

## *Thanks for the Memories*

The only man who wasn't spoilt by being lionized was Daniel.  
—Herbert Beerbohm Tree

In November 2004, CBS CEO Les Moonves and Dan Rather agreed that Rather would step out of the chair one year short of his twenty-fifth anniversary as the *Evening News* anchorman. The Bush Memo-gate controversy provided Moonves with a convenient excuse to do what he wanted to do anyway: go younger. After all, Rather had just turned seventy-three, and the *Evening News* had been in third place for a decade. Talk of succession had gone on for years, but CBS News was so thin on talent, there was no one to replace Rather. When Moonves told reporters that he no longer wanted the “Voice of God” to deliver the news, he knew, as did everyone else at CBS News, that there was no one on the roster with the gravitas to affect the Voice of God even if he had wanted one.

For Moonves, Rather's report on Bush's National Guard service was the camel that broke the camel's back. Rather had been involved with controversies before, but the firestorm from this one was simply too hot to

handle. The outrage triggered by the report was curious because it was not a new story. The same allegations about young Lieutenant Bush had been reported over and over again since at least 1999. The response from Bush was always the same: "I was honorably discharged."

This time, Rather and his producer, Mary Mapes, had believed that they could revive and advance the story by showing documents they claimed would corroborate the charges. The four pages of documents, actually photocopies of documents, were memos allegedly written by then Lieutenant Bush's Air National Guard commander, now deceased. Their origin was unknown, and the source not always truthful. Without the memos, what they had was largely a rehash.

The story was rushed onto the air September 8, 2004, out of fear that other news organizations might have the same documents, and the skeptics began weighing in and weighing in heavily. When the documents were placed on the CBS News Web site, so-called bloggers quickly declared that they were fake. They wrote that the type style used could only have been made on a personal computer, which was not available back in 1972. There were also questions about the terminology used in the memos that some Guardsmen said would never have been used in an official memo.

This was serious stuff. It was bad enough that Rather had had a memorable on-air contretemps with the president's father during the 1988 presidential campaign, but this scandal played directly into the hands of conservatives who believe that the press in general, CBS News in particular, and especially Dan Rather are liberal lefties to the core. When all was said and done, Rather, Mapes, and their superiors at *60 Minutes Wednesday* simply could not prove that the documents were copies of genuine originals.

The end game was numbingly predictable. First, stubborn denial, followed by grudging acceptance, followed by a mandated public apology, followed by a fresh burst of denial, followed by the denouement: Rather's final broadcast as anchorman on March 9, 2005. Although Moonves, Rather, and official CBS spokespeople insist that Rather's early exit had absolutely nothing to do with the Bush story, no one believes it.

“That last day in the studio,” an observer told me, “management was really sweating bullets that nobody was going to show up. It was supposed to be an incredibly emotional moment. But the feeling was more like ‘Go away . . . go to your room.’ Because that Bush story was such a colossal wound. We play a very high-wire act here, don’t we? We walk the tightrope. And he pushed more people off that tightrope than I care to think about.”

Although at least one TV Web site stated flatly that “Dan Rather holds the dubious distinction of being the only network anchorman that people vaguely expect to go berserk on the air,” the technicians and the staffers in the control room that night were reasonably sure that unlike the terminally depressed anchorman of *Network*, there would be no Howard Beale moment at the end of the broadcast.

In fact, Rather was downright eloquent. “Not long after I first came to anchor chair,” he said, “I briefly signed off using the word *courage*. I want to return to it now in a different way. To a nation still nursing a broken heart for what happened here in 2001 and especially those who found themselves closest to the events of September 11, to our soldiers in dangerous places, to those who have endured the tsunami and to all who have suffered natural disasters and who must find the will to rebuild, to the oppressed and to those whose lot it is to struggle, in financial hardship or in failing health, to my fellow journalists in places where reporting the truth means risking all, and to each of you . . . courage. For the CBS *Evening News*, Dan Rather reporting. Good night.”

The cartoons jumped off the pages of every major newspaper and magazine, their bite eliciting more of a wince than a smile. From the *Tampa Tribune*, a sketch of a graveyard with a talking tombstone: “This is a CBS News bulletin . . . the report of the death of our credibility has been grossly exaggerated!” The tombstone is marked CBS News. From the *Orlando Sentinel*, a harried secretary hands a note to her boss at CBS News. Secretary: “Here, it’s Dan Rather’s resignation.” Boss: “How do we know it’s authentic?”

Conservatives across the country acted as if the Soviet Union had

collapsed a second time. Several CBS radio affiliates canceled Rather's daily commentaries. Some called it a victory for "the people's journalists," the bloggers. On right-wing Web sites, one could find a lengthy list of Good-bye Dan parties, scheduled for the night of his final *Evening News* broadcast. "The Independence Institute of Denver will break out the tissues at Jackson's Hole Sports Grill as we say a tearful farewell to legendary anchorman and beacon of journalistic integrity, Dan Rather. Retirement gifts and party favors for the first 48 people."

Former CBS newsman Bernard Goldberg, who had once used his friendship with Rather to secure a hefty new contract, listed him as number twelve among *100 People Who Are Screwing Up America*. Osama bin Laden did not make the list. From the *National Review*'s Jonah Goldberg there was this outpouring of ecstasy: "Why is Dan Rather doing this to himself? Why would he let this happen in the first place? There can be only one plausible answer: Ours is a just and decent God. Second, and more important, if we, as Americans, cannot take a moment to relish the comeuppance of the most enduringly pompous partisan yutz in Elite Journalism, then the terrorists will have won. . . . This story is really God's own piñata: You can bash it from any angle and nothing but sweet, sweet goodness flows out."

Perhaps such bile from the right wing could be expected, but if Dan Rather thought he might receive kindness from his longtime colleagues at CBS News, he was mistaken. Mike Wallace, whose famously checked career has included the secret videotaping of a fellow journalist, an unfunny racist crack about Hispanics caught by an open microphone, and his complicity in a seriously flawed documentary about General William Westmoreland and the Vietnam War, told the *New Yorker* magazine, "He's a superb reporter, and dead honest. But he's not as easy to watch as Jennings or Brokaw. He's uptight and occasionally contrived." (To which one columnist replied, "Mike, may all your foxholes be lonely ones.") Walter Cronkite, who still believes that the anchor chair should have been retired with him in 1981, said, "It surprised quite a few people at CBS that they tolerated his [Rather's] being there for so long." On NPR, Cronkite added, "There was a kind of mystical self-promotion in

things that Dan did. He seemed to be consciously amplifying his role as anchorman rather than simply the reporter of the day.” Cronkite later tempered his remarks, describing Rather as a “victim” who had trusted his producer too much. Other CBS veterans, speaking anonymously, reveled in what they saw as his payback for wielding far too much power for too long.

All this made Tim Goodman of the *San Francisco Chronicle* boil. “You can take your CBS backstabbers who found in Rather’s last hours of weakness a chance to rise up and join the chorus of haters . . . and give them all a great big prize for bravery. And yes, that includes Walter Cronkite.” This sentiment was echoed by Victor Navasky in the *Nation*: “Yes, Dan Rather and his *60 Minutes II* colleagues ought to feel embarrassed, but so should his *60 Minutes* colleagues who seemed more eager to exonerate themselves from having anything to do with those tainted documents than to support their colleague, who has anchored CBS News with passion and professionalism for twenty-four years.”

Former executive vice president Bill Small told me that he discussed the internal warfare with the venerable Frank Stanton who, along with William Paley, had created CBS from nothing. “He’s ninety-eight years old now and bedridden,” Small said, “but his mind is still clear. I said, ‘Frank, they’re beating up on him.’ And he said, ‘They shouldn’t be doing that. He’s part of the family.’”

Support for Rather also came from a few unexpected sources. Bill O’Reilly, the rottweiler of right-wing FOX News, defended Rather’s right to be wrong. “Dan Rather is guilty of not being skeptical enough about a story that was politically loaded. I believe Rather, along with Andy Rooney, Walter Cronkite and other guardsmen of the old CBS News, is liberal in his thinking. . . . But holding a political point of view is the right of every American and it does not entitle people to practice character assassination or deny the presumption of innocence. Dan Rather was slimed. It was disgraceful.”

It didn’t seem to concern Moonves or anyone else at CBS that the network had no transition plan and no vision about what a new *Evening News* would be. It appeared that Moonves simply wanted Rather out and

the sooner the better. In examining the causes of Memogate, many press followers, including Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame, described it as an “institutional failure.” That may be true, but over the years Dan Rather had become the institution itself. His aggressiveness and zeal were exacerbated by a system that he himself had largely constructed, with the help of timid and sometimes encouraging managements.

As if to underscore Rather’s new place in the CBS News pecking order, he was not even informed that longtime friend and fellow Texan Bob Schieffer would be replacing him temporarily on the *Evening News*.

“They haven’t even asked me what I thought they should do with the *Evening News*, nor do I particularly think they should,” he told Larry King on *Larry King Live*. “It’s their decision to make.”

When King asked how he felt as the Bush story unraveled and the criticism mounted, Rather replied, “It’s never pleasant. But you know, among the many things that my late father—God rest his soul—said was ‘Don’t whine, don’t complain, and don’t fall into a trap of saying it’s bad luck or good luck. Stand up, look them in the eye, and tell them what you know. Tell them what you don’t know.’ And I tried to do that. I’m not a victim of anything except my own shortcomings. And it didn’t feel terrific. There certainly were days when I felt I had been put to bed wet. But I always get up the next morning and say, ‘You know what? This looks like a great day to me even during what other people might say were the worst of times.’”

King asked, “Do you think the Republicans, the right-wing Republicans, were after you?” Rather responded, “No. Again, I’m not a victim of anything.”

But Dan Rather doesn’t really believe that. In fact, in the days that followed his final broadcast as anchor, he began to sound somewhat like his old nemesis, Richard Nixon, taking personal blame for personal flaws but quickly pointing out that, as Henry Kissinger was fond of saying, “even paranoids have enemies.”

“A man is not finished when he is defeated,” Nixon once said. “He is finished when he quits,” and that is Rather’s philosophy as well. The Nixon-Rather comparison has been pretty much flogged to death in

recent years, but there are those who dispute it. As one veteran producer said, “Nixon was a crook and a liar. Dan Rather has principles. I can’t think of Nixon and Rather in the same sentence.”

As Rather cleaned out his *Evening News* office, he came across drawers full of touchstones, tchotchkes, and every manner of memorabilia that had piled up over the course of his anchor career. He dusted off a piece of framed embroidery once sent to him by a nun. “Be thou a soul to fullness grown. . . . Arise to gain thy dreams. . . . Today’s trials were meant to make you young.” There would be more than just cardboard boxes leaving with him. He would be taking part of a culture with him as well, even though some people would say that culture had left a long time ago.

Now he was anxious to get back to reporting, telling reporters that he felt his best work was still ahead of him. Yes, he truly believed, you *can* go home again.

To an interviewer, Rather recalled one of his favorite stories: the last at bat of the mighty Ted Williams, who hit a home run, circled the bases, and trotted through the dugout tunnel, as legend has it, into the parking lot, where he drove off into history. But the analogy is not apt. After all, the Splendid Splinter was a blue-blooded specimen—a can’t-miss prospect who had size, strength, and a knowledge of the fine art of hitting that went well beyond his years. In contrast, as a prospect, the young Dan Rather was more like the young Pete Rose. No power, no glove, no arm, no speed—just a buzz cut and some ungodly hustle. And that’s about all Rather had had when he left Texas on his way to “the show.”

