

TV-Radio

Robert Lewis Shayon

Blowup

WHEN *CBS Evening News*, in a recent broadcast, defended itself against charges that a filmed atrocity incident filed from Vietnam had been faked, one of the devices its news staff employed to substantiate the report was the blowing up of single frames of the film. Two blowups proved that a combat helicopter on the scene had been American and not Australian, as was suggested by Pentagon experts. Another blowup established that it had not been an Australian but an American adviser with a South Vietnamese outfit who observed the cold-blooded stabbing of a wounded North Vietnamese prisoner by a South Vietnamese sergeant.

In Antonioni's film *Blow-up*, the photographic enlargement was the basic metaphor of a story that dealt with fantasy and reality. In the CBS/Pentagon (and White House) episode, fantasy and reality are also the essential ingredients; so, to get to the truth of the matter, let's blow up one phase of the six-month-old story.

After *CBS News* first reported the stabbing early last November, a Pentagon official asked the network to cooperate in an investigation of what might be a war crime by furnishing the Pentagon with film outtakes (discarded footage) of the incident, and with the name of the Vietnamese photographer who had filmed the episode for CBS. The network refused, claiming freedom to protect its news sources and asserting that the life of the photographer would be endangered if his identity were made known.

If (and here is fantasy) the Pentagon had respected the traditional rights of a free press, it would never have made such requests in the first place; it would have conducted its own investigation. After all, the military spend large sums for the activities of an army of intelligence-gatherers in Indochina, whereas CBS, like other broadcast organizations, has only a handful of correspondents there. Had the Pentagon conducted its own investigation properly (it had videotapes of the CBS film and could have made its own blowups), it would have been able to ascertain the report's authenticity.

Then (continuing our fantasy), it ought to have condemned the stabbing and subsequent mutilation of the corpse as a violation of the Geneva conventions.

In reality, the Pentagon chose to explain the report as a "cut and paste job" by CBS. This explanation was not made publicly, or even directly to the network, but instead, according to CBS, was disseminated by way of an "undercover campaign" in which a purported White House memo on the affair was first leaked to the *Des Moines Register-Tribune*, and then to syndicated columnists Richard Wilson (whose column appears in sixty newspapers) and Jack Anderson (in 620 papers). Somewhere along the line, as the campaign to discredit *CBS News* developed, Clark Mollenhoff, Special Counsel to the President, became involved. He is a former Pulitzer Prize reporter for the *Register-Tribune*.

When CBS news broadcaster Walter Cronkite presented the unprecedented rebuttal on the air, he refuted the Pentagon's suggestion that the stabbing had occurred during a training exercise rather than in a battle, and that the prisoner was already dead when the South Vietnamese sergeant (on camera) removed the knife from the prisoner's back, turned him over, and deliberately plunged the knife into the belly of the helpless victim. CBS reporter Don Webster interviewed the sergeant who did the stabbing; the sergeant admitted to his act, asserting that the captive might have reached for a nearby rifle (a patent absurdity, as the camera's eye indisputably revealed). He also stated that the Vietcong had murdered one of his children. Subsequent to the incident, the sergeant was chosen Soldier of the Year by the South Vietnamese military.

In a brief press flurry following the Cronkite broadcast, administration forces neatly side-stepped all responsibility. The White House stated that it had never investigated *CBS News*: Mr. Mollenhoff admitted that he had received a Pentagon report, but had not leaked it selectively to the press. The Defense Department said that it had never questioned the integrity of *CBS News*.

Is this a case of men acting under orders, or of men looking at fantasy and believing that it is reality because that may be what they wish to see?

As long as the grim reality in Washington is a government of the day apparently intent on bending all media to its own selective fantasies, it behooves all supporters of a free press to commend *CBS News* for its willingness to blow up the truth.