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In search of truth?

Editor Jerry Ceppos and mainstream newspapers were too keen to bury a story on the CIA

Journalists are supposed to take risks. American journalists in particular have a tradition of defending the underdog against the deceitful assaults of the powerful.

Given those truths, I can't believe the Society of Professional Journalists gave Jerry Ceppos an ethics award after what he did. Worse, I can't believe Tim Gleason really thinks Ceppos' behavior was an example to be followed.

Ceppos, the editor of the San Jose Mercury News, was on campus last

Thursday to talk about "journalistic ethics." These days, the term seems to mean that editors should cave in when the powerful papers exert pressure.

Under Ceppos' watch, Gary Webb of the Mercury News wrote the

well-known "Dark Alliance" story, which tried to show that drug dealers in California, with the complicity of the CIA, funneled profits from crack sales to the Nicaraguan Contras, whom the United States and the CIA backed. Remarkably, the story raised a furor in the national news media.

I say "remarkably" because the story is far from new. CIA involvement with drug dealing had been extraordinarily well documented since the early '70s at least, and The Associated Press first reported that Contra operatives were involved in "cocaine trafficking ... to help finance their war against Nicaragua" in 1985. The only new parts of Webb's story were the allegations that 1) this drug dealing had moved to the United States

and 2) certain CIA officials knew it.

When Webb's piece ran, the papers of record commenced to froth at the mouth. A stream of scornful coverage flowed from The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, and The Washington Post. It's rare that major dailies take the time to refute an investigative effort by a regional daily — why would three high-circulation national papers deem it necessary to assault Webb and the Mercury News?

The reason is that those three papers not only missed the story, but in some cases they actively tried to suppress it. When the Kerry Commission was investigating allegations of Contra drug trafficking, an investigative reporter rose to ask the lead counsel whether evidence linked the Contras and drug smuggling. According to Tim Kornbluh of the Columbia Journalism Review, "a New York Times correspondent screamed derisively at him from across the aisle: 'Why don't you ask a serious question?'"

I wish this were an isolated event rather than the new trend in journalism: a pathological reliance on the "official version," the absurd willingness to accept the first line offered by an establishment source, and a lock-step refusal to hear dissenting voices.

The New York Times was so anxious to refute Gary Webb, they forgot about consistency. A reporter named Jesse Katz hurried to attack the credibility of one of Webb's sources, an alleged Contra crack dealer named Ricky Ross. Katz declared that "the crack epidemic ... had nothing to do with Ross," forgetting that in an earlier article, Katz himself described Ross as the "criminal mastermind behind crack's decade-long reign."

It's controversial to say the papers of record care more about saving face than being honest. Controversial, but undeniable.

So what does Ceppos do after the heat comes from the big dailies? He writes a column apologizing for the series. To be fair, Ceppos did maintain his support for the core truth of the story — but he had to know, as

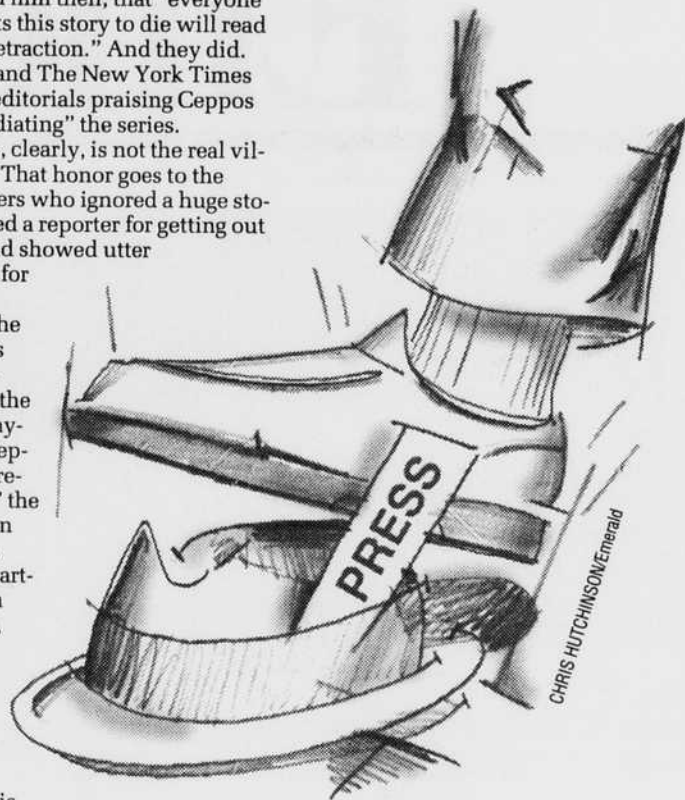
Webb told him then, that "everyone who wants this story to die will read this as a retraction." And they did. The Post and The New York Times both ran editorials praising Ceppos for "repudiating" the series.

Ceppos, clearly, is not the real villain here. That honor goes to the three papers who ignored a huge story, attacked a reporter for getting out of line, and showed utter disregard for the truth down to the last words they published on the subject, saying that Ceppos had "repudiated" the story when he hadn't.

Equal partnership in the fiasco, though, goes to everyone complicit in continuing this shameless pattern. That includes: Ceppos, who should have known that his step back would be seen as capitulation; SPJ, who should remind itself that its own code of ethics advises journalists to "be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable"; and Gleason, dean of the School of Journalism, who told the Emerald he thought Ceppos' "response to the 'Dark Alliance' series was exemplary."

It wasn't exemplary of anything but a cop-out. Ceppos wanted the respect of his peers in the big cities more than he wanted to tell the truth. And really, the latter is the only thing any journalist should set out to do.

When I think of journalism in America today, I think of what John Swinton, a former chief editor of The New York Times (called "the Dean of



his Profession" by his peers) had to say in 1953 when he was asked to give a toast at the New York Press Club:

"There is no such thing in America as an independent press. ... We are the tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes. We are the jumping-jacks; they pull the strings and we dance. Our talents, our possibilities and our lives are all the property of other men. We are intellectual prostitutes."

Ceppos had a chance to be something more. It's too bad he didn't take it.

Jeff Shaw is a columnist for the Emerald. His columns appear on alternate Wednesdays. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.

Thumbs



TO INDIA: The nation that achieved liberation through non-violent means recently exploded five nuclear bombs, including one that appears to have been a hydrogen bomb. The tests were intended to prove India had a nuclear capacity, something world leaders have been aware of for some time. They also served as a threat to neighboring Pakistan, with which India has been feuding since its inception. This action, a blatant affront to the cause of world peace, has received intense attention from President Clinton. We can only hope he decides to follow U.S. law and imposes sanctions against India as he has promised.

TO LAX STANDARDS FOR DRINKING AND DRIVING: Congress decided not to require states to set .08 as the standard blood-alcohol maximum for drivers. That level still allows the average person to have three or four drinks and get behind the wheel; anything more is too much.

TO THE REGISTER-GUARD: Maybe it was a slow news day, but the Guard's decision to run a feature photo on the front page featuring a couple making out in a yellow kayak was inexplicable. Meanwhile, a story about Indonesia's president's pledge to step down was buried on an inside page.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Impeach court

Who made the Constitution Court king? First it voided the Progressive slate Senate victory because it failed to fill out the paperwork for a table. Then it completely overlooks elections violations that included poll workers telling voters to vote "no" on the OSPIRG question and the "Honesty" Campaign manager systematically violating campaign rules, including harassing the chair of the non-partisan elections committee. Finally, to add insult to injury, the court censured Ben Unger for taking down illegally posted campaign fliers at the behest of the elections board.

This blatant partisanship would disturb even the most committed judicial activist. The Senate should impeach this court, or at least it should make it clear that only the Senate can censure its members, not some unaccountable judge.

Mike Running
 Political Science

Still faithful

Bill Smee (ODE, May 11) marched onto the editorial page of the Emerald and declared victory over biblical morality, assigning those of us who disagree with him to "a large, vocal minority." Smee declares that cultural evolution has left the God of Abraham and Moses and his followers behind.

Smee should first look at the current state of the battlefield. Ninety percent of Americans still identify themselves as Christians or Jews (Newsweek, March 31, 1997). Ninety percent of Americans say they pray (American Academy of Family Physicians, 1997). Sixty-seven percent say they have

made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, and 68 percent believe that the Christian faith has all the answers relevant to their lives today (Christian American, 1996). Seventy-one percent of Americans say they never doubt the existence of God, up from 60 percent in 1987. Sixty-one percent believe miracles come from the power of God, up from 47 percent in 1987. Fifty-three percent say prayer is important to daily life, up from 41 percent in 1987 (PEW Research Center, 1997). A million teens prayed at school flagpoles on Sept. 21, 1994, and three years later it was three million. Recently, over a million men prayed at the Promise Keepers gathering in Washington, D.C., and even 30,000 prayed and worshiped in Autzen Stadium. It appears by these trends that cultural evolution is progressing over the top of and past Bill Smee toward the God of Abraham and Moses.

Perhaps Smee could win over the next generation, except that nine out of 10 teens don't drink or smoke, six out of 10 teens don't approve of premarital sex and seven out of 10 teens say religion is important in their lives (NFO Research, Parade Magazine, Aug. 18, 1996).

In Smee's evolution transformation of morality, how does one distinguish a degenerative trend from progress? Measured by traditional Judeo-Christian moral values, the God of Abraham (though certainly under attack) appears to be still dominating the moral battlefield.

Sixty-four percent of Americans oppose homosexual marriage and adoptions by homosexuals (Louis Harris and Associates; Gallup, 1992; Yankelovich Clancy Shulman, 1992). Seventy-one

percent of Americans believe couples should save sex for marriage, and 90 percent believe in traditional wedding vows. The ultra-liberal People for the American Way reported that 74 percent of Americans were more likely to vote for a candidate who put top priority on returning traditional moral values. Seventy-three percent of Americans agreed that "it is more important for government and elected officials to support traditional family values rather than tolerance for alternative lifestyles and values" (Wirthlin Group/Family Research Council, 1994).

The support base for abortions is less than a majority after the heartbeat and brain waves have started and it is 25 percent or less after the first three months (UPI, 1996; USA Today/CNN/Gallup, 1996/1997; New York Times/CBS, 1998). The Planned Parenthood position of abortions any time during pregnancy (and birth) has less than a 10 percent support base (Wirthlin, 1998; New York Times/CBS, 1998).

Smee's minnow with little feet is about to be devoured by the giant Christian fish.

Barry Williams
 Lane County Oregon Citizens Alliance
Whipping boy

Ben Unger may be a convenient whipping boy for the right, but this time he has been wronged. The Constitution Court censured Unger for taking down campaign fliers that were placed in illegal locations. He was even granted permission by the non-partisan elections board.

Spencer Hamlin
 Political Science