

CBS cancels broadcast on Bush's use of forged Iraqi WMD documents

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In a development that highlights the cowardice and subservience of the US media—and suggests there is far more to the so-called “memogate” affair at CBS News than has so far been made public—the network confirmed September 27 that it had cancelled a planned “60 Minutes” broadcast exposing the use of forged documents by the Bush administration in the run-up to the Iraq war.

The program focused on documents supplied to the US embassy in Italy that allegedly confirmed Iraqi efforts to acquire large quantities of uranium in the west African country of Niger during the last years of Saddam Hussein's regime. The documents were the basis of the claim by President Bush in his State of the Union speech in January 2003 that Iraq was seeking to purchase uranium in Africa, a charge the White House was later forced to retract.

The chief reporter of the “60 Minutes” segment, Ed Bradley, conducted the first on-camera interviews of two key figures in the affair: Elisabetta Burba, the Italian journalist who first obtained the phony documents, and the man who supplied them, Rocco Martino, a Roman businessman and former Italian intelligence agent with purported ties to other European intelligence agencies.

Burba reportedly said that she was instructed by her editor at *Panorama*, a news magazine owned by Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, to provide the documents to the US embassy in Rome, which forwarded them to the State Department and CIA. Berlusconi has been one of the most vocal international supporters of the Bush administration and the war in Iraq.

The documents were quickly exposed as fraudulent when turned over to the International Atomic Energy Agency for verification. According to the current

Newsweek, which summarizes the suppressed CBS program, “Within two hours, using the Google search engine, IAEA officials in Vienna determined the documents to be a crude forgery.”

An investigation into the forgery subsequently initiated by the FBI has been an exercise in stonewalling. Two years after the event, the FBI has not even interviewed Martino, although he has been publicly identified in the press as the source of the documents and was even flown to New York City by CBS for his interview. A Justice Department official said the Berlusconi government had not yet given its permission for the FBI to interview Martino.

Dr. Jafar Dhia Jafar, Iraq's former chief nuclear scientist, also spoke to Bradley in Rome. According to a summary of the program that CBS supplied to *Salon* web magazine, Jafar testified that Iraq had completely dismantled its nuclear program after the 1991 Gulf War. “So what was going on?” Bradley reportedly asked. “Nothing was going on,” Jafar replied, adding that the Bush administration either was “being fed with the wrong information” or “they were doing this deliberately,” i.e., lying to the American people about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction.

Bradley also interviewed Joseph Wilson, the former US diplomat who was sent to Niger by the CIA in 2002 to investigate the Iraqi purchases and concluded that the report was bogus. When Wilson made his findings public in June 2003, exposing the lies in Bush's State of the Union speech, he became the target of a smear campaign by the White House. White House officials leaked the fact that Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, was a covert CIA operative, blowing her cover and exposing her to possible attack.

This transparent effort at political retaliation backfired, and a Justice Department special prosecutor

has interviewed dozens of Bush administration officials in an investigation into who leaked the information on Plame, which is potentially a criminal offense.

There seems to have been a similar, but more successful, effort to block the CBS report, which was highly critical of the administration's fabrication of the Iraq WMD claims. The White House was acutely aware of the impending report, as "60 Minutes" approached both Bush administration officials and congressional Republicans as part of its preparation of the story. None would agree to be interviewed, including Porter Goss, the Florida Republican congressman who chaired the House Intelligence Committee and has just been sworn in as the new CIA chief.

The "60 Minutes" segment was initially slotted for broadcast in June, but was put off because of unspecified new developments, according to CBS spokeswoman Kelli Edwards. It was finally scheduled for the evening of September 8, but network officials decided to replace it with the report on Bush's National Guard service that included purported memos from Bush's former commander that turned out to be bogus.

That decision itself demonstrates the bankruptcy of what passes for professional journalism in the United States. CBS decided to shelve a report carefully prepared over six months, documenting systematic lying by the US government to justify an illegal war in which tens of thousands of Iraqis and more than a thousand Americans have died, and replaced it with a tabloid-style exposure of Bush's efforts to avoid combat more than three decades ago.

The fact that Bush used his family's political influence to escape military service in Vietnam is insignificant compared to the war crimes Bush has committed and continues to commit as commander-in-chief.

Even after the political furor over the use of apparently fabricated memos in the National Guard story, the CBS reporters and producers who worked on the Niger uranium story believed it would be broadcast. Before the final decision to scrap the Niger story, David Gelber, the lead producer, told *Newsweek* he had been told it would run within a week, adding, "Obviously, everybody at CBS is holding their breath these days. I'm assuming the story is going to run until I'm told differently."

CBS News President Andrew Heyward eventually

declared that broadcasting the "60 Minutes" program on Iraq's nonexistent WMD would be "inappropriate" so close to the election, since it would give the appearance that the network was seeking to influence the vote. This rationale, of course, ignores the fact that not broadcasting the program also influences the vote, and amounts to a whitewash of the Bush administration's lies.

Newsweek, citing CBS sources, said the network feared it would become a "laughingstock" if it broadcast a program criticizing the Bush White House for using forged documents so soon after CBS itself fell victim to forged documents.

This account suggests another explanation for the whole affair: it raises more forcefully the likelihood that the bogus memos on Bush's National Guard service were supplied to CBS by dirty tricks operatives of the Republican Party, for the purpose of embarrassing the network and blowing up its planned exposure of the WMD fabrications.

There has been relatively little comment in the US media over the CBS decision to suppress its report on the origins of the bogus Niger uranium story. The chilling effect of the "memogate" scandal is being felt.

Meanwhile, the chairman of CBS's parent company, Viacom, has publicly disavowed longstanding ties to the Democratic Party and suggested he supports the Bush campaign. Viacom CEO Sumner Redstone told the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, "From a Viacom standpoint, the election of a Republican administration is a better deal. Because the Republican administration has stood for many things we believe in, deregulation and so on . . . from a Viacom standpoint, we believe the election of a Republican administration is better for our company."



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