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Networks: Big Business Is Bad, Reform Means New Regulations, Stale Harken Charges Are Newsworthy

Pushing Bush to Become Business Basher

When journalists are under attack, they scorn broad-brush terms like “the media” that lump good and bad reporters into just one category. Sometimes this is comical, as when CBS anchor Dan Rather pulled out his 12-foot pole in the face of charges his *CBS Evening News* unethically publicized claims of drug use by candidate George W. Bush in 1999. FNC’s Bill O’Reilly confronted him in May 2001 with transcripts of those smarmy *Evening News* stories, but Rather seized on the fact that they aired while he was on vacation and on weekends when Russ Mitchell anchored the broadcast.

“Let me stop you right there. You’re talking about Russ Mitchell’s program, not Dan Rather’s program,” Rather slyly argued. “I did not want to run it on my show.” (And CBS News condemned Bernie Goldberg for lacking team spirit.)

Contrast Rather’s meticulous parsing with the denigrating one-size-damns-all coverage that American business has received at the hands of Big Media. “The scandals in corporate America just seem to keep coming,” ABC’s Cokie Roberts argued on Sunday’s *This Week*. “Just how bad a black eye does corporate America have right now?” Katie Couric chirped on Tuesday’s *Today*, lumping law-abiding firms with Enron, Global Crossing and WorldCom.

Liberal journalists demanded that Bush attack this axis of evil with more government regulations: “This is a President who has made no bones about the fact that he is not a great fan of regulation, he talks about cooperation, not regulation. Does he have a credibility problem?” CNN’s Aaron Brown wondered on Monday, the night before Bush’s speech. That same evening, July 8, CBS’s Wyatt Andrews pushed Bush even harder, branding him the “President who, for most of his term, has been ‘partner-in-chief’ with big business.” He didn’t mean that as a compliment.

All three evening newscasts showcased Bush critics who faulted him for not being “tough enough” on U.S. business even as he was fulfilling liberal wishes by agreeing to more regulations. At the same time, the networks resuscitated

charges that Bush greedily tried to hide a 1990 stock sale, allegations which have been repeatedly explored by national reporters beginning in 1991.

After the White House press corps extracted new quotes from Ari Fleischer on July 3, *NBC Nightly News* substitute anchor (and heir-apparent) Brian Williams had the hook he needed to assert that Bush “ran afoul” of the law, despite being investigated and cleared more than once: “The White House today insisted there is a very simple explanation for why President Bush ran afoul of federal law when he sold stock in a Texas oil company at a time when he was a corporate director of that company.”

On CBS, Andrews argued that the absence of wrongdoing wasn’t important: “Never mind that Mr. Bush was cleared. His opponents will charge this champion of personal responsibility once failed that standard himself,” he knowingly predicted on July 9. Meanwhile, CNN’s Brown, who likes to begin each *NewsNight* show by listening to the sound of his own views, rationalized that he had to cover

the Harken story because talk radio often focused on Clinton scandals (see box)

Liberal sniping was touted as proof of a Bush credibility gap, not of Democrats’ unceasing partisanship: “There are a lot of questions about the President’s own dealings in Harken oil stock, where he made much of his own personal fortune. Do you think he has credibility with the public on this issue?” ABC’s Charles Gibson challenged Commerce Secretary Don Evans on the July 9 *Good Morning America*.

The point of all this is to either push Bush to adopt liberal business-bashing policies or, if he resists, condemn him for his coziness with corporations. It promises to be an election year filled with liberal media bias. — Rich Noyes

Is Harken Story Payback For Whitewater?

“My gut says if the President were Clinton, this decade-old story would be hyped to death all over the radio, through at least half the Congress, probably around more than a few water coolers, and maybe, just maybe, the Justice Department.... Would the same people who now urge reporters to drop the Harken story have said the same thing three years ago, a different President from a different party, different times? Does consistency count more than politics?” — Aaron Brown opening CNN’s *NewsNight*, July 9.

L. Brent Bozell III, Publisher; Brent Baker, Rich Noyes, Editors; Jessica Anderson, Brian Boyd, Geoffrey Dickens, Patrick Gregory, Ken Shepherd, and Brad Wilmouth, Media Analysts; Kristina Sewell, Research Associate; Liz Swasey, Director of Communications. For the latest media bias, sign up for daily *CyberAlerts* at www.mrc.org.