

# Dana Priest:

## Cleaning up the Government, One Story at a Time

Two-time Pulitzer  
Prize winner and *CHP*  
alumna wins UCSC  
Distinguished  
Alumni Award

**Daniel Zarchy**  
Co-Editor in Chief

Adding another item to her trophy shelf, Dana Priest returned to Santa Cruz in October to accept the Distinguished Alumni Award. Priest, a *Washington Post* reporter who has won two Pulitzer Prizes in three years for some of the most groundbreaking investigative journalism in the media, returned to her alma mater and her old stomping grounds, *City on a Hill Press* (*CHP*).

Priest won her first Pulitzer in 2006 for her reporting on secret CIA prisons in Eastern Europe for terror suspects, known as “black sites,” and again in 2008 for her coverage of the unsanitary conditions at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

Priest, who graduated from Merrill College in 1981, served as editor of *CHP* and to this day remains our favorite alumna.



Dylan Chappier | CHP

UCSC alumna and Pulitzer Prize winner Dana Priest visited campus on Friday, Oct. 24, to talk about her experience as a reporter for the *Washington Post*.

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Dana Priest  
UCSC and CHP Alumna and two-time Pulitzer Prize Winner

**CHP:** *Can you explain how you ended up in the position that you're in now, and the kinds of things you've covered?*

**DP:** First of all, I didn't know that I wanted to be a journalist when I was at UCSC. I never took a journalism class, but I got a lot of internships. I was at the *LA Times* first, then the *San Jose Mercury*, then the *Chicago Sun Times*. And then, when I was in graduate school, I got an internship with the *Washington Post* on the foreign staff, which is really what I wanted ... I thought I had died and gone to heaven and said, "I want to be a journalist."

But because I didn't have any formal experience, I went to the *St. Petersburg Times* to get some experience, and there I covered everything from fires and floods to a woodpecker who in mating season knocked down a phone pole because he was pecking so hard and knocked out the lights for 10,000 people.

And then about 15 months later, the *Post* foreign desk called up and said, "Would you like to come back as an editor to get your foot in the door as a reporter?" So I went back, and I was really, really happy, and worked for a year on the foreign desk as an editor and edited the correspondents from overseas, so I got to be a specialist in the Lebanese Civil War and in the contra war in Central America, so those are my two kind of specialty areas on the desk.

A year after that the metro staff had a position for me in the smallest county in the country, Arlington County. There I covered courts and cops and schools and everything that you do as a metro reporter when there are not a lot of people. So I was there for two years, and then on the third year I did bigger stories for Virginia State.

The trick was trying to find places that no one else was covering, because the paper's giant, there were a lot of people on metro, so you had to figure out what no one else was covering, and that was kind of a trick. If you can figure out what no one else is covering, you can take your small universe and keep growing it bigger and bigger.

So one of them that I found out was jail overcrowding in Arlington County, and I spent time in the Arlington Jail. And then there was a whole overcrowding in Virginia, so I did a whole thing about the Virginia prison system, and toured the prisons and really got to know that, and it was really an amazing trip. ... And then I wrote about prisons nationally, and then I covered health care reform and the Clinton health care plan, and then I became the Pentagon correspondent and covered the Pentagon for seven years. Then I wrote a book about the military ... and when I came back I just thought I shouldn't cover that anymore, because I had been doing that long enough, so I covered the intelligence community.

**How has your job changed with the industry?**

Well, I am in the lucky position now that I don't have to worry about writing for the Web all the time, because I only do these projects. My colleagues who do that are

beat reporters, and I was a beat reporter for 16 years before I started down this other path, so it's not double the work, but it's a lot more work, and it's on a different cycle. You do have to think of it not as 24/7, but 18/7, always updating at different hours of the day.

And I don't think we've fully adjusted for what that means. A lot of us who are older are still thinking about people who want to get their newspaper in the morning and look at something on the front page that they say, "Wow, what?" You know, the scoop.

It's hard to maintain a scoop in the 24/7 cycle, because people can get a piece of information and even if they don't have the whole story they'll put it out there, and it kind of blows the scoop that you might have been working on. So the real scoops are in the longer-term projects. ...

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I'm kind of limited in how I think about it. I don't want to think if my article will make money for the paper, that's not my role. Chances are some of them have resulted in people boycotting the paper, so I don't think I'm the best person, and I think there always needs to be that separation, and there's less and less of that separation in the industry at large. Some of them are ruled now much more heavily by corporate ownership issues.

***The Washington Post has not been immune to a loss of advertising revenue that's industry-wide. Do you see that reflected in what you do?***

Oh yeah. We've had three rounds of early retirements. That's a way to avoid layoffs, but it's downsized the paper a lot. ... And this is at a time when newspapers competing with visual media and the Web feel like they need to give people what's called more 'consumer-oriented news,' like movie sections and entertainment sections, dining sections, all of the fun things that you do when you have time off, we want people to be able to come to the *Post* website to find it.

That's not the core of what journalism is, I don't think, but we have to do it to keep people coming to our Web site. So you have fewer people but an expanded mandate, which involves things that are traditionally journalism but also the bells and whistles.

What I hope that we do, and what our corporate leaders and our editorial leaders say that they want to do, is maintain a couple core areas. Like for us, politics and the main government agencies: White House, National Security, Congress, and also investigative reporting. ...

If you want to see where the latest scandal is or how the government's really serving you or not, I think you'd still want to think of the *Post*, and probably the *Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* and some of the other big outlets that still do hardcore accountability journalism, so I don't think anyone wants to lose that even though it's a lot more expensive and time-consuming and takes more people.

***You've also had to deal with a number of tough decisions, such as choosing not to reveal the names of the countries that had the black sites. How do you make those decisions?***

Well, that's a good question, because it's a really important decision. First of all, I don't make it — it's the hell-head of the paper, the executive editor, who makes it.

This happens quite a bit, but not quite as dramatically as it did in this case. You're in this realm of national security, and chances are you're going to find out things the government has said are classified. They are supposed to say things are classified if revealing them would damage national security. Well, that's a judgment call.

Now you've found out something that's classified. On this story ... we called the CIA up and said, "This is the story we're thinking about running." And I didn't give them the story, but I read all the elements of it. It's not a game, but they know what the procedure is. And they say, like they did here, "We have some problems with that," if they want to they can say that's all wrong, but in this case they didn't. ... In this case they said, "We have some real problems with that, we really feel that revealing this and this and this would damage national security," so then the next step is "OK, tell us how, because we're not just going to take your word on it."

We had meetings at a higher level, where higher-level CIA people spoke with me and other editors, higher-level editors, and made their case. And we wanted to keep pushing them, because they don't really make their case, they make it in the general way because they don't want to give anything else away.

In this case the president called and had our editor over to the White House — I was not in on that meeting. I told them I was ready to go, but I was not invited — Bush was there with his national security team, like Cheney, I think Rice was there too, and some other members. They made their case to the editors. ...

So the editors came back and then we had a series of meetings where we debated the issue. And the government ... they said if we reveal the names, because the people in them are high-value targets, the big terrorists, that those countries would be more subject to retaliation.

And then they also made the argument that if you reveal the names then those countries will stop cooperating with us in other things that are not controversial, and I happen to have known what some of those other things were, and I don't think anybody would consider them controversial.

So Lynn Downey, the editor, decided to not name the countries for that reason, but to say they were in Eastern Europe. And the real for that is you talk about hypocrisy: Here you have Eastern Europe still struggling to throw off the Soviet-dominated mindset of state rule and no rule of law and domination by their internal intelligence agencies, and that's exactly what we say we promote, and yet we were doing exactly the opposite with putting these prisons there ... doing something that was illegal in their countries. It's like, "What do you stand for here?"

So at least we thought we should say Eastern Europe, so that hypocrisy would be evident, and people could weigh the merits of doing this or not doing this. That's how he decided, which was all very exciting, interesting, frustrating. 🐼 [features@cityonahillpress.com](mailto:features@cityonahillpress.com)