

The lynching of Dan Rather

By Greg Palast
gregpalast.com | September 20, 2004

“It’s that fear that keeps journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions,” the aging American journalist told the British television audience. In June 2002, Dan Rather looked old, defeated, making a confession he dare not speak on American TV about the deadly censorship – and self-censorship – which had seized US newsrooms. After September 11, news on the US tube was bound and gagged. Any reporter who stepped out of line, he said, would be professionally lynched as un-American.

“It’s an obscene comparison,” he said, “but there was a time in South Africa when people would put flaming tires around people’s necks if they dissented. In some ways, the fear is that you will be necklaced here. You will have a flaming tire of lack of patriotism put around your neck.” No US reporter who values his neck or career will “bore in on the tough questions.” Dan said all these things to a British audience. However, back in the USA, he smothered his conscience and told his TV audience: “George Bush is the President. He makes the decisions. He wants me to line up, just tell me where.”

During the war in Vietnam, Dan’s predecessor at CBS, Walter Cronkite, asked some pretty hard questions about Nixon’s handling of the war in Vietnam. Today, our sons and daughters are dying in Bush wars. But, unlike Cronkite, Dan could not, would not, question George Bush, Top Gun Fighter Pilot, Our Maximum Beloved Leader in the war on terror.

On the British broadcast, without his network minders snooping, you could see Dan seething and deeply unhappy with himself for playing the game.

“What is going on,” he said, “I’m sorry to say, is a belief that the public doesn’t need to know – limiting access, limiting information to cover the backsides of those who are in charge of the war. It’s extremely dangerous and cannot and should not be accepted, and I’m sorry to say that up to and including this moment of this interview, that overwhelmingly it has been accepted by the American people. And the current Administration revels in that, they relish and take refuge in that.”

Dan’s words had a poignant personal ring for me. He was speaking on Newsnight, BBC’s

The lynching of Dan Rather / 2

nightly current affairs program, which broadcasts my own reports. I do not report for BBC, despite its stature, by choice. The truth is, if I want to put a hard, investigative report about the USA on the nightly news, I have to broadcast it in exile, from London. For Americans my broadcasts are stopped at an electronic Berlin wall.

Indeed, Dan is in hot water for a report my own investigative team put in Britain's Guardian papers and on BBC TV years ago. Way back in 1999, I wrote that former Texas Lt. Governor Ben Barnes had put in the fix for little George Bush to get out of 'Nam and into the Air Guard.

What is hot news this month in the USA is a five-year-old story to the rest of the world. And you still wouldn't see it in the USA except that Dan Rather, with a 60 Minutes producer, finally got fed up and ready to step out of line. And, as Dan predicted, he stuck out his neck and got it chopped off. Is Rather's report accurate? Is George W. Bush a war hero or a privileged little Shirker-in-Chief? Today I saw a goofy two page spread in the Washington Post about a typewriter used to write a memo with no significance to the draft-dodge story. What I haven't read about in my own country's media is about two crucial documents supporting the BBC/CBS story. The first is Barnes' signed and sworn affidavit to a Texas Court, from 1999, in which he testifies to the Air Guard fix – which Texas Governor George W. Bush, given the opportunity, declined to challenge.

And there is a second document, from the files of US Justice Department, again confirming the story of the fix to keep George's white bottom out of Vietnam. That document, shown last year in the BBC television documentary, "Bush Family Fortunes," correctly identifies Barnes as the bag man even before his 1999 confession.

At BBC, we also obtained a statement from the man who made the call to the Air Guard general on behalf of Bush at Barnes' request. Want to see the document? I've posted it at: <http://www.gregpalast.com/ulf/documents/draftdodgeblanked.jpg>

This is not a story about Dan Rather. The white millionaire celebrity can defend himself without my help. This is a story about fear, the fear that stops other reporters in the US from following the evidence about this Administration to where it leads. American news guys and news gals, practicing their smiles, adjusting their hairspray levels, bleaching their teeth and performing all the other activities that are at the heart of US TV journalism, will look to the treatment of Dan Rather and say, "Not me, babe." No questions will be asked, as Dan predicted, lest they risk necklacing and their careers as news actors burnt to death.

"Bush Family Fortunes," the one-hour documentary taken from Greg Palast's BBC investigative reports, including the story of George Bush and Texas Air Guard, can be viewed, in part, at <http://www.gregpalast.com/bff-dvd.htm>