CBS purges producer, executives for anti-Bush broadcast

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12 January 2005

The CBS firing of producer Mary Mapes and the forced resignation of three network executives is a further stage in the process of intimidating and disciplining the mass media to ensure that only government-approved propaganda is broadcast to the American public. The four were discharged within hours of an independent review committee issuing its report on the "60 Minutes" broadcast last September that alleged George W. Bush received favorable treatment with the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam War, thanks to his high-level political connections.

The two-man committee, consisting of Richard Thornburgh, attorney general in the first Bush administration, and Louis Bocciardi, former president of the Associated Press, documented multiple flaws in methodology and research in the preparation of the September 8 program. The lengthy report casts Mapes as the scapegoat: her actions are presented in the worst possible light—as willful distortion or even fabrication, together with lying to her supervisors and fellow journalists.

The three executives above her, Senior Vice President Betsy West, Josh Howard, executive producer of "60 Minutes Wednesday," and his deputy, Mary Murphy, are criticized primarily for failure to properly supervise. CBS anchorman Dan Rather, who was the on-camera reporter for the story, is also criticized, more for his subsequent strident defense of the program than for his actions beforehand. Rather announced in November that he would retire in March 2005, and CBS President Leslie Moonves said, in a statement issued in response to the report, that this was sufficient sanction for Rather.

This apportionment of the blame also served to let CBS News President Andrew Heyward off the hook: according to CBS, he gave proper instructions to West and Howard, which they failed to carry out. Moonves defended Heyward as the right man for his position, even though he viewed the "60 Minutes" segment beforehand and approved its broadcast.

Mapes said in a statement that she was "shocked by the vitriolic scapegoating in Les Moonves's statement" and "concerned that his actions are motivated by corporate and political considerations—ratings rather than journalism." She said that she kept her supervisors informed at every stage of the process of bringing the story to broadcast.

"Contrary to the conclusions of the panel, I vetted all aspects of the story with my editors," she wrote. "In fact, as I have always done with my editors, I told them everything... If there was a journalistic crime committed here, it was not by me."

There are strong indications that Rather and Mapes fell into a trap laid by right-wing political operatives who supplied Mapes with fraudulent documents, in the expectation they would be used and then be exposed as fakes, thereby discrediting the network and politically neutralizing the charge that Bush used his family connections to avoid service in Vietnam, and then failed to properly fulfill his Air National Guard obligations. With or without the allegedly forged documents used in the "60 Minutes" segment (the review committee report does not take a position on the authenticity of the documents), there is ample evidence to back up such charges.

In any event, the scandal that erupted in the aftermath of the September program on Bush's Vietnam-era service was sufficient to cow CBS into canceling a "60 Minutes" documentary it was planning to run prior to the November election on the Bush administration's use of forged documents to promote its pre-war claim that Iraq had sought to purchase uranium from Niger.

The entire episode demonstrates remarkable naiveté and political unseriousness on the part of the two liberal journalists. But there is a far more important issue: CBS has dismissed four people, all with long resumes, because of a single episode of poor judgment or recklessness. Mapes was considered the most talented and aggressive producer in the news division, the journalist who first brought to light the photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib prison, but that credential did not save her job (although it increases the likelihood that she was targeted by the right wing for retaliation).

Yet no such treatment has been meted out to those within the Bush administration who are guilty of far worse acts of reckless disregard for the truth or outright fabrication. Not a single government official has been fired or forced to resign in disgrace over the lies about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the false claims about connections between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, and the ever-shifting and contradictory explanations of what the Bush administration was doing in the months leading up to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

On the contrary, the chief liars have been promoted. Condoleezza Rice, who played a leading role in trying to panic the American people with the prospect of Saddam Hussein supplying a nuclear weapon to terrorists for use against the United States, has been nominated for secretary of state.

Her deputy, Stephen Hadley, admitted to being responsible for inserting false claims about Iraqi efforts to purchase uranium in

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Africa into Bush's 2003 State of the Union speech. He is being promoted to replace Rice as national security adviser.

No one has been fired at the CIA for the bogus intelligence reports about Iraq. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, the most strident advocate of war with Iraq, who claimed the Iraqi people would welcome US troops by strewing flowers in their path—"like Paris in 1944"—will remain in his job in Bush's second term. So will his boss, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, whose lies about Iraq, weapons of mass destruction, Abu Ghraib and the progress of the US occupation regime would require an entire book to document.

Then, of course, there are the liars-in-chief, President Bush and Vice President Cheney. The White House was so concerned about the damage to their credibility—and potential for perjury charges—that it insisted that the two testify before the 9/11 commission in secret, without a transcript or other record, and without being sworn to tell the truth. Moreover, it insisted that they testify together at the same hearing, so they could keep their stories straight.

White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan said, in response to the CBS actions, "We felt all along that it was important for CBS to get to the bottom of this. CBS has taken steps to hold people accountable, and we appreciate those steps."

No one in the cowed and venal White House press corps asked him why heads have rolled at the television network for a story that, whatever its defects, did nothing more than embarrass Bush, but no heads have rolled in Washington for lies that have led to the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis and nearly 1,400 American soldiers.

Then there is the systematic deception carried out by the mass media as a whole in connection with the war. If the measures taken by CBS over the "60 Minutes" failure were applied to the American media's role in selling the war in Iraq, hundreds of journalists and executives would be summarily fired at the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, ABC, NBC, CBS and PBS, not to mention all those who organize and dispense the disinformation spewed out by the right-wing cesspool at Fox.

But Judith Miller, chief peddler of CIA fabrications about Iraq buying aluminum tubes to develop nuclear weapons, still works at the *Times*. Other brazen war propagandists are still writing their columns: Thomas Friedman at the *Times*, Jim Hoagland at the *Post*.

There are, in fact, close parallels between flaws in the "60 Minutes" broadcast, as noted in the Thornburgh-Bocciardi report, and the conduct of the Bush administration in its propaganda campaign to mobilize public opinion behind the decision to go to war with Iraq.

Mapes is taken to task for her failure to authenticate documents about Bush's service record. The White House claim that Iraq was seeking to purchase uranium in Africa was based on documents supplied to the CIA through Italian intelligence that were later determined to be fabricated.

CBS is criticized for failing to scrutinize the political bias of the informant, retired Lt. Col. Bill Beckett, who supplied the alleged Bush documents. The Bush administration based its claim that Iraq had mobile biological weapons laboratories on the testimony of a single Iraqi informant, later revealed to be the brother of a leading member of the Iraqi National Congress, the exile organization headed by Ahmed Chalabi that engaged in multiple fabrications to help facilitate the US invasion.

Rather was criticized for refusing to consider criticism of the "60 Minutes" program for nearly two weeks after the broadcast. The Bush administration has never responded to any of the exposures of its myriad lies about Iraq, except to pile up more lies, without any attempt to make the new lies compatible with the old. Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld & Co. live by the maxim of Josef Goebbels, Hitler's propagandist: "If you tell the same lie enough times, people will believe it; and the bigger the lie, the better."

The White House blocked any investigation into its conduct before and during the September 11 attacks for nearly two years. It stalled an investigation into the false intelligence reports used to justify the Iraq war for so long that the presidential commission eventually appointed—packed with right-wing supporters of the war—is not scheduled to deliver its report until the spring of 2005, more than two years after the invasion of Iraq.

The purging of CBS News has ominous implications for the future. It will have a chilling effect on what little remains of independent reporting and critical commentary in the American mass media. One indication is the sole concrete action taken by the network, in addition to the firings: the creation of a new position to oversee controversial programming. This new post of "senior vice president of standards and special projects" should have been called, in accordance with truth-in-packaging rules, "chief of pro-government censorship and internal witch-hunting."

According to the statement issued by CBS President Moonves, "The Standards Executive will be identified throughout CBS News as someone with whom employees can communicate on a confidential basis, without fear of retaliation, if they have concerns that a planned segment may not meet CBS News standards of accuracy and fairness."

In other words, CBS journalists who work on projects that might result in criticism or exposure of the Bush administration and the US government will be the targets of anonymous informants, whether Bush political sympathizers or careerists looking to get ahead by ratting on their fellow employees.

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