

Exposé on Crack Was Flawed, Paper Says: Expose on Crack Cocaine and ...

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SAN JOSE, Calif., May 12 — In a highly unusual critique published in his own newspaper, the editor of The San Jose Mercury News acknowledged on Sunday that a series of articles last year on the rise of crack cocaine in urban America was marred by shortcomings, including its strong implication that the Central Intelligence Agency had countenanced the drug's spread in league with Nicaraguan dealers.

The publication of the series, "Dark Alliance," provoked a furor among black elected and community officials and prompted multiple Federal investigations. Its central assertion was that a pair of Nicaraguan drug traffickers with C.I.A. ties had started the nationwide crack trade by selling drugs in black neighborhoods in the 1980's. Their goal, the series said, was to help finance the C.I.A.-backed rebels, or contras, then fighting the Sandinista Government in their homeland.

That notion — amplified by the paper's Web site and distorted by talk radio and street-corner gossip — prompted widespread outrage, even as reporting by other news organizations cast severe doubt on many of the articles' salient points. Government officials from Washington to Los Angeles denied any knowledge or complicity in such a plot, while pledging thorough investigations into the questions raised by The Mercury News.

But after an exhaustive internal review, the executive editor, Jerry Ceppos, said in the careful, understated language of a signed editori-



The first article of the series, on page 1 of the paper last Aug. 18.

al column in the paper's "Perspective" section on Sunday that the most sensational implications of the series by his investigative reporter, Gary Webb, were not supported by the facts as he now understood them.

"Although members of the drug ring met with contra leaders paid by the C.I.A. and Webb believes the relationship with the C.I.A. was a tight one," Mr. Ceppos wrote, "I feel that we did not have proof that top C.I.A. officials knew of the relationship. I believe that part of our contract with our readers is to be

as clear about what we don't know as what we do know." [Excerpts, Page A16.]

A spokesman for the C.I.A., Mark Mansfield, said today that the agency's inspector general was continuing his investigation into what John M. Deutch, the Director of Central Intelligence at the time of publication last year, called "an appalling charge."

"It is gratifying," Mr. Mansfield said, "to see that a large segment of the media, including The San

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Jose Mercury News itself, has taken a serious and objective look at how his story was constructed and reported."

Reporting by The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Los Angeles Times produced no clear evidence of any direct link between the drug dealers and the C.I.A. Neither did they find any proof of a connection between the support the leafers said they had given the Nicaraguan rebels and the money generated during the long relationship that one of them, Oscar Danilo Blandon, maintained with a Los Angeles drug

kingpin named Ricky Donnell Ross, who is now facing life imprisonment on a narcotics conviction.

Mr. Ceppos wrote that the series had erroneously implied that the Blandon-Ross ring "was the pivotal force in the crack epidemic in the United States," when in fact the roots of the drug's spread were much more diffuse and complex. He said the series had failed to include testimony from Mr. Blandon that in 1982 he stopped sending cocaine profits to the rebels, and had failed to acknowledge that its assertion that the ring funneled millions of dollars to the rebels was merely an estimate.

According to his own court testimony and law-enforcement agents

familiar with his debriefings as a paid informer for the Drug Enforcement Administration, Mr. Blandon has said that as a used-car salesman and member of a tiny rebel support group in Los Angeles he helped raise a few thousand dollars for the insurgents and later sent them a pickup truck and supplies.

Mr. Blandon said he had also been told by his partner in trafficking, Juan Norwin Meneses Canterero, that the rebels were sent profits from the first kilograms of cocaine that he gave Mr. Blandon to sell as a neophyte dealer in 1982.

In his column, Mr. Ceppos wrote that Mr. Webb had disagreed with many of his conclusions, and in a

telephone interview today from his home in Sacramento, Mr. Webb confirmed that. He elaborated on his objections by saying that since February the paper "has been sitting on a series of follow-up stories" that buttress his initial assertions, both about the C.I.A.'s involvement and the financial scale of the drug traffickers' contributions to the rebels.

Asked why those articles had not been published, Mr. Webb, who promoted the original series extensively, replied: "That's a darn good question. I don't know, I haven't been able to get a straight answer."

Mr. Webb said he was particularly concerned that Mr. Ceppos's column would "just make it harder" for the pending official investigations into the series' charges to "get at the truth," and suggested that he was on the verge of asking The Mercury News for permission to publish his new material elsewhere.

But in an interview in his glass-walled office in the newsroom here this afternoon, Mr. Ceppos said that Mr. Webb had so far submitted only notes and ideas for future articles, and that "we certainly are going to go over those and not disregard them." Several times, Mr. Ceppos declined to characterize his findings in any language other than that of his Sunday column, but he said the controversy "has taught us about how many grays there are in life."

In the months after publication of the series, Mr. Ceppos defended its core conclusions.

"The key finding finding of the series that people associated with the C.I.A. also sold many tons of cocaine has not been challenged," he said then. "The beauty of the series is that it clearly went that far and didn't go any further than that."

But Mr. Ceppos ordered the review last fall after public controversy over the series had swirled into a firestorm. It involved three-full-time reporters and several editors, before Mr. Ceppos learned in December that he had prostate cancer and took a leave for surgery in January.

He returned to work this spring; and when the group produced a written report of its findings, Mr. Ceppos decided that he could best explain the facts to readers in a column. He said there were no plans to publish a corrective article or any further details of the group's "re-reporting."

"I'm not sure any series has ever been scrutinized as much as this one was," Mr. Ceppos, who has led the paper for two years, said of the out-

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The San Jose Mercury News  
Jerry Ceppos, left, editor of The San Jose Mercury News, says a series of articles by a reporter, Gary Webb, right, was marred by serious shortcomings. The articles linked the C.I.A. to crack cocaine sales.

cry that greeted the series' publication. "I thought it was very important to respond to all that."

Mr. Ceppos explained his decision at a staff meeting attended by more than 100 reporters and editors last Friday afternoon, at which, several participants said, there seemed to be general support for his findings.

But some reporters suggested that they should be published on Page 1, not in the section reserved for editorial commentary. Others demanded

## A series prompts outrage and then an exhaustive review.

to know whether Mr. Webb and editors associated with the series would be disciplined. When someone asked whether Mr. Webb would remain employed by the paper, one participant recalled, Mr. Ceppos said, "That will be determined."

But in the interview today, Mr. Ceppos said Mr. Webb was still on the staff, and Mr. Webb said he expected to continue to be.

Representative Maxine Waters, a Los Angeles Democrat who became a vocal critic of the C.I.A. after the series appeared, said today that Mr. Ceppos's column did not alter her

belief that the agency had been involved with the crack cocaine trade.

The furor over the original series divided journalists but led some experts on the news media to stand up for Mr. Ceppos and the paper.

"I was forceful in his defense because I thought the journalists who were going after him on this story ought to be out trying to match it and not jumping on him," said Bill Kovach, a former senior editor at several major newspapers who is now curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism, at Harvard University.

Mr. Kovach added: "It is hard to imagine a more explosive story. And to put it in the paper and on the Internet as a way to get it out as fast as possible and as broadly as possible, and then find out that it had an editing process that was as permeable as it now appears to have been, is depressing."

Phil Yost, the paper's chief editorial writer, echoed several other staff members who did not want to be quoted by name in expressing relief that Mr. Ceppos had at last put a period at the end of a troubling paragraph in the paper's history.

"There was a division inside the paper whether the series was well enough reported and presented," Mr. Yost said. "I'm glad we publicly said there were problems with the piece. I think it's important and I think it's something that newspapers don't do very often. It's not an easy thing to do."