

NBC suspends news anchor Brian Williams over Iraq war episode

David Walsh
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The announcement Tuesday by the US television network NBC that it was suspending the anchor and managing editor of its “Nightly News” program, Brian Williams, for six months without pay raises significant issues.

For what is Williams, one of the most prominent media figures in the US, being punished? He apparently lied about his experience as an embedded reporter aboard an American military helicopter during the invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

According to the *New York Times*, Deborah Turness, president of NBC News, commented in an internal memo that the falsehood “was wrong and completely inappropriate for someone in Brian’s position.”

After the controversy made headlines last week, Williams announced on Saturday that he was taking himself off the air for several days. NBC officials meanwhile reported that they were carrying out their own investigation. The half-year suspension is the evident result.

Williams’ account of the Iraq war experience has changed over the years, at each stage becoming more dramatic and further exaggerating his own risk in the 2003 incident. Over the course of several public retellings, Williams transformed the shooting down by Iraqi forces of a Chinook helicopter in an entirely separate formation from the one carrying him, first into an attack on the military helicopter in front of his, and later into the shooting down of his own aircraft.

During his January 30 news program, Williams described a tribute the night before to a former US soldier who, he claimed, had helped rescue and protect him in the Iraqi desert. Williams, who was naturally front and center at the ceremony, began his report by explaining, “The story actually started with a terrible moment a dozen years back during the invasion of Iraq

when the helicopter we were traveling in was forced down after being hit by an RPG.”

Military personnel on board both the helicopter that was downed and the one on which Williams was flying came forward to dispute the news anchor’s claims, and the story quickly unraveled. On February 4, Williams made an on-air apology, asserting that he had only made “a bungled attempt...to thank one special veteran, and by extension our brave military men and women--veterans everywhere--those who have served while I did not.”

He continued: “I hope they know they have my greatest respect. And also now my apology.”

His apology, however, fell back on the story that he was in the helicopter following the aircraft hit by fire. This was also untrue.

Williams’ recollections of covering Hurricane Katrina in 2005, one of his first major assignments after taking over as NBC’s news anchor in 2004, have also been called into question. Among other sensational claims, Williams has asserted over the years that the Ritz-Carlton hotel in which he was staying was invaded by marauding gangs, that he saw bodies float down the street from his eighth-floor room, and that he contracted dysentery.

Various witnesses, including the general manager of the Ritz Carlton at the time, dispute Williams’ account, noting, among other things, that the French Quarter, the location of the hotel, received only inches of rain and that no looters ever entered the establishment.

The revelation that Brian Williams is a fabulist and a self-promoter when it comes to his own history and career should not come as a great shock. In the first place, fantasizing, Walter Mitty-like, about exploits that never took place is not something unknown in human history. Moreover, Williams’ personal trajectory ought

to have served as something of a warning.

Of the various television anchors and pundits, he has gone the farthest toward turning himself into a celebrity and entertainer. Williams has become a staple of late night television and even shown some comedic talent. It may be that he was simply miscast as a news anchor.

Of course, the circumstances surrounding his Iraq war story are telling and damning. The embedding of the American media in the invading imperialist force in March 2003 was a further and fairly decisive stage in the integration of the media into US government and military operations. Williams enthusiastically did his bit to pass on the official story, and continues to proclaim his admiration and allegiance to the military at every opportunity.

Moreover, the NBC anchor's own inability to distinguish reality from fantasy, apart from what it may indicate about him psychologically, speaks to the present character of the American media apparatus, in which the walls between entertainment, theater, propaganda and "news" have largely come down. On a nightly basis, Williams acts the part of a journalist (a role for which he is paid a reported \$13 million a year), using various props and mannerisms to create an illusion.

All that being said, Williams' transgressions, in the grand scheme of things, are relatively minor. If he is to be suspended half a year for falsifying one incident in the Iraq invasion, what is the fitting penalty for those commentators and pundits who helped plunge the US into the catastrophic invasion and occupation through their systematic deception?

What should be done, for instance, with Wolf Blitzer and Christiane Amanpour of CNN, Richard Engel of NBC, Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post*, Bill Keller, Judith Miller and Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, Rupert Murdoch and the maniacs at Fox News, the heads of all the networks, the editorial boards of the leading newspapers, and hundreds of other prominent figures who deliberately and knowingly lied to the American people and continue to lie today about the crimes of the CIA, Russian "aggression" and so forth—people whose hands drip with blood?

In terms of filthiness and criminality, there is no comparison between those responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the destruction of entire

countries, on the one hand, and Williams' somewhat pathetic self-aggrandizement, on the other.

Williams' wrongdoing has been taken so seriously by NBC and the rest of the media establishment because, as they never cease repeating, it further undermines the "credibility" of the official news outlets.

The morning and evening news programs are central to the massive misinformation effort that involves manipulating the day's events to dupe and disorient the public. What is so unpardonable about Williams having carelessly made things up is that it points to one of the biggest dirty secrets of American public life: that the media as whole is a vast instrument for promulgating trivia, rubbish and lies.



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