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OPINION

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Papers forget original mission

■ OUR OPINION:
The best in media performed the worst of sins: misrepresenting a story



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

When it became clear last August that CIA-backed Nicaraguan Contras were linked to the West Coast cocaine trade, the public was appalled — and rightfully so.

After the *San Jose Mercury News* proved in a three-part series that the Contras received some funds from a San Francisco drug ring's profits, the possibility of U.S. government involvement was too much to ignore. Soon, the Justice Department, Congress and the CIA itself began their own "internal" investigations. And the public came to its own conclusions, demanding more evidence and investigation into the "CIA's involvement in drug-dealing."

While the *Mercury News* series never actually established a direct correlation between the CIA and drug trafficking, the public was right to demand the truth about the matter. One of the places they turned to was the media. The *Washington Post*, which just over twenty years before had uncovered the truth about Watergate, was of course, one of the first accosted. Readers demanded to know why the paper wasn't following the *Mercury News* story. The *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* felt the same pressure. It wasn't until October that the three best papers in the country truly obliged.

On Oct. 4, the *Post* published a 5,000 word examination of the Contra/drug trade relationship which was largely a refutation of the *Mercury News* series. Two weeks later, the *Los Angeles Times* printed its own three-part condemnation. The *New York Times* soon followed with its own criticism.

This widespread reaction, however, wavered from the public's desire to know the truth. Instead,

it followed the papers' own agenda to discredit the *Mercury News*, wholeheartedly and mercilessly.

The *Mercury News* series did not deserve to stand alone. In fact, it was harmful that it did so for nearly two months. But the issue of whether a publicly-funded government agency knowingly took part in selling drugs on its own soil did not deserve the biased and narrow treatment it was given by the three most respected newspapers in the nation.

The three papers' reporting did prove the *Mercury News*'s stories to be flawed on many levels. The amount of money the Contras received from the drug dealers is most likely much lower than originally reported. And the amount of cocaine introduced to the Los Angeles area is also probably lower than the *Mercury News* claimed.

But the three papers' sacred reliance on CIA sources and remarkable ability to reach final conclusions gave scant service to an issue that deserves a national newspaper's undivided and unbiased attention. Indeed, no attention was given by the papers to the subject of the Contras' involvement in the drug trade when it was brought up in the 1980s by the Associated Press and CBS News. The *Mercury News*, while making its own mistakes, fully explored an issue that had been thoroughly ignored by other media for over a decade.

The *Mercury News* and the three papers still have conflicting sources and information neither side will back down on. And the CIA and Justice Department have yet to conclude their investigations. The issue is far from dead. The *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* must now focus on what they should have done all along: finding the truth.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board.

THE MIXED MESSAGES

■ **Dec. 20, 1985:** The Associated Press documents involvement by the Nicaraguan Contras in the U.S. cocaine trade, the first major news organization to do so.

■ **Aug. 18-20, 1996:** The *San Jose Mercury News* publishes a three-part series detailing a link between the Contras and a Bay Area drug ring.

■ **Sept. 21, 1996:** The *New York Times* publishes the first story of many refuting several of the *Mercury News* claims.

READER VOICES

Do you feel safe in Eugene?



"The underground drug world and the thieves are the biggest problem in this town. My skateboard got stolen out of my car. The major problem I think is just thieves."

Jesse Clark
Junior
E.M.S.



"The only problem I can see is for women at night around the University. I don't think that the lighting is very good. I think overall Eugene is a pretty safe city."

Ely Janis
Sophomore
History



"There is always campus security driving around, and I feel like there are places to walk that are lit up enough. There are always a lot of people walking around so I feel pretty safe."

Heidi Marshall
Senior
Spanish



"I think it is pretty safe. I'm an architect student, so I've been coming home pretty late from studios, as late as four in the morning, and I have not had any trouble or seen any trouble."

Joanna Schafer
Sophomore
Architecture



"It depends on how you define safe. If you are talking about rape and stuff like that, definitely not. If you're talking about murder then it's probably safer than most."

James Curtis
Senior
History



"It's safe except for downtown because there are a lot of scary people down there with all of the homeless people."

Laura Glatze
Freshman
Pre-Law

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