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## OBITUARIES

# Gary Webb, 49; Wrote Series Linking CIA, Drugs

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Gary Webb, an investigative reporter who wrote a widely criticized series linking the CIA to the explosion of crack cocaine in Los Angeles, was found dead in his Sacramento-area home Friday. He apparently killed himself, authorities said.

Webb had suffered a gunshot wound to the head, according to the Sacramento County coroner's office. He was 49.

His 1996 San Jose Mercury News series contended that Nicaraguan drug traffickers had sold tons of crack cocaine from Colombian cartels in Los Angeles' black neighborhoods and then funneled millions in profits back to the CIA-supported Nicaraguan Contras.

Three months after the series was published, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said it conducted an exhaustive investigation but found no evidence of a connection between the CIA and Southern California drug traffickers.

Major newspapers, including the Los Angeles Times, New York Times and Washington Post, wrote reports discrediting elements of Webb's reporting. The Los Angeles Times report looked into Webb's charges "that a CIA-related drug ring sent 'millions' of dollars to the Contras; that it launched an epidemic of cocaine use in South-Central Los Angeles and America's other inner cities; and that the agency either approved the scheme or deliberately turned a blind eye."

"But the available evidence, based on an extensive review of court documents and more than 100 interviews in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington and Managua, fails to support any of those allegations," The Times reported.

Months later, the Mercury News also backed away from the series, publishing an open letter to its readers, admitting to flaws.

"We oversimplified the complex issue of how the crack epidemic in America grew," wrote the paper's executive editor, Jerry Ceppos, adding, "I believe that we fell short at every step of our process — in the writing, editing and production of our work."

The paper reassigned Webb to a suburban bureau. In December 1997, he quit.

"All he ever wanted to do was write," said Webb's ex-wife, Susan Bell, who met him when they were both high school students in Indiana. "He never really recovered from it."

Webb was born in Corona to a military family and moved around the country throughout his youth. He dropped out of journalism school just shy of graduating to accept his first newspaper job at the Kentucky Post, then went to the Cleveland Plain Dealer and the Mercury News.

Within two years of arriving at the paper, Webb was part of a team that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1990 for coverage of the Loma Prieta earthquake.

Webb continued to defend his reporting, most notably in a 548-page book, "Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion," which was published in 1999.

After leaving the Mercury News, Webb worked in state government, including the Joint Legislative Audit Committee's investigation into then-Gov. Gray Davis' controversial award of a \$95-million, no-bid contract to Oracle in 2001.

"The guy had a fierce commitment to justice and truth. He cared deeply about the people who are forgotten, that we try to shove into the dark recesses of our minds and world," said Tom Dresslar, a spokesman for the California attorney general's office who worked with Webb on the Oracle investigation.

But Webb's career remained troubled. While working for another legislative committee in Sacramento, Webb wrote a report accusing the California Highway Patrol of unofficially condoning and even encouraging racial profiling in its drug interdiction program.

Legislative officials released the report in 1999 but cautioned that it was based mainly on assumptions and anecdotes. Earlier this year, Webb was one of a group of employees fired from the Assembly speaker's Office of Member Services for failing to show up for work.

Webb, who lived in Carmichael, continued to write occasionally for a variety of publications. Last summer, the weekly Sacramento News & Review hired Webb to cover government and politics. He had recently written two cover stories, including one on how much money Sacramento County was making off the use of red-light cameras.

"He's obviously a skilled reporter and writer and he was doing good work for us and the evidence was on the page," said News & Review Editor Tom Walsh.

Webb is survived by two sons, Ian and Eric; and a daughter, Christine.

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