

If You Believe the Government, 'You're Stupid'

Americans are taught the myth that their democracy is safeguarded by an independent press. But the government and other powerful entities have long mastered the art of manipulating the major media, even to the point of bluntly telling reporters the facts of life, as Jon Schwarz recalls.

By Jon Schwarz

Everyone who watched John Miller's "60 Minutes" segment on the NSA should follow it up with this story involving Morley Safer, who, at 82 years old, is still a correspondent at "60 Minutes":

In August, 1965 Safer appeared in what became one of most famous TV segments of the Vietnam War, showing U.S. troops setting fire to all the huts in a Vietnamese village with Zippo lighters and flamethrowers.

A year later in 1966, Safer wrote an article about what he'd seen firsthand during a visit to Vietnam by Arthur Sylvester, then Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs (i.e., the head of Pentagon PR). Sylvester met with reporters for U.S. news outlets at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon:

There was general opening banter, which Sylvester quickly brushed aside. He seemed anxious to take a stand, to say something that would jar us. He said:

"I can't understand how you fellows can write what you do while American boys are dying out here," he began. Then he went on to the effect that American correspondents had a patriotic duty to disseminate only information that made the United States look good.

A network television correspondent said, "Surely, Arthur, you don't expect the American press to be the handmaidens of government."

"That's exactly what I expect," came the reply.

An agency man raised the problem that had preoccupied Ambassador Maxwell Taylor and Barry Zorthian [a press officer based in Vietnam], about the credibility of American officials. Responded the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs:

"Look, if you think any American official is going to tell you the truth, then you're stupid. Did you hear that?, stupid."

One of the most respected of all the newsmen in Vietnam, a veteran of World War II, the Indochina War and Korea, suggested that Sylvester was being deliberately provocative. Sylvester replied:

“Look, I don’t even have to talk to you people. I know how to deal with you through your editors and publishers back in the States.”

At this point, the Hon. Arthur Sylvester put his thumbs in his ears, bulged his eyes, stuck out his tongue and wiggled his fingers. [For the full article by Safer, see below.]

There are several significant aspects to this:

– A top U.S. official was honest enough to tell reporters: look, we lie to you constantly and you’re a moron if you believe anything we say. He also honestly expressed his total contempt for them and intention to manipulate news coverage by dealing directly with their management and employers.

Moreover, Sylvester (who before going to work for the Pentagon had been the Washington correspondent for the *Newark News*) put his beliefs into practice at key moments of history. He lied about what the U.S. knew about Soviet missiles in Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and personally told the key lies about the Gulf of Tonkin incident (listen to him here).

And word was passed to Safer’s superiors at CBS that “Unless you get Safer out of there, he’s liable to end up with a bullet in his back.”

This is such important information about how politics and the media work that it should be taught to everyone in second grade. It’s not.

– Even if regular people don’t know this story, you’d expect it to be famous within the media, and particularly famous at “60 Minutes.” You might even imagine that “If you think any American official is going to tell you the truth, then you’re stupid” would be spray-painted on the walls of the “60 Minutes” offices. But if the performance of John Miller and his producers on the NSA segment is anything to go by, that is not the case.

It’s hard to imagine what more the U.S. government could do to get reporters to distrust it, and all for naught. John Miller likely has an office feet away from someone who’s been told by a top U.S. official that reporters are morons if they believe anything top U.S. officials say. Miller’s response? Believe everything top U.S. officials say. (Of course, given that Miller is recreating Sylvester’s career path, it may also simply be that he agrees with Sylvester on the necessity of the press being handmaidens of government.)

– Even if reporters have forgotten this story, you'd expect that it would be Exhibit A for left-wing media critics and repeated so often that it would be common knowledge in those limited circles. Yet the forces of forgetting in the U.S. are so powerful that I'd never encountered it, and I'm probably one of America's top 25 consumers of left-wing media criticism.

I can't find any references to it by Noam Chomsky, Gore Vidal, Norman Solomon, Jeff Cohen, Robert Parry, Robert McChesney or Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting. (William Blum does tell part of what happened in his book *Killing Hope*, and the key sentence appears in some online collections of quotes about the media.)

To make it even more surprising, Safer's story was well-known enough at the time that Indiana's anti-war Senator Vance Hartke referred to it on the Senate floor as "the now famous article." And references to it sometimes appeared in books about Vietnam during the late Sixties and early Seventies. But after that it evaporated.

So if something this significant can disappear from history, truly only god knows what else has been thrown down the memory hole. To try to pull it back, I'm putting the entire text of the article online for the first time below, and adding the gist to Safer's Wikipedia page.

I'm also going to try to get John Miller to answer a straightforward question: has Morley Safer ever told him this story?

Jon Schwarz is editor of MichaelMoore.com and was research producer for 'Capitalism: A Love Story.' He's also contributed to the New Yorker, New York Times, Atlantic, Wall Street Journal, Slate, Saturday Night Live and NPR. [Reprinted with the author's permission.]

[Click here](#) for an image of the article as it appeared in the Southern Illinoisan on Sept. 1, 1966.

'Look, If You Think Any American Official Is Going to Tell You the Truth, Then You're Stupid'

By Morley Safer
Of the Columbia Broadcasting System

There has been no war quite like it. Never have so many words been churned out, never has so much 16-mm film been exposed. And never has the reporting of a story been so much a part of the story itself.

This has been true whether you are reporting television's first war, as I have been, or for one of the print media. Washington has been critical of American newsmen in Saigon almost continuously since 1961. That criticism has manifested itself in a number of ways, from the cancellation of newspaper subscriptions to orders to put certain correspondents on ice to downright threat.

As a friend of mine puts it, "The brass wants you to get on the team."

To the brass, getting on the team means simply giving the United States government line in little more than handout. It means accepting what you are told without question. At times it means turning your back on facts.

I know of few reporters in Viet Nam who have "gotten on the team." The fact is, the American people are getting an accurate picture of the war in spite of attempts by various officials, mostly in Washington, to present the facts in a different way. That is why certain correspondents have been vilified, privately and publicly.

By late winter of 1964-1965 the war was clearly becoming an American war. And with it came an American responsibility for providing and reporting facts. American officials thus were able to deal directly with reporters. The formality of "checking it out with the Vietnamese" ceased to be relevant.

In Washington the burden of responsibility of giving, controlling and managing the war news from Viet Nam fell to, and remains with, one man: Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs.

By early summer of 1965 the first set of ground rules had been laid down for reporting battles and casualties. There was no censorship but a very loose kind of honor system that put the responsibility for not breaking security on the shoulders of correspondents. The rules were vague and were therefore continually broken.

For military and civilian officials in Viet Nam there was another set of rules, rather another honor system that was not so much laid down as implied. "A policy of total candor" is a phrase used by Barry Zorthian, minister-counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Zorthian is what Time calls "the information czar" in Viet Nam.

The breaking of the vague ground rules was something that annoyed everyone. Correspondents were rocketed by their editors, and the military in Viet Nam felt that Allied lives were being endangered. So in midsummer, when Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara came to Saigon and brought Sylvester with him, we all looked forward to the formulation of a clear-cut policy. Sylvester was to meet the press in an informal session to discuss mutual problems. The meeting was to

take the vagueness out of the ground rules.

The Sylvester meeting was surely one of the most disheartening meetings between reporters and a news manager ever held.

It was a sticky July evening. Inside Zorthian's villa it was cool. But Zorthian was less relaxed than usual. He was anxious for Sylvester to get an idea of the mood of the news corps. There had been some annoying moments in previous weeks that had directly involved Sylvester's own office. In the first B-52 raids, Pentagon releases were in direct contradiction to what had actually happened on the ground in Viet Nam.

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A correspondent for one of the New York papers began a question. He never got beyond the first few words. Sylvester interrupted:

"Aw, come on, What does someone in New York care about the war in Viet Nam?"

We got down to immediate practical matters, the problems of communication, access to military planes, getting out to battles.

“Do you guys want to be spoon-fed? Why don’t you get out and cover the war?”

It was a jarring and insulting remark. Most of the people in that room has spent as much time on actual operations as most GI’s.

The relationship between reporters and public information officers in Saigon, or the other hand, has been a good, healthy one. The relationship in the field is better, and in dealing with the men who fight the war it is very good indeed.

ABOUT THE ARTICLE

Arthur Sylvester, assistant secretary of defense in charge of public affairs, said Wednesday that no government official should lie when giving out information about the country.

He said it was all right to withhold information to safeguard the country. He was testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. This article is one correspondent’s report of Sylvester’s statement about truth in public affairs one year ago.

THIS article is excerpted from “Dateline 1966: Covering War,” a publication of the Overseas Press Club of America.
