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'Honest Mike's' documentary lemon

In its special program a few months back on Gen. William Westmoreland, CBS-TV professed to give us some hard-nosed investigative journalism. In its expose of the network's incredible bias in concocting that report, TV Guide delivers the genuine article.

As TV Guide's reporters spell it out, the CBS attack on Westmoreland was a premeditated hatchet job in which the conclusions were written in advance, dictating the course of the whole inquiry. Facts, assertions and rebuttals that didn't fit the predetermined pattern were simply excluded from the program.

The thrust of the CBS Special, "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," was that Gen. Westmoreland, commander of our forces in Vietnam, had suppressed intelligence data showing a substantial enemy buildup prior to the Tet Offensive of 1968. The object of this deception, supposedly, was to make our strategy of attrition look good — with the unintended consequence of misleading authorities on the homefront about the dangers we confronted.

The CBS story was primarily based on the theories of a former CIA operative who believed so-called "self-defense" forces of the communists, including women, children and the elderly, should have been included in the enemy force estimates, and that a conspiracy was afoot to prevent this from happening. This notion, the magazine shows, was planted in the CBS project from the beginning. The words "conspiracy" and "conspirators" appear

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repeatedly in the program outline submitted to CBS at the outset.

The interviews conducted, and the use made of them, conformed completely to this original format. For instance, the top U.S. intelligence official in Vietnam, who would have known about any such deception by Westmoreland, was never interviewed. Nor, he says, did the network make any effort to get in touch with him. Others who did get interviewed but disagreed with CBS's pre-conceived thesis wound up on the cutting-room floor.

A glaring example in this category is Walt W. Rostow, a top adviser to President Johnson at the time of the Tet Offensive. Rostow had a three-hour interview with CBS in which he pointed out that the debate over enemy strength in Vietnam was well known in government, that the issue was in honest disagreement over what kind of forces should be counted as fighting units, and that the full range of estimates on such matters was known to the White House.

"President Johnson," said Rostow, "was fully aware of the Viet Cong order of battle debate, at the center of the CBS documentary...it was precisely because order of battle estimates were so inherently difficult that we relied on the widest range of intelligence." The charge that LBJ was misled by Westmoreland, says Rostow, "is false; and those who produced the documentary knew it was false" — since he had told them so at considerable length.

Not one word of Rostow's three-hour interview on this subject was included in the CBS documentary. All too clearly, what he had to say didn't fit with the preconceived notions of the producers.

Similar treatment was accorded Lt. Gen. Daniel Graham, accused of helping Westmoreland suppress intelligence data. The outspoken and highly quotable Graham was interviewed for 90 minutes — 20 seconds of which actually made it on the air.

Even worse, if possible, was the way Westmoreland himself was handled. The CBS letter to him before his interview indicated the subject was to be intelligence matters generally — with an illusion to the order-of-battle dispute casually tucked in far down the list. Westmoreland was told nothing up front about the charges to be aired against him, while CBS was conniving with his critics to perfect them.

Among other revelations, TV Guide tells us that CBS had its star witness against Westmoreland flown to New York and prepped on the questions he would be asked by Mike Wallace — in violation of the network's own guidelines. When Wallace conducted this interview he did so on an entirely friendly basis, drawing out the charges against Westmoreland. The magazine points out still other inaccuracies and problems in the CBS special — suggesting that, while there are plenty of things to criticize about our strategy in Vietnam, this emphatically wasn't it.

TV Guide's disclosures confirm the earlier charges on this subject made by Accuracy in Media, Rostow's statement to the New York Times and the rebuttals offered by Gens. Graham and Westmoreland. The net weight of the evidence indicates that the "deception" in this broadcast was committed — not countered — by CBS.