Robert Parry, Investigative Reporter in Washington, Dies at 68

By SAM ROBERTS  JAN. 29, 2018

Robert Parry, a tenacious investigative reporter and author who exposed details of the Reagan administration’s secret support for Nicaraguan rebels in the 1980s, died on Saturday in Arlington, Va. He was 68.

The cause was pancreatic cancer, said his wife, Diane Duston.

Mr. Parry won the George Polk Award for national reporting in 1984 for his disclosures that the Central Intelligence Agency had provided an assassination manual to the so-called contras, the right-wing insurgents who were seeking to topple the socialist government in Nicaragua. Mr. Parry was part of an Associated Press investigative team based in Washington when he broke the story.

For that reporting, he was also named a finalist for the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for national reporting.

In 1985, Mr. Parry broke news of the involvement of Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, a deputy director of the National Security Council, in a covert operation to support the contras with proceeds from clandestine arms sales to Iran. Congress had banned such support. The weapons had been sold to Iran to speed the release of American hostages in Lebanon.

In 2015, the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard awarded Mr. Parry the I. F. Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence. Last year, he received the Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism, named for a 20th-century war correspondent and presented by a trust set up in her name.

Mr. Parry complained that some articles on the Iran-contra scandal, including those he wrote for The A.P. with a colleague, Brian Barger, had been watered down or even withheld because his bosses had been meeting with Colonel North to negotiate the release of Terry Anderson, an A.P. reporter who was being held hostage during Lebanon’s civil war. A.P. executives denied the accusations.

Frustrated with the mainstream news media, in 1995 Mr. Parry established the Consortium for Independent Journalism. The organization’s website, Consortiumnews, is financed by contributions
Mr. Parry left The A.P. for Newsweek in 1987 and later worked on documentaries for the PBS series “Frontline.” In one, broadcast in 1991, he investigated whether Reagan, as a presidential candidate, had sabotaged the release of American hostages in Iran in 1980 to keep President Jimmy Carter, his Democratic rival, from benefiting politically from their release. The hostages were freed on the day of Mr. Reagan’s inauguration.

“Those looking for a smoking gun are coming to the wrong place if they hope ‘Frontline’ will provide it,” The Boston Globe wrote in a review of the documentary. “‘Frontline’ does, however, provide so much circumstantial evidence that you can suspect only the worst after watching it.”

A congressional investigation discounted Mr. Parry’s version of Reagan’s role, but Mr. Parry amassed more evidence after publishing a book, “Trick or Treason” (1993), which implicated Reagan.

He wrote five other books, including “Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush” (2007), a collaboration with two of his sons, Sam and Nat Parry.

Mr. Parry was featured in “Ukraine on Fire,” a recent documentary film that argued that the 2014 uprising in Ukraine, which some Western news media depicted as a people’s revolution, was actually a coup staged by nationalist groups with the complicity of the United States.

In a telephone interview on Monday, Oliver Stone, one of that film’s executive producers, said of Mr. Parry: “I don’t see him as a conspiracist, but as a man of common sense and integrity. He leaves a giant hole in American journalism.”

Robert Earle Parry was born on June 24, 1949, in Hartford to the former Elizabeth Caton and William Parry, publisher of The Middlesex Daily News in Framingham, Mass. He earned a bachelor’s degree in English from Colby College in Waterville, Me., in 1971.

In addition to his wife, a former A.P. reporter, he is survived by their sons, Sam, Jeff and Nat; a daughter, Elizabeth Parry; a sister, Randine Parry; a brother, William; and six grandchildren.

Mr. Parry worked briefly for his father’s newspaper before joining The A.P. in 1974. Besides Washington, he worked for the agency in Baltimore and Providence, R.I. He was with Newsweek from 1987 to 1990.

Writing this week on Consortiumnews, Nat Parry recalled that one of his earliest memories “was of my dad about to leave on assignment in the early 1980s to the war zones of El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala.”

“I remember asking him why he had to go,” he continued. “He replied that it was important to go to these places and tell the truth about what was happening there. He mentioned that children my age were being killed in these wars and that somebody had to tell their stories.”

After decades of enraging conservatives, Mr. Parry began angering liberals in 2016 by suggesting that Russian meddling had had little influence on the election of Donald J. Trump, though he was critical of President Trump for what he called his “contempt for facts and his crass personal behavior.”

Mr. Parry considered himself a pariah in the eyes of politicians as well as the major established news organizations, which he viewed as constituting a kind of parallel “permanent government.”

“The people who succeeded and did well” in the news media, he said in a speech to the media watchdog group Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting in 1993, “were those who didn’t stand up, who didn’t write the big stories, who looked the other way when history was happening in front of
them, and went along either consciously or just by cowardice with the deception of the American people."

Referring to his coverage of the Iran-contra scandal, he was self-effacing, saying it “didn’t require that much.”

“It just required sort of following the leads,” he said. “They were all over the place.”