

Something About Mary (and Ben)

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Truth and Duty: The Press, the President, and the Privilege of Power by Mary Mapes St. Martin's Press 371 pages, \$24.95

Barn Burning, Barn Building: Tales of a Political Life, from LBJ through George W. Bush and Beyond by Ben Barnes with Lisa Dickey Bright Sky Press 256 pages, \$24.95

What type of personality disorder shall we attribute to Mary Mapes, the disgraced former television producer for Dan Rather? She got burned by the infamous story about President Bush's National Guard records, was fired by CBS, and still, heretic-like, she refuses to recant. CBS and Rather publicly apologized for airing the story on 60 Minutes II after questions were raised about the authenticity of key documents. Yet Mapes stubbornly maintains the documents are real. She views herself as the victim of a right-wing cybermob. From the opening chapter, her book Truth and Duty reads like a primal scream against the bloggers who pursued her, the mainstream reporters who piled on, and the colleagues and corporate executives who abandoned her.

Delusional? That was my first hunch. In denial? Surely. Maybe even paranoid. Several pages into her book, she describes her feeling on September 9, 2004, the day after the 60 Minutes II report, when it came under attack: "This was like rounding a corner in the woods and spotting a new creature, all venom and claws and teeth. You didn't know what it was, but you knew it was out to get you." And a few pages later: "There is a well-coordinated attack machine out there in the media world, a monster that waits in the woods for an opening and then overpowers its victim."

Such complaints mean little if you believe, as I did when I started reading, that Mapes had screwed up. She had pursued an explosive story in the heat of an emotional campaign season, and she did something you can't do when the stakes are high: She relied on guesswork. She based a documentary report, I believed, on documents she couldn't prove were authentic. Therefore, she opened herself and CBS up to the fire-storm that followed. Now she seethes with resentment that high-and-mighty journalists can be held up to the kind of withering criticism that politicians have always faced. It kills her that she helped bring Dan Rather's anchorman career to an inglorious end. The rest of us, I submit, looked on with either indifference or amusement. Dan was always a little ... funny.

So I was making my way through Mapes' book with the view that she was conducting a kind of public therapy. There are pages of prose that are meant to even the score. For example, there's a dishy little passage about her chance encounter at an airport with CBS President Les Moonves on an extramarital vacation with then-galpal Julie Chen, the early morning CBS anchorbabe and current Mrs. Moonves. Mapes reports the thrill of "seeing the company's illicit power couple out in the wild" and admits she and a co-worker fell over laughing when the lovebirds were out of sight. Her literary style is overdramatic and

inartful, yet seldom dull. She does know how to move the narrative along. It's fun reading.

But is it persuasive? I didn't think so-until I got to the last third of the book. When Mapes finally gets around to spilling all the details about the controversial documents, her sob story morphs into a surprisingly compelling brief. I'll admit I didn't follow the details carefully when "Rathergate" (as the wingnuts called it) unfolded. This was an easy story to jump to conclusions on. In fact, it seems to me now that, at some level, I wanted to believe Mapes and Rather had blown it. Why? Because the alternative is to believe that a scurrilous bunch of screwball bloggers scared a professional news crew silly, and that the nation's top media outlets failed to tell the truth, and that in the end a false story won out over the true one. I read most of this book refusing to believe that. By the end I wasn't so sure. What if Mapes is not the one who's in denial here? Suppose the "disorder" that matters is the one afflicting American journalism. If nothing else, Mapes' book makes the case that something extremely important happened in the aftermath of this story and that it shouldn't all be swept under the rug.

The 60 Minutes report in question tried to advance a story that has intrigued journalists for years: What was George W. Bush up to when he was in the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam years? How did he get into the Guard, and why did there appear to be a year when he did not report for duty? Why and how was he discharged early to attend Harvard Business School?

Mapes, a 15-year CBS News veteran, had collected as much of the official record as was available over several years, starting when Bush first became serious about running for president. She also knew that many of those who had firsthand knowledge of Bush's National Guard years were loyal to Bush and had closed ranks-while others were reluctant to talk for fear of retribution. Former Texas Lt. Gov. Ben Barnes had been telling people for years that he helped get Bush into the Guard, along with other privileged sons who were hoping to avoid action in Vietnam. But Mapes had never been able to convince Barnes to speak publicly.

As Bush's campaign against Sen. John Kerry heated up in the summer and fall of 2004, questions about the two candidates' military service were again on the table. Barnes was volunteering for Kerry and had spoken to an Austin gathering about Bush's National Guard record. Unbeknownst to him, someone videotaped his remarks, and the tape migrated to an Internet site. So Barnes finally agreed to a sit-down interview with Rather to talk about his role.

Around the same time, Mapes and her associates aggressively pursued West Texas cattle rancher Bill Burkett, who was rumored to have secret documents relating to Bush's National Guard service. Burkett was already known in Texas circles for having gone public earlier in 2004 with an account of witnessing the 1997 "scrubbing" of documents in the Bush file at Texas Air National Guard headquarters in Austin. Mapes asked around and decided Burkett was worth talking to. She arranged a meeting.

At a pizza joint in Clyde, Texas, Burkett produced copies of two memos from 1972 that were signed by Jerry B. Killian, who had been Bush's commander in Houston. Shortly thereafter, Burkett gave CBS four additional memos. The evidence, although not earth-shattering, was politically sensitive: Killian had apparently suspended Bush from flying because he failed to perform to required standards and to take an annual physical as ordered. Mapes was "on top of the world" when she got her hands on the "Killian memos," she writes. "I didn't imagine that I was setting myself up for a story that would blow my career to smithereens."

It did occur to her that the documents could be part of a "political dirty trick," she writes. She knew she'd have to have experts examine every detail before using of them. And before long she was informed by analysts that "there was no way we could ever date the documents physically and be 100 percent certain from the pages themselves that they were produced in the 1970s." You can't rely on ink-and-paper tests for dating when you're dealing with photocopies of photocopies. Still, Mapes says, "Scientific proof isn't the journalistic standard in such a case." With military experts, she looked for any sign the details were off. And she relied on the judgment of two experts who believed the signatures and initials of Killian looked authentic. Everything checked out. Then she spoke by telephone with retired Gen. Bobby Hodges, who had been Killian's supervisor. She read him the memos and asked if he was familiar with them. He said he was. He recalled that Killian was a "hardnose" who was miffed because Bush didn't seem to be fulfilling all his service requirements. Hodges went on to defend Bush and urge Mapes not to rely on the memos. "You're creating a situation," he said.

With that confirmation, Mapes' executive producer scheduled the fateful 60 Minutes II broadcast. It included Barnes' recollections about a phone call he made after a Bush family friend asked Barnes to help get young Bush into the Guard. Barnes called his friend Gen. James Rose, the head of the Texas Guard. Despite a long waiting list, Bush got in shortly after. The broadcast also reported on the contents of the Killian memos, without saying where they had come from or how CBS had obtained them.

This is where Mapes et al ran into those monsters in the woods. CBS, Rather, Mapes, and Barnes were subjected to what seemed like well coordinated attacks from the right. The reaction was instantaneous, tribal, sometimes profane, and mostly anonymous.

The Killian documents came under attack within hours of the broadcast. A blogger going by the name "Buckhead" posted an authoritative-sounding analysis on a right-wing site that used typographical details to argue the documents were "forgeries." Before long, amateur typography sleuths all over the Web were disputing the Killian memos. Although they were looking at type that had been photocopied, scanned, and faxed, they were attuned to the subtlest of details. Similar-looking documents could easily be produced in Microsoft Word, they claimed.

Mapes does a pretty thorough job of debunking the debunkers. There's a lot of arcane document debate involved, but the argument comes down to this: CBS's detractors claimed that since the documents used "proportional spacing" (different widths allotted to

different characters) and occasional "superscripts" (the tiny "th" in 111th) they were produced on a computer, not a typewriter. Mapes produces evidence that authentic official documents from 1972 and 1973 show proportional spacing and superscripts, demonstrating that some electronic typewriters could have produced such type styles. And, yes, it's possible for computers to make documents that look similar to typewritten ones. But, Mapes says, that proves nothing, "other than the fact that computers can replicate all kinds of things."

Nevertheless, Web-fueled suspicions spread to the mainstream press. Many had been working on the same story and quickly assumed the documents came from Burkett, who was portrayed as an anti-Bush zealot. Reporters found dissent among former National Guard members. In a crushing blow to CBS, Gen. Hodges suddenly got back on the reservation, telling reporters he no longer believed the memos were real. He hadn't seen them, after all-he'd only heard them read over the telephone.

With a few different circumstances, Rather and Mapes might have been able to defend the story. But the bottom fell out when they got back to Burkett and pressed him for more information about where he got the documents. He had originally told Mapes they were given to him by another former National Guard member (whom Mapes had been unable to contact). When the pressure was on, he told CBS higher-ups that in fact he had been contacted by an unidentified man who said a "Lucy Ramirez" wanted to arrange a handoff of some sensitive documents. Burkett agreed to receive the papers in March of 2004 at the Houston Livestock Show. He took them from someone he didn't know, with no way of knowing where they came from or why they were being passed to him. It was only 11 days after the 60 Minutes broadcast that Rather apologized on the CBS Evening News and said, "If I knew then what I know now, I would not have gone ahead with the story as it aired, and I certainly would not have used the documents in question."

This is the mistake Mapes can't quite own up to. She admits she was "furious" at Burkett "for misleading us [and] lying about the provenance of the documents." She knew she was sunk when she realized nobody could explain who put the documents in Burkett's hands, or why. In her opening chapter, she admits she knew she could never be 100 percent sure about the documents. But, she writes, "I felt that I was in the clear, that I had done my job, and that the story met the high standards demanded by 60 Minutes." In the end, she holds to that position. She believes the "preponderance" of evidence suggests the memos are real. "I came to a well-grounded conclusion that these documents appeared to be true in every way," she writes. She had demonstrated "that the Killian memos were most likely real and deserved to be reported."

In the final analysis, going with documents that an unknown person produces, without a reliable first-hand authority to vouch for them, surely doesn't meet the highest standards of journalism. Almost certainly, if Mapes knew then what she knows now about how the documents fell into Burkett's hands, she would have held back. Yet she doesn't get around to saying that.

In a sad coda, CBS News, a division of the entertainment company Viacom Inc., assembled a panel to conduct an exercise in self-flagellation. Since CBS had already apologized, Mapes notes, the strategy "would prove the corporate equivalent of declaring yourself guilty and then setting up a trial." Led by former U.S. Attorney General Richard Thornburgh, a prominent Republican elder, the panel made no finding as to whether the Killian memos were authentic. Thornburgh at one point criticized the use of the Barnes interview because it didn't "prove" that Barnes helped Bush get into the Guard, thus proving that Thornburgh himself had no useful insight into the practice of journalism. The panel concluded that the 60 Minutes II crew had acted irresponsibly in rushing the story onto the air and made Mapes the fall-gal.

And what does Barnes have to say about all this? In his memoir *Barn Burning, Barn Building*, he looks back at the Vietnam years and regrets most of the stands he took. He supported the war partly out of loyalty to Lyndon Johnson. As he told Rather on 60 Minutes, he regrets using his political influence to get Bush and others into the Texas National Guard.

"I've never changed my story on the issue of helping Bush get into the Guard, and I never will," writes Barnes. "I thought at the time that I was simply doing political favors, but as I got older, I came to realize I'd been playing God. For every privileged boy like George W. Bush that I helped, another young man was shipped to Vietnam."

Barnes says he "got hit by a barrage from Republicans" for speaking out. But, he writes, "it wasn't half as bad as the fusillade that brought down Rather and his associates after they aired another segment during the show that relied on apparently falsified documents." He continues: "Dan Rather is a good man and a fine journalist, but it's clear CBS made some mistakes in airing that segment." (It's also clear Barnes has not read Mapes' book, which predates his. If he had, he might not be so sure CBS relied on "apparently falsified documents.")

In fact, Barnes goes on to say that although journalists haven't found a "smoking gun" to prove Bush shirked his Guard duty, "I believe it's clear that Bush didn't fulfill his duties in the Guard after he transferred to Alabama to work on a political race." He didn't say that on 60 Minutes "because I wanted to stick to what I knew 100 percent to be true." But he says it in his book. He even recounts speculation "that Bush refused to take the physical because he was afraid it would show evidence of drug use. I don't know anything about that, but I do know that he wasted a lot of money and time-and a place in the Guard that could have gone to someone who took his responsibilities more seriously."

On the whole, Barnes' book is full of a lot of political bosh-John Connally was the greatest political leader of the modern age, and Ralph Yarborough was a foolish liberal who caused nothing but trouble for the Democratic Party-but there are enough poop droppings to make it all worthwhile. Barnes includes weightless homiletics about how to strengthen the Democratic Party, but the chapter that has lasting value, for my money, is his detailed account of how his promising career was brought to a halt by the Sharpstown financial scandal. Barnes had become speaker of the Texas House at age 26 and was

lieutenant governor by the time he was 30. When Sharpstown hit in 1972, he was preparing to run for governor.

Sharpstown brought down House Speaker Gus Mutscher and others who had apparently accepted loans and stock tips in exchange for legislation, but Barnes shows that the investigations were pushed hard by the Nixon administration and that he, Barnes, was a major target. No evidence ever emerged that Barnes had done anything improper. But one of Barnes' core principles was always that Democrats need to serve the interests of the business community. So he was lumped in with the Sharpstown gang and came in third in the 1972 Democratic primary, behind Dolph Briscoe and Sissy Farenthold.

"The truth is," Barnes writes, "it's almost impossible to get your reputation back fully once you've been smeared-no matter how much you protest, or how right you might be."

Mapes' tale of how she lost her journalistic reputation has a few elements in common with the fall of Ben Barnes. In both cases, a not-quite-right version of events triumphed in the media and took root in the public mind. Mapes lashes out at the unscrupulous and dishonest people who publish on the Web. But there have always been times in journalism and politics, as Barnes attests, when false accusations win out over the facts. It may be that the Republican "noise machine" has been unduly successful lately in scaring key elements of the national media at just the right times. After all, President Bush's less-than-distinguished record of National Guard service somehow became less relevant in the last campaign season than what happened on John Kerry's Swift boat in the jungles of Vietnam. But the noise machine is here to stay. All the important action ahead depends on how well our remaining credible news organizations do their jobs.

For political journalists and for people in political life, there is a vital field of study that needs to be attended to: scandalology, if you will. Mapes and Barnes provide useful lessons in the mechanics of scandal and media manipulation. Ignore them at your peril.

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