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Controversy and Credibility–The Scandal at CBS News

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It all began when Dan Rather presented a report on a Wednesday edition of "60 Minutes" claiming to present documentary evidence that President George W. Bush had failed to meet his obligations to the Texas Air National Guard, and that he had subsequently lied about his service. Furthermore, the report claimed that the president had been involved in an intentional cover-up of the truth about his military service.

According to the report, former Texas National Guard official Bill Burkett provided the network with documents purporting to be memoranda dictated by Colonel Jerry Killian, Bush's commander. The memos claimed that Lieutenant Bush had failed to take a mandatory physical exam, had failed to complete his service, and had received special treatment because of his father's political visibility.

The story hit the political campaign with a thunderclap, as the Kerry campaign quickly jumped on the story, seeking to shift attention from controversy over John Kerry's Vietnam service and subsequent anti-war activities.

Within hours, serious questions were raised about the authenticity of the documents. CBS News, long accustomed to dominating the field of television news, found its credibility undermined by an army of "bloggers" and cable news networks, many of whom compared the documents, supposedly written in the early 1970s, with today's word processing software. It soon became clear that the documents could not have been produced on 1970s-vintage typewriters, but were easily reproduced using Microsoft Word, the most commonly used word processing software.

Unbelievably, even as these questions dominated news reports, Dan Rather and his team insisted that the documents and their report were absolutely authentic and accurate. Rather devoted a series of reports on the CBS Evening News and then did a follow-up segment on "60 Minutes" featuring Marion Knox, the secretary to the National Guard officer who had supposedly written the memos. Knox insisted that the documents revealed the true circumstances about Lieutenant Bush's service, even though she argued that the documents were fake. Without batting an eye, Rather directed the interview with leading questions, arguing both implicitly and explicitly that the story was accurate even if the documents were fake.

Drowning in a flood of controversy, and watching its credibility erode by the minute, CBS News officials finally acknowledged their mistake on Monday, admitting serious doubt about the authenticity of the documents and admitting that their report should never have been presented in the first place.

"Based on what we now know, CBS News cannot prove that the documents are authentic, which is the only

acceptable journalistic standard to justify using them in the report,” said Andrew Heyward, president of CBS News. As he continued, “We should not have used them. That was a mistake, which we deeply regret.”

Why did it take CBS News so long to reach the conclusion others had reached days before? Why did the network first insist that the documents were authentic, and then argue in their report that the documents were “accurate,” even if they were fake?

These questions and many others were swirling about as Heyward went on to claim that CBS News would work “tirelessly” to regain its viewers’ trust. “Nothing is more important to us than our credibility,” said Heyward, “and keeping faith with the millions of people who count on us for fair, accurate, reliable, and independent reporting.”

Rather also released a statement indicating, “I no longer have the confidence in these documents that would allow us to continue vouching for them journalistically.” Instead of accepting blame for misleading the American people, Rather claimed: “I find we have been misled on the key question of how our source for the documents came into possession of these papers. That, combined with some of the questions that have been raised in public and in the press, leads me to a point where—if I knew then what I know now—I would not have gone ahead with the story as it was aired, and I certainly would not have used the documents in question.”

Rather acknowledged “a mistake in judgment” and said he was sorry. Nevertheless, in a sentence that continued to stretch the public trust, Rather insisted: “It was an error that was made, however, in good faith and in the spirit of trying to carry on a CBS News tradition of investigative reporting without fear or favoritism.”

The statements by Heyward and Rather did very little to stem the tide of public outrage. As a matter of fact, the actions and statements coming from CBS News raised more questions than they answered. Even as evidence suggested that producer Mary Mapes was directly responsible for the use of the faked documents, and even as CBS acknowledged she had made direct contact with the Kerry campaign, Mapes continued to work on the story for CBS News.

On Tuesday, reports confirmed that Mapes had arranged for Burkett, the source of the faked documents, to talk to a top aide with the Kerry campaign. As Peter Johnson of USA Today explained, “Standard journalistic ethics forbid reporters from doing anything that could be perceived as helping a political campaign.” As the hemorrhaging of credibility from CBS News continues, the story is likely to get even messier and more complicated.

Wednesday’s announcement that CBS had named a review panel is not likely to stem the network’s credibility crisis. CBS News released a statement indicating that former U.S. Attorney General Dick Thornburgh and retired Associated Press chief Louis Boccardi would serve as the review panel, charged to bring a report to the network that would eventually be released to the public. “The two-person review panel will commence its work this week,” said CBS, “and will have full access and complete cooperation from CBS News and CBS, as well as all of the resources necessary to complete the task.”

The review panel is certain to focus on legalities and matters of journalistic ethics. The legal angle may take on both urgency and importance in coming days, as the specter of criminal charges came to public attention. Writing in *The New York Times*, columnist William Safire drew attention to the section of the U.S. Criminal Code that states: “Whoever, having devised any scheme or artifice to defraud, transmits or causes to be transmitted by means of wire, radio or television communication in interstate or foreign commerce, any writings for the purpose of executing such scheme or artifice, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than 20 years, or both.” As Safire summarized, “At the root of what is today treated as an embarrassing blunder by duped CBS journalists may turn out to be a felony by its faithless sources.”

While others are concerned with the journalistic and political aspects of this controversy, this is a good opportunity for Christians to think through some of the most basic issues related to our engagement with the news media.

What credibility should be expected of the news media? The report on President Bush’s National Guard service lacked credibility from the beginning. Why did CBS not address basic questions? Is it plausible to assume that a retired Air National Guard colonel would have kept a series of memoranda in his home files to be retained in the event one lieutenant out of his squadron was eventually elected President of the United States? The military runs on paper the way airliners run on fuel. Why would this colonel have kept these particular documents in the first place? Are we to assume that he had

been keeping them under his mattress all these years?

More significantly, what are we to make of Dan Rather's claim that the documents were "authentic" even if "fake?" This is postmodernism in its purest form. Rather, who continues to insist that he is a serious journalist committed to "investigative reporting without fear or favoritism," tried to persuade the public that the documents continued to prove his point even if they were counterfeits. Has Dan Rather lost his mind?

The Memogate affair will be watched closely by journalists, lawyers, politicians, and the general public. At the same time, the unraveling of the CBS claims about these documents shows that the general public retained some common sense and is not under the sway of the network news. Anyone doubting that the explosion of news authorities that has occurred in recent years is a net gain for the nation should ponder where we would be if the bloggers, cable news networks, and investigative newspaper reporters had not pressed this story.

Beyond this, Christians should reconsider how we engage the media as a whole. We can offer no excuse for being uninformed, and we should never trust any single media outlet as our only news authority. We must learn to ask basic questions about the truthfulness and trustworthiness of reporters, commentators, and media outlets, and we must be aware at all times that every reporter, every producer, every editor, and every viewer comes to a story with some degree of bias.

As Christians, we know that truth will always be a contested commodity, because we are the people who know what sin is really all about. We know that credibility is a matter of character as well as content, and we know that the press is interested in persuasion, not merely in the transfer of information.

Armed with this understanding, we can engage the media critically and carefully. We must always have our minds set on finding the news beyond the news.

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