

Pentagon pressure behind CNN firing of Peter Arnett

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CNN's firing of Peter Arnett, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who achieved international acclaim for his on-the-spot reporting from Baghdad during the Gulf War, sheds further light on the subordination of the US media to the military and intelligence establishment.

CNN announced on Tuesday it had agreed to a settlement with Arnett, who has worked for the network for 18 years, to terminate his employment two and a half years in advance of the expiration of his current contract. The network's statement came one day after Arnett told the press that CNN had rejected his request to report on the current war from Belgrade, and had effectively muzzled him since last July.

Arnett received a Pulitzer in 1966 for his work as an Associated Press reporter in Vietnam. By the time of the Gulf War he had become CNN's premier international correspondent. He came under criticism at that time from government and military circles for his objective reportage of civilian casualties resulting from the US bombing of Baghdad.

Last summer the Pentagon, backed by retired military brass, prominent political figures and associations of special forces veterans, began a campaign to drive him off of the air waves. The occasion was an investigative report aired by CNN on June 7, entitled "Valley of Death."

The segment, narrated by Arnett, concerned Operation Tailwind, a secret incursion by Army special forces into Laos in September of 1970. The TV report, a joint production of CNN and *Time* magazine, presented compelling evidence that US commandos had used deadly sarin gas in an operation to kill American soldiers who had defected into Laos from Vietnam.

"Valley of Death" included interviews with Tailwind

commandos, statements from high-level (unnamed) veterans of the military and intelligence apparatus, and an on-camera discussion with retired Admiral Thomas Moorer, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time of Operation Tailwind. Top CNN news executives reviewed and approved the segment prior to its airing.

The program evoked public attacks and private protests from Pentagon officials, the Special Forces Association, and figures such as retired General Colin Powell and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The latter, who was Nixon's national security adviser at the time of Tailwind, would be directly implicated in the illegal actions alleged in the CNN report. Powell and Kissinger, among others, contacted CNN executives and demanded that they retract "Valley of Death" and issue a public apology to the military and special forces groups.

CNN quickly caved in, issuing an ostensibly "independent" review of the program in early July, while concealing the fact that the review had been co-authored by the network's general counsel. The review acknowledged that "Valley of Death" was based on exhaustive research and "considerable supportive data," and rejected any allegation that the producers had falsified evidence. Nevertheless, it recommended that CNN retract the story, which the network immediately did.

The co-producers, April Oliver and Jack Smith, refused to knuckle under and disavow their report. They were promptly fired, and their senior producer resigned. Arnett took the ignoble course of denouncing his own story in an attempt to save his job. Instead of being fired, he was publicly reprimanded.

This, however, satisfied neither the right-wing Special Forces Association nor the military and

intelligence establishment. They were determined to humiliate Arnett, silence him and ultimately force him off the CNN payroll. They wanted to send an unmistakable message to any journalist who might be inclined to investigate illegal actions by the Pentagon and the CIA, or in any way deviate from the official Pentagon line. If a man of Arnett's reputation could be purged, no reporter was safe.

At the time of the "Valley of Death" controversy, the Pentagon bluntly told CNN management that the network would be effectively quarantined if it did not fire Arnett. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported on July 8, 1998: "Military officials continue to press the network to dismiss Mr. Arnett."

The *Journal* went on to quote Retired Major General Perry Smith, a former CNN consultant who had resigned in protest over the Tailwind report. "Gen. Smith said he told Mr. Johnson [Tom Johnson, chairman of the CNN News Group] that US military leaders felt that dismissing Mr. Arnett was the only way the network could regain its credibility in light of the nerve gas report. Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon has criticized the CNN report, and the network said 'hundreds' of former military officials, including former Gen. Colin Powell, have come forward to complain.

"I basically told Tom you have no choice if you ever hope to have a relationship with the US military,' Gen. Smith said."

While CNN did not immediately fire Arnett, it effectively banished him. Since last July he has appeared only once, in a story filed last December from Algeria.

CNN's capitulation to Pentagon blackmail in the Tailwind episode has undoubtedly played a role in reducing the press corps to little more than a public relations arm of the Pentagon in the current Balkan War. Even by the abysmal standards of the American media, the degree of self-censorship and cowardice displayed in the coverage of the US-NATO assault on Yugoslavia is remarkable. It should be added that it did not take a great deal to convince media executives and journalists alike to toe the line, and Arnett himself bears no small responsibility, having set a lamentable example by his own capitulation.

The final act in Arnett's humiliation, coming in the midst of the expanding attack on Yugoslavia, is a

further measure to intimidate the press and keep it in line.

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