



Tell the Truth! 2004

Media Reality ✓ Check

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ABC, CBS & NBC Gave 75 Stories to Bush "AWOL" Charge, 9 to Claims Kerry Embellished War Record

TV Gives No Respect to Swift Boat Vets for Truth

Back in February, the three broadcast networks were obsessed with the story of President Bush's National Guard service. But in May, when John Kerry's former Navy colleagues from Vietnam went to the National Press Club to charge that Kerry's tales of heroism as a Swift Boat commander were highly exaggerated, those same networks acted as if their job was to bury the news, not report it.

Back on May 4, ABC and NBC ignored the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth's press conference, while CBS's Byron Pitts claimed the veterans had merely "unleashed decades of bitterness." His *Evening News* story ignored Kerry's record, but challenged his critics: "If you think this is just a concerned group of veterans, think again."

Even though the Swift Vets have now published a book, *Unfit for Command*, and sponsored a TV ad, the networks still aren't investigating their charges. MRC analysts examined ABC, CBS and NBC's morning and evening news shows. They found 75 stories this year questioning Bush's National Guard service, but only nine detailing any of the Swift Vets' anti-Kerry charges, an eight-to-one disparity. But the networks' double standard runs far deeper than the amount of coverage:

■ **Partisanship:** The "AWOL" story got its legs February 1 when Democratic boss Terry McAuliffe appeared on ABC's *This Week* to declare how he wants a debate in which "John Kerry, a war hero with a chest full of medals, is standing next to George Bush, a man who was AWOL in the Alabama National Guard," and reporters began badgering the White House to prove McAuliffe's charges false. But the hint of a GOP connection to the Swift Vets has reporters

holding their noses. The first mention of the Swift Vets on *NBC Nightly News* came on August 6 when Andrea Mitchell complained the groups' anti-Kerry "ad is paid for by Bush contributors using a loophole in the McCain-Feingold law." Mitchell's story did not examine the vets' charges against Kerry, just complained about the fact that they could get them on TV.

CBS Strained to Keep "AWOL" 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, Feb. 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, February 13.

■ **Evidence.** Reporters put the onus on Bush to prove the critics wrong. "Given the absence of any witnesses who could fill in those gaps and corroborate the President's recollection," ABC's Terry Moran insisted on February 10, "the issue is not going to go away." CBS was even more demanding (see box).

But holes in Kerry's record aren't treated as suspicious. On the issue of Kerry's first wound in 1968, then-Coastal Division 14 Commander Grant Hibbard says

Kerry came to his office asking for a Purple Heart for what amounted to a scratch. As recounted in *Unfit for Command* (page 38), "I told Kerry to 'forget it.' There was no hostile fire, the injury was self-inflicted for all I knew, besides it was nothing more than a scratch. Kerry wasn't getting a Purple Heart recommendation from me." But when the issue became news in April, the networks made it a one-day story, even though the records Kerry released failed to include the paperwork supporting the Purple Heart award.

■ **Enthusiasm.** On February 10, White House reporters badgered Press Secretary Scott McClellan for 30 minutes, demanding detailed proof that everything Bush said in the past was true. But the networks now call the Swift Vets' ad "ugly," and reporters' demand is for Bush to condemn it, not Kerry to factually rebut it. — Rich Noyes

To schedule an interview with an MRC spokesman, please contact Katie Wright at (703) 683-5004