

Drugs, Corruption, and Justice in Vietnam and Afghanistan: A Cautionary Tale

By Merle L. Pribbenow

On October 27, 2009, *The New York Times* published a dramatic [article](#) about Ahmed Wali Karzai, the brother of the president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai. The article alleged that the president's brother is a major Afghan drug trafficker as well as being a paid asset of the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The byline to the article listed three names, including that of James Risen, the well-known author of [State of War](#), a recent and controversial book about US intelligence operations under the Bush Administration. And like the sensational allegations Risen made in *State of War*, the *Times* [article](#) was based almost entirely on anonymous sources.

While noting that Ahmed Wali Karzai categorically denied any involvement in drug trafficking, and that he also denied being a paid agent of the CIA, the article went on to quote unnamed U.S. "military and political" officials as stating that the Agency's relationship with Karzai had become a source of "anger and frustration among American military officers and other officials of the Obama administration." While admitting that the evidence against Wali Karzai was "largely circumstantial," the article charged that Karzai's alleged involvement in the opium trade meant that Karzai was viewed as a "malevolent force" in Afghanistan (a peculiar and incendiary choice of words). The article also repeated critical comments made by anonymous US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) sources about the US government's failure to take action against Karzai and his alleged narcotics connections.

As a retired CIA officer who served in South Vietnam, the *Times* story struck a very familiar chord with me. Several decades ago, strikingly similar wartime allegations were made against a powerful government official, Lieutenant General Dang Van Quang, who was very close to South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu. Although I retired from the CIA more than a decade ago and have absolutely no personal knowledge, one way or the other, about the accuracy of the charges made against President Karzai's brother, I believe that before the press, the American public, and senior Obama administration officials blindly accept as accurate the charges made in the *Times* article, it might be useful to review the earlier Vietnamese case. Lessons from General Quang's case may be applicable to the allegations being made about President Karzai's brother.

Virulent Rumors

General Dang Van Quang was President Thieu's special assistant for Military and National Security Affairs. He was also Thieu's friend and confidant, and had a relationship with the South Vietnamese president that stretched back to the earliest days of their military careers. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, rumors began to circulate in Saigon to the effect that Quang was one of South Vietnam's leading heroin traffickers; that he was a paid agent of the CIA; and that he was Thieu's "bag-man" for collecting corruption payments. These rumors, many of which were reportedly being spread by President Thieu's political opponents (including followers of Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky), were picked up by the Vietnamese and American press and given wide circulation. In addition to being reported in American [newspapers](#) and on [network television news broadcasts](#), the charges were also featured prominently in a book entitled *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, a widely-read and still frequently referenced publication written by [Alfred W. McCoy](#), now a professor at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

As is often the case with rumors, especially hearsay involving people who, like General Quang, work in the shadowy worlds of national security and intelligence, the allegations soon took on a life of their own. Before long virtually everyone, including most of the American press and even some US embassy officials and DEA officers, began to accept them as true.

The stories did not go unnoticed by the CIA's Saigon Station, which was particularly concerned by these claims because of the Station's close working relationship with General Quang, whom President Thieu had designated as his principal liaison to the CIA. The Station monitored the stories and, as has recently been revealed, at one point prepared and forwarded to Washington a review and assessment of the accuracy of the charges. The existence of this review, heretofore highly classified, came to light earlier this year in a newly-declassified CIA historical study entitled [CIA and the Generals: Covert Support to the Military Government in South Vietnam](#), written by Agency historian Thomas Ahern. This declassified document is now available to the general public on the [electronic FOIA page](#) of the CIA's official website. The brief section of the historical study that discusses the Station's review of the allegations against General Quang reads as follows:

After the January 1973 cease-fire agreement, the traditional role of the Vietnam Station as a US channel of influence and information to the Saigon generals increasingly involved it in issues like corruption, South Vietnam's image in the United States, and the prospects of continued US military aid. Official corruption had long counted as one of Saigon's more intractable problems. Among Station contacts, the most controversial in this respect was Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang, the portly aide to Thieu whom some Americans were inclined to take lightly because of his high-pitched giggle in moments of tension. Sometime in 1974, hoping to resolve the issue of Quang's alleged corruption, the COS [Chief of Station] designated [name deleted] to do an all-source review of Quang's financial probity. [name deleted] could find no smoking gun, and did a report whose thrust was, if not vindication, at worst "not proven." [several lines deleted].

I am familiar with the contents of the Station's review, since I was its author. I believed then and I still believe today that, while General Quang was by no means a saint,

and although I would never contend he was totally innocent of *all* the varied charges of corruption leveled against him, Quang was not involved in narcotics trafficking in any way.

I can certainly understand that some might be suspicious of the conclusions reached by me and by the CIA's Saigon Station. In order to come to an objective assessment of the accuracy of these conclusions, I believe one should take a careful look at what happened to General Quang after he fled South Vietnam when the communists captured that country in 1975.

After the Fall

When Saigon collapsed at the end of April 1975, General Quang fled to the United States with his family. They were initially housed in a camp in Arkansas alongside thousands of other South Vietnamese refugees. Feeling threatened by many of his fellow refugees who believed the rumors about his corruption, and who blamed him for being at least partially responsible for the ruinous defeat, General Quang and his family fled the camp and traveled to Canada to resettle there.

The [Canadian government](#) ordered General Quang deported based on the press stories and rumors about him that had found their way into official government reporting channels. However, again based on the ubiquitous stories and rumors about Quang, neither the [United States](#) nor any other country would accept him (the communist Vietnamese regime did agree to take him but refused to give the Canadian government assurances that Vietnam would not summarily execute Quang if he was forcibly returned). As a result, Quang lived in Canada in a state of legal limbo for more than a decade—no legal residence status, no work permit, and with a standing deportation order against him.

Despite the stories that he was a multi-millionaire from drug trafficking, in Canada General Quang and his family were destitute. They lived in cheap, cramped, run-down apartments and Quang supported himself and his family by working in a succession of menial jobs on the fringes of society, including as a janitor and a bottle-washer. On several occasions, he was fired and forced to relocate after Canadian investigative journalists ran him down and wrote “exposés” for their newspapers, each time revealing where this infamous “narcotics trafficker” was working illegally.

In 1989 Quang was finally allowed to immigrate to the United States. Like many Vietnamese refugees, he settled in southern California. As had been the case in Canada, his financial situation in America was very modest, and in the early 1990s he was supporting his family by working as a baggage handler at the Los Angeles International Airport. Currently, according to a [December 4, 2008 article](#) in the *Sacramento News & Review*, General Quang, who has been in poor health for several years, lives in an assisted-living facility in Sacramento, California.

Quang's poverty and his many trials and tribulations following the fall of Saigon provide the clearest possible evidence that the widespread (and almost universally-accepted) allegations about him being a multi-millionaire drug king-pin were simply false. Both logic and experience indicate that drug lords always squirrel away much of their ill-gotten gains in international bank accounts. If Quang had been, in fact, as rich and corrupt as the Saigon rumor-mill and the American press portrayed him, he surely would have transferred the bulk of his riches out of South Vietnam during the final weeks of that country's existence, when it was clear to everyone that a communist victory was inevitable. A number of other South Vietnamese generals and political leaders who fled, including President Thieu, Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem, and Joint General Staff Commander General Cao Van Vien, were able to live out their long years of exile in the United States in relative comfort, buying homes and living off their "savings" without ever having to work for even a single day to support themselves. While it is notoriously difficult to prove a negative, in this case I believe any objective observer could only conclude that the drug-trafficking charges against General Quang must have been false.

This brings us back to the allegations against the brother of Afghan President Karzai. Like the allegations against General Quang, these charges seem, on the surface at least, to consist of vague rumors unsupported by solid evidence. Like the allegations against General Quang, they are being spread mostly by political opponents of Ahmed Wali Karzai's political mentor (his brother) or by anonymous sources, both Afghan and American. I readily admit that I have no inside information about the truth of the allegations, and for all I know Ahmed Wali Karzai may, in fact, be the scumbag that the article portrays him to be. I understand the need for journalists to get "scoops" and write articles that will get their names on the front page, and I recognize the need for newspapers to make money.

I would, however, respectfully suggest to *The New York Times*, James Risen, and other reporters and media outlets that *responsible* journalists—journalists who are as interested in the truth as they are in personal acclaim—should first make an honest effort to dig out some solid evidence to support the claims of their anonymous sources before they proceed to publish these kinds of stories. I would also suggest that US government officials and the American public should be extremely cautious about accepting any such news stories that are based solely on anonymous sources and vague, unsubstantiated rumors.

It is too late to undo the harm that was done to General Dang Van Quang by such unfounded rumors. But perhaps his example may help us avoid making similar mistakes in the future.

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