

The firing of Peter Arnett: right-wing straitjacket tightens on the US media

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The firing of longtime war correspondent Peter Arnett is intended to send an unambiguous message to American journalists that the Bush administration and the corporate media will not tolerate any reporting that deviates from the official presentation of the invasion of Iraq as a war of liberation.

NBC News announced late Sunday night that it was severing its relationship with Arnett, who had been hired to provide on-the-spot reporting from Baghdad for a news magazine program that is a joint venture of the network's MSNBC cable subsidiary and the magazine *National Geographic*.

Arnett's "offense" was to give an interview to Iraqi state television on Sunday in which he called the Bush administration's military strategy a failure that did not take into account the likelihood of intense Iraqi resistance to an invasion. In the course of his ten-minute interview with the Iraqi network, Arnett observed, "The first war plan has failed because of Iraqi resistance. Now they are trying to write another war plan."

He continued: "Clearly, the American war planners misjudged the determination of the Iraqi forces. And I personally do not understand how that happened, because I've been here many times and in my commentaries on television I would tell the Americans about the determination of the Iraqi forces... But me, and others who felt the same way, were not listened to by the Bush administration."

At one point his interviewer asked Arnett about antiwar demonstrations in the United States. He replied, "In answer to your question, it is clear that within the United States there is a growing challenge to President Bush about the conduct of the war and also opposition to the war. So our reports about civilian casualties here, about the resistance of the Iraqi forces, are going back to the United States. It helps those who oppose the war when you challenge the policy to develop their arguments."

Arnett's comments were picked up by CNN and posted on the network's web site, in what amounted to a deliberate effort to stir up trouble for the correspondent, whose live reports of the bombing of Baghdad in 1991 brought international attention to the then-struggling cable network.

Extreme-right-wing elements in the US media and the Republican Party immediately began a hue and cry against

Arnett, charging him with supporting the Iraqi regime politically. The lead was taken by Fox News, the semi-official network of the Bush administration. One Fox commentator, John Gibson, raged, "His comments seem to be supporting the Iraqi side." Arnett "seems to cheer the Iraqi resistance," Gibson declared, adding, "Peter Arnett is live in Baghdad and we may now know why."

Gibson interviewed former Republican senator Al D'Amato, who accused Arnett of giving "aid and comfort to the enemy," i.e., treason in wartime, for which the penalty is death. Two Republican members of Congress appeared on Fox to denounce Arnett: Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida and Brad Sherman of California. Ros-Lehtinen, a Cuban exile, called Arnett's comments "nauseating," adding, "It's incredible he would be kowtowing to what is clearly the enemy in this way."

Rich Lowry, editor of the far-right magazine *National Review* and a Fox commentator, denounced Arnett for talking to what he called "Gestapo-run TV," and suggesting that "people resisting us must have a heroic aspect to them."

NBC initially defended Arnett's comments and his reporting from Baghdad. A statement from the network declared: "Peter Arnett and his crew have risked their lives to bring the American people up-to-date, straightforward information on what is happening in and around Baghdad. His impromptu interview with Iraqi TV was done as a professional courtesy and was similar to other interviews he has done with media outlets from around the world. His remarks were analytical in nature and were not intended to be anything more. His outstanding reporting of the war speaks for itself."

But this position was reversed within a few hours, undoubtedly under direct pressure from the Bush administration or NBC's corporate owner, General Electric, the second largest US military contractor. A White House official accused Arnett of "coming from a position of complete ignorance. He's never designed a war plan or implemented a war plan. His judgment is suspect... For him to state that to the Iraqi people is, I'd suspect, a certain level of pandering."

The actual substance of Arnett's comment is no more than what many former US military officers, now working as expert war commentators for US television networks, have said, noting the initial failure of the Pentagon's military strategy.

Front-page articles expounding such critiques have appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and other daily newspapers. Arnett's comments drew fire for two reasons: his past record as an enterprising war correspondent who has exposed official US government lies, and his failure to dismiss the popular resistance to the US invasion as the product of coercion by Saddam Hussein's "death squads"—the Pentagon line that has been obediently parroted by the bulk of the American media.

Arnett's record as a war correspondent goes back to the 1960s, when he won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from Vietnam for Associated Press. In 1991, his coverage of the US bombing of Baghdad won international renown, and the enduring malice of the Pentagon and the first Bush administration. His CNN team were the only Western reporters to stay in the Iraqi capital during the air war. One of his most important reports was a tour of a baby milk factory destroyed by US bombing. He refuted US claims that the factory was a biological weapons facility.

In 1998 Arnett served as narrator for "Valley of Death," a joint CNN- *Time* magazine documentary that raised charges that the US military used the nerve gas sarin during the Vietnam War, in particular, in Operation Tailwind, a special forces raid into Laos seeking US deserters. The two producers of the program, April Oliver and Jack Smith, assembled a mass of testimony and other evidence to back up the report.

The exposé provoked a furious counterattack from the US military-intelligence complex. Colin Powell, then a retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and former CIA Director Richard Helms all lobbied CNN for a retraction of the allegations of nerve gas use. The Clinton administration weighed in, with Defense Secretary William Cohen denouncing the charges and declaring that the program undermined the ongoing US efforts to target Iraq for alleged production of biological weapons.

CNN issued a retraction and a groveling apology, and fired Oliver and Smith. Arnett, to his discredit, repudiated "Valley of Death," and escaped with a reprimand. But when his contract with the cable network expired the following year, he was let go, not finding equivalent work until his recent hiring by MSNBC.

In its second statement on Arnett, announcing that he was being fired, NBC declared: "It was wrong for Mr. Arnett to grant an interview to state-controlled Iraqi TV—especially at a time of war—and it was wrong for him to discuss his personal observations and opinions in that interview. Therefore, Peter Arnett will no longer be reporting for NBC News and MSNBC."

In an appearance on the NBC *Today* show Monday morning, Arnett defended the substance of his comments on the war: "I said in that interview essentially what we all know about the war, that there have been delays in implementing policy, there have been surprises." He apologized, however, for the trouble

he had caused the network, saying, "clearly by giving that interview I created a firestorm in the United States and for that I am truly sorry."

Within a day of his dismissal by NBC, Arnett was hired by the *Daily Mirror*, a London-based tabloid that has aggressively campaigned against British participation in the war on Iraq. In an interview posted on the *Mirror*'s web site, Arnett said, "I am still in shock and awe at being fired. There is enormous sensitivity within the US government to reports coming out from Baghdad. They don't want credible news organizations reporting from here because it presents them with enormous problems."

The 68-year-old New Zealand-born journalist said: "I'm not angry. I'm not crying. But I'm also awed by this media phenomenon. The right-wing media and politicians are looking for any opportunity to be critical of the reporters who are here, whatever their nationality. I made the misjudgment which gave them the opportunity to do so. I gave an impromptu interview to Iraqi television feeling that after four months of interviewing hundreds of them it was only professional courtesy to give them a few comments. That was my Waterloo—bang!"

Arnett said he has not decided whether to remain in Baghdad through an eventual US-British attack on the city. "But whatever happens I will never stop reporting on the truth of this war whether I am in Baghdad or somewhere else in the Middle East—or even back in Washington."

He concluded by warning of the danger of huge losses of civilian life if the war is fought to the bitter end: "We have to watch the reality now and some Iraqis are fighting and the government does seem very determined. For me to see that and to be criticised for saying the obvious is unfair... I just want to be able to tell the truth. I came to Baghdad with my crew because the Iraqi side needs to be heard too."

This episode is clearly intended to have a chilling effect on any independent reporting about the Iraq war in the American media. If Peter Arnett, one of the best known and most respected war correspondents, can be dismissed on such a pretext, it can happen to anyone. As it is, there is little enough truthful coverage of the war. The American media is aligned to an unprecedented degree with the requirements of the Pentagon, symbolized by the "embedding" of hundreds of US journalists in the military units that are waging war on the Iraqi people.



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