CNN withdraws report on US use of nerve gas in Vietnam War

Editorial Board
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The decision by CNN to retract its investigative report on the use of nerve gas by American special forces during the Vietnam War raises more questions than it answers. The program, 'Valley of Death,' broadcast June 7, charged that the Studies and Operations Group (SOG), an army commando unit, used deadly sarin gas during a mission in September 1970 aimed at killing defectors from the US military who had fled into Laos.

Heads have already rolled at the network, with a vice-president resigning and two producers fired for their role in the broadcast. CNN correspondent Peter Arnett, arguably the only well-known television journalist with a deserved reputation as a serious and courageous reporter, has been reprimanded. Yet there is no question that Arnett and April Oliver, the senior producer for the program, assembled a mass of testimony to back up their report.

The CNN broadcast provoked a furious response from the Pentagon, which denounced it and denied, without providing substantiation, that Operation Tailwind involved the use of nerve gas or an attempt to eliminate American soldiers who had defected. This public attack was accompanied by a well-organized campaign by right-wing groups and publications to discredit the CNN program. Considering the fact that many prominent political and military figures responsible for US policy in Southeast Asia at the time are still alive, it is likely that pressure was brought to bear from these quarters as well.

In response to these attacks, CNN issed a statement that it had begun an investigation into its June 7 broadcast. On Thursday it made public a lengthy analysis of how it researched the story, prepared by attorney Floyd Abrams. This report found no evidence that any of the material presented in the CNN exposé was falsified or doctored. Rather it concluded the opposite, stating that the reporters had assembled considerable evidence.

Abrams writes: 'The broadcast was prepared after exhaustive research, was rooted in considerable supportive data, and reflected the deeply held beliefs of the CNN journalists who prepared it ... we do not believe it can reasonably be suggested that any of the information on which the broadcast was based was fabricated or nonexistent.' Why then the abject apologies to the Pentagon and the participants in Operation Tailwind?

Abrams admits that most witnesses interviewed for the program agreed that they had been quoted accurately: 'Contemporaneous notes made by the principal producer, April Oliver, are not only consistent with typed notes that she prepared immediately after her interviews, but in almost all cases with the later recollections of the individuals interviewed.'

The source material for the program was brought together in a briefing book for senior CNN executives which ran to 150 pages. The witnesses included Admiral Thomas Moorer, who was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time of Operation Tailwind, three high-level intelligence sources who confirmed the basic story but would not allow their names to be used, and nearly a dozen participants, including the second-in-command, Robert Van Buskirk.

Nevertheless, Abrams argues in his report that the producers were negligent in not including the accounts of other Tailwind participants who disputed the claim that nerve gas was used, and in not reporting information that might discredit Van Buskirk as a witness, such as a history of nervous disorders and his claim to having suffered repressed memory syndrome. On this basis, he concludes that the program should not

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have been broadcast.

It could be pointed out that a history of emotional distress is not uncommon among Vietnam veterans, particularly those who were engaged in highly stressful--and murderous--activities such as those carried out by the SOG. But there is a more fundamental issue: Arnett and Oliver were journalists, not prosecutors. It was not their job to develop evidence 'beyond a reasonable doubt,' but to bring hitherto suppressed issues to light, for public discussion and further investigation.

Given the seriousness of the facts uncovered by Arnett and Oliver, the burden of proof rests on the government and the military. Rather than a retraction, the logical step would be for CNN to demand the opening of all files on Operation Tailwind and the convening of a public inquiry.

There is a curious double standard at work in the network's humiliating climbdown. When it serves their interests, as in the campaign over Clinton's alleged relations with Monica Lewinsky, the American media have no compunction indulging for months on end in speculation, presented as news, about an episode of no intrinsic importance, and with virtually no factual substantiation. Similarly, government dispatches alleging Iraqi schemes to conceal 'weapons of mass destruction' are routinely reported by the media as fact, with little or no independent verification. But when it comes to allegations of real crimes by the Pentagon and CIA, it seems no amount of evidence is sufficient.

Allegations of US use of nerve gas in Vietnam, backed by considerable eyewitness and participant testimony, cannot be lightly dismissed, given the circumstances of that time. This was the period of Operation Phoenix, when the CIA organized the assassination of 20,000 National Liberation Front cadres and supporters in South Vietnam; of the systematic spraying of Agent Orange, a powerful chemical weapon, to defoliate much of the Vietnamese countryside; of napalm and saturation bombing; of the My Lai massacre--an atrocity which may never have been brought to light if similar standards of proof had been required before the first news articles were written.

As a result of CNN's retraction, the focus of attention has been shifted from an important issue with considerable contemporary relevance--whether the United States military has used nerve gas and sought to kill military defectors--to a dispute over the network's handling of the evidence.

CNN's surrender to a barrage of attacks from military and intelligence circles conforms to a disturbing pattern. The *San Jose Mercury-News* withdrew its exposure of CIA ties to the crack cocaine traffic in south central Los Angeles. And only days ago, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* retracted a report on human rights violations by Chiquita Foods at its banana plantations in Central America and agreed to pay the agribusiness giant $10 million.

In the relative handful of instances in recent years where media exposés have made serious probes into misconduct by major American corporations or government agencies, the reports have, with increasing regularity, been retracted or suppressed after political and economic pressure was brought to bear.

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