

Media was AWOL. Was Bush?

By Rory O'Connor

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After being absent without leave for years, the mainstream media is finally demanding answers to perennial questions about President Bush's military service. This week – more than thirty years after joining the National Guard, and four years after occupying the Oval Office – Bush suddenly agreed to 'meet the press' and discuss the issue with Tim Russert.

Was Bush a "deserter," as gadfly filmmaker Michael Moore recently charged? Was he AWOL for a year, during a time when 500,000 Americans were fighting in Vietnam, as the Boston Globe's Walter V. Robinson reported four years ago? Or is it true that "The president fulfilled his duties. That's why he was honorably discharged," as White House spokesman Scott McClellan told the Associated Press last week?

Whatever the facts, as Eric Boehlert noted in the online magazine Salon, one thing seems indisputable: "Bush's National Guard record, long ignored by the media, has surfaced with a vengeance."

Why did it take so long for Big Media to focus on a story that broke years ago? As the Globe's Robinson explained to Joe Strupp of Editor & Publisher, "Other news organizations are not inclined to credit their competition, particularly if they have done their own look at the candidate." Robinson cited The Washington Post and Los Angeles Times as two examples. "It would have been nice if the Post had mentioned it in 2000," Robinson said. "I think the story deserved more attention than it got."

The Post and L.A. Times are not the only outlets to blow the story. Until quite recently most mainstream media minimized the controversy. The Associated Press erroneously reported that the President's AWOL time lasted just three months. And ABC, which never ran any reports about Bush's military record during the 2000 campaign, noted two weeks ago that Bush merely "missed some weekends of training."

NBC and CBS also turned away from the story in 2000. So did the New York Times, which to this day has never reported many of the facts about Bush's service. As usual, when the 'paper of record' dropped the ball, other reporters stopped pursuing the story.

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Asked by Russert about charges that “there’s no evidence that you reported to duty in Alabama during the summer and fall of 1972,” Bush responded with a vague denial. “Yeah, they’re just wrong. There may be no evidence, but I did report,” he asserted. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been honorably discharged.”

Naturally, Democrats have seized on the story of Bush’s “missing year.” National Committee chairman Terence McAuliffe said he looked forward to a debate “when 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.”

But Bush-Cheney ‘04 chairman Marc Racicot denounced a request for a fuller explanation of Bush’s service record as a “slandorous attack” and “character assassination,” while Scott McClellan asserted that Democratic questions about Bush’s military service “have no place in politics and everyone should condemn them.”

The President could defuse the controversy by making his full military records public. Asked by Russert if he would do so, Bush said, “ Yes, absolutely.” But he also falsely added, “We did so in 2000, by the way.”

If the media continues to press him, however, the records may eventually be opened, and the truth revealed.

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