

CIA Series 'Fell Short,' Editor Says

San Jose Paper Probed Rise of Crack Trade

By Howard Kurtz
Washington Post Staff Writer

The executive editor of the San Jose Mercury News has acknowledged that its controversial series suggesting a link between the CIA and cocaine trafficking was "oversimplified," omitted important conflicting evidence and "fell short of my standards."

In a column Sunday, Jerry Ceppos told readers that the "Dark Alliance" series "strongly implied CIA knowledge" that a drug ring linked to the Nicaraguan contras was selling crack in Los Angeles in the 1980s. "I feel that we did not have proof that top CIA officials knew of the relationship. . . . We also did not include CIA comment about our findings, and I think we should have."

He added: "We fell short of my standards for the Mercury News. . . . I believe that we fell short at every step of our process . . . in the writing, editing and production of our work."

The author of the series, Gary Webb, yesterday called the column "very bizarre" and in some cases "misleading." He added: "I'm not happy about it at all. It's rather nauseating."

Webb's series in August, widely read on the Internet, sparked a na-

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tionwide furor, particularly among some black politicians, journalists and radio hosts who charged that the CIA had deliberately spread crack to inner-city communities. The uproar led to investigations still underway by the CIA, Justice Department and Congress. Then-CIA Director John M. Deutch flew to Los Angeles to address an angry crowd about the allegations.

Three newspapers—The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and New York Times—published lengthy articles in the fall that challenged major parts of the series. In response to such criticism, the San Jose paper last year acknowledged some deficiencies and said some people misinterpreted its articles, but it generally stood by Webb's reporting.

CIA spokesman Mark Mansfield called it "gratifying" that "a large segment of the media, including the San Jose Mercury News itself, has taken a serious and objective look" at the series.

In an interview, Ceppos said the series remained "a pretty important story" but declined to detail what was right about it. Reading from his column, he said: "A drug ring associated with the contras sold large quantities of cocaine. . . . Some of the drug profits from those sales went to the contras."

Ceppos made clear in his column, on the front page of Sunday's opinion section, that Webb "disagrees with my conclusions. Gary believes that the evidence isn't gray; he sees the issues in much clearer terms than I do."

Webb said the paper is holding four of his articles, based in part on two reporting trips to Central America, that confirm and expand on his original pieces. If the editors refuse to run them, he said, "I would say they have abandoned me" and will seek to publish the material elsewhere. Ceppos said the material was just "notes" and that they would be "looked at."

At a packed staff meeting Friday, numerous staff members assailed the series and asked why the paper still employs Webb, Mercury News sources said. But Ceppos said he has since received "some very positive messages from staff members."

Doyle McManus, Washington bureau chief of the Los Angeles Times, called Ceppos's column "courageous" and "an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. I give him high marks for openness and candor, which is something newspapers don't have a very good record of doing. We tend to bury our corrections in small type on page 2."

Rem Rieder, editor of American Journalism Review, which also criticized the series, called the column a "significant, major correction." He said the controversy represented "another dark day for journalism. . . . It's now accepted by a lot of people in this country that the CIA was behind the crack cocaine epidemic." But Rieder said Ceppos's column was "painfully honest."

Ceppos's column did little to change the views of some prominent CIA critics. Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) said there was "nothing new" in the column and that the acknowledged errors did not alter the central point of the series.

Joe Madison, a WRC-AM radio host and member of the NAACP's national board, said "there may have been some gray areas in the story." But he described Ceppos's column as an "assertion that the stories documented a cocaine-contras-CIA connection," which he said "substantiates what we have been saying."

But Arthur Fennell, president of the National Association of Black Journalists, said the group is reconsidering its plans to give its "Thumbs Down" award to The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and New York Times for coverage detrimental to the African-American community.

The Webb series reported that two former contra sympathizers, Oscar Danilo Blandon and Juan Norwin Meneses, sold cocaine in South Central Los Angeles and sent "millions" of dollars in profits to the Nicaraguan rebels. Crack "was virtually unobtainable in black neighborhoods before members of the CIA's army started bringing it into South Central," Webb wrote. The Internet version superimposed the CIA's insignia over a man smoking crack.

After reexamining the series with seven reporters and editors, Ceppos essentially conceded major criticisms of the three newspapers. "We oversimplified the complex issue of how the crack epidemic in America grew," he wrote. "Many experts dis-

agree," he said, that the Blandon drug ring "played a critical role in the nation's crack explosion."

"In a few key instances," Ceppos wrote, "we presented only one interpretation of complicated, sometimes-conflicting pieces of evidence. In one such instance, we did not include information that contradicted a central assertion of the series."

He was referring to testimony by Blandon "that he stopped sending profits from cocaine sales to the contras at the end of 1982, after being in operation for a year." Webb says a reference to that testimony was cut during the editing process.

Regarding the "millions" of dollars the series said was funneled to the contras, Ceppos acknowledged that "we made our best estimate of how

much money was involved, but failed to label it as an estimate, and instead it appeared as fact." In court records, Blandon has said he sent Meneses \$60,000 and assumed it went to the contras.

Waters, however, said, "It doesn't matter to me how much [the drug dealers] gave the contras. The fact that that they gave anything is what bothered me."

According to American Journalism Review, Ceppos didn't read the entire series before it ran, managing editor David Yarnold left a month before publication and the investigative projects editor was not involved. The articles were closely supervised by city editor Dawn Garcia.

The series won Webb the "Journalist of the Year" award from the

Society of Professional Journalists' Northern California chapter. He has appeared on dozens of talk shows, lectured around the country and, he says, passed up book and movie deals to pursue his Mercury News reporting.

Webb stands by his conclusions. In a letter to the journalism review, he said "that a Nicaraguan contra drug ring sold tons of cheap cocaine to the gangs of South Central Los Angeles, sent millions in drug profits to the contras and helped create the first mass market in America for crack."

Staff writer Michael A. Fletcher contributed to this report.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To read the entire series as it was originally published, click on the front page of The Post's Web site at www.washingtonpost.com