

"Rathergate" Part 1 – an Update (with more details than previous)

My piece on the Rather/Mapes controversy has generated a great deal of passion and interest from readers of my column and from folks who watched me on Bill O'Reilly's program on Fox. And, yes, as expected, there has been some criticism.

The main point of contention centers on something I never said. I have been taken to task for hauling out tired old news in the guise of a brand new "Exclusive." This, my friends, simply is not true.

First, a little background:

In September 2004, the weekday edition of 60 Minutes ran a story by Dan Rather and his producer Mary Mapes about how a young George W. Bush went into the Texas Air National Guard in order to avoid service in Vietnam. The story aired just 55 days before a very tight presidential election – and depended on documents that have since been discredited.

The only point I was making (in my column and on The Factor) was this: Mapes was *told before her story went on the air* that Bush had *volunteered* to go to Vietnam and *left it out of the story*. I made it perfectly clear that this information was in the CBS report on the "Rathergate" fiasco and that it had been available to the public for more than four years. I never suggested I had new information – only that this fact never gained traction and wasn't even known by people who worked with Mapes on the story, let alone the public at large.

I made the point that this "lost" fact undermined the Rather/Mapes story. After all, if Mapes was told Bush volunteered to go to Vietnam and intentionally kept that from

her viewers, it rendered the 60 Minutes story suspect – and it put Mapes' motives into question.

Permit me a brief media culpa: I should have mentioned that Accuracy in Media was one of the very few organizations to report this fact early on. I merely said that “a few websites” had noted the finding. My apologies to AIM.

Now, one other point: The New York Observer has published a column by Felix Gillette that says none other than Mary Mapes herself had revealed information that George Bush volunteered to fly combat missions in Vietnam – in her 2005 book, *Truth and Honor*. The clear implication is my “exclusive” (again, I never claimed to be breaking news, exclusive or otherwise) was a joke!

Here's how Mr. Gillette put it: “Last night on the *O'Reilly Factor* on Fox News, Bernard Goldberg told anchor Bill O'Reilly that he had uncovered an exclusive scoop ‘about a lost crucial fact in the so-called ‘Rathergate’ scandal.’”

Sorry. I never said anything about “an exclusive scoop.” Not a word!

Then he said that by writing about the “Bush volunteered” angle in her book, Mapes had already shared the information with ... Mr. Gillette's words ... “the entire English-reading world.”

Well, technically, I guess, that could be true. But let's be kind and simply say that outside of Mapes' family and friends, just about nobody read the book.

Gillette tells us that in *Truth and Honor* Mapes writes about an interview she did with Maurice Udell, Bush's flight trainer in the late 1960s. This is the exchange between Mapes and Udell (starting with Mapes' question) that Gillette quotes from the book:

“Had Bush joined the Guard to avoid Vietnam? ‘That’s bullshit, that he avoided the war,’ Udell told me in 1999. ‘They try to put George down...He performed very well. I’m not saying that because he’s running.’

“Udell told me that Bush had wanted to go to Vietnam.”

Felix Gillette shares this with his readers to make only one point: that Mapes broke the news – not me. Never mind, as I say, that I never claimed I broke news, that I was only sharing a fact I had not known about, a fact that practically nobody knew about.

But here’s the interesting part, Gillette apparently doesn’t wonder why Mary Mapes waited until her book came out (a full year and two months after the CBS broadcast) to reveal what she should have revealed in the 60 Minutes Wednesday piece.

Since she says in her book that she spoke to a source who told her that “Bush wanted to go to Vietnam” and that he didn’t join the Air National Guard to avoid service in Vietnam, why didn’t she reveal that in her CBS story?

Wouldn’t a curious journalist wonder why Mapes kept that from her viewers and saved the information for her book, which came out long after she got fired and the careers of her colleagues, including Dan Rather, had been ruined, thanks to her.

Instead, all we get are snarky comments from Gillette about an “exclusive” I never claimed was an exclusive, about how “excited” I was to break news, which I never claimed I was breaking.

For those who think I’m naive, let me be clear once again (as I was in my original piece): I am more than willing to entertain the possibility that Bush volunteered knowing he didn’t have enough flight hours and therefore wouldn’t actually have to go. But if Mapes believed that she had an

obligation to report that some say he volunteered ... and if there was a credible source that says it was all a sham ... fine ... report that, too. But Mapes did neither.

My next column – “Rathergate” Part 2 – will also contain information that has been available for years. But I’ll bet it will be news to almost all of you. I’ll even bet it will be news to Felix Gillette.