

The Gary Webb story in *Kill the Messenger*: Shedding light on CIA criminality and conspiracy

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Directed by Michael Cuesta; screenplay by Peter Landesman, based on books by Gary Webb and Nick Schou

Michael Cuesta's *Kill the Messenger* tells the story of Gary Webb, whose August 1996 investigative series "Dark Alliance," published in the *San Jose Mercury News*, uncovered ties between the Central Intelligence Agency and massive drug peddling by the right-wing, mercenary Nicaraguan Contras. Webb's three-part series established that in the 1980s the CIA-backed Contras smuggled cocaine into the US that was widely distributed as crack. The drug profits were then funneled by the CIA to the Contras in their war against the left-nationalist Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The movie is based on a book by Nick Schou about Webb and the latter's own 1998 book, *Dark Alliance*, a follow-up to his 1996 series.

A 1990 Pulitzer Prize winner, Webb was ferociously attacked and smeared by the media for his articles because they exposed a network of criminal covert operations by the American government. Of course, the CIA's activities went beyond collaborating with drug traffickers. The agency organized death squads and subversion, terrorizing the populations of Nicaragua and Honduras.

It is to Cuesta's credit he has made a film about Webb's career and ultimately tragic fate. In *Kill the Messenger*, Jeremy Renner is outstanding as Webb. Gary is a motorcycle-riding contrarian married to his high school sweetheart Sue (Rosemarie DeWitt) and a devoted father to his three children. As the film begins, it comes to light that the Webbs' relocation to California was prompted by a brief affair the journalist had in Cleveland.

It is 1996. Webb is approached by Coral (Paz Vega), the girlfriend of a Nicaraguan immigrant awaiting trial on cocaine charges after three years in prison. She tells him that the key government witness in the case, Danilo Blandón (Yul Vazquez), had worked for the CIA-financed Contras while smuggling drugs into the US. She hands Gary

astonishing federal grand jury transcripts in which Blandón provided a detailed account of his operations importing cocaine and selling it to wholesale drug dealers in Los Angeles.

Armed with this information, Webb confronts district attorney Russell Dodson (Barry Pepper), who is clearly operating on behalf of the government. Threateningly, Dodson tells Gary that "this leads to very sensitive national security matters." Replies Webb: "National security and crack cocaine in the same sentence, does that not sound strange to you?" The case against the drug dealer is dropped, despite the fact that, as Gary explains, "One of the DEA's [Drug Enforcement Administration] most wanted brought in thousands of kilos of cocaine to the U.S. every day for them."

In pursuit of the story, Webb gets approval from his editor, Anna Simons (Mary Elizabeth Winstead), and publisher, Jerry Ceppos (Oliver Platt), to fly to Nicaragua to interview imprisoned drug kingpin Norwin Meneses (Andy Garcia).

Despite warnings by a National Security Council member (Michael Sheen) that "You have no idea what you're getting into," and from an unnamed CIA operative ("You're getting into some sensitive areas"), Webb pens the 20,000-word series, which finds a wide audience. The version of the stories on the *Mercury News* website initially receives over one million hits per day.

Then the "majors"—the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in particular—weigh in and do their dirty work. They pull out all the stops to "controversialize," i.e., demonize, the journalist, including digging into his personal life. His own newspaper caves in to the pressure and Gary is thrown under the bus. He protests: "Am I being followed [by the CIA]? 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."

(The 2012 documentary *Shadows of Liberty*, directed by

Jean-Philippe Tremblay, contains archive footage of Webb commenting, “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.”)

In the course of Webb’s persecution, a former CIA agent (played by Ray Liotta) secretly tells the reporter-outcast, “What you found here, Gary, is a monster.”

Webb’s career is destroyed. The film’s postscript notes that in 1998, the CIA acknowledged that it had covered up Contra drug trafficking for more than a decade. In 2004, Webb was found dead from two gunshot wounds to the head. The official cause of death was suicide.

Indicating certain political illusions, the movie’s epilogue points to the fact that Webb’s article eventually forced then-CIA director John Deutch to make a rare public appearance in South Central Los Angeles before an angry crowd, as though this were some significant victory. In fact, it was a rather pathetic attempt at damage control.

Nonetheless, Cuesta’s *Kill the Messenger* is a worthwhile and serious effort, which can only help discredit the various institutions involved, at a time when television and movie screens, disgustingly, are all too often filled with celebrations, for example, with “Murder, Inc.,” of the CIA.

The director takes pains to humanize the events by paying considerable attention to Webb’s personal relationships. This may detract somewhat from the political-historical analysis, but, after all, this is a fiction film, not a documentary, and Renner is largely up to the task of carrying *Kill the Messenger*. Cuesta explains: “That was always the intent, to keep the camera on his [Renner-Webb’s] shoulders, so to speak. The camera should reflect his feeling.”

Highlighting the family’s suffering as Gary’s victimization progresses tends to add dimension and texture to the movie’s indictment of the line-up of the national media and the CIA. It allows for an examination of the psychological impact on muckrakers like Webb of crossing swords with pundits from the mainstream media, who are little more than shills for the military-intelligence apparatus.

US newspapers and other media slavishly passed on CIA-generated disinformation and slander. The *New York Times*, for example, in its review of Webb’s book, asserted, “It is laughable to suggest that today’s CIA has the imagination or the courage to manage a cover-up on the scale” indicated by Webb.

In an interview, Cuesta (best known for his work as a television producer and director— *Homeland*, *Blue Bloods*, *Dexter*) elaborates on his views about the media, opining

that, “since the Reagan administration, the media has become more of a conglomerate, and is driven by profit. In doing that, the appeal has to be for a middle base because of ratings. Also the media became more pro-American around the time of Reagan, emphasizing what Katharine Graham [former publisher of the *Washington Post*] once said, ‘we live in a dirty and dangerous world, there are some things the public should not know.’ That idea is perpetuated in the ‘insider journalism’ that takes place in Washington.”

Cuesta, however, tends to minimize the media’s subservience to the governmental machinery. In another interview, he says that he “saw it [the attack on Webb] as those papers being really jealous that they missed the scoop or were afraid or were diverted and they didn’t dig.”

In fact, the Webb persecution was one of the way stations in the process of the transformation of the American media into a propaganda arm of the White House, Pentagon and CIA. As the WSWS noted in 2001: “The debasement of the US media can be traced in relation to the great political convulsions of the past 30 years. ... In the aftermath of Watergate ... there was a determined campaign to bring the media more tightly to heel, to which the media succumbed with relatively little resistance. ... Already by the time of the Iran-Contra crisis of the mid-1980s, the element of press cover-up for the unconstitutional actions of the Reagan administration far outweighed that of serious investigation and exposure.”

In the course of the decade that followed the assault on Webb’s “Dark Alliance” articles, the American media would, successively, collaborate with the extreme right in an attempt to oust a twice-elected president in the Clinton-Lewinsky scandals; cover up the hijacking of a national election in 2000; raise no questions about the events of 9/11 and do everything in its power to further the so-called “war on terror”; eagerly allow itself to be “embedded” during filthy neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and beyond. *Kill the Messenger* effectively depicts an event that foreshadowed this sinister shift.

The author also recommends:

New book documents US complicity in drug running
[22 October 1998]

CIA document details cover-up of drug trafficking by Contras
[2 October 2014]



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