

September 20, 2004 CBS Evening News Report

Rather: Now, news about CBS News and the questions surrounding documents we aired on this broadcast and on the Wednesday edition of *60 Minutes* on September 8th. The documents purported to show that George W. Bush received preferential treatment during his years in the Texas Air National Guard. At the time, CBS News and this reporter fully believed the documents were genuine. Tonight, after further investigation, we can no longer vouch for their authenticity. The documents were provided to CBS News by a former commander in the Texas Air Guard, Bill Burkett. He did not come to us; we went to him and asked him for the documents. Burkett is well known in National Guard circles for a long battle over his medical benefits and for trying for several years now to discredit President Bush's military service record. Burkett initially told CBS News he got the documents from a fellow guardsman. But, when we interviewed Burkett this past weekend, he changed his story and told us he got the documents from a different source, one we cannot verify. Why did Burkett tell CBS News something he now says is not true? We put the question to him.

Rather: Why did you mislead us?

Burkett: Well I didn't totally mislead you. I did mislead you on the one individual. You know your staff pressured me to a point to reveal that source.

Rather: Well we were trying to get the chain of possession.

Burkett: I understand that.

Rather: And you said you had received it from someone?

Burkett: I understand that.

Rather: And we did pressure you – to say, well, you received them from someone?

Burkett: Yes.

Rather: And that someone was whom? And it's true, we pressured you?

Burkett: Right.

Rather: Because it was a very important point for us.

Burkett: Yes. And, and I simply threw out a name that was basically, it was, I guess to get a little pressure off for a moment.

Rather: Have you forged anything?

Burkett: No sir.

Rather: Have you faked anything?

Burkett: No sir.

Rather: But you did mislead us?

Burkett: Yes I misled you. Yes I did.

Rather: You lied to us. Why would I or anyone believe that you wouldn't mislead us about something else?

Burkett: I could understand that question. I can. That's gonna have to be your judgment and everybody else's.

Rather: Burkett still insists the documents are real but says he was in no position to verify them.

Burkett: I also insisted when I sat down with your staff in the first face-to-face session, before I gave up any documents, I wanted to know what you were gonna do with them. And I insisted that they be authenticated.

Rather: The failure of CBS News to do just that, to properly, fully scrutinize the documents and their source, led to our airing the documents when we should not have done so. It was a mistake. CBS News deeply regrets it. Also, I want to say personally and directly, I'm sorry. CBS News President Andrew Heyward has ordered an independent investigation to examine the process by which the report was prepared. The results of that investigation will be made public. This was an error made in good faith as we tried to carry on the CBS News tradition of asking tough questions and investigating reports. But it was a mistake. Now, some reaction to our revelations today. It comes from a spokesman for President Bush, Scott McClellan.

Scott McClellan: Obviously, there are still a number of questions that need to be answered. We look forward to seeing the results of the investigations that other media organizations have undertaken and that CBS says that they have now undertaken. And we appreciate the fact that they have said they deeply regret it but we still need – wanna see those questions answered.

Rather: And Scott McClellan repeated the White House insistence that President Bush fulfilled his obligations to the National Guard and he noted again the President was honorably discharged.