



Was Bush "AWOL" From the National Guard? Reporters Find Accuracy and Civility Not the Point

DNC "Warning Shot" Feisty, Not Dirty?

Can you imagine the national press agreeing in 1996 that the Republicans were showing spirited "determination" if they had made an issue out of Bill Clinton's record of draft evasion? Reporters considered that scandal dead by April of 1992. But this week, the networks are raising "new questions" about President Bush's record of service in the Air National Guard in 1972 and 1973.

It began when Peter Jennings challenged Wesley Clark in a January 22 debate to distance himself from the radical-left filmmaker Michael Moore, who falsely called Bush a "deserter" as he campaigned with Clark.

Then on Sunday's *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*, DNC Chairman Terry McAuliffe lobbed the slightly less uncivil

and inaccurate charge that Bush was "AWOL" from his service in the Air National Guard. In 2000, reports in the *Boston Globe* noted that Bush spent 36 days on duty in May, June, and July of 1973 "cramming" to put service days on the record, and was honorably discharged, not "AWOL." By contrast, young Bill Clinton avoided the draft by signing up for the ROTC at the University of Arkansas, and then ducking out of the unit in order to study at Oxford.

To his credit, former Clinton spin artist Stephanopoulos asked McAuliffe: "So how do you answer, then, people who would say, wait a second, Democrats all defended Bill Clinton back in 1992 despite the questions about his draft record? Isn't this hypocrisy here?" No one else on the broadcast networks has asked McAuliffe this question or considered this angle of hypocrisy in their news coverage.

In past campaigns, the networks rejected GOP charges against Democrats as uncivil dirty tricks, but **reporters have greeted these unproven anti-Bush smears not by finding Democratic inaccuracy, incivility, or hypocrisy, but by noting Democratic feistiness and esprit de corps:**

■ On the *CBS Evening News*, reporter Mark Strassmann asserted Wednesday night: "Democrats want to exploit a contrast with Lt. George Bush. They charge the future Commander-in-Chief was AWOL. Call it a clear warning shot on the debate to come about national security."

■ On Wednesday's *NBC Nightly News*, Tom Brokaw maintained: "Now that Senator John Kerry is the front-runner...Democrats are anxious to show they will play hardball when comes to patriotism and national security."

■ On Wednesday morning's *Today*, NBC's Tim Russert explained: "This was a warning. 'If you punch we are punching back and punching again.'" When Matt Lauer asked if Kerry should embrace the "AWOL"

smear, Russert didn't assess its accuracy, but noted Kerry "looks like he's embracing it."

■ On Tuesday morning's *Today*, Russert merely commented on the tactics, not whether it was dirty politics: "But what has happened this past week is very important psychologically....It was done to fire up the base. There's been a sense in the Democratic party that they've been too passive in responding to Republican attacks."

Russert was preceded by a story reported by *Newsweek* columnist Jonathan Alter, who highlighted the Bush "AWOL" charges of former Sen. Max Cleland, and ignored the lack of evidence. In *Newsweek*, Alter wrote: "But even if Cleland turns out to be wrong (the facts are hazy and inconclusive), the dustup symbolizes the determination of Democrats to match the GOP blow for blow." — *Tim Graham*

Left Out of the Liberal Civility Story

"I would like to apologize for referring to George W. Bush as a 'deserter.' What I meant to say is that George W. Bush is a deserter, an election thief, a drunk driver, a WMD liar and a functional illiterate. And he poops his pants. In fact, he shot a man in Tucson 'just to watch him die.'" — Michael Moore on his Web site.

L. Brent Bozell III, Publisher; Brent Baker, Tim Graham, Rich Noyes, Editors; Geoffrey Dickens, Jessica Anderson, Brad Wilmouth, Brian Boyd, Ken Shepherd, Amanda Monson, Media Analysts; Kristina Sewell, Research Associate. For the latest documentation of liberal media bias, sign up for the daily *CyberAlert* at www.mrc.org.