

In a lather over Rather

By Danny Schechter
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CBS's most popular program "CSI" can now investigate a crime scene close to home. The reputation of veteran news anchor Dan Rather is lying on the floor, bloodied by a mistake he has now admitted, flanked on the political right by "we told you so" finger-pointers led by GOP operatives demanding his head. A news outlet once headed by "the most trusted man in America" is accused of being the least trustworthy. With Rather apologizing for airing a story based in part on memos that CBS cannot verify, it looks bad for network news in general and critics of President George W. Bush in particular. And that fits the M.O. of the people behind the hit.

The story that "60 Minutes" ran charging that Bush had not completed his Texas National Guard duty has now been pronounced a "mistake." CBS News added that "a source had misled the network on the documents' origins." The network promised "an independent review of how the report was prepared to help determine what actions need to be taken."

Over at Fox News, they were breaking out the champagne when the admission of error came down from Black Rock. Fox, of course, has its own (wink, wink) "standards" and never makes mistakes worth acknowledging. Their playbook in this regard feeds and follows a well-established White House approach: When confronted by unwelcome truths, avoid them, deny them or tarnish the critic.

Fox News branded this dust-up a scandal, a "Rathergate," using a familiar "change-the-subject" tactic to deflect attention away from persuasive charges that President Bush has not told the truth about his military "service." Allegations about a media misdemeanor were quickly blown up into a felony demanding Rather's career termination with prejudice.

The right-wing attack machine works by personalizing issues and demonizing "enemies" with overheated language and cartoon-like characterizations. Osama "the evil doer" bin Laden gave way to Saddam "the butcher of Baghdad" Hussein, and now John "the phony war hero" Kerry has been displaced with a "lather over Rather." It's a textbook example of how attacks against journalists are used to denigrate news not to the right wing's liking by planting items in the media food chain and cranking up an echo chamber of feigned indignation.

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The Republican National Committee operates its own 24/7 anti-news network to monitor coverage and orchestrate a rapid response. Salon reports that the story casting doubt on the documents was first pushed into the news stream by Creative Response Concepts, a Republican public relations firm. Then, selected bloggers went to work led by an Atlanta lawyer who helped get President Bill Clinton disbarred and was the first who called the memos fakes. His charges spread like a prairie fire through the rabid conservative grapevine and amen corner. The goal: Focus the media on Rather, not Bush. CBS initially stood by the documents, then hedged, saying that even if they were flawed, the story that Bush had disobeyed his commander's order to have a physical was accurate in essence. But it finally had to concede it was a mistake to run the story.

It's possible that CBS was flim-flammed, but TV's need for visuals did them in. By trying to gussy up the story with what producers call "video enhancement elements," "60 Minutes" fell on its own sword, opening itself up to attack. Other leading news outlets including the BBC ran the same story about Bush's troubles in the Guard without being discredited.

Dan Rather has been a punching bag of the right ever since he was targeted for being rude to President Richard Nixon 30 years ago. Conservative journalists accused him of fudging footage from Afghanistan in the 1980s when he took over the anchor chair as the high salaried "Six Million Dollar Man." Some conservatives tried to buy CBS with the promise they would fire Dan Rather the day the "Tiffany Network" became theirs. His critics pictured him as the poster boy of their hated "liberal media."

The irony is that he doesn't fit the stereotype. Rather has a superpatriotic persona. A day after 9/11 he went on the David Letterman show to proclaim his willingness to do whatever his president ordered. On Sept. 22, 2001, he said he would give the administration the benefit of every doubt. When a pre-war interview with Saddam Hussein in Baghdad raised eyebrows, he tacked hard right in his war reporting, for which he later won the conservative Media Research Center's top prize for best network coverage.

Don't write Rather off. He has had more media lives than the Republican Guard that wants to bury him. He is just this week's poster boy for the sins and screw-ups of an imagined liberal media.