

Think Again: 'A Shameful Debate'

by [Eric Alterman](#) with [Paul McLeary](#)

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As the slow drip of military and civilian casualties in Iraq quickly metastasizes into a mighty flood, the mainstream media finds itself acquiescing to conservative coercion on a number of fronts. Most prominent, of course, is the case of the apparently forged memos Dan Rather irresponsibly broadcast in his "60 Minutes" piece on the president's National Guard record.

Conservative pundits have jumped all over the memos, leading Rather and CBS (quite properly) to apologize and forcing CBS to appoint a Republican-led commission to examine how it got duped. Blurring the line between official pressure and private media criticism, House Majority Whip Roy Blunt collected signatures from 39 colleagues on a letter sent to CBS calling for a retraction and asking the network to reveal the source of the documents. "Clearly, their sources aren't what they need to be, or they're not willing to reveal even the nature of who their sources are," he said. (My various searches for a similar interest by Blunt and his colleagues for the sources involved in the matter in which Bob Novak—acting as a hit man for the administration—outed CIA officer Valery Plame came to naught.)

Not incidentally, these tactics had the effect of ensuring the CBS flap dominated a news cycle that might otherwise have been devoted to the unfolding quagmire in Iraq. To underscore just how overblown the furor over the National Guard memos has become, [Mediamatters.org](#) has compiled a [telling report](#): Within 48 hours of CBS' announcement that it "should not have used" memos critical of the president's military service because of questions surrounding them, "the story was reported 167 times in U.S. newspaper and wire reports and 57 times on cable news broadcasts." Conversely, "In the 48 hours after The New York Times published its acknowledgment that it 'was not as rigorous as it should have been' in investigating the Bush administration's claims regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, that story was reported 38 times in U.S. newspaper and wire reports and seven times on cable news." In addition, it seems that while no FOX News primetime program reported the Times story during those 48 hours, every single FOX News primetime program has addressed the CBS memo story.

Despite the Grand Canyon-sized chasm between the two stories' world historical significance, the CBS apology has received vastly more ink and air time than the New York Times' case. [According to the San Francisco Chronicle](#), "The Times itself is one example. The paper ran its own apology on Page 10, but, perhaps drunk on schadenfreude, played the CBS confession above the fold on the front page. Other papers showed similar judgment. The Los Angeles Times put the New York paper's goof on Page 10, the CBS one on the front page. Sad to say, The Chronicle did much the same thing: The Times story was reported on Page 2 in an unsigned note "to the readers;" the CBS gaffe merited two stories on Page 1." Considering that these three papers comprise the front lines of the So-Called Liberal Media (SCLM), a conservative reader would be hard pressed to find friendlier story placement.

Not only did Rather's failure to properly check his sources allow conservatives to roll out the "bias" drug to which they've become so dangerously addicted, but it also scuttled a far more important story. The memo report bumped a previously scheduled story which was to have included the first on-camera interview with Elisabetta Burba, the Italian journalist who provided the United States with forged documents purporting to show that Iraq had tried to buy uranium from Niger, documents which the administration used to bolster its case for war. Not only was the piece killed at the last minute, but a CBS spokesperson said that it may never run at all, because "We now believe it would be inappropriate to air the report so close to the presidential election." Repeat after me: What liberal media?

With so much of the media caving in to (and internalizing) the conservative critique, Americans hear precious little in the way of fact-checking, or even "common sense checking" when right-wingers take [flights of fancy in pursuit of political pay dirt](#). Take, for instance, the vice president's suggestion in early September that the country would be more vulnerable to attack if Kerry were elected, and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage's recent allegation that insurgents have stepped up their deadly assaults in Iraq because they want to "influence the election against President Bush," a contention, unless we've been secretly polling insurgent public opinion, that is completely fabricated. Just last Thursday, appearing in the Rose Garden with Iraq's interim prime minister, Ayad Allawi, the president said Kerry's statements about Iraq "can embolden an enemy." Sen. Orrin Hatch has said terrorists "are going to throw everything they can between now and the election to try and elect Kerry." When asked whether he believed al Qaeda would be more successful under a Kerry presidency, House Speaker Dennis Hastert added his unbiased view, "That's my opinion, yes."

One might think that a reporter from CNN—which conservatives like to call the "Communist News Network"—would debunk these malicious falsehoods, right? Not so. Station political analyst Bill Schneider gave his blessings to the conservative spin, saying, "Well, I can guarantee you, they don't like George Bush... They would very much like to defeat President Bush. But the question is: Can they pull off the same trick that they pulled off in Spain?" In fact, the Spanish attack was planned long before the war in Iraq even began—not that Schneider, who happens to have authored a book with discredited uber hawk, Richard Perle—is likely to have any solid sources inside al Qaeda to begin with. This is the second time a CNN analyst has made this slanderous, uninformed charge, when in fact, all the evidence points to the fact that, as former Reagan National Security Adviser William Odom [has said](#), under President Bush, "Right now, the course we're on, we're achieving Bin Laden's ends."

The conservative claim to be able to read the minds of al Qaeda terrorists is fear mongering of the most dangerous kind in a democracy. It relies on the most elemental human fear—the fear of death—as a rationale to maintain the status quo, and reduces our national democracy to a kind of terror=by-proxy debate. That it is accepted—even embraced by the media upon whom we rely to referee our political discourse—shames us all.

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