

Since Gary Webb's suicide four years ago, I have written annual retrospectives about the late journalist's important contribution to the historical record -- he forced devastating admissions from the CIA about drug trafficking by the Nicaraguan contra rebels under the protection of the Reagan administration in the 1980s.

Webb's death in 2004 had its roots in his fateful decision eight years earlier to write a three-part series for the San Jose Mercury News that challenged a potent conventional wisdom shared by the elite U.S. news organizations -- that one of the most shocking scandals of the 1980s just couldn't possibly be true.

Webb's "Dark Alliance" series, published in August 1996, revived the decade-old allegations that the Reagan administration in the 1980s had tolerated and protected cocaine smuggling by its client army of Nicaraguan rebels known as the contras.

Though substantial evidence of the contra crimes had surfaced in the mid-1980s (initially in an article that Brian Barger and I wrote for the Associated Press in December 1985 and later at hearings conducted by Sen. John Kerry), the major news outlets had refused to take the disclosures seriously.

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