Managing a Nightmare

CIA Public Affairs and the Drug Conspiracy Story

The charges could hardly be worse. A widely read newspaper series leads many Americans to believe CIA is guilty of at least complicity, if not conspiracy, in the outbreak of crack cocaine in America’s inner cities. In more extreme versions of the story circulating on talk radio and the Internet, the Agency was the instrument of a consistent strategy by the US Government to destroy the black community and to keep black Americans from advancing. Denunciations of CIA—reminiscent of the 1970s—abound. Investigations are demanded and initiated. The Congress gets involved.

But, after this surge of publicity that questions the Agency’s integrity, the media itself soon begins to question the veracity of the original story. A completely one-sided media campaign is averted, and reporting on the issue becomes polarized rather than wholly anti-CIA. By one count, press stories skeptical of the charges against CIA actually begin to outnumber those giving the story credence. A review of the CIA drug conspiracy story—from its inception in August 1996 with the San Jose Mercury-News stories—shows that a ground base of already productive relations with journalists and an effective response by the Director of Central Intelligence’s (DCI) Public Affairs Staff (PAS) helped prevent this story from becoming an unmitigated disaster.

This success has to be viewed in relative terms. In the world of public relations, as in war, avoiding a rout in the face of hostile multitudes can be considered a success. Obviously, it is not an ideal situation. We would rather promote CIA and its missions and people all the time, stopping occasionally only to correct errors in a reporter’s story—but that is not realistic. As an important public relations resource book advises:  

"Crisis and controversy can strike any organization, regardless of its size or line of business... the rule is: Anything can happen. No organization with the remotest chance that its regimen could be upset by surprise happenings should fail to keep at least one eye open for the unexpected.... No organization can expect to be immune to events that engage public attention, affect key constituencies, and arouse emotions."

With the drug conspiracy allegations, public attention was certainly engaged, as the story was carried nationwide by major and local press, TV, and radio. Emotions were aroused. The more virulent of the public attacks against CIA charged the Agency with engaging in “chemical warfare,” “systematic genocide,” and “attempted mass murder” against black Americans. Were “key constituencies” affected negatively by the story? Inasmuch as the American public is the ultimate “constituency” for any element of our democratic form of government, the answer has to be yes. The Congress—a constituency for CIA due to its budget and oversight responsibilities—also became involved. Finally, the men and women who work for CIA...
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Alarming Allegations

The firestorm began when the San Jose Mercury-News ran its three-part series, “Dark Alliance,” by staff writer Gary Webb. In the series, Webb alleged that the US-backed Contra rebels in Nicaragua forged a “union” with gangs in Los Angeles to sell tons of cocaine in black neighborhoods and to use “millions” of dollars in profits to fund the Contras’ war against the Sandinista regime. “Dark Alliance” did not state outright that CIA ran the drug trade or even knew about it, but CIA complicity was heavily implied by the graphics accompanying the story and by the frequent use of the phrase “the CIA’s army” to describe the Contras and anyone working with them.

The series appeared with no warning. Generally speaking, reporters working stories on CIA will call the PAS for comment, background, specific information, or requests to speak with retired Agency employees. Part of Public Affairs’ planning for crisis involves an ongoing, active engagement with media representatives. The telephone and fax numbers for CIA Public Affairs are well known among US and foreign journalists, as evidenced by the quantity and variety of calls fielded every day by the Agency’s media relations spokesman. Webb, who reportedly investigated this story for a year, would later claim—during the media criticism that emerged in the coming weeks—that he tried to call the Agency but was unsuccessful: “Essentially, our trail stopped at the door of the CIA. They wouldn’t return my phone calls.”

CIA was caught unawares by the Mercury-News series because Gary Webb had never called or spoken with anyone on the PAS. Touted as an investigative journalist—Webb was named Northern California’s Journalist of the Year for this series—he apparently could not come up with a widely available and well-known telephone number for CIA Public Affairs. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that he spoke to no one at CIA because he was uninterested in anything the Agency might have to say that would diminish the impact of his series.

The story quickly spread through wire services and the Mercury-News website. CIA complicity in drug smuggling into US cities was more strongly implied or explicitly stated with every “bounce” of this story. Public Affairs received its first call on the story from a journalist on 21 August, the day after the series ended. In the first few days, CIA media spokesmen would remind reporters seeking comment that this series represented no real news, in that similar charges were made in the 1980s and were investigated by the Congress and were found to be without substance. Reporters were encouraged to read the “Dark Alliance” series closely and with a critical eye to what allegations could actually be backed with evidence. Early in the life of this story, one major news affiliate, after speaking with a CIA media spokesman, decided not to run the story.

Gaining Momentum

The story languished with little attention for a week or so, during which DCI John Deutch received a letter from Representative Maxine Waters of California, who had asked for an investigation into the charges. In his response, the DCI reiterated his belief that the allegations were groundless: at the same time, he said, he was requesting a review by CIA’s Inspector General (IG), in light of the serious nature of the charges. The Director sent a similar letter to Senator Barbara Boxer of California and to the chairman of the House and Senate intelligence committees. At this point, the story began to pick up steam.

Because of the ongoing IG review, CIA was limited in its response, and requests for CIA spokesmen to appear on talk radio or TV programs had to be turned down. Nevertheless, Public Affairs emphasized to callers the independence of CIA’s IG (although press commentary often distorted the IG review as an “in-house” or “internal” investigation) and that the Agency would willingly cooperate with any external investigation. Public Affairs also began to distribute to media contacts copies of the Director’s letter to Waters, and, beginning in early September, many stories made use of the DCI’s words.

On 11 September, activist Dick Gregory and local Washington talk radio host Joe Madison were arrested...
most journalists are professionals genuinely interested in getting the story right.

Spreading Skepticism

That third week in September was a turning point in media coverage of this story. Respected columnists, including prominent blacks, began to question the motives of those who uncritically accepted the idea that CIA was responsible for destroying black communities. Others took a hard look at the evidence provided by the Mercury-News—something Public Affairs encouraged from the beginning—and found it convincing. A *New York Daily News* reporter concluded the *Mercury-News* series "just doesn't say what everybody seems to think it says." *The Baltimore Sun*, after running articles giving credence to the allegations, reported that the series was "weak" in documentation; the *Sun* also quoted a CIA spokesman to the effect that the *San Jose Mercury-News* never called CIA for comment and should have called "in the interest of fair and balanced reporting." *The Weekly Standard* published a piece that discredited the *Mercury-News* series. *The Washington Post* ran two articles by leading journalists that criticized the assumptions and connections made by the original series. Public Affairs made sure that reporters and news directors calling for information—as well as former Agency officials, who were themselves representing the Agency in interviews with the media—received copies of these more balanced stories. Because of the *Post*'s national reputation, its articles especially were picked up by other papers, helping to create what the Associated Press called a "firestorm of reaction" against the *San Jose Mercury-News.*

The *Mercury-News* soon found itself the target of so much media-generated criticism that it resorted to the unusual measure of scrutinizing its own series, addressing the criticism, and concealing the paper might have done some things differently, including calling the CIA, not using the CIA logo, clarifying the use of the term "CIA's army," and including a statement that the paper found no evidence that CIA ordered or sanctioned the drug trade. One reporter of a major regional newspaper told Public Affairs that, because it had reprinted the *Mercury-News* stories in their entirety, his paper now had "egg on its face," in light of what other newspapers were saying.

By the end of September, the number of observed stories 12 in the print media that indicated skepticism of the *Mercury-News* series surpassed that of the negative coverage, which had already peaked. In fact, for three weeks the number of skeptical or positive pieces observed in the media constantly exceeded the number of negative treatments of CIA. After a brief surge in negative reporting in mid-October, the observed number of skeptical treatments of the alleged
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CIA connection grew until it more than tripled the coverage that gave credibility to that connection. The growth in balanced reporting was largely due to the criticisms of the San Jose Mercury-News by The Washington Post, The New York Times, and especially The Los Angeles Times.

In its own three-part series, The Los Angeles Times debunked Gary Webb's claims and insinuations regarding the alleged role of CIA in drug smuggling, the amount of money that went to the Contras, and even such basic elements of the story as the chronology of events. Published almost exactly two months after the San Jose Mercury-News stories, The Los Angeles Times series itself became a newsworthy story and was picked up by many media outlets across the country.

By the time the SSCI ended its first round of hearings on the matter in late October, the tone of the entire CIA-drug story had changed. Most press coverage included, as a routine matter, the now-widespread criticism of the Mercury-News allegations.

DCI Deutch's much publicized "town meeting" in Watts in mid-November, other than sparking a small surge of stories, ironically seemed not to have made much difference on the generally factual character of news reporting—other than possibly generating some public sympathy for the way he was treated.

The Role of Public Affairs

Of the journalists and columnists who wrote pieces skeptical or critical of the CIA-cocaine connection, about one-third called Public Affairs before going to print. Some called to check facts; many called for an official CIA comment; most called for further information.

It is in providing information that Public Affairs can best do its job. I have spoken with some CIA employees who are angry that Public Affairs "does not do more" when adverse publicity hits the papers; a few even seem to think CIA can and should write the media's stories for them. It is important to reiterate that the PAS aims above all to inform rather than to pressure or to persuade. When dealing with the media, the rule practiced by Public Affairs is to provide as much information as possible, consistent with the need to protect sensitive information, sources, and methods. Often, CIA spokesmen cannot comment. Frequenty, they can say something to the media, but it can take days to figure out within the Agency what it is that can be said.

For example, in order to help a journalist working on a story that would undermine the Mercury-News allegations, Public Affairs was able to deny any affiliation of a particular individual—which is a rare exception to the general policy that CIA does not comment on any individual's alleged CIA ties. But coordinating that response took time.

Because of CIA's secret history and public interest in its work, whatever CIA spokesmen say—even denials—can make news. So Public Affairs fields a lot of calls from journalists—up to 300 a month, if CIA is having a particularly bad time—and these journalists tend to pay attention to the information CIA provides. CIA benefits from the good track record the PAS has with journalists for returning phone calls promptly, providing background briefings on occasion, and helping journalists as much as possible. This record gives CIA a certain level of credibility when a public relations crisis occurs.

Public Affairs cannot dictate stories to the media—not would we want to live in a society where that was possible. CIA's relationship with the media can be an extremely sensitive matter, as demonstrated by the public flap in 1996 over the possible intelligence use of information from journalists. What CIA media spokesmen can do, as this case demonstrates, is to work with journalists who are already disposed toward writing a balanced story. Even when dealing with a breaking story that puts the Agency in a bad light, CIA Public Affairs can help the journalist with information he might not have or a perspective that might not have crossed his mind. The result is a more balanced story: better for the reporter, because the facts are right; better for CIA, because the Agency gets a fairer hearing; and better for the public, which is better informed than it otherwise might be. In a few cases, it may be possible, through simply providing information, to change the mind of a reporter whose initial inclinations toward CIA were negative but who is willing to listen to the other side of the story. The influence Public Affairs wields has its limits, but at least it exists.
Some Self-Policing

What gives this limited influence a “multiplier effect” is something that surprised me about the media: that the journalistic profession has the will and the ability to hold its own members to certain standards. This self-policing phenomenon reached its apogee early in 1997, when the American Journalism Review (AJR) published a skeptical piece on “The Web That Gary Spun.” This piece also revealed that some of Gary Webb’s harshest critics were his own colleagues on the Mercury-News staff. The editor of the AJR later wrote that the Mercury-News deserved all the heat leveled at it for “Dark Alliance.” The criticism from within the journalistic community had its effect; in May 1997, the executive editor of the Mercury-News made nationwide news by apologizing in print for the flaws and shortcomings of “Dark Alliance.” This mea culpa was reported by every major newspaper in the country.

The CIA-drug story has largely run its course. It is by no means a dead issue, however. The Mercury-News disclaimer “didn’t change things at all” for Representative Waters, and she continued to conduct her own investigation. She and her other critics publicly disparaged CIA again in late 1997, when the IG announced its investigation came up with no evidence to support the charges. About the same time, Gary Webb resigned from the Mercury-News. He evidently is considering writing a book in which he would expand his theories to include the notion that the war in Nicaragua—far from being a battle in the Cold War—was not a real conflict at all but rather a charade to cover up drug smuggling by rogue CIA agents. As Howard Kurtz of The Washington Post remarked, “Oliver Stone, check your voice mail.”

A Question of Trust

There will be other public relations crises with which CIA will have to contend. As John Ranelagh suggested 10 years ago in his history of CIA, the attitude of the American people toward the Agency parallels its view of government generally; when the public’s trust in politicians and government institutions sinks, CIA can expect to be a target, with the media the obvious delivery vehicle. If historians such as Samuel Huntington and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., are correct, we can expect periodic displays of public distrust in government roughly every 20 to 30 years—and we are just beginning such a phase. In such times, even fantastic allegations about CIA—JFK’s assassination, UFO coverups, or importing drugs into America’s cities—will resonate with, and even appeal to, much of American society. At those times, it is especially important to have a professional public affairs staff help limit the damage and facilitate more balanced coverage of CIA.

Societal Shortcomings

As a personal postscript, I would submit that ultimately the CIA-drug story says a lot more about American society on the eve of the millennium than it does about either CIA or the media. We live in somewhat coarse and emotional times—when large numbers of Americans do not adhere to the same standards of logic, evidence, or even civil discourse as those practiced by members of the CIA community. Venom against “CIA thuggery” can still be found in place of reasoned discourse in the public square. “Freeway Ricky” Ross, whom all agree actually brought the drugs into Los Angeles, was treated with deference and even respect on talk shows, while CIA—which is helping fight the drug scourge—was dragged through the mud. Public hearings on the allegations—even Congressional hearings—were marked by jeering or cheers from audiences less interested in truth than in having personal beliefs vindicated. Journalists who wrote articles skeptical of the charges against CIA were pilloried in print—one was accused of serving as a CIA lackey—and even threatened with physical harm over their articles.

Because of episodes like the drug story, some Agency employees might conclude that there is scant public appreciation of their dedication and hard work and of the fact, that as citizens themselves, they are just as outraged as any other responsible group in American society about the damage done by drug trafficking. But most CIA employees probably will see the drug story as yet another bum rap—one that, in this case, was belatedly acknowledged as such by reputable journalists.

NOTES

1. See the chapter on “Crisis Communications: Dealing With The Unforeseen,” in Robert Dilen- schneider and Dan Forestal, The Darnell Public Relations Handbook (Chicago: Darnell, 1990), pp. 330-347; emphasis by the author.

2. For example, “State NAACP Vows To Act on CIA-drug Reports,” The Sunday Record (New Jersey),
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3. In October 1996, I went on a speaking tour to Brigham Young University, Washington and Jefferson College, and the US Coast Guard Academy. While I encountered no hostility at any of these institutions, one of the first questions raised in Q&A was the drug conspiracy issue.


5. According to journalism’s primary trade journal, Webb’s former employer, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, lost a libel suit and was assessed over $13 million in damages because of stories Webb wrote that alleged improprieties surrounding the Cleveland Grand Prix. See Susan Revah, “A Furor Over the CIA and Drugs,” American Journalism Review, November 1996, p. 11. Those who followed General Westmoreland’s unsuccessful suit against CBS several years ago can appreciate how difficult it is to win a libel suit against the press.


9. Congressman Waters was only the most vocal of the Congressional critics. For example, Congressman Cynthia McKinney on the House floor called CIA the “Central Intoxication Agency.” See Jim Wolf, “CIA on Defensive Over Drug-Peddling Charges,” Associated Press, 18 September 1996.


12. PAS Research and Services staff regularly clips articles relevant to intelligence and national security issues.


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