

The general and the journalists

By William Scott Malone

navyseals.com | April 30, 2004

CBS 60 Minutes II's Wednesday report alleging Iraqi POW abuse by U.S. forces has spawned headlines around the world. Six US military personnel now face court martial and the Army brigadier general in charge was suspended from duty. But in a little noted announcement at the end of the program, Dan Rather, amongst other things, the Managing Editor of CBS News, made a statement that was perhaps even more extraordinary:

“Two weeks ago, 60 Minutes II received an appeal from the Defense Department, and eventually from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Richard Myers, to delay this broadcast – given the danger and tension on the ground in Iraq. 60 Minutes II decided to honor that request, while pressing for the Defense Department to add its perspective to the incidents at Abu Ghraib prison. This week, with the photos beginning to circulate elsewhere, and with other journalists about to publish their versions of the story, the Defense Department agreed to cooperate in our report.”

In many ways, this part of the story is much more intriguing. It is a tale of “high-politics” between significant members of the media and significant officials at the Pentagon.

Originally scheduled to air on April 14, the 60 Minutes II piece was bumped for various reasons, including phone calls to CBS from the Pentagon, according to sources at CBS and elsewhere. The producers used the time to do additional research and reporting.

When the next air date slot rolled around, Wednesday, April 21, the phones began to ring even more loudly at Black Rock, CBS' New York City headquarters building. Things had been going dreadfully in Iraq that week, and the military's top brass was very concerned about the effect the story would have on US troop morale.

The CBS story was in essence about how ill-trained Reservists and National Guard soldiers who, while serving as prison guards in the notorious, over-crowded Abu Ghraib prison, were asked by superiors to “prepare” the Iraqi prisoners for interrogation.

Being Americans, they also managed to take candid snapshots of some of their efforts – appalling ‘trophy photos’ – an episode eerily reminiscent of some very candid photos I

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uncovered during an investigation of the 1991 Navy Tailhook scandal. The Iraqi POW photos soon came to the attention of sharp-eyed CBS news staffers and Army authorities, who then launched an official court martial investigation.

The exclusive, shocking pictures showed both men and women in US military uniforms, posing with naked Iraqi prisoners, some stacked in a pyramid. Other photos show male prisoners positioned to simulate sex with each other. In many of the pictures, the Americans appear to be laughing or giving the camera a thumbs-up.

It was a blockbuster of a story, but it was missing one of the 60 Minutes trademark elements – identifiable “bad guys” – in this case, the civilian and military intelligence interrogators who had requested these “preparation” techniques, and the higher-ranking officers who had allowed untrained prison guards to participate.

On the other hand, CBS had at least one of the military guards willing to defend himself on the record. “We had no support, no training whatsoever. And I kept asking my chain of command for certain things...like rules and regulations,” Staff Sgt. Chip Frederick told Rather. “And it just wasn’t happening.”

Frederick also told the CBS anchorman that Americans of all stripes had come through the prison: “We had military intelligence, we had all kinds of other government agencies, FBI, CIA ... All those that I didn’t even know or recognize.”

Frederick’s civilian attorney Gary Myers also attempted to put his client’s position in perspective for CBS. “The elixir of power, the elixir of believing that you’re helping the CIA, for God’s sake, when you’re from a small town in Virginia, that’s intoxicating,” Myers said on camera. “And so, good guys sometimes do things believing that they are being of assistance and helping a just cause. ... And helping people they view as important.”

According to one source, CBS, in an effort to put some names, if not faces, to these seemingly invisible interrogators, approached veteran, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative legend, Seymour Hersh. CBS hoped Hersh’s stellar collection of intelligence and military sources could further identify some of the higher ups. It turned out he was working along similar lines himself.

But when Gen. Richard Myers – the highest-ranking military officer in the U.S. – calls, attention is paid. Rather, as the Managing Editor of CBS News agreed to not run the segment on April 21.

Shortly afterwards, when Hersh learned about Myers’ call to Rather, he was outraged, according to two knowledgeable sources. By Monday, April 26th, “he was fit to be tied,” as one source put it. It was, after all, precisely this kind military ‘cover-up’ that led to his ground-breaking expose of the now infamous My Lai massacre in 1968.

Hersh told me Thursday that he had no comment about the entire affair. Hersh’s venue

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these days is the prestigious New Yorker magazine, but it is a weekly. Executives at CBS, sources report, are now anxiously awaiting his next New Yorker article to be posted on Sunday, May 2nd.

Retired Marine Lt. Colonel Roger Charles, the associate producer and investigator on the segment, also declined to discuss the matter. “I don’t talk about the internal workings of CBS News,” he told me Thursday from New York.

But it was Rather’s rather disingenuous statement at the end of the segment that set many tongues wagging. As Rather explained it, “with other journalists about to publish their versions of the story, the Defense Department agreed to cooperate in our report.” Perhaps true enough on its face, but it was CBS News who had approached Hersh about the story in the first place.

In essence, Rather and crew played it rather well, pointing to “other journalists” as the cause for Gen. Myers to relent not only on his “appeal [for a] delay,” as Rather carefully phrased it, but to provide the anchorman with an exclusive satellite interview with the deputy coalition commander, Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmit about the abuse allegations in Baghdad.

Most attempts to impose such media secrecy, at least since the days of Vietnam and Watergate, generally don’t work anyway, several veteran reporters and special operators point out.

“If you have the story, you should publish,” said one grizzled, trench-warrior journalist about the CBS decision. Preferring to remain anonymous in this intramural media squabble, he does believe that CBS was “very wise to own up to it.”

CBS has declined to comment on this story.

“We will be paid back for this. These people at some point will be let out,” retired Marine Lt. Colonel and Middle East operator Bill Cowan told CBS. “Their families are gonna know. Their friends are gonna know.”

Journalistic high politics extraordinaire perhaps, but no doubt a downside awaits.

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