

BARBARA TRENT

The Making of *The Panama Deception*
University of Florida, Gainesville, April 2, 1994

Barbara Trent is an independent filmmaker. She is founder and artistic director of The Empowerment Project based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She produced and directed *Coverup*, a film about the Iran/Contra scandal. She is best known for *The Panama Deception*, winner of the 1993 Academy Award. The film has been honored with other international awards and has been shown in more than twenty-five countries. She is currently working on a number of new film projects, including ones on immigrant issues and the global effort to ban land mines.

I'd like to take you through a process that I go through every few years when I make a film and show you what I mean by the kinds of censorship and the kinds of obstacles that we face.

Some countries have very overt censorship. Personally, I think there's something to be said for that model, as opposed to the more covert censorship. When people living in countries with government-controlled media read the media, they read between the lines. They laugh. They get just enough information to realize that something's going on, but they surely know that what they read is not exactly what's going on or why. It seems to me that that's an advantageous attitude over the one that most Americans hold, that is, that we have the freest press in the world. But I always try to tell audiences, We do have perhaps the freest press in the world, but it is free to the highest bidder. We know who those bidders are. They're General Electric, that owns NBC, one of the largest arms builders in the world. Capital Cities, that owns ABC, with a board that Casey sat on, the former CIA director, strewn with Pentagon people. It goes on and on.

So the issue isn't to me a free press, the issue is an independent and a courageous press. That's what we need. The lack of that is what I believe is really one of the most serious threats to this experiment called democracy and our attempt to have a participatory democracy.

So let's look at how it works. I'm going to use this most recent film, *Panama*, as an example. One day you turn on the TV, as we did, and George Bush announces that he's sent 26,000 troops to arrest one guy in Panama. You know that something's terribly wrong, that either we have the most incompetent military in the world, which is *not* the case, or there's really another agenda. So let's assume you believe, as we did, that there really is another agenda. We decided we wanted to go down and see what that agenda was down there and we wanted to do some research up here and see if we could figure out what that agenda was.

For starters, our name was left out of the press pool. For starters, independents are not privy to the privilege of being sent down in the middle of a war, even though those who did go were held for something like a day and a half on bases before they even got out into the countryside. But that's the beginning of the censorship: who gets to go in the press pools. Another issue, of course, is, Who gets the press pool footage? Presumably if the government is shipping these people in and it's a press pool, that footage ought to be available to everybody else. There has been some discussion after the fact that in fact that is the intention of the press pool. But there really is no muscle in that intention. That footage is considered private property by those who shot it.

So for starters we are not there on the ground when it all starts. But we still want to make the film. So we know we've got to raise money. This film cost us \$300,000. It took two years. It cost more than it should. All of that's considered nothing. And it took much longer than it should have, al-

though for independent documentaries two years is considered very short. I think *American Dream*, Barbara Koppel's piece, took about eight. *Building Bombs* took I think five. Typically independent filmmakers take a very long time to do their film because their resources are so diminished. So we begin to try to raise funds.

First of all, we can't get them, to speak of, in this country. Most of our funding from this film came from "off-shore." The biggest hunk, \$75,000, came from Channel 4 in the United Kingdom. I think on the next film that we brave and do will have advance money probably from two or three other countries as well who have bought our films in the past and have some confidence in our track record. So we begin by getting a little bit of money together, \$3,000 from the Veterans Foundation, \$10,000 from the National Council of Churches, \$10,000 from the Grateful Dead [laughter, applause]. Our biggest hunk of money from within the U.S. was \$20,000 from the J. Roderick MacArthur Foundation. We've never been able to get funding for films from the bigger MacArthur, from NEA, although NEA is in the credits because we got \$15,000 from the American Film Institute, which was partly a re-granting of some NEA money. But NEA itself has turned us down on every film, as have the state arts councils, the state and national humanities councils, all of the possible government options, CPB, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and any of the stations that we've individually approached. So fundraising is an enormous obstacle.

So we begin to get enough money and think we're going to go ahead. We go to rent a camera, since we don't keep our own camera equipment. We have editing equipment. We find out that you have to have an insurance certificate to get the camera out of the commercial rental house. It wasn't so bad this time for us, because we got the camera through a friend. But for instance with our first film, *Destination Nicaragua*, there was not an insurance company in the U.S. that would give us an insurance policy for a lousy Betacam camera to take it to a war zone. It had to be bid out at Lloyd's of London. Networks have cameras. They can go anywhere they want with their camera. If they lose a camera, they lose a camera. They buy another camera. What I'm going to try to go through here, because I suspect that people who haven't made films haven't experienced all this, is all the little economic obstacles that add up to these kinds of films not getting produced and not getting released, by and large.

Then there's the whole issue of the personal threat to the people who are going to act as sources for us in these countries where the U.S. has restored democracy, [laughter] which are the most dangerous places I've ever made films. We interviewed people whose faces we blacked out. We interviewed people that we met clandestinely when we were in Panama who, even with their face not showing, we had to stay in touch with them up to the final day of editing to see whether we could include or not include the footage. People were still in the process of going back underground because

the government was after them again, a warrant had come out for them again. Then things would cool off in Panama and people would be aboveground for a while. So it's this constant problem of staying in touch with your sources to see whether or not in the long run you even get to use their words. Even their words, in their opinion, could endanger them. And we always respect the justifiable fears of the people with whom we deal. And it is the people with whom we deal who always pay the heaviest price, by and large, which is also very difficult for us. The fact that we come into a country and we are going to be able to leave that country. The people who helped us, who stayed behind because they lived there, are the people who continue to be in danger.

In the country, mobility is a huge problem, being able to get around and being able to actually shoot video. In Panama there were three areas of threat to our safety. One was, of course, the Southern Command, the U.S. forces, who stopped us regularly on the streets, who would walk up to a uniformed Panamanian that I was interviewing and grab him by the shoulder and pull him out of the frame of the camera and say to him, You don't want to be doing this interview. The President and the two Vice-Presidents that have been installed by the U.S. government, Endara, Calderon and Ford, each of them have their own private guard, so to speak, anywhere up to about a hundred people each, completely unregimented, not in uniform. They all wear these wide-bottom pants so they have guns in both their low-cut boots and they all wear these wide shirts because they've got guns on both of their hips. They're always pulling them out and putting them away. Someone would pull one out and someone else would say, Put it away! Put it away! These people were probably the most serious threat because they're completely undisciplined.

The third threat, for us, at least, in Panama, which was the most painful for me, was the very poorest of people in Panama, who had suffered the most in the invasion. It took us six months from the day of the invasion to raise the money to even get to Panama with equipment. By the time we were there, these people had been taken advantage of so many times, they had told their stories so many times, and yet the U.S. press was still saying, Gosh, Panama is so happy that we came down and invaded, and things are really OK. *U.S. News and World Report* had an incredible piece about the refugee center that I later visited that you see in the film, where 2,650 people lived in an airplane hanger. Their position was, What a marvelous job the U.S. had done of setting up this refugee center, and there was daycare there, and they painted it like a fabulous place. So the Panamanians themselves because a lot of the people in the sovereignty movement were already dead, a lot of them were underground, the people left on the street were not well organized. It was not like being in Nicaragua working during the Sandinista period. It was not like being in El Salvador and being able to work where there's a strong solidarity movement. The solidarity movement in Panama had been fairly well demolished. Of all the Latin American countries that I've been to, there's no country that I've ever been to aside from Panama that has such a colonized kind of mentality, which was particularly painful for me to deal with. In Nicaragua people would lay their life down to be sure that we got the footage out. In Panama, people would come up literally with photos inside of their coat and open it and show us three or four photos they

had gotten during the first few days of the invasion, and they wanted a lot of money for them, right now, on the spot. Not tomorrow, not a later meeting. Now. And if we didn't have it and didn't give it to them, that was OK with them. They'd find someone else to sell it to. That's all the further people were able to hope. This \$35 or this \$50 will buy my family security for another month. The concept of this story ever getting out to the world and making a difference for Panama was outside of most people's sensibilities. That was really difficult and painful.

It's a big job to try to guard the footage. We always hide the footage after we shoot. Getting it back into the U.S. is a problem. We send it back, as a rule, with a variety of different people. If somebody's coming with a lot of footage at once we get a letter from one of the Congressmen or women who have been supporting us to the customs officials saying, If you want to stop this woman, you stop her, fine. But don't separate her from her footage, and call my office. I have one of my assistants waiting for your call at such-and-such a time when her plane comes in. It's stamped and sealed, and the customs people tend to think, Well, yeah, because they're just low-level people. But without those kinds of safeguards, footage doesn't always get in this country.

So we're back in the country. We've shot what we shot. There are additional documents that we need. We've been lucky because we've worked through the National Security Archives and the Center for Defense Information, particularly the National Security Archives does a fabulous job of filing Freedom of Information Act requests and getting a lot of documents released. They put them in a library and they actually know how to find them. They are an amazing resource. There are between 650 and 700 hours of footage that the Pentagon shot during the invasion. Through FOIA the Pentagon has released 50 hours, and that is all. Fifty hours. We have pressed, and of course we have the letter saying it's an issue of national security and that's why they can't release the rest. We continued to press them until the final days of the edit. At that point, which was almost two years later, their response was, Oh, that footage? That was of no particular value and we re-recorded over it. Which I know can't be true. That footage had to have been maintained. Even the Pentagon concedes that this was the first time a variety of new weapons systems were tested out in the "arena," as they like to call it in their sportsman-like language, of war. So you know that the arms people and the Pentagon have that footage. Even Congress hasn't been able to see that footage. So we really still don't know what happened in Panama. And what our film does as much as anything is open a lot of questions. We present a lot of evidence and leave a lot of questions unanswered.

Then there's the issue of getting the simplest kind of footage to try to tell the story, that the networks have. We figured that in order to make this film we have to bring people up to speed, the history between the U.S. and Panama. So we started with the 1800s and bring them up. For innocuous little things like President Jimmy Carter signing the Carter/Torrijos Treaty, shots of the Iran/*contra* event opening up, that footage costs from ABC and Viznews \$150 a second. From NBC, a lot cheaper, we do most of our work with them and they have the best archive library of them, in my opinion, \$45 a second. So we're talking about tens of thousands of dollars that we had to raise for the most com-

mon, innocuous historical footage. Anything that's real old we can get from the National Archives for free. But anything in the last twenty years is still under copyright.

So when the networks go to make a film, a little historical overview of how Noriega came to power and why we had to invade, they buy footage from each other all the time. At the end of the year they add up how much they owe and they add up how much they owe them, and nobody owes anybody anything. They're all charging those kinds of prices. Whereas an independent has to cough up real cash. For them it's play money. For us it's real cash. And it's another way that limits our ability to make these kinds of films.

One of the best footage issues that we ran into is, in our film we try to show how the news media manipulated the public into being prepared for an invasion, as they did so nicely in advance of the Persian Gulf war as well. So we've got these little clips of Dan Rather and Brokaw and Jennings and CNN and MacNeil/Lehrer—they never forgave us for that—, just quick little clips showing you what they were saying, and then we show you what was happening to our knowledge. It's very interesting what you go through to get those clips. That's what they call their "talent," these news-people. To get footage that includes their talent in the picture, you have to submit to them your script. They have to approve the film. Then the price is astronomical anyway, because it is their talent. It's not just a piece of historic footage that anybody might have shot but they happen to own it, so you have to pay \$45 a second.

There's this fair use thing, this little clause in the copyright law, that says that you can use footage of the anchors, from the media, free, without paying, legally. There are a bunch of criteria, but what it boils down to is, if you are in fact critiquing them, you're not using that piece of footage to tell the story, you're actually using that piece of footage to critique the way they told the story. So it's perfectly legal for us to have that footage in our film. But you can't get it. Because they won't sell it to you. So it's an amazing catch-22. It makes it amazingly difficult to critique the TV news in this country. We were able, through a lot of real breaks and things I'm not at liberty to discuss, to get all the footage that we needed. Our standard explanation is that we were just awful lucky that three of the producers had parents who had been recording the news for the last thirty years, because we certainly can't explain how we got it. But it's legal for us to possess it. So it's pretty interesting.

This is all about money. I hope it's not so boring, because it's just really about money. It just keeps going. Most people probably haven't had the opportunity to see how many ways the economics of the way we run this country and the way we run media intervenes and stops a story. That's the whole purpose of this discussion today.

Then it comes to doing a final on-line edit that's going to meet broadcast standards. We can actually do most of that in our own facility. There were certain things we couldn't do at that time, certain equipment that we didn't have. So we were able to find large edit houses that made very generous donations, but interestingly enough it actually ended up costing us more. The sound was donated by Skywalker, by Lucas Sound, but it was a 72 digital track system. When they ran out of having spare days that they didn't have clients and we still needed time and had to buy time, then we're talking about several thousand dollars a day. So we made a lot of errors, I

think, in accepting some of these contributions and then having a very difficult time at the end finishing in those houses. For the first six months of the release of this film, even though I traveled with it from city to city, I was not able to watch it. I never saw this whole film from start to finish since we finished it. You never see it from start to finish when you're finishing it. You're just working on a little part. I probably didn't sit through the whole thing for close to a year. I would leave the theater in tears because we would come to a section where I just couldn't stand it because there's a whole sound track that never got mixed in because we ran out of time and money. Or there are images that something else was supposed to happen to but we ran out of time and money and had to leave them still-framed up there as opposed to a movement that we wanted to do. Little stuff that nobody else cares about. But after you've spent two years of your life and you go through everything you've gone through, you want the doggone thing to be what you planned it to be. Once again, financial resources restrict that. But we did get the Academy Award, anyway. So I don't cry any more over that. [applause]

Then there's the bigger issue of the release. That is equally scandalous. It costs a fortune to transfer from tape to film. I can't even remember now. I think the 16mm cost us \$5,000 or \$6,000, and I think to make the 35mm cost over \$12,500, just to make the internegative. Then it's a few thousand dollars per print. It's very difficult to find a good distributor. You kind of need a distributor. We've done it with distributors and without distributors. We did the first several months without a distributor. What happens when you don't have a distributor is, theaters don't pay you. We have a theater in San Francisco, for instance, that made \$20,000 on the film. All they had to pay us was a measly \$6,000. But when these little art houses, who are themselves struggling because there's no base of support and no real economy that's supporting these kinds of films, when they start to get tight, who do they pay? They pay the distributors because the distributors have another film that they want, whereas an independent filmmaker is not going to have another film for a few years. They may not even be in business in a few years. We had several theaters go under and never pay us.

We have a distributor theatrically, for instance, who's been very kind, very honest, very well-meaning, who came out with a royalty report in January that there had been \$24,000 in profit for that period of time after all of these expenses, which were enormous and which eat up 80% of the money. Of that \$24,000, \$12,000 is ours. But he's sorry because he doesn't have it. Which means he spent it. But he'd hope to have it from another film. It's the cash flow issue. So he has another quarterly report due yesterday. Who cares what it says? He still hasn't been able to pay on the last one. And you don't want to sue these people or get heavy with them because these are the handful of people in the country who even will take on a film like this. And we will ultimately get paid by most of these people.

In the meanwhile, of course, we've put over \$100,000 on our Visa cards to make this film. So we got that down to about \$80,000. Now it's down to about \$40,000. We have since refinanced it at no-interest or low-interest loans with donor-type people for most of it. But by the time we get paid by these people, what it's cost us to cover that loan to them doesn't ever get paid, even from the very large corporations.

It just amazes me. So that's another big problem. Getting your money.

Another problem with the independent film is that you end up, because you don't have an enormous amount of money behind you, you're taking it city to city. You're not doing a national campaign. You're not taking advantage of the economy of being able to do national advertising, where you create a buzz that at some point there's a critical mass and everybody's talking about the film. But if you're only going to one town and creating a little critical mass there, and then you get booked maybe five states over in another town, it's very ineffective in terms of cost. There's also a problem in terms of once you move out of the art houses in a do-gooder effort to try to reach a larger audience that is not already predisposed, we made 35mm prints and went into the very big theaters that have seven, eight, nine different films playing at once. These guys play hardball. They make you put up \$10,000-\$15,000 in advance for advertising at your risk. The way the game works, in case you ever have important films coming to town in your theater, go see them the first three days. I'll tell you why.

Your film opens on Friday. It runs Friday to Thursday. People are talking about it. More people come Saturday. More come Sunday. On Monday morning they decide whether or not your film is going to stay in that theater. On Monday morning every other distributor in the country is calling that theater and saying, Our film grossed \$5,000 or \$10,000 over the weekend. What did *Panama Deception* gross? If they've got a film that grossed more, the theater kicks you out. You finish until Thursday, and by then of course it's sold out, because word of mouth has gotten out and people want to see the film, and you're already gone.

I'm going to end with a challenge. There are ways to resolve these things. Going it alone, as we and most independent filmmakers do, is not the way. Some of the bigger theaters also are simply deceptive. They invite us in for an open run. We spend a fortune, fly a few people in, put an enormous amount of effort, as we did in Philadelphia at the Ritz, to create a real strong run. Some places, like Seattle, we ran for seven weeks. In New York we ran for five weeks and re-opened for four weeks at the Village East, a seven-plex. We outperformed *1492*, *Sister Act*, everything but *Consenting Adults* is the only thing in the country that we've never outperformed in terms of box office. We run against all the same films because we're all on the circuit together. So Philadelphia invited us in, had us spend a whole lot of money, bring in a whole lot of people, do this huge organizing campaign, and we found out from the projectionist, who was splicing together the reels of the next film, that they had never intended to let us stay past Thursday. They just wanted us to go for broke so they'd have one good week and they'd make good money, even though they knew we would lose money. There was no way we could make up our investment in one week. Our investment was made, and our gamble ... I can still cry about these things if I'm not careful. It was like boom! boom! every time we'd turn around. It was amazing. Oh, they can do that. Oh, they can do that. They can lie. Oh, of course. Then you can be doing very well, you can be running in a seven-plex, you can be outperforming all the other films with a very honest feeder and still be the film that gets bumped. When you open the newspaper and it says some big new film is opening up in 1500 cinemas this Friday,

on the TV it says, In your neighborhood this week. They mean it. And they will bump off the screen whoever they have to to get 1500 screens that weekend. Who are they going to bump? Warner Brothers? Fox? New Line Cinema? No! Barbara Trent and David Casper, the Empowerment Project. What are they going to do?

So it's a lack of strength that we go out individually like this. Theaters that have bumped us because they've been required by the studios. It really is an antitrust issue, and I think there are a few cases where we probably had the basis for a suit. It really is like a locking arrangement between the theater and the studios. But who's going to book your film after you start suing theaters? It's just something you can't do. You can do it but I'm not convinced it's the way to win.

In other countries it's more interesting. Theatrically it's very difficult. TV is much more possible. We've sold this film to about fifteen other countries for broadcast. It usually involves me going there to a festival, showing the film, doing a lot of press and creating a buzz about the film. Then a distributor comes forward and says, Maybe there's an audience for this film. But in advance of that they're all saying no, nobody wants to see this film. You really have to go to each country and prove that people are interested in this and then the gatekeepers, the people who are in control of the venues see, in fact, that it's possible and at that point they'll get involved.

TV in this country, of course, has been the most painful, partly because it's the most important country for all of our work. I really think theater is a very important place for us to do our initial releases. We're pretty committed to that model, although it usually ends up costing us. But it drives the publicity for retail video and for TV sales. But the reason I really think it's important is because we're actually in a room with four or five hundred people at once who have just seen the film and we can talk about, What are we going to do about it? So instead of just leaving people with this awful story of what our country has done, what we have allowed to happen, we're able to translate that into a series of actions. I think that's very empowering. Theatrical release is still the venue that I'm most committed to because that's where community organizing takes place. But it's also the most difficult, which is why most of the films like this don't do it. They just go straight to TV.

TV has been a real ball for us in this country. None of our films has ever been broadcast nationally by PBS. They've all been refused out of hand. The real scandal is that what PBS does at the national level, in order to defend their decision to not show your film, they basically smear your film. How else can they defend not showing an Academy Award-winning documentary that's been broadcast in fifteen countries, including the U.K., Japan, allies, not just fifteen Cubas, has had fabulous reviews in all the major papers in the country, been in a hundred cities and cinemas, how can they refuse to show that on public TV? Let me tell you how. I have the letter.

This is from our buddy Jennifer Lawson of PBS, Executive Vice President of National Programming: "*The Panama Deception* covers an important topic," thank you, "but does not meet our standards for fairness. In our view, some of its assertions about the intent of U.S. policy and the conduct of U.S. troops are not adequately substantiated." I find that interesting. The primary leads for us in terms of our assertion

of U.S. foreign policy intent came from Maxwell Thurmond, who led the invasion. He was the first guy who obviously hadn't been debriefed who said that the purpose of the invasion was to destroy the Panamanian Defense Forces. Pete Williams backed that up in an interview with us, saying that that was the essence of the operation. We didn't even put Pete Williams's comment in because we thought we were hitting the public over the head. We forgot who the public includes. What they mean by the "conduct of U.S. troops" is that poor, black, often non-English-speaking victims on the ground ten of them can't compare to one Dan Rather in terms of knowing what really happened, on the ground, in Panama. I'm sure it's a racist issue as well.

They went on to say, "PBS has already extensively reported on U.S. relations with Noriega, the invasion of Panama and conditions in post-invasion Panama. Such coverage has included two *Frontline* documentaries: 'The Noriega Connection,'"—as if that was the issue. Once again, not on target at all—"and 'War and Peace in Panama.'" A contribution, definitely, this film was, a contribution to analyzing the logistics of the invasion itself. Did they have good maps? Was it planned well? Did more people die than we had anticipated? The problem I have with the film is it begins by ticking off the four reasons we invaded, as if they were fact. The whole point of our film is to expose that the four reasons given by the President had nothing to do with the invasion.

Two things happen when PBS does a simple little thing like this: It's released to the press. Individual stations who might otherwise feel courageous and show the film get nervous. If it doesn't meet PBS's "standards of fairness," and if it's "not adequately substantiated," who is the program manager in Nebraska to say that he knows better than the people and the lawyers and the corporate heads of PBS? And if he shows that film, wouldn't it in fact be possibly irresponsible? If he were sued, and the station were sued, how could they defend themselves when the national office has already made it clear that this is a piece of garbage? This is not journalism? So their ability to disrupt our ability to do business is substantial. I would rather see all the money go to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Let them fund films and let the films fend on the open market. You know who showed our film? Cinemax. You know who showed the most challenging piece on the JFK assassination, by Nigel Turner in the U.K.? Arts and Entertainment, HBO, Discovery. There are a lot of national cables now that are doing very cutting edge and very risky stuff, aside from all the ride with the police and watch people's lives get wrecked, kind of reality stuff. I think what's so important about allowing PBS at the national level to fall is because they are the ultimate censor, and I believe that the individual stations who actually serve their constituency will survive. That's the first thing everybody says in every theater in the country, Is PBS going to show it? How come PBS isn't going to show it? If something's not on PBS, the progressives, or the liberals, at least, in the country think it must not be real. It must be some kind of conspiratorial thing. The public has an enormous amount of respect in the national PBS office's positions. I think that's particularly damaging. I know people who have done some of the *Frontline* pieces, and I know there is more information than they were allowed to disclose in those pieces. Those pieces are a contribution, but because they pull back and don't give us the final names, show the faces, name the names and take us all

the way to the end, we feel like we've had a critique on the issue, and we have not.

The other thing that happens is that we're pre-empted. As they say, What took you two years, Barb? We've already shown two full-hour docs on this. This has happened with every film we've done. They have the money to go out and do a fast, slick piece that appears to be critical of the government. When we come around with a real critique, the message is, We already did this. It's a serious problem, and it's a problem again of funding. Who has got the funding to move when they need to move?

Finally, we are right now in the midst of just dealing with lawyers. That's all I do now is deal with lawyers in a few parts of the country. Because of the errors and omissions insurance requirements of broadcasting in this country. We are about to consummate our first few sales in this country with WGBH in Boston [applause]. Thank you, WGBH, because a few of these major public affairs stations coming out is going to have a strong effect on the more frightened stations who actually would like to show it but feel like they don't dare. They're going to show it and so is WNYC in New York. This is not to say anything against them. This is just across the board. They've been amazingly cooperative to deal with. But we're required to include them in a policy, and every other station, that's called errors and omissions. A million dollars for each occurrence and some stations want up to \$3 million aggregate, which we can't provide. We've ended up with a \$25,000 deductible policy in case there's an error in the film or in case we have omitted something by accident that substantially would change things. It amazes me that that responsibility falls on each individual filmmaker. I don't understand why these stations, aren't they carrying this stuff? Of course they are. I want to repeat, I'm not saying this against these two stations, for we are indebted to them for leading the way, along with KQED in San Francisco, who already broadcast *The Panama Deception* for us. So that's the final kicker. It's going to cost us \$7,250, the most recent quote, for this insurance. So there you have it. So give me your rings and your watches. If you really care.

Some of the solutions I see that we've been working towards for years and haven't really had a lot of success in convincing the foundations of the necessity of this kind of thing. Here's what happens with us. We've got a film. We actually go from theater to theater because we've got a background in community organizing. We go from town to town with this huge hoopla. People come to the theater. There's organizing around it. The local community group that sponsored us is in a high profile for those few weeks. All of the people who give us a donation, we give all those names and addresses to that group. They have all those people to work with in the future. A lot of good and important things happen. As a rule, they make money on the opening night. We've really trained them. We've actually written a whole book, *Taking It To the Theaters*, a whole manual on distributing films. What happens is that when we come back two years later and we want to open in Madison, the same people aren't there any more. The people we trained aren't there any more, and we have to start from scratch. That's crazy. It's real not cost-effective.

I am convinced that we have got to explain to the foundations that sinking the millions and millions and hundreds of millions that they sink into producing films is pissing in the

wind if they're not going to create a facilitative environment to release the film. We're just wasting money and breaking hearts and burning out well-meaning people. What we have tried to do, and we do it with an occasional filmmaker, but we don't have any funding, so we can't do it with all the people who come to us. It would be nice if people could just go out to somebody's farm, where land is cheap and you can have a few little geodesic domes and they can come and live in one and they stay there for a few months and they develop their posters and their fliers and their campaign and all their press materials. Everybody finishes films and doesn't seem to have a clue on the next thing. A poster? What an idea? I'm not putting down my cohorts. We don't deal with it until we're done with the film. We just don't have time, often. If we charge people to do this they won't do it, because they're broke and in debt because they've just finished the film. So the few people we help we help because we give it to them. There's got to be some support for either us or anybody who knows how to do this, having prepaid that a good film completed gets two months of preparation before it goes on the road. If we could guarantee these community groups and the theaters in each town that we would put a good film down the pipeline every four months, there would be this standing army of people who know how to release it, who can bring in new people off the street who come to theaters to see films. We're not trying to get them to come to a church basement or a conference. We're talking about a theater, with a marquis, with a review in the paper and all the radio interviews. This is doable.

There probably needs to be something like a revolving fund for ads. A certain amount of money put in by some foundations that is so to speak loaned out film by film and hopefully returned, so that filmmakers don't have to do everything the most uneconomical way. We make our posters, for instance, we have never had enough money to do a run of of the one-sheet that you put right at the theater. We've never had the money to do a real printing. You know how we do ours? It's probably the most expensive way you can do it. They're a buck apiece or more when we do them. They're blueprints, a black and white, basically. It's a big poster, and it's pretty attractive, but we have never been able to do a mass run, for instance. Then we could have had color and we would have attracted even more people. So there ought to be a fund like that. And we probably need to consider underwriting some kind of either agent or distributor so they can afford to put their time into this film. What happens with even the good distributors who agree to take on these films is they still spend more energy and more of their money that they put at risk on more exploitive films that they think are going to bring in more money. The films that make money are the films that take the attention of the distributors. We've got to find a way, if we believe there's an audience out there, and I'm convinced there is, we have to find a way to launch ongoing release of films like this.

For video we need to have a fund so that we can provide something called a "buy-back guarantee," so that when my video manufacturing, Rhino Home Video, offers this video to the big distributors, region by region, who warehouse the tapes, they'll buy 500 of them, because Rhino can say, If you don't sell them to the stores, we'll buy them back. That's how all the other videotapes are distributed, all of them but important social, political documentaries. The other thing I

think we can do with video is develop relationships with stores and chains around the country who will take a certain number of controversial videos and people can begin to know that they can go there. Blockbuster does it, for instance. A lot of others could be encouraged to do it as well.

In terms of TV, we have to start focusing off public TV, sink money into deep-dish or some of these other kinds of options, the national public-access networks. We need probably a publicist. That's some of the things that I think are going to be essential if we want people to keep making these kinds of films and if we want to exploit these films to their fullest. And I think that they deserve it.

For information on obtaining copies of the film *The Panama Deception*, write to

The Empowerment Project
3403 Hwy 54 W
Chapel Hill, NC 27516
Tel: 919/967-1963

For information about obtaining cassette copies or transcripts of this or other programs, please write to:

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