

CONTRARY NOTIONS  
The Michael Parenti Reader



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## INTRODUCTION

Contained herein are the *contrary notions*, the critical analysis that is so grandly ignored or viciously misrepresented by many persons from across the political spectrum—left, right, and center. To some readers my efforts might appear one-sided, but if it is true that we need to hear all sides and not just the prevailing conventional opinion, then all the more reason why the reflections and analysis presented in this book deserve reasoned attention.

It is not demanded of readers that they embrace my views but that they reflect upon their own. How seldom we bother to explore in some critical fashion the fundamental preconceptions that shape our understanding of social and political life. How frequently, as if by reflex rather than reflection, we respond to certain cues and incantations, resisting any incongruous notion. Our opinions shelter and support us; it is an excruciating effort to submit them to reappraisal. Yet if we are to maintain some pretense at being rational creatures we must risk the discomfiture that comes with questioning the unquestionable, and try to transcend our tendencies toward mental confinement.

My intent is to proffer contrary notions, that is, critical ways of thinking about socio-political reality that will remain useful to the reader long after many of the particulars herein have slipped from his or her recall. What you are about to dip into are readings from various works of mine, from across some forty years and covering a wide range of subjects, including culture, ideology, media, environment, lifestyle, gender, race, ethnicity, wealth, class power, public policy, political life, technology, empire, history, and historiography, along with a few selections drawn directly from my personal life. Almost all these entries have been revised, expanded, updated, and, I like to think, improved. A few have never before been published. A few other selections are from publications or books of mine that are out of print and not easily accessible. This volume presents a varied sampling of my work without trying to represent every chronological phase or every subject I have ever treated.

Most of the writing herein is anchored in extensive research and is concerned with ideas and analyses that go beyond the issues of the day. I am of the opinion that there does not have to be an unbridgeable gap between scholars and lay readers. One can write in an accessible and pleasant style while dealing with complex concepts and constructs. To write clearly and understandably does not mean one is being simple or superficial. The converse is also true: to write in a dense, dull, or convoluted manner (as one is trained to do in academia) does not mean that one is being profound and insightful.

I decided not to include any of the many letters and book reviews I have published in newspapers, magazines, and journals, nor the polemical exchanges, rebuttals, and rejoinders I allowed myself to be drawn into, nor the numerous interviews I gave that have found their way into print. Letters, reviews, and interviews can provide

food for thought, I think, but in a form that seems too fragmented and off-the-cuff for this volume. (For further information about me and my talks and writings, see [www.michaelparenti.org](http://www.michaelparenti.org).)

I hope the reader's experience with this book will be not only informational but conceptual and maybe even occasionally enlightening. Everything on the pages that follow is meant to cast light on larger sets of social relations. In one way or another, everything herein is meant to engage our concerns about social justice and human well-being. The struggle against plutocracy and the striving for peace and democracy are forever reborn. Along with the many defeats and deceits produced in this age of reactionary resurgence, there have been some worthwhile victories. And although we are here only for a limited time, I like to think that this is not true of the world itself.

—Michael Parenti

I.

THROUGH THE  
LOOKING GLASS

## **1 MEDIA MOMENTS**

For some time now I have been suffering from what I call “media moments.” We all have heard of “senior moments,” a term used mostly by people of mature years who suddenly experience a lapse in recall. The mind goes blank and the individual complains, “I’m having a senior moment.” A media moment is a little different. It happens when you are reading or hearing what passes for the news. You are appalled and frustrated by the conservative bias, the evasions, the non sequiturs, and the outright disinformation. Your mind does not go blank; you simply wish it would.

I recall one media moment I experienced while listening to the BBC news. Now the BBC supposedly provides coverage superior to what is heard on U.S. mainstream media. It occasionally runs stories on European and Third World countries that are not likely to be carried by U.S. news sources. And BBC reporters ask confrontational questions of the personages they interview, applying a critical edge rarely shown by U.S. journalists. But the truth is, when it comes to addressing the fundamental questions of economic power, corporate dominance, and Western globalization,

BBC journalists and commentators are as careful as their American counterparts not to venture beyond the parameters of permissible opinion.

The BBC newscast segment that gave me my media moment was a special report on asthma, of all things. It began by noting that the number of asthma sufferers has been increasing at the alarming rate of 50 percent each decade. “Scientists are puzzled,” for there is “no easy explanation,” the narrator told us. One factor is “genetic predisposition,” he said. We then heard from a British scientist who said, yes, there is definitely a hereditary factor behind asthma; it tends to run in families. Sure, I said to myself, asthma is increasing by 50 percent a decade because people with a genetic tendency toward the disease are becoming more sexually active and procreative than everyone else. I felt a media moment coming on.

There are other contributing factors to the asthma epidemic, the narrator continued, for instance “lifestyle.” He interviewed another scientist who confirmed this “scientific finding.” People are keeping cleaner homes, using air conditioning, and in general creating a more antiseptic lifestyle for themselves, the scientist said. This means they do not get enough exposure to pollen, dust, and dirt the way people did in the good old days. Hence, they fail to build up a proper defense to such irritants.

These comments made me think back to my younger years when I lived next to a construction site that deposited daily clouds of dust over my abode for months on end. Rather than building up a hardy resistance, I developed an acute sensitivity to dust and mold that has stayed with me to this day. Does exposure to a toxic environment really make us stronger? Looking at the evidence on cancer, lung diseases, and various occupational ailments, we would have to conclude that exposure does not inoculate us;

rather it seems to suppress or overload our immune systems, leaving us more vulnerable, not less.

The BBC report on asthma then took us to India for some *actualité*. A young man suffering from the disease was speaking in a rasping voice, telling of his affliction. This was accompanied by the squishing sound of a hand-held respirator. The victim said he had no money for medication. The narrator concluded that the disease persists among the poor in such great numbers because they cannot afford medical treatment. Yes, I said to myself, but this doesn't tell us what causes so much asthma among the poor to begin with.

Another "expert" was interviewed. He said that in India, as in most of the world, asthma is found in greatest abundance in the congested cities, less so in the suburbs, and still less in the countryside. No explanation was given for this, but by then I could figure it out for myself: the inner-city slum dwellers of Calcutta enjoy too antiseptic a lifestyle; too much air-conditioning and cleanliness has deprived them of the chance to challenge and strengthen their immune systems—unlike their country cousins who have all that pollen and earthy dust to breathe and who thereby build up a natural resistance. At this point I could feel the media moment drawing ever closer.

The BBC report makes no mention of how neoliberal "free market" policies have driven people off the land, causing an explosion in slum populations throughout the world. These impoverished urban areas produce the highest asthma rates. And the report says nothing about how, as cigarette markets in the West become saturated, the tobacco companies vigorously pursue new promotional drives in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, leading to a dramatic climb in Third World smoking rates, which certainly does not help anyone's respiratory system.

Finally the BBC narrator mentioned pollution. He said it “may” be a factor, but more study is needed. May? More study? In any case, he asked, “Is pollution really a cause or is it merely a trigger?” He seemed to be leaning toward “trigger,” although by then I was having trouble seeing the difference. The media moment had come upon me full force. I began talking back at my radio, posing such cogent and measured comments as “You jack-ass, flunky, BBC announcer!”

Media apologists like to point out that journalists face severe constraints of time and space, and must necessarily reduce complex realities into brief reports; hence, issues are conflated, and omissions and oversights are inevitable. But this BBC report went on for some ten minutes, quite a long time by newscast standards. There would have been enough time to mention how the destruction of rain forests and the dramatic increase in industrial emissions have contributed to an alarming CO<sub>2</sub> buildup and a commensurate decline in the atmosphere’s oxygen content. The BBC could have told us how the oil cartels have kept us hooked on fossil fuel, while refusing to develop nonpolluting, inexpensive tidal, wind, thermal, and solar energy systems.

And there would have been ample opportunity to say something about how the use of automobiles has skyrocketed throughout the entire world, causing severe damage to air quality, especially in cities. One study found that children who live within 250 feet of busy roads had a 50 percent higher risk of developing asthma than those who do not.<sup>1</sup> The asthma risk decreased to “normal” for children living about 600 feet or more away from a busy road. The researchers noted that major sources of air pollution like highways should not be the only cause for concern. Local roads also create a serious asthma hazard.

But rather than digging into the actual and less speculative

causes of asthma, including the direct link to air pollution, this BBC report chose to be “balanced” and “objective” by blaming the victims, their genetic predisposition, their antiseptic lifestyles, and their inability to buy medications.

Newscasters who want to keep their careers afloat learn the fine art of evasion. We should not accuse them of doing a poor or sloppy job of reporting. If anything, with great skill they skirt around the most important points of a story. With much finesse they say a lot about very little, serving up heaps of junk news filled with so many empty calories and so few nutrients. Thus do they avoid offending those who wield politico-economic power while giving every appearance of judicious moderation and balance. It is enough to take your breath away.

## 2 LIBERAL MEDIA YET TO BE FOUND

It is widely believed that the corporate-owned news media suffer from a liberal bias. TV pundits and radio talk show commentators (many of whom are ultraconservatives), as well as right-wing political leaders have tirelessly propagated that belief. Meanwhile liberal critics who think otherwise, are afforded almost no exposure in the supposedly liberal media.

Consider the case of David Horowitz. When Horowitz was an outspoken left critic of U.S. domestic and foreign policies and an editor of the popular radical magazine *Ramparts*, the mainstream press ignored his existence. But after he and former *Ramparts* colleague Peter Colliers surfaced as born-again conservatives, the *Washington Post Magazine* gave prominent play to their “Lefties for Reagan” pronunciamento. Horowitz and Colliers soon linked

up with the National Forum Foundation which dipped into deep conservative pockets and came up with munificent sums to enable the two ex-radicals to do ideological battle with the left. In short order, Horowitz, now a rightist media critic, had his own radio show and appeared with notable frequency on radio and television political talk shows to whine about how the media is monopolized by liberals.

Another example might suffice. When ABC correspondent John Stossel belatedly emerged as a *laissez-faire* ideologue, announcing, “it’s my job to explain the beauties of the free market,” his career took off. An ardent supporter of chemicalized agribusiness, Stossel claimed that organic food “could kill you” and catastrophic global warming is a “myth.” He called for the privatization of Social Security, the curbing of environmental education, and the celebration of greed as a good thing for the economy. Instead of being challenged for his one-sided views, Stossel was given a seven-figure contract and a starring role in numerous TV specials.<sup>2</sup>

Then there are the many radio talk-show hosts, of whom Rush Limbaugh is only the best known, who rail against the “pinko press” on hundreds of television stations and thousands of radio stations owned by wealthy conservatives and underwritten by big business firms. To complain about how liberals dominate the media, the ultraconservative Limbaugh has an hour every day on network television and a radio show syndicated on over 600 stations. No liberal or progressive or far-left commentator enjoys anywhere near that kind of exposure.

Most toxic of all is Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News Network. Unlike the pabulum dished out by CNN and the three traditional networks, Fox News and Fox commentators are on message every hour hammering home conservative ideological points. Daily

memos come down from the corporate office at Fox telling its reporters and commentators what the story of the day should be and what point of view was expected when reporting it. Fox News reportedly quizzes journalistic applicants on whether they are registered Republicans or not. Fox dismisses the idea of an ecological crisis and is scornful of environmentalists in general. It never mentioned the numbers of U.S. casualties accumulating in Iraq, believing that this would reflect unfavorably upon the war effort of George W. Bush (hereafter referred to as Bush Jr. to distinguish him from his father who was also a president). Fox News supports U.S. military interventions around the globe, the untrammelled glories of the “free market,” and just about every other reactionary cause, with a lockstep precision and persistence that is unmatched by the rest of the political spectrum.<sup>3</sup>

Religious media manifest the same imbalance of right over left. Liberal and often radically oriented Christians and their organizations lack the financial backing needed to gain serious media access. Many liberal Christians are busy doing good: relief work, community assistance, soup kitchens, and the like. Meanwhile right-wing fundamentalist Christians are busy doing propaganda, promoting homophobic, sexist, reactionary causes. Rightist Christian media comprise a multi-billion-dollar industry, controlling about 10 percent of all radio outlets and 14 percent of the nation’s television stations.

Commentators on televangelist Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) insist that we should get government out of our lives, yet they seem determined to get government into our bedrooms. They want government to outlaw cohabitation, birth control, adultery, and gay marriage. Many support retention of sodomy laws that dictate what sexual positions consenting married couples may take in bed. CBN commentators

want government to outlaw safe and legal abortions because they believe a fertilized ovum takes precedent over the woman (or adolescent girl) carrying it. I heard one panel of CBN commentators, all women, tell listeners that abortion causes cancer. CBN opinion makers want government to require prayers in our schools and subsidize religious education. They blame the country's ills on decadent morality, homosexuality, feminism, and the loss of family values. Pat Robertson himself charged that feminism “encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.”<sup>4</sup>

Political leaders do their share to reinforce the image of a liberal press. During the Iran-Contra affair, President Reagan likened the “liberal media” to a pack of sharks. And President Clinton, a Democrat, complained that he had “not gotten one damn bit of credit from the knee-jerk liberal press.” Clinton was confused. Almost all the criticism hurled his way by the so-called liberal press came from conservative sources.

There is no free and independent press in the United States. The notion of a “free market of ideas” is as mythical as the notion of a free market of goods. Both conjure up an image of a bazaar in which many small producers sell their wares on a more or less equal footing. In fact—be it commodities or commentary—to reach a mass market you need substantial sums of money to buy exposure and distribution. Those without corporate media connections end up with a decidedly smaller clientele, assuming they are able to survive at all.

The major news media or press (the terms are used interchangeably here) are an inherent component of corporate America. As of 2007, only six giant conglomerates—Time Warner, General Electric, Viacom, Bertelsmann, Walt Disney, and

News Corporation (down from twenty-three in 1989)—owned most of the newspapers, magazines, book publishing houses, movie studios, cable channels, record labels, broadcast networks and channels, and radio and television programming in the United States, with additional holdings abroad. About 85 percent of the daily newspaper circulation in this country belongs to a few giant chains, and the trend in owner concentration continues unabated. All but a handful of the 150 movies produced each year are from six major studios. Big banks and corporations are among the top stockholders of mainstream media. Their representatives sit on the boards of all major publications and broadcast networks.<sup>5</sup>

Corporate advertisers exercise an additional conservative influence. They cancel accounts not only when stories reflect poorly on their product but, as is more often the case, when they perceive liberal tendencies creeping into news reports and commentary.

Not surprisingly, this pattern of ownership affects how news and commentary are produced. Media owners do not hesitate to kill stories they dislike and in other ways inject their own preferences into the news. As one group of investigators concluded years ago: “The owners and managers of the press determine which person, which facts, which version of the facts, and which ideas shall reach the public.”<sup>6</sup> In recent times, media bosses have refused to run stories or commentaries that reflected favorably on single-payer health insurance, or unfavorably on “free trade” globalization and U.S. military intervention in other countries.

Clear Channel, corporate owner of some 1,200 radio stations, canceled an antiwar advertisement, and stopped playing songs by the Dixie Chicks after that group’s lead singer uttered a critical remark about President Bush Jr. In 2004, Clear Channel sponsored jingoistic “Rally for America” events around the country in support of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. That same year the Walt Dis-

ney Co. blocked its Miramax division from distributing a documentary by Academy Award winner Michael Moore because it offered an unflattering picture of Bush. Sinclair Group, the largest owner of local TV stations in the country, censored its ABC affiliates for reading the names of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq (because publicizing the casualties might dampen public support for the war). Sinclair sends recorded right-wing editorial commentary to its affiliates to be broadcast as local news, and regularly contributes large sums to Republican candidates.<sup>7</sup>

A favorite conservative hallucination is that the Public Broadcasting System is a leftist stronghold. In fact, more than 70 percent of PBS's prime-time shows are funded wholly or in major part by four giant oil companies, earning it the sobriquet of "Petroleum Broadcasting System." PBS's public affairs programs are underwritten by General Electric, General Motors, Metropolitan Life, Pepsico, Mobil, Paine Webber, and the like. A study of these shows by one media-watchdog group found that corporate representatives constitute 44 percent of the sources about the economy; liberal activists account for only 3 percent, while labor representatives are virtually shut out. Guests on NPR and PBS generally are as ideologically conservative or mainstream as any found on commercial networks.

Politically progressive documentaries rarely see the light of day on PBS. In recent years, "Faces of War" (revealing the brutality of the U.S.-backed counterinsurgency in El Salvador), "Deadly Deception" (an Academy-Award-winning critique of General Electric and the nuclear arms industry), "Panama Deception" (an Academy-Award-winning exposé of the U.S. invasion of Panama) and numerous other revealing documentaries were, with a few local exceptions, denied broadcast rights on both commercial and public television.

The spectrum of opinion on political talk shows and on the pages of most newspapers ranges from far right to moderate center. In a display of false balancing, right-wing ideologues are pitted against moderate centrists. On foreign affairs the press's role as a cheerleader of the national security state and free-market capitalism is almost without restraint. Virtually no positive exposure has been given to Third World revolutionary or reformist struggles or to protests at home and abroad against U.S. overseas interventions.

Be it the Vietnam War, the invasions of Grenada and Panama, the intervention against Nicaragua, the Gulf War massacre, and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. military undertakings are portrayed as arising from noble if sometimes misplaced intentions. The media's view of the world is much the same as the view from the State Department and the Pentagon. The horrendous devastation wreaked upon the presumed beneficiaries of U.S. power generally is downplayed—as are the massive human rights violations perpetrated by U.S.-supported forces in scores of free-market client states.

If all this is true, why do conservatives complain about a liberal bias in the media? For one thing, attacks from the right help create a climate of opinion favorable to the right. Railing against the press's "liberalism" is a way of putting the press on the defensive, keeping it leaning rightward for its respectability. So liberal opinion in this country is forever striving for credibility within a conservatively defined framework.

Furthermore, ideological control is not formal and overt as with a state censor, but informal and usually implicit. Hence it works with imperfect effect. Editors sometimes are unable to see the troublesome implications of particular stories. As far as right-

wingers are concerned, too much gets in that should be excluded. Their goal is not partial control of the news but perfect control, not an overbearing advantage (which they already have) but total dominance of the communication universe. Anything short of unanimous support for a rightist agenda is treated as evidence of liberal bias. Expecting the press corps to be a press chorus, the conservative ideologue, like any imperious maestro, reacts sharply to the occasionally discordant note.

The discordant notes can be real. The news media never challenge the free-market ideology but they do occasionally report unsettling events and mishaps that might put business and the national security state in a bad light: toxic waste dumping by industrial firms, price gouging by defense contractors, bodies piling up in Haiti, financial thievery on Wall Street, U.S. casualties in Iraq, and the like. These exposures are more than rightists care to hear and are perceived by them as a liberal vendetta and evidence of a liberal bias.

In order to perform their class-control function, the media must maintain some degree of credibility. To do that, they must give some attention to the realities people experience. They must deal with questions like: Why are my taxes so high? Why are people losing their jobs? Why is the river so polluted? Why is there so much corruption in business and government? Why are we spending so much on the military? Why are we always at war? The media's need to deal with such things—however haphazardly and insufficiently—is what leads conservatives to the conclusion that the media are infected with “liberal” biases.

This is the conservative problem: reality itself is radical, so we must not get too close to it. The Third World really is poor and oppressed; the U.S. often does side with Third-World plutocrats; our tax system really is regressive and favors the very richest; mil-

lions of Americans do live in poverty; the corporations do plunder and pollute the environment; real wages for blue-collar workers definitely have flattened and even declined; the superrich really are increasing their share of the pie; and global warming really is happening.

Despite its best efforts, there are limits to how much the press can finesse these kinds of realities. Although it sees the world through much the same ideological lens as do corporate and government elites, the press must occasionally report some of the unpleasantness of life, if only to maintain its credibility with a public that is not always willing to buy the far-right line. On those occasions, rightists complain bitterly about a left bias.

Rightist ideologues object not only to what the press says but to what it omits. They castigate the press for failing to tell the American people that federal bureaucrats, “cultural elites,” gays, lesbians, feminists, and abortionists are destroying the nation; that God has been shut out of public life; that “secular progressives” are waging war against Christmas; that the U.S. military and corporate America are our only salvation; that litigious lawyers are undermining our business system; that there are no serious health-care problems in this country; that eco-terrorists stalk the land; that the environment is doing just fine—and other such loony tunes.

One ploy persistently used by rightists to “demonstrate” a liberal bias is to point out that journalists tend to vote for the Democrats. When polled, the Washington press corps favored Kerry over Bush in 2004 by a substantial majority. Left unmentioned is that working reporters are at the bottom of the command chain. They are not the ones who decide what gets printed and what does not. Nor do they determine which events are to be covered or ignored. Conservatives who rail against the

“liberal media” have not a word to say about the rightist and ultra-rightist proclivities of media owners, publishers, corporate advertisers, network bosses, senior editors, syndicated columnists, commentators, and shock-jock talk-show hosts—those who really determine what comes across as news and opinion.<sup>8</sup>

Reporters often operate in a state of self-censorship and anticipatory response. They frequently wonder aloud how their boss is taking things. They recall how superiors have warned them not to antagonize big advertisers and other powerful interests. They can name journalists who were banished for turning in the wrong kind of copy too often. Still, most newspeople treat these incidents as aberrant departures from a basically professional news system, and insist they owe their souls to no one. They claim they are free to say what they like, not realizing it is because their superiors like what they say. Since they seldom cross any forbidden lines, they are not reined in and they remain unaware that they are on an ideological leash.

While incarcerated in Mussolini’s dungeons from 1928 to 1937, the Italian communist and journalist Antonio Gramsci wrote about politics and culture in his prison notebooks. But he carefully had to eliminate words like “capitalism” and “class,” for these might attract the attention of the fascist censor who would then stop him from doing any more writing. The fascists well understood their job was to suppress class consciousness wherever it might appear. Today most of our journalists and social commentators exercise a similar caution. However, unlike Gramsci, they are not in prison. They don’t need a fascist censor breathing down their necks because they have a mainstream one implanted in their heads.

These internalized forms of self-censorship are more effective in preserving the dominant ideology than any state censor could

hope to be. Gramsci knew he was being censored. Many of our newspeople and pundits think they are free as birds—and they are, as long as they fly around in the right circles.

For conservative critics, however, the right circles are neither right enough nor tight enough. Anything to the left of themselves, including moderate right and establishment centrist, is defined as “liberal” or “leftist.” Their unrelenting campaign against the media helps to shift the center of political gravity in their direction. Giving generous exposure to conservative and far-right preachments, the press limits public debate to a contest between right and center, while everything substantially left of center is shut out. So the press becomes an active accomplice in maintaining its rightward bent.

On the American political scene, the center is occupied by relatively conservative members of the Democratic Leadership Council who are happy to be considered the only alternative to the ultra-right. This center is then passed off as “liberal.” Meanwhile real liberalism and everything progressive have been excluded from the picture—which is what the pundits, politicians, and plutocrats want.

### **3 METHODS OF MEDIA MANIPULATION**

Those who own and those who work for the major news media like to think they provide us with balanced coverage and objective commentary. Journalists and editors claim that occasional inaccuracies do occur in news coverage because of innocent error and everyday production problems such as deadline pressures, budgetary constraints, and the difficulty of reducing a complex

story into a concise report. Furthermore, no communication system can hope to report everything, hence selectivity is unavoidable.

To be sure, such pressures and problems do exist and honest mistakes can be made, but do they really explain the media's overall performance? True, the press must be selective, but what principle of selectivity is involved? Media bias usually does not occur in random fashion; rather it moves in more or less consistent directions, favoring management over labor, corporations over corporate critics, affluent Whites over low-income minorities, officialdom over protesters, privatization and free market "reforms" over public-sector development, U.S. dominance of the Third World over revolutionary or populist social change, and conservative commentators and columnists over progressive or radical ones.

#### SUPPRESSION BY OMISSION

Some critics complain that the press is sensationalistic and intrusive. In fact, the media's basic *modus operandi* is evasive rather than invasive. More common than the sensationalistic hype is the artful avoidance. Truly sensational stories (as opposed to sensationalistic) tend to be downplayed or completely avoided, even ones of major import. We hear about political repression perpetrated by officially designated "rogue" nations, but information about the massacres and death-squad murders perpetrated by U.S.-sponsored surrogate forces in the Third World are usually denied public airing.

In 1965 the Indonesian military—advised, equipped, trained, and financed by the U.S. military and the CIA—overthrew President Achmed Sukarno and eradicated the Indonesian Communist

Party and its various allies, killing half a million people (some estimates are as high as a million) in what was the greatest act of political mass murder since the Holocaust. The generals also destroyed hundreds of clinics, libraries, schools, and community centers that had been established by the communists. Here was a sensational story if ever there was one, but it took three months before it received passing mention in *Time* magazine and yet another month before it was reported in the *New York Times*, accompanied by an editorial that actually praised the Indonesian military for “rightly playing its part with utmost caution.”<sup>9</sup>

Over the course of forty years, the CIA involved itself with drug traffickers in Italy, France, Corsica, Indochina, Afghanistan, and Central and South America. Much of this activity was the object of extended congressional investigation—by Senator Church’s committee and Congressman Pike’s committee in the 1970s, and Senator Kerry’s committee in the late 1980s. But the corporate mainstream media seem not to have heard about this truly sensational story.

#### ATTACK AND DESTROY THE TARGET

When omission proves to be an insufficient mode of censorship and a story somehow begins to reach a larger public, the press moves from artful avoidance to frontal assault in order to discredit the story.

In August 1996, the *San Jose Mercury News* ran an in-depth series by Pulitzer-winning investigative reporter Gary Webb, about the Iran-Contra crack shipments from Central America that were flooding East Los Angeles. The articles were based on a year-long investigation. Holding true to form, the major media mostly ignored the exposé. But the *Mercury News* series was picked up

by some local and regional newspapers, and was flashed across the world on the Internet, copiously supplemented with pertinent documents and depositions supporting the charges against the CIA. African-American communities, afflicted by the crack epidemic, were up in arms and wanted to know more. The story became difficult to ignore.

So the major media switched to all-out assault. Hit pieces in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* and on network television and PBS assured us that there was no evidence of CIA involvement, that Gary Webb's *Mercury News* series was "bad journalism," and that Webb was irresponsibly playing on the public's gullibility and conspiracy mania. In effect, the major media exonerated the CIA from any involvement in drug trafficking. The *Mercury News* caved in to the pressure and repudiated its own series. Webb was demoted and sent away to cover suburban news. He soon resigned. Webb's real mistake was not that he wrote falsehoods but that he ventured too far into the truth.

It should be mentioned that both the CIA and the Justice Department conducted internal investigations that belatedly vindicated Webb's findings, specifically that there were links between the CIA and drug dealers and that the U.S. government dealt with the drug traffic mostly by looking the other way.<sup>10</sup>

#### LABELING

Like all propagandists, mainstream media people seek to prefigure our perception of a subject with a positive or negative label even before anything of substance is said about the topic at hand. The function of labeling is to preempt substantive information and analysis. Some *positive* labels are: "stability," "the president's firm leadership," "a strong defense," and "a healthy economy."

Indeed, not many Americans would want instability, wobbly presidential leadership, a weak defense, and a sick economy. The label defines the subject without having to deal with particular actualities that might lead us to a different conclusion.

Some common *negative* labels are: “leftist guerrillas,” “Islamic terrorists,” “conspiracy theory,” “inner-city gangs,” and “anti-American” (the latter applied to groups or leaders at home or abroad who criticize White House policy). These labels are seldom treated within a larger context of social relations and issues. Some labels the major media are not likely to employ are “class power,” “class struggle,” and “U.S. imperialism.”

A favorite label used regularly by policymakers and faithfully repeated by media journalists and commentators is “reforms,” whose meaning is inverted, being applied to any policy dedicated to *undoing* popular reforms that have been achieved after decades of struggle. So the elimination of family assistance programs is labeled “welfare reform.” “Reforms” in Eastern Europe—in Yugoslavia, for example—have meant the dismantling of the public economy, its privatization at bargain prices, with a dramatic increase in unemployment and human suffering. “IMF reforms” is a euphemism for the same kind of bruising cutbacks throughout the Third World. As someone once noted, “reforms” are not the solution, they are the problem.

“Free market” and “free trade” are other pet labels left largely unexamined by those who promote them. Critics argue that free-market and free-trade policies undermine local producers, rely heavily on state subsidies to multinational corporations, destroy public sector services, and create greater gaps between rich and poor nations and between the wealthy few and the underprivileged many in every nation. Such arguments are seldom if ever considered by the major media.