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IN LATE JUNE 1995, I did a story on a federal appeals court decision regarding narcotics cops taking money and property away from people suspected of drug crimes. A few days later, there was a phone message on my desk from someone in Oakland with the exotic-sounding name of Coral Marie Talavera-Baca.

Ms. Baca said she'd seen my story and knew of a case that might make a good follow-up. It involved her boyfriend and several other men who had been in federal prison for three years on cocaine conspiracy charges -- without ever being brought to trial. While behind bars, she said, her boyfriend had been stripped of his house, his cars, and his money, and his court-appointed lawyer seemed in no hurry to try the case.

Almost as an aside, Ms. Baca mentioned that the Justice Department's chief witness was a man who'd brought literally tons of cocaine into this country "and was supposed to be hooked up with the CIA."

It sounded far-fetched but she was insistent. "Don't believe me," she said sharply. "Read the files for yourself. I've got them."

Fair enough, I told her, and we agreed to meet at a court hearing in San Francisco in a few days, where I'd take a look at what she had.

She wasn't kidding. And, a year later, I would still be working on the story.

--Gary Webb



Gary Webb, 40, has been an investigative reporter for 18 years and has written extensively about government and private sector corruption. Since 1988, he has worked in the Mercury News' Sacramento bureau. He has won numerous state and national journalism awards.

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