

Fired CNN journalists speak out:

Kissinger, Powell demanded retraction of nerve gas report

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Two CNN producers fired for their role in the June 7 broadcast alleging the use of nerve gas by US forces during the Vietnam War told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Henry Kissinger and Colin Powell played key roles in a behind-the-scenes campaign to kill the story.

The program, a joint-production of CNN and *Time* magazine entitled 'Valley of Death,' concerned Operation Tailwind, a special forces incursion into Laos in September 1970. It presented interviews with some of the commandos involved in the attack, as well as retired Admiral Thomas Moorer, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who acknowledged that the operation was aimed at killing US defectors and made use of deadly sarin nerve gas.

April Oliver, the lead producer of the program, and Jack Smith, senior CNN producer, spoke to the WSWS last Friday. Oliver called CNN's July 2 retraction of the program 'spineless.' Substantiating her charges of high-level pressure, she cited a conference call in which Richard Kaplan, CNN/USA president, complained about a 'Colin Powell problem.' Kaplan said Tom Johnson, CNN News Group's chairman, had received a call from the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs protesting against the broadcast. On another occasion, according to Oliver, Johnson said he had just gotten off the phone with Kissinger, who was Nixon's national security adviser in 1970.

Smith strongly confirmed Oliver's account of pressure from high-ranking government and military sources. 'There was pressure from Kissinger,' he said. 'Powell was talking to the executive suite.'

Oliver described a meeting with Moorer a day after the June 7 program. She had spent some eight hours interviewing the former Navy chief in preparing the

report, and had submitted the entire script for his approval in advance of its airing. She was surprised that Moorer was moving to disavow his interview within hours of the broadcast. 'When I got there,' she told the WSWS, 'Moorer had a statement in his hand that he was supposed to read out. It had been faxed to him by Bacon.' (Kenneth Bacon is the Pentagon press spokesman).

Oliver and Smith said they were preparing to publish a detailed reply to the review of 'Valley of Death' by the attorney Floyd Abrams, who was commissioned by CNN to look into the program. On July 2 Abrams issued his report. It acknowledged that 'Valley of Death' was based on exhaustive research and 'considerable supportive data,' and rejected any allegation that the producers falsified evidence. Nevertheless, Abrams claimed that the report's central allegations were 'insupportable.'

CNN and *Time* immediately retracted the report and issued public apologies. When Oliver and Smith refused to disavow the story and resign voluntarily, CNN fired them. A third CNN producer resigned under pressure and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Peter Arnett, who narrated the program, was reprimanded.

Oliver told the WSWS that Abrams' report was 'prejudiced from the outset.' Contrary to the network's characterization of the document as an independent review, she pointed out that it was co-authored by CNN's general counsel. 'It was a vehicle to discredit the story,' she said.

Oliver added that she and CNN had come under attack from two groups of ex-special forces commandos--the Special Forces Association and the Special Operations Association. Pressure from these

groups had begun last year, after CNN broadcast a segment on its Impact program entitled 'The Secret Warriors.' This report, also produced by Oliver, was aired on September 14, 1997. It described activities in Southeast Asia from 1968 to 1970 of the same commando unit involved in Operation Tailwind, the Studies and Observations Group (SOG).

Speaking of this earlier report, Oliver said, ' I interviewed Singlaub (Major General John Singlaub, ret., a former SOG commander), who talked about using chemical incapacitating agents that are sometimes lethal.'

Asked if she had received any threats against her physical well-being, Oliver said she had not. But, she added, some of her sources in the June 7 Operation Tailwind story had gotten death threats.

Oliver acknowledged she had not anticipated the universal backing in the media for CNN's retraction, and the failure of any mass circulation newspaper, magazine or broadcast outlet to question its cave-in. 'I thought that by putting the story out there, we would get good investigative journalists to continue digging around. Why, for example, does the Pentagon maintain that there were only two US defectors during the Vietnam War? Instead, it is being treated as a story about the media.'

Jack Smith described how CNN gave the forces seeking to discredit the story free rein, while preventing those involved in its production a chance to respond. 'They ordered us not to talk to the press,' he said. 'They gagged us for several weeks. We were left to bleed to death.'

Asked about the implications of CNN's retraction, Smith said, 'It paralyzes any investigative reporting pertaining to the secret army. We have to break through the paralysis imposed by CNN.'

See Also:

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[10 July 1998]

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