

exaggerate its ability to address the wide range of problems that require some degree of government taking and regulation.

In refusing to address those problems, Barnett reminds me of physicians who defend therapeutic nihilism, claiming that most medical treatments have negative results, so patients are better off with no treatment at all. That position became untenable probably by the end of the 19th century, and certainly after the end of World War I. Yet it holds a lesson for us today: Regulation can kill, just as bad medicine can kill, but it can also serve useful ends.

Today the knowledge required for sensible regulation is available. Incremental

improvements are possible; bad schemes can be denounced, good ones improved. That debate is where the action is, but Barnett will have to sit on the sidelines. Regulatory nihilism will not cut it as we enter the 21st century. Regulation beyond the libertarian norms is a necessity. The only question is whether we shall do the task wisely or poorly. ♦

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was doubtless thinking) that will sound great in the final scene of the mini-series, as the sound effects men clank brass *cojones* in the background.

If the plot line of *Dark Alliance* sounds familiar, that's because it's appeared in other works of fantasy. The belief that the U.S. government forced cocaine into the ghetto in an attempt at genocide has attained urban myth status in the black community. Substitute the FBI for the CIA and the Mafia for the contras, and you have the plot of Mario Van Peebles' 1996 film *Panther*.

Ludicrous though it was, *Panther* sounded downright plausible next to the lawsuit filed by the Christic Institute, the leftist "public interest" law firm, in 1986. The suit, directed against a number of civilian supporters of the contras (including several former U.S. intelligence and counterinsurgency officials), said the whole war in Nicaragua was basically an excuse to sell drugs. The contras, the lawsuit said, were just one minor facet of a 20-year narcotics conspiracy by the CIA, the National Security Council, Cuban Americans, and right-wing Libyans.

Despite support from intellectual luminaries ranging from Sally Field to Bruce Springsteen, the lawsuit failed to impress a federal judge, who dismissed it as frivolous and ordered the Christic Institute to pay \$1.2 million in legal costs for the defendants. (Another element of the Christic lawsuit was disproven a few years later when fingerprint evidence proved that a terrorist bombing that killed an American reporter was committed not by a right-wing Libyan working for the CIA, but by a left-wing Argentine working for the Sandinistas. Oops.)

Webb tries to disguise them, but the bloodlines between the Christic Institute lawsuit and *Dark Alliance* are quite direct. The bulk of the book's Nicaragua reporting was done by Swiss journalist Georg Hodel, who worked closely with the Christic Institute. (The firmness of Hodel's grip on reality may be judged by the other conspiracy white whale he has been pursuing for years—that the Rockefeller family was the secret power behind Hitler.) Hodel and Webb were introduced by Christic Institute investigator Doug Vaughan. Though he discreetly fails to

Hooked on Fantasies

By Glenn Garvin

Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion, by Gary Webb, New York: Seven Stories Press, 548 pages, \$24.95

Hell hath no fury like a leftist scorned. And boy, have they been scorned for the past decade. The fall of the Berlin Wall, Tiananmen Square, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European puppets, the deluge of Cuban rafters—the list is endless. It's gotten to the point where I wouldn't be surprised to see a mob of students marching on Sproul Hall at Berkeley, chanting, "Ho! Ho! Ho Chi Minh! General Motors is gonna win!"

But nothing, *nothing*, has stung like the defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. You could explain away the Soviet Union and even grizzled old Fidel Castro (four decades without elections and still counting) as cases of revolutionary sclerosis. And everyone knew China hadn't been the same since the Gang of Four was so indecorously tossed in the slam. But Nicaragua! Now there was socialism with a baby boomer face.

The fact that Ronald Reagan hated them so much was the best validation of all. Who could have believed that those ungrateful peasants would fling the Sandinistas overboard the first chance they got?

For the left, bad journalism has always been the continuation of war by other means, and journalism doesn't get much worse than *Dark Alliance*. It's Gary Webb's book-and-a-half-length expansion of the sensational series he published two years ago in the *San Jose Mercury News*. The series argued that the U.S.-backed contra rebels, whose war forced the Sandinistas to hold free elections, funded themselves by flooding the United States with cocaine. Contra cocaine, Webb claims, not only set off the nationwide explosion of low-priced crack but also triggered the rise of black street gangs in Los Angeles. And all the while the CIA stood by, winking and nodding.

The newspaper series was quickly shot to pieces by other news outlets, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Eventually even the *Mercury* itself, after sending a reporter around to recheck Webb's work, started backing away. Webb, not surprisingly, began intimating that his own newspaper was part of the conspiracy, and they soon parted ways.

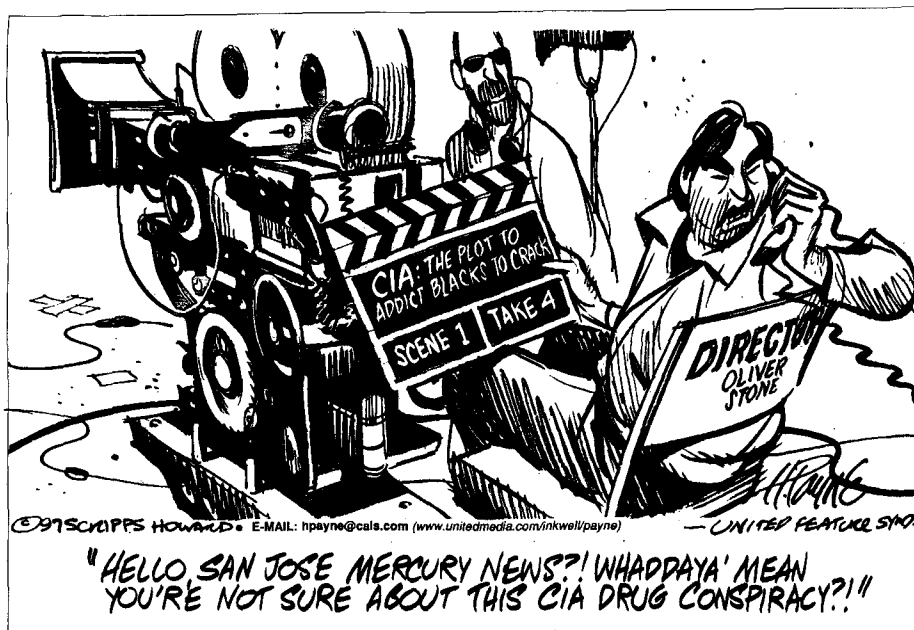
"I'm not the first reporter to go after the CIA and lose his job," said Webb, a line (he

mention it, at least half a dozen of the people Webb thanks in his preface worked for or with the Christic Institute.

The Christic pedigree is important because of what it says about intellectual honesty. The institute's lawsuit was a fraud from the start. At its heart was an affidavit supposedly based on testimony of 79 secret witnesses whose identity could not be revealed because their lives were in danger. When the judge finally warned Christic to either reveal the names or withdraw the affidavit, it turned out that several were listed twice. Others were newspaper reporters who knew nothing more about the case than they had been told by Christic officials. One of the most important was someone known merely as "David" from Costa Rica, whom no one from Christic had ever met or spoken with; he was a supposed barroom acquaintance of another witness, who didn't know his last name or address, and hadn't seen him in years. And some witnesses obviously couldn't have feared for their lives if their names were disclosed because they were already dead. (Christic's lead attorney, Daniel Sheehan, must have been taking a good many depositions with his Ouiji board. When he submitted his list of 2,176 trial witnesses—that number is not a typo—at least 12 percent of them turned out to be dead.)

This same flexible approach to the facts colors *Dark Alliance* from cover to cover. How can I begin to tell you about this book? Maybe I should start with a small detail, like this one: Webb's salute in passing to his colleague Roberto Orozco, "who later lost his job at [the Nicaraguan daily newspaper] *La Prensa* for pursuing this story." As they say in that Hertz ad, well, not exactly. It's true Orozco quarreled with editors over, among other things, chasing a story about the CIA and narco-trafficking. But as any *La Prensa* reporter can tell you, what got him fired was a note he posted on the newsroom bulletin board: "This place is full of shit."

Or perhaps it would be better to plunge right into the whoppers, the paranoid fantasies that call into question not only Webb's basic skills as a reporter but his entire psychiatric history, like this one: He recounts the tale of a captured Colombian narco-trafficker named Allen Raul Rudd, who explained how then-Vice President



George Bush had flown down to Colombia to strike a bargain with the Medellin cocaine cartel. The agreement was that the cartel could fly as much cocaine as it wanted into U.S. military bases as long as it sold guns to the contra rebels in Nicaragua. The deal was sealed by Bush and cartel leader Jorge Ochoa, who posed for a photo together in front of suitcases stuffed with cash.

To buy that story, you have to believe not only that Bush broke all existing Washington records for venality but that he was at once clever enough to give the slip to the phalanx of U.S. reporters who dog the vice president's every step, yet stupid enough to pose for a photo that would blow the whole thing. Then you've got to concede that Jorge Ochoa was even stupider, because even as the United States was pushing Colombia into a war on the cartels that would end in Ochoa's death, he never went on television to wave around a picture that would have proven that the biggest pusher of all was sitting in the White House.

Every page of *Dark Alliance* is like this, festooned with false information ranging from Clintonian half-truths to loony-tune delusions. No subject is too great, too small, or too far afield for Webb to distort or falsify. The misrepresentations run the gamut from trivial acts of self-aggrandizement, like Webb's claim that he won a Pulitzer Prize that was really awarded to the entire staff of the *Mercury News*, to

calculated character assassinations that would be grounds for horsewhipping if they were not so obviously mendacious. Does Webb really think that anyone is going to believe that Seymour Hersh—the reporter who broke not only the My Lai massacre but the story of CIA monitoring of domestic dissident groups—is a CIA tool?

The fact that Gary Webb is a jerk does not, of course, necessarily mean that the CIA and the contras weren't cocaine merchants, any more than the fact that Joe McCarthy was a jerk proved there were no communists. Government agencies can and do run dangerously off-track all the time, and the peril is greatest when you're talking about an organization like the CIA, which not only is imbued with a sense of higher purpose (protecting national security) but shrouded in secrecy as well.

Moreover, if the contras had managed to skirt all entanglement with narco-traffickers, it would make them unique among the world's insurgent movements of the past 20 years. Every guerrilla group, from the anti-communist *mujahideen* in Afghanistan to the nutball Maoists of Peru's Shining Path, has at least brushed shoulders with the drug trade. For one thing, it is only a matter of time until supply pilots flying around the bush realize that bags of white powder can be profitably stashed among the loads of guns they're carrying. A few contra pilots and their associates—particularly on the so-called southern front

of the war, where the commander was the erratic ex-Sandinista war hero Eden Pastora—succumbed. But to label that a CIA-contra-cocaine connection is like trying to label the Pentagon a pusher because a private in Fort Hood, Texas, sells a lid to his girlfriend's brother.

Much more serious is the inevitable moment when it occurs to guerrilla leaders that dope represents a potentially lucrative source of funding: An army travels on its wallet, and cash flow, be it from Moscow or Washington, can be erratic. The temptation has proven irresistible to many insurgencies, especially in Latin America; drug money is a major source of revenue to all the various guerrilla groups in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, and the Marxist Revolutionary Forces of Columbia (FARC) may be the biggest narco-trafficking gang in the world.

The contras—especially before the United States began funding them in 1981—had the same money problems as their Marxist counterparts. They turned to some of the same solutions. One contra faction based in Guatemala raised money for a time through bank robberies, car thefts, and kidnappings. But in late 1981, as American money began to flow to a

stick. But he finally prevailed, in large part because there was no longer any need for the contras to pay their own way. From 1981 to 1984, the United States put up \$72 million for the contras, more than enough to fund them even as their numbers increased to 15,000. Congress, in a spat with Reagan, closed the spigot in 1985, and the contras began withdrawing from Nicaragua, triggering Oliver North's now-infamous efforts to enlist the Ayatollah Khomeini in the anti-Sandinista cause. In 1986, another appropriation of \$100 million started the war up again.

So you don't have to believe the CIA and contras were saints to stay out of the cocaine business, only that they had a rudimentary sense of self-preservation. Between 1982 and 1985, there was no need to undertake anything as insanely risky as running dope into American ghettos. During the 18-month span in 1985 and 1986 when they did need money, the evidence is overwhelming that the contras didn't have the pot of cocaine gold that Webb imagines—if they had, they would have stayed in Nicaragua and continued the war instead of withdrawing to Honduras.

***Dark Alliance* isn't really about crack or the ghetto. It's about vindicating the American left. If proving the Sandinistas were the good guys has gotten tougher as the evidence mounts that they used their power to amass offshore bank accounts and molest their stepdaughters, then more energy will have to go into proving the contras were the bad guys.**

united contra front based in Honduras, new commander Enrique Bermudez ordered an end to the Al Capone stuff. His officers complained: If robberies were good enough for the communists in El Salvador and Colombia, why not for us? Because, Bermudez said, nobody in Moscow cared what Soviet clients did to raise money. In Washington, it would be a different story.

There was a serious schism with the contras over the issue, and Bermudez had to oust a number of officers to make it

Webb would have known this if he had ever taken the trouble to interview any actual contras, or any of the CIA officers who worked them. But he didn't. His evidence that the contras were selling cocaine is almost entirely drawn from the claims of a few Nicaraguan traffickers facing long jail sentences who were using a the-CIA-made-me-do-it defense. Their involvement with the contras was tangential, if even that. And by their own testimony—which Webb distorts to the point of falsehood—they stopped giving the contras

any money at all by 1982, if not earlier.

Webb's attempts to inflate bit players into contra warlords can be downright comic. Take the case of Norwin Meneses, the Professor Moriarty of *Dark Alliance*. Webb says he was chief of "intelligence and security" for the contras...in California. (Does anyone out there know how many Sandinista divisions were based in San Francisco?) And Meneses certainly kept the contra coffers full. Webb triumphantly produces written proof of \$484.20 in contributions. In small bills, I imagine, to confound all those Sandinista search-and-destroy teams running around Fisher-man's Wharf.

If Meneses and his pals barely qualified as featherweights as far as their contra credentials go, their credits as cocaine traffickers weren't much more impressive. Webb breathlessly reports that they brought in five tons of cocaine over a decade. To put that in perspective, U.S. Customs agents found two tons in *a single plane* on a runway at Miami International in 1981. That's why Webb's claim that the Nicaraguan dealers single-handedly blighted inner-city Los Angeles with crack is not even taken seriously enough to rebut by most of his critics.

But then, *Dark Alliance* isn't really about crack or the ghetto. It's about vindicating the American left. If proving that the Sandinistas were the good guys has gotten considerably tougher as the evidence mounts that they used their time in power to amass offshore bank accounts and molest their 11-year-old stepdaughters, then more energy will have to go into proving the contras were the bad guys. I'd look for *Dark Alliance II: The CIA, the Contras, and the AIDS Explosion* any day now. That will be followed, if necessary, by *Dark Alliance III: The CIA, the Contras, and Jerry Springer*. And were those Nicaraguan cigars that Monica Lewinsky used to tempt the president? Anything is possible, except for the Gary Webbs of the world to admit that Ronald Reagan might have known more about Central America in the 1980s than they did. ♦

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Truth Believer

By Jonathan Rauch

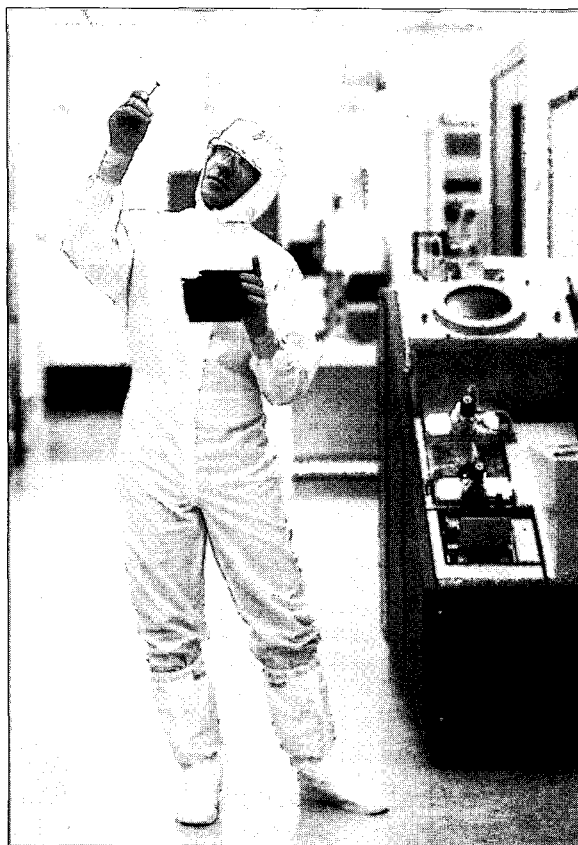
Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays, by Susan Haack, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 212 pages, \$22.50

When was the last time you heard from a professional philosopher who wanted to intervene in a public argument in order to say something sane? Today in Washington, where I live and work, it is not unusual for an economist—a Paul Krugman, a Herb Stein, a Robert Reich, a Jagdish Bhagwati—to step forward and say something sensible or informative or (even) useful. Sometimes political scientists also do it, although that is somewhat rarer; and certainly working scientists—Freeman Dyson or Edward O. Wilson or Stephen Jay Gould—are helpful. But philosophers? When we hear from them, whether “we” are in Washington or just in ordinary life, they come as aliens from outer space, depositing here or there a podlike idea whose esotericism or smugness puzzles or annoys us; and then the little green philosophical men climb back aboard their saucer and fly away.

Philosophy at its best can help save society, but today what needs saving is philosophy itself, from death by obscurity. To re-engage, philosophers must relearn that it is not enough merely to be clever or politically advanced. In fact, it is not anything, really, merely to be clever or politically advanced. What matters is being right, and this means, for the philosopher no less than for the scientist, testing one’s ideas honestly and carefully and in a spirit that puts truth ahead of cleverness or politics. Which brings us to Charles Sanders Peirce and his intellectual goddaughter, Susan Haack.

Peirce (1839–1914; pronounced “purse”) was a philosopher of science and knowledge, a working physicist and astronomer, a pioneer in semiotics and symbolic logic. His astonishingly broad interests ranged from aesthetics to photometrics,

and his writings were prolific and strikingly original. But because he was an irascible and eccentric character who managed to keep only one brief academic job, because his writings were fragmentary and his style often dense and thorny (though it could also be majestic and passionate), and because he never inspired a social movement or attracted a public following, his name has never been known outside of a fairly small circle of cognoscenti. He spent his last years in poverty and isolation, too poor even for a decent burial. This would have been a shame even if not for the fact that, as it happens, he was the greatest of all American philosophers.



Cleaning the Academic House: Philosopher Susan Haack is appalled by current notions of “politically adequate research and scholarship.” To politicize inquiry, she says, is to cut corners on all the hard, painful, frustrating work of figuring out what is actually the case, and to substitute foregone conclusions.

Peirce founded America’s signature philosophy, pragmatism, in its original, most refined vintage. To wit: A statement’s meaning is the sum of all the ways in which it might be tested in the real world (or in logical space). Or, as Peirce put it more picturesquely, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” If a proposition bears no pragmatic fruit, it has no proper meaning at all, and is nonsense (he called metaphysics a “puny, rickety and scrofulous science”). To have meaning, then, is to be testable, and to learn is to test.

Anyone can test ideas according to his own lights, of course, and can demonstrate to his own satisfaction that 47 angels can dance on the head of a pin. But scientific testing is different, because it happens only when a network of people test each other. “Individualism and falsity are one and the same,” Peirce wrote; “one man’s experience is nothing if it stands alone.” He pushed far out ahead of his time, and in some ways even of our time, in seeing the profoundly communitarian nature of scientific inquiry. Science, he said, must be a public, communal process in which all assume that each may be wrong, and each constantly checks for his own and other mistakes (thus the Peircean doctrine of “fallibilism”). And this social process of inquiry, he further saw, could work only if most inquirers, most of the time, maintained what he called the scientific attitude: a genuine desire to learn, a genuine humility before the difficulty of learning, and above all a determination to follow the search wherever it leads.

In a thousand ways, on a thousand battlements, Peirce defended that ethic. The rule which deserves to be inscribed on every wall of the city of philosophy, he said, is: Do not block the way of inquiry. When he spoke of rescuing “the good ship Philosophy for the service of Science from the hands of the lawless rovers of the sea of literature,” he might have been talking about preserving the scientific attitude from today’s deconstructionists and subjectivists and radical feminists and egalitarians, who regard science as little more than one way people