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An AIDS yarn is unraveled

On March 30, 1987, Dan Rather gave the following report on "The CBS Evening News."

"A Soviet military publication claims the virus that causes AIDS leaked from a U.S. Army laboratory conducting experiments in biological warfare. The article offers no hard evidence, but claims to be reporting the conclusions of unnamed scientists in the United States, Britain and East Germany. Last October, a Soviet newspaper alleged that the AIDS virus may have been the result of Pentagon or CIA experiments."

Mr. Rather, who recently publicly accused his new boss, CBS President Laurence Tisch, of cutting the budget of CBS News to a degree that threatened to transform its vaunted excellence into "mediocrity," did not report any official U.S. reaction to this Soviet charge. Maybe the personnel cuts have been so deep that there simply wasn't anyone available to call the Pentagon or State Department.

That is unfortunate, because one phone call to the State Department press office would have kept CBS News from being suckered by a Soviet disinformation operation that is a year and a half old and that was thoroughly exposed at a special State Department press briefing on Nov. 3, 1986. At that briefing it was disclosed that the first allegation that the U.S. Army had developed the AIDS virus appeared in the Soviet magazine, *Literary Gazette*, a year earlier. The article cited as its source an Indian paper called *The Patriot*. The KGB is said to plant stories in this paper from time to time to enable Soviet media to quote non-Soviet sources for their disinformation. In this case, there was evidently a breakdown in communication. *The Patriot* was quoted in Moscow even though it had not yet published the AIDS story.

The story subsequently appeared in other Soviet publications and in the foreign media. It made headlines in the London *Sunday Express* after a Czech publication quoted "French

researchers" as making the allegation that the Pentagon was spreading AIDS.

They turned out to be Jakob and Lilli Segal, residents of East Berlin.

The story was obviously being taken seriously abroad and was doing great damage to the reputation of the United States. That is why the State Department took the trouble to trace its origins and expose it as a Soviet disinformation operation.

It is shocking and disgraceful that five months after this big lie was exposed as a KGB fabrication, it was reported seriously as a news item on "The CBS Evening News." Just days earlier, two Soviet defectors had testified in a court in London about the unceasing efforts being made by the KGB to plant disinformation in the Western media. Ilya Dzhirkvelov, who worked for Radio Moscow before he defected, testified that he had worked with Vassily Sitnikov, assistant director of the Department of Disinformation of the KGB, on projects designed to get their stories in liberal and even rightist publications in foreign countries. He said that both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were "used actively" by the Soviets. He claimed they were able to do this without the publications knowing that they were being used.

Dan Rather's broadcasting the Soviet disinformation on AIDS demonstrated the validity of Mr. Dzhirkvelov's claim that our prestige media are vulnerable to this kind of manipulation. The CBS case suggests several reasons for this.

First, there is the obvious ignorance among the highly paid CBS News staff of major Soviet disinformation themes.

Second, there is the willingness to report Soviet allegations, no matter how wild, without seeking a reaction from the U.S. government.

Finally, top CBS officials have admitted in the past that they have no special measures to guard against Soviet disinformation or even penetration by Soviet agents.

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