

Fired journalists say CNN caved in to pressure

Barry Grey
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Two CNN journalists, fired after the network retracted their story alleging US use of nerve gas during the Vietnam War, are vigorously defending their report. April Oliver was the lead producer of the program 'Valley of Death,' broadcast June 7 as the premier installment of a joint CNN and *Time* magazine venture. She and her immediate superior, senior producer Jack Smith, have charged that CNN caved in to pressure from top military and intelligence figures, including Henry Kissinger and General Colin Powell.

The media have uniformly endorsed CNN's renunciation of its segment on Operation Tailwind, as well as the victimization of those who produced it. Numerous articles and editorials have appeared associating the CNN program with recent cases of journalistic fraud and suggesting that any controversial exposure of wrong-doing by the military or the CIA is either too risky or too speculative to see the light of day.

In its current issue, for example, *Newsweek* boasts that it attacked the CNN- *Time* report after it was broadcast, and highlights the following blurb: 'Did US Special Forces use nerve gas to kill American defectors in Vietnam? No.' Even *Salon*, an internet magazine that generally maintains a somewhat higher journalistic standard, accepted uncritically CNN's retraction and, in an article by Ted Gup, stated that 'both organizations [CNN and *Time*] **admitted** that the story was unsupported by facts (emphasis in the original).'

Such characterizations are false. Neither CNN nor *Time* have stated that the story broadcast by the network, and subsequently published by the magazine, was factually untrue. On the contrary, the report commissioned by CNN and issued July 2 by attorney Floyd Abrams concludes: '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.'

This makes all the more disturbing the rush by CNN and *Time* to retract, and the no less indecent haste of the rest of the media to join them in denouncing the report on Operation Tailwind. The argument put forward by Abrams and CNN is that the program did not sufficiently present the views of officers and participants in the 1970 raid in Laos who contradict eye-witnesses accounts and statements by other military figures acknowledging the use of sarin gas in an operation aimed at wiping out US defectors.

The network also charges that Admiral Thomas Moorer was misquoted in the TV report. Moorer, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time of the raid into Laos, appears on the broadcast and concedes that nerve gas was used in Tailwind, as well as other operations during the Vietnam War. This past week April Oliver told a TV interviewer that she gave Moorer a transcript of the entire program prior to the broadcast, and he approved it. Oliver went on to describe how, the day after the broadcast, Moorer came under immense pressure and began to back away from his earlier statements.

It is impossible to avoid asking the question: why is this story--dealing with the secret murder of American citizens and the use of deadly toxins--being retracted, even though it is acknowledged to have a basis in fact, at the same time that the media retails the most outrageous and unsubstantiated allegations concerning Clinton's sex life, a matter of no intrinsic importance?

This past week publications from the *Wall Street Journal* to the *New York Times* postured as the guardians of journalistic ethics in order to kill the Tailwind story, while continuing to promote Kenneth Starr's campaign against the White House. The *Journal* reached a new low in an editorial on July 9 which ended with the following

advice to Starr: '...he should indict the little tart [Monica Lewinsky] and get the show on the road.'

Not one newspaper, magazine or network has retracted any of the reports circulated over the past six months--from semen-stained dresses to eye-witness accounts of hanky-panky in the Oval Office--which have since been exposed as fabrications. None have answered the detailed account published last month by Steven Brill of their collusion with the Independent Counsel.

This is a politically significant double standard. In the pursuit of one agenda the lowest forms of gossip and innuendo are permissible. But when it comes to uncovering major breaches of law and human rights by the US government, journalists are held to unattainable and unreasonable standards.

Such is the basis on which CNN repudiated the Tailwind story. It and the rest of the corporate media are treating investigative reporters as though they were lawyers trying a case. This is a false standard. The job of journalists is to raise serious issues and present facts to back up their allegations, thereby making the case for a deeper inquiry into the matter at hand. It is not their task to prove their contentions beyond a reasonable doubt. If that were to be the yardstick, no exposures of government or military operations would pass muster.

The aim is not just to kill one story, but to intimidate all journalists and dissuade them from pursuing similar stories. Hence the highly public and humiliating reprimand for Peter Arnett, CNN's most prestigious reporter. The network delivered a clear message: if this can happen to Arnett, it can happen to anyone.

Peter Arnett is a man of considerable physical courage who has in the past evinced a degree of journalistic integrity highly unusual in this day and age. The fact that he has sought to distance himself from the Tailwind story is an indication of the enormous pressure being brought to bear. His less than admirable response, in its own way, testifies to the existence of a well-orchestrated counteroffensive against the report he narrated and helped produce.

The CNN case is only the latest in a series of media retractions of reports critical of either the military/intelligence apparatus or big corporations. Most significant was the *San Jose Mercury News*' retraction in May 1997 of a series by Gary Webb documenting the connivance of the CIA in drug smuggling operations by the Nicaraguan contras in the early 1980s. Webb asserted, on the basis of solid evidence, that the CIA knowingly permitted the contras to bring crack cocaine into South

Central Los Angeles as a means of raising funds for their counterrevolutionary war against the Sandinista regime.

As in the CNN case, the *Mercury News* did not deny the truthfulness of the facts reported by Webb. It admitted that the series 'solidly documented disturbing information.' But because the articles failed, according to the publisher, to 'indicate the vast 'gray areas,' it was repudiated.

The *Mercury News* came under ferocious attack from military and Reagan administration figures, including Oliver North. And, as in the present case, major newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* rushed to endorse the retraction and denounce Webb's reports.

The central question is not whether the allegations in the CNN report have been definitively proven to be true. That remains to be determined. The point is that the report brought forward serious evidence of criminal actions on the part of the American military, raising the need for further investigation.

It concerned, moreover, a period in which the American government was daily carrying out acts of mass terror against the people of Southeast Asia, while trampling on constitutional rights in its political war against opponents at home. The year of Operation Tailwind was the year of Kent State and Nixon's secret wiretaps. The very presence of American forces in Laos was a violation of international law, since Laos was a neutral country. Such incursions were, moreover, kept secret from the American people. For all the criticisms of the CNN program, no one has denied that Operation Tailwind, in and of itself an illegal action, occurred.

See Also:

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

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