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THE OVERVIEW

CBS Dismisses 4 Over Broadcast on Bush Service

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CBS yesterday dismissed four of its top journalists, including a high-ranking news executive, after an independent panel concluded that a September report that raised questions about President Bush's Vietnam-era National Guard service never should have been broadcast.

The panel concluded that the network's news division, in a dash to beat its competitors, suffered a breakdown in judgment as it rushed the report onto the air on Sept. 8. Among its findings was that the news report was approved by inattentive executives; was delivered by an overworked anchor, Dan Rather; and did not undergo even the most rudimentary fact-checking.

The segment, broadcast on the Wednesday edition of "60 Minutes," raised new questions about Mr. Bush's service in the Texas Air National Guard in the early 1970's. It presented four documents, described as memorandums from the files of his commander, suggesting that Mr. Bush, then a lieutenant, had received preferential treatment. The panel said that the documents had not been properly authenticated, but that it had no evidence they were forgeries.

The panel - Louis D. Boccardi, a former chief executive of The Associated Press, and Dick Thornburgh, a former attorney general of the United States - noted that the CBS News president, Andrew Heyward, had ordered an internal inquiry into the accuracy of the report two days after the segment was broadcast. But the panel found no indication that such an inquiry was pursued.

Nonetheless, Mr. Heyward publicly defended the report in the face of mounting criticism, including comments featured prominently in a new medium, the so-called blogosphere on the Internet.

Mary Mapes, the producer in charge of the segment, was fired. Resignations were demanded from three others, including Betsy West, a senior vice president.

Leslie Moonves, the chairman of CBS, said that Mr. Heyward had "issued direct instructions to investigate the sourcing of the story" but that his instructions had not been "implemented in a prompt or systematic way." He said Mr. Heyward would remain in his job.

Mr. Rather, who narrated the news report but played only a limited role in assembling it, will remain a CBS correspondent for the Wednesday edition of "60 Minutes" - the program that broadcast the troubled news report - as well as the fabled Sunday edition of "60 Minutes." He had previously announced that he would step down as the anchor of "CBS Evening News" in March.

In his statement yesterday, Mr. Moonves said: "As far as the question of reporting is concerned, the bottom line

is that much of the Sept. 8th broadcast was wrong, incomplete or unfair. We deeply regret the disservice this flawed '60 Minutes' Wednesday report did to the American public, which has a right to count on CBS News for fairness and accuracy in all it does."

Within CBS's broadcast center in Midtown Manhattan, Mr. Moonves's swift response - as well as the panel's finding of a catastrophic breakdown in internal checks and balances - left many employees expressing bewilderment that so much had gone so wrong in their midst.

Meeting in small groups with supervisors, they debated the merits of various decisions - including the retention of Mr. Heyward - and vowed to continue to pursue the kind of aggressive investigative reporting that had long been the network's trademark, albeit through new layers of scrutiny.

In seeking to cling to a thin reed, several CBS employees said they took heart that the panel had found that no political bias existed within the ranks of the Wednesday edition of "60 Minutes" - a charge that had been widely repeated on the Internet.

Because of the nature of the allegations about a sitting president - and because Mr. Rather has long been characterized by the right as someone who periodically shades his journalism to the left - the memos that were the basis for the broadcasts were quickly injected into the presidential campaign.

CBS also said yesterday that it was imposing requirements that senior news division managers extensively review the reporting that goes into news segments before they are broadcast. These include a provision for naming an additional team of reporters to fact-check a segment that has been called into question - rather than leaving that verification to the team producing the segment - and a stipulation that on sensitive stories, "when appropriate," senior management must know not just the name of an anonymous source "but all relevant background that would assist in editorial news decisions."

In his own nine-page statement, Mr. Moonves announced that he had fired Ms. Mapes, the longtime producer. He also demanded the resignations of three other CBS News executives who had overseen the segment: Ms. West, a senior vice president and top deputy to Mr. Heyward; Josh Howard, who became executive producer of the Wednesday edition of "60 Minutes" only weeks before it broadcast the segment; and Mary Murphy, his deputy.

Sandra Genelius, a CBS spokeswoman, said it was not immediately clear whether the three had tendered their resignations, but staff members of the Wednesday edition of "60 Minutes" said that Mr. Howard and Ms. Murphy appeared at a meeting yesterday morning to thank people and say goodbye. Both were said to be stunned by the decision to force them to resign, having told colleagues in recent weeks that they expected to survive. Ms. Murphy was in tears throughout the meeting, one "60 Minutes" producer said. Ms. West said that she would have no comment on her status.

In his remarks, Mr. Moonves directed some of his sharpest expressions of disappointment at Ms. Mapes. "Her basic reporting was faulty and her responses when questioned led others who trusted her down the wrong road," Mr. Moonves said, a reference to comments she had made to supervisors, in the days leading up to the broadcast, that she could vouch for both the source of the documents and the authenticity of the documents themselves.

In a statement issued to other news organizations late yesterday, Ms. Mapes said she was "shocked by the vitriolic scapegoating in Les Moonves's statement."

"I am very concerned that his actions are motivated by corporate and political considerations - ratings rather than journalism," she added.

When asked about the panel's findings at a briefing, Scott McClellan, the White House press secretary, said: "We felt all along that it was important for CBS to get to the bottom of this. CBS has taken steps to hold people accountable, and we appreciate those steps."

In an interview yesterday, Mr. Moonves said: "I was shocked by the extent of some of the things that went unchecked. I was not surprised at many of the panel's findings, but the fact that none of our experts truthfully authenticated the documents - that was shocking to me."

Mr. Moonves said that he took the report at face value and did not consult with any other executives before deciding to fire Ms. Mapes and demand the three resignations.

The two members of the independent panel said in their report that they were unable to verify the authenticity of the documents cited in the broadcast. They also said that Ms. Mapes misled - or at the least was not completely honest with - her superiors about the origins of the documents or about the results of efforts to verify them. Among the panel's criticisms of Ms. Mapes was that she did not, in its opinion, make enough of an effort to verify the original source of the memorandums or their authenticity.

The panel said that Bill Burkett, the former National Guard officer who gave her the documents, had initially described his source to her as another former Guard officer, George Conn. Ms. Mapes told the panel that she had tried to contact Mr. Conn at an address in Texas, but was unable to. She added that it was her understanding that he was living in Germany, but she said that she did not try to find him there.

"It appears to the panel that a crash to air the story was under way without effective consideration of the chain of custody" of the memorandums, Mr. Boccardi and Mr. Thornburgh wrote.

The panelists said that there was a cascade of warning signs that, if heeded, could have prevented the broadcast of the report or at least delayed it considerably. The panelists concluded that there was little internal oversight or control within the news division to ensure that fact-checking took place.

"The investigation quickly identified considerable and fundamental deficiencies relating to the reporting and production of the Sept. 8 segment and the statements and news reports during the aftermath," the panelists wrote.

"These problems were caused primarily by a myopic zeal to be the first news organization to broadcast what was believed to be a new story about President Bush's Texas Air National Guard service, and the rigid and blind defense of the segment after it aired despite numerous indications of its shortcomings."

The panelists painted a portrait of the corporate culture within the news organization that stood in stark contrast to its heyday, when its public face was Edward R. Murrow in the 1950's and Walter Cronkite in the late 1960's and 1970's.

While the panelists said they could find no evidence that the network prepared and broadcast the report to hurt the president's re-election campaign, they cited one instance in which Ms. Mapes "created the appearance of a political bias." In the reporting phase, Ms. Mapes reached out to the campaign of Senator John Kerry, Mr. Bush's Democratic opponent, and asked that it contact the former National Guard officer who would later be identified as the source of the documents.

"The panel reviewed this issue and found certain actions that could support such charges," the panelists wrote. "However, the panel cannot conclude that a political agenda at '60 Minutes' Wednesday drove either the timing of the airing of the segment or its content."

The panel was somewhat tempered in its criticism of Mr. Rather. While it acknowledged that he was stretched to the limit while reporting aspects of the Guard segment - he had left the scene of Hurricane Frances in Florida to do an interview - it described him as a distracted participant who did not even watch the completed segment before it was broadcast.

The panel was, however, sharply critical of Mr. Rather's use of his perch on "CBS Evening News" to mount a spirited defense of documents - said to be memorandums from the files of Mr. Bush's commander in the Texas Air National Guard - used to buttress the news report.

The panel also criticized the substance of Mr. Rather's on-air apology on Sept. 20, saying that he had largely blamed Mr. Burkett for misleading the network by changing his account of how he had come to obtain the documents.

"The panel finds this statement confusing, since "60 Minutes" Wednesday had never verified the original source from whom Lieutenant Colonel Burkett initially said he received the documents," the report said.

Though Mr. Rather did not participate in vetting the story, the panelists said that he told them that he "still believes that the content of the documents is accurate."

Mr. Rather, who returned Sunday night from a reporting trip to Asia covering the aftermath of the tsunami, did not return a message seeking comment that was left with an assistant. He was replaced as anchor of "CBS Evening News" last night by Bob Schieffer, the host of the Sunday program "Face the Nation." Mr. Schieffer did not explain Mr. Rather's absence, other than to say, "Dan will be back tomorrow."

Mr. Schieffer then introduced the lead segment on the broadcast, in which a correspondent provided a blistering recitation of the day's developments at CBS.

The panel report issued yesterday found fault with those network executives who, they said, should have pressed Ms. Mapes to verify a document trail - but did not. The panel suggested that those executives had been cowed, to some extent, by the track record and celebrity of Mr. Rather and Ms. Mapes, who collaborated earlier in the year on a report that first broadcast photographs of abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

In her statement released to news organizations yesterday, Ms. Mapes said: "It is noteworthy the panel did not conclude that these documents are false."

Instead, she said that the timing of the segment - it was broadcast less than a week after she obtained the bulk of the documents - was dictated not by her but by her superiors, including Mr. Heyward.

She added: "If there was a journalistic crime committed here, it was not by me."