

"Kill the Messenger" Resurrects Gary Webb, Journalist Maligned For Exposing CIA Ties to Crack Trade -- Illustrated Screenplay

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by Amy Goodman

Democracy NOW!

October 9, 2014



The new Hollywood film "Kill the Messenger" tells the story of Gary Webb, one of the most maligned figures in investigative journalism. Webb's explosive 1996 investigative series "Dark Alliance" for the San Jose Mercury News revealed ties between the CIA, Nicaraguan contras and the crack cocaine trade ravaging African-American communities. The exposé provoked protests and congressional hearings, as well as a fierce reaction from the media establishment, which went to great lengths to discredit Webb's reporting. We revisit Webb's story with an extended clip from the documentary "Shadows of Liberty," and speak with Robert Parry, a veteran investigative journalist who advised Webb before he published the series.

[This is a rush transcript. Copy may not be in its final form.]

[Illustrated Screenplay prepared by Tara Carreon]

NERMEEN SHAIKH: A new film out in theaters this week tells the story of one of the most maligned figures in investigative journalism: Gary Webb. In 1996, Webb published an explosive series in the San Jose Mercury News titled "Dark Alliance." It began, quote, "For the better part of a decade, a San Francisco Bay Area drug ring sold tons of cocaine to the Crips and Bloods street gangs of Los Angeles and funneled millions in drug profits to a Latin American guerrilla army run by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency."

AMY GOODMAN: The series revealed ties between the CIA, the Nicaraguan contras, the crack cocaine trade ravaging African-American communities here in the U.S. This is a trailer for the new film Kill the Messenger, starring Jeremy Renner as Gary Webb.



GARY WEBB: [played by Jeremy Renner] Gary Webb, San Jose Mercury News.

RONALD QUAIL: [played by Robert Patrick] Do you believe in conspiracy theories, Gary?

GARY WEBB: No, I don't believe in conspiracy theories. Conspiracies, yes. If I believe it, there's nothing theory about it.



ALAN FENSTER: [played by Tim Blake Nelson] Was the government aware ...



that you were smuggling tons of cocaine into the United States?



DANILO BLANDÓN: [played by Yul Vázquez] Yes, the government knew.



RUSSELL DODSON: [played by Barry Pepper] This leads to very sensitive national security matters.



GARY WEBB: Natural security and crack cocaine in the same sentence, does that not sound strange to you?



NORWIN MENESES: [played by Andy García] I'm going to tell you the whole truth. I'm going to introduce you to people you should talk to. And then you will be faced with the most important decision of your life.

GARY WEBB: Oh, yeah? What's that?

NORWIN MENESES: Deciding whether to share it or not.



GARY WEBB: One of the DEA's most wanted brought in thousands of kilos of cocaine to the U.S. every day for them.

JERRY CEPPOS: [played by Oliver Platt] For who?

GARY WEBB: The U.S. government. Or with them. Or at least while they were looking the other way.

JERRY CEPPOS: Jesus



"FREEWAY" RICKY ROSS: [played by Michael Kenneth Williams] L.A., New York, Atlanta. I couldn't sell it fast enough to keep up with supply.

FRED WEIL: [played by Michael Sheen] Fancy information you have there. Dangerous.



JOHN CULLEN: [played by Ray Liotta] What you found here, Gary, is a monster.

FRED WEIL: You have no idea what you're getting into.

GARY WEBB: You really telling me that I should just walk away from this?

FRED WEIL: You'd be an idiot not to.



ANNA SIMONS: [played by Mary Elizabeth Winstead] This story scares people.

GARY WEBB: Well, it should.



SUE WEBB: [played by Rosemarie DeWitt] Be careful.



DEA AGENT MILLER: [played by Gil Bellows] There are ongoing operations you're in danger of exposing.



We know you were in Nicaragua.



GARY WEBB: Am I being followed?



I thought my job was to tell the public the truth, the facts, pretty or not, and let the publishing of those facts make a difference in how people look at things, at themselves and what they stand for.





CIA AGENT: We'd never threaten your children, Mr. Webb.



GARY WEBB: What did you say?



ANNA SIMONS: It's over.



GARY WEBB: I'm not finished with it! I'm not finished!

This is a true story.



FRED WEIL: Some stories are just too true to tell.



NERMEEN SHAIKH: That was the trailer for Kill the Messenger, a new film directed by Michael Cuesta about investigative journalist Gary Webb. Webb's exposé provoked protests and congressional hearings. It also provoked a fierce reaction from the media establishment, which went to great lengths to discredit Webb. The Los Angeles Times alone assigned 17 reporters to dissect both Webb's reporting and his personal life. Recently declassified CIA files show the agency used a, quote, "ground base of already productive relations with journalists [at other newspapers]" to counter what it called, quote, "a genuine public relations crisis."



AMY GOODMAN: The impact of the campaign against Webb by both the CIA and the media ...



is outlined in a documentary film called *Shadows of Liberty*, directed by Jean-Philippe Tremblay. In this extended excerpt from the film, you hear a number of voices, including veteran investigative journalist Robert Parry, who will join us after we play this excerpt, as well as the author and journalist Charles Bowden, who recently died, Peter Kornbluh of the National Security Archive, comedian and activist Dick Gregory, California Congressman Maxine Waters, Gary Webb's brother Kurt Webb, and Gary Webb himself. It's narrated by Kerry Shale.

KERRY SHALE: One of the biggest news stories of the 1980s was the explosion of crack cocaine in the United States.

POLICE OFFICER: Police! Freeze! Freeze!

REPORTER: It's another night, another crack raid. Today, crack cocaine use here is an epidemic.



ROBERT PARRY: Well, the crack epidemic not only destroyed lives in the sense that people were addicted to this powerful drug, but also it set off gang wars. Certain communities, like the African-American communities, were disproportionately hurt.



Gary Webb, he began investigating that.



CHARLES BOWDEN: Gary Webb, he thought being a reporter was the best thing you could be, the only independent force in society to establish truth.



KERRY SHALE: What Gary Webb witnessed in a courthouse would lead him on a journey to uncover the origins of the crack epidemic in America.

CHARLES BOWDEN: What first caught his eye, he's got Nicaraguans, obviously dirty in a drug deal, and they're not going down, they're getting a walk. Well, if you're a reporter, you look into that.



KERRY SHALE: As Webb looked at the suppliers of the crack trade in Los Angeles, the trail led back to a U.S.-sponsored war a decade earlier in Central America



PETER KORNBLUH: The Reagan administration wanted to be proactive in sticking it to the communists around the world. President Ronald Reagan authorized the CIA to spend hundreds of millions of dollars building, supporting, directing the contras against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.



PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: They are the moral equal of our founding fathers. We cannot turn away from them.



KERRY SHALE: While the CIA attempted to topple the democratically elected government in Nicaragua, Webb discovered the contras had ties to the crack explosion in Los Angeles.



PETER KORNBLUH: Sponsoring violence in a small Central American country was far more important than stopping drugs from flowing into our cities and our communities.



KERRY SHALE: After a year-long investigation, Webb's story was published on the front page of the San Jose Mercury News.



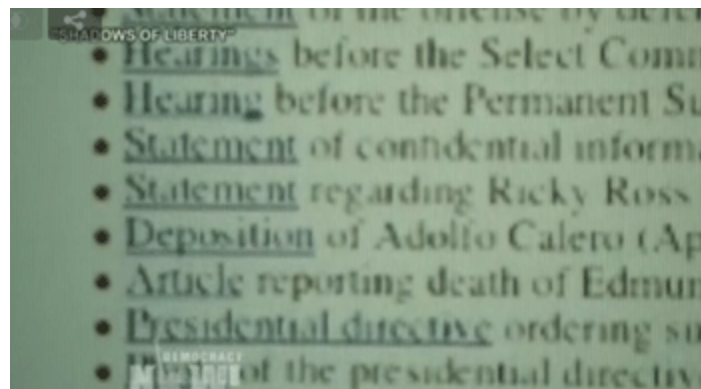
GARY WEBB: The central thing that we tried to show, and it wasn't particularly that the CIA knew about it, it was how crack came to be such a problem in America, that it was connected to this Nicaraguan cocaine pipeline.



KERRY SHALE: Webb's report broke new ground by becoming the first major news investigation published both in print and on the Internet.



SUSAN PATERNO: As a consequence, even though the San Jose Mercury News is considered a regional newspaper, it was able to get national traction, and even international traction on this story, because it was now on the web.



GARY WEBB: We've got all the DEA undercover tapes. We've got the FBI reports. We've got the court records. They're all posted for people to see.



DICK GREGORY: Brother Webb, when you look at his research and what he was doing and tracing it, and he was hip enough to check it and know it was true.



KERRY SHALE: By November 1997, the website was getting over a million hits a day. And the story made the biggest impact in Los Angeles.



REP. MAXINE WATERS: What is the word on the street now? "Have you heard about the CIA?" Well, you know what? We have heard. We have seen. And now we are moved to action. And we're moved to action in ways that we haven't been moved before.

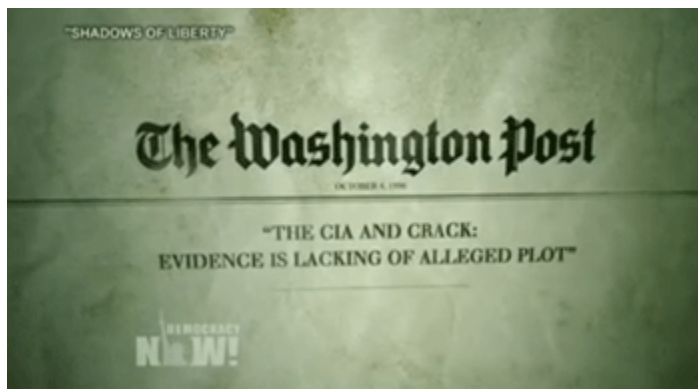
KERRY SHALE: With the CIA on the defensive and the public demanding answers, the major national newspapers waded into the controversy.



SUSAN PATERNO: The mainstream media at first responded with pretty much a deafening nothing. But as the story got bigger and bigger, they started responding by blaming Gary Webb.



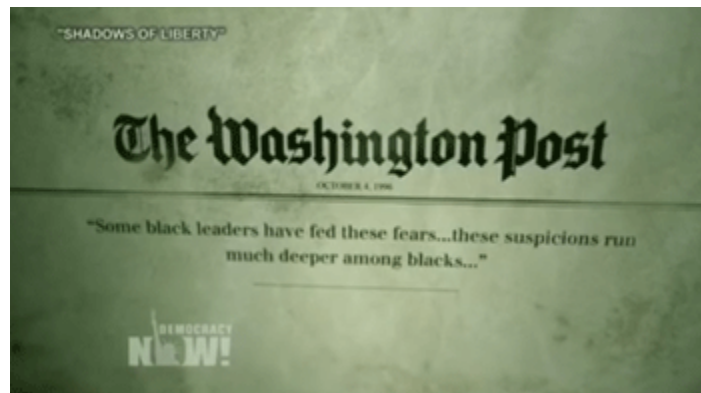
ROBERT PARRY: You have the fact that the San Jose Mercury News, being in Silicon Valley, was sort of challenging the gatekeeper function that The New York Times, the L.A. Times ...



The Washington Post and other big papers had assumed was theirs.



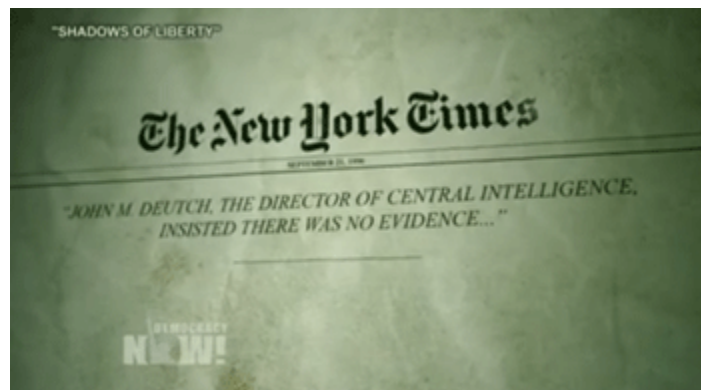
CHARLES BOWDEN: The Washington Post weighs in and says Gary Webb got it wrong, but we can't tell you exactly how he got it wrong, because we haven't the faintest goddamn idea.



ROBERT PARRY: It was accompanied by a piece that declared that the African-American community was conspiracy-prone.



So that sort of set the tone that Webb's story would be dismissed and, to a degree, ridiculed.



NORMAN SOLOMON: You had major media outlets going to the CIA and saying, "Is this true?" And the CIA would say, "Oh, no, this is not true." And then the reportage was, "Oh, well, it's not true."



DUANE CLARIDGE: This is nonsense. Come on. Come on. I mean, come on. This is—this is—there has never been a conspiracy in this country.



NORMAN SOLOMON: The fact is that the shoddy reporting on the story was not from Gary Webb.



It was from his corporate-backed detractors.

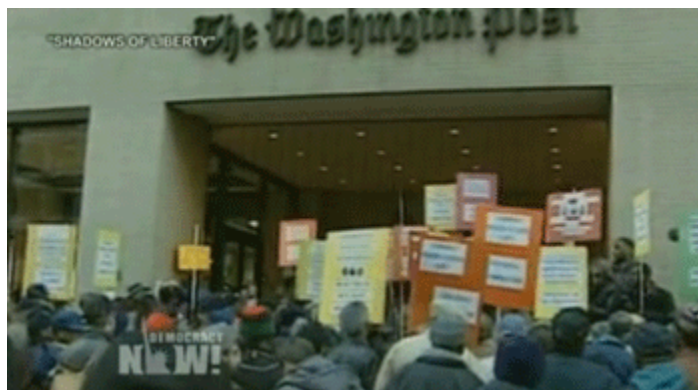


CHARLES BOWDEN: Now, I had a drink with a major figure at the L.A. Times, and I asked him about the crackback.



And he said, "Look, there were meetings in the building, that they weren't going to let a guy from San Jose, California, come into their turf and win a Pulitzer Prize."

PROTESTERS: Expose CIA! Expose CIA! Expose CIA!



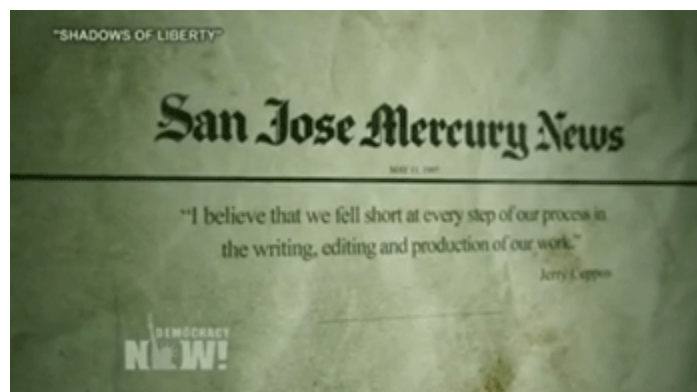
KERRY SHALE: As the press attacked Gary Webb, the public protested.



DICK GREGORY: I got involved with the protests, because Gary Webb, he had no hidden agenda. He's not lying.



And we're going to put the CIA in this country on notice.



KERRY SHALE: With the national media calling for a retraction of Webb's story, his own newspaper took action.



KURT WEBB: The Mercury News was behind Gary 100 percent while he was writing it. And then, because of the backlash from the other media, they also backpedaled away from Gary.



INTERVIEWER: In the beginning, they were behind you.

GARY WEBB: That's right. And then they caught—then they caught a world of hell from the establishment media, and now they're not behind me anymore.



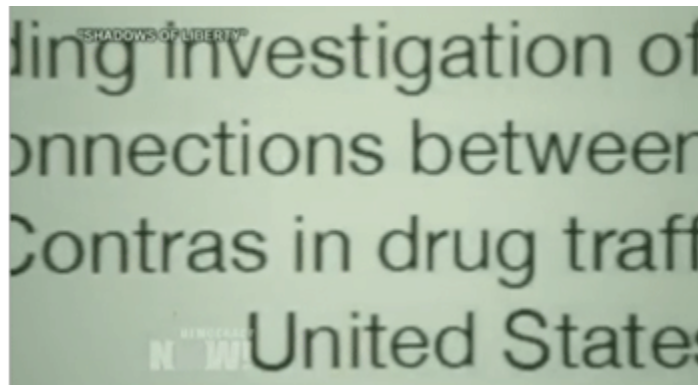
ROBERT PARRY: The San Jose Mercury News essentially abandoned him.



KERRY SHALE: The pressure paid off, when the Mercury News took down the "Dark Alliance" website and reassigned Webb to a bureau 150 miles from his home.



KURT WEBB: And here, this guy that had all these awards, this guy that broke a story that everyone warned him not to break, and all of a sudden a journalist that should be hailed was treated like a piece of crap.



KERRY SHALE: A year later, the CIA released its internal report into the agency's involvement with contra drug traffickers.



FREDERICK HITZ: There are instances where CIA did not, in an expeditious or consistent fashion ...



cut off relationships with individuals supporting the contra program who were alleged to have engaged in drug-trafficking activity.



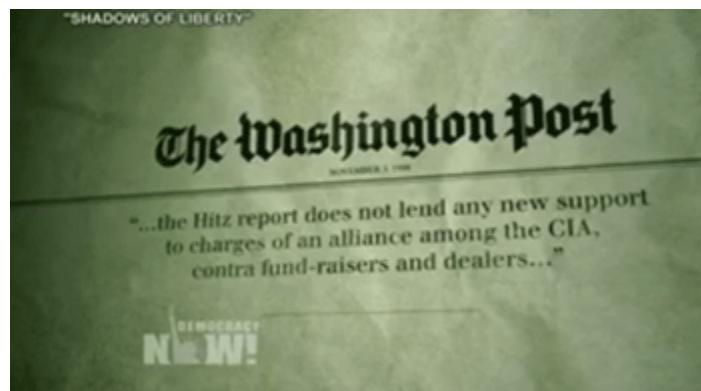
ROBERT PARRY: The contents of the reports, if you go into the actual nitty-gritty of them, what you find is that there was a serious problem, that the U.S. government knew about, and that the contras were far more guilty of drug trafficking and the CIA was more guilty of looking the other way than even Gary Webb had suggested.

FREDERICK HITZ: That report includes a great deal of information and quotes many documents.

KERRY SHALE: With the CIA's report about its relationship with contra drug traffickers, the media had a chance to vindicate Webb's investigation.



ROBERT PARRY: The New York Times, they do a story that is half kind of mea culpa, we should have done more with this, it was worse than we thought, and half Gary Webb's still an idiot.



The Washington Post waits several weeks and does a rather dismissive article.



And the L.A. Times never reports on the CIA's findings.



So even though Webb was proven correct, he's still considered a flake who got a story wrong.



KURT WEBB: Gary felt betrayed by his own brethren, if you will. In his mind, journalists were supposed to expose the truth, not do the opposite, not try to quash it.

KERRY SHALE: As the media buried the CIA's report, Webb found his career at a dead end.

KURT WEBB: When he was interviewing with another job, they'd always say, "Aren't you the guy who wrote 'Dark Alliance'?" And then they would kill the interview. He couldn't make a living being a journalist anymore, and that ripped his heart out.



ROBERT PARRY: He is despondent about his inability to find work.



He got his father's pistol, laid out a certificate for his cremation, and then he shot himself.



GARY WEBB: Frankly, you know, if I have to stand up and take a beating for putting the issue of government complicity in drug trafficking on the national agenda, I'll take that beating any day of the week.



I mean, I was glad to do this story, I'm proud of what we did, and I'd do it again in a second.



CHARLES BOWDEN: We killed one of the few decent working reporters in the country. By that "we," I mean the business I'm in: media.



NERMEEN SHAIKH: That last voice was Charles Bowden from the documentary *Shadows of Liberty*. Bowden recently died. *Shadows of Liberty* is on a nationwide tour and screens this Friday in St. Louis. We'll link to the tour's full schedule on our website, democracynow.org. The new feature film, *Kill the Messenger*, opens around the country this week.



AMY GOODMAN: To talk more about Gary Webb, we're joined by Robert Parry, investigative journalist who worked for years as an investigative reporter for both the Associated Press and *Newsweek* magazine, reporting led to the exposure of what's now known as the Iran-contra scandal. He edits the website Consortiumnews.com.

Robert Parry, welcome back to Democracy Now! Talk about the significance of Gary Webb—his life, his investigative journalism, *Dark Alliance* and his ultimate suicide.



ROBERT PARRY: Well, history owes a great deal to Gary Webb. If it weren't for Gary and his courage in reviving this story in 1996, we would not have known anything near like the full picture of what happened in the 1980s. Some of us that were reporting it back then—myself and my colleague Brian Barger at the Associated Press wrote the first story in December of '85, and that sparked Senator John Kerry to do a fairly good investigation that reported more about this in—by 1989. But because the major news organizations back then did not want to pursue this very difficult and painful story—they tended to dismiss it back then, as well—it was up to Gary Webb in reviving the story in 1996 that forced the CIA to finally take seriously this investigation. And the inspector general, Frederick Hitz, did a fairly thorough job, produced a report that amounted to an institutional confession by the Central Intelligence Agency that indeed they were aware of the contra drug trafficking as far back as 1981, that it had continued throughout the decade, and that the CIA had consistently protected those drug traffickers, even to the point of steering away investigations by the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Justice Department, as well as Congress. So you had the CIA finally coming to the table and admitting that what we reported in the '80s and what Webb reported in the '90s was in fact true.

The tragedy was that the mainstream news organizations that had dismissed the story in the '80s would not face up to this reality when it was even admitted to by the Central Intelligence Agency. We saw a complete failure,

perhaps one of the most shameful examples of how the mainstream press can operate in destroying a fellow journalist for getting at an important story. And Webb suffered mightily for this. There's a special pain when your colleagues in your profession turn on you, especially when you've done something that they should admire and should understand. It's hard to do these kinds of stories. They're really—they're very difficult, because of the reporting that's required, the going into the field, dealing with often unsavory characters, dealing with secret government sources. And to do all that work and then have The New York Times and The Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times attack you and try to destroy your life, there's a special pain in that.



AMY GOODMAN: You know, following the controversy around "Dark Alliance," the San Jose Mercury News transferred Gary Webb from the paper's Sacramento office to a suburban office in Cupertino. In December '97, Webb resigned. I got a chance to speak to him on Democracy Now! about his resignation.



GARY WEBB: Hi, Amy. How are you doing?

AMY GOODMAN: Good. Well, the more important question is: How are you doing?

GARY WEBB: Hey, I'm alive. I'm here, you know?

AMY GOODMAN: Well—

GARY WEBB: And not working for that newspaper anymore, thank God.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, tell us exactly what happened.

GARY WEBB: Well, what happened was, you know, like you said, they transferred me out to the boondocks, and I went on a byline strike, and I wouldn't allow my name to be used on any stories while I was out there. And, you know, that made everybody even madder. And then, you know, I finally had to sit down and figure out—you know, this is a year and a half now since the series came out, and what am I doing with my life, and what am I doing with my work that's meaningful? And I had to answer that, you know, nothing was happening. You know, it was clear to me that the Mercury—I mean, they had told me that, you know, even when we won

the arbitration, that they weren't going to let me do anything worthwhile. They were not going to let me do any investigative reporting. So I had to figure, you know, this is kind of pointless to hang around and work for a newspaper whose editors you didn't respect and do dog bite stories for the rest of my life. It just didn't seem worthwhile.



AMY GOODMAN: That was Gary Webb speaking on Democracy Now! in December 1997. He would ultimately commit suicide. You can go to our website to see all of our interviews with Gary at democracynow.org. Bob Parry, your final comments about the significance of the story that he broke?



ROBERT PARRY: Well, there's no question that this was one of the most important stories of the 1980s and really the 1990s, when you get to the end of this and the CIA confessing. But it's also a story about the failure of the mainstream press that extends to the present, goes through the Iraq War, the failure to be skeptical there, and goes right on to the present day. So it's not an old story; it's very much a current story.



AMY GOODMAN: Robert Parry, thank you so much for being with us, veteran investigative journalist. Again, our website with Gary Webb at democracynow.org.



I'll be speaking tonight at the University of Michigan-Flint at 6:00 p.m. Check our website at democracynow.org.