

Journalistic Jihad

Holes in the coverage of a holy war

BY ERWIN KNOLL

Early last fall, Mary Williams Walsh had what she thought was one of the best jobs in American journalism. At age thirty-three, she was based in Hong Kong as *The Wall Street Journal's* principal correspondent in South and Southeast Asia. Her stories often appeared as "leaders" on *The Journal's* front page, and her coverage of the war in Afghanistan had attracted international attention. Her editors at *The Journal* were planning to nominate her for the Pulitzer Prize. And she was working on a story that would, she believed, be the high point of her brief but illustrious career.

By late fall, Walsh had resigned in fury and frustration from *The Journal*. The story she had been preparing for half a year—an exposé of shamefully deceptive coverage of the Afghan war by one of America's great television networks—had been killed. She felt betrayed by her editors.

"I was sold out," she told me when I talked to her recently in Toronto, where she is now based as Canadian correspondent of the *Los Angeles Times*.

But this is not a story about a reporter's disappointment and disillusionment; that sort of thing happens every day on newspapers and magazines, in network newsrooms and on local stations. This is a story about faked and distorted coverage by CBS News, which boasts about its thorough and outstanding reporting on the Afghan war. It's a story about how *The Wall Street Journal*, presented with a thoroughly documented article about that fakery and distortion, decided not to publish it. And it's a story about how even a respected journal issued under academic auspices—the *Columbia Journalism Review*—was persuaded to tone down Walsh's exposé after accepting for publication the story *The Wall Street Journal* had refused to print.

So this isn't about how Mary Williams Walsh was sold out but about how we—the viewers and readers, the news consumers trying to understand what was

happening in far-off Afghanistan—were sold out.

Before I continue with this story, I need to tell you that Mary Williams Walsh and I are friends, and that she used to be a member of *The Progressive's* staff. She came to this magazine in 1979 as an editorial intern while she was still a student editor at the University of Wisconsin's Madison campus. After graduation, she was hired as an assistant editor and soon promoted to associate editor at *The Progressive*, and long-time readers will remember her by-line (she was Mary Williams then) on a number of significant stories. She met her future husband, Lawrence Walsh, while he, too, was an associate editor of *The Progressive*; now a freelance writer, he still serves on the magazine's Editorial Advisory Board.

In 1982, Mary Williams Walsh won a Bagehot Fellowship to attend Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. When she completed her studies in 1983, she joined *The Wall Street Journal's* Philadelphia bureau, and in the spring of 1985, not yet thirty years old, she was handed the choice assignment of Mexico City bureau chief. (She was injured while covering the September 1985 earthquake, and carries a seven-inch scar on her right leg as a souvenir.) A couple of years later, after her reporting had won high praise for her within and outside *The Journal*, her beat encompassed all of Latin America. The Asia assignment followed in 1988.

As she had at her previous posts, Walsh quickly distinguished herself in Afghanistan by independent reporting that strayed far from the herd journalism which often characterizes the U.S. mass media. One colleague, John Burns of *The New York Times*, calls Walsh "a terrific reporter."

Typical of Walsh's stand-out reporting was a story datelined Samarkhel, Afghanistan, that appeared on *The Journal's* front page last March, shortly after the Soviet army withdrew. The article began:

"Scenes from the front in eastern Afghanistan hold dark hints of what lies ahead for the Afghans, a people widely considered the beneficiaries of the Reagan Doctrine at its best.

"Brutality has been pervasive here. The charred corpse of a government soldier lies on the desert just outside this sprawling military complex, newly captured by the U.S.-backed resistance, the mujahideen. It is left to rot in the sun, without even a few stones and shovels of dirt for a grave—an almost unthinkable cruelty in the Islamic world.

"This is Nangarhar Province, one of Afghanistan's 'liberated zones.' Yet even far from the fighting, families fear to let their young women work the fields. While the mujahideen say they have formed an interim government, there are no police or courts for protection; the only law here is the law of the gun."

Walsh went on to describe "the bitter divisions among the mujahideen" at a time when most dispatches appearing in the U.S. media were proclaiming their imminent triumph over the government in Kabul. The outlook for the Afghan people, she wrote, was grim.

Obviously, such clear-eyed reporting did not endear her to the clique of U.S. correspondents based in Peshawar, Pakistan—headquarters for the Afghan resistance-in-exile—whose reporting had consisted primarily of cheering the U.S.-backed guerrillas and their jihad against the Soviets. In an article for *The New York*

Erwin Knoll is the editor of *The Progressive*.

Times Magazine earlier this year, John Burns wrote:

"In Peshawar's American Club, reporters skeptical of an approach that celebrated the rebels' virtues encountered ostracism. One visitor, Mary Williams Walsh of *The Wall Street Journal*, had her entry to the club 'suspended' after reporting sardonically on the rebel boosterism she found. . . . When in the fall of 1989 word of her departure from *The Journal* reached the American Club, some of the free-lancers involved called for drinks all round."

But departure from *The Journal* was farthest from Walsh's mind early last year. In January 1989, a message to all overseas bureaus from Karen Elliott House, then the newspaper's foreign editor, urged correspondents to "read Mary Walsh's fabulous Kabul leader this morning. It's a gripping read . . . full of beautiful description and vivid anecdotes that really make one feel as if you were there with Mary. . . . It's a model not only of good reporting but of how essential good observation and descriptive writing are to the success of a story."

Shortly thereafter, during one of her trips to Peshawar, Walsh wrote a memo to her editors proposing what she called "a good and unusual investigative story, one unlike anything else I've seen written on this war." The story was to deal with a charity called the Mercy Fund, headquartered in Washington, D.C., with field operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Walsh had heard rumors that the Mercy Fund, which engaged in extensive fundraising in the United States, might not be quite on the up-and-up.

One intriguing aspect of the Mercy Fund's operations, Walsh told her editors, was "its apparent political and media role [which] is particularly effective because the Mercy Fund director's boy friend is CBS's local correspondent for the Afghan war. He has been able to portray the war in his own way, with all the credibility of CBS behind him. He has selected Abdul Haq [a commander in one of the mujahideen guerrilla factions] as the man to promote."

"A diplomat here told me confidentially that this CBS man has decided not to quit until he has made Abdul Haq the president of a liberated Afghanistan."

Walsh's article about the Mercy Fund, never published by *The Wall Street Journal*, appears in this issue of *The Progressive* starting on Page 23. But as she began digging into the story—her *Journal* editors had given her "wholehearted support" to go ahead, she recalls—she became increasingly engrossed with one aspect: what she now calls "corruption in the news and the way American TV viewers' values and perceptions are shaped." That proved to be the story that was too hot for *The Journal* to handle.

Kurt Lohbeck was the live-in companion of Anne Hurd, the Mercy Fund's field director for Afghanistan. He was also contract field producer for CBS News's coverage of the Afghan war. A single sign outside the residence Lohbeck and Hurd shared in Peshawar proclaimed it to be the headquarters of the Mercy Fund, CBS News, and HNS (Humanitarian News Service), the propaganda effort described in Walsh's article on the Mercy Fund.

Walsh calls Lohbeck CBS News's "day-in-and-day-out eyes and ears on the war." He traveled into Afghanistan with guerrilla units based in Pakistan, filmed their operations, and filed reports for the *CBS Evening News* and other network broadcasts. When CBS correspondents from London or New York went to Afghanistan to report the big stories, Lohbeck handled the arrangements.

In an article about coverage of the Afghan war published in the January/February issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Walsh quoted R.J. Halderman, a producer in the CBS News London bureau, on Lohbeck's key role: "Kurt is, and was, the main Afghan source of material for CBS News over the years. I can't think of many people we have a relationship with that's as strong as Kurt's is."

That alone made Lohbeck an important figure in shaping U.S. reporting on Afghanistan, for almost two-thirds of all Americans get their news primarily from the television screen, and CBS prides itself on the depth and extensiveness of its coverage of the Afghan war. According to a study by the Congressional Research Service, CBS aired 55.2 minutes of Afghan news during 1986, a peak year for Afghan coverage. It may not seem like much, but it compares favorably to the 28.8 minutes allocated that year by NBC and the 19.7 minutes broadcast by ABC.

Lohbeck, however, was much more than CBS News's reporter on the scene. Through his interconnected associations with the network, the Mercy Fund, the Humanitarian News Service, the U.S. Government, and the mujahideen, he had set himself up as a guide and guru to visiting journalists—a source of information, a contact with the guerrillas, an expert on the tangled politics of the Afghan resistance.

In effect, says Walsh, Lohbeck was "some sort of gatekeeper" who could determine which journalists would be able to cross into Afghanistan with the mujahideen. U.S. diplomats in Pakistan regularly directed arriving reporters to Lohbeck for briefings. "I saw letters going back and forth from the [late U.S.] ambassador—thank you notes to Kurt Lohbeck and Anne Hurd for entertaining people investigating Afghanistan," Walsh recalls. The couple even set up a hostel that provided journalists with accommodations and

with such conveniences as telephones, Telex facilities, and photocopying equipment. Walsh was one of the reporters who availed herself of Lohbeck's help when she was initially assigned to the Afghanistan story.

What troubled her was the growing realization that Lohbeck had an agenda of his own. He was, she wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, "a partisan of the mujahideen and of one guerrilla leader in particular, Abdul Haq, for whom he served in effect as a publicist. Moreover, other reporters claim that he sought by various means to shape their coverage of the war."

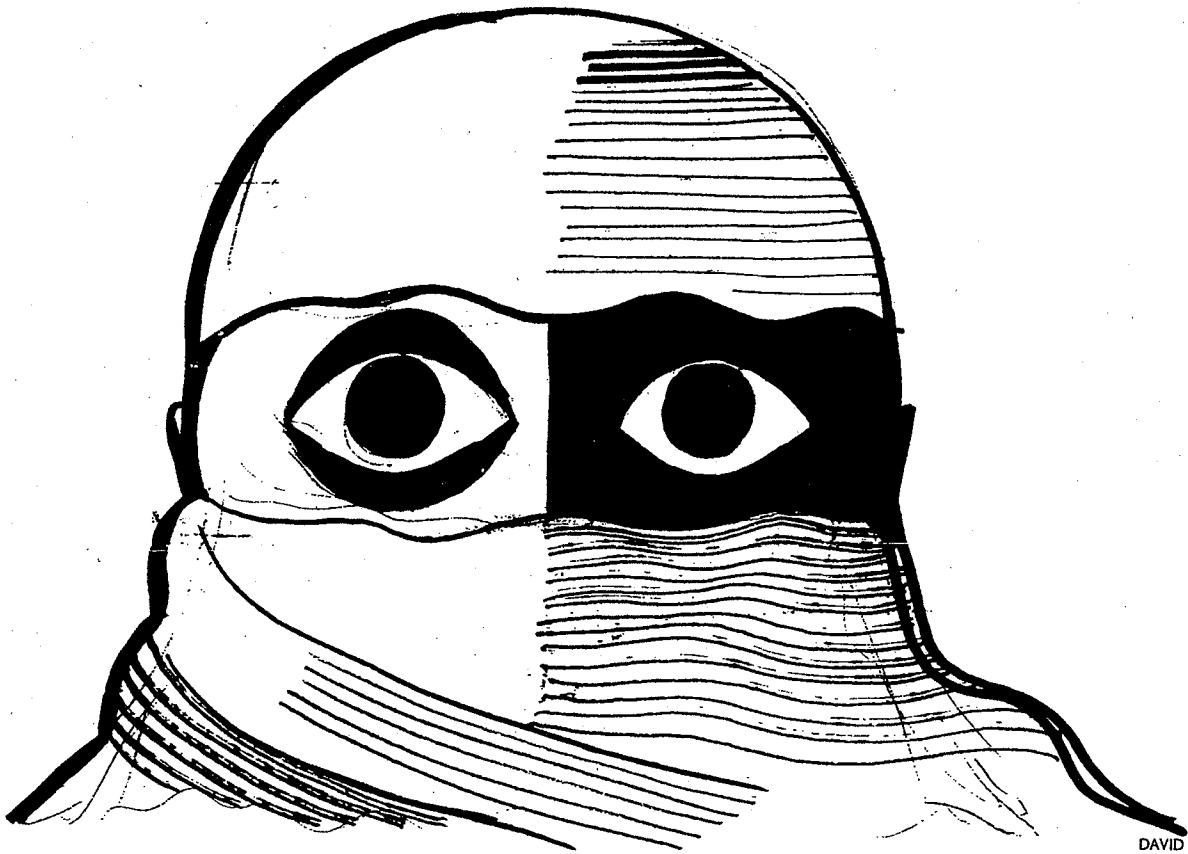
"U.S. and Afghan sources say furthermore that, while he was on contract for CBS, Lohbeck set up a press conference for the guerrillas and coached them on how to address skeptical Western reporters. There is evidence to suggest that he tried to help put together at least one weapons deal for the mujahideen."

In the shadowy world of international free-lance operatives, Lohbeck's contacts included Jonathan Jay Pollard, now serving a life sentence for spying for Israel. In his court pleadings, Pollard called Lohbeck "a recognized liaison to the mujahideen" whose connections enabled him to gain access to U.S. classified documents. (Lohbeck denies having engaged in illegal activities with Pollard.)

It was largely through Lohbeck's efforts that Abdul Haq appeared on U.S. television screens as a leading spokesman for the Afghan mujahideen, asking for more U.S. military aid and asserting that the Soviets were stepping up their aggression in Afghanistan. And other media, too, presented Abdul Haq as a major figure in the Afghan resistance. He was profiled in *The New York Times Magazine*, interviewed by *Newsweek*, and described in *The Wall Street Journal* as "the resistance commander most likely to pull down the flag in Kabul." Walsh herself interviewed him after she was introduced to him by Lohbeck, though she now believes she and other reporters were induced to vastly exaggerate Abdul Haq's importance. (American diplomats, she learned, referred to him as "Commander Hollywood.")

In 1985, Lohbeck arranged for Abdul Haq to put in an appearance at a Washington banquet sponsored by the Conservative Political Action Conference. The main speaker, Ronald Reagan, singled out the mujahideen spokesman for special recognition. Nonetheless, by 1988 Abdul Haq's appearances on CBS News were devoted to accusing Reagan of selling out the guerrillas, though covert U.S. aid since the Soviet invasion had by then reached a total of about \$2.4 billion.

As the focus of Walsh's investigative reporting shifted from the Mercy Fund's charitable pitch to Lohbeck's dubious interests and commitments, she dug up



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some fascinating facts about CBS News's representative at the Afghan front. Born forty-eight years ago in St. Louis and reared in New Mexico, Kurt Lohbeck was the son of Don Lohbeck, a top aide and publicist for Gerald L.K. Smith, the notorious bigot who flourished on America's lunatic-fringe Right during the Great Depression. The father had edited an anti-black, anti-Semitic hate sheet called *The Cross and the Flag*, and had run for office on the ticket of the Christian Nationalist Party. The son, too, had an interest in politics; he served one stint as a Republican member of the New Mexico legislature.

Kurt Lohbeck, Walsh discovered, had a criminal record that dated back to a 1965 conviction and suspended sentence for passing bad checks in Garden City, Kansas. After a brief stint as news director for a television station in El Paso, Texas, Lohbeck joined his father in operating a bingo parlor in Albuquerque, supposedly for the benefit of an institution called the Holy Orthodox Church, which dispensed its sacraments from a house trailer. Police twice raided the bingo parlor and seized gambling gear, but a judge dismissed charges. About that time, however, Lohbeck was convicted and paid a \$50 fine after a former employee complained to police that he had forced his way into her home and roughed her up.

There were more bad-check charges, and a New Mexico judge sentenced Lohbeck to a three-year term in a minimum-security prison. "Well, Mr. Lohbeck," said the judge, "you've come to the end of the

Through Lohbeck's efforts, Abdul Haq appeared on American TV as a leading spokesman for the mujahideen.

line." But he hadn't; he was paroled after seven months and went back into television news. In the early 1980s, when the "Reagan Revolution" brought conservatives in droves to Washington, Lohbeck found work on Capitol Hill with a House committee chaired by Representative Manuel Lujan, the New Mexico Republican who is now Secretary of the Interior. Lohbeck left that job shortly after a woman to whom he was engaged complained to Lujan that Lohbeck had taken her credit card and run up thousands of dollars in unauthorized charges. (When Walsh asked Lohbeck about this episode, he told her, "It's my personal life. It was years ago. It had nothing to do with [the coverage of the war in Afghanistan].")

Walsh, whose stacks of investigative files on the Afghan war-coverage story take

up several feet of floor space in her Toronto office, says she has evidence that CBS knew much—if not all—about Lohbeck's background before she began looking into it. Why he was hired and kept on as the network's point man in Afghanistan is a mystery to her. CBS News never replied to a series of telephone calls and registered letters from Walsh asking about Lohbeck.

When Walsh's article appeared in the *Columbia Journalism Review* earlier this year, CBS News President David Burke was content to tell inquiring reporters at a Los Angeles press conference, "When you're far away in Peshawar, you look for facilitators. You look for people who know the landscape. You look for people who can introduce you to people, so that when you arrive cold, you can at least get your feet on the ground and start to move. How you chose those stringers is fraught with difficulty. When you go to Peshawar, [*New York Times* columnist] Scotty Reston doesn't come out of the local bar. I mean, you have to find the kind of people who are . . . attracted to that region for some purpose or other."

What the network should have asked, says Walsh, is, "Can we rely on this man's ability to tell the truth?"

Another CBS News contract reporter, Mike Hoover, also came under Walsh's close scrutiny as she worked on her *Wall Street Journal* story. Hoover was an Academy Award-winning documentary film-maker whose

Afghan coverage for CBS had won a prestigious Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award. But there was evidence that in 1984 he had persuaded Afghan peasants to stage a "sabotage attack"—the explosion of electric-power pylons—for CBS cameras, and that he had passed off footage of a Pakistani air force jet on a training mission as a Soviet MIG bombing Afghan villages. Viewers of some of his Afghan "combat" coverage said they recognized the terrain: Parts of the film, they said, were shot not in Afghanistan but at mujahideen training camps in Pakistan.

Last fall, while Walsh was waiting—in vain, as it turned out—for her *Wall Street Journal* editors to approve publication of her story, a *New York Post* reporter, Janet Wilson, broke her own version, developed from her own sources, of the allegations against Hoover. She wrote that Dan Rather's CBS newscasts had repeatedly aired "faked battle footage and false news accounts" of the Afghan war. On August 11, 1987, for example, Rather presented combat footage of what he described as "the biggest one-day defeat for Soviet forces since the end of World War II." It was, in fact, a small engagement that involved no Soviet troops.

Another journalist, Frank Swertlow of the *Los Angeles Daily News*, reported that Ed Joyce, a former president of CBS News, and Dan Rather had exchanged memos about Hoover after a 1985 article in *Outside* magazine discussed his faking of scenes in adventure films. Joyce asked Rather to read the article and "let me know if we have any reason to be concerned," Swertlow reported. Rather replied that he had "made as strong an effort as possible to verify the authenticity of Hoover's work in Afghanistan." But others suggest that if Rather made such an effort, it fell far short. (One CBS News employee told Walsh that some dubious Afghanistan coverage had been "verified" by asking the CIA to vouch for its accuracy.)

Edward Girardet, a former correspondent in Afghanistan for *The Christian Science Monitor* and author of a book, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War*, wrote to *The New York Times* last fall (in a letter never published by that newspaper) that Hoover's credibility "has long been questioned by journalists, cameramen, relief officials, and diplomats." He added:

"Over the past few years, various Afghans traveling with Mr. Hoover have alleged dubious journalistic if not unethical practices on his part. Guerrilla commanders laughingly joked about Mr. Hoover's staging of events, or his 'action' filming in Pakistani training camps.

"Even a cursory perusal of Mr. Hoover's rushes by CBS prior to broadcast should have revealed serious discrepancies. At least one BBC television producer refused to accept his material because it appeared suspect. Military experts, who

have viewed some of Mr. Hoover's footage, noted among other things that a supposed Soviet MIG was in fact a Chinese version bearing Pakistani insignia; a mine gingerly removed by mujahideen for the camera appeared to have no detonator; the bursting of supposed artillery or mortar shells suggested previously positioned ground explosives.

"Furthermore, as Western cameramen have pointed out, a suspiciously high propensity of Mr. Hoover's bursting shells appear on center camera. As anyone who has covered a war knows, unless you happen to be in position and 'rolling,' the chances of recording impact are slight. Sadly, Mr. Hoover's Afghan reportage seems both a victim of the network 'bang-bang' obsession and his own failure to differentiate between Hollywoodese and documentary actuality. If so, it is indeed a sad reflection of U.S. television journalism today."

So far as CBS News President David Burke is concerned, however, the network's Afghanistan coverage has been "fantastic." CBS News spokesman Tom Goodman told me the network would have no further comment. Were Lohbeck and Hoover still under contract to CBS? Goodman said he didn't know but would "try to have someone get back" to me. No one did.

Mary Williams Walsh, an aggressive reporter who prides herself on keeping out in front of the competition, was increasingly upset as stories about Mike Hoover—part of her exposé of CBS's Afghan coverage—began appearing in *The New York Post* and elsewhere while her own editors at *The Wall Street Journal* stalled her story. But what infuriated her and ultimately persuaded her that she had to leave *The Journal* to protect her own integrity was a news story in *The New York Times*—the same article that prompted Girardet's letter to the editor. The story appeared last September 29 under the headline, **CBS OFFICIALS PROMISE TO REBUT AFGHAN CHARGES.**

The article quoted unnamed CBS executives as promising to rebut "point by point" *The New York Post's* stories about Mike Hoover. (No such point-by-point rebuttal has been issued to this day.) It went on to say: "But a CBS executive charged yesterday that *The Post* had decided to run 'a trashy story' that had already been rejected by *The Wall Street Journal*. A *Journal* editor confirmed that the paper had received an article including much of the same material that was eventually printed by *The Post*.

"Whether a story has a sufficient level of proof to go with is something for an individual editor to decide," said the editor, who asked not to be identified. "And you can infer what you have to from that."

The unnamed *Wall Street Journal* editor—Walsh later learned that he was, in fact, Managing Editor Norman Pearlstine—went on to tell *The Times*, "I do think there ought to be a presumption that Rather would not deliberately air faked footage."

Walsh had several immediate reactions to the *Times* article: How had CBS learned that her newspaper had rejected her story—something she herself had not been told—especially when *Wall Street Journal* reporters and editors are under strict orders not to discuss work-in-progress with outsiders? At that point, Walsh was still under the impression that her story would appear on *The Journal's* front page within a week or so. And why had a *Journal* editor implied to *The Times* that her story lacked "a sufficient level of proof," when no such criticism had been addressed to her?

She was puzzled, too, by the denial that Rather had deliberately aired faked footage, when all she had suggested in her article was that Rather had been, for his own reasons, careless in his eagerness to cover the Afghan war? (In her *Columbia Journalism Review* article, Walsh later suggested that "to counter criticism by conservative groups of the network's coverage of leftist insurgencies in Central America," Rather may have used his occasional Afghan stories "to demonstrate that he was not soft on the Soviets.")

"It is a complete mystery to me," Walsh subsequently wrote in a long memorandum addressed to her friends and colleagues, "why the [*Journal's*] managing editor would convey such an off-the-mark synopsis of my article—or why he was even talking to *The Times*, when he hadn't ever talked to me."

Walsh's exposé, she subsequently learned, had been the topic of intense discussion in a series of *Wall Street Journal* meetings—meetings from which she was excluded even though she was in New York City (and in *The Journal's* offices) at the time. She was told no such meetings had occurred. And ultimately she was informed, regarding the results of her months of investigative reporting, that the story "simply didn't measure up."

"A *Journal* staffer who had taken part in one of the neurotically secret meetings told me," Walsh wrote in the memo to her friends, "that the managing editor admitted to being 'terrified' of the Lohbeck-Hoover-Mercy Fund package. And a friend told me that a 'high *Journal* editor' had been overheard at a party, telling people that I had decided to write a negative article about Lohbeck because I had once had an affair with him and our love had soured! It made me wonder why I had ever bothered telling such editors anything, if they would rather come up with lunatic fantasies like this than listen to what I had to say.



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"It also made me think that the feminists are right: A tough male reporter is 'aggressive'; a tough female reporter is irrational, bitchy, and probably a slut."

Walsh learned, in fact, that a number of rumors about her (and her husband) had been put into circulation from one source or another—in Peshawar, New York City, and Washington, D.C.—in an attempt to discredit her reporting. And instead of rallying to her support, some editors at her newspaper appeared to be joining in the attacks. She submitted her resignation on October 17, 1989, in a letter to Pearlstine that referred to "the cowardice and dishonesty I've seen in some editors" at *The Journal*.

"There's something very, very wrong here," Walsh wrote. "It's clear I can no longer do the kind of work I want to at *The Journal*. I resign with the greatest regret." Not long after, members of Peshawar's American Club were hoisting glasses in celebration, and Walsh heard from friends that "Lohbeck was boasting to people that he had gotten me fired."

Walsh had received frequent job offers while at *The Wall Street Journal*, and she swiftly landed on her feet as Canadian correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*. Her new editors there had a look at her unpublished Afghan material and decided, for whatever reasons, not to publish it. Perhaps they felt uncomfortable about appropriating work completed at another newspaper's expense.

'A tough male reporter is "aggressive"; a tough female reporter is irrational, bitchy, and probably a slut.'

Walsh, determined to stimulate serious discussion of what she regarded as major breaches of journalistic standards in covering the difficult and important Afghan story, eagerly accepted an offer to publish her story in the respected *Columbia Journalism Review*. It appeared as a nine-page spread, under the heading MISSION: AFGHANISTAN, in the January/February 1990 issue, and contained much of what *The Journal* had refused to publish.

Much, but not all. Walsh was in for another disappointment. Here's how she described the experience in the memo she wrote to her friends:

"I sent my drafts off to the *CJR*, and the editors there set about editing. It was a pleasure to work with people who han-

dled the piece with such honesty and intelligence—and open admiration for the quality of my reporting. We didn't agree on every matter of style or focus, but *CJR* believed me when I presented my evidence, listened to me when I told them why it was essential to include certain things, worked hard to achieve compromise rather than kill things outright. And nobody ever accused me of having an affair with Lohbeck. . . .

"David Burke, president of CBS News, called the editor of *CJR* and demanded a meeting, in which he tried to talk her out of publishing the piece. The editor listened, returned to her office, and continued preparing the piece for publication as if nothing had happened.

"Days before publication, things at the magazine began getting strange. There was a big, inexplicable push to kill the story. Thanks to the fighting of some tough, committed editors, the story was published anyway—but not before the central point I was trying to make had been changed."

Walsh has no direct knowledge of what happened at the *Columbia Journalism Review* in the days before her article went to press, but she believes that Joan Konner, dean of the School of Journalism and publisher of the *Review*, made a serious attempt to have the article killed. Konner, who rarely involves herself in editorial decisions at the *Review*, went over the galley of Walsh's article line by line, accusing her in extensive marginal notations of "ignorance" and of making "terrible charges." "Why is this a story?" she asked at one

point. (Fund-raising for the School of Journalism is, of course, a major part of the dean's job—and such important news organizations as CBS and *The Wall Street Journal* are significant contributors.)

Some members of the *Review's* editorial staff resisted the attempt to block Walsh's story, and the dispute was settled in favor of publication—but with major cuts and revisions—after Fred Friendly, a former CBS News executive who now teaches at Columbia, was called in to mediate. The result, Walsh wrote in her memo to her friends, was “a straightforward, barest of barebones account of a far broader and more sinister situation.” (Suzanne Braun Levine, the editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, did not return my calls requesting comment.)

In the memo to her friends, Walsh wrote, “In my original draft for *The Wall Street Journal*, and in a draft for *CJR* months later, I took the trouble to point out that not just CBS but the entire U.S. news industry had done a lousy job on Afghanistan, that not one significant prize had been won for newspaper or magazine work on Afghanistan, and why I thought this was so. I even called attention to the skimpiness of my own paper's Afghan coverage.”

The “central point” Walsh believes was lost in the last-minute editing of her *Columbia Journalism Review* article, she told me, was that CBS News itself—not just a couple of erratic free-lancers—had betrayed its responsibility to provide truthful and comprehensive coverage of the Afghan war. CBS News, she says, was not just—as she believes the published version of her article implied—“a poor, innocent network that got duped.”

What was it about television journalism in the 1980s that would make a network behave this way?” she asks, and then hesitates before answering her own question. Walsh likes to deal in fact, not conjecture, and she emphasizes that her comments on CBS's motives are pure speculation. In the 1980s, she points out, competition for audience ratings—and for advertising revenues—has become the driving force behind television news. “The entertainment concept has become more and more important,” she says. “Complexity isn't very photogenic, is it?”

Another factor of undetermined significance in shaping CBS News's coverage of Afghanistan was the network's eagerness to disprove the claims of right-wing critics that CBS was “soft on communism.” In his recent book, *Who Killed CBS?*, Peter J. Boyer recalls the time Dan Rather signed off the air “by giving his fellow Americans a hearty salute,” and tells of “a new flag-waving promotion for the [*CBS Evening News*] that vowed to keep ‘America on top of the world.’” Professor Dan

Hallin, a communications expert at the University of California, La Jolla, says CBS News is “always happy for an occasion to show themselves to be patriotic and not liberal.”

In a larger sense, coverage of the Afghan war has generally been pathetic in all of the mass media, Walsh says, though she can cite specific exceptions—reporters and cameramen who did excellent work. But the war is far away; the language of Afghanistan is arcane; it's difficult to find reliable translators who aren't committed to one or another passionate faction; a reporter who wants to cover the war from the guerrilla side must spend weeks walking over the mountains. And so the U.S. media have been content to leave much of the reporting to young, inexperienced free-lancers—“thrill-seekers, soldiers of fortune, Indiana Jones types,” Walsh calls them.

“There are lots of stories in Afghanistan that simply weren't covered,” Walsh says. “There's a drug story. There's a story about traditional social structures being broken down by people the United States was supporting, so that the society was basically destroyed. There are stories about the rise of radical Islam, which had not previously existed in Afghanistan. All this has been going on, but all you've seen are stories about the brave guerrillas with their simple weapons fighting an invasion by the Soviet superpower. No wonder everyone expected Kabul to fall as soon as the Soviet troops left.”

And now, she adds, even the limited and defective coverage we had has largely ceased; the Soviet troops have left Afghanistan, and the focus of U.S. overseas coverage has shifted to developments in Eastern Europe.

U.S. aid to the mujahideen, Walsh points out, was “America's biggest covert operation since the Vietnam war. When you have billions of dollars going to the guerrillas, people are entitled to know what their tax money is buying. They still haven't been told.”

She blames the media as well as the policy makers in Washington. In the memo to her friends, Walsh wrote, “A senior U.S. official who would speak only off the record—a man who organized and directed the flow of U.S.-financed weapons to the mujahideen from his embassy post in Pakistan—told me that while he didn't think much of the coverage of the war, American reporters certainly had made his job easier. He was delighted to have encountered so little criticism in what should have been, even in his opinion, a controversial job. He contemptuously summed up the Western journalists covering Afghan issues in Peshawar and Islamabad as docile.”

And she noted, “It is no secret in Peshawar (or in official Washington) that our holy warriors are back raising poppy des-

tinued for sale as heroin on the streets and in the backyards of Oakland and Detroit. How many viewers of the *CBS Evening News* know this? . . . The media are eager to ‘cover’ America's foreign undertakings but seemingly unable to consider, much less explain, the complex and tedious disasters they often become.”

In her conversations with me, Walsh asked me to make it clear that she was not “bad-mouthing the whole Afghan insurgency.” Unlike the Nicaraguan contras, she said, “these people have a just cause. They've been subjected to a brutal Soviet occupation. They represent a legitimate popular uprising. And I don't have much trouble with the idea of the United States backing the mujahideen. What bothers me is that we did it the wrong way for the wrong reasons, and the American media just went along with the whole parade.”

Why weren't her exposé of CBS News and her broader conclusions on coverage of the Afghan war published by the newspaper that had previously placed such a high premium on her outstanding reporting? In an October 2 letter to Walsh, Managing Editor Pearlstine wrote, “I am convinced that your story didn't work the way you conceived and wrote it. It simply didn't measure up. . . . I kept asking myself, ‘Who cares?’ and ‘So what?’”

Here too, Walsh is reluctant to engage in speculation as to motives. “What happened inside *The Wall Street Journal* could have been innocent bungling,” she says. “I'm willing to think that institutionally it could have been a big screw-up.”

“Don't you suppose,” I suggest, “that your story violated the good manners of the club that all these folks belong to?”

Some insiders at *The Wall Street Journal* have told her as much, Walsh acknowledges, but “I can't say that's what happened. I just don't know. It's a bad experience, and maybe there's an explanation for it.”

In a 1975 film called *Three Days of the Condor*, Robert Redford plays a researcher for an unspecified U.S. intelligence outfit—it's called “the company”—who inadvertently discovers a murderous “rogue” faction within the agency. After much derring-do, the movie's final scene takes place on the sidewalk outside *The New York Times*, where Redford confronts Cliff Robertson, one of the outlaws within “the company” who have launched their own foreign policy, Iran-contra style.

“They've got it,” Redford says, pointing to the *Times* building. “They've got all of it. I told them the story.”

“How do you know they'll print it?” Robertson asks.

“They'll print it.”

“How do you know?”

That's where the movie ends. The question is left unanswered. ■