



SPECIAL REPORT

AN IN-DEPTH STUDY, ANALYSIS OR REVIEW EXPLORING THE MEDIA

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The Ten Worst Media Distortions of Campaign 2004

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In a fit of candor back in July, Evan Thomas, *Newsweek's* Assistant Managing Editor, blurted out the truth: most reporters want President George W. Bush to lose and John Kerry to win. Appearing on the syndicated program *Inside Washington* July 10, Thomas zeroed in on the adoring coverage most in the media, including his own magazine, were awarding John Kerry and John Edwards.

"The media, I think, wants Kerry to win," Thomas explained. "And I think they're going to portray Kerry and Edwards — I'm talking about the establishment media, not Fox — but they're going to portray Kerry and Edwards as being young and dynamic and optimistic and all. There's going to be this glow about them that some, is going to be worth, collectively, the two of them, that's going to be worth maybe 15 points."

Ten Worst Media Distortions

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Appearing on CNN's *Reliable Sources* three months later, Thomas told the *Washington Post's* Howard Kurtz that he was wrong to peg the value of the media's contribution at "maybe 15 points" for the Democrats, but said he "absolutely" believed the media preferred Kerry and Edwards. He speculated that media bias might be worth five points for the Democrats on Election Day.

Thomas's observation fits with a poll taken by the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press back in May. The group surveyed 247 journalists at national-level outlets, and found only a piddling seven percent would describe themselves as "conservative," compared to 33 percent of the overall population. While the majority of journalists (54 percent) labeled themselves as "moderate," one out of three national journalists (34 percent) called themselves "liberal," a far higher rate than the regular public (23 percent).

Pew found that journalists' ideology seems to affect how they approach their profession. In May, a mere eight percent of the national press believed the media were being "too critical" of President Bush, compared to nearly seven times as many (55 percent) who thought the media were "not critical enough."

Journalists' desire for more bad news about Bush contrasts with their feelings about the media's treatment of Bill Clinton. Back in 1995, as recounted in the MRC's June 1995 edition of *MediaWatch*, 48 percent of national journalists thought there was "too little" news about Clinton's achievements in office, compared to just two percent who thought the press had given "too much" coverage to his achievements.

No matter who wins or loses this year's presidential election, Campaign 2004 will be remembered for the unprecedented partisanship of the so-called mainstream media, as the Media Research Center has documented all year. Here are our awards for the ten most-biased episodes in Campaign 2004, along with commendations for those instances when journalists rose above their bias and approached their craft in a fair and balanced way.

1. Dan Rather's Forgery Fiasco

On September 8, Dan Rather led off his *CBS Evening News* by touting four exclusively-obtained "memos" purportedly showing that George W. Bush's squadron commander, Jerry Killian, was fed up with the young Air National Guard Lieutenant's failure to get a physical exam. The same documents also starred on *60 Minutes* that night, as did a major Democratic partisan, Ben Barnes, who claimed he was "sorry" he helped Bush get a slot in the National Guard, a suspicious reversal of his previous accounts.

CBS's new "evidence" triggered stories in every major news outlet, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, ABC, NBC, FNC and CNN. But by Friday, September 10, many of those same news organizations quoted independent experts doubting the authenticity of the memos, dated 1972 and 1973, since they looked computer-generated, not typed, citing a range of formatting issues. Then Killian's widow told ABC Radio that her late husband did not type or keep extensive records, and Killian's son told the Associated Press he doubted his father wrote those "memos."

Heads I Win, Tails You Lose

As CBS's anti-Bush story unwound, ABC political analyst George Stephanopoulos suggested the forgery could have originated with the GOP.

"A lot of Democrats suspect this was a set up, something set up by Republicans," he relayed on the September 10 *Good Morning America*.

But on the September 10 *Evening News*, Rather offered a six-minute response that repeated his indictment of Bush, ignored most of the substantive charges (including any mention of Killian's family) and cast CBS's critics as partisan and unreliable: "Today, on the Internet and elsewhere, some people, including many who are partisan political operatives, concentrated not on the key questions of the overall story, but on the documents that were part of the support of the story." So it didn't matter that his "memos" were a fraud?

Rather and his network spent the next week pointing fingers at others, falsely suggesting that CBS was promoting "truth" in the face of "partisan political ideological forces." Rather told the *New York Observer's* Joe Hagan: "Powerful and extremely well-financed forces are concentrating on questions about the documents because they can't deny the fundamental truth of the story." He added, "This is your basic fogging machine, which is set up to cloud the issue, to obscure the truth."

In an interview with the *Washington Post's* Howard Kurtz, Rather boasted about standing up to right-wing meanies: "I don't back down. I don't cave when the pressure gets too great from these partisan political ideological forces."

Even as he continued to impugn Bush's National Guard service, the CBS anchor portrayed himself as the victim: "People who are so passionately partisan politically or ideologically committed basically say, 'Because he won't report it our way, we're going to hang something bad around his neck and choke him with it, check him out of existence if we can, if not make him feel great pain.' They know that I'm fiercely independent and that's what drives them up a wall," Rather told *USA Today's* Peter Johnson and Jim Drinkard.

Josh Howard, the Executive Producer of the Wednesday edition of *60 Minutes*, even tried to blame Bush himself, telling the *Los Angeles Times*: "If we had gotten back from the White House any kind of red flag, raised eyebrow, anything... we would have gone back

to square one.” But, Howard told the *Times*, “the White House said they were authentic, and that carried a lot of weight with us.”

That’s incorrect. The White House, which only saw the “memos” a few hours before *60 Minutes* went on the air, did not confirm the authenticity of CBS’s fraud memos. That job was botched by CBS itself.

On September 20, twelve days after their original report aired, Rather revealed that CBS got the “memos” from a disgruntled ex-National Guardsman, Bill Burkett, who had a long grudge against Bush. But Rather only admitted that CBS could not authenticate the documents, telling the *Chicago Tribune*, “Do I think they’re forged? No.”

Some in the liberal media refused to condemn CBS for sacrificing its professional ethics in pursuit of a political agenda. CNN anchor Aaron Brown was the most condescending, sniffing that those who linked the memo scandal with liberal bias lack brainpower. “Some partisans...will see willful deception on the part of CBS,” Brown lectured on the September 20 *NewsNight*. “Smarter and more reasoned heads know better.”

On the Bright Side: ABC Investigated CBS’s Document Experts

Even as CBS News was claiming that its independent document experts had vouched for the four forged memos at the center of their anti-Bush story, ABC’s *World News Tonight* revealed that two of the experts CBS consulted thought the documents were suspicious. On September 14, ABC’s Brian Ross reported that “two experts hired by CBS News say the network ignored concerns they raised prior to the broadcast about the disputed National Guard records.”

Ross explained how Emily Will, a certified document examiner, “says she saw problems right away with the one document CBS hired her to check in the days before the broadcast.” Will recalled how right before the Wednesday, September 8, broadcast she predicted: “I told them that all the questions I was asking them at that time, which was Tuesday night, they were going to be asked by hundreds of other document examiners on Thursday if they ran that story.” Then Ross noted how “a second document examiner hired by CBS News, Linda James of Plano, Texas, told ABC News she too had concerns about the documents prior to the broadcast.”

But to viewers, Ross pointed out, “CBS made no mention that any expert disputed the authenticity of the documents.”

2. Ignoring, then Attacking, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth

Even before John Kerry used his Vietnam record to vault to victory in the Iowa Democratic caucuses, the national media frequently touted the Massachusetts liberal as a decorated, thrice-wounded war hero. But apart from interviewing the small group of Vietnam veterans who have campaigned with Kerry over the last two decades, national reporters did not seek out others to confirm or challenge the tales of Kerry's valor and heroism. The networks' approach to questions about Kerry's past is in stark contrast to the aggressiveness with which they pursued theories about Bush's National Guard service (see #3).

Then on May 4, a group of more than 250 Vietnam veterans — including Kerry's superior officers and many who served with him when he was a Swift Boat commander — launched a public challenge to Kerry's version of Vietnam. At a press conference, they charged Kerry had greatly embellished his military record and betrayed his fellow Swift Boat veterans when he went before the Senate to make sweeping charges of American war crimes in Vietnam. Based on this record, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth declared Kerry "unfit" to serve as Commander in Chief.

Yet the national media still offered little scrutiny of either Kerry's service or his anti-war rhetoric. The ABC and NBC evening newscasts ignored the Swift Boat veterans' press conference, while on the May 4 *CBS Evening News* Byron Pitts chose to impugn their integrity: "If you think this is just a group of concerned veterans, think again."

On May 31, nearly four weeks after these veterans came forward, *CNN NewsNight* anchor Aaron Brown narrated a four-minute long Memorial Day account of John Kerry's exploits in Vietnam that only quoted Kerry and the handful of veterans who had signed up for his presidential campaign. Brown's panegyric, event-by-event tribute to Kerry's heroism — which could have passed as a Democratic National Committee infomercial — did not include a single syllable about the questions raised by the other Swift Boat veterans.

NBC Nightly News ignored the Swift Boat veterans for three months, until August 6. Then, after the veterans raised \$150,000 for a TV ad — a tiny sum compared to what George Soros and MoveOn.org had by then spent on anti-Bush ads —

Trusting the Viet Cong More than U.S. Vets

Prior to October 14, ABC's *Nightline* had not hosted any of the anti-Kerry Swift Boat veterans who witnessed Kerry's service in Vietnam.

But *Nightline* sent a producer all the way to Vietnam to interview ex-Viet Cong guerrilla fighters who, Ted Koppel insisted, back up Kerry's story. Koppel called them "witnesses....who have no particular ax to grind," even though the communist government had a "minder" monitoring every interview ABC conducted in the totalitarian state.

And Koppel got snippy when Swift Boat vet John O'Neill reminded him that Kerry has garnered a spot in the communists' war museum as someone "who helped them win the war."

NBC aired a story suggesting that the ad was the scurrilous work of anti-Kerry forces exploiting a loophole.

“The ad is paid for by Bush contributors using a loophole in the McCain-Feingold law,” reporter Andrea Mitchell complained on the *NBC Nightly News*, adding “some of the same players organized anonymous attack ads against John McCain four years ago.”

Earlier that day, on the August 6 *Imus in the Morning* on MSNBC, Mitchell told radio host Don Imus that the anti-Kerry vets were “grossly distorting the record, according to anybody who knows anything about Kerry’s record.” If that was true, then why didn’t Mitchell tell *Nightly News* viewers about Kerry’s real record, instead of merely grumbling about who paid for the TV spot?

ABC’s *World News Tonight* did not mention the existence of the anti-Kerry Swift vets until Kerry himself gave a speech attacking the credibility and integrity of his fellow veterans. Kerry’s speech on August 19 marked the point when the liberal media began to actively cover the story, but even then most of their scrutiny was reserved for the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, not the candidate seeking the highest office in the land.

Peter Jennings, for one, was unhappy with even the puny amount of attention his network gave to the Swift Boat veterans’ charges. “The ads were demonstrably false,” he asserted at a *New Yorker* forum on October 2, suggesting that he and his colleagues should have been faster to exonerate Kerry: “If you look seriously at the coverage, I think you didn’t find the media quick enough to say these were demonstrably false, for the most part. And we did what we do tend to do in journalism sometimes, he said, she said, he said, she said.”

On the Bright Side: FNC Reported Kerry’s Cambodia Capitulation

On August 11, the Kerry campaign backtracked from John Kerry’s oft-repeated claim that he was in Cambodia on Christmas Eve 1968, in what would have been a violation of international law by the U.S., but only the Fox News Channel cared and ran a full story on the admission prompted by John O’Neill’s book, *Unfit for Command: Swift Boat Veterans Speak Out Against John Kerry*.

On FNC’s *Special Report*, anchor Brit Hume announced: “A new book about John Kerry has prompted a debate unlike any seen in modern presidential history: whether a decorated war veteran really is a hero. The Kerry campaign has dismissed the book as a political smear, but now the Kerry camp is making adjustments in key parts of a story Kerry has told about fighting in Cambodia.”

Reporter Major Garrett elaborated: “The Kerry campaign has been forced to admit errors in statements Kerry made in a 1979 *Boston Herald* article and in a 1986 Senate speech shown here in the *Congressional Record* about vivid memories of his leading a Swift Boat deep into Cambodia and taking enemy fire on Christmas Eve 1968.”

Garrett then showed a soundbite from Kerry’s designated surrogate, “Veterans for Kerry” spokesman John Hurley: “I don’t know that anyone can actually say whether or not they were in Cambodia.”

Garrett qualified Kerry’s new story: “The Kerry campaign also says Kerry was in Cambodia on a different mission with Navy Seals but can provide no date for that mission....In the past, Kerry has written that the Cambodian incursion on Christmas Eve was, quote, ‘seared into his memory.’” He then showed another clip from his interview with the pro-Kerry Hurley: “I think the experience is seared into his memory. I think that he knows that he was under fire in Cambodia. I think the date is what’s inaccurate, that it was just not Christmas Eve day.”

3. Pounding the Bush National Guard Story

The networks did their best to ignore or demean the Vietnam veterans who criticized John Kerry’s military service and post-Vietnam activities as an anti-war activist (see #2), but when Democratic partisans like Terry McAuliffe and Michael Moore in February challenged President Bush’s service in the Texas Air National Guard, reporters quickly adopted the issue as their own and criticized as unsatisfactory every answer provided by the White House.

Reporters could not justify pursuing the Bush “AWOL” story by citing any actual proof of wrongdoing, any relevance to Bush’s role as President, any sign that his conduct in 1972-73 was especially uncommon, or any clamoring from voters to get to the bottom of the story. The only impetus was DNC boss Terry McAuliffe’s stated desire to contrast “John Kerry, a war hero with a chest full of medals” with “George Bush, a man who was AWOL in the Alabama National Guard.”

The networks followed McAuliffe’s agenda. From February 1 through February 16, ABC, CBS and NBC aired 63 National Guard stories or interview segments on their morning and evening news programs. That’s far more coverage than Bill Clinton’s draft-dodging scandal received in 1992. Back then, the three evening newscasts offered 10 stories on Clinton’s complete evasion of service; this year, those same broadcasts pumped out 25 stories on whether Bush’s acknowledged service was fully documented.

Despite the fact that no Democrat had substantiated their AWOL claims, the networks put the burden on Bush to prove his innocence. After the White House released documents on February 10 showing Bush had satisfied the Guard's requirements and received an honorable discharge, reporters wanted more evidence (see box). The records showed Bush was never "AWOL," exposing the baselessness of the Democrats' original charge, yet none of the networks framed their stories around questionable Democratic tactics. Instead, they kept the onus on Bush: "The issue is not going to go away," ABC's Terry Moran promised. Other lowlights:

■ On February 12, the *CBS Evening News* promoted a conspiracy theory floated by disgruntled ex-National Guard officer Bill Burkett, who claimed he overheard a 1997 order to purge Bush's records. The *Boston Globe* reported the next day that Burkett's back-up, George Conn, totally disagreed with his friend's version of what happened, but the *Evening News* never told viewers about that crucial detail. (Six months later, CBS would again rely on Burkett as a crucial source for an anti-Bush National Guard story, as Burkett later revealed himself as the provider of forged documents to CBS's *60 Minutes*. See #1.)

■ Early on, John Kerry tried to egg on the media. "Was he present and active, on duty in Alabama, at the times he was supposed to be?" he challenged on February 8. "Just because you get an honorable discharge does not, in fact, answer that question." Given Kerry's defense of the draft-dodging Clinton twelve years ago ("We do not need now to divide America over who served and how"), unbiased reporters would have questioned the candidate for his hypocrisy in at least not repudiating the other Democratic "dividers," but ABC, CBS and NBC concealed the Kerry flip-flop and kept him above the fray.

■ On February 12, Peter Jennings did not report the finding of ABC's polling unit that two-thirds of the public, including 58 percent of Democrats, thought the Bush National Guard story was "not a legitimate issue." Instead, Jennings highlighted how Bush's "rating for honesty and trustworthiness is at a new low" — as if the networks' biased promotion of unproved partisan charges had nothing to do with that.

Time magazine writer Joe Klein, a regular on CNN this political season, branded the "AWOL" story as "gutter politics," but he was nevertheless pleased to see President Bush on the receiving end of unfair attacks.

CBS Strained to Keep the Democrats' Story Alive

"The White House did release some of what it called newly discovered documents today. But as CBS's John Roberts reports, it did not put the issue to rest."

— **Dan Rather on the February 10 CBS Evening News.**

"Officials hoped the release of Mr. Bush's dental records would end the matter, but the dentist who treated him has no specific recollection of seeing the future President."

— **John Roberts, February 12.**

"Even with these new records, which describe Mr. Bush as an exceptionally fine young pilot and officer, there are still some gaps the White House has yet to fill in."

— **Roberts on February 13.**

“Gutter politics goes both ways. And I think that in this case, what we’re talking about is a legitimate issue of character which is peripheral to the campaign, not nearly as important as issues of war and solvency, but it’s an issue,” he justified on CNN’s *Paula Zahn Now* on February 11. “It’s kind of fun to watch Republicans respond to the kind of politics that they’ve been practicing for the last 20 years, especially the Bush family in 1988 and in 2000.”

4. Spinning a Good Economy into Bad News

When Bill Clinton ran for re-election in 1996, unemployment was 5.2 percent, inflation 3 percent, and economic growth 2.2 percent. Economic conditions are similar, if not better, today: unemployment is 5.4 percent, inflation 2.7 percent, and economists’ consensus forecast for economic growth this quarter is 3.7 percent. But the networks have stressed the downside of the most positive economic reports, and given wide play to any statistics suggesting weakness.

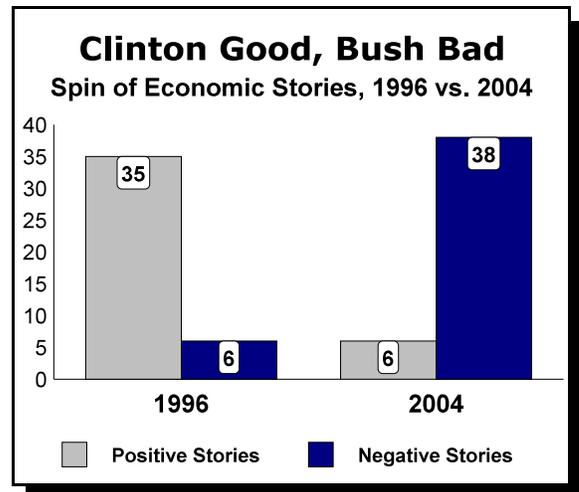
On April 2, after the Labor Department announced how 300,000 jobs were created in March, *NBC Nightly News* anchor Brian Williams was dubious: “Today’s announcement was such a badly needed shot in the arm for the Bush administration — and was such good news — some thought the numbers were too good to be true.”

The networks quickly got back to pessimism: On ABC’s *World News Tonight* the next evening, anchor Dan Harris introduced a story on how “some of those who are actually finding jobs are not getting the ones they had in mind.” Reporter Heather Cabot looked at an accountant who is now driving a cab in New York City. Cabot asserted, “He’s not the only over-qualified cabbie on the road. Today, nearly 16 percent of America’s taxi drivers have attended college.”

In May, the networks pounded the bad news of “record-high” gas prices, even though the inflation adjusted price of gasoline never approached the record highs of the early 1980s. Reporters fell over themselves trying to push the same negative line, from Peter Jennings (“certainly a record”) to Dan Rather (“record highs”), Tom Brokaw (“record-high gas prices”) to CNN anchor Aaron Brown (“rising to records”), CNN’s John King (“certainly a record”), NBC’s Carl Quintanilla (“record-high gas prices”), CBS’s Julie Chen (“record gas prices”), and finally ABC’s Jake Tapper (“record-high prices”), who found a man on the street to lament, “It’s going to kill us. These prices are going to kill us, man.”

At the time, real gas prices stood 26 percent lower than their peak in March 1981, when the average price per gallon translated to \$2.99 in today’s dollars.

CBS specialized in cherry-picking bad news. On Friday, June 4, we learned the booming U.S. economy created 947,000 new jobs in March, April and May, but *CBS Evening News* anchor Dan Rather spent just 20 seconds on that good news. Reporter Jim Axelrod then devoted two minutes to an Ohio company that was laying off employees. “After 103 years,” Axelrod intoned, “work at this plant in Canton, Ohio is set to stop. The Timken Company is shutting three factories and shedding 1300 jobs....The 1300 jobs lost here, at a company whose chairman is one of his strongest supporters, that’s bad for the President, very bad.”



On June 30, CBS business reporter Anthony Mason hyped how a slight increase by the Federal Reserve to a 1.25 percent interest rate meant “the era of cheap money is over.” Instead of saying that the Federal Reserve’s rate change ratified the recovery’s growing strength, Mason on the *CBS Evening News* stressed bank layoffs and the harm to everyday consumers: “Your credit card interest rate will be rising. So will adjustable rate mortgages. And say goodbye to those zero percent auto loans.”

On October 8, after the 13th straight month of reported job gains, CBS anchor Dan Rather chose to link President Bush with the worst economic period in American history. Apparently assuming poor job growth over the next four months, Rather proclaimed, “It’s the first net job loss on a President’s watch since Herbert Hoover during the Great Depression of the 1930s.” But in none of CBS’s employment reports this year did the network quantify for viewers the number of jobs lost as a direct consequence of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

5. The Networks’ Outrageous Convention Double-Standard

The media’s bias was never clearer than when it came to the two party conventions. In Boston, network journalists touted Democratic speakers as “rock stars,” but at the Republican convention in New York those same reporters led the resistance.

Less than 24 hours before the GOP convention convened, Tom Brokaw on the August 29 *NBC Nightly News* warned viewers not to believe that Republicans were sensible centrists just because moderates like John McCain were on the stage: “Streetwise New Yorkers may call that the political equivalent of a popular con game in this tough town –

three-card monte. But then," he rued, "that's a game in which the dealer almost always wins."

The next night, Dan Rather began the *CBS Evening News*: "Tonight, inside a post-9/11 security fortress, the Republican Convention opens in New York to re-nominate George W. Bush and showcase the party's, quote, 'moderate side.' Will voters buy it?" On the August 31 *Inside Politics*, CNN's Judy Woodruff worried out loud: "Can the Republicans get away with putting these moderate speakers up there and saying, 'Hey, we're really more moderate than what a lot of people say we are'?"

CNN hated the convention speakers, too. On the September 1 *NewsNight*, political analyst Bill Schneider complained, "This is a very angry convention, it's a very belligerent convention. I mean, I've covered 16 conventions." He zeroed in on Zell Miller's keynote address: "I've never heard such an angry speech." A few minutes later, *Time* magazine writer Joe Klein, a CNN regular, also castigated Miller, a Democratic Senator who crossed party lines to endorse Bush: "I've been doing this for a fair number of years and I don't think I've seen anything as angry or as ugly as Miller's speech."

But five weeks earlier, CNN and the rest of the liberal media were enthusiastic about the Democratic convention. ABC's Charles Gibson began the July 27 *Good Morning America* by celebrating the Democrats' energy: "I've been coming to conventions now since 1968, and I know they're controlled and they're scripted, but you can tell a lot about how energized a party is. And Monday night, for a convention, was rocking here. People were juiced like I don't think I've seen at a convention ever before. This place really was moving last night."

Over on CBS, morning co-anchor Hannah Storm was even more ecstatic: "In this sports-mad town, it was like the Celtics were playing in a championship game here at the Fleet Center last night. It was absolutely electric. Good morning to all of you. It was just rocking here last night," she began the July 27 *Early Show*.

NBC's Brokaw, who would later complain about GOP "con games," swooned over Bill Clinton's opening night speech July 26. "The Democratic Party is off to its start here in Boston by bringing out their biggest rock star. They call him Elvis, and not for nothing," Brokaw raved. Following Tuesday night's keynote address by liberal Senate candidate Barack Obama, MSNBC's Chris Matthews gushed that he'd "just seen the first black President."

"No Place" for Moderates

"You and Olympia Snowe, the other Senator from Maine, are known as moderate Republican women. You have no place in this convention. The platform does not seem to speak to a lot of women in this country. It's anti-abortion, it does not expand stem cell research, on other social issues in which women have some interest, for example, gay unions, is formally opposed to that. Do you think that this platform and this party is doing enough to reach out to moderate women across the country?"

— NBC's Tom Brokaw to Senator Susan Collins on his 4pm EDT MSNBC show *Brokaw in New York*, August 31.

Most of the applause was saved for the candidates, however. Following John Edwards' speech on Wednesday, July 28, CBS's John Roberts admired how "just the personality that Edwards exudes when he comes to these events is something that's pretty infectious with these delegates. And I talked to one delegate yesterday who says 'you know, I'm coming to like John Kerry but I haven't yet fallen in love with him, but I will tell you this: I have fallen in love with John Edwards.' It's obvious the charisma out there gets to everybody here in the Fleet Center."

During live coverage on July 29, ABC reporter Dan Harris gushed how he watched John Kerry deliver his acceptance speech while "standing next to the young speech writer who worked with Kerry on this speech...The look on his face: Rhapsody throughout." On CBS, Dan Rather championed how there was "an almost literal thunder inside the hall, shaking the Fleet Center in a way that it seldom shakes, if ever, even during a Celtics basketball playoff game." Bob Schieffer echoed Rather: "This is the best speech I have ever heard John Kerry make. I listened to a lot of speeches back there in the primary. This was the best. This was a very deft critique of policy."

6. Swooning Over Edwards' Image, Ignoring His Liberalism

When George W. Bush selected Dick Cheney as his running mate in 2000, the networks went into overdrive warning audiences that the man who turned out to be their next Vice President was a "hard right" conservative. But after John Kerry selected John Edwards as his running mate on July 6, those same networks skipped over Edwards' strict liberal voting record, instead touting the supposedly wonderful image and personality of the ex-trial lawyer.

"John Edwards' phone rang this morning at 7:30," NBC's Carl Quintanilla trumpeted on the July 6 *NBC Nightly News*, "and on the other end, John Kerry both formalized Edwards' rock star status and answered Democrats' demands too loud to ignore."

Byron Pitts, on the same night's *CBS Evening News*, fawned how "with a style as syrupy as Carolina sweet tea, Edwards could also help in the South." Pitts insisted: "Democrats have what many consider their dream team."

And over on ABC's *World News Tonight*, Dan Harris offered hope: "With his Southern accent and son of a mill worker biography, he may very well appeal to rural voters who the Democrats badly need." George Stephanopoulos opined, "He may

Grueling Interview

"What were you like as a kid?"
"Was there ever any doubt about you going to college even though neither of your parents did?"
"Tell me about your wife. Where did you meet her?"
"Why did you want to be a lawyer?"
"I gather you were a hell of a lawyer."
"I gather you've never been short of confidence."

— Every question Peter Jennings was shown asking John Edwards in an interview played on the July 7 *World News Tonight*.

have only two campaigns under his belt, but Democrats say Edwards makes up for his slim political resume with raw political talent. A natural style. He doesn't speak like he's been in the Senate his whole life. He's from the South; that broadens the ticket's geographic reach and his small town roots should appeal to rural voters in other regions, too. Finally, all those years as a trial lawyer taught Edwards to argue tough cases with a big smile, which Democrats believe is perfect training for a debate with Vice President Cheney."

But CBS wasn't done fawning. The next night, Pitts called Edwards and Kerry a "dream team" when he reviewed the ticket's first joint appearance for the July 7 *Evening News*: "It was the all important and perfectly choreographed first glimpse of the Democratic Party's new dream team: The Kerry and Edwards families posing for pictures, a nervous first date with the American public."

Pitts kept up the fawning spin as he showed brief soundbites from the candidates: "Humor from the boss, humanity from his running mate....Team Kerry touched and tickled their way to Ohio, the first stop in a six-state, five-day swing through battleground states, where the Kerry campaign hopes this rope-line honeymoon will help introduce two men many Americans say they still don't know, but what they do know they seem to like. A CBS News overnight poll shows more than half of all voters are glad Edwards was chosen....Both partners in this political marriage hope it's a winning formula....At the moment, star-struck Democrats are willing to believe."

On July 8, two days after Edwards was announced, CBS was still glowing: "The Democrats' dream team of John Kerry and John Edwards hits the campaign trail today," Hannah Storm chirped on *The Early Show*. Reporter Thalia Assuras swooned at the Democratic campaign's photo-op: "It was a perfect portrait – smiles all around, hugs and hand-holding. A warm family photo of the Kerry/Edwards clans that seemed capable of melting the camera lenses." Three days later, Lesley Stahl grilled Kerry on *60 Minutes*: "You seem so pumped up since you chose Senator Edwards as your running mate. You're looser. Do you think that his energy is rubbing off on you?"

Four years earlier, CBS and the other networks stressed Cheney's conservative views. On the day of Cheney's selection (July 25, 2000) CBS reporter Bill Whitaker managed three different adjectives, tagging Cheney "a bedrock conservative" and "a rock-solid conservative" with a "a solidly conservative voting record." Whitaker also relayed how Democrats are "planning to paint him as too far right and wrong for the country." Earlier that morning, then-*Early Show* co-host Bryant Gumbel defined Cheney as outside of the mainstream: "Cheney's politics are of the hard-right variety."

But Edwards, selected earlier in the year by the *National Journal* as the fourth-most liberal Senator (with Kerry ranked as the most liberal), was not tagged as ideological by network reporters. Mentions of his liberalism were portrayed as Republican attacks, as

when ABC's Kate Snow on the July 6 *World News Tonight* asserted "the Republican rapid response team tore into John Kerry." What followed was this soundbite from Ken Mehlman, Bush/Cheney campaign manager, talking about Kerry's selection of Edwards: "He is the most liberal Senator, and he wants someone who's almost as liberal as he is to run with him on the ticket."

Wow, that's some attack.

7. CBS's Byron Pitts Promotional Kerry Coverage

Most reporters adopt a skeptical or even adversarial approach when they are assigned to cover a specific campaign, believing it their job to point out any newsworthy contradictions or gaffes and to ask tough questions of the candidate and his team. But CBS's Byron Pitts seemed to define his job as transcribing the Kerry campaign's spin points and supinely passing them off as news. Pitts rarely failed to give the Kerry campaign a positive plug whenever he had a chance to file a story for either the *CBS Evening News* or *The Early Show*.

Back on the February 11 *CBS Evening News*, Pitts obligingly helped the Democrats swat back at criticism of Kerry's anti-war activities. Over a picture of Kerry getting a medal, Pitts warned that Republicans were trying to undermine Kerry's image as a hero of the Vietnam War: "Kerry the Vietnam war hero? The GOP is developing their own spin. [Over a picture of Kerry sitting on the ground a few rows behind Jane Fonda at a 1970 anti-war protest in Valley Forge] This picture of John Kerry war protester, sitting near controversial anti-war activist Jane Fonda, now appears on a number of Web sites."

Pitts then cut to a soundbite from former Gore campaign manager Donna Brazile: "Remember Willie Horton? Well Willie Horton has been retired. Jane is taking his place, and they're going to use that to undermine his credibility."

On June 15, Pitts narrated a laudatory profile of Teresa Heinz Kerry for the *CBS Evening News*, touting her as "both rich and reachable" and trumpeting how she even "bakes brownies for the campaign press corps" while "close friends call her 'Momma T' for her nurturing ways." On *The Early Show* on July 6, as reporters learned that John Edwards would be Kerry's running mate, Pitts gushed, "When you talk to Democrats...by far the name you hear most often is John Edwards. He's 51 years old. In 2000, *People* magazine selected him the sexiest politician in America."

Pitts promotion of Kerry's campaign climaxed on July 29, the day Kerry accepted the Democratic presidential nomination. On *The Early Show*, Pitts narrated a profile of John

Kerry that could easily have passed for a Democratic campaign commercial. The more than three-minute story included quotes only from Kerry, his wife, laudatory soundbites from liberal *Boston Globe* columnist Tom Oliphant, and Pitts' fawning narration: "Tonight's acceptance of the Democratic nomination is more than merely a day, it's his destiny."

Pitts showed Kerry as an anti-Vietnam war protester in 1971 dramatically asking Senators, "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" but he gave no hint of how had Kerry alienated a great many Vietnam veterans by making unfounded charges of war crimes.

CBS's entirely positive review of Kerry's life ended with some of the Kerry campaign's preferred "Band of Brothers" imagery: "The day before his speech, Kerry crossed Boston Harbor with some of his crewmates from Vietnam. His band of brothers. They have one battle left. But tonight the loner will stand alone here in his hometown one more time and look to do what John F. Kerry has nearly always done — find a way to win."

That night, just before John Kerry emerged into the convention hall to make his speech, Pitts passed along fawning spin points from Kerry operatives about how before every important event Kerry will "make a sign of the cross, then kiss the St. Christopher's medallion his mother gave him as a child." Plus, Kerry always keeps with him his "Vietnam dog tags" and "a four-leaf clover that a voter in Iowa gave him in January when he was trailing badly." After the speech, Pitts relayed how John Kerry had supposedly reminded his sister that on her deathbed their mother told him, "integrity, that's what matters," and "tonight," Pitts truckled, "John Kerry tried to show that integrity."

After Kerry faced criticism from the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth in August, Pitts did not seek explanation or documentation from Kerry (as CBS's John Roberts did with Bush over the National Guard flap in February). Instead, on the August 19 *CBS Evening News* Pitts framed the issue as one where Kerry was the victim of dirty politics: "Kerry, who's made his tour of duty in Vietnam the centerpiece of his campaign, realized today he could no longer let the ad go unanswered and took aim at President Bush for not condemning it."

Pitts also didn't hesitate to try to discredit a Kerry detractor by bringing up Richard M. Nixon: "The men behind the Swift Boat Veterans ad refused to back off. Their leader, John O'Neill, was also Richard Nixon's point man in attacks on John Kerry's protest of the Vietnam War 30 years ago." That's the same smarmy approach Pitts took in May, when he was the only broadcast network reporter to even mention the Swift Boat vets' charges (see Item #2).

8. CBS Promotes Fears of a New Military Draft

On the September 28 *CBS Evening News*, the network that had just been caught using forged documents in an anti-Bush news story decided to give legitimacy to Internet rumors by devoting one of its election-year “What Does It Mean to You?” segments to “fears” of a supposedly Bush-supporting mother that President Bush will impose a military draft. But the woman presented to viewers as an ordinary suburban mom is really an activist leader of a group called “People Against the Draft,” whose Web page is packed with left-wing screeds and links to far-left groups, and CBS reporter Richard Schlesinger never bothered to mention that the Pentagon opposes a new draft.

Anchor Dan Rather intoned at the beginning of his broadcast, “A mother worries her son will be drafted. Does she have good reason?” In his report, Schlesinger focused his piece around how the mother, Beverly Cocco, “is petrified about a military draft, and she’s not alone. Mass e-mails are circulating among worried parents.” Schlesinger noted how both Bush and Kerry deny that they’d institute a draft, but the mother is “not buying it. She’s a Republican, but she’s also a single-issue voter.” The onscreen moniker CBS applied to Cocco: “Pennsylvania Voter.”

He asked her: “Would you vote for a Democrat?”

Cocco replied: “Absolutely. I would vote for Howdy Doody if I thought it would keep my boys home and safe.”

Schlesinger concluded with a warning: “She’s a Bush supporter today, but if she doesn’t like what she hears between now and November, Beverly could easily cross over.”

Earlier in his story, Schlesinger had given credence to the fears: “The machinery for a draft is already in place, and the acting director of Selective Service believes he could start drafting people quickly.”

Within hours, the duplicity of CBS presenting an activist as an ordinary voter was uncovered by bloggers, who revealed that Cocco is the Philadelphia-area contact person for “People Against the Draft.” In an interview with the blog InDCJournal.org, Schlesinger justified basing a story on the scare-mongering e-mails: “The fact is, they were going around. I know several people that got them, and it’s gotten people all riled up. Whether or not there’s any reality to there being a draft, is almost besides the point. Do I think there’s going to be a draft? No. But it’s an issue that people are talking about.”

Producer Linda Karas told the same blog: “The truth of the e-mails were absolutely irrelevant to the piece, because all the story said was that people were worried.” And she’s supposed to be in the “news” business?

On the Bright Side: NBC Offered Balanced Coverage

One day after the *CBS Evening News* touted fears of a new draft, NBC's Jim Miklaszewski explored those same worries, but properly included the Pentagon's position opposing a new draft.

"Internet postings claim the Selective Service system has been given \$28 million to prepare for a draft and is secretly hiring 10,000 people for draft boards nationwide," Miklaszewski explained on the September 29 *Nightly News*.

"Pentagon officials call it bunk," Miklaszewski reported, as NBC put the word "Bunk" on screen in large red letters. "Most Pentagon and military leaders actually oppose the draft because, they say, the all-volunteer Army is working. Generally, today's soldiers are in the Army because they want to be. Drafted soldiers would be forced to serve, and then for only two years, barely enough time to train them for today's high-tech force."

Now, why couldn't CBS have reported that?

9. Misrepresenting the 9/11 Commission on Iraq/al-Qaeda Links

On June 16, the networks pounced on one sentence on the fifth page of a 9/11 Commission report released earlier in the day, which declared: "We have no credible evidence that Iraq and al-Qaeda cooperated on attacks against the United States." Of course, administration officials never claimed any Iraqi connection to the 9/11 attacks, just a mutually-advantageous relationship over the years, but all three broadcast networks twisted that sentence into an utter rejection of the administration's case for war, only to be reprimanded by the 9/11 Commissioners the next day.

On the June 16 *CBS Evening News*, reporter John Roberts charged Bush had a credibility gap: "One of President Bush's last surviving justifications for war in Iraq...took a devastating hit when the 9/11 Commission declared there was no 'collaborative relationship' between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden....The report is yet another blow to the President's credibility."

Over on *World News Tonight*, ABC's Peter Jennings said the finding was unequivocal: "One of the Bush administration's most controversial assertions in its argument for war in Iraq was that Saddam Hussein had links to al-Qaeda. Today the 9/11 Commission said,

unequivocally, not so." Actually, the commission detailed several links between Saddam and al-Qaeda.

And on *NBC Nightly News*, David Gregory seemed astonished that Bush was sticking to his story: "The White House isn't backing down tonight, insisting there always was an Iraq/al-Qaeda link. But it's clear this report is a blow to the President's rationale for war."

But the commission did not examine the case for war against Saddam, and on June 17, its Democratic Vice Chairman Lee Hamilton scolded the media: "I must say I have trouble understanding the flap over this. The Vice President is saying, I think, that there were connections between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's government. We don't disagree with that."

Hamilton added, "It seems to me that the sharp differences that the press has drawn, the media has drawn, are not that apparent to me."

The Republican chairman, former New Jersey Governor Tom Kean, agreed. "Were there contacts between al-Qaeda and Iraq? Yes. Some of them are shadowy, but there's no question they were there."

Perhaps embarrassed, ABC and NBC buried that information deep inside their June 17 evening broadcasts — and the *CBS Evening News* ignored the commissioners' rebuke altogether.

10. Equating New Terrorism Warning to LBJ's "Gulf of Tonkin"

On his August 2 MSNBC program *Countdown*, Keith Olbermann devoted an entire segment to speculation that Bush re-election politics lay behind a terror threat warning that the Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge issued the day before. Apparently angry that the warning was publicized in the days following the Democratic National Convention, Olbermann revealed his paranoid mindset: "History tells us Presidents have exaggerated threats to the public safety to gain political advantage or simplify complex needs of strategy. Ask Lyndon Johnson. Ask William McKinley. Do we need to ask George W. Bush?"

Olbermann soon added Joe McCarthy to the pantheon President Bush is supposedly following, "from Joe McCarthy to Lyndon Johnson's manipulation of the Gulf of Tonkin, our politics have been filled with politicians who have created a kind of evil twin to FDR's famous phrase, 'We have nothing to fear but fear itself.' All of that seems particularly

relevant when the Secretary of Homeland Security changes the threat level three days after his boss's challenger accepts the nomination of the rival party."

Two days later, Olbermann lashed out at an editorial "in a thing called the *Investor's Business Daily*," to denounce it for supposedly doubting his patriotism when he questioned if politics were behind Sunday's terror warning: "I got ripped. Anybody who said anything other than, 'Yes, sir, Homeland Security, thank you for the information, we'll do what you say,' was viewed as unpatriotic and inspiring lack of confidence and aiding the terrorists, good Lord, there's everything but accused us of keeping, you know, a phone line open to bin Laden."

Investor's Business Daily, which had picked up on the MRC's quotation of Olbermann's earlier rant, did not call Olbermann "unpatriotic" in its editorial, although Olbermann had done a bit more than just raise the possibility of political influence; he had brought up the name Joe McCarthy. The editorial correctly noted: "In the current, highly charged political atmosphere, if the White House didn't warn us of an impending attack and one happened, there would be political hell to pay."

That would surely include a condemnatory lecture from the cocksure Keith Olbermann.

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