

Shoot the messenger, but not the message

By Greg Palast
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When Dan Rather went down for airing a document he couldn't source, he did the courageous thing: blamed someone else. In this case, Rather and CBS loaded their corporate guilt on a guy you've probably never heard of before, rancher Bill Burkett of Abilene, a retired Lieutenant Colonel from the Texas Air National Guard.

CBS did a no-no – used a document on air without fully checking out its source. No excuses. Shouldn't have done it. They got the document from Burkett.

Once CBS hung out its source and painted a target on him, Rove-ing gangs of media hit men finished him off. Burkett's an evidence "fabricator," "Bush-hater," and even, suggests William Safire in the New York Times as he fantasizes a dark left-wing conspiracy, a felon ready for hard time.

Let me tell you about this Burkett "criminal." I met him while filming for BBC's Television documentary, "Bush Family Fortunes." Better than that, I'm posting a transcript of our hour-and-a-half interview.

Burkett a 'Bush-hater'? "George W. Bush was an excellent pilot," Burkett told me, "He had the right leadership skills, he had the 'Top Gun' approach."

But I didn't go interview Burkett to chat about our President's days when he flew high. He has an important story to tell which has not one damn thing to do with a memo by some Lt. Col. Killian. It has to do with a phone call and a shredder.

Burkett, a top advisor to Major General Daniel James at the Air Guard, was working at Camp Mabry with Major General James when a call came in from Joe Allbaugh, the Chief of Staff to then-Governor George W. Bush. Bush was about to get a political polishing up for his White House run, with a ghost-written autobiography, which would include his heroic years during the war in Vietnam. Allbaugh, according to Burkett, stated that Bush political operatives Karen Hughes and Dan Bartlett would be dropping by the Air Guard offices to look at the war record and wanted to, "make sure there's nothing in there that'll

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embarrass the Governor.”

According to Burkett, the General and his minions who work for the Governor, not the US Air Force, took this as an unsubtle hint from the boss to purge the record. Lt. Col. Burkett, both curious and disturbed by the call, wondered how his fellow comrades-in-arms would respond. His answer was in the trash-to-be-shredded bin: George Bush's military pay records. “I saw what are called LES (Leave and Earnings Statements) which are pay documents. I saw Retirement Points documents and other administrative information.”

He did not see their content, only Bush's name, and therefore cannot answer the 64 million dollar question: Did those records, now “missing,” indicate that our President went AWOL while others ended up on the Black Wall?

That's Burkett's story and it's in the BBC film. Watch the film, read the transcript, and judge for yourself. I think you'll find in Burkett a straight shooter, telling a piece of the larger draft-dodge story which mounting evidence corroborates.

So what about that “Killian” document? We don't have it in the BBC film - we couldn't source it so we wouldn't use it. Burkett passed it on from a third party, obviously someone still in the Guard or fearful of Bush Family retribution. Now why would they imagine that?

Under pressure, Burkett gave CBS a false name to cover for the whistleblower. Burkett should not have done that. It is inexcusable. Period. Yet, that does not tell us the document was fabricated. It was the job of CBS to follow up – they are the journalists.

And it is also the President's job. Safire in the Times, in charging that Burkett faked the document, demanded the military open a criminal investigation. Darn right they should. They haven't. Why not? Maybe they don't want to check into this ‘fake’ document because maybe it's not fake.

An investigation should begin with questions for the President. After all, he can clear up the matter lickety-split.

“Mr. President, did you or did you not ask your commander Lt. Col. Killian how you could shirk your duty to show up?”

“Mr. President, did you or did you not refuse a direct order to take a medical exam and pee into a jar?” (The record is solid on the evidence of refusing that order, Mr. Top Gun – you were stripped of your flight wings.)

“Mr. President, did Texas Lt. Governor Ben Barnes make any calls to get you out of ‘Nam and into the Air Guard? Yes or no?”

See Dan, that's how it should be done. It wasn't Burkett's job to verify the evidence, it was the job of Dan and the President.

It is for the President, not Bill Burkett, to answer the question, “Did your daddy the

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congressman vote to send other men's sons to Vietnam while pulling the strings to keep you cozy and safe? Yes or no, Mr. President, yes or no?"

For a clip from the BBC Television investigative reports on George Bush's military career, go to [www.http://www.gregpalast.com/bff-dvd.htm](http://www.gregpalast.com/bff-dvd.htm) Greg Palast's interview with Col. Burkett for BBC can be read at <http://www.gregpalast.com/documents/BurkettTranscript.pdf>