

CBS issued a damning independent review Monday of mistakes related to last fall's "60 Minutes Wednesday" report on President Bush's National Guard service and fired three news executives and a producer for their "myopic zeal" in rushing it on the air.

The review said CBS compounded the damage with a circle-the-wagons mentality once the report came under fire. The independent investigators added, however, that they found no evidence of a political bias against Bush.

CBS News President Andrew Heyward and Dan Rather, who announced in November he was stepping down as the anchor of "CBS Evening News," escaped without any disciplinary action. But Rather, who narrated the Sept. 8 story and subsequent follow-ups, was criticized by CBS chief executive Leslie Moonves for "errors of credulity and over-enthusiasm."

"The system broke down on this one, for sure," said Louis D. Boccardi, retired chief executive officer of The Associated Press, who conducted the investigation along with former Republican Attorney General Dick Thornburgh. They delivered their 224-page report to Moonves last week.

Fired were Mary Mapes, the story's producer; Josh Howard, executive producer of "60 Minutes Wednesday"; Howard's top deputy, Mary Murphy; and CBS News senior vice president Betsy West.

The "60 Minutes" story had questioned Bush's Vietnam War-era commitment to service in the Texas Air National Guard. Mapes began reporting the story in 1999, but the report centered on documents obtained only weeks earlier, supposedly written by Bush's commander, the late Lt. Col. Jerry Killian. The memos said that then 1st Lt. Bush did not take a mandatory medical exam and that Killian reportedly felt pressured to sugarcoat an evaluation of him.

Questions were quickly raised about the typed memos, with some document experts saying it appeared they contained a computer character inconsistent with typewriters at the time.

Boccardi and Thornburgh found that Mapes had said the documents were authenticated, when in fact she had found only one expert to vouch for only one signature in the memo. They said she also failed to look into the background of her source, retired Texas Army National Guard Lt. Col. Bill Burkett; to find Burkett's source; or to find other corroboration of the charges.

"Her confidential source was not reliable and her authenticators were unable to authenticate the documents, and yet she maintained the opposite. ... This is truly disquieting," Moonves said in a statement released with the report.

Reached at her Dallas home Monday, Mapes said: "I haven't seen the report yet, so I won't be saying anything until I do."

When the Bush report aired, Mapes was a veteran, respected producer on a professional high: She had produced the "60 Minutes" report last spring that showed the first pictures of Americans mistreating Iraqis in Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison.

The review concluded that accomplishment essentially made her bulletproof despite the delicate, complicated nature of the Bush story, and that Howard, a CBS News veteran who had become chief of "60 Minutes Wednesday" in June, and Murphy failed to adequately question her.

Moonves said Howard "did little to assert his role as the producer ultimately responsible for the broadcast and everything in it. This mistake dealt a tremendous blow to the credibility of '60 Minutes Wednesday' and to CBS News in general."

Two days after the report aired, Heyward ordered West to review the opinions of document examiners and confidential sources who had supported the story but no such investigation took

place, the investigators said.

If the review had been conducted promptly, Thornburgh and Boccardi said they did not believe CBS would have publicly and stridently defended the report for nearly two more weeks. The two men also criticized CBS for falsely saying the source of the documents was "unimpeachable" and that experts had vouched for their authenticity.

CBS aired subsequent stories designed to support the original installment prepared by the same people instead of providing a balanced look at the controversy, the investigators said.

They also said it was "inappropriate" for Mapes to have helped Burkett get in contact with Joe Lockhart, a political adviser to Democrat John Kerry, in the midst of the presidential campaign. But Boccardi said that to conclude CBS was guilty of anti-Bush bias would be to make the same mistake "60 Minutes Wednesday" made drawing a conclusion without enough evidence.

Still, Thornburgh said he doubted the review would deflect the political criticism of CBS.

"A lot of different news organizations were pursuing the same story," Thornburgh said. "Were they all politically motivated? I doubt it. What we did take notice of was the insensitivity of the people involved to appearances."

The panelists even faulted CBS' eventual apology for the story, saying the network placed too much blame on Burkett and not enough on itself.

Rather was portrayed as an overworked anchor who had just finished coverage of the Republican convention and Hurricane Frances in Florida. As a result, he did little to help prepare the original report, and did not even appear to have seen it before it aired, the panel said.

"He asked the right questions initially, but then made the same errors of credulity and

over-enthusiasm that beset many of his colleagues," Moonves said.

In light of Rather's announcement that he will step down as anchor in March a move the anchor insisted had nothing to do with the investigation Moonves said he concluded no disciplinary sanctions against his anchor were necessary.

An aide to Rather said Monday that he would have no immediate comment on the report, since he had just returned from covering the tsunami in Thailand and had not yet read it.

As for Heyward, the panel said that he had urged extreme caution in preparing the story, an order that apparently wasn't heeded. But Thornburgh and Boccardi did note that Heyward attended a screening of the story the night before it aired an unusual step for the top news executive and apparently saw nothing to stop it.

"Andrew's sin was in trusting his lieutenants too much," Moonves said in an interview with the AP.

CBS is the third major news organization to sustain a black eye recently: Top editors at both The New York Times and USA Today left in the wake of plagiarism and fraud scandals involving correspondents Jayson Blair and Jack Kelley.

For television news organizations, the incident rivals CNN's retraction of a June 1998 report that the U.S. military used sarin nerve gas in Laos during the Vietnam War, which led to correspondent Peter Arnett's departure. Former NBC News President Michael Gartner resigned under pressure in 1992 after "Dateline NBC" rigged crashes of General Motors pickup trucks to show alleged fire dangers.

As a result of Monday's report, CBS News said it had appointed one of its executives, Linda Mason, to a newly created job of senior vice president of standards and special projects, charged with thoroughly reviewing investigative stories before they air.

Media Justice

Written by Westside ID690

Monday, 10 January 2005 06:51 -

Both Moonves and the panel said it hoped the report did not have a "chilling effect" on CBS' commitment to investigative journalism.

On the Net: read the full report: www.cbsnews.com

[Source](#)