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From:
THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PARTY
Rt. Hon. Norman Tebbit MP

30 October 1986

I enclose an analysis which Conservative Central Office has made of BBC TV's news coverage of the US raid on Libya in April of this year.

It raises some very serious questions as to the way in which the BBC reports the news. For our analysis, we have taken as a yardstick the BBC's own public commitment to impartiality and balance. In the light of our evidence you may feel that the BBC news reporting, in this instance at least, fell far short of the high standards which the Corporation espouses. Indeed you may conclude that far from being balanced, fair and impartial, the coverage was a mixture of news, views, speculation, error and uncritical carriage of Libyan propaganda which does serious damage to the reputation of the BBC.

From my many years of association with the BBC, I know that most of your staff are deeply proud of their association with the best known broadcasting operation in the world. I also know that many of them feel that the BBC has lost its way. Perhaps the news coverage of the Libyan attack is a reflection of this lack of direction. I have no way of knowing whether the coverage was affected by bias, incompetence, low professional standards or simple error - although I am sure you will have your own opinion on that. However, I am sure that it is neither in the interests of the Government, the political parties, the taxpayers, the BBC, or its employees, that such criticism is capable of being made.

We have tried to argue our analysis in detail. I expect that you too will make your own detailed analysis. However, that would miss the point I am making, which is to question whether an increasingly subjective and confrontational style of BBC news coverage is appropriate for a public service broadcasting system, funded by the taxpayer, required to emphasise impartiality, objectivity and factual reporting. I hope you will agree that this analysis and criticism which the BBC received from various other quarters recently, makes it appropriate for you to undertake a thorough reappraisal of the managerial and editorial standards which are currently in operation for your TV news coverage.

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Given the considerable public interest in this issue, I intend to issue copies of this letter and its attachments to the press.

The Rt. Hon. Norman Tebbit, MP.

The Rt. Hon. Lord Barnett
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CONSERVATIVE CENTRAL OFFICE - MEDIA MONITORING

INTRODUCTION

The BBC has a worldwide reputation other broadcasters envy. Many of its programmes and most of its workers strive to achieve the highest standards of professionalism in broadcasting.

However, in recent months Conservative Central Office has received a growing wave of correspondence and telephone calls complaining about various aspects of BBC activity. Although media monitoring is not a mainstream CCO activity, the weight of complaint was such that we felt it necessary to investigate at least some of these complaints in depth and in detail. In July we announced we would be conducting a media monitoring exercise.

The basis of our analysis was the BBC's own constitutional commitment to balance and impartiality. Its own Constitution requires the BBC "to refrain from expressing its own opinion on current affairs or on matters of public policy", and a BBC Board Resolution "recognises the BBC's duty to treat controversial subjects with due impartiality".

In some cases, the BBC has clearly failed to meet the standards it

has set for itself. We do not have the resources to investigate all complaints - indeed many in our view are unjustified. Nonetheless, we feel the BBC should be made aware of various disturbing aspects of one particular news story. This is the BBC TV coverage of the US strike against Libya earlier this year about which we have received a particularly high level of viewers' complaints.

We do not expect governments to be above criticism, or bad news to be suppressed. But broadcast journalism is not the same as newspaper journalism. Stories should not be given a particular "flavour" which reflects editorial policy. Viewers should not be led to an opinion but rather allowed to form their own opinions on the basis of the facts presented. We stand by the terms of the BBC's Constitution. We applaud the view of the late Chairman, Stuart Young, who said: "Above all, our viewers and listeners expect our journalism to be balanced, fair and impartial".

(Institute of Journalists, Blackpool, September 1983).

THE AMERICAN RAID ON LIBYA

A comparative analysis of its treatment on the BBC Nine O'Clock News and ITN's News at Ten:

Tuesday 15th April 1986

The American bombing raid on Tripoli on 15th April 1986 was one of those events open to two quite opposite interpretations.

To the Libyans and to the British Opposition parties, it was a vicious and illegal attack by a militaristic super-power on a small nation, killing civilians and children with callous disregard for human life. On this interpretation Britain should have refused to allow the USA to use British bases for the raid. To the Americans and the British government, it was a legitimate and necessary defensive action against a military dictator who was using the resources of his state to carry out acts of barbarous terrorism against innocent people in foreign countries. On this interpretation Britain was right to let America use the bases.

Various predictions of the likely consequences of this action would tend to strengthen or weaken support for the two sides. It was in Libya's interests to suggest that the raid would result in a fundamental realignment of the Arab sympathies behind Libya, that America would be isolated by world opinion, and that Mrs Thatcher had laid Britain open to painful and violent reprisals for its co-operation.

By contrast, it was in the interests of America and Britain that the diplomatic consequences of the raid would be ephemeral and not fundamental, that their action would receive understanding and

acquiescence if not vocal support from other nations, and that Libyan state terrorism would itself become more isolated and undermined.

All of these potential consequences were, in the immediate aftermath of the raid, conjectural and incapable of proof. Responsible broadcasters would therefore have treated these matters with the greatest caution. The duty of the television news organisations in these difficult and delicate journalistic circumstances is to report all the most significant available facts and reflect the two contrasting attitudes. It is submitted that a comparison of the two bulletins for Tuesday evening 15th April shows that "News at Ten" was able to preserve an impartial editorial stance, while the BBC took a number of editorial and journalistic decisions the effect of which was to enlist the sympathy of the audience for the Libyans and to antagonise them towards the Americans. This in turn also encouraged agreement with the Opposition and condemnation of the Government.

In any news story it is important to remember that the early or introductory part of the report sets the context of what follows and conditions the audience's response, rather like the headlines in a newspaper story. In this case it tells the audience whether the story is about unjustifiable aggression, or legitimate self-defence, or an international crisis in which one side says the former and

the other the latter. It would be generally accepted that the third course is the only proper one for a British television news service. In our view this analysis demonstrates that this course was followed by ITN, but not by BBC News.

Look first at the headlines:

ITN: "Mr Gorbachov tells Mr Reagan 'Our Foreign Ministers can't meet now'. The bombs meant for terrorists kill Colonel Gadaffi's daughter. President Reagan says 'If necessary we will do it again'. Mrs Thatcher - 'I agreed last week'. Mr Kinnock - 'It will provoke'. The police are busy with demonstrators in Downing Street tonight."

BBC: "Worldwide condemnation of the American air strike on Libya. Children are casualties - three from Gadaffi's own family. Mrs Thatcher under fire in the Commons defends her decision to allow the use of British bases. Tonight she shows her critics the proof of Libyan terrorism."

The contrast is clear. The BBC gave particular emphasis to the Libyan case. The BBC made the principal feature of its news the "worldwide condemnation" of America - a subjective and emotive description which is repeated but never substantiated throughout the broadcast.

The BBC then turned to the civilian casualties of the raid - thus giving emphasis to one of Libya's major propaganda points - before

describing Mrs Thatcher as being "under fire in the Commons". Only in the last breath did the BBC make any reference to "Libyan terrorism", in a series of headlines which otherwise tended to support the pro-Libyan argument.

In our view ITN chose a very different approach, which emphasised hard fact. It chose to lead the story with a factual report of the diplomatic repercussions between the superpowers, rather than the vague phrases such as "worldwide condemnation" employed by the BBC. ITN did not attempt to hide the civilian casualties, but chose also to report that these were caused by "bombs meant for terrorists". And neither did it shirk reporting domestic criticism of Mrs Thatcher's action, but reported the differing views in an entirely factual fashion. Whereas for the BBC Mrs Thatcher was "under fire", ITN left Mrs Thatcher and other politicians to speak for themselves. There can be little doubt that ITN succeeded far better than the BBC in introducing the news in a balanced and impartial fashion. They were scrupulous in not attempting to lead the viewer either to a pro-American or pro-Libyan opinion.

In the section following the headlines, the ITN report stuck firmly to journalistic facts: the cancelled meeting, the Libyan casualties, the Prime Minister's Commons Statement, the Opposition criticism.

But the BBC went straight into alarmist hyperbole: "The world is waiting to see what Colonel Gadaffi is going to do in response ...".

It was a phrase which raised the general level of anxiety while doing nothing to inform the viewer of the facts, and which also established one of the main strands in the anti-American argument, that the attack would provoke more violence. It was a line which was to dominate and distort much of the final part of their broadcast.

The BBC then chose a particularly damaging phrase to describe America's response, "in Washington the mood is one of jubilation", which, when sandwiched between phrases such as "children are casualties" and "causing deaths and injuries to men, women and children as they slept in their homes", suggested extreme callousness.

It also devoted far more of the opening paragraph than ITN did to words and phrases designed to arouse anti-American emotion: "across the world there is great concern", "deaths and injuries to men, women and children as they slept in their homes", "Colonel Gadaffi's own family was hit", "in intensive care with serious injuries".

The point is not whether these statements should be made but whether they should be given such prominence in the first, 'audience conditioning' part of the report. ITN apparently thought not. Their brief factual summary of Libyan casualties was prominent but half

the length and much less emotive: "Reports from Western diplomats in Libya said that up to 100 had been killed in the American attacks. An adopted daughter of Colonel Gadaffi's was said to have been killed in the raid on Tripoli and two of his sons were injured."

Again ITN, but not the BBC, reported the Prime Minister's statement that she had received assurances that the attack would be only on terrorist targets. The BBC instead stated "Mrs Thatcher has been under pressure to explain". The BBC's introduction to the rest of the bulletin was similarly more sympathetic to the Libyan position than to that of the American or British Governments. They might quite fairly have said "We'll be looking at the events that prompted America's retaliation and its chances of success." In fact they said "we'll be assessing the world reaction to what the Americans have done, and the political repercussions for Mrs Thatcher". "Assessing the world reaction", "what the Americans have done" and "political repercussions" have entirely negative connotations in this context, and are the aspects of the story that the Libyans would have chosen, given that the BBC had already advised the viewer that the "world reaction" had been one of "worldwide condemnation".

They did not use ITN's quotation from George Schultz: "Intelligence implicated Colonel Gadaffi in the West Berlin bombing and plans to attack 30 American installations around the world". The BBC's reference to the American justification for the raid - surely a vital part of any balanced coverage - was buried late in the newscast.

ITN also included in their introductory section the American statement that they had acted legitimately under Article 51 of the UN Charter (as well as suggesting that it was an unusual action under that Article). The only American quotation in the BBC's introductory section was the 'jubilation' one, "We have struck a blow against terrorism. We have sent a message to Gadaffi".

The BBC chose throughout the broadcast to emphasise the aspect of "worldwide condemnation". It amplified the thought throughout the broadcast in phrases such as "across the world there is great concern", "worldwide criticism", "the United States finds itself more isolated than at any single moment since 1945", "popular only among Americans" and America "almost completely isolated from world opinion". The only countries it actually quotes in the bulletin are the Soviet Union, Syria, Egypt and Jordan, in other words Arab or Communist states with strong vested interests whose criticism was totally predictable. Critical statements as sweeping as that require specific support, but the BBC were either unable or unwilling to provide any real evidence for this fundamental audience-conditioning allegation. The BBC suggested that "only Canada and Britain support the American action. All the others... are uniformly hostile to it" but failed to show any evidence for such a sweeping statement. Indeed, within a few hours several other nations were to express their formal support, sympathy or understanding, but by then the BBC had already delivered its verdict.

In both the BBC and the ITN bulletins the first full film story was a report from Tripoli. Both had much the same story (not surprisingly, - since they could only film what the Libyans allowed them to): the raid at night, the damage to residential property, civilians including children killed and injured, outrage among ordinary Libyans. The contrast in the treatment, however, is significant. The ITN report is briefer and more factual, ending with a summary that expressed the situation very fairly: "Thé Libyans are now trying to use the American raid as a propaganda weapon for themselves by concentrating news coverage on the civilian and not the military side of the attack. But these scenes of residential carnage can hardly do President Reagan's case any good." No similar qualification concerning Libyan control of news coverage was forthcoming from the BBC.

The success of the Libyan propaganda effort can be clearly seen in the BBC News bulletin. It devotes considerably longer to this Libyan-controlled footage than the ITN bulletin, and the relative amount of time and emphasis given in the whole report to civilian death and injury is significant. For, as the ITN reporter stated, such footage was the heart of the Libyan propaganda case. A simple count shows that ITN gave 45 seconds to the discussion or depiction of civilian casualties. The BBC returned to the civilian casualties on three separate occasions throughout the broadcast, for a total of over 130 seconds. And in contrast to the ITN balanced summary, the last words from the BBC reporter were emotive and sympathetic

' to the Libyan position: "We've had no word from him (Colonel Gadaffi) about the death of his daughter - she's already been buried."

This section shows up very clearly one of the major problems of reporting, especially film reporting, in countries which exercise tight control over the activities of journalists. The media have ample opportunity to film what is favourable to the regime and are barred from the rest - in this case the damage to military and terrorist installations or the voices of Libyans opposed to Gadaffi's policy of state terrorism. An objective news organisation will try to balance this with restrained reporting of what the regime wants shown and reminders of what the home audience is not allowed to see. In this case ITN showed reasonable restraint, but the BBC did not.

It is relevant to compare the BBC's activity in the Libyan instance with their news coverage of South Africa on 16th June 1986 (the "Soweto anniversary") immediately following the imposition of tighter reporting restrictions. In its first broadcast under these new controls, it mentioned the restrictions placed by the Government on its news coverage no less than ten times. Two months earlier it did not mention Libyan reporting restrictions once. *

* The contrast between this aspect of the BBC treatment of Libya and its treatment of South Africa is such that we are forced to ask "why?". This extract is not intended to concentrate on South Africa in particular. However, two points are worth noting.

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Much of the other reporting from Tim Sebastian, Christopher Wain, Michael Sullivan, John Simpson, John Cole, Christopher Morris and Brian Barron was more fair and balanced, although not without fault. Sebastian made an unnecessarily emotive reference - "in the general mood of self congratulation (in America) there was barely a mention of Libyan casualties". Equally emotive was Barron's claim that "Britain is in the firing line". Wain quoted unnamed defence experts to suggest that the use of British bases was not for military reasons but "was political", and Sullivan stated that the attack on Libya was "popular only among Americans". But these are minor points on their own.

We believe Keith Graves' report is more questionable. He stated that "for once the Arab world is united" in condemning the raid, but supported this claim with only two weak items - an unattributed

(Footnote continued):

First, the NUJ instructs its members as follows: "Where you carry reports, make sure there is a statement that the material has been compiled under South African Government censorship". Did trade union instructions rather than the BBC's own editorial judgement contribute to this rather worrying discrepancy between the reporting from Libya and from South Africa?

Second, in spite of the clear constitutional duty of the BBC to offer balanced and impartial coverage of the news, this has clearly been ignored in recent months in the coverage of South Africa. They have admitted this. The BBC's Assistant Director-General, Alan Protheroe, has stated: "The BBC is not impartial as regards apartheid because the BBC could not be impartial about things like apartheid." He justified the huge amount of BBC air time given to coverage of events in South Africa as follows: "We really are dealing with what I honestly believe to be one of the most important social political stories of the 20th Century. It's a very big story, it's a very important story with international ramifications. It's a story that's bigger than the story of South Africa itself, and I think we are devoting about the right amount of time to it." ("Feedback", BBC Radio 4, 20th June 1986).

quotation saying that it had "boosted Gadaffi's image", and an Arab League statement "speaking for all Arab states" that the raid was "unprecedented".

These were insufficient to justify the statement that the raid was "driving moderate Arab states into the radical camp". Events since then would suggest that this comment was inaccurate.

The concentration of his report on the likelihood of "revenge attacks" and other reprisals, quoting only unidentified individuals and organisations as sources, was again unsupported by hard fact. "News" seemed to have given way to "views" and provocative conjecture on future events, with unqualified statements such as "likely call for Arab sanctions against America and Britain", "will kidnap and kill any Britons or Americans it finds", "will result in a fresh outbreak of attacks, only now the targets will be not only American but British as well", "has forecast a sharp increase in attacks on American and British targets. They will choose their time and place ... they will strike back". Such conjecture inevitably has a dramatic negative conditioning effect on the conclusions drawn by the viewer and contributed to the imbalanced emphasis of the broadcast.

It would be foolish to predict that none of those consequences could have happened or may not still happen, although experience

since April suggests that such speculation was highly misleading. But it is the task of the responsible reporter and news broadcaster to concentrate on fact rather than speculation, and to handle possible consequences of any action with the greatest circumspection. Altogether the BBC placed much more emphasis on and gave much greater coverage than ITN to potential reprisals and danger to British interests and lives, with a discussion of "fears there could be reprisals", "a tense vigil for any signs of a Libyan retaliation", "targets in this country", "danger area", "most vulnerable Britons", "the new dangers that opened up today to crews and passengers" and comments that individual Britons "are at greater risk than they were 24 hours ago", and that Britain was "on the brink of summer anxiety that could frighten off foreign tourists".

The BBC used six different individuals - two reporters, a newscaster, two experts and a civilian - to advance their opinion that Britain and Britons were at serious risk as a result of support for the American raid. The concentration on conjecture, which was inevitably highly disturbing to the viewer, was clearly excessive and could only have distorted views.

As we shall argue, the BBC's failure to separate fact from conjecture led them to very serious mistakes later in the week.

Any news event can be reported in a number of different ways, depending on what the writer and editor think to be "the story" - the most interesting and important aspects of the event. Comparing

the two broadcasts for Tuesday 15th April, one could readily conclude that two different stories were being reported. For ITN "the story" was that the Americans has carried out a raid on Libya, which they defended as a timely and necessary demonstration that the USA would not tolerate state terrorism, that the raid had been attacked by many others as a savage and unjustifiable use of force by a superpower against a small country, and that by allowing British bases to be used for the raid the British Government had created a political storm at home.

The BBC view of "the story" appeared to be that the Americans had committed an act of unjustifiable aggression which had resulted in the deaths of many innocent civilians, which had attracted worldwide condemnation and which had greatly increased international sympathy and support for Libya, and that by supporting the Americans the British Government had put British lives at risk.

The essential point is that in contrast with ITN, we consider that the BBC bulletin - and particularly its early part - constructed an emotional context of anti-American and pro-Libyan feeling which coloured the whole of the bulletin, and it did so under the cloak of impartial and objective news reporting. A brief examination of BBC reporting later in the week shows how misleading this could be, and also shows that this fault was not an isolated incident.

Thursday 17th April 1986

A comparison of the introductions to the BBC and ITN bulletins for Thursday shows yet again a dramatic contrast between the more objective reporting style of ITN and the more contentious editorial line of the BBC.

ITN describes the revenge killing of these Britons (it was later revealed that only two were British) in the straight convention of news reportage. "Good evening. Three British men held hostage in Lebanon were murdered today, taken in to the hills and shot in the back of the head. A revolutionary Muslim group said they were executed to avenge the American air attacks on Libya early on Tuesday."

The BBC, however, continued to use language which in our view was likely to alarm the audience, and to suggest that the Government had put the nation in danger. The opening headlines emphasised retribution - the attempt to blow up an airliner, the deaths of three British hostages, and the Labour accusation that Mrs Thatcher was "provoking terrorism".

They then offered a prejudicial and emotive piece of opinion. The opening words of the broadcast stated: "Good evening. Britain is paying the price for supporting America's attack on Libya." This was an inexcusable departure from straightforward news coverage. It was not an attempt to provide news but to prey on people's emotions and fears in a fashion which should find no home in any

respectable broadcasting operation.

In their next paragraph following the headlines, ITN picked out two quotations from the Commons: "Labour's Foreign Affairs spokesman Mr Donald Anderson called them the first tragic victims of Mrs Thatcher's total and isolated support for President Reagan. The Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe said the Government wouldn't be diverted."

The BBC however painted a picture of the Government under siege: "In the Commons this afternoon Mrs Thatcher under fierce attack accused of endangering British lives. Her retort. 'If you let the threat of further terrorism stop you then the terrorist has won'."

Stressing Britain's isolation, the BBC did not mention, as ITN did, the fact that the French government had expressed "firm solidarity" with Britain. Nor did they include the quotation from President Reagan used by ITN, saying that the killings were a tragic illustration of the need for joint international effort against terrorism.

Strangely, whereas ITN said the hostages were "murdered", the BBC merely said they were "shot through the head" and "killed", neutral terms which decriminalise the act, although at the very end of their broadcast the BBC did acknowledge that the hostages "have been murdered".

A far more serious matter, however, was the major error into which the BBC's editorialising stance led them. To show how the Government's support for the American raid had endangered British lives, they

prominently suggested that the Heathrow bomb attempt was an act of retribution for it. The opening remarks of the broadcast described it in highly emotive terms as bombers having "struck against the British people", without explaining why the terrorists should choose an El Al plane to strike against the British.

The introduction continued in the same vein: "And the long arm of Arab revenge reached Heathrow Airport. 400 people, many of them British, escaped certain death when police intercepted a time-bomb in luggage being taken aboard an Israeli jumbo."

There was indeed considerable speculation at the time concerning a connection between the raid and the bomb, but subsequent information showed that there had never been any. Subsequent information, however, came too late to change the attitude of an audience that had been emotionally conditioned by those speculative phrases purporting to be hard fact in the key opening seconds of the news bulletin: "Britain is paying the price...terrorists and bombers have struck against the British people ... punishment for the Libyan attack ... long arm of Arab revenge ... 400 people, many of them British, escaped certain death ... gangs of armed men were by now roaming the streets of West Beirut looking for British people ... Mrs Thatcher under fierce attack accused of endangering British lives." All this in the first 200-odd words of the bulletin.

The BBC did not stop there. The unbalanced editorial flavour

continued right through the broadcast. Once again emphasising retribution and revenge, they stated: "There is no doubt that the three Britons found dead today were killed in retaliation for Britain's part in the operation against the Libyans. And all the indications are that this is just the start of a campaign aimed at Britain and British targets". Even the good news was heavily qualified: "There's satisfaction tonight that about 400 lives have been saved, but nobody believes that this will be the last terrorist threat".

The BBC finished off its broadcast, repeating its speculative claim of a direct link between the Libyan raid and the Heathrow bomb, and re-emphasising the anti-Government tone: "And the main points of the news again. The backlash against Britain for supporting the American bombing of Libya. Four hundred people escaped death when a bomb was discovered 20 minutes before their Jumbo jet was due to leave Heathrow. Tonight police are hunting for this man, Nasir Hindawi. Three British hostages have been murdered in Lebanon".

For their final example of lack of balance, the BBC signed off their broadcast with the following emotion-laden and highly provocative line - "Neil Kinnock said tonight 'Mrs Thatcher had abandoned them to their fate'".

Looking in detail at the two bulletins side by side it is very hard to come to any other conclusion than that ITN strived hard to achieve impartial news reporting and that BBC did not. The flawed editorial line

of the BBC was not confined to one or two isolated incidents, but ran consistently throughout the events we have studied.

CONCLUSION

Our short study shows that the BBC coverage of these events represented a serious and significant failure to achieve professional news coverage which can only serve to undermine the principles of public service broadcasting. Isolated instances of error are understandable, but we believe that the BBC's coverage was riddled with inaccuracy, innuendo and imbalance. While some of the examples we have quoted in this analysis are, on their own, not damning, their cumulative impact is profound, damaging to the American and British Government cases and helpful to that of Libya.

Within the spirit of the BBC Charter and the highest standards of journalism, the task of a broadcasting reporter is not to thrill, nor excite, nor raise fears, nor offer speculation. It is to report the facts in an even-handed manner which allows the viewer to reach his or her conclusions on the evidence offered. The BBC did not offer objective evidence so much as a highly flavoured editorial view. It prompts charges of professional incompetence or, even worse, prejudice. This could be held to have arisen either through bias or incompetence. Given the pressures under which the broadcasters operated, a serious shortfall in professional and editorial standards is much the easier alternative to accept. But the BBC can no more live with such standards than it could with prejudice.

As the BBC's own guide emphasises, without maintaining "the highest standards of truthfulness and impartiality... it is difficult for any broadcasting organisation to be recognised as being truly independent and worthy of trust."

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