



Campaign 2004

Media Reality ✓ Check

Expert Documentation of the Latest Liberal Media Bias ✪ Tuesday, February 17, 2004

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ABC, CBS and NBC Give Bush "AWOL" Charge Double the 1992 Coverage of Clinton's Draft Dodging

Kerry's Partisan Partners in Smearing Bush

When a liberal Democrat faces a personal charge, the national media find ways to avoid discussing it in public. Is there proof of wrongdoing, or merely suspicion? Is it relevant to their public role? Does everybody do it? Do voters even care? When they want to, the media can usually find an excuse to spike an uncomfortable story before the feeding frenzy ever begins.

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 wish 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 Feb. 1-16, 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 retired 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.

■ 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 pounded 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.

■ Last Thursday, Peter Jennings refused to report the finding of ABC's polling unit that two-thirds of the public, including 58 percent of Democrats, thought the Bush 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 phony charges had nothing to do with that. — *Rich Noyes*

Straining to Keep McAuliffe's 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 Feb. 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.

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.