

# SYRUPY MINUTES

HOW CBS'S 60 MINUTES  
WORKS OVERTIME FOR  
THE OBAMA LEFT



A Special Report from the Media Research Center

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## How CBS's *60 Minutes* Works Overtime for the Obama Left

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last five years, CBS's *60 Minutes* has become infamous for letting its left-wing ardor get away ahead of its journalistic mission. Dan Rather destroyed his own reputation in 2004 with a *60 Minutes II* "expose" of President Bush's incomplete Vietnam-era service in the Texas Air National Guard which relied on falsified documents. A CBS-appointed panel found "myopic zeal" in Rather's professional demise, but no one would admit a political bias.

For more than 40 years, CBS has boasted of *60 Minutes* as a hard-hitting news show, a weekly story of investigative gumshoes digging up dirt and accusing major business and government leaders of committing dastardly deeds against the public interest. But the history of *60 Minutes* isn't filled to the brim with brutal investigations. It has a much softer, syrupy side, and it isn't just reserved for movie stars or rock musicians. When it comes to champions of liberalism and even the radical left, the CBS News program has rolled out a red carpet, asking softball questions and lionizing their policy stands and programs - whether they were actually "achievements" or disasters.

On September 19, a week before the new season officially began, CBS's Lesley Stahl promoted the latest book of Jimmy Carter, and insisted that Carter was a bigger success than most presidents, including Ronald Reagan: "But when all is said and done, and many will be surprised to hear this: Jimmy Carter got more of his programs passed than Reagan and Nixon, Ford, Bush 1, Clinton or Bush 2." Carter's utter failure to end the Iranian hostage standoff and crushing inflation and unemployment rates were somehow irrelevant to history. Stahl also gushed to Carter: "A lot of critics of yours, when you were President, say that you've been a fantastic ex-President. You hear that all the time." She said this even as she reminded viewers that Carter wrote a letter to the U.N. Security Council telling them they should oppose the first President Bush on the need for the Gulf War.

In studying *60 Minutes* broadcasts from January 1, 2006 through the September 2010 season premiere, Media Research Center analysts have found a very biased pattern of soft interviews and promotional language for the American left:

■ **Liberals were featured more than twice as often than conservatives, and were four times more likely to be awarded easygoing interviews.** Since 2006, *60 Minutes* has aired 35 interviews with liberal leaders and celebrities versus 17 with conservatives. Twenty-four of the 35 interviews with liberals (69 percent) were friendly and unchallenging. Only five of the 17 conservative segments (29 percent) were soft – and one unchallenged conservative was hammering Sarah Palin as utterly unqualified for national office.

■ **Barack Obama was a major beneficiary of *60 Minutes* admiration.** CBS has devoted hours of air time to the promotion of Barack Obama – five interviews before the election, and six after it, all reported by Steve Kroft. Of the 49 Kroft questions in the first four CBS interviews (before the financial crisis hit), 42 were personal or horse-race questions. Only seven focused on issues – five on foreign policy, and two on trade – with no real focus on any domestic issues. Kroft never focused a question on Obama scandals, or his record in the Illinois legislature. Even issue questions were soft and open-ended. Kroft’s interviews were even made into a DVD for nostalgic Obama supporters, *Obama All Access*.

■ **Other candidates for president were not granted the same red carpet as Obama.** The contrast was striking to Scott Pelley’s 2008 bailout interview with John McCain: “But why would you let the Wall Street executives sail away on their yachts and leave this on the American taxpayer?” Mike Wallace’s interview with Mitt Romney in 2007 was sharply personal, demanding to know if the Republican candidate had premarital sex with his wife and asking his five sons why none of them had ever joined the military.

■ **Liberal journalists and celebrities were also celebrated, and conservative celebrities were hounded.** Morley Safer championed Stephen Colbert for satirizing conservative talk show hosts and their “wildly inaccurate, but patriotic and combative noise...With all of their excesses, it was only a matter of time before someone came along to skewer them. Well, the eagle has landed.” Safer also felt the pain of actor Alec Baldwin having to deal with “conservative junkyard dogs like Sean Hannity.” But Mike Wallace confronted Bill O’Reilly: “You are addicted to the power, you are addicted to the money, you are addicted to the fact that ‘I am Bill O’Reilly, and everybody knows it.’”

A review of the recent output of *60 Minutes* should cause media historians to restrain themselves before declaring that this program is a hallmark of hard-hitting journalism, without a political axe to grind. They either carry an axe or a shoe-shine kit.

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## How CBS's *60 Minutes* Works Overtime for the Obama Left

BY TIM GRAHAM

MRC DIRECTOR OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

Since its debut in 1968, the CBS news magazine *60 Minutes* has painted itself as a hard-hitting show where reporters force top political and business leaders through a sweat-inducing obstacle course of scrutiny. But not every interview subject is subjected to brutal questioning. When it comes to liberals, the tone regularly changes from aggression to adoration.

In his book *Tell Me A Story*, Don Hewitt, the late founder of *60 Minutes*, declared “Good journalism is confrontational by definition: You want information that other people prefer not be made public. In that regard, my wife, Marilyn, who has worked in both print and television, has said on many occasions, ‘Breaking eggs isn't pretty, but it's an inevitable part of strong reporting. The problem in television, and it's unavoidable, is that when television breaks eggs, the whole world is watching; when a print reporter breaks eggs, no one sees him do it.’ To which I have to add, one of the things that neither print nor television should do is make omelets out of law-abiding citizens.”

But what happens when the boasting egg-breakers of television news make a sugary meringue instead of making trouble? A look back at the profiles on political figures on *60 Minutes* over the last four and a half years demonstrates that CBS hasn't only deployed its soft human-interest lens on movie stars or musicians, but on political leaders that it favors.

In looking at *60 Minutes* interview segments since January 1, 2006, Media Research Center analysts identified 52 politically oriented profile/interview segments: 35 granted to liberals and Democrats, and 17 to conservatives and Republicans. Interviews with current or former candidates, politicians, and political staffers were awarded on a more than two-to-one basis, 27 liberal interviews and 13 conservative. In addition to presidential candidates, CBS

interviewed liberals John Murtha, Brian Schweitzer, Joe Biden, Rahm Emanuel, Barney Frank, Valerie Plame, Al Gore, Nancy Pelosi, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bill Clinton, and Jimmy Carter. Ten of these were unchallenging. Only Mike Wallace's turn with Murtha offered hardballs.

Lesley Stahl was especially eager to please liberal stars. Jimmy Carter was selling a new book on September 19, and Stahl insisted with a straight tone that Carter was a bigger success than most presidents, including Ronald Reagan: "But when all is said and done, and many will be surprised to hear this: Jimmy Carter got more of his programs passed than Reagan and Nixon, Ford, Bush 1, Clinton or Bush 2." On April 26, 2009, Stahl forwarded the White House spin that Biden had a talent for connecting with people: "With his 'atta-boying,' hand-gripping, hot personality, versus Obama's cool cat...Call him 'schmooser-in-chief.'" On December 18, 2008, Stahl touted Frank: "Barney Frank has been called the smartest guy in Congress, which is lucky for us, since he works on some of the thorniest issues around." She pointed out Republicans called him not a liberal, but a "market-savvy pragmatist."



Stahl wasn't alone. On March 19, 2010, Katie Couric's profile of Obama chief of staff Rahm Emanuel was fun and games, as when she pressed him about his profanity, specifically a plaque in his office his brothers gave him that reads "The Undersecretary of Go [Blank] Yourself." Then they laughed.

There was a more serious gap between presidential candidates before the 2008 elections: eight to Democrats (Obama drew five interviews, Hillary Clinton two and John Edwards one) and four to Republicans (John McCain three, Mitt Romney one). All four Republican interviews were challenging. The first four Obama interviews were soft, as well as one Katie Couric interview with Mrs. Clinton. Overall, Obama was awarded eight interviews - and an hour-long special at the end of 2008 that replayed all the interviews up to that time. Obama's three interviews as president have been tougher and more substantive sessions.

Conservatives or Republican officials interviewed were Supreme Court justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas, Rep. Jeff Flake, President Bush, and Bush administration officials Douglas Feith, Condoleezza Rice, George Tenet, and David Kuo. The Flake interview (about his battle against earmark spending) was positive. The Clarence Thomas interview by Steve Kroft on September 30, 2007 drew much more controversy in liberal-media circles than Kroft's Obama interviews. Kroft began with a list of liberal complaints about Thomas being an opportunistic sellout and lightweight, and declared: "The problem with the characterization is that it's unfair and untrue."

As for the other interviews, Lesley Stahl began by telling Justice Scalia on September 14, 2008 that “I’m surprised at how many people really, really hate you. These are some things we’ve been told. ‘He’s evil.’ ‘He’s a Neanderthal.’ ‘He’s going to drag us back to 1789.’” None of the Bush administration officials (even Kuo, who delighted liberals by charging hypocrisy and bad faith in the President’s faith-based initiative) went unchallenged.

When it came to journalists and celebrities, the ratio was ten interviews to three. There were liberal authors Bob Woodward (twice), the duo of Mark Halperin and John Heileman, and the pairing of Ted Kennedy, Jr. and publisher Jonathan Karp, selling Sen. Ted Kennedy’s last book *True Compass*. The liberal entertainers were Alec Baldwin, Bruce Springsteen, the Dixie Chicks, Stephen Colbert, and Vanessa Redgrave. The conservatives were T. Boone Pickens, Bill O’Reilly, and Lou Dobbs. In this category, all ten of the liberal interviews were unchallenging to the guest, even as they denounced conservatives.

O’Reilly and Dobbs were both treated skeptically. The Pickens interview on October 26, 2008 (about his advocacy of wind power) was very positive – except for Charlie Rose’s request that Pickens denounce the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth ads against John Kerry.

Rose said Pickens found it uncomfortable around Kerry, “whose presidential campaign Pickens helped destroy four years ago when he gave money for the infamous and widely criticized Swift Boat ads that attacked the Senator’s service in Vietnam and his later testimony before Congress.” Rose pressed Pickens about any regrets: “You spent \$3 million funding an advertising campaign that, in some people’s mind, was representative of dirty politics, smear politics, character assassination, all of that. At this stage, do you have any reservations?” Pickens said “None.”

### ***The Selling of Barack Obama***

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No politician has been a greater beneficiary of *60 Minutes* publicity than Barack Obama. His interviews have also benefited his CBS questioner, Steve Kroft. The *Los Angeles Times* reported Kroft has “emerged in the last year as the face of the program, in part because of his reports on the financial crisis and his much-watched interviews with candidate and President Obama.” Executive producer Jeff Fager boasted: “I don’t think anyone can tell a story better.”

On National Public Radio, Fager insisted the show had hit its stride, digging into the hard news and leaving celebrity puffery behind. “We had an enormous responsibility to fulfill our commitment to be there when important stories break, and to report them in a way that I think we do uniquely, which is to dig down deeper and help people understand them.” Reporter Steve Kroft added: “I think the news just took over...How are you not going to do a

story about the first black presidential candidate in the most closely watched presidential campaign since 1960, probably? You have to do it. That's what everybody's interested in." But *60 Minutes* never really "dug down deeper" into Obama's life or record. Instead, they awarded him vague and friendly interviews not much different than the celebrity puffery they claimed to be avoiding.

While Democratic nominee John Kerry drew only two favorable profiles in 2004, CBS correspondent Steve Kroft interviewed Obama five times before the election for *60 Minutes* – and three times since. In the first four interviews, before the Labor Day campaign kickoff or the mid-September economic collapse, Kroft's questions focused in two vague and unchallenging areas: horse-race questions about Obama's political viability against his opponents, or personal inquiries, including questions about making chili for the kids or getting a family dog. Of the 49 Kroft questions in the first four CBS interviews, 42 were personal or horse-race questions. Only seven focused on issues – five on foreign policy, and two on trade – with no real focus on domestic issues.

There's a wide swath of issues that Kroft avoided – every social issue from abortion to homosexuality to affirmative action; every concern about taxes and federal spending and regulation; and major areas of liberal ambition like health care and global warming. Kroft also completely avoided Obama's state legislative record in Illinois and scandal figures from Reverend Jeremiah Wright to Tony Rezko to William Ayers. This raises the question of whether CBS agreed to interview Obama with the condition that some questions were off limits – or worse, that conditions weren't really needed since CBS wanted to make history instead of news.

**Interview One.** The first interview came early – on February 11, 2007, timed to mark Obama's entry into the presidential race. Kroft asked Obama "What makes you think that you're qualified to be president of the United States?" and noted his confidence, even hinting at hubris, since Obama compared himself to Abraham Lincoln: "He is ambitious and just daring enough to invite comparisons to one of the few American presidents who was elected with even less political experience than he has." Kroft suggested the CBS fascination with him was just a media phenomenon, not an ideological love affair: "Propelled by the media hungry for a fresh face and a good story, he has graced the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, the pages of *Men's Vogue*, and has been endorsed by Oprah."



Kroft didn't touch on Rev. Wright, but he did focus Obama on the topic of race: "Do you think the country is ready for a black president?" Obama said yes. Kroft protested: "You don't think it's going to hold you back?" He also told Obama: "There are African-Americans

who don't think that you're black enough, who don't think that you have had the required experience." Race isn't just a color, it's an "experience."

Kroft certainly could have touched on Obama's minister. On that same night – February 11, 2007 – ABC's Jake Tapper mentioned the controversy in passing on *World News Sunday*: "His foreign-policy views are just one target for Obama's critics, who have questions for the senator about any number of issues, including whether his church here on Chicago's South Side, which expresses a message of black power, is too militant for mainstream America to accept." Obama's critics had questions, but CBS did not.

**Interview Two.** A year later, Kroft and Obama reconnected, on February 10, 2008. Again, Kroft sold Obama as a media star: "He's been helped by the media's lust for a good story and the electorate's hunger for change. What he lacks in executive experience, he's made up for with a grasp of the issues, an ability to read the public mood, and the gift of turning Democratic boilerplate into political poetry." As in the first interview, Kroft's toughest push was on experience: "The only thing that you've actually run is the *Harvard Law Review*."

Several Kroft assertions were made without the irony they deserved. He asked Obama, "You talk about big ideas, often with a lack of specificity, and it's been one of the complaints about your campaign." He then asked questions without much specifics: "What do you think of what's going on in Iraq right now?" He ended the interview by noting Obama was only getting three or four hours of sleep and asking him: "Did you play basketball on Super Tuesday?" Obama liked to play basketball on primary days, whether that was superstition or just public relations. Kroft then closed: "But superstitions won't stop scrutiny, and so far, his record has received far less of it than Senator Clinton's, in part because he has less of a record to scrutinize." Kroft had done nothing to change that pattern.

**Interview Three.** For a segment that aired on March 2, 2008, Kroft traveled with both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton on the campaign trail in Ohio, so it wasn't as much of an Obama profile as the previous interviews. While Kroft pressed Obama from the left on trade, on whether he needed to stop "nibbling around the edges" and take "stronger action, bolder action, a more protectionist policy," the interview made waves with its supportive focus on rumors that Obama was a Muslim:



KROFT: One of the things we found in southern Ohio – not widespread, but something that popped up on our radar screen all the time, people talking about it, this idea that you're a Muslim.

OBAMA: Did you correct them, Steve?

KROFT: I did correct them.

OBAMA: There you go.

KROFT: Where's it coming from?

Obama explained that it was a "systematic e-mail smear campaign," and said "I have never been a Muslim, and not a Muslim," but asserted he was "a devout Christian who's been going to the same church for the last 20 years." Despite that cue, Kroft never mentioned Reverend Wright. Kroft also pressed Hillary Clinton to denounce the rumors he found "scurrilous," and she drew brickbats across the media for answering he wasn't Muslim "as far as I know."

**Interview Four.** Kroft interviewed Obama and new running mate Joe Biden after the Democratic convention on August 31, 2008. This interview had two themes: the first was a set of horse-race questions ticking off liberal worries. There was Biden's trouble with gaffes and the plagiarism problem that killed his 1988 presidential campaign. Kroft said "I'm sure the Republicans are working on a campaign commercial right now on it." There was Obama's lack of "killer instinct," or as Kroft sweetly put it to Obama, he was "a very deliberative, judicious person who prides himself on building consensus, but it is not in your DNA to be confrontational." Kroft concluded the segment by asking about liberals who expected a larger lead in the polls: "You are running against the record of an administration that is one of the most unpopular in the history of the country. And there are people that believe that you should be much farther ahead in the polls than you are."



They also discussed the potential of McCain running mate Sarah Palin to peel off blue-collar voters, that spurred chummy banter about beer and bowling:

KROFT: But you tried really hard to reach these people. You went and sipped beer, which I know you don't particularly like. I mean, you even...

OBAMA: Well, now, Steve, I had a beer last night. I mean, where do these stories come from, man?

BIDEN: I'm the one who doesn't drink.

KROFT: I thought you told me that.

OBAMA: Where does the story come from that...

KROFT: I thought you told me.

OBAMA: ...I don't like beer?

KROFT: Anyway.

OBAMA: Come on, man.

KROFT: You even tried bowling. Some might...

OBAMA: Now, hold – time out a second.

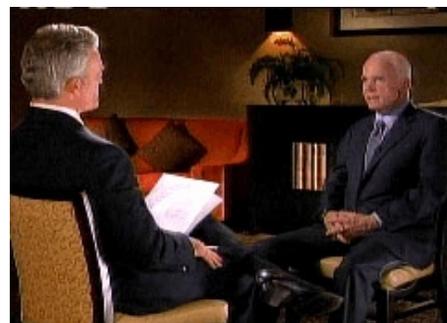
KROFT: My question is, Senator...

OBAMA: No, look, you're – I've got to defend my bowling out of here. It is true that my bowling score left something to be desired. The reason I bowled, though, wasn't to try to get votes. If I had – if I had been trying to get votes, I promise you, I would have been avoiding a bowling alley. The reason I was there was to campaign, and we had great fun.

Viewers might have wondered whether they were watching a “newsmaker” interview, or just three friends shooting the breeze.

**Interview Five.** Both Obama and John McCain were interviewed for the September 21, 2008 edition of *60 Minutes*, two days after the first presidential debate. Due to the economic collapse (and perhaps the bipartisan booking), Obama faced only 10 generic personal or horse-race questions and 17 policy inquiries. Even then, Kroft's questions were not hard-hitting. They were vague and they were brief. “Do you think that Secretary of the Treasury Paulson has done the right thing?....Do you think we're in a recession?....Do you think the worst is over?” The bailout was questioned like this: “Should the government be bailing out all these banks and insurance companies? We're talking about hundreds and hundreds of billions of dollars.”

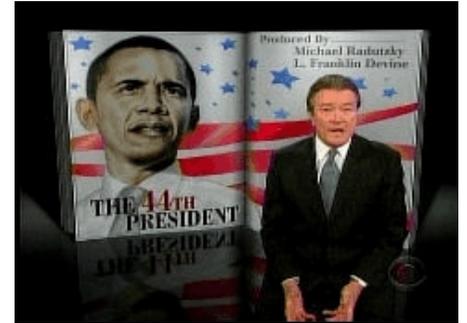
The contrast was striking to Scott Pelley's interview with McCain: “But why would you let the Wall Street executives sail away on their yachts and leave this on the American taxpayer?” Obama and McCain both supported the bailout, but CBS only painted one as a soft touch for crooked financial barons.



Kroft memorably insisted to Obama that many voters in Nevada were racists: “I know, for a fact, that there are a lot of people out there, there are a lot of people right here in Elko, who won't vote for you because you're black. I mean, there's not much you can do. But how do

you deal with it? I mean, are there ways that, from a political point of view, that you can deal with it? And how do you fight that?"

**After the Victory.** November brought only victory laps. A November 9, 2008 interview with a set of Obama's campaign aides (David Axelrod, David Plouffe, Robert Gibbs, and Anita Dunn) began with Kroft asking Axelrod: "We just left [the victory rally at] Grant Park. What are you feeling?" It ended with Kroft asking in amazement: "You ran an incredibly effective and disciplined campaign, certainly one of the most effective presidential campaigns that's ever been run. There was no infighting, no real leaks, almost no turnover. How did you manage that? Even the Republicans were in awe."



It's easier to run a disciplined campaign when your CBS interviewers act so very disciplined in their interviewing and reporting. For example, why didn't Kroft manage to discover the Reverend Wright controversy in any of his pre-election interviews?

All of the questions to Team Obama were personal or horse-race questions, and none of them were tough. In between those softballs was a brief review of the Wright fiasco, which only bubbled up when Plouffe attempted to claim that "I think the number of meetings we had about race was zero." Kroft couldn't believe it: "You certainly must have had some meetings on it during the Jeremiah Wright affair." Axelrod conceded indirectly that it was a "pivotal moment," but the fuss was all external: "Pandemonium erupted in the political community," but not inside the no-drama Obama campaign.

**Interview Six.** On November 16, 2008, Kroft's Obama interview was split into hard news and soft. In the first segment, Kroft offered 15 issue questions (11 on the financial crisis), eight brief queries on the transition, and seven personal questions. The second segment of the interview, with Michelle Obama, consisted of 21 personal softballs. Now that the election was over, CBS's Steve Kroft proposed that perhaps Obama could be Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "People are comparing this to 1932. Is that a valid comparison, do you think?" Obama didn't accept the comparison: "Well, keep in mind that 1932, 1933 the unemployment rate was 25 percent, inching up to 30 percent. You had a third of the country that was ill-housed, ill-clothed. We're not going through something comparable to that. But I would say that this is as bad as we've seen since then."

But Kroft wouldn't let go of trying to paint the America of 2008 as dire as 1932. Eight minutes later in the interview, when Obama related how he was reading briefing papers and had read about Abraham Lincoln putting political rivals in his cabinet, Kroft returned to the Depression: "Have you been reading anything about the Depression? Anything about FDR?" Kroft also lobbed

personal softballs to the incoming First Couple, including: “Do you have a special transition team for [selecting] the dog? Or are you just doing that?”

**Selling a DVD.** On December 28, 2008, *60 Minutes* aired a special edition rehashing all the previous interviews. There were no new Obama interviews, but there were new softball questions that had not previously aired. But the whole thing focused on the personal questions – 36 personal questions to the Obamas, and just five rehashed horse-race inquiries.

This special documentary was the basis for an Obama-promoting DVD called *Obama All Access: Barack Obama’s Road to the White House*. CBS used this promotial lingo to lure Obama supporters: “See the candidate making sandwiches for his young daughters, the rising political superstar on the campaign trail, the confident candidate poised for victory, and the president-elect with his future first lady reflecting publicly for the first time on the fact that they will be the first African-American couple to occupy the White House.”

When he was interviewed by Bill O’Reilly on FNC’s *O’Reilly Factor* on February 4, 2009, Steve Kroft explained they jumped out of the starting gate on the Obama story: “We started early. I went out and spent a bunch of time with him before he declared...They were dying to have somebody come out, especially *60 Minutes*, very early on to kind of explain their campaign....we developed a nice rapport.” O’Reilly asked “What does it say to people other than ‘Go, go Obama?’” Kroft replied: “It’s an historical document. And I think we’ll probably sell a lot of copies to libraries and things like that. Maybe to some -- maybe to some Republican political consultants.” O’Reilly followed up: “Is there cheerleading in it?” Kroft responded: “No, I don’t think so. It’s -- we’ve taken the interviews and it is a straight narrative of the campaign.”



In narrating the Obama story around the clips, Kroft strongly pushed Obama as a star and a phenomenon: “He had yet to declare his candidacy, but he was already the biggest political celebrity in America. Propelled by the media hunger for a fresh face and a good story, he had graced the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, been endorsed by Oprah, and the campaign itself seemed to have morphed out of his latest book tour.”

Kroft recalled a rally at George Mason University in northern Virginia: “It was our first exposure to what came to be known as ‘Obama-mania.’ You sensed immediately that something unusual was going on, something rarely seen in American politics... 5,000 students had turned out to see him...he urged his young audience to cast aside its cynicism of politics and engage the system, evoking the words of Martin Luther King.”

Kroft had this question for Michelle Obama: “We were with him at George Mason, and it was like – it was like a rock concert. I mean, he was – people were mobbing him. Do you understand the charisma thing? Do you see it?”

Obama’s five interviews with Kroft since he became president have been tougher and more issue-oriented. Unlike the warm and light segments of the campaign phase, they were not jam-packed with positive personal information. On September 13, 2009, Kroft pressed Obama gently from the right about his sunny optimism about the cost of his health-care proposals: “There is still a great deal of skepticism about how this plan is going to be paid for. What you promised is essentially you promised not to affect anybody who has coverage now at all. You have promised to add another 30 million people into the system and you're saying that you can do all of this or want to do all this without impacting or increasing the deficit by a dime. How do you do that?”

CBS may have decided a president needs a little more scrutiny – or their DVD production for Obama supporters was completed.

### *A Contrast to Obama*

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Other presidential candidates didn’t get Obama’s kind of deference in their single appearances on *60 Minutes*. When Katie Couric interviewed John and Elizabeth Edwards on March 21, 2007, she hit Edwards repeatedly with charges that he was exploiting his wife’s cancer diagnosis, or that running for president was callous: “Your decision to stay in this race has been analyzed, and quite frankly judged by a lot of people. And some say, what you're doing is courageous, others say it's callous. Some say, ‘Isn’t it wonderful they care for something greater than themselves?’ And others say, ‘It’s a case of insatiable ambition.’ You say?” These questions dominated the interview: “Some people watching this would say, ‘I would put my family first always, and my job second.’ And you’re doing the exact opposite. You're putting your work first, and your family second.”

Couric lectured about the younger Edwards children: “They’re six and eight. They’re still baby birds.” This might seem odd to the CBS viewer, since Obama’s daughters were five and eight at the time, and the Obamas were not asked about it.

Mike Wallace interviewed Republican candidate Mitt Romney on May 13, 2007, and Wallace not only pounded him on his changing stances on issues from taxes to abortion to his new membership in the NRA, he asked Romney if he engaged in premarital sex with his wife.

When Romney explained that they were married young in part because of the Mormon prohibition against premarital sex,



Wallace dove in: "Did you have premarital sex with Ann?" Romney replied: "I'm sorry. We don't get into those things. The answer is no." Wallace crossed a line his longtime boss and friend Don Hewitt wrote about in his book: "But poking into the sex lives of public officials – or anybody else, for that matter? That's where a line should be drawn." That's apparently not a line if the candidate is religious.

Wallace did press Romney on his Mormon beliefs, while Kroft never asked a single question about Obama claiming to be a "devout Christian." Wallace even pounded Romney's five sons on why none of them ever joined the military – a question never put to Obama. "Not one agreed or thought about serving in the military," Wallace remarked. He also pressed Gov. Romney himself about not serving in the military.

While Kroft pressed Hillary Clinton to denounce Obama-is-a-Muslim rumors, she did receive her own softball interview from Katie Couric on February 10, 2008 – on the same show as Kroft's second Obama interview. This was the hardest ball: "Barack Obama's candidacy has undeniably gained momentum over the recent months. Have you grappled with the idea, Senator Clinton, that it could be him and not you?" She also suggested the Clintons could be secretly harming Obama. "You've said, 'I've been through the Republican attacks. And I've been vetted.' And cynics suggest that you're insinuating there's some deep, dark secret that is in Barack Obama's past that will be somehow unveiled by a GOP attack machine," Couric said.



Couric also offered one zinger from the left. When Clinton complained about the \$400 billion deficit projected in President Bush's new budget, Couric pounced: "A deficit that's been caused largely by a war that you authorized." But most of the interview was bubbly girl talk like this:

COURIC: How do you do it? I mean, the satellite interviews, the speeches, the travel, the debates, the schmoozing, the picture taking, 24/7?

CLINTON: I do it because I really believe in what I'm doing.

COURIC: I knew you were gonna say that.

CLINTON: Well, but it's true.

COURIC, giggling: But I'm talking about pure stamina.

CLINTON: Well, pure stamina. I have a lot of stamina and I have a lot of resilience.

COURIC: Having said that, do you pop vitamins, do you mainline coffee?

And then there was this:

COURIC: What were you like in high school? Were you the girl in the front row taking meticulous notes and always raising your hand?

CLINTON: Not always raising my hand, not only raising my hand.

COURIC: Someone told me your nickname in school was "Miss Frigidaire." Is that true?

CLINTON: Only with some boys. [laughs]

COURIC, giggling: I don't know if I want to hear the back story on that!

CLINTON: Well, you wouldn't want to know the boys either.

Past presidential candidates also drew softballs from *60 Minutes*. On March 30, 2008, correspondent Lesley Stahl oozed about former vice president Al Gore: "Since he lost the election, Al Gore has become a certified celebrity, a popular prophet of global warming." In the introduction to the segment, Stahl proclaimed: "When Al Gore ran for president in 2000, he was often ridiculed as inauthentic and wooden. Today, he is passionate and animated, a man transformed." Stahl later observed about the chances of Gore brokering a deal between Obama and Hillary Clinton before the convention: "He's not ruling it out, but he says he already has a job -- as he puts it, P.R. agent for the planet." Stahl barely asked questions, beyond imploring Tipper Gore to explain how her husband had changed.

The most notable part came when she suggested Dick Cheney had conveyed skepticism about global warming: "We don't know what causes it and why spend all this money till we really, really know?" Gore responded: "I think that those people are in such a tiny, tiny minority now with their point of view. They're almost like the ones who still believe that the moon landing was staged in a movie lot in Arizona and those who believe the Earth is flat. That demeans them a little bit, but it's not that far off." Stahl offered no reaction and no follow-up. Her next sentence: "What Al Gore has set out to do is mobilize a big, popular movement, worldwide. And his winning the Nobel Peace Prize hasn't hurt, since it's given him more stature and prestige."

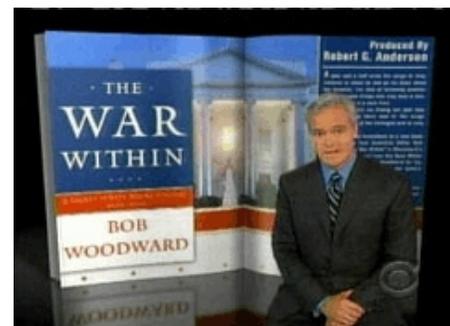
When President Bush granted an interview to Scott Pelley that aired on January 14, 2007, Pelley was throwing hardballs: "You know better than I do that many Americans feel that your administration has not been straight with the country, has not been honest. To those people, you say what? ....No weapons of mass destruction....No credible connection between 9/11 and Iraq....the Office of Management and Budget said this war would cost somewhere between 50 and \$60 billion, and now we're over \$400. Bush said "I got you. I got you. I got you." Pelley replied: "But the perception, sir, more than any one of those points is the administration has not been straight with us." Bush strongly disagreed, and they talked about Iraq being unstable. Pelley shot

back: "But wasn't it your administration that created the instability in Iraq? Bush said: "Well, our administration took care of a source of instability in Iraq. Envision a world in which Saddam Hussein was rushing for a nuclear weapon to compete against Iran. If--my decision to remove Saddam Hussein was the correct decision in my judgment. But he is a -- he was a significant source of instability." Pelley insisted: "It's much more unstable now, Mr. President."

### *Stenographers to Liberal Media and Celebrity Power*

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CBS also celebrated liberal journalists and celebrities with softball interviews on *60 Minutes*, even as they denounced conservatives. *Washington Post* editor and author Bob Woodward was granted a series of interviews promoting his books and attacking President Bush. CBS didn't challenge Woodward, and viewers were usually notified about one reason: Woodward's books were published by Simon & Schuster, part of the same corporate family as CBS.



On September 7, 2008, as they plugged Woodward's book *The War Within*, Scott Pelley summoned the subject of Bush's frustration with the Iraqi people. Woodward explained: "He has a meeting at the Pentagon with a bunch of experts and he just said, 'I don't understand that the Iraqis are not appreciative of what we've done for them,' namely liberating them." Pelley then asked: "But tens of thousands of innocent Iraqis had been killed in the invasion and through the occupation. He didn't understand why they might be a little ungrateful about what had occurred to them?" Woodward suggested the president was deluded: "His beacon is liberation. He thinks we've done this magnificent thing for them. I think he still holds to that position."

Earlier in the interview, Pelley aided Woodward in underlining Bush's thirst for blood: "Mr. Bush told Woodward that he was frustrated with his commanders and asked for enemy body counts so he could keep score." Woodward explained: "And this is Bush's concern that we're not going out and killing. In fact, [Gen. George] Casey told one colleague privately that the president's view is almost reflective of 'kill the bastards, kill the bastards, and that way we'll succeed.'" Pelley didn't challenge Woodward's fierce narrative against Bush, and didn't question any of Woodward's sources or methods -- except to suggest that Woodward was holding back information on how the government was targeting al-Qaeda leaders.

Mike Wallace hawked Woodward's book *State of Denial* on October 1, 2006. "According to Woodward, another key general, John Abizaid, who's in charge of the whole Gulf region, told friends that, on Iraq, Rumsfeld has lost all credibility." Woodward touted war stories from liberal hero John Murtha: "John Murtha is, in many ways, the soul and the conscience of the military. And

he came out and said, 'We need to get out of Iraq as soon as it's practical.' And that sent a 10,000-volt jolt through the White House. Here's Mr. Military saying we need to get out. And John Abizaid went to see him privately. This is Bush's and Rumsfeld's commander in Iraq. And John Abizaid held up his fingers, according to Murtha, and said, 'We're about a quarter of an inch apart.' He said 'We're that far apart.'"

This is quite a contrast with Bush Pentagon official Douglas Feith. When he was interviewed by Steve Kroft on April 6, 2008 about his book *The Path to War*, it wasn't just a helpful download of his findings. "General Franks, I don't have to tell you what he said, but he called you...Basically, the dumbest guy on the face of the planet. Former CIA Director George Tenet called your intelligence evaluations 'total crap.' This isn't normal Washington discourse." But it is the way conservatives are evaluated on CBS. Kroft continued: "Some of them have already answered that question in books of their own or with quotes in the books of others, portraying Feith as a bureaucratic bully hellbent on war."

Scott Pelley's interview with former CIA director George Tenet on April 29, 2007 was a classic *60 Minutes* takedown, not letting Tenet answer in mid-accusation: "Two of the 19 hijackers, in your files, in Langley, Virginia, a year and a half...before 9/11....They don't get on a watch list....They don't get on a no-fly list....You know, these are bad guys." He added: "If this plan of yours is so great....and if Afghanistan went so well....how does Osama bin Laden get away....when we've got him cornered at Tora Bora?" On evidence of chemical weapons in Iraq, Pelley lectured: "We are going to war. Tens of thousands of people are going to be killed, and you're telling me you had evidence to prove a civil case, and not a criminal case?"

CBS didn't play hardball with liberal darling Valerie Plame, the CIA agent who hired her own husband to find evidence Saddam Hussein sought uranium for nuclear weapons in Niger. Katie Couric's sugary profile on October 21, 2007 began with inaccuracy: "As a CIA spy, Valerie Plame Wilson wasn't allowed to defend herself, maintaining her silence for four long years until tonight." That was a bizarre claim considering that Couric reported the story of Plame testifying before Congress in March of 2007.



Couric failed to press hard on Plame over the politically charged decision to assign her husband to a secret mission to Niger. Plame suggested "another colleague of mine" came up with the idea of sending her husband:

COURIC: When it was brought up, did you think, 'That's a reasonable idea.'

PLAME: Well, yes, because Joe has the independent credentials to do this. He knew Iraq and Saddam Hussein. He had served many years in Africa, he had, in fact, knew the governments, the different governments of Niger. He...

COURIC: He had, in fact, gone to Niger for the CIA before.

PLAME: Yes. He had done some missions, yes....

COURIC: Why do you think the administration made such a big deal over who exactly sent your husband to Niger?

PLAME: Because this sets up this erroneous charge of somehow there was nepotism involved. And therefore, if I could be accused of sending him, then what Joe reported on was invalid.

Couric and CBS made no attempt to press Plame about her honesty, using her own obvious words personally selling her husband in a February 12, 2002 internal CIA memo, pushed forward by Sen. Kit Bond in May of 2007: "My husband is willing to help, if it makes sense, but no problem if not. End of story....my husband has good relations with both the PM [of Niger] and the former minister of mines, not to mention lots of French contacts, both of whom could possibly shed light on this sort of activity. To be frank with you, I was somewhat embarrassed by the agency's sloppy work last go-round, and I am hesitant to suggest anything again. However, [my husband] may be in a position to assist."

One part of the *60 Minutes* formula for ratings is grabbing movie stars for interviews. When Morley Safer interviewed Alec Baldwin on May 12, 2008, shortly after the Democratic primaries ended, he not only let the actor vent about the "vast right-wing conspiracy," he joined him in condemning Sean Hannity as a "junkyard dog."



SAFER: And yet it's his off-screen performances that can get in the way of a truly gifted man. And often it's his liberal politics that make him red meat for his critics.

BALDWIN: They hate liberals who can throw a punch.

SAFER: "They"? Who's "they"? Who's...

BALDWIN: They, the vast right-wing conspiracy that's after me.

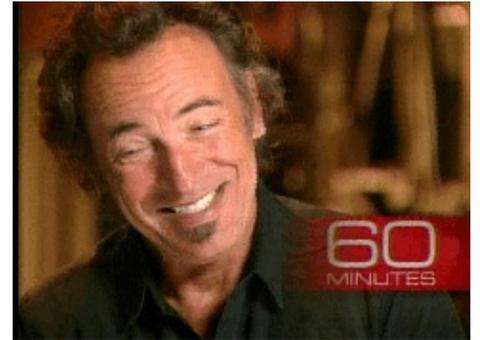
SAFER: Liberal politics has always been his passion. He grew up in a working class family on Long Island, New York. He has an impressive grasp of the issues and spends a huge

amount of his time and money supporting causes he believes in: animal rights, the environment, the arts. But his bare-knuckled approach to political discourse –

BALDWIN: Not all Republicans are as insane as these extremist conservatives.

SAFER: – has made him an easy target for conservative junkyard dogs like Sean Hannity.

On October 8, 2007, Scott Pelley rolled out the red carpet for rock star Bruce Springsteen to unload on the terrible, even “anti-American” things unleashed by the Bush administration. Springsteen boasted he was a “canary in a coalmine” during the dark era of Bush.



PELLEY: What's on your mind? What are you writing about?

SPRINGSTEEN: I try to chart the distance between American ideals and American reality. That's how my music is laid out. It's like we're – we reached a point where we're so intent on protecting ourselves that we're willing to destroy the best parts of ourselves to do so.

PELLEY: What do you mean?

SPRINGSTEEN: Well, I think that we've seen things happen over the past six years that I don't think anybody ever thought they'd see in the United States. When people think of the American identity, they don't think of torture, they don't think of illegal wiretapping, they don't think of voter suppression, they don't think of no *habeas corpus*, no right to a lawyer to --you know? Those are things that, those are things that are anti-American.

PELLEY: You know, I think this record is going to be seen as anti-war. And you know there are people watching this interview who are going to say to themselves, “Bruce Springsteen is no patriot.”

SPRINGSTEEN: Well, that's just the language of the day, you know? The *modus operandi* for anybody who doesn't like somebody, you know, criticizing where we've been or where we're going, you know. It's unpatriotic at any given moment to sit back and let things pass that are – that are damaging to someplace that you love so dearly and that's given me so much, and that I believe in. I still feel and see it as a beacon of hope and possibility.

CBS also hailed the Dixie Chicks for bravely declaring at a London concert they were ashamed to be from the same state as President Bush, which led to controversy and boycotts. Since the Bush-bashing incident in London, Steve Kroft insisted, “the only thing that's changed is that nearly 70 percent of the American public now agrees with her, at least to some extent.” Kroft

touted their new song "Not Ready to Make Nice" like he was earning a commission: "The song is powerful and unrepentant. The anger isn't directed at the war or the president or their many fans who deserted them. It's about the hatred and narrow-minded intolerance that they encountered for expressing an opinion. As artists, they wanted to respond with music and a video to drive home the point." Kroft overlooked that the song painted their critics with a broad brush, as people who write letters "Sayin' that I better shut up and sing, or my life will be over."

Unsurprisingly, on April 30, 2006, CBS touted liberal satirist Stephen Colbert, who pretends to be an idiotic conservative on Comedy Central. Whether his liberalism or his corporate connection to CBS through Viacom is a better reason for a puff piece is unclear. But Morley Safer began with his personal delight: "If you flip through the cable news channels any weeknight, you're bound to see a collection of talking heads, or rather shouting heads, who draw large audiences with a diet of often wildly inaccurate, but patriotic and combative noise. The shows are not exactly news or entertainment, but are exactly outrageous. Bill O'Reilly perfected the formula on Fox, and others have successfully followed his recipe. With all of their excesses, it was only a matter of time before someone came along to skewer them. Well, the eagle has landed." This exchange summed it up:

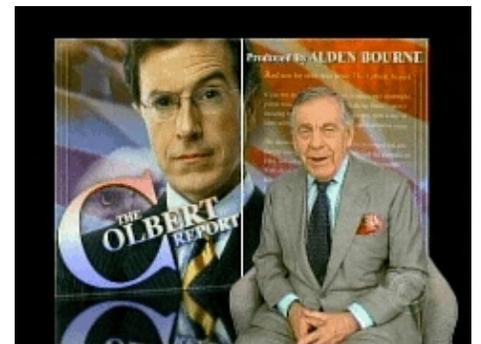
SAFER: That character that you play. Is he smart or is he proud to be stupid?

COLBERT: I think of him as well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-status, *idiot*.

SAFER: And the last defense against Hollywood liberals like Tim Robbins. Colbert looks to the very fount of truthiness for inspiration: Bill O'Reilly....Apart from the substance, which you, in a sense, borrow from these guys, what about mannerisms?

COLBERT: Volume's very important. The only real way to tell your audience what's important is what you say loudest. I can say it up here or I could say it down here, but I'll cut off your mike, sir. Get - shut up! Shut up, Safer!

The 13-minute segment could easily be mistaken for infomercial, with four and a half minutes of its air time devoted to clips from *The Colbert Report*, and that's not counting all the endless clips being shown while Safer talks over the video. The title of the piece was simply "The Colbert Report," with the program's logo on screen.



To make sure CBS was taking its corporate synergy to the highest level, Colbert was also featured when *60 Minutes* profiled FNC's Bill O'Reilly, and CNN's Lou Dobbs. Mike Wallace began his O'Reilly piece on February 26, 2007 this way: "Who is Bill O'Reilly? Is he a patriot? A blowhard? A braggart? A bully? Well, it turns out, there's a lot more to him than any of that. Since

we sat down in 2004, he has maintained his domination of cable news, competitors have tried to copy him. And four nights a week, perhaps the ultimate flattery, Stephen Colbert parodies him on Comedy Central.” The story was chummy in tone, but Wallace called O’Reilly a fame and power addict:

O’REILLY: When you’re a working-class guy like I used to paint houses...

WALLACE: Oh, give me a break! You’re a working-class guy?

O’REILLY: I am, Mike. You know that.

WALLACE: You are addicted to the power, you are addicted to the money, you are addicted to the fact that ‘I am Bill O’Reilly, and everybody knows it.’

O’REILLY: Dr. Phil is back. How did he get in the room?

WALLACE: Come on, come on, come on!

Lesley Stahl’s segment on Lou Dobbs on May 3, 2007 used footage of Dobbs on *The Colbert Report*, but Stahl presented Dobbs as a man who’s reckless with the facts. At one point, she lectured: “Well, here’s what they say about you: That you distort the figures, that you exaggerate, and that you aim to inflame just to get ratings....Reporters don’t take on issues; reporters report issues. And there’s a big difference there.” It’s too bad Stahl didn’t take this critique to Dan Rather before his George W. Bush National Guard fiasco on *60 Minutes II*.



Stahl accused Dobbs of wildly exaggerating the amount of leprosy cases in the United States (and Dobbs later retracted). She was obviously hostile. Dobbs brought in a leftist group that wanted Dobbs removed from CNN (and ultimately succeeded):

STAHL: Mark Potok who monitors hate groups for the Southern Poverty Law Center, charges that Dobbs is a fearmonger.

POTOK: The impression you get, pretty strongly, I think, day after day, is that, you know, sort of all 11 million illegal aliens are bringing leprosy; they’re bringing crime; they’re bringing all these terrible things to the United States.

STAHL: If these people have come into this country illegally, what is so wrong with somebody taking it up as an advocate?

POTOK: That does not sort of give one the go-ahead to say that, you know, "These are a group of rapists and disease-carrying people who are coming to, you know, essentially destroy the culture of this country." You know, I think that's a long leap.

Potok was exactly the kind of fierce critic that *60 Minutes* never seemed to locate for an interview when it was profiling liberal politicians and celebrities.

CBS even honored an author posthumously. On September 13, 2009, Lesley Stahl honored the last memoir of Ted Kennedy, titled *True Compass*. Ted Kennedy Jr said he often feared his father would be shot: "Most people keep coats and umbrellas in their coat closet. My father kept bulletproof vests in his coat closet. And believe me, we would walk by that coat closet every day, you know, fearful about some crazy person out there, you know, wanting to make a name for themselves. And that I think was in the back of our minds almost every time that my father would appear in public."

Stahl lamented "how hard it was for Ted Sr. to be the baby in the Kennedy family. 'I was always catching up,' he writes, 'I was the ninth of nine'.... He felt a -- a sense of inadequacy till he was quite old." Stahl glossed quickly over Chappaquiddick, as Jonathan Karp, his publisher with Hachette, insisted "he's spent his life trying to atone for this," and then quickly turned the sympathy right back to poor Teddy. "One thing he says that he's never said before is that he was tormented by the idea that it's-- his father's death may have been hastened by Chappaquiddick." Stahl could only wither and sympathize: "Oh, my God."

## *Conclusion*

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Over its long tenure, *60 Minutes* has unquestionably manufactured a long record of highly-rated TV news, and part of that formula is an occasionally syrupy profile of celebrities. But our politicians are not elected to be famous and admired. They are elected to serve the public. When the anchors who boast of their hard-hitting techniques treat politicians as celebrities and devote their questions to flattering trivia about getting a family dog or whether the candidate makes his daughters macaroni and cheese, as they did with Barack Obama, they doubly fail to serve the public.

CBS could protest that they're just trying to allow the public an exclusive view inside a candidate's private life. But the makers of *60 Minutes* didn't offer that softly lit view to all the candidates. They favored one candidate, repeatedly, and then took a victory lap when the election was over with a DVD featuring the Greatest Softballs. A review of the recent output of *60 Minutes* should cause media historians to restrain themselves before declaring that this program is a hallmark of hard-hitting journalism, without a political axe to grind. They either carry an axe or a shoe-shine kit.

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