Former CBS anchor Dan Rather: big corporations, government interfering in news

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In an interview on the Larry King Show, broadcast by CNN September 20, former CBS News anchorman Dan Rather denounced what he called "the level of big corporate and big government interference and intimidation in news."

Rather was interviewed on the evening talk show after his attorneys filed a $70 million lawsuit against CBS, its corporate parent Viacom and several top executives for the two companies, charging them with breach of contract and destroying the newsman's reputation in forcing him out of CBS News in 2005.

The suit charges that CBS and Viacom executives were responding to political pressure from right-wing activists and the Bush administration after a CBS news program, narrated by Rather, alleged that Bush received a cushy stateside position in the Air National Guard during the Vietnam War, with no risk of combat, because of his family's wealth and political connections.

Rather says he was told of his own ouster as CBS News anchor the day after the 2004 election that returned Bush to the White House. He eventually left his position in May 2005, but did not receive the slot on the "60 Minutes" program he had been promised. He eventually left CBS after 44 years and works for the HD-NET cable network.

On the interview program, Rather told King that he filed the lawsuit, nearly three years after the controversy over the Bush-Air National Guard story and two years after leaving CBS, because he learned later of significant corporate skullduggery in his firing, particular the personal role of Sumner Redstone, the billionaire owner of Viacom.

Rather said that Redstone "was described as being enraged that a news division—this story had cost Viacom and CBS in Washington. And he wanted Dan Rather and everybody connected with it out. So that's an example of the kind of thing that a year ago that I didn't know."

Asked who had caved in to the Bush administration, Rather replied, "The ownership and management. And, you know, what they did was they sacrificed support for independent journalism for corporate financial gain."

Rather defended the basic accuracy of the CBS program on Bush's privileged treatment in the Air National Guard, pointing out that the right-wing furor against the program was focused on the allegedly fraudulent character of documents that the CBS report itself had admitted were copies rather than originals. "The facts of the story, the truth of the story stands up to this day," he maintained.

The former CBS news anchorman explained that the Bush story was not the first instance of overt corporate-level interference in the conduct of CBS news operations. He saw it six months earlier, when the same top officials tried to delay or prevent a broadcast on "60 Minutes II" by the same team of journalists—producer Mary Mapes and Rather as reporter/narrator—on torture of Iraqi prisoners at the US military prison at Abu Ghraib.

In response to a question from King, Rather repeated his support for internationally known reporter Peter Arnett, vilified by the US military and the ultra-right and ultimately fired by CNN for a 1998 report on US use of nerve gas during the Vietnam War (Operation Tailwind).

Rather dismissed the "independent" investigation commissioned by CBS into the Bush-Air National Guard broadcast, pointing out that those involved were securities lawyers rather than journalists, and that the co-chairman, former Pennsylvania Governor Dick

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Thornburgh, had been US attorney general in the administration of Bush's father. This occasioned the following exchange about the CBS investigation:

RATHER: This was, in many ways, a fraud. It was a setup. It was designed...

KING: A fraud?

RATHER: Yes. It was designed to achieve a certain result so that the corporation would be exonerated.

KING: Are you saying Dick Thornburgh, former governor of Pennsylvania, former—participated in a fraud?

RATHER: That's what the record shows.

Rather then reiterated his central theme of the danger of corporate-government collaboration. "You can't have freedom of the press if you're going to have large, big corporations and big government, intruding and intimidating in newsrooms," he said. "The chilling effect on investigative reporting is going to be something we don't want to see."

These comments were echoed by Mapes, the producer fired by CBS at the time of Rather's ouster as anchorman, in a blog on the liberal web site *Huffington Post*. Mapes wrote, "Though our story had raised entirely appropriate questions about the president's military record, though there had been substantiation for everything we reported, though this was an issue certainly worth discussing in wartime, all that was lost in the melee that followed. Because of the angry conservative outcry, the corporation we worked for chose to walk away from an uncomfortable controversy rather than stick up for its reporters."

"In a democracy, journalism cannot fear bullies or pull its punches because somebody powerful might get uncomfortable," she continued. "But I'm afraid this entire episode just encapsulates what has happened to journalism in general in this country. It has become corporatized, trivialized and castrated."

Mapes noted that by filing a lawsuit, Rather would obtain "that delicious power of discovery. Who knows what that might shake loose?"

Rather's suit, and his public defense of his journalistic record, has provoked anger not merely in ultra-right circles, but among much of the liberal media establishment, with columns and blogs suggesting that the former CBS anchorman has lost his mind as well as his integrity.

What shocks and outrages them, however, is Rather's bluntness in pointing to the nexus of corporate-government collaboration to manage the news and suppress critical reporting. The 75-year-old Rather represents, not a heyday of objective and critical journalism, but at least an era before the concentration of media control into a handful of giant monopolies and the corruption of leading journalists, pundits and broadcasters with six- and seven-figure incomes.

These bought-and-paid-for careerists—at the television networks, the cable channels, the news magazines, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and other major dailies—serve as little more than purveyors of official propaganda while covering up the crimes being committed by the American ruling elite, both in the Iraq war and in other acts of aggression worldwide and every day at home.

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