic answer to that mystery by profiling the relationship between a pair of contra sympathizers in California, Danilo Bandon and Norwin Meneses, and “Freeway” Ricky Ross, the most notorious crack dealer in the history of South Central’s crack trade.

“Dark Alliance” created history in another way: it was the first major news exposé to be published simultaneously in print and on the Internet. Ignored by the mainstream media at first, the story nonetheless spread like wildfire through cyberspace and talk radio. It sparked angry protests around the country by African-Americans who had long suspected the government had allowed drugs into their communities. Their anger was fueled by the fact that “Dark Alliance” didn’t just show that the contras had supplied a major crack dealer with cocaine, or that the cash had been used to fund the CIA’s army in Central America—but also strongly implied that this activity had been critical to the nationwide explosion of crack cocaine that had taken place in America during the 1980s.

It was an explosive charge, although a careful reading of the story showed that Webb had never actually stated that the CIA had intentionally started the crack epidemic. In fact, Webb never believed the CIA had conspired to addict anybody to

drugs. Rather, he believed that the agency had known that the contras were dealing cocaine, and hadn't lifted a finger to stop them. He was right, and the controversy over "Dark Alliance"—which many consider to be the biggest media scandal of the 1990s—would ultimately force the CIA to admit it had lied for years about what it knew and when it knew it.

But by the time that happened, Webb's career as a journalist would be over. Just two months after his story appeared, the most powerful newspapers in the country had published massive rebuttals to "Dark Alliance." Webb increasingly became a focus of those attacks, as the mainstream media began digging through his twenty-year career, looking for evidence of bias that would bolster their attacks on his credibility. In less than a year, the *San Jose Mercury News* would back away from the story, forcing Webb to a tiny regional bureau of the paper. He quit his job and never worked for a major newspaper again.

The attacks continued even after Webb's death. The *L.A. Times* published an obituary that ran in newspapers across the country which summed up his life by claiming he was author of "discredited" stories about the CIA. The paper would later publish a lengthy feature story revealing that Webb had suffered from clinical depression for more than a decade—even before he wrote "Dark Alliance." Titled "Written in Pain," it painted Webb as a troubled, manic-depressive man who had repeatedly cheated on his wife, and a reckless "cowboy" of a journalist.

Such a portrait offers only a misleading caricature of a much more complicated man. Interviews with dozens of Webb's friends, family members and colleagues reveal that Webb was an idealistic, passionate, and meticulous journalist, not a cowboy. Those who knew him before "Dark Alliance" made him famous and then infamous say he was happy until he lost his career. His colleagues, with the exception of some reporters and editors at the *Mercury News* who found him arrogant and self-promoting, almost universally loved, respected and even revered him.

As this book will show, the controversy over "Dark Alliance" was the central event in Webb's life, and the critical element in his eventual depression and suicide. His big story, despite major flaws of hyperbole abetted and even encouraged by his editors, remains one of the most important works of investigative journalism in recent American history. The connection Webb uncovered between the CIA, the contras and L.A.'s crack trade was real—and radioactive. Webb was hardly the first American journalist to lose his job after taking on the country's most secretive government agency in print. Every serious reporter or politician that tried to unravel the connection between the CIA, the Nicaraguan contras and cocaine, had lived to regret it.

Senator John Kerry investigated it through congressional hearings that were stonewalled by the Reagan administration and for this, he was alternatively ridiculed and ignored in the media. Journalists like the AP's Bob Parry quit their jobs after being repeatedly shut down by their editors. Some reporters, working on the ground in Central America, had even been subjected to police harassment and death threats for pursuing it. Webb was simply the most widely and maliciously maligned of these reporters to literally die for the story.

The recent history of American journalism is full of media scandals, from the fabulist fabrications of *The New Republic's* Stephen Glass and the *New York Times's* Jayson Blair to Judith Miller's credulous and entirely discredited reporting on Saddam

Hussein's nonexistent weapons of mass destruction for the *New York Times*, which helped pave the way for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Webb, despite his stubborn refusal to admit his own errors, hardly deserves to be held in such company. What truly distinguishes his fate is his how he was abandoned by his own employer in the face of unprecedented and ferocious attacks by the nation's major newspapers, the likes of which had never been seen before or occurred since.

The controversy over "Dark Alliance" forced Webb from journalism and ultimately led him to take his own life. Besides Webb, however, nobody else lost a job over the story—nobody at the CIA certainly, and not even any of Webb's editors, who happily published his work only to back away from it under withering media attacks before getting on with their lives and receiving promotions. Gary Webb's tragic fate, and the role of America's most powerful newspapers in ending his career, raises an important question about American journalism in an era where much of the public perceives the fourth estate as an industry in decline, a feckless broadcaster of White House leaks with a penchant for sensationalized, consumer-driven tabloid sex scandals.

Webb spent two decades uncovering corruption at all levels of power, at the hands of public officials representing all ideological facets of the political spectrum. Indeed, his very fearlessness in taking on powerful institutions and officials was an ultimately fatal character trait that nonetheless embodies the very sort of journalistic ethic that should be rewarded and celebrated in any healthy democratic society. In 2002, Webb reflected on his fall from grace in the book *Into the Buzzsaw*, a compendium of first-person accounts by journalists whose controversial stories ultimately pushed them from their chosen profession. His words are worth remembering now more than ever.

"If we had met five years ago, you wouldn't have found a more staunch defender of the newspaper industry than me," Webb concluded. "And then I wrote some stories that made me realize how sadly misplaced my bliss had been. The reason I'd enjoyed such smooth sailing for so long hadn't been, as I'd assumed, because I was careful and diligent and good at my job . . . The truth was that, in all those years, I hadn't written anything important enough to suppress."

TWO

Guns and Girls

BORN ON AUGUST 31, 1955, at the apex of America's post-war economic boom to a nomadic household centered on his father's career as a Marine Corps sergeant, Gary Webb enjoyed an adventuresome if peripatetic childhood as a military brat. His father, William Webb, served as a Navy frogman in the Korean War and almost perished from a mine explosion while swimming to a submarine after an operation above the 38th parallel. After recovering from his wounds, he returned to Korea, serving in the air wing. A few months after the war's end, he found himself at a restaurant in San Francisco, where he met his future wife Anita, an Italian-American who had followed her brother, then serving in the Coast Guard, from Brooklyn to California.

Because the Marine Corps didn't have an adequate hospital in Hawaii, Anita Webb gave birth to her first-born son alone at a military hospital in Corona, California. Two months later, Webb's father rejoined the family when he was transferred to El Toro Marine Corps Air Station in Orange County, California. The family lived in nearby Los Alamitos until 1957, shortly after Webb's younger brother Kurt was born, when Bill was transferred again, first to Florida, then North Carolina and finally to Huntington Beach, California. A year later, Bill got his orders to transfer to Hawaii, where he was attached to a radio battalion.

"Gary was a strange child," Anita says. "He was very serious. He had big eyes and kept looking and looking, but didn't talk. He was very peculiar. But once he started talking, it never stopped." When Webb was two years old, he told his mother he had a headache. "Oh Gary," she said. "You're a hypochondriac. When she explained what the word meant, it became Webb's favorite word. "He ran around telling anyone who would listen that he was a hypochondriac."

In Hawaii, she insists, Gary spent the happiest years of his life. "We found a nice house up in the hills in Kaneohe and the kids started playing with the Hawaiian kids. It was good for them. Bill and I were water lovers. We were always near the beach. And this stereotype of a Marine Corps father—forget about it. He was always playing with the kids, teaching them how to swim and bodysurf."

Now a lawyer who works for defense contractors in San Jose, Kurt Webb recalls one of he and Gary's favorite pastimes was collecting shells—not from the beach but the Marine Corps gunnery range. "We had a lot of independence and would run around

until evening, going to the beach, building tree forts, popping Portuguese man-o-wars or having snail fights.”

“Gary was very sensitive,” Anita says. “I remember my brother came to visit when we were in Hawaii and took the kids out to the beach. My brother walked along the ocean with them and told them stories about the man who lived in the ocean and all these fairy tales. And then he picked up this tiny blue plastic soldier and told them this story about how this soldier had conquered all these lands. Well, one day, I’m cleaning Gary’s drawers years later when he was in college, and there’s the soldier. Gary was very sensitive about these things.”

While still in grade school, Gary showed early talent in what would later become a passion for poring over complex documents—the hallmark of a true investigative reporter. “One time, he went to the PX and bought a book on the stock market,” Anita says. Soon thereafter, Webb began to read the business section of the newspaper each morning and built a spreadsheet for tracking stock prices. One day, he told his parents he wanted to purchase stock in the Xerox Corporation. “His father and I were totally stupid on stocks,” Anita says. “We didn’t have tons of money. And his father said, ‘You can’t: it costs a lot of money to go into the stock market.’ And Gary never forgave his father because he said he could have made a lot of money from buying stock in Xerox. He was an amazing young man.”

When Webb was in seventh grade, the family left Hawaii. By then, his father had spent twenty years in the military and was ready to retire. “We talked about it, and at first we wanted to move to California,” Anita says. “But my mother said ‘Don’t move to California: they’re smoking pot and doing all sorts of horrible things.’ Haight-Ashbury was going on. It was the ’60s. We made the decision that Indianapolis was a safe place to raise children.”

The family moved to Lawrence, Indiana, just outside the city. There, Anita recalls, “little girls looked like little girls and not hookers.” Their house was located in a good school district, and the real estate agent told the Webbs that local kids won more college scholarships there than students at any other district in the city. “It was a good decision,” Anita says. “The boys got a great education.”

In Indianapolis, Bill Webb found a job as a security guard at a hospital. Faded family photographs show a typical suburban nuclear family: Bill a patriarch of ramrod-straight military bearing, Anita, a cheerful, checkered-blouse housewife, and Gary and Kurt slouching mischievously in striped T-shirts and sunglasses. Although thousands of miles from the ocean, the family still spent vacations on the water, either on a houseboat they’d moor on the Indiana River or at a beach cottage at the Outer Banks in North Carolina. But the most important family time transpired around the dinner table, where politics were openly discussed.

Although Anita was a staunch Republican, Bill was a Democrat, and by the late 1960s, both were adamantly opposed to the Vietnam War. “We always listened to the news and discussed politics around the dinner table,” Anita says. “In the beginning, my husband believed in the Domino Theory. Over time he changed. And even though I was a Republican, I was against it. But Gary was always apolitical. During the Vietnam War, Gary used to sit there reading the newspaper. He was in the sixth grade, and he’d keep track of the body counts from the war. Gary kept a running calculation of how many Vietnamese died and one day he said ‘Well, we’ve killed the whole of

Vietnam.”

At Lawrence Central High School, Gary and his brother drifted apart. “Every time we moved, we’d go off together and explore,” Kurt says. “Prior to junior high, we always had the same friends and did things together in the neighborhood. But in high school we separated and had our own friends. We had sibling rivalry; it was our competitive nature. He’d beat me up sometimes, because he was bigger, but I got my revenge. Gary was a thickheaded individual. He always wanted things his way. He always used to read stuff and absorb it and have all this knowledge in his head. He could sit down and read and suck all this knowledge out of stuff.”

“He was just a goofy guy,” says Greg Wolf, a lifelong friend who first met Webb at Belzer Junior High. “He was a horny teenager like the rest of us. There was no soccer or ballet or any of that crap. We just rode our bicycles and sat around. He and I used to go down to Madison, Indiana, a little town on the Indiana River where I had an aunt and we’d shoot guns and camp out. One day we went to a river and there was a dock there with a bunch of houseboats. They were all empty because it was winter. He gets off the dock, goes on one of these boats and starts snooping inside. He wasn’t going to steal anything, but property rights never occurred to him. He wasn’t afraid of anything.”

Another high school friend, Mike Crosby, recalls that despite his later reputation as a leftist reporter, Webb loved shooting guns. “We’d camp out, a dozen of us, on this unimproved property down in Jefferson County, and shoot guns,” he says. “Rifles, handguns, whatever people had. Gary would say, ‘I’m not one of those anti-gun people. I’m a member of the Greenpeace Liberation Front. We shoot hunters.’”

Gary’s fearlessness as a reporter surfaced in his first work of journalism, in a story that convinced him he had found his true calling. It was 1970, Richard Nixon was in the White House, the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War was still raging, but Webb wasn’t out in the streets protesting. Given that his interests ranged from cars and bikes to guns and girls, it’s not surprising that his first story combined guns and girls. In a 1999 speech in Eugene, Oregon, Webb recalled how he got his start in journalism with a piece he wrote for his school paper about the high school’s militaristic cheerleading squad.

“I think I was fifteen,” he said. “They thought it was a cool idea to dress women up in military uniforms and send them out there to twirl rifles and battle flags at halftime. And I thought this was sort of outrageous, and I wrote an editorial saying I thought it was one of the silliest things I’d ever seen. And my newspaper advisor called me the next day and said, ‘Gosh, that editorial you wrote has really prompted a response.’ And I said, ‘Great, that’s the idea, isn’t it?’ And she said, ‘Well, it’s not so great, they want you to apologize for it.’”

According to Webb, he refused to apologize. “They said, ‘Look, why don’t you just come down and the cheerleaders are going to come in, and they want to talk to you and tell you what they think,’ and I said okay. So I went down to the newspaper office, and there were about fifteen of them sitting around this table, and they all went around one by one telling me what a scumbag I was, and what a terrible guy I was, and how I’d ruined their dates, ruined their complexions, and all sorts of things . . . and at that moment, I decided, ‘Man, this is what I want to do for a living.’”

“I don’t think you can attach any political weight to it,” Wolf insists. On the one

hand, Webb was serious about being a reporter. “He was delivering papers for the *Lawrence Journal*, and I guess he worked his way up there writing articles for them, too,” he says. But Wolf says Webb was just screwing around with the drill team satire. “He wasn’t a pacifist or anything like that,” he says. “His dad was a Marine. Gary and I would go shoot guns. It wasn’t a Birkenstock and Volvo kind of thing. I never thought it was a seminal event in Gary’s writing career, but it was sort of typical of him. Gary wasn’t afraid of anything. It was a sort of character flaw.”

Kurt Webb says his brother found the whole experience hilarious. “I don’t think he really apologized,” he says. “He just said ‘I’m sorry you were offended.’ He had the attitude that it was their problem and if they didn’t like it they could write something about him. Gary always had a flippant attitude about stuff like that, how people could get so uptight about such a simple little thing.”

“It was a good piece,” Anita Webb says. “I thought it was very funny.” But when parents of the cheerleaders demanded an apology from Webb, she confronted his teacher. “I told her that if anyone should apologize, she should, because she was the one who submitted the essay to the paper,” she says. “And Gary came home from school and said he got up in class and said he was sorry. Gary just felt it was the better thing to do. Everyone was just pouncing all over the poor kid.”

WHEN WEBB GRADUATED from high school, he won a Hoosier scholarship and chose to attend IUPI, a community college whose initials stand for Indiana University/Purdue University in Indianapolis. “IUPI was where the poor kids went,” says Rex Davenport, one of Webb’s college friends who now edits a magazine for the Washington, D.C.-based American Society for Training and Development. At IUPI, Davenport edited the school newspaper, *The Sagamore*, where Webb wrote music reviews.

“He showed up as a freshman and started working for me,” Davenport says. “We were an independent bunch and didn’t have a lot of supervision. We didn’t cover much hard news; it was all opinions and rants. I certainly didn’t teach him anything, but Gary was a good critic. We got a lot of free vinyl, and a lot people hung out at the newspaper for the free records.”

Davenport recalls that Webb mostly wrote about his favorite bands, Mott the Hoople and Roxy Music, but just as in high school, he also wrote scathing satires about campus events. When a liberal history professor sponsored an antiwar film series at the school, Webb helped pen several reviews of the series, each freighted with self-parodying pacifist clichés.

“We got irked because there was all this money being spent on a film series that was essentially just antiwar propaganda,” Davenport says. “Not that any of us were against that necessarily, but it was horribly one-sided. The professor called the series ‘Battle Cry of Peace,’ and we just mocked it horribly. We kept running headlines like ‘Battle Cry of Peace,’ ‘More Battle Cry of Peace,’ and ‘Still More Battle Cry.’ Gary was on board for that. It was pretty funny considering that Gary was a military brat.”

The lack of editorial supervision at *The Sagamore* meant that campus reporters had to police each other. “Some kid had written a film review and convinced us to run it, and I got called on the carpet because the kid had stolen it from *Playboy*,” Davenport says. “Gary found him a day later and dragged him into a restaurant and threatened to