

# The Operation Tailwind Tangle

Washington's denials notwithstanding, the question remains: did the United States use the lethal nerve gas sarin in the Vietnam War?

by M S Venkataramani

IN July 1998, two key units of a giant American conglomerate, Cable News Network (CNN) and

Time magazine, which modestly labelled themselves as the world's two great news organisations, were laid low and thrown into convulsions in full public view. The onslaught against them was led in person by William S. Cohen, Secretary of Defence in the Clinton Administration. The convulsions of the two were of such severity that one wondered whether Cohen had unleashed against them the verbal equivalent of the dreaded nerve gas sarin.

The Pentagon and its chief were not lacking in compassion and willingness to "forgive and forget" selectively. Confronted with the wrath of the Pentagon, CNN and Time tearfully retracted two serious allegations that they had made against the Pentagon and offered abject apologies. Magnanimous in victory, Cohen was content to let bygones be bygones. Apparently what he had used against the world's two great news organisations was merely the verbal equivalent of a potent tear gas of the "hidden persuader" category, and not that of sarin. Tear gas and nerve gas are important elements in this analysis of Pentagon's top-secret "black operation" codenamed Tailwind in neutral Laos in September 1970.

On June 7, 1998 CNN telecast a programme entitled "Valley of Death" which purported to expose shocking details about Operation Tailwind. Time, which had joined hands with CNN in sponsoring the programme, carried a print version of the story in its issue of June 15, 1998. Their reports alleged that in September 1970 the US military establishment had authorised and implemented Operation Tailwind, which had as its objective the killing of US soldiers who had defected to North Vietnam. The reports asserted that in the course of efforts to extricate the Tailwind team from the site of their incursion, US aircraft used sarin against a group of advancing enemy soldiers. Time said: "Now, after the eight-month investigation, military officials with knowledge of the mission assert to... CNN and Time that the gas dropped 28 years ago in Laos was nerve gas, specifically sarin, the lethal agent used in the 1995 terrorist attack in a Tokyo subway that killed a dozen people."

The horrifying charges purveyed by CNN and Time were featured in newspapers around the world. A Pentagon official was quoted as saying that the US military establishment "has found no documentary evidence to support CNN's claim that nerve gas of any type was used in Operation Tailwind." Cohen, who was in Europe at the time, found that the CNN telecast "had an impact certainly on the people I was dealing with" and immediately ordered a comprehensive investigation. He explained subsequently why such an investigation was necessary.

"CNN/Time said that the purpose of this (Tailwind) mission was to hunt and to kill US defectors and that the United States used sarin, a lethal nerve gas, during the mission."

A section of the top-secret Command History 1970: Annex B.

"...If true, the United States would have been in violation of its own policy against the use of lethal nerve gas, and out of step with international efforts to ban the use of deadly chemical weapons... The charge would be used to discredit the United States' attempt to curb the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction."

Clearly the Pentagon and the US establishment were determined that the two allegations made in the CNN-Time reports should be challenged and discredited to the maximum extent possible. Only time will tell whether any pressures were brought to bear on the world's two great news organisations to retract their allegations and to don sackcloth and ashes to demonstrate their repentance. At a 90-minute press conference in the Pentagon that a contrite CNN carried in full, Cohen declared that the exhaustive investigation completed on his instructions revealed "no evidence to support CNN/Time assertions." He said:

"With respect to defectors, no document, military order, after action report, briefing paper or official military history mentions pursuit of US defectors as Tailwind's mission. There is no hint, nod, wink, or subliminal reference to such a mission."

"On the use of nerve gas, we found no evidence that sarin nerve gas was used or that it was ever transported to Vietnam, Laos, or Thailand. Sarin was stored in Okinawa at the time and remained there until 1971."

"The Air Force pilots who provided air cover to Tailwind said they dropped tear gas, not nerve gas... The Marine Corps pilots who rescued Tailwind soldiers from Laos deny that sarin was used."

Cohen focused attention exclusively on the two issues on which he was interested in rebutting CNN and Time. He did not offer any concrete information on the actual Tailwind mission. He did not provide any details of the acts perpetrated by the US team in its four-day murderous intrusion into the territory of a neutral country, nor did he refute the description of some of those acts given by CNN and Time. He prudently chose to remain silent on such matters because they had been mentioned in a top-secret official history of the expedition. The reporters covering his press conference did not press him on these issues. Cohen's aim was to close the lid on Operation Tailwind and the US media followed his lead.

The principal and authoritative source for this analysis is the top-secret "Command History 1970: Annex B" prepared under instructions from the Commander-in-Chief, US Forces, Pacific (CINCPAC). Annex B tersely chronicles the operations of an elite formation of commandos that the Pentagon euphemistically called the "Studies and Observations Group" (SOG). The Chief of the

staff, subject to presidential approval, its recommendations were of decisive importance.

The key role that Kissinger played and his high evaluation of his own thoroughness in exploring all aspects of any proposed action are brought out in a comment that he made about commando raids by US troops: "A President, and even more so his National Security Adviser, must take nothing on faith; they must question every assumption, every presumption and probe every alleged fact." That comment, made by Kissinger with regard to another commando operation a few weeks after Tailwind, indicates that Tailwind too must have received his close scrutiny before it was approved by the WSAG.

The timing of Tailwind is significant as it brings out Kissinger's carrot-and-stick strategy in his approach towards the North Vietnamese regime. (The strategy prolonged the war for three years, brought death and disability to thousands of US soldiers and Vietnamese, ravaged three countries of Indochina, drained the US treasury of billions of dollars and, as a final irony, earned

among the Montagnards. CNN investigators stated that "as many as 60 of the Montagnards died in Operation Tailwind, but all 16 Americans got out alive." The Montagnards might have volunteered for, or might have been assigned, hazardous tasks. Cohen said proudly that all the US members of the Tailwind team had received injuries; it is reasonable to assume that several Montagnards who escaped death might have sustained injuries. The Montagnards were sought after, used and sacrificed; afterwards they were erased from Washington's memory.

What did the Tailwind commandos accomplish? "The documents that they captured provided an intelligence bonanza," Cohen claimed. In the absence of any evidence of what exactly the bonanza was, Cohen's statement appears to be a figment of his imagination. Annex B of the top-secret official history makes no reference whatever to any documents "captured" by the US raiders in the obscure Laotian village that they ravaged. In the preface to Annex B, its compiler and "SOG Historian" Lt. Commander Mark H. Waggoner says that the document records "significant accomplishments" of the operations conducted by the SOG. The accomplishments mentioned in Annex B are the following: destruction of a single 120mm mortar, 40 dismantled bicycles, several latrines and hootches, miscellaneous ammunition of no significant volume, and 8,000 kg of rice. Annex B makes no mention of documents containing valuable intelligence information triumphantly captured and brought back by the SOG. Cohen's "bonanza" reminds one of the 1970 cartoon by Bill Mauldin, a perceptive chronicler of the tribulations of the US soldier, that lampooned the US forays into Laos and Cambodia. Neither the cartoonist nor even the US Congress had any knowledge of Tailwind.

The cartoon reflected the disenchantment among growing segments of the US public and the Congress with their country's protracted and costly military adventure in Vietnam. They were baffled and angered over the continuing sacrifice of American lives despite Nixon's announced course of "Vietnamisation" and the progressive reduction of US troops in Vietnam.

The hypothesis is that Operation Tailwind had very much less to do with any significant military objectives than with Henry Kissinger's schedule for holding secret talks with the North Vietnamese. He did not expect that the first or several subsequent rounds of talks could evoke the kind of concessions that he desired from the North Vietnamese. He was driven by his "concept" that commando raids and bombings, along with continued economic pressures, would progressively bring about a softening of Hanoi's negotiating posture. He and Nixon were "made for each other" and they convinced themselves that such a course was a realistic effort "to achieve an honourable exit from the war". The human cost of the actions they initiated hardly figured in their calculations. It is not surprising that Kissinger remained unconcerned over the fate of the Montagnards who had been sent into Laos as part of the Tailwind team.

Conserving his energies for bold conceptualisation and for efforts to influence the President, Kissinger did not worry even about death of or injury to the US soldiers who were dropped into hostile territory during raids such as Tailwind. After each raid, an officer of the Pentagon briefed the National Security Adviser. No information is available on the briefing after Tailwind. But there is Kissinger's own account of a briefing after the next raid on a North Vietnamese installation 32 km from Hanoi, ordered after Kissinger's fruitless second meeting with the North Vietnamese emissary. Kissinger provides a sample of what he himself characterised as his "warped sense of humour".

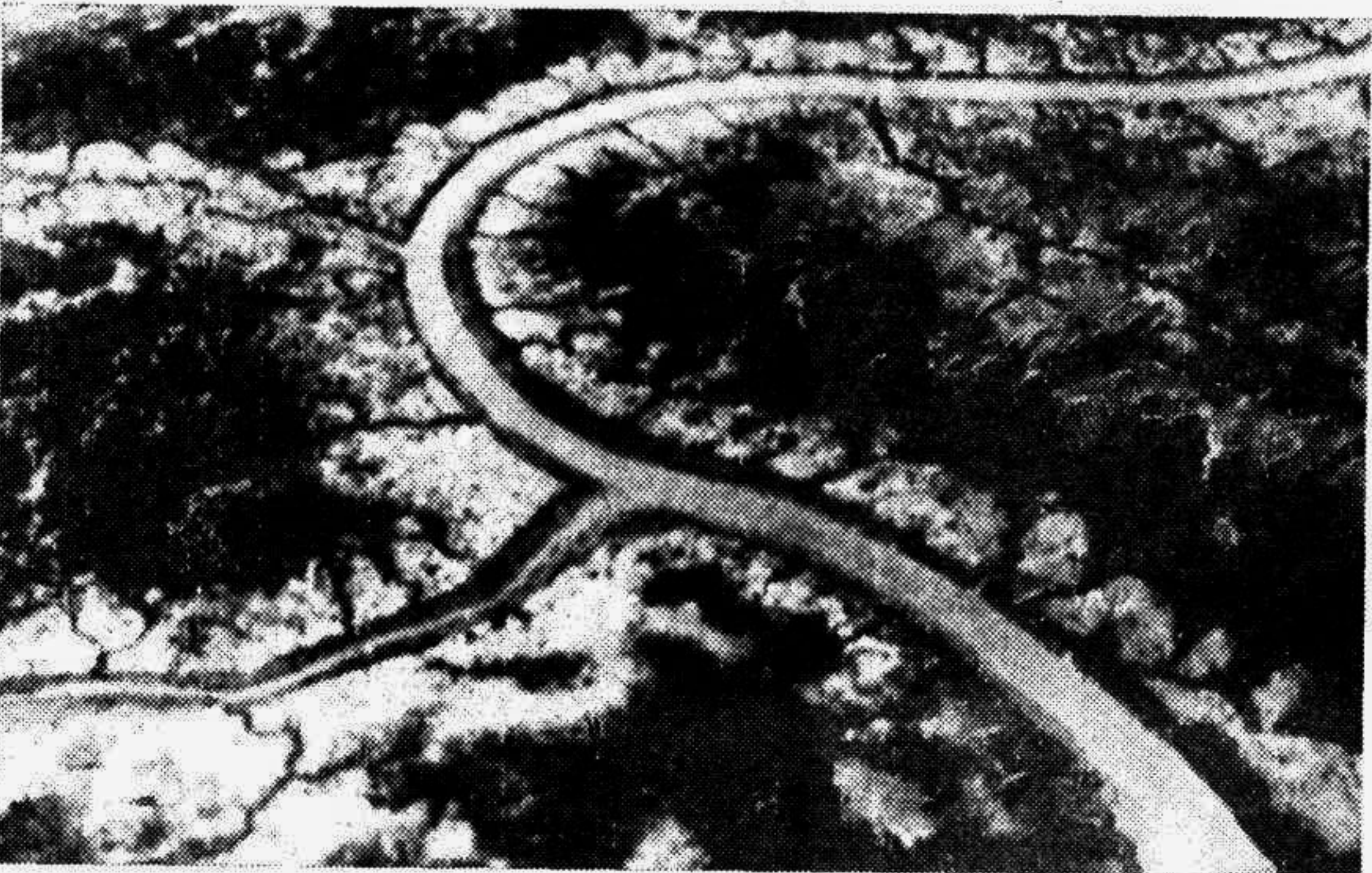
When the briefing officer reported that the operation had been a complete failure, the National Security Adviser did not make anxious enquiries about the fate of the US commandos. Kissinger says: "I told him (the Pentagon official) not to apologise, that no doubt they had brought back a baby water buffalo, and the North Vietnamese were going crazy trying to figure out why we had mounted a big operation for that purpose." So exalted was Kissinger's position as the chief policy formulator that the Pentagon urgently called for full information on the baby water buffalo and was dismayed when the troops in the field reported that they "knew nothing about any kidnapped baby water buffalo". What happened subsequently is thus recounted by Kissinger: "The Pentagon refused to believe I had made my comment lightly. Back went a cable (to Vietnam) asking to make sure by checking the helicopter for buffalo dung."

Perhaps after the briefing by the Pentagon official, the National Security Adviser busied himself with conceptualising the next commando raid and the next bombing mission that he should push.

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The village raid lasted no more than 10 minutes. The body count, according to Captain Eugene McCurley, the officer in charge, was "upwards of 100". Sergeant Mike Hagen says, "The majority of the people were not combat personnel. The few infantry people they had we overran immediately. We basically destroyed everything there."

The next issue relates to casualties suffered by the Tailwind team. Cohen mentioned that all 16 US members of the team had returned safely to the base in South Vietnam and cited as conclusive proof that no lethal gas had been used during the operation. He made no reference to the 140 Montagnards in the team. "Sixteen Americans fought steadily for four days... All got out alive," said Cohen. "I think all Americans should know that the 16 men who conducted the mission were heroes," he added. What happened to the Montagnards? According to Annex B, while four C-53 helicopters were used for the initial airlift to Laos, only three C-53s were needed to extract the Tailwind team for the return journey to South Vietnam, indicating that there must have been some casualties



A mangrove forest that was sprayed with 'herbicides' in '65

SOG, Col. John F Sadler of the US Army, described the highly "sensitive" nature of the information in Annex B thus:

This document contains information affecting the security of the United States within the meaning of the Espionage Laws, Title 18, US Code Sections 793 and 794.... The information presented in this document is to be treated with the utmost discretion. Under no circumstances shall possession thereof be transferred or the information contained therein be imparted to personnel other than those whose duties specifically require knowledge thereof. Information provided to any individual will be the minimum required in the performance of his duties.

Tailwind was a SOG operation and was described in Annex B. Photocopies of selected pages of Annex B are shown on Pages 64 and 65. Certain descriptive passages from the CNN-Time reports that had not been refuted or contradicted by Cohen or, to the best of my knowledge, by any other Pentagon official will supplement the military-style information given in Annex B. For instance, Cohen did not refute the following description of what the SOG was and the functions that it was trained and expected to perform:

Based in Kontum, South Vietnam, the men involved in Operation Tailwind were known as a SOG team... Officially SOG units did not exist, but they were America's fiercest warriors, conducting classified "black operations" with unconventional weapons and unusual targets. They did little studying and a lot of fighting. According to SOG veterans, they had no rules of engagement; anything was permissible as long as it was deniable.

According to Annex B, the decision to launch Operation Tailwind was made on September 4, 1970 and the venture was to be "in support of a larger CAS/CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) operation near Chavane, Laos." No indication was given on what the CIA mission was. Cohen revealed that Tailwind was designed to divert the attention of the enemy from "the forces that were marshalled in that region" for a CIA operation codenamed Gauntlet. Cohen did not say why the CIA had marshalled forces for "a larger operation" than Tailwind in an obscure corner of neutral Laos. The reporters attending his press conference did not pose any questions on whether the CIA's Operation Gauntlet was concerned, among other things, with hunting down US defectors or looking for US prisoners of war.

ONE important US policy-maker of the time, who is still around in Washington and who would have had a major say in the decision to unleash Tailwind, is Henry Kissinger, National Security Adviser to President Richard Nixon. Kissinger chaired a subcommittee of the National Security Council which had been set up shortly after Nixon entered the White House. Kissinger named the subcommittee as the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG). The WSAG was concerned with contingency plan-

Kissinger the Nobel Prize for Peace. From July 1970 Kissinger had tried to arrange a secret meeting in Paris with North Vietnam's key intermediary, Le Duc Tho. Eventually Hanoi agreed to hold such a meeting on the outskirts of Paris on September 7, 1970, but indicated that its emissary would be Xuan Thuy instead of Le Duc Tho. The WSAG's decision that Tailwind should be launched was conveyed to the US military commander in Saigon on September 4, 1970.

To this day Kissinger remains dazzled by what he regards as the brilliance of his own tactical concept: seek a meeting in Paris with the enemy to talk peace and simultaneously organise a below-the-belt blow at the enemy in Laos so that it is more reasonable in the next round of talks. Tailwind would be a reminder to Hanoi of the discomfort that Washington would continue to mete out to it if it persisted in "unreasonableness". At the secret meeting in Paris on September 7, Kissinger could only win acceptance from Hanoi's emissary for a second meeting on September 27. Operation Tailwind began on September 11 and lasted for four days.

The September 27 meeting produced no results. It was followed by a speech by President Nixon in which he offered to end all bombing operations in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, and to participate in an international conference to bring about an end to all military operations by both sides, mutual withdrawal of forces, and an opportunity for the South Vietnamese people to determine their own future. The rejection of the proposal by Hanoi led Kissinger's WSAG to authorise two days of B-52 bombing of "North Vietnamese installations" and a Tailwind-type commando raid on a facility barely 32 km from Hanoi that was believed to hold 60 US prisoners of war.

On September 11, 1970, four large Marine Corps transport helicopters took off from a US military base in the South Vietnamese town of Kontum. They carried 16 US soldiers of the SOG and about 105 members of the Montagnard tribal community from Vietnam's mountainous areas, who had been hired and trained by US military instructors. The raiders were to be dropped at a pre-designated location about 100 km away in Laos. The transport helicopters were escorted by 12 Cobra helicopter gunships and two back-up helicopters. The members of the assault force were equipped with gas masks, which indicates that the use of some sort of gas during the raid was anticipated.

The helicopters encountered some small-arms fire when they dropped the Tailwind team in the chosen Laotian location. This indicates that the arrival of the commandos had been noticed by hostile elements on the ground and that the latter had neither heavy anti-aircraft guns nor any air support. Their number too must have been small because they had appar-

## Into the Clinton Conundrum

by Mir A Zaman

The only source of solace for Clinton was the opinion polls. Even after the House voted for impeachment, the public rating of his presidency was on the up. Most Americans believe that Clinton did try to cover up his 'inappropriate affair' with Lewinsky, maybe even lied under oath, but they don't think his offence constitutes 'high crime and misdemeanours' as defined by their founding fathers as the basis of impeachment.

THE Christmas vacation must have been a reprieve for US President Bill Clinton. The year 1998 was, to say the least, quite unpleasant for him. When the American force, along with their British ally, was carrying out air-strikes on Baghdad, at the same time, at the Capitol Hill, the House of Representatives were debating on the four articles of impeachment to remove the president from the White House. Cynics, like the deputy in the Russian Duma who implored White House intern Monica Lewinsky to pour some sense into her paramour, tried to trace a link between the two events and only stopped short of saying that the Baghdad blitz was just his scheme to divert public attention from what the Republicans termed the Clinton Crisis.

However, the two events bore similar results — embarrassment for Clinton. While the House voted in favour of impeachment on two counts — perjury and obstruction of justice, Operation Desert Fox led to a schism among the members of the United Nations Security Council. Russia, shadow of the once powerful Soviet Union, made no attempt to hide their disapproval of the Anglo-American air assault on the Gulf nation, recalling its envoys from the two countries.

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On the other hand, the Republicans, who hold majority both at the Congress and the Senate, have been held responsible for inflating Clinton's infidelity to his wife and family into a constitutional crisis. Their popularity plunged to a record low and hovered above 14 per cent while Clinton's was near the 70-mark. The Republicans, who voted mainly along the party line on the two Articles of impeachment, surely won't have the calm and peace of mind during the vacation, although they did claim on the floor that they would vote and go home to their families to spend the vacation in the belief that they had done the right thing, American people, however, feel, according to the polls, otherwise.

The Senate is not scheduled to assemble before the first week of the new year, but the Senators, both in Republican and Democrat ranks, have already launched their campaign for and against the impeachment trial. The Republicans, who hold 55-45 edge in the Senate, are insisting on trying Clinton on the perjury and obstruction of justice charges passed along the party lines at the House of Representatives. They know the trial to go ahead although they are not expected to muster the 67 votes needed to remove Clinton from the office.

On the other hand, the Democrats are pushing for a strongly-worded censure to punish Clinton for aberration, perhaps adding a fine and perjury admission. Both sides, however, are in agreement on one issue: like most Americans, they also want a quick end to the whole matter. But it is highly unlikely in a chamber that prides itself on careful, and often lengthy, deliberations.

However, the Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott has proposed a strategy that might speed up the proceedings. Lott proposed on January 30 an early vote that would require two-thirds majority to permit a full airing of evidence in the president's impeachment trial. If it fails, as is widely expected, it will open the door to a censure resolution. The vote would come after three days of presentation — one day each for the House prosecutors and Clinton's defence team, and a third day for questions.

The Trent Lott proposal came across immediately as objection from the lead prosecutor from the House of Representatives, Henry Hyde. The House Judiciary Committee chairman urged the Senate Majority Leader "not to sacrifice substance and duty for speed" and said the Lott's plan "would unwisely short-circuit the process." An early vote could prevent House prosecutors from presenting their full body of evidence and would deprive senators of a yes or no vote on the two articles of impeachment approved by the House.

The Democrats are, obviously, in support of the proposal. In an interview with *The Associated Press* on January 31, Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle, said although he could not predict whether the test vote concept would survive with majority Republicans, most Democrats "are supportive of a process like that."

Meanwhile, Clinton's predecessors Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, and Gerald Ford, a Republi-



Sipping is no hubris

can, proposed an end to the impeachment proceedings with a bi-partisan censure resolution that the president had lied under oath. The linchpin would be language stating that Clinton accepted the findings in the resolution, but his admission that he did not tell the truth could not be used against him in future trial, the former presidents wrote in an op-ed column in *The New York Times*.

"Somehow we must reach a conclusion that most American can embrace and that posterity will approve," they wrote.

However, such a conclusion is highly likely to come easy, especially after a year-long purge rooted in Clinton's affair with Lewinsky that, according to a Democrat, has brought Washington to its knees. Scandal and its after-shocks has taken its toll on Clinton, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Chairman of House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde and speaker-elect Bob Livingston.

Livingston's decision on not to accept the speakership during the last day of debate on the articles of impeachment on December 19, just two days after his admission to extra-marital affairs, took the House unawares.

"I must set the example that I hope President Clinton will follow," urged one sinner to the other.

While the Republicans harped on Livingston's example and called for Clinton's resignation on moral grounds, few politicians savoured its implications.

"No one standing in this House today can



pass a puritanical test of purity that some are demanding our elected leaders take," said House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt in his reaction to Livingston's resignation and remarks. "If we demand mere mortals live up to this standard, we will see our seats of government lay empty."

Gephardt's remarks, applauded by the whole House, in a subtle way, refuted the basis for Republican argument to impeach and remove Clinton from the White House. It actually takes the whole issue back to square one — should a president, elected twice by the people, be ousted simply because of infidelity to his wife and family?

Whether Clinton is a bad husband is something his wife, Hillary, should decide, not the House of Representatives, said one journalist at a BBC-brokered discussion immediately after the House Judiciary Committee decided to make the Starr investigation report public. Hillary Rodham Clinton has so far been supportive of her husband and has repeatedly said that she has forgiven her husband for the aberration. In public gatherings, the Clintons have tried, often successfully, to give an impression that they have got over the Lewinsky disaster. However, a recent report in *The Times of London* suggests they may not have. Hillary's patience may be on the wane. The report on the December 26 issue says that there has been a fight between the Clintons at the White House over the Lewinsky affair. Hillary became hysterical at one stage and landed a few slaps on her husband's face, which left a few marks that heavy make-up failed to veil. Clinton was reported to have cried out, "Keep this bitch away from me." The fight could have gone worse had the secret service personnel intervened. The report has already been on the Internet.

The First Lady has been of great support to Clinton ever since the Lewinsky episode was unveiled. Hillary's determination to hold things together has had a significant impact on American people. They have censured the man Clinton for his aberration but, at the same time, are ready to condone his acts because they feel that if the president's can live with them so can they. *The Times of London* report is unlikely to change people's attitude towards the Clintons. The fight would surely make the Clintons more human to the eyes of the common man and American people would certainly find it much easier to forgive his aberration. Whether the senators share similar sentiments, no-one would know until the Senate seats in a day or two.



Is this the moment that sparked everything?