

Ashes and Diamonds

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North's preppy poet laureate.

The senators listened to Milián-Rodríguez's testimony with rapt attention, and then issued 18 subpoenas, including one to John Hull—long rumored to be the CIA's man in northern Costa Rica. A curious alliance has developed on the Foreign Relations Committee, determined to push forward into the intricacies of the contra/drug scandal and complaisance of U.S. federal officials witting of this trade.

One one side is Senator John Kerry, the most determined prober of contra abuses on Capitol Hill, and on the other is Jesse Helms, whose own passionate hostility to the CIA's activities in Central America has pulled him into the investigation. Helms was particularly gratified to hear Milián-Rodríguez's statement that the cartel had been paying Gen. Noreiga of Panama \$4 million a month for the privilege of operating in Panama.

You Be the Judge

Douglas Bennet, President
National Public Radio
2025 M Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Mr. Bennet:

Last evening, Senior NPR News Editor John McChesney was an evening guest on affiliate station WAMU's Fred Fiske Show. Mr. McChesney's appearance came in the wake of citizen criticism of news media coverage of the congressional Contragate hearings. I am one of those critics, and I am grateful to WAMU for providing the forum for Mr. McChesney to discuss NPR's news gathering philosophy.

I taped the show in anticipation that it would reflect a healthy interchange between your listeners and NPR management. Instead it turned out to be a defense by NPR of the deliberately limited scope of the congressional inquiry and the correspondingly limited coverage by the news media. I was disappointed but not surprised to hear that while NPR considers the hearings to have been dealing with "dramatic and important" issues, the Congress itself finds the public to be bored with it all. I believe the Congress is correct on this point, and that furthermore, most of the news media cooperate in this congressional effort to shield the public from gaining substantial knowledge of our government's secret, shameful, illegal, and dangerous foreign policy in Central America.

Day before yesterday, in one of the more enlightening bits of testimony, former CIA agent Glenn Robinette said he was paid lots of money by General Secord to spy on U.S. citizens in Central America and to purchase derogatory information on them. Two of these spied-upon people are journalists who have filed a lawsuit against General Secord and his colleagues for their part in alleged assault, murder,

and attempted assassinations associated with agencies of the United States Government.

In its meticulously detailed summary of Tuesday's testimony, NPR made the decision to ignore the Robinette spy story and instead concentrated on the relatively trivial matter of Mr. Robinette's design of a fancy burglar alarm for Oliver North's private home. I asked an NPR staff member why NPR did this. He inquired and reported to me that prior to Tuesday's hearing, the Contragate Committees and Mr. Robinette had entered into a very elaborate agreement to not discuss publicly the matter of spying, but to consider instead Oliver North's security alarm system. He said that NPR decided to follow this script.

What happened is now history; the script was apparently modified; Mr. Robinette gave limited testimony on the matter; but NPR followed the original script, skipped the testimony on spying, and reported dutifully the protracted interchange about the burglar alarm.

Acting News Director Neal Conan told me that NPR's handling of the Robinette news summary was a mistake but that such things are after all a matter of "news judgment." I can wholeheartedly agree with that, and it is just this kind of news judgment that puts your listeners to sleep. If NPR news is to gain credibility in handling controversial matters, it should put more scholarship into some of its token "investigative reporting." Running interference for our less-than-responsible Congressman keeps the board of directors out of your hair, but it will hardly impress your news-hungry public.

Although I tend to credit the news media with being better informed on issues than the limited scope of some news broadcasts would indicate, I would concede that there may be times when such restricted reporting of controversy simply reflects a lack of knowledge of the issues. Mr. McChesney's performance last night could perhaps be explained by his apparent unfamiliarity with both U.S. Central American Foreign Policy and the elaborate efforts of the Congress to protect the public from learning much about it. This is not meant to be a criticism of Mr. McChesney personally. He is obviously a competent person to be where he is. And as busy as he must be, he cannot possibly be expected to keep track of everything.

But whether reporting the news is limited by design or by scanty information, NPR should at the very least see to it that news is reviewed by persons who are conversant with the particular subject. That being the case, instances of "unfortunate news judgment" could less often be ascribed to naivete.

Sincerely,
Julian C. Holmes
Friendly, Maryland
June 25, 1987

Singlaub's Treasure

When news came from the Philippines earlier this year the General John Singlaub was down there on a visit, supposedly searching for treasure, many people wondered what the head of the World Anti-Communist League was actually up to. The answer seems to be that he was pursuing a traditional avocation of the league, the organization of death squads.

A year ago President Corazon Aquino pledged that she would order the dissolution of all private armies. On March 16 of this year she ordered all paramilitary forces disbanded. The U.S. embassy exerted enormous pressure, through the Filipino military and General Ramos, to have this order rescinded or at least delayed, and so the hated Civilian Home Defense Force will continue under another name. The constitution approved in February had ordered the CHDF dissolved because of its record of atrocities.

The U.S. embassy had also, slightly earlier, exerted fierce pressure for Aquino to permit Singlaub to enter the country, under the preposterous pretext of the treasure hunt. Singlaub, it will be recalled, has served in recent years on U.S. Defense Department committees devising counter-insurgency strategy in Central America. Since his visit to the Philippines a number of death squads have sprung up, including *Alsa Masa* (Rising Masses) operating in Mindanao.

On June 16 Secretary of State George Shultz endorsed the paramilitary groups, denying that they were squads of vigilantes. Lucy Komisar, author of a new book on Aquino, reckons there are now about 13,000 members of the squads throughout the Philippines. If the Salvadoran model holds, these groups, operating with infrastructural support and manpower from the Filipino military and interior ministry and with CIA logistical back-up, will step up a death campaign among labor and student and rural opposition leaders. Aquino can either remain in impotent complicity or get kicked aside in a year or two.

Footnote: The determination of the U.S. to beef up "security" in the Pacific against another major explosion in the Philippines probably lies behind the coup on May 14 that deposed the newly elected Fijian leader Timoci Bavadra and his cabinet. Bavadra has claimed that Singlaub was in Fiji shortly before the coup. Former U.S. mercenary Jack Terrell, now based in Washington, has said that the actual coup was carried out by a squad of U.S., British and West Germans operating off a West German "research vessel" that vanished the following day. Bavadra was anathema to the U.S. because of his government's policy against visits by nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered ships. Expect similar interventions elsewhere in the Pacific.

VIDEO

SCAN LINES Video Reviews by Sean Axmaker

New Releases and The Fab Four

Something Wild

Jonathon Demme's quirky comedy *Something Wild*, a strong critical hit with an avid following, is certainly one of the best features of 1986. Melanie Griffith (looking like silent film star Louise Brooks) plays a spunky, free-wheeling young woman who likes to shake up the establishment. Enter staid Jeff Daniels, rising manager and closet petty thief. Griffith takes the somewhat willing Daniels on a merry-go-round of wild encounters, beginning with an unexpected motel fling and ending with her high school reunion. There the fun and games take a dangerous turn with the introduction of the unnerving Ray Liotta, a suspicious character from Griffith's past.

Something Wild straddles two genres—the screwball comedy and the thriller. Somewhere in the middle the wild, unpredictable comedy becomes dark, no longer harmless fun, and the elements of the thriller take shape with the influence of Liotta. In an almost Hitchcockian manner the innocent becomes dangerous and the characters must put not just their reputations but their lives on the line.

Demme fills his world with richly layered atmosphere, developed through decor, costume, music and pace as much as through the acting of his leads and his minor characters. Everywhere you look there is more than meets the eye, in Daniels, in Griffith, in Liotta, in the film as a whole. *Something Wild* is exactly what it promises.

The Color Purple

A film with its share of controversy, Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* delighted people pleased to see Alice Walker's award winning novel on the screen and appalled many more upset that a wealthy white suburban male had the audacity to interpret the experience of a poor black woman in the turn of the century rural South.

Whoopi Goldberg is Celie, the wide eyed young woman sold into marriage with the cruel Danny Glover (Mr.). The film follows her struggle through to old age, chronicling her relationships with Mr.'s lover Shug Avery (a sympathetic friend), Rae Dawn Chong and her sister who long ran away, pressured by her father's advances.

The film is a visual feast, full of

color, densely realized decor and glorious camerawork. The acting is fine, the music quite good. On the debit side Spielberg presents the deep South as an almost fairy tale wonderland where princess Whoopi (an ET-like waif under Spielberg's guidance) suffers at the hands of bad people. The issue of racism is played down to emphasize the cruelty of black males, an easy out for Spielberg who doesn't have to face the connections between the two.

Many people enjoyed *The Color Purple*. Many were simply happy to see a film featuring a black cast. (How many have you seen in the last few years?) I found the film seriously wanting, but nonetheless there is much to be said for what the film does provide.

The Beatles on Video

When the Fab Four conquered the English speaking world, they left their mark in a number of media, including a small but striking legacy of film and television work. With the 20th anniversary of *Sgt. Pepper* rekindling interest in the Beatles, a survey of video glimpses seems in order.

The first and best of their motion pictures is *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), energetically directed by Richard Lester in a distinctively anarchic style. Though made simply to cash in on their popularity, the quickly made black and white film has a witty screenplay (written to fit the Beatles' individual personalities), which the group confidently performs, and a wonderful set of songs written for the film. The follow-up picture, *Help!* (1965), shot in color on a bigger budget in international locations, is fun but not as sharp or distinctive as the first.

Though they had little input in the animated *Yellow Submarine* (1968), for which they wrote two original songs (the voices were provided by actors), it is a surprisingly entertaining feature. *Let It Be* (1970), a documentary undertaken to pull the group together, conversely chronicles the disintegration of the once great group and is interesting largely for historical reasons.

The Complete Beatles (1982), a British made-for-video documentary, is a good introduction to the Beatles and Beatlemania for those rusty on their history. It features a good assortment of clips and interviews and great music. Hardcore fans may want to follow this with the spoof *The Rutles*, made by Python alumnus Eric Idle with help from the old *Saturday Night Live* cast. Other interesting tapes include *The Beatles Live*, a presentation of live performances on the British TV show *Ready Steady Go!* from 1965, and *Fun with the Fab Four*, an inconsistent video presentation with no music but a number of interviews, newsreel bits and odd television clips concluded with the justly renowned performance of Pyramus and Thisby (from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), a bit of Beatles tomfoolery for British TV.

One last piece of advice—stay away from the awful *Magical Mystery Tour*, a truly rotten film made worse by inferior video transfers. You have been warned.

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