

CBS admits being duped over Bush National Guard memos

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The so-called “memo-gate” affair—the use of apparently fabricated documents as part of a CBS News report on President Bush’s National Guard service during the Vietnam War—has been the occasion for much media hand-wringing, as well as harangues from the right wing about alleged liberal bias on the part of CBS and anchorman Dan Rather.

The moralizing of media pundits about a decline in journalistic standards is perhaps the most repulsive aspect of the affair. What standards? The American media is among the most corrupt and subservient institutions in the world.

Night after night, the network news programs pump out lies, most of them supplied verbatim by spokesmen for the US government. The slaughter of the Iraqi people is “liberation.” The torture of prisoners is the result of a “few bad apples.” Rising poverty and insecurity at home are “economic recovery.” An election in which the choice is restricted to two right-wing multimillionaires is “democracy.”

To hang CBS for credulously accepting fabricated memos is like indicting Enron for failing to pay parking tickets. It is the least of the network’s sins. Rather and company may have been fed phony documents, but the basic story is obviously true and hardly disputed. Bush, who today postures as an intransigent wartime leader, sought to escape military service in Vietnam and received privileged access to the National Guard due to the political connections of his wealthy family.

There are nonetheless serious political issues raised by the CBS debacle. Perhaps most striking is the double standard of those condemning CBS, who have not vented a tenth as much outrage—if any—over the far more grievous crimes against the truth committed by the Bush administration.

There were, of course, the flat-out lies about Iraq’s alleged connections to Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein’s possession of WMD stockpiles. There were also forged documents—those that were fabricated to “prove” that Iraq sought to purchase uranium from Niger. Bush cited the forgery-based “evidence” in his 2003 State of the Union speech.

As for CBS, the most remarkable aspect of the “60 Minutes” debacle is the staggering level of incompetence displayed by the network’s leading journalists. If the current version of the story’s origins is accurate, CBS received the memos from former Texas National Guard official Bill Burkett. The

documents detailed concerns by Bush’s former National Guard commander, the late Jerry Killian, that he faced political pressure to “sugarcoat” his performance evaluations of Bush. Killian also complained of Bush’s refusal to show up for a physical exam required for maintaining his status as a pilot.

Burkett himself is a well-known supporter of the Democratic Party in Texas, and an active opponent of Bush personally. In an interview with Dan Rather after the scandal broke, Burkett admitted that he had lied to the network about where he got the National Guard memos. But the network itself neither subjected the memos to a serious forensic examination, nor contacted Burkett’s alleged source, another former National Guard official. Instead, within five days of receiving the documents from Burkett, the network broadcast a lengthy report on “60 Minutes.”

What gave this subject such burning urgency? It is not simply, as the Bush campaign and the Republican National Committee maintain, that CBS was showing political bias in favor of Democratic candidate John Kerry. CBS joined with the other television networks last month in echoing and magnifying the smear campaign against Kerry launched by a group of right-wing Vietnam veterans, the misnamed “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.”

The CBS affair is another demonstration of the degeneration of American political life into a morass of mud slinging and finger pointing, empty of all genuine content. Neither the two big-business parties nor the media are capable of any objective engagement with the real social and political issues that confront the vast majority of working people, because this would require addressing the great unmentionable—the vast growth of social and economic inequality in America. Instead, they resort to scandal mongering and personal attacks.

From the standpoint of the Bush campaign, such diversions are essential, since the incumbent would otherwise have to run for reelection on the basis of his actual record: the security failures before and on 9/11, bloody and illegal wars of aggression, huge tax breaks for the wealthy, unprecedented attacks on democratic rights, the worst record of job creation since Herbert Hoover.

The Bush campaign has a constant need to change the subject. August was occupied by the Swift boat smear

campaign; September is taken up with the phony National Guard memos. As far as the Republican campaign is concerned, that leaves only one more month in which public opinion must be distracted and confused.

The Democratic Party resorts to similar methods, although, as in other respects, what the Republicans do with reckless and brazen abandon, the Democrats do in a halfhearted and cowardly fashion. It is entirely possible that Democratic Party officials were involved in instigating the CBS report. But Democratic “dirty tricks” have been largely focused on opponents on their left—Socialist Equality Party candidates in Illinois and Ohio, the Nader campaign in dozens of states.

One connection has been definitely established: Kerry campaign adviser Joe Lockhart, former press spokesman in the Clinton White House, telephoned Burkett before the “60 Minutes” program aired, after Mary Mapes, the story’s producer, called him and said Burkett wanted to speak with the Kerry campaign. According to both Lockhart and Burkett, the two men discussed Burkett’s concern that Kerry was not responding aggressively enough to the Swift boat smear campaign, not the issue of Bush’s National Guard service.

If there was Democratic involvement in the production of false documents, this only provides a further demonstration of the inability of the Democratic Party to offer any *political* alternative to Bush, Cheney & Co. The Democrats support the “war on terror,” they advocate American military victory in Iraq and the crushing of all Iraqi resistance, they demand financial austerity at home and tax cuts for business. They cannot make a genuine appeal to the masses of working people who increasingly oppose the war and who face deepening economic insecurity, because the Democrats, like the Republicans, uphold the interests of US imperialism and the financial aristocracy that dominates American society.

There is also considerable—and eminently plausible—suspicion that the Bush campaign itself played a role in the doctored memos, as a preemptive strike in an area where Bush seemed vulnerable to attack. Bush’s top campaign adviser, Karl Rove, has a previous record of such methods, fabricating a claim of dirty tricks by political opponents when he was managing a Texas Republican gubernatorial campaign. Back then, he announced he had found a bug in his office planted by the Democrats. The bug was later traced back to Rove himself. (The treasurer of that 1986 campaign, according to the *LA Weekly*, was Bob Perry, the principal financier of this year’s Swift boat slanders.)

Once the network was in possession of the alleged memos, a CBS reporter went to the White House and showed them to Bush communications director Dan Bartlett. This occurred half a day before the “60 Minutes” program aired. Bartlett did not dispute their validity, even arguing that the text of the memos bolstered Bush’s own account of his National Guard duty.

CBS reportedly took this response as confirmation that the memos were genuine. This could well have been a setup, a

deliberate effort by the Bush White House to encourage the network to use forged documents, so that the Republicans could unleash a well-planned counterattack that would discredit Rather and CBS, and shift attention from the message of the “60 Minutes” program to the messenger.

Within a few hours of the broadcast, the first rebuttal of the documents, citing obscure technical details like the fonts available on IBM electric typewriters in the 1960s, was being posted online. The source was not an expert in typography, but Harry W. MacDougald, an Atlanta attorney who is an active participant in the right-wing network of lawyers and political activists mobilized as part of the anti-Clinton campaigns of the 1990s.

MacDougald, who helped draft a legal petition to the Arkansas Supreme Court seeking to disbar Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky affair, is a member of the right-wing Federalist Society and serves on the advisory board of the Southeastern Legal Foundation, a right-wing legal advocacy group. He is also a Republican representative on the Fulton County Board of Registration and Elections.

Since then, top Republican Party officials and their media allies at Fox television and the *Wall Street Journal* have portrayed the memo affair as a crime of constitutional dimensions, more important than the deteriorating US economy or the disasters in Iraq. Ed Gillespie, chairman of the Republican National Committee (and former Enron lobbyist), declared, “I think it is time Senator Kerry came clean about all the contacts between CBS, his campaign and Bill Burkett,” adding there was evidence of complicity in attempted “character assassination” against Bush.

The response of CBS to this political barrage has been further prostration before the Bush administration. On September 23, the network announced that it had chosen former attorney general Richard Thornburgh and retired Associated Press executive Louis Boccardi to investigate the network’s handling of the Bush National Guard story.

The selection of Thornburgh, a former Republican governor of Pennsylvania, is remarkable, since he owes a considerable political debt to the Bush family. Thornburgh was appointed to his cabinet position in 1987 on the recommendation of George H.W. Bush, then vice president, and was retained in the cabinet after the senior Bush won the 1988 presidential election. Now he has been named to head a probe into a news program that charged the younger Bush obtained favorable treatment in the National Guard thanks to the political influence of his father, Thornburgh’s political patron.



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