

Truth: The victimization of CBS's Dan Rather and Mary Mapes

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Directed by James Vanderbilt; written by Vanderbilt, based on the book by Mary Mapes

Truth, written and directed by James Vanderbilt, provides a fictional account of events that occurred in 2004, on the eve of the 2004 presidential election eventually won by Republican George W. Bush.

In September of that year, the CBS television newsmagazine “60 Minutes II” broadcast a story alleging that Bush had used family influence to gain entry into the Texas Air National Guard as a way to avoid the draft during the Vietnam War.

Mary Mapes, a CBS News producer and a colleague of the network's long-standing anchor Dan Rather, had uncovered documents exposing Bush's history in the National Guard. The newsmagazine and the network as a whole came under a massive attack focused on the claim that the documents were a forgery.

CBS quickly caved in to the campaign driven by the extreme right. Rather was forced to apologize on the air for the fact that the documents had not been properly authenticated. Mapes was unceremoniously fired, and several other producers were forced to resign.

Rather himself announced his retirement immediately after Bush's reelection, effective several months later. While by this time the American media's filthy role had been displayed on countless occasions, perhaps never before had it claimed the scalp of such a prominent figure, an icon of television news.

The film is based on Mapes's 2005 memoir, *Truth and Duty: The Press, The President, and the Privilege of Power*. It tells the story from her viewpoint, but not falsely or unrealistically.

Although the events are public knowledge, *Truth's* account maintains a certain level of suspense, depicting both the somewhat frantic search for the evidence about Bush's past, and then the unraveling of the

investigative scoop as all the attention is shifted away from the content of the story itself. In fact, as Rather and Mapes have pointed out, the charges about Bush are true and have never been answered.

The film begins with a tense and angry meeting between Mary Mapes (Cate Blanchett) and the lawyer whom she has retained to advise her in preparation before her appearance in front of CBS's “independent” review panel. We then see the events in flashback beginning about six months earlier.

Mapes, who became well known for breaking the infamous Abu Ghraib scandal earlier in 2004, is engaged with her team of investigative journalists in tracking down the story of Bush and his National Guard assignment. Along the way, Mapes regularly consults with Rather, portrayed by 79-year-old actor-director-producer Robert Redford. Her investigative team consists of several others, including Michael Smith (Topher Grace) and Lt. Col. Roger Charles (Dennis Quaid). The main source for the Bush story comes from retired Lt. Col. Bill Burkett (Stacy Keach).

The presence of such actors as Redford, Blanchett, Keach and Quaid is significant. They are undoubtedly working for less than their usual fees, and their work here must reflect a general sympathy for the protagonists. As the *New York Times* quoted Redford, “These guys had to live with being shut down for years and years. The idea of playing a role in a project that would open things up and give them their day in court, which I thought they well deserved, was very appealing to me.”

Mapes gains the cooperation of Burkett, but he at first refuses to tell her his source for the documents, photocopies of correspondence from the future president's superior in the Air National Guard decades earlier. Finally he gives her a name.

The story begins to unravel, amid a vitriolic Internet campaign led by right-wing bloggers who claim the letters could not have been typed in the 1970s. Burkett admits that he has lied, and the documents cannot be authenticated. The CBS brass, all too willing to placate the Bush administration and panicked in the face of right-wing charges against the so-called liberal media, capitulates quickly.

Blanchett is effective as the central character. Her background is filled in somewhat sketchily, with brief scenes with her husband and young son back in Dallas, and a later anguished telephone call with her father, a right-wing Bush supporter who has publicly denounced her amid the controversy. This is the same father who ruled tyrannically over his children when they were growing up. Mapes at one point explains that she has gotten into investigative journalism because “I don’t like bullies.”

One of the film’s most effective scenes is that of Mapes’s appearance before the review panel. While carefully avoiding any discussion of her own political views, she challenges the committee by inquiring whether she is being asked, “Am I now or have I ever been a liberal?” An impassioned defense of investigative journalism before this panel seals her fate, but, as she tells her attorney, “I am what I am.”

A weaker element is *Truth*’s portrayal of Rather. Redford does as much as he can with a fairly limited role. The veteran newscaster is depicted as almost above the battle, an icon standing for the ideals of American democracy and press freedom. At one point Mapes insists, in front of some colleagues, that he repeat the one-word closing that he used in the past: “Courage.” This is all overdone, and amounts to little more than a defense of a vague liberalism. In fact, the whole episode, whatever the sincere motives of Mapes or even of the highly paid Rather, reflects the general bankruptcy of American liberalism, and the shift from an earlier period in which big-business control of the media was not entirely in contradiction with principled journalism.

Valentine’s *Truth* has nevertheless hit a raw nerve in some circles, and this is an indication that it has something to offer. A CBS spokesman declared, in an account in the *Times*, that it was “astounding how little truth there is in ‘Truth.’ ” Andrew Heyward, the former president of CBS News who is chillingly

portrayed by Bruce Greenwood in the movie, declared of the film, “It takes people responsible for the worst embarrassment in the history of CBS News, and what was at the time a grievous blow to the credibility of a proud news organization, and turns them into martyrs and heroes.”

The hypocrisy is overwhelming. Heyward and his fellow television news executives were more than willing to overlook the Bush administration’s lies about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, not merely inadequately sourced intelligence but outright fabrications that sent many hundreds of thousands to their deaths and many millions into internal and foreign exile and misery.

The same executives who postured as defenders of journalistic integrity appointed a panel to sit in judgment of Mapes and her staff, among whose prominent members was none other than Richard Thornburgh, a former US attorney general under Reagan and the elder George Bush, in 1988. When Thornburgh later ran for the US Senate from Pennsylvania, his campaign manager was the same Karl Rove who was running the younger Bush’s 2004 campaign.

US politics has been increasingly characterized by the methods of the criminal underworld in recent decades. The clumsy operations of Richard Nixon’s inner circle have been replaced by more sophisticated methods, backed in some cases by unlimited spending. It cannot be entirely discounted that Mapes and Rather were not merely careless in the case of the National Guard story, but were entrapped in a dirty tricks operation like later ones directed against the liberal ACORN community-based organization and, most recently, Planned Parenthood.

The media, with only limited and occasional hesitation, has become a full participant in a conspiracy against democratic rights. While the film steers clear of bigger historical questions, this lesson, on the gulf between pretensions and reality within the US media establishment, is spelled out quite effectively in *Truth*.



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