

Sen. Simpson Calls Arnett 'Sympathizer'

CNN Reporter Blasted For Iraq Coverage

By Howard Kurtz
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Sen. Alan Simpson (R-Wyo.) charged yesterday that CNN correspondent Peter Arnett is "a sympathizer" with Iraq, that his reporting during the Vietnam War was biased and that he has a brother-in-law who was "active in the Viet Cong."

At a Capitol Hill luncheon with reporters, the Senate minority whip assailed Arnett for his censored television reports from Baghdad. He said the reporter is "what we used to call a sympathizer. . . . He was active in the Vietnam War and he won a Pulitzer Prize largely because of his anti-government material. And he was married to a Vietnamese whose brother was active in the Viet Cong. I called that sympathizers in my early days in the Second World War."

An Arnett family member, who asked not to be identified, said the Viet Cong allegation is "completely untrue." The family member said Arnett's estranged wife, Nina, from whom he has been separated for several years, had two brothers—a heart doctor who was forced into early retirement by the Viet Cong and died in the 1960s, and a math professor in Hanoi who was not po-

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litically active during the war and who has not been allowed to leave the country.

Friends and colleagues of Arnett reacted angrily to Simpson's remarks.

Simpson, known for his outspoken and acerbic style, said in a telephone interview after the lunch that he was given the information "by an AP man who was involved in reporting during the Vietnam War . . . a man of great repute . . . a friend I've known for 30 years." He said he did not know the brother-in-law's name or the nature of his supposed Viet Cong activities.

Asked if he felt it was proper to make such an allegation public without attempting to verify it, Simpson said: "I find a lot of those [kind of allegations] used in your line of work. . . . They slap guys like me around day and night [with such charges]."

"This is what I was told by a source I consider to be reputable. . . . To me, it has not been refuted."

Simpson said the source gave him the information about Arnett last week after the senator debated columnist Jack Anderson in Cheyenne, Wyo. Anderson, in a column published Wednesday, reprised some controversial remarks Simpson made when he visited Saddam Hussein with a Senate delegation last April.

"I believe your problems lie with the Western media and not with the U.S. government," Simpson told the Iraqi leader. "As long as you are isolated from the media, the press—and it is a haughty and pampered press—they all consider themselves political geniuses. That is, the journalists do. They are very cynical. What I advise is that you invite them to come here and see for yourselves."

Author David Halberstam, who al-

so won a Pulitzer for his Vietnam coverage, said yesterday he was "stunned by the ugliness" of Simpson's remarks about Arnett.

"I like Alan Simpson. I think he's smart as hell, funny as hell," Halberstam said. "But the ugliness of him even mentioning someone like Nina, and connecting Peter's extraordinary coverage, as if that made him a sympathizer to the other side . . . He's dead wrong. I know the family and that charge is particularly painful for them."

Terry Smith, a CBS News reporter who was the New York Times Saigon bureau chief, said, "It is ludicrous to suggest [Arnett] is a sympathizer with Saddam Hussein, or that he was in any way sympathetic to either the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong. He makes crystal clear in every report that he was taken to this or that site on a guided tour by the Iraqi government."

"People are intelligent enough to hear that and understand exactly what he is telling them. I just find this sort of personal attack outrageous," Smith said.

Ed Turner, CNN's executive vice president for news, said he was "flabbergasted" by Simpson's remarks. "CNN is fortunate to have on site, in the most difficult circumstances, a seasoned combat correspondent, Peter Arnett, who has been tested by time and in so practicing his craft received the highest honors journalism can bestow. Arnett and CNN are there so all our viewers can be there—as imperfect, restricted and dangerous as the conditions are."

Arnett won his Pulitzer in 1966 for his coverage of the Vietnam War while with the Associated Press. He was in Baghdad when the Persian Gulf War began and has been the only

American television reporter allowed to remain there, Iraq admitted British and European journalists last week and also allowed CNN to send five more staffers.

Arnett has been criticized, by White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater among others, for reporting on allied bomb damage in residential neighborhoods to which he was taken by Iraqi authorities. Saddam granted him an interview several days ago.

At the luncheon, Simpson acknowledged that he was putting "my foot clear down in my mouth." But he said "our greatest problem right now in this conflict" is that "now there is an entire convoy of media people crossing the desert to get to Baghdad, with their satellite dishes and all their antennas, and we've got to protect them. And who the hell who has any imagination knows what they're going to feed us. . . .

"Maybe I'm from the old school, that we can't spend our time trying to protect people who are there at the invitation of an enemy government."

In the interview, Simpson said it was "good for the American people" to know of Arnett's personal history. He said Arnett, who remained in Vietnam for a time after U.S. forces withdrew, "was able to have free range of the country in a communist regime."

The senator called Arnett's reporting from Baghdad "repulsive," citing his report that allied forces had bombed what the Iraqis claim is an infant formula factory but which the White House says is a biological weapons plant. "My question is, why is he the only one there? . . . Here is a man who is reporting from a country with which we are at war, the same people who are trying to kill our young men and women," Simpson said.

*Staff writer Helen Dewar
contributed to this report.*