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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

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## **PROJECT CENSORED: IS THE PRESS REALLY FREE?**

(A Film by Steve Keller, Narrated by Martin Sheen)

**Bruce Brugman** (Publisher, San Francisco Bay Guardian): And the dailies wouldn't cover it. AP wouldn't cover it. UPI wouldn't cover it. The Examiner Chronicle wouldn't cover it. The New York Times wouldn't cover it. Why? They cover everything else.

**Peter Phillips** (Professor, California State University Sonoma): I mean, if you think about it, for the working people in this country, no one's telling us--no one's saying anything to us--why our wages have gone down for the last twenty-five years. No one's talking about why health care keeps spiraling. I mean the media industry is probably the only industry protected by the U.S. Constitution directly, you know, stated in the Bill of Rights.

### **CLINTON ADMINISTRATION AGGRESSIVELY PROMOTES U.S. ARMS SALES WORLDWIDE (No. 1 Most Censored Story of 1998)**

**Narrator:** In June of 1997, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously approved the Arms Transfer Code of Conduct. This code prohibits arms sales or military aid to foreign governments that are undemocratic, abuse human rights, or engage in aggression against neighboring states. Unfortunately, this code has been virtually ignored by Congress and the Clinton administration. The mainstream press has also ignored this issue; however, the story was covered by two small publications and was selected by Project Censored, a Sonoma State University research project, as the number one, most censored news story of 1998.

According to reporter Lora Lumpe, the massive build up of arms during the Cold War made it inevitable that excess or surplus arms would pile up. As a result, dozens of foreign countries have been able to obtain so-called surplus weapons at bargain prices or even free of charge from the U.S. government. All branches of the military are unloading potent, nearly new equipment under this surplus transfer program. The Army recently sold 700 M60 tanks to Egypt. Each tank originally cost \$1.3 million, yet Egypt paid only the cost of transport for all 700.

In recent deals, the Navy has unloaded 39 frigates, 5 guided-missile destroyers, and 13 tank-landing ships, and now, the Navy wants to unload some of its nearly new F18 fighters. Over the past five years, the Air Force has sold or given away more than 900 planes including dozens of these F16's. The Air Force now wants to transfer all of its FB111 fighter-bombers, most of its F4 fighters, more than 100 A10 attack aircraft, and hundreds of early model F15 Eagles and F16 Falcons. All of these deadly weapons of war have been used in recent U.S. military actions including the Gulf War.

It's expected that all recipients in these deals will use these weapons for internal security and to promote world peace; yet, it's hard to comprehend how providing weapons of war to countries in unstable regions will help to promote world peace. And how does this conform to the Arms Transfer Code of Conduct? But perhaps the most alarming aspect of this policy is that in each of the last five U.S. military conflicts, American troops have faced opponents who were armed through these surplus arms deals from the United States.

Despite such troubling questions, the military is pushing these surplus transfers to justify increased spending on new weapons systems. For example, the Navy is selling active-duty vessels as surplus goods in order to make room for new ships, and the Air Force is lobbying Congress for funds to produce the new F22 fighter, claiming that the worldwide proliferation of advanced aircraft, such as the F15's and F16's given away as surplus, diminishes the military superiority of the U.S. Martha Honey reports that in addition to giving away surplus weapons, the Clinton administration is aggressively promoting private sector arms sales at every opportunity. The United States share of the global arms business jumped from 16% in 1988 to 63% in 1996. This figure could be increased even more through NATO expansion, the foreign policy centerpiece of President Clinton's second term, as former Soviet bloc nations update their armies with Western weapons and equipment.

So why, in spite of the Congressional Arms Transfer Code of Conduct, does the Clinton administration promote U.S arms sales so vigorously? The official answer is jobs. And yet, even as U.S. arms revenue soared, some 2.2 million defense industry workers lost their jobs between 1988 and 1996. Why do stories such as these go unreported by the mainstream press? Are they really censored from the public? For an answer, we met with Dr. Peter Phillips of the California State University Sonoma.

**Phillips:** Well, censorship, in terms of the Project, means any interference with the free flow of information in society, and so we don't see it as a conspiracy. We don't see censorship as something the media is deliberately doing to keep the American public from being informed about certain stories. It's much more complex than that in the sense that we have these huge mega-media organizations (and these are large bureaucracies), and the way these systems have evolved, and how concentrated they've

become, and their focus on profit and getting audience percentage points in terms of viewing has [sic] restructured how the news is selected and what's being presented to the public.

**Narrator:** Our Founding Fathers knew that freedom of the press is one of the basic tenets of democracy, and to ensure our right to a free flow of information, they protected the press in the Bill of Rights: the only industry afforded this luxury. Yet today, is the press really free? Dr. Carl Jensen of the California State University Sonoma decided to look into this issue over twenty-five years ago.

**Carl Jensen** (Professor Emeritus, California State University Sonoma): . . . and I was teaching a class, Sociology of Media. One of the problems I had in that class was that I never could explain satisfactorily to the students or to myself how it could be that Richard Nixon won election to the presidency in the fall of 1972 by a landslide vote nearly five months after the biggest political burglary--crime--in history. So I started looking into that. Where were the media? What happened there? And I discovered that Watergate was not an issue in 1972. I mean I think now most of us look back and we say Watergate was a big issue in 1972. It wasn't. It was a non-issue. I found stories about Watergate in the alternative media but not in the mass media. That was the genesis of the Project. So then I started looking at the alternative media and I discovered--"whoa!"--all kinds of stories I hadn't seen in the mass media, and I thought, "Wow, there's something strange going on there!" And so the more I looked into it, the more I discovered that, and that was the basis and genesis of Project Censored.

**Narrator:** Today, Project Censored involves hundreds of concerned students, faculty, and community volunteers, who come together annually to compile a list of the most censored news stories of the year. In order to make the list, students begin by combing through thousands of articles from a variety of independent publications, the so-called alternative press. These stories, which cover the full range of the political spectrum, are checked and cross-referenced using a variety of Internet-based search engines to determine mainstream press coverage. The stories are narrowed down during this process. After review by a nationwide group of judges, each story is graded based on its importance and lack of coverage. In the end, twenty-five stories are selected by Project Censored each year. The major print and broadcast media employ thousands of reporters. With so many reporters on the beat, how could stories like these be overlooked?

**Phillips:** The main causes of censorship in the United States or the kind of interference with the free flow of information are structural, and they have to do with how the media system has really evolved down to about eleven major media corporations today. That's from twenty-five that were in existence ten years ago and fifty that were in existence twenty years ago, and we're on our way (really) within the next decade to probably only three or four. As the media has consolidated (and the big consolidations

were CNN and Time Warner and ABC being, you know, being taken over by Disney), with the downsizing that occurs because of that in terms of personnel, the reporters who are there become dependent upon sources for information or public relations people. And these PR people work in government and they work in corporations, and we kind of call this "PR censorship" in that literally half to two-thirds of the news today has been pre-spit, pre-spun, or pre-written by a PR professional who works for a public or private bureaucracy.

And that means that the stories that we are getting are shaped and are focused to meet the needs of corporations and government in advance. We don't have people out collecting news worldwide. That's really been limited, so the numbers of stories that happen are limited. Probably, one of the most important aspects of media censorship is the idea that mainstream media tend not to want to run stories that offend their major advertisers. We call this "marketplace censorship," and we literally see this all the time, whether it's cosmetics, or milk, or beer, or tobacco. There's a real tendency for mainstream not to want to run critical stories that offend their friends, the people on their corporate boards, and their mainstream advertisers.

**Ben Bagdikian** (Dean Emeritus, University of California Berkeley School of Journalism): They used to be embarrassed by it . . .

**Narrator:** Ben Bagdikian, former dean of the School of Journalism, U.C. Berkeley.

**Bagdikian:** . . . so that has always gone on, but mostly its embedded in the culture on certain papers. You know certain subjects either will not get into the paper or they will be buried on the inside. And reporters come very quickly to understand the culture of a particular newsroom, and in general, reporters don't bother doing stories that they know are not going to appear or that will be buried in obscurity. The payoff for a reporter is to be read.

## **PERSONAL CARE AND COSMETIC PRODUCTS MAY BE CARCINOGENIC (No. 2 Most Censored Story of 1998)**

**Narrator:** Would consumers use a product daily if they knew it caused cancer? In a series of articles identified by Project Censored, reporter Joel Bleifuss tells us about the dangers of common, everyday hygiene products. Bleifuss bases his findings on the research of Dr. Samuel Epstein of the University of Illinois School of Public Health, author and founder of the Cancer Prevention Coalition in Chicago. Most of us use a variety of hygiene products on our bodies. In the course of one day, an American woman might color and wash her hair, apply makeup, moisturize her skin, brush her teeth, douche, and then dust herself with baby powder. After this daily routine, the woman will have absorbed into her body at least five chemical compounds that are known carcinogens.

These products and others like them may include chemical compounds such as those seen here which can contain or react to form a class of substance called nitrosamines which are known carcinogens. In the mid 1970s, nitrosamine contamination of cooked bacon and other treated meats became a well-publicized health issue. Since then, the food industry has drastically lowered the amounts of nitrosamines in treated meats. Today, however, cosmetics contain higher levels of nitrosamines than cooked bacon did in the 70s, and while people don't eat cosmetics, they can absorb these compounds through their skin. Surprisingly, the FDA has known of the nitrosamine danger in cosmetics for some time, yet it has done nothing to regulate these products.

Let's take a look at some other ingredients. According to the Cancer Prevention Coalition, titanium dioxide and FD & C (dye) #1 are known carcinogens, and medical evidence strongly suggests that women, who use talc, particularly in their genital area, are significantly more likely to get ovarian cancer than those who don't. Sales of these products represent a significant share of the personal hygiene market estimated at \$20 billion annually. This is an industry known for lavish advertising. The Food and Drug Administration oversees the cosmetic industry, and it has the authority to ban the sale of products made from harmful ingredients, yet it continues to allow the sale of these items.

One is left to wonder, "Is the FDA more concerned with public health of corporate profits, and is the media too dependent on advertising dollars to report on this story?" Phillips: It still is part of the ethic in terms of journalism to try to reject the outside pressures, but the media systems today--the way they have evolved as corporate profit-making systems--really structure it so that a journalist who is interested in career advancement, has a mortgage, has a family, is really kind of thinking very carefully if they're going to run a story that's very controversial because the message to reporters is "If you're going to take on the powerful, if you're going to write stories about powerful people, corporations, and government, your career is on the line. Your career is on the line."

### **MILKING THE PUBLIC (No. 12 Most Censored Story of 1997)**

**Narrator:** Can reporters lose their jobs for telling the truth? "Milking the Public" by Hilary Varner was number twelve on Project Censored's 1997 list of stories. It documented the increasing use of a potentially dangerous drug by American dairy farmers. Later that year, producers Steve Wilson and Jane Akre filed a report with television station WTVT of Tampa, Florida on this same subject. Here is a summary of that report. It should be noted that we were prevented from including an edited version of the original report. Across the country, some farmers are quietly squeezing more cash from their cows by injecting them with a new, artificial, and potentially dangerous drug. They're using Monsanto's Posilac, a laboratory version of a hormone

cows produce on their own known as bovine growth hormone or BGH. When a cow is injected with artificial BGH, often called rBGH, it stimulates her metabolism causing the cow to produce up to 30% more milk.

Unfortunately, revving up milk production isn't the only effect of rBGH. Many farmers say they've watched Posilac wreak havoc on their herds causing a variety of medical problems from udder infections to hoof disease. This means that dairymen who use Posilac are more likely to treat their herds with higher doses of antibiotics and other drugs to keep them healthy. Not only is this dangerous for the cows but it can lead to human health problems as well. Posilac was approved for use in the U.S. by the FDA despite the fact that it was banned in a dozen European countries, Canada, and New Zealand.

Monsanto, the chemical company that manufactures Posilac, has repeatedly refuted the claims that it may be unsafe. Posilac, a veterinary drug, was tested for only ninety days on thirty rats before it was approved by the FDA. In contrast, a human drug requires two years of extensive testing before FDA approval can be granted. Yet Monsanto, the same company that claimed that its Agent Orange was a safe product in the 1960s, continues to attest to Posilac's safety. Many scientists claim that there is a significant amount of evidence suggesting that milk from BGH treated cows can be very dangerous, even carcinogenic, to humans.

**William Liebhart** (Director, Sustainable Agriculture Program, U.C. Davis): And this is part of the Canadian study, and it showed that there are antibodies in the rats related to the rBGH, which says that it is active in the bloodstream. It is often said that since this is a protein or a peptide that it is totally digested and would not pass into the bloodstream. This suggests that that is not true, that it does pass into the bloodstream. As a result of this, the rats fed high doses of rBGH developed thyroid cysts and prostate abnormalities. Really, there is no benefit to consuming milk with rBGH and there are substantial risks.

**Narrator:** Wilson and Akre also claim that Monsanto has prevented the entire dairy industry from marketing safe milk. Apparently, one of the FDA's lawyers, the one who crafted the regulation that prohibits these words on dairy product labels, was previously on the payroll at Monsanto and returned to work for the chemical giant after his stint at the FDA. By all accounts, the report filed by Wilson and Akre appeared to be accurate and balanced: the trademarks of good journalism. Yet, after producing this piece, Wilson and Akre were fired from station WTVT and their report was never aired.

**Steve Wilson** (Former WTVT Producer): After the stories were produced, the station went through the normal course of reviewing them, and this took about a week, and they bought thousands of dollars worth of radio commercials, and it was ready to go on the air on Monday, and the only thing that changed was on Friday night before that

Monday Monsanto hired a lawyer to write a very threatening letter. They pulled the stories, which we weren't terribly happy about, but they certainly have the right to review them more closely. The general manager, who was a former investigative reporter himself, took a look at these stories and he said, "I don't see anything wrong here. The stories are fair. They're balanced. Let's go ahead and run it." The lawyer said, "We could face a very expensive lawsuit."

And then came the second letter. And they called us in. They tried to get us off the story. They offered us a large cash settlement, almost \$200,000. All we had to do was essentially not talk about bovine growth hormone in everybody's milk in Florida and not talk about how Fox handled that story, and they would send us (to our mailbox) checks on a regular basis. We could go get another job; we could sit by the pool; we could go on vacation; we could do whatever we wanted to do. We decided that we would feel worse about ourselves than we would miss their \$200,000, and we told them "no."

**Jane Akre** (Former WTVT Producer): The review process after the Monsanto letters was very different than it had been before the Monsanto letters because now we were the subject of the inquiry, as well as the story, and the tone of it was very different, and it was no doubt an effort to whittle down, dilute, neutralize, and make false the story: to make it much more Monsanto friendly; to take out any edge, any criticism; to allow Monsanto statements to stand unrefuted, even though we had evidence that what they were saying was lies.

**Wilson:** I wrote them a letter and said, "You didn't fire us for no cause. You fired us for standing up for the truth on this story." And they wrote back a letter, which surprised me and essentially said, "You're damn right that's why we fired you. We gave you instructions and you wouldn't follow them." Once we had that letter, we had what we thought was a valid claim for a whistle blower action in the state of Florida claiming that we were fired because we refused to broadcast lies, and we think that's illegal. It's against our contract to put in things on the air that we knew are false (never mind the fact that it's against the Federal Communications Act of 1934 to broadcast lies), and so that's the basis of our struggle.

**Akre:** People often ask us, "Why did you take a stand? Why did you junk . . . ?" We have forty-six-years collective experience here, you know, and I don't think we're ever going to get a job again. It's just speculation, but, you know, we're sort of radioactive. Why did we take a stand on this story: because this is a potential public health issue. It isn't just about somebody who is rolling back odometers or someone who is conning people out of their life savings. I don't know that we would have taken a stand on that that just affects a few people. This is the entire nation's milk supply. Milk is consumed by little kids. This is a potential--we don't know--but it's a potential public health issue,

and (I just) we both thought the stakes are much too high to just cash in and walk away. That was wrong, and we couldn't have done it.

**Narrator:** WTVT is a Fox Network affiliate owned by media mogul Rupert Murdoch. Murdoch also owns a public relations firm that represents Monsanto, but is there a deeper connection between Fox and Monsanto?

**Akre:** We don't know what the connection is. We hope in our depositions to ask the highest level of Fox if they were in touch with Monsanto and to what extent they were in touch. I mean, how did Monsanto know what was in the piece? Was it just a luck guess? It's possible, but we want to know the answer. We want to know if there was a friendship, you know, if it was fear or was it favor that had them go after the story to the extent that they did.

**Bagdikian:** Well, every newspaper has a board of directors or its parent firm, if it's a chain, has a board of directors, and these boards of directors are overwhelmingly what have been called captains of industry (men and women who are heads of big insurance companies, which are very heavily represented on boards of directors of news organizations, banks, and pretty much the power brokers in the corporate world.) The excuse for doing it is they understand business and therefore they are good directors of a business, and there's (maybe) something to that, but it also means that they hire and fire top news executives or the publishers who do it for them. This does not mean that they reach down daily and change news stories. They do sometimes but rarely.

But it does create a culture which the operative persons in every paper, the publisher and the executive editor, understand that some stories are going to bring static from above and some won't, and depending on the tradition of the paper and the strength of the editor, there are different kinds of levels at which they know they've entered dangerous territory or an editor knows that he or she has a certain amount of credit that they can expend by a story that may offend the owners. Some of the papers we think of as the better papers have a wider gray zone, but most of them, its pretty clear cut, and every year, it gets more clear cut and lower.

**Narrator:** In 1997, Project Censored researchers examined the connections that exist between top media corporations and the rest of the corporate world. All corporations are run by a board of directors. Together, these media corporations have 157 directors on their boards. These individuals hold board positions at dozens of other large corporations, and it's not uncommon for two board members to sit together on the board of a third company. Overall, there were fifty-six direct board member links in 1997 between these corporations, making them an interwoven web of shared interests. This suggests that decision-makers at the top of these companies represent an extremely narrow and corporate-biased point of view.



**Phillips:** And the public is literally become, in the United States, the best entertained, least informed society in the world, and, you know, Neil Postman said that ten years ago, he's at NYU, and it's more true today.

**Jensen:** Let me just step back a moment about some criticism that I got with Project Censored and that is that editors and news directors would say the issue isn't censorship. The issue is judgment: news judgment. We have a series of professional editors and journalists who decide what information should go into that very limited time and space we have for news. You don't happen to like the kinds of stories we put in there, but that's not censorship. That's just news judgment. So I thought to myself, "That's a reasonable argument," and so I decided to--instead of looking for what they're not covering in the media--I started to look at what they are covering in the media.

**Phillips:** There's really a tyranny of the bottom line in terms of profit-making in media systems today, and what that means is that the systems are filled up, the newspapers, the radio, the television, are filled up with stories that are meant to attract viewers, and these stories may or may not have important news content. Generally, very often, they're stories about--that have an element of fear in them. Crime, fear of cancer, disasters, and that are very, very big and have increased tremendously and just--and particularly in the last decade in terms of the amount of content. Crime reporting has gone up 300% in this decade when in fact crime has gone down. So there's an element of fear that's very important. The other element is kind of this gossip, element of gossip, so that you know, OJ, you know, was guilty or not. This will draw viewers in because it's kind of exciting, but it leaves them very empty, and actually fewer and fewer people are watching the news because of that (and we call that junk food news) and that's literally what's been happening.

Literally, you know, half the news today is something that's not important in terms of how it impacts people's lives. We have to honor the First Amendment and the intent of the First Amendment. Media, if they don't follow that as their number one priority (protecting the First Amendment), they are abdicating their responsibility to the American people, and if they just simply become an entertainment source and news becomes simply entertainment--and it may be stimulating, it may be kind of titillating, exciting to people, and they may find it interesting to talk about and gossip about, but it's not meeting the needs of the society collectively.

**Narrator:** Although the mainstream media might ignore important stories in favor of junk news, the alternative press at both ends of the political spectrum has and will continue to cover these issues.

**Phillips:** You know, historically in the United States, you would have anywhere from five to ten newspapers in a metropolitan area, and today, we've got 98% of the cities have one daily, one daily newspaper, and those are increasingly owned by chains. You

know, basically, Gannett and Knight Ridder have about 150 metropolitan areas that they control and dominate. Brugman: My God! The country is just one monopoly town after another with stories that avoid the local power structure, with stories that cheer on the soldiers in Vietnam, and the Gulf War, and the bombings that Clinton just did, with editorial endorsements from The New York Times, The LA Times, and The Washington Post. They're all there, but the alternative press is here to do these kinds of stories as the opposition and the competitor to the daily papers.

**Phillips:** There's a tremendous amount of information, but it goes through windows. It goes--it's framed and it goes through these frameworks, and if it doesn't fit in the frame, then it kind of gets tossed aside and (that's kind of what the alternative press sort of picks up and looks at) are things on both the right and the left, and Project Censored, every year, we're getting stories from outside the frame, so to speak.

### **RISKING THE WORLD: NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION IN SPACE (No. 1 Most Censored Story of 1997)**

**Narrator:** In the summer of 1996, reporter Karl Grossman broke this story for Covert Action Quarterly, which discussed the upcoming launch of the NASA Cassini space probe. Cassini is an unmanned, deep space probe designed to explore Saturn and its moons: on board, 72.3 pounds of highly radioactive plutonium 238. The probe was launched on a Lockheed Martin built Titan IV rocket. Plutonium 238 has long been confirmed by scientists as the most toxic substance known.

**Helen Caldicott** (Founder, Physicians for Social Responsibility: The body thinks plutonium is iron so it handles it like iron, combines it in a hemoglobin molecule, stores it in the liver where it causes liver cancer. It crosses the placenta. The placenta lets very few things past: viruses, bacteria, or toxic chemicals. Plutonium gets through. Plutonium has a half-life of 24,400 years, so it's got a total radiological life of half a million years. That means if I die of lung cancer caused by plutonium and I'm cremated, the plutonium doesn't disappear. It just goes up the chimney, so you can breathe it in, ad infinitum, forever more. Plutonium is the most carcinogenic substance known.

**Narrator:** The 72.3 pounds of plutonium 238 on Cassini is particularly dangerous. The radioactivity on board the craft is said to be far greater than the radioactivity in Chernobyl reactor at the time of its meltdown. Yet, would NASA knowingly launch such dangerous cargo on a rocket that has been known to explode? In 1993, a Titan IV rocket exploded shortly after launch destroying a \$1 billion spy satellite, and again in 1998, a Titan IV exploded after launch. The failure rate of the Titan IV is now one out of every 12 launches. But in spite of this record, NASA insisted the chances of launch failure for Cassini were insignificant.

In order to propel the probe to Saturn, NASA plans to use what is known as the slingshot maneuver. Cassini will circle the planet Venus twice and then hurl back towards Earth. It will buzz the Earth in August of 1999 traveling at over 42,000 miles per hour at an altitude of only 500 miles above the surface. The gravity of Earth will then slingshot the probe along its final path to Saturn. However, even the slightest mishap during the flyby might cause Cassini to disintegrate and disperse deadly plutonium 238 across the planet.

This NASA report claims that such an inadvertent re-entry would expose almost 5 billion people, 99% of the Earth's population, to the deadly plutonium, yet would lead to at most 2,300 deaths. Many independent scientists, however, dispute these claims, and some suggests that as many as 40 million people would be killed. Amazingly, many experts believe that plutonium was not even needed on this mission. The plutonium generators on board the craft are emitting less electricity than is needed to power an ordinary hair dryer, a task that could have been performed using advanced solar panels.

**Newscaster:** Liftoff. Liftoff of the twenty-fifth space shuttle mission.

**NASA Controller:** 1 minute 15 seconds; velocity 2,900 feet per second; altitude 9 nautical miles; downrange distance 7 nautical miles.

**Narrator:** So why was NASA bent on taking this huge gamble? Some attribute it to the power and influence wielding of big corporations like General Electric and Lockheed Martin, who stand much to gain from these operations. But after the Apollo missions ended in the 70s, NASA endured significant budget cuts, which they have made up for in a series of contracts with the military. Now, NASA relies on the military for a large portion of its total funding, and according to Grossman, the military has a hidden agenda to develop nuclear-powered war platforms in orbit around the Earth and as such has been pushing for the development of nuclear space probes such as Cassini.

**Newscaster:** Two, one, and liftoff of the Cassini spacecraft on a billion mile trek to Saturn.

**Narrator:** CAQ broke this story in the summer of 1996. While the mainstream media did cover the upcoming launch, most reports seemed more like NASA press releases than investigative journalism. Interestingly, the corporate owners of NBC and CBS are also two of the country's biggest nuclear contractors. Does this explain why the press was silent on this important issue?

**Phillips:** Well, there's a myth out there that the media is predominantly liberal, and it's just simply not true. The content of media reflects the corporate viewpoint, and it's a relatively conservative viewpoint. And a lot of journalists, per se, are very informed

people, and they tend to be a little liberal in the sense of they're kind of moderate, but when we actually poll them, particularly the big stars of media--and there was a poll done by FAIR and researches back east just recently--what you find is some very conservative opinions on fiscal policy, on international trade, and that among the big media stars in the United States. So, I think, at the entry level, there's a number of journalists that might tend to vote more Democrat than Republican, but at the corporate level, at the board of directors' level, at the editor's level, and at the publisher's level, we see a very, very conservative side of media in the United States.

**Narrator:** Dr. Erna Smith, Professor of Journalism at San Francisco State University.

**Erna Smith** (Professor of Journalism, San Francisco State University): Well, I think mainstream media distort racial issues, and they do so principally because of two reasons. I mean, first of all, most of the people in the mainstream media are white, and they tend to assume their experiences are universal, and the second reason I think is because of the great emphasis on conflict in the construction of stories in the mainstream media. So what you end up with race is either, you know, either based on some assumptions that are not true, and so literally, racial groups tend to always be presented in opposition to or in relationship to the majority cultures which are white. Therefore, you end up missing just, you know, tons of kinds of stories that are going on that are actually more relevant and are more truthful and would give people a better perspective on what's going on in race relations in this country. You can see a really great, really extraordinary example of this was television news coverage of the 1992 Rodney King riots.

If you looked at the stuff on national news about the Rodney King riots, you would think that this was a riot that principally affected black people and white people and to some degree Koreans. Well, in reality, the Los Angeles riot was the most multiethnic, civil rebellion we've seen in the history of this country where you had substantial numbers of people from all races--black, white, Latino, Asian--involved in actually, you know, committing violence and/or involved in being affected by it. But this didn't come across, and I think the most under-reported part of that story was the tremendous impact and involvement of this uprising on the Latino populations and the implications for that for this country.

There were people--most of the people arrested in Los Angeles, for example, for looting were Latino, and actually a substantial number were white. I mean 10-12% were white. Riots are always presented as something that where you have black people rebelling against whites or white power structure where it's set up symbolically. In LA, you saw it symbolically through the juxtaposition of two enormous images: one of Rodney King getting beaten up and one of Reginald Denny getting beaten up (as if that was normal--and it wasn't. Reginald Denny getting beaten up), it was almost an

anomaly in terms of who got hurt there. Who gets hurt doing riots are people who live in the areas affected by the riots.

## **THE UNITED STATES AND ITS CONTRA-DRUG CONNECTION (No. 2 Most Censored Story of 1987)**

**Narrator:** Occasionally, the mainstream press does report on Project Censored stories. In 1987, Project Censored identified an explosive story, which examined connections between the CIA, an international drug smuggling ring, and the Reagan administration. In 1996, reporter Gary Webb of the San Jose Mercury News investigated the same story, unaware of the earlier report. In the 8 past, press reports critical of the CIA had been met with skepticism from the mainstream media so the Mercury News backed up their claims with a detailed and comprehensive website. This allowed the public to examine first-hand the extensive government documents, photos, and tape recordings that Gary Webb had used to compile his report. The story reported that for the better part of a decade, a drug ring sold tons of cocaine to the street gangs of Los Angeles through a dealer named Ricky Ross. The staggering amounts of cocaine that flooded into LA from this operation helped ignite the crack explosion in urban America. Ross's main supplier, Danilo Blandon, once testified under oath that his drug ring sold almost a ton of cocaine in the United States in 1981 alone: \$54 million worth at prevailing wholesale prices.

The drug ring's leaders then funneled millions in profits to a Nicaraguan guerilla army called the FDN, the largest and best organized of the anti-communist guerilla groups Americans would come to know as the Contras. In 1984, as a result of public pressure, Congress passed legislation, which banned any and all support for the Contra resistance, much to the dismay of the Regan administration. In spite of this, however, it appears that the FDN had been organized and was being run throughout the 80s by the CIA. Furthermore, the CIA and the Drug Enforcement Administration had full knowledge of the drug smuggling and may even have assisted in its transport. Webb asserts that while the CIA did not organize the whole operation, it was aware of and protected its existence. This "Dark Alliance," as it would come to be known, is obviously a story of national significance, yet even after Webb's story ran, the mainstream press showed practically no interest in this issue.

**Gary Webb** (Former Reporter, San Jose Mercury News): I think the--I think--the major newspapers were ignoring it because, first of all, it was a fantastic-sounding story. I mean CIA involvement in drug trafficking in the United States is not something you read about in the paper every day. Secondly, it was an issue they were already familiar with from the 1980s and had done a very shoddy job of covering in the 1980s, and here it was coming back to bite them again ten years later and bite them a lot harder because now we had living human beings saying, "Yes, I did it," and admitting it. So that was another problem they faced, and I think the third problem they were

faced with was seeing the reaction of the black community and seeing what a volatile affect the story had had on the black community. Their initial instinct was to not fuel the flames. It was to settle people down because people were getting very agitated about it. You know, there was a lot of public reaction. A lot of public pressure was put on these organizations to respond to the story, and the response they chose was to attack it rather than to investigate it and then try to further the information that we'd come up with.

**Narrator:** Soon, however, under pressure from the public, the mainstream press broke its silence. On October 4, 1996, the Washington Post ran an editorial highly critical of Webb's story.

**Webb:** Well, the Washington Post story essentially said that there was no evidence that this whole thing was a CIA plot, which was an interesting take on the story since I'd never said that it was. A lot of people read the story, and I think accurately, to say, "Well, if this was going on, the CIA had to know about it." The Washington Post said, "Well, there's no evidence the CIA plotted this." They weren't denying that it happened. They weren't denying that the Contras were selling dope in Los Angeles. Finally, you know, they were admitting that after all these years of denial. They were admitting that it happened, but their argument was, "So what? Even if they were, this wasn't the biggest drug ring in the world. It didn't supply crack to every single city in the United States, and at most, it could only have brought in five tons of cocaine" (which, to me, five tons of cocaine in one neighborhood is a whole hell of a lot of cocaine, but not to the Washington Post.) And that was the attack and their evidence was unnamed government officials saying so--period.

The LA Times added a different twist. They had unnamed sources saying, "Well, they didn't give them millions of dollars. They only gave them tens of thousands of dollars." And suddenly, this became sort of accepted that these guys didn't give millions of dollars even though they had testified that they had sold hundreds of kilos of cocaine for the Contras and given all their profits, you know, it was \$60 thousand at most.

**Narrator:** Despite the criticism from the mainstream papers, managers at the Mercury News were standing behind the story including Executive Editor Jerry Ceppos. As a result, Webb was asked to submit a series of follow-up reports.

**Webb:** I went down to Central America in the fall and I did another week down there and we interviewed eyewitnesses, and we interviewed police officials. We interviewed former Contras, and I came back and wrote four more stories, which took it beyond the CIA knowing--maybe knowing--about it, showing the CIA definitely knew about it because there was an agent involved and we had his name and we had this information from the man who had actually handed over the money to him. We had information that I had gotten out of the Archives: interviews with CIA officials that were done by

the Iran-Contra committees in which they admitted, "Yes, we knew this was going on. Yes, we knew the hangers that they were flying it out of. We knew the hanger number." So I was fairly confident that when we came back and showed these stories to the editors, they were going to be jumping for joy because it proved everything that we had wrote was true. And what happened was I sent the stories in and nobody said anything.

**Narrator:** On March 25, the tide at the Mercury News suddenly changed direction.

**Webb:** Ceppos called me at home on March 25 and said he had made--they had made--a very difficult decision. And he was on a speaker phone (I don't know who else was in the room) and said that they believed that mistakes had been made in the earlier series and that they were planning to write a column pointing this out (which came as news to me because I had been talking to them for months and nobody had at that point been able to show me a single factual error in the whole thing). And when Ceppos wrote his column, I went public, and I said, "This is bullshit! Half this stuff isn't true. There's more information that you're not being told about, that we're sitting on and pretending doesn't exist."

Stuff was being suppressed now. It was not just that they were backing off from what they had written. They were suppressing stuff they already knew and this became a very sticky situation for the Mercury and I refused to shut up about it. I went public and I said, "They're sitting on information," and at that point, I was called up by Ceppos and told that, you know, I was off the story, that they were not going to do any more investigations of it, and that I was to report to the Mercury in two days to discuss my future with the newspaper. **Narrator:** In the spring of 1997, Webb was forced to resign his position at the Mercury News. Later that year, the Justice Department and the CIA issued reports on their own internal investigations into the matter. Both reports indicated the agencies were, at the very least, aware of what was going on and had agreed to do nothing about it.

**Webb:** So the New York Times actually did a story of the 17 of July that said the CIA has now admitted that there were at least two dozen drug traffickers they worked with during the Contra war, and they knew that they were trafficking drugs, and that this was known all the way to the top of Langley. But came--that admission came two years after the fact, and I think most people thought, "Well, this is interesting."

**Smith:** I had an interesting conversation with a national editor of the Washington Post a few days after the Washington Post ran its series criticizing Gary Webb's piece, and I said to him, "Well, if it was so awful, why didn't you put a team of reporters on it when it came out to do this criticism? Why did you wait all this time?" And he said that at the time when the piece came out, you know, he saw it and he had--that he thought it was flawed--but they had so much respect for the San Jose Mercury News that they decided they just weren't going to, you know, deal with it, but then after there was so much

controversy about it within the African-American community, they felt compelled to respond. And my question to him was, "Well, didn't you get that that was going to cause a lot of controversy in the African-American community, when you are sitting in Washington, DC, you know, one of the crack cocaine capitals of the world?"

And he said, "Well, I guess you'd know more about that than me, Professor Smith" (you know, which I assumed to mean because I'm African-American, of course, I would know which is one issue). But the other issue is sort of ironic because they are in Washington where a mayor, you know, was caught on tape smoking crack cocaine, where you can walk out the door of the Washington Post and probably run into a crack addict. I mean the lives of people who work at places like the Washington Post are—could not be—more different than a person who lives in the inner cities of this country, regardless of what color they are, than if the person was from the moon. They might as well be a different, from different planets. Yet, in the saying, "They have the responsibility, the privilege, of actually reporting about the world and do so in the name of the public all the time. . . ." And have no idea who the public is, even in the middle of the capital, what is known as the capital of black America, a guy at the Washington Post tells me he did not have a clue this story might cause this controversy. It's amazing!

**Phillips:** There's a number of ways that I think the system could be improved. Whether or not they'll happen immediately, I don't think so. I don't think we have the political will to require all the news systems to create independence within their journalists. In other words, sort of like a tenure system we have at universities where we have the right to write, read, and speak about things here at a university that we believe in and we think are important without being worried about being fired. I think we need a tenure system for reporters and writers in the country where they can be given a budget, and you take your best reporters and your best journalists, and you send them out into the community with a budget, and they go after the stories they think are important, and you publish them and you put them on the air. We need ombudsmen, people who are in these media systems that challenge (within the media system), whose job it is to challenge things that are going wrong and bring up ethical issues with the media system. And we need a diversity of news sources, but I'm not sure that that's going to happen.

**Jensen:** Each year we receive letters from people and others across the country who say that the biggest censored story of all is Project Censored. The Project has never been mentioned in the New York Times. It's never been mentioned in the Washington Post. There was a two or three inch thing in the Los Angeles Times once. None of the major media have done anything on Project Censored.

**Brugman:** It gets at the underbelly of monopoly journalism, which is that they're a hell of a lot of stories that they simply won't cover, and when someone comes along like the



radicals from Sonoma State, they're not even going to do that. So we would do the story, and then we would call up The Examiner, and Chronicle, and AP, and so forth, and so on, and say, "Why didn't you do this story (Santa Rosa Press Democrat)? Why didn't you do this story (big New York Times paper)?" It was like they were gurgling through a tube underwater from a submarine in the Bay. It was never clear. They could never come up with an answer.

**Jensen:** I understand that because they perceive me as attacking them, which (in reality) I'm not. I'm a former journalist. Journalism is my lifeblood. That's what I'm really interested in because I believe journalism is the solution to our problems. If we can let people know what's happening, they're going to react and do things and get those problems solved. And so I wasn't attacking the media. I was. . . . We've got the best media system in the world. No question about it. We have the First Amendment supporting it. But it can be improved.

**Narrator:** Project Censored has just released its 1999 list of censored stories. They are as important and dramatic as those you have just seen. As for the mainstream press, when will they begin to uphold their constitutional duty and obligation to the public? Will Project Censored be needed in the years to come?

**Jensen:** Another question I am often asked is, "Would it make any difference?" An ABC television crew was in Rome and shooting a brief documentary over there. While they were there, they heard about the fact that there was an incredible drought and starvation threatening the lives of millions of people down in Africa. They immediately picked up the phone, called the headquarters in New York, and got their producer on the line, and said, "Hey, this a big story. Can you get, you know, can you swing it so that we can, instead of coming right back to New York, we can go down into Africa and then come back from there?" He checked it out and because of money he said, "No. Can't do it. Just come on straight home." So ABC News just dropped the story right there.

Subsequently--and we don't know how many lives were lost as a result of that--- subsequently, a crew from BBC in London went down there, took the pictures, sent them out internationally, and the American--not the American people--people throughout the world reacted. As a result of the BBC uncovering and doing and airing that story, seven million lives of Ethiopians were saved. The lives of seven million Ethiopians were saved. The press--the media--can make a difference.