

The inglorious exit of CBS anchorman Dan Rather

Patrick Martin
29 November 2004

Longtime CBS newsman Dan Rather abruptly announced last week that he will end his tenure as anchorman of the CBS Evening News on March 9, the 24th anniversary of his debut as the network's principal news reader. The 73-year-old journalist had reportedly been planning to complete 25 years as an anchorman before stepping down, working until March 2006, and the network has taken few measures to prepare a successor.

Rather's abrupt departure is the latest in a long line of actions taken by media conglomerates in recent years bowing to objections from the government or from corporate, military or intelligence interests to any serious investigation of the practices of the American ruling elite.

CBS officials admitted, in unattributed comments to the press, that the timing of the decision was determined by the network's internal investigation into a "60 Minutes" broadcast, narrated by Rather, which used apparently falsified documents to substantiate the well-founded charge that George W. Bush received special treatment while serving in the Air National Guard during the Vietnam War era. Former attorney general Richard Thornburgh and former Associated Press chief Louis Boccardi are to deliver the report early next year, and the result is expected to be the firing or forced resignation of many of those responsible for the program.

The September 8 broadcast was quickly undermined by reports circulated on the Internet by right-wing activists linked to the Bush campaign, who pointed to obvious defects in the documents, including their typography, showing that they could not have been typewritten in the early 1970s, but were produced on a personal computer using Microsoft word processing. Rather was ultimately compelled to disavow the program in a statement he read during an evening news broadcast.

The debacle of the "60 Minutes" broadcast was widely hailed in right-wing circles as a fatal blow to the supposed left-wing bias of CBS, long demonized as the most liberal of the major television networks, with Rather as demon-in-chief. His departure—or ouster—was similarly celebrated as the demise of a diehard opponent of the Bush administration and supporter of the Democratic Party.

In truth, however, both the liberalism and intransigence of Rather and CBS have been vastly overrated. Only from the warped standpoint of the US ultra-right—which considered even the conservative "New Democrat" Bill Clinton a crypto-communist—could such leading lights of the American corporate media be considered figures of the left.

Rather began his career as a local television reporter in Texas, and first came to national attention at the time of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas, in November 1963. He became a national affairs reporter for CBS, eventually assigned to cover the Nixon White House, where he gained a reputation as an effective and adversarial questioner at Nixon press conferences (a reputation which was deserved, at least by comparison to the timid and obsequious performance of the current White House press corps).

The high point of conflict between the Nixon White House and the press came in 1971, when the *New York Times* published the Pentagon Papers, an internal chronicle of US intervention in Vietnam, and CBS broadcast "The Selling of the Pentagon," a documentary so critical of US war propaganda that several southern Democrats called for a congressional investigation of the network for allegedly undermining the military.

Perhaps the greatest sin of CBS in the eyes of the military establishment was anchorman Walter Cronkite's conversion to an antiwar stance. In the wake of the 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam, Cronkite publicly declared the war not worth the sacrifice in American lives. (In retirement, the former CBS anchorman has maintained his moderate liberalism, which now appears positively radical as the spectrum of official US politics swings further and further to the right. Cronkite has denounced the war in Iraq and said that the Bush administration deliberately misled the American people about supposed connections between Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 terrorist attacks.)

Rather himself was never identified with any criticism of specific US government policies, despite his hard-edged questioning of Nixon about Watergate and other scandals. On the contrary, he exuded a conventional patriotism and anticommunism, which found a particularly noxious expression when he dressed up in the garb of the Islamic fundamentalist Mujahedin to narrate an admiring profile of the guerrilla forces fighting in Afghanistan after the 1979 Soviet invasion.

This was the US-backed force, organized, financed and armed by the CIA, which ultimately gave rise to Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization. The CBS correspondent earned the derisive sobriquet "Gunga Dan" for his self-promoting stunt. It was his last major reporting venture before he replaced Cronkite in the anchorman's chair in March 1981.

This elevation coincided with a shift to the right in US politics, with the installation of Ronald Reagan in the White House and an

accelerated anti-Soviet military buildup, combined with a policy of confrontation abroad and attacks on the working class and the labor movement at home. In that context, CBS suddenly and unexpectedly came under right-wing attack.

The network broadcast a documentary in January 1982, “The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception,” charging that General William Westmoreland, the commander of US forces in Vietnam from 1965 to 1968, had concealed and distorted intelligence estimates of the size of the guerrilla forces fighting the US troops in Vietnam. The program sought to shift some of the blame for the Tet debacle from the Johnson administration to the military brass.

Westmoreland filed a libel suit against CBS, which, unlike previous efforts at legal retaliation by public figures criticized by network television, attracted widespread political and media support. Although the suit was ultimately settled out of court in 1985, CBS issued a statement that amounted to an apology and partial retraction. Even more significantly, the network found itself undermined financially and vulnerable to a series of attempted takeovers—beginning with a bid by Ted Turner—that led to its sale in 1987 to Tisch Corporation. Until then, CBS had prided itself on being the only network that was not a component of a much larger corporate entity exercising final authority, as General Electric exerts over NBC, and Capital Cities and later Walt Disney exerts over ABC.

The Westmoreland affair was a turning point in the trajectory of the US media, reflecting an emerging consensus within top corporate and political circles in the aftermath of the US defeat in Vietnam that coverage and commentary on the social contradictions of American society, and critical exposures of US foreign policy, had to be prevented. The media was to be disciplined to galvanize public opinion behind the foreign policy objectives of American capitalism, especially its military interventions.

Rather was, to his credit, somewhat slower to adapt to this new consensus than many other figures in the corporate-controlled media. While the media generally covered up the significance of the Iran-contra affair of 1986-87—involving constitutional violations far greater even than Watergate—Rather appeared genuinely outraged at the undermining of traditional democratic norms and procedures, an attitude he displayed in an interview with then-vice president George H.W. Bush in 1988, which ended in a near shouting match.

The increasingly censored and distorted reporting in the mass media was especially blatant in relation to US military operations, beginning with Grenada in 1983, when the Reagan administration invaded to overthrow a left-wing nationalist regime that had allied itself with Cuba. There was virtually no media criticism of the transparently bogus pretext given for the invasion: saving allegedly endangered US medical students. (When Hurricane Ivan flattened the island this summer—posing a far greater danger to the lives and health of US students at the medical college—both the US government and the media yawned and looked the other way.)

Campaigns of media demonization against targets of US military action became standard practice. Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, Manuel Noriega of Panama, Saddam Hussein, Somali warlord Mohammed Aideed, Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic,

Hussein again: each was portrayed as a monster in human form, the new Hitler, the worst terrorist in the world, etc. Again, Rather did not buy in fully to the media’s assigned role of brainwashing the American people to hate the enemy *du jour*. His interview with Saddam Hussein just before the March 2003 US invasion of Iraq was treated as something approaching an act of treason by right-wing press outlets like Fox and the *New York Post*.

CBS was also targeted by the Bush administration and the military for helping expose the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib last April. CBS producer Mary Mapes and *New Yorker* magazine writer Seymour Hersh played key roles in bringing to light the graphic photos of tortured prisoners, first made public on the CBS program “60 Minutes II.”

Mapes was also the producer of last September’s “60 Minutes” program examining Bush’s National Guard service. It is quite plausible that she was the victim of an effort to plant bogus evidence that would backfire on Mapes herself, Rather, and the network as a whole. But it takes two to be scammed, and the credulousness of Mapes and Rather only demonstrates the inability of the corporate-controlled media to conduct a serious and independent investigation of the corporate and political establishment of which they are part.

CBS’s response to a barrage of political attacks following the September 8 segment on Bush’s National Guard service was to announce on September 27 that it was canceling a “60 Minutes” segment, slated to be broadcast before the November 2 election, detailing the Bush administration’s use of forged documents to make its case for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to the March 2003 invasion. The program, which had been ready to run for months, dealt with the administration’s claims—later withdrawn—that Iraq had sought to purchase uranium from Niger.

One important factor in the decay of the “fourth estate”—as the American press once titled itself—which contributes to its complete subservience to official government and corporate propaganda is the enormous inflation in salaries for network newscasters, who have become multimillionaire celebrities in their own right.

The principal occupation of Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw or Peter Jennings—writing and then narrating brief news stories—would not seem, from the standpoint of its social utility, to have 100 times the value of the work of a nurse, a garage mechanic or a computer programmer. Yet the salaries of the top news readers for CBS, NBC, ABC and Fox are well above \$5 million annually.

Any journalist for the major newspapers or television networks who dares to challenge the corporate and political hierarchy is jeopardizing not only his job, but his future prospects of rising into the seven-figure bracket where media “personalities” rub shoulders with the corporate and political elite. Self-censorship of a careerist kind is a more potent factor than any direct orders from the top dictating what should and should not be the subject of media inquiry.



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